Material Wonders: Nature, Matter and New Materiality in Contemporary Fairy-Tale Fiction

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Abstract

In fairy tales the material world is rich with wonder. The flowers, waterfalls, tables, keys and shapeshifting bodies all exist outside the accepted 'laws' of reality, capable of transforming, speaking and participating in an enlivened vision of existence that invites a sense of the wondrous. While Western dualistic philosophy has traditionally denigrated matter, bodies and nature for their supposed opposition to language, thought and culture, in the fairy tale, materiality, nature and nonhumanity are not fixed, inert and passive, but alive and full of possibility.

Though materiality has always played an important and active role in folk and fairy tale, in much of the contemporary scholarship on the fairy tale genre, the focus has been on postmodernism in its attempts to highlight the constructedness of nature and matter as fictions. This thesis suggests that in the quest to undermine the concept of 'nature' as a fixed reality, the potential for the fairy tale to enable radical and positive reimaginings of nature/culture, matter/thought boundaries has been overlooked in critical discussion. In an echo of contemporary theory's move away from purely discursive understandings of existence, this thesis uses a new, vital materialist lens – with a Deleuzian emphasis – to examine the ways in which contemporary authors have used the fairy tale suspension of reality to depict nature and matter as fluid and active, and how these depictions can lead to radical re-conceptualisations of the boundaries between accepted dualities of nature/culture, mind/body, matter/language.

This thesis argues that drawing from the fairy-tale traditions of anthropomorphism, metamorphosis and the vitality of material potential, the fairy-tale inspired fictions of Angela Carter, Graham Swift, Philip Pullman and A. S. Byatt offer alternate, fluid and processual depictions of life that deny the fixity of dualistic visions of matter and nature and refute the idea of materiality as mere discourse. By reading through the materialities of wood, water, metal and earth, this study considers how examining contemporary fairy tale using new materialist theory can highlight the fairy tale's capacity to dismantle dualistic thought and reimagine nature, matter and bodies as enlivened and full of wonder.

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INTRODUCTION

'All the natural laws of the world were held in suspension here', Angela Carter's narrator observes of the enchanted castle in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', capturing the fairy tale tradition's irreverence to the commonly accepted laws of material reality.[1] Entering the world of the fairy tale means discarding preconceived notions about nature, flesh, animals or objects as fixed, thoughtless and inert. As Marina Warner observes: '[a]nimals speak, especially birds, and no one in a fairy tale is taken aback when rocks and trees and streams and waterfalls act under their own volition or shape-shift from one form to another'.[2] Instead, fairy tales embrace the supposed irrationality of the supernatural in an 'animist landscape' in which the material world is made active, given agency and endowed with wonder.[3]

This enlivening of matter in fairy tale aligns with the current wave of new materialisms in contemporary theory, which call for an appreciation of the 'power of matter' and the vibrant 'vitality' or agency of nonhuman (material) life; that is, an acknowledgement of 'the capacity of things […] not only to impede or block humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities and tendencies of their own.'[4] By reimagining matter, nature, flesh and the 'more-than-human' world as active, agentic and intelligent, such theories attempt to dissolve the dualistic hierarchies of nature/culture, mind/body, language/reality that the dominant strands of Western philosophy, science and theory have for centuries upheld.[5]

Fairy tale scholarship has often focused on how the traditional European stories affirm dualistic thought and has, in turn, overwhelmingly used a postmodern lens to focus on the linguistic and ideological constructions in fairy tales and their modern revisions. This thesis offers instead a new and vital materialist enquiry into contemporary fairy tale fiction. By arguing that the new materialist vision of material

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[1] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 50. All subsequent references will be parenthetical.

[2] Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 21.

[3] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 14.

[4] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms' in Coole, D. and Frost, S. (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1 – 45, p. 1. and Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. viii.

[5] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012).

agency has parallels with the fairy tale genre's fluid and active depictions of matter, it will demonstrate that fairy tales contain within them potential for radical re-examinations of dualistic thought through their conscious disruptions to the laws of reality. Looking at key works by Angela Carter, Graham Swift, Philip Pullman and A. S. Byatt, it will consider how, through their differing approaches to matter and language, these authors reveal their attempts to use the wonder of fairy tale to problematize dichotomous thought; depicting matter, nature and flesh as both active, animate participants in their narratives and vibrant, living agencies in the world.

Fairy Tales and the Borders of Wonder

Wonder rests on the boundaries; it occupies the borderlines. To wonder at something we crave knowledge of it, but to be full of wonder is to marvel in awe at things we may not fully believe or understand. For Plato's Socrates, wonder is where 'philosophy begins', where the sense of awe meets a thirst for knowledge.[6] According to Howard L. Parsons, the word comes, in part, from the Latin *mirari*, meaning 'to wonder or marvel at', and *miraculum*, which was 'used in the Latin translation of the Greek New Testament to indicate "anything wonderful, beyond human power, and deviating from the common action of nature, a supernatural event."'[7] For Maria Tatar, 'wonder inevitably produces the desire to wander'; that is, to cross thresholds into the unknown; into, perhaps, that which exists 'beyond human power'.[8] But for Parsons, wonder does not simply inspire transgression, it alters the fabric of our understanding:

> *[w]onder*, from the Old English *wundor*, might be cognate with the German *Wunde* or *wound*. It would thus suggest a breach in the membrane of awareness, a sudden opening in a man's system of established and expected meanings, a blow as if one were struck or stunned.[9]

The breach in the membrane of awareness – the shock that comes with crossing into new understanding – is a transgression in itself. Wonder may encourage this

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[6] Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d.
[7] Howard L. Parsons, 'A Philosophy of Wonder' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30, 1 (1969), pp. 84-101, < http://www.jstor.org/stable/2105923> [Accessed 16 June 2019], p. 84.
[8] Maria Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 1.
[9] Parsons, 'A Philosophy of Wonder', p. 85.

transgression, may inspire awe, but its power lies in its ability to bridge gaps between worlds. As Warner observes: 'wonder has no opposite'.[10]

In fairy tales, to think of wonder is often to think of magic, and it is true that the two are invariably interwoven. Like wonder, magic is catalytic, frequently ignited by and leading to a breach of borders. As Tatar suggests, '[m]agic happens on the threshold of the forbidden'; the moment of transgression from one realm to another, or indeed, as many wish-fulfilling narratives demonstrate, the *desire* to transgress between realms.[11] Fairy tales are tales of magic *and* wonder, in which magic may lead to wonder just as wonder may bring about the magical. Jack Zipes observes that the fairy tale has been known as the 'wonder or magic tale' and, as Warner suggests, though 'the French *conte de fées* is usually translated as fairy tale, […] the word *Wundermärchen* was adopted by the Romantics in Germany and the Russian folklorists [led by Vladimir Propp] to characterize the folk tale or fairy tale.'[12] For Warner, the distinction between fairy tales and wonder tales is useful not only because '[m]ore than the deeds of the fairies, wonders characterize fairy tales', but also because of its potential to 'free the stories from the miniaturized whimsy of fairyland to breathe the wilder air of the marvellous'.[13]

In fairy tale scholarship the term 'wonder' has political effect. Just as Warner highlights the trappings of the 'fée' and its associations with a 'miniaturized' form of magic, Cristina Bacchilega suggests that changes in prominence of the terms 'magic' and 'wonder' have reflected a desire to discredit the power of the fairy and thus the feminine.[14] The term 'wonder tale' she suggests, emerged in Europe at least in part as a result of the 'secularization of medieval miraculous tales and the transformation of pagan belief'.[15] However, as the newly coined term *conte de fée* became prevalent as a secular form of storytelling, it simultaneously

> emancipated the fairy (*fée*) as a powerful, experienced woman from the patriarchal control of the church *at the same time* that it subordinated wonder to magic, to what the modern fairy could make happen rather than what nature, numen, or fortune produced.[16]

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[10] Marina Warner, 'Introduction' to *Wonder Tales: Six French Stories of Enchantment* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3 – 17, p. 3.

[11] Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door*, p. 1.

[12] Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 21 and Warner, 'Introduction' to *Wonder Tales*, p. 3.

[13] Warner 'Introduction' to *Wonder Tales*, p. 3 and p. 4

[14] Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), p. 194.

[15] Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed?*, p. 194.

[16] Ibid.

When the focus on human-made wonders replaced the numinous in the age of modernity, she suggests, the wondrous was relegated to the realm of fairyland, and tales of wonder from cultures outside Europe were seized upon to further imperialist agendas or perpetuate ideas of a magical exotic Other.[17] As fairy tales both produce and depict wonder, '[w]onder's association with the numinous has implications for thinking about the fairy tale as a genre', and any depiction of the term as interchangeable with 'magic' and/or 'fairy' is replete with complications.[18]

'The dimension of wonder', Warner notes, 'creates a huge theatre of possibility in the stories: anything can happen', but as Bacchilega's theories of wonder suggest, that 'anything' is often strictly controlled.[19] Fairy tales have repeatedly been used to affirm dominant ideological structures and uphold the status quo, even in their subversive and emancipatory format; *even* as they 'spread word through their fantastic images about the feasibility of utopian alternatives'.[20] That magic and wonder play their part in this duplicity is undeniable; just as the magical events of the fairy tale enable those visions of 'utopian alternatives', the wonder they produce can too distract from more conservative values. For Bacchilega, wonder is generated by and through this veiled contradiction:

> [a]s folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation.[21]

A gulf arises between what a fairy tale appears to be offering (its 'subversive wonder') and what is simultaneously being implied to its readership (its 'normative function'), and for Bacchilega, the wonder of the stories hinges upon both this duality and the fairy tale's attempts to 'naturalize its artifice'.[22] Wonder thus inhabits and perpetuates the border between reality and appearance implicit in the fairy tale's narrative form; a form in which borders are inescapable.

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[17] Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed?*, p. 194.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Marina Warner, *The Absent Mother, or Women Against Women in the "Old Wives' Tale"* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991), p. 17.

[20] Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), p. 3.

[21] Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tale: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 7.

[22] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tale*, p. 8.

For fairy tales, Bacchilega suggests, are a '"*borderline*" or transitional genre', straddling a threshold of difference.[23] Similarly, Antonella Ansani observes that 'one of the distinctive traits of the folktale is its predilection for sharp *conflicts*: the tales' protagonists, for example, are either kings or paupers, beautiful or ugly, good or evil.'[24] And Marina Warner identifies fairy tales as replete with 'imagery of *strong contrasts*'.[25] Narratives of conflict and contrast, thresholds and borders, traditional fairy tales are famed for their fierce oppositions. So often shaped around the tensions that arise between conflicting binaries of good and evil, the tales pit the savage against the civilised, the aged against the youthful, the witch against the princess, delighting in the friction these dualities invite. As philosophical dualism marked out dividing lines between mind and matter, nature and thought, the literary European fairy tale tradition - in the case of many of the most well-known tales, at least - reflected this preoccupation with delineation and duality. The borders and binaries of distinction and difference in fairy tale are, like the philosophical tradition, often bound to the tales' moral metaphysics and fixed in systems of 'naturalness'. For all the wonder and magic of fairy tales then, the fluid fantasy such wonder invites, it is in fact the fairy tale's 'boundlessness', Warner suggests, which 'serves the *moral purpose* of the tales'; that is, to 'teach *where boundaries lie*.'[26]

However, just as fairy tales teach where boundaries lie, as a liminal space in which 'all the natural laws of the world are held in suspension', they also reveal their potential to dissolve the foundations on which those boundaries rest. In *Reinventing Nature?*, Gary Lease observes that '[f]rom Pseudo-Dionysus through the early medieval Platonists to the reworked Aristotelianism of Aquinas, there emerged a concept of "natural" law, or a divinely ordained "order" to all reality.'[27] In fairy tales, the order of reality is undone; the laws of nature are abandoned:

> [t]he gold and glass, forests and animals, all vividly and physically embodied, reach out to the listener and the reader and pull us in to the story, and there

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[23] Ibid, p. 3. [my italics]

[24] Antonella Ansani, 'Beauty and the Hag: Appearance and Reality in Basile's Lo cunto de li cunti' in *Out of the Woods: The Origins of the Literary Fairy Tale in Italy and France*, ed. Nancy L Canepa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 81-98, p. 81. [my italics]

[25] Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. xix. [my italics]

[26] Marina Warner, *The Absent Mother*, p. 17.

[27] Gary Lease, 'Introduction: Nature Under Fire' in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, eds. Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington D. C. and California: Island Press, 1995), pp. 3-16, p. 8.

> everything changes, for the laws of nature are disregarded and the plots work instead according to the laws of enchantment.[28]

These 'laws of enchantment' are hardly laws at all; anarchic in their departure from convention, they free the inhabitants of fairyland (human and nonhuman) from the trappings of those philosophical and scientific laws of reality. If wonder can be understood as 'anything wonderful, beyond human power, and deviating from the *common action of nature*, a *supernatural* event', it is wonder that challenges our limited perceptions of nature or reality, wonder that transgresses the borders, and wonder that breaches the membrane of awareness, casting us into new understandings of an enlivened material world.[29]

Philosophy, Wonder and the Laws of Material Nature

Ever since Descartes attributed agency and rationality to the soul or mind and cast the material or corporeal in the role of the soul's dialectic other, nature, matter and flesh have been trapped in assumptions of irrationality, givenness and fixity; defined by and through deterministic laws of reality. According to Elizabeth Grosz, '[w]hat Descartes accomplished was not really the separation of mind from body (a separation which had already been long anticipated in Greek philosophy since the time of Plato) but the separation of soul from nature'.[30] It was a separation that would, alongside the Newtonian laws of cause and effect, guide the trajectory of Western philosophy and science, as the Humanist agenda of the Enlightenment era further embedded matter and nature in a supposedly inherent incapacity for reason, autonomy and logic. These assumptions heralded the division between nature and culture, paving the way for the justification of the supremacy of man and the "naturally" occurring hierarchies within society. As Coole and Frost suggest, "[t]he Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of matter […] yields a conceptual and practical domination of nature as well as a specifically modern attitude or ethos of subjectivist potency".[31] The rationality of the human subject becomes the measure and marker through and against which everything else is assessed, casting the material world of nature – the environment, matter, flesh

[28] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 20.
[29] Parsons, p. 85.
[30] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 6.
[31] Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', p. 8.

and all nonhuman life – as subordinate to the supremacy of Man's consciousness, language and culture, and fixed in the inevitability of natural laws that posit nature and matter as devoid of wonder or agency.

Descartes' metaphysical dualism is central to the conception of nature and matter in the West and the endurance of those associations with inertia and fixity. As Grosz outlines:

> Descartes distinguished two kinds of substances: a thinking substance (*res cogitans*, mind) from an extended substance (*res extensa*, body); only the latter, he believed, could be considered part of nature, governed by its physical laws and ontological exigencies. The body is a self-moving machine, a mechanical device, functioning according to causal laws and the laws of nature. The mind, the thinking substance, the soul, or consciousness, has no place in the natural world.[32]

These laws of nature or 'physical laws' are those of cause and effect, in which material objects are 'identifiably discrete', moving 'only upon an encounter with an external force or agent'.[33] Coole and Frost highlight the endurance of Cartesian dualistic theories: '[m]any of our ideas about materiality in fact remain indebted to Descartes, who […] provided the basis for modern ideas of nature as quantifiable and measurable and hence for Euclidian geometry and Newtonian physics', and in turn, solidifying nature/culture, mind/matter divides.[34] Yet, these ideas, they remind us, are 'intuitively congruent with what common sense tells us is the "real" material world of solid, bounded objects that occupy space' as opposed to the fluid complexities of thought.[35]

The 'real' world of matter and nature is perceived to be *known* to us in this sense: we 'know' both that it acts only as a result of causal laws, and it is knowable to us because it has always *been here*.[36] We do not expect things to move out of turn, nor do we predict activity from objects we 'know' to be static, and though we also know that some 'things' (plants, clouds, machines, stars, flesh) have complex abilities that enable them to move, grow or change, we reduce them to that same level of inertia. For Jane Bennett, this is evidence of the human 'need to interpret the world reductively as a series of fixed objects, a need reflected in the rhetorical role assigned to the word *material*. As noun or adjective *material* denotes some stable or rock-bottom reality,

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[32] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies,* p. 6.
[33] Coole and Frost, p. 7.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Mark Halsey, *Deleuze and Environmental Damage: Violence of the Text* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), p.14.

something adamantine.'[37] The stability of a material world that acts only when acted upon or when subject to laws of biology, chemistry or physics is a world that is controllable and ultimately under the dominion of consciousness, which is fluid and in flux, and the term 'nature' further affirms this fixity via its dual usage as both the inherent nature of something and the supposedly natural world more generally. Bennett observes that

> [i]n *Critique of Judgment*, Kant famously insisted that matter as such can have no "spontaneity": "We cannot even think of living matter as possible. (The concept of it involves a contradiction, since the essential character of matter is lifelessness, *inertia*)"; we must not "endow matter, as mere matter, with a property [viz. the property of life…] that conflicts with its nature".[38]

Kant's conception of matter as entirely inert by its very 'nature' contributes to what Bennett calls the 'disenchantment tale' of Western philosophical thought; the story of the human mind at the helm of a stagnant material world, devoid of wonder.[39]

The implications of this dualistic model and its representation of nature as fixed and passive were far-reaching for the natural world but also for human social hierarchies because the Humanist paradigm of the rational, thinking subject was firmly tied to a (European, well-educated, heterosexual) masculinity. As Stacy Alaimo observes,

> Nature, as a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism, has long been waged against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes. Paradoxically, women, the working class, travel people, and people of color have been denigrated because of their supposed 'proximity' to nature, even as queers have been castigated for being "unnatural."[40]

The assumed dichotomy between the natural and cultural has enabled (and was used to legitimize) domination of the natural world, but also any person who was perceived to fall outside the accepted model of 'rational human'. Therefore, to discuss the dualistic hierarchies of nature/culture, mind/body and flesh/thought is also to discuss the oppositional positioning of male/female, human/nonhuman, savage/civilised, self/other, and the myriad variants of these dualisms that have upheld oppressive hierarchies of race, gender, species, sexuality and class through a conception of nature as the inferior

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[37] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 58.

[38] Ibid, p. 65; Bennett quotes from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 394 and 374.

[39] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantments of Modern Life*: *Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 7.

[40] Stacy Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature' in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 237- 264, p. 239.

side of the binary. Alaimo notes, for example, the pervasive nature of the dichotomy in relation to women: '[t]he dual meanings of nature [as both biological and behavioural] converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments. Woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature has made her so.'[41] Under the terms of a dualistic worldview, nature exists as both oppressed and oppressor, with its apparent fixity and adherence to natural laws justifying its inferiority.

In *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe,* Mary-Jane Rubenstein suggests that wonder has been, like matter and nature, similarly contained and controlled by the dominant discourses of Western philosophy. Just as Bacchilega suggested that the age of modernity placed its emphasis on man-made wonders over those of the supernatural, Rubenstein too highlights the role modernity played in the philosophical tendency to view wonder as a feature of humanity – or more specifically, human thought:

> with increasing intensity as Western philosophy approaches modernity, wonder becomes the source of great ambivalence. It is both the height of intellectual attainment and the depth of stupidity, depending on when it strikes. So wonder becomes something to ration, to rein in, to delimit – something whose entrances and exits are ultimately subject to the knowing self.[42]

The containment of wonder to a function of the human mind echoes that sense of passivity attributed to materiality. Rubenstein notes too, that for both Descartes and Francis Bacon it is 'causal knowledge of wonderful things' – in other words, the ability to rationalise the wondrous – that 'disciplines and eradicates' wonder itself.[43] Attempts such as these to discipline, eradicate and determine wonder through knowledge reflect the desire to uphold the divisions between matter and mind – wonder must be controllable in every aspect so that it may not destabilise the centrality of human thought and the certainty of the dualisms of mind/matter, language/reality, nature/culture.

For if wonder, as Rubenstein puts it, 'opens an originary rift in thought, an unsuturable gash that both constitutes and deconstitutes thinking as such', then 'to open the question of wonder […] is to open thought not only to the fantastic and amazing but

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[41] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 3.
[42] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 14.
[43] Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 15.

also to the dreadful and the threatening', that is, the threat of the *unknowable*.[44] To deny wonder's agency or to define it a feature only of the knowing mind has the effect, then, of severing the material world from the activity that a sense of wonder facilitates and burying matter and nature in a fixed state of knowableness. When Parsons suggests that *miraculum* indicates 'anything wonderful, *beyond human power*, and *deviating from the common action of nature*,' [my italics] he highlights the potential of wonder to undermine the power of humanity by positioning its existence as tied to an erosion of deterministic laws of nature.[45] The existence of wonder 'beyond' human knowledge and control and outside of the realm of causal laws disrupts the stability of anthropocentrism – and the matter/thought divisions that uphold it – by reopening that 'originary rift in thought' and unhinging the assumed locus of both power and knowledge.

> Diana Coole observes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contention that

> it is impossible to reappraise humanism until the Cartesian perspective that "still overhangs ideas about nature" has been laid to rest since "an ontology which leaves nature in silence shuts itself in the incorporeal and for this reason gives a fantastic image of man, spirit and history."[46]

For Merleau-Ponty, man's effort to elevate himself and his thoughts above all else is far from rational, and rather, has lead humanity toward one 'fantasy' just as it sought to contain the other. Rubenstein suggests that wonder 'arises when something that seemed reasonable and self-evident becomes strange and insupportable', hinting at the importance of wonder as a tool for questioning knowledge.[47] The enduring legacy of Cartesian Dualism has upheld a story of nature and matter as trapped in the 'silence' of inertia and fixity; perhaps wonder, as the vehicle through which all that seems 'reasonable and self-evident' is questioned, can enable a revelation of new thinking, a blurring of borders that comes about from that 'sudden opening in a man's system of established and expected meanings', so that nature, matter and the nonhuman world need not remain, as they have been, fixed in those old stories of deterministic natural laws.[48]

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[44] Rubenstein, p. 10-11.
[45] Parsons, p. 84.
[46] Diana Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh' in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 92- 115, p. 95.
[47] Rubenstein, p. 4.
[48] Parsons, p. 85.

Nature, Culture and the European Literary Fairy Tale

Fairy and folktales have long been acknowledged to both reflect as well as challenge cultural preoccupations, and their engagement with 'natural laws' and nature/culture boundaries is no exception. Just as the term 'wonder' is politically charged, so too are the fairy and folktale depictions of what is 'natural'. The European literary fairy tale has come to be widely understood – thanks to the postmodern analysis that began in the 1970s – as a genre which perpetuates stereotypes of 'naturalness', affirming both 'appropriate' models of 'civilised' behaviour and dualistic hierarchies, particularly in relation to gender, race, class and sexuality. As the dominant narratives of the genre, contemporary analysis of the tales of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen has encouraged assumptions about the literary fairy tale as a whole; homogenizing the myriad and complex depictions of nature and culture in the tradition. In fact, the fairy tale's relationship to dualism alters dramatically across borders and centuries, and despite the endurance of narratives which serve to uphold hierarchical oppositions, from the earliest literary narratives of Straparola and Basile to the French salons of the seventeenth century, fairy tales can also be seen to depict alternate and fluid visions of existence and experience that counter the Cartesian narratives of natural/cultural, mind/body, male/female, etc., even if the stories that remained in western social consciousness were the ones that affirmed rather than challenged the dominant view of dualistic existence. As Zipes acknowledges, far from neutral or benign, '[f]airy tales – and one could add the oral folktales as well - always have been concerned with sex roles, social class and power', and for this reason, writers of fairy tale have grappled with the dualities and 'laws' of existence, undermining as well as upholding stereotypes of 'civility' and 'naturalness' under the guise of magic and wonder.[49]

Though fairy tales today are often associated with Perrault, Andersen and the Grimms, the origins of the literary tradition in Italy are crucial for an understanding of the function of wonder and how it served the authors in undermining the status quo. Suzanne Magnanini observes that

> [t]he literary fairy tale was born at a time when marvels were not relegated to
> fantastic fictions, but swirled around the courts, academies, churches, and public

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[49] Jack Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization (London: Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2006), p. 21.

squares of Europe. Straparola (1480-1557) and Basile (1575-1632) lived and wrote during the Age of the Marvellous (1550-1700), a period in which Europe was awash in wonder.[50]

In the so-called Age of the Marvellous, the work of Straparola and Basile – often viscerally charged and obscene – was as much a social critique as a new form. Unlike the fairy tale format that we now expect - singular, unconnected stories, often peddling moral messages and politely civilised in tone– these writers used frame narratives for their collections, wrote seemingly immoral stories that made light of supposedly serious issues and used vulgarity in language or plot to disrupt cultural assumptions. The marvellous and the political are interwoven at this critical point in fairy-tale history, as wonder functions in these narratives to question social norms.

Giovanni Francesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* – translated as *The Facetious Nights* or *The Pleasant Nights* and published between 1550-53– includes some of the first examples of fairy tale in the literary tradition and highlights Straparola's disruptive narrative tendencies. The collection includes over seventy stories under one umbrella narrative, and though the early examples of fairy tales within those stories did not retain the success they were granted on publication, they would go on to inspire and inform some of the tales we do know, such as 'Puss in Boots'. Zipes suggests that

> [t]he allure of [Straparola's] work can be attributed to several factors: his use of erotic and obscene riddles, his mastery of polite Italian used by the narrators in the frame narrative, his introduction of plain earthy language into the stories, the critical view of the power struggle in Italian society and lack of moralistic preaching, his inclusion of fourteen unusual fairy tales into the collection, and his interest in magic, unpredictable events, duplicity, and the supernatural.[51]

The combination of all of these effects serves to create a basis for the fairy tale that combines political standpoint with magic and, in the case of the earthy and erotic language, an approach that is unashamedly connected to physical experience. Drawing on the oral tradition at a time when literacy was not yet the norm in Italy, Zipes suggests that Straparola's stories 'were part of the nascent civilizing process in Italy', but that they also actively 'demonstrated how both oral and literary fairy tales could be shaped in metaphorical form to address delicate issues pertaining to the power of tyrannical princes, justice, and proper comportment.'[52] By using the fairy tale narratives to

[50] Suzanne Magnanini, *Fairy-tale Science: Monstrous Generation in the Tales of Straparola and Basile* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 4.
[51] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, p.14.
[52] Zipes, p. 16.

challenge accepted cultural behaviours, Straparola highlights an attempt to confuse and disrupt notions of civility which, in turn, affect conceptions of the natural.

In the fairy tales of *The Facetious Nights*, Straparola's depictions of metamorphosis are key to understanding his subversive approach to what is 'natural' as they use magic to confuse corporeal boundaries and undermine the fixity of matter. From transformative feline saliva, porcine princes, hair that produces jewels, and eyes which are gouged out, transformations in this collection are embodied as well as wondrous – his descriptions rarely shying away from the gory or violent: 'so they cut off both her hands and tore her eyes out of her head' (Tale III.3).[53] As Magnanini suggests,

> [t]hrough his own tales of metamorphosis, Straparola offered his non-aristocratic readers the fantasy of assuming social roles from which they were excluded by Venetian law and custom. In Straparola's rise tales, corporeal metamorphosis often precedes and facilitates the social-economic betterment of the protagonist. The transgression of natural physical limits mirrors the protagonists' ability to slip the bounds of social hierarchies.[54]

One such example of slipping the 'bounds' of convention comes in the tale 'Of Filomena the Hermaphrodite Nun' (Tale XIII.9) , in which a woman develops a swelling in between her legs that is revealed in surgery to be a newly-formed penis, and 'in a trice the young lady, restored to health, became both a man and a woman.'[55] The transformation – like any in fairy tale – is accepted, and she exists from then on as both male and female, with no judgment or moral passed by the narrator. Magnanini notes that '[i]n early modern Italy, the intersexed body, like Straparola's fairy tales, possessed the power to fascinate the onlooker and inspire the interrogation of systems of categorization.'[56] By blurring the boundaries between male and female bodies in such a harmless and humorous fashion, Straparola invites considerations of alternate existences, denying the rigidity of corporeal and social boundaries by subverting our expectations of what is natural. As the first literary fairy tales, his stories highlight their own capacity for fluidity and boundary shifting, and demonstrate that the fairy tale is by no means conservative by 'nature'.

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[53] Giovanni Francesco Straparola, 'Biancabella, or the Damsel and the Snake' in *The Pleasant Nights: Volume 1*, ed. Donald Beecher, trans. W. G. Waters (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp.423-455, p. 427-8.

[54] Magnanini, *Fairy-tale Science*, p.52.

[55] Giovanni Francesco Straparola, 'Of Filomena the Hermaphrodite Nun' in *The Pleasant Nights: Volume 2*, ed. Donald Beecher, trans. W. G. Waters (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 617-629, p. 618.

[56] Magnanini, p.68.

The collection *Pentamerone* or *Lo cunti de li cunti* by Giambattista Basile, which includes the earliest known literary versions of the Rapunzel narrative (ATU 310) and was first published posthumously in 1634, has, like *The Facetious Nights*, been acknowledged not only for the brilliance of its narrative creativity, but also its criticism of society and challenge to dualistic structures. As a 'moralist and commentator on social ills', Basile's unashamed depictions of flesh and bodily matter as well as his seemingly protofeminist female characters with sexual desires and unsilenced voices differentiate his narratives from the traditional fairy tales that have come to be associated with patriarchal, conformist agendas.[57] Nancy L. Canepa observes too how Basile's tales disrupted the dualistic categorization we might expect from that era. She suggests his depictions of ogres, for example, offer a challenge to the ideas of nature and culture and civilized and savage as being innately opposite and differentiable:

> the ogres that inhabit forests and other "wilds" consistently prove to be bearers of a relative, ambivalent monstrosity which suggests not only that the categories of "good" and "evil" and "civilized" and "savage" can no longer be so rigidly articulated, but also, in many cases, that these ogres are figures of a positive difference. […] by creating dubious "monsters" who often inspire sympathy instead of terror, Basile also effects, metatextually, a revaluation of the popular culture with which they are intimately linked, as well as a general critique of court society and the canonical literary tradition.[58]

For Basile, the fairy tale could be used to challenge the socially accepted dualities of existence; to undermine what was accepted as natural or civilised.

When the literary fairy tale emerged in France towards the end of the following century, the tales continued to reflect a preoccupation with naturalness, civility and duality. This interest is hardly surprising considering that fairy tales often reflect the philosophical and scientific landscapes of the time, and with the publication of Descartes' *Meditations* in the mid-seventeenth century, it was inevitable that the European fairy tale would continue to engage with discussions of duality in the coming years. As Canepa notes:

> the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were themselves also a time of vast upheavals in virtually all fields – scientific, religious, artistic, geographical, epistemological – which resulted in a questioning, and in many cases undoing, of categories that had previously seemed unquestionable.[59]

[57]Nancy Canepa, 'Basile, Giambattista (1575-1632)' in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, ed. Donald Haase (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), pp. 99-101, p. 101.
[58] Nancy L. Canepa, *From Court to Forest: Giambattista Basile's Lo cunto de li cunti and the Birth of the Literary Fairy Tale* (Detroit: Wayne State Uni press, 1999), p. 177.
[59] Canepa, *From Court to Forest*, p. 177.

And though the French were 'the progenitors of a more general and effective civilizing process in the sixteenth century' than the Italians, the 'French writers learned from the Italians to use a narrative strategy that enabled them to intervene in the civilizing process and allowed them to publish and publicize subversive views that questioned the power of hegemonic groups.'[60]

French fairy tales are often attributed to Charles Perrault, but his female contemporaries were also important figures in the literary scene, and according to Anne E. Duggan, many of these writers were directly engaging with Cartesian dualism and the mind/body, nature/culture divisions it posited.[61] While Perrault's work 'upholds the traditional idealist association between women and matter, both to exclude women from the public sphere or culture, and more generally legitimate male domination in society and the family', Duggan suggests that female salon writers of the time instead often used dualism to see themselves on the side of culture rather than nature (a sentiment offered again centuries later by Simone de Beauvoir). [62]

Unlike both Perrault and the salon writers, however, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, progenitor of the term *contes des fée* or 'fairy tale' and writer of many wonderful stories such as 'The White Cat', has been acknowledged for subverting Cartesian dualism in a way that does not distance femininity from nature or the body, but instead depicts materiality in ways that complicate the civilized/savage, male/female, passive/active hierarchies the philosophy upheld. Duggan argues that

> D'Aulnoy's recuperation of nature as an active force allows her to posit
> "feminine nature" in terms of activity rather than, as Perrault would have it,
> passivity and domesticity. Moreover, d'Aulnoy reimagines the relation between
> nature and culture, woman and man, body and mind, not in terms of oppositions,
> but rather as concepts that are intertwined or interrelated. As such d'Aulnoy
> undoes the dichotomies characteristic of idealist philosophy which distinguishes
> her from the earlier generation of salon women.[63]

D'Aulnoy's tales – from *Les Contes des Fées*, published in 1697, the same year as Perrault's seminal collection – stand out as stories which refute the binary oppositions inherent in the Cartesian views of the time. Patricia Hannon suggests that d'Aulnoy's 'metamorphosed characters seem to look back toward a pre-Cartesian worldview

[60] Zipes, *The Art of Subversion*, p. 16 and 20.
[61] Anne E. Duggan, 'Nature and Culture in the Fairy Tales of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy' in *Marvels & Tales*, 15, 2 (2001), pp. 149-167, p. 150.
[62] Duggan, 'Nature and Culture in the Fairy Tales of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy', p.152.
[63] Duggan, p.162

wherein the boundaries between self and universe, human and natural, are less clearly drawn.'[64] D'Aulnoy's work reveals a desire to challenge dualistic thinking, refuting the idea the fairy tale is inherently dualistic and/or patriarchal, offering fairy tales that use their narrative magic and wonder to reimagine the hierarchies embedded in the oppositional positioning of nature and culture.

Zipes observes that '[t]he theme of transformation runs through all of d'Aulnoy's tales and most of the ones about fairies written by the other conteuses of her time', indicating a desire to highlight potential fluidity and changeability.[65] Writers such as d'Aulnoy were thus critics of oppressive social structures and saw the fairy tale as a way to develop new, transformative stories of society, gender roles, nature and bodies: '[t]he political purpose and design of most of the tales are clear: the narratives are symbolical representations of the authors' critique of the patriarchal status quo and of their desire to change the current socialisation process.'[66] For all its associations with patriarchy, the traditional fairy tale emerges from the fictions of Straparola, Basile, d'Aulnoy and also Charlotte Rose de Caumont de La Force – whose 'physical and often erotic descriptions of love ran counter to prevailing moral and social values, […] portraying sensuality as an integral part of the feminine nature' – as a genre capable of tackling deeply embedded dualistic assumptions.[67] As Canepa suggests of those sixteenth and seventeenth century authors:

> Far from conceiving the fairy tale as an "escapist" genre, the tellers of this period alternately used their tales as vehicles for antimonarchical polemics and ethical critique, or as fantastic, utopian models for a transformed world in which justice, equality, and love would reign. In short, the "marginality" of these early tales, from Basile to the first wave of French production, took on the status of a space where authors could experiment with different languages and ideological visions and sustain critiques of literary traditions and social institutions.[68]

The capacity for the fairy tale not just to uphold dualistic assumptions and hierarchies, but challenge them through transformative depictions of nature and culture, civilized and savage, mind and body, stands in stark contrast with the dominant discourse about

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[64] Patricia Hannon, *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998, p. 81.

[65] Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 36

[66] Jack Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairytales in North America and England* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. xi.

[67] Harold Neemann, 'La Force, Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de (c. 1650–1724)' in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, ed. Donald Haase (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), p. 552.

[68] Canepa, *From Court to Forest*, p. 19

traditional fairy tales as inherently conformist. What these lesser-known fairy tales reveal is that the fluidity and transformative capabilities of the narratives make them a prime site for reimagining oppressive dualities, and rewriting those deterministic stories of materiality.

Duggan observes that '[s]ince at least the early modern period, particularly after the "discovery" of the New World, European writers, philosophers, and scholars have been preoccupied by the concepts of nature and culture.'[69] However, despite the examples of blurred boundaries in the works above, these concepts tended to be viewed as polarities, which were then used to assert the supposedly inherent differences between European 'civilization' over the non-European savage, or the rational male over the 'bestial' female.[70] Both models saw the 'natural' Other as either inferior due to lack of intellect, or venerated for a perceived closeness to 'nature', and these models were then often reflected in the literature of the time.[71] Evidence of this preoccupation can, of course, be observed in some of the most prevalent tales of the European tradition, many of which posit the perfect woman as a passive recipient of male activity or the 'difficult' woman as in need of taming.

The oppositional construct of witch vs princess is one trope which demonstrates clearly the way that fairy tales enabled the perpetuation of myths of nature and culture and the depiction of nature as the site of both purity and dangerous uncontrollability. Witches, for example, tend to live alone (without children) in the forest; ugly and viscerally other, they live in close proximity to that wild, uncultured natural world and are thus made threatening. On the other hand, princesses may be depicted as closer to nature through their ability to communicate with animals, their bird-like voices, or self-sacrificing (motherly) personalities, but this connection is deemed pure, angelic, untainted. In these oppositional character tropes the dualistic and problematic stereotypes of naturalness can be seen to police models of behaviour for women in fairy tales. So, for all the disruptions to duality that can be observed in the fairy tales of this period, it is still the case that many of the most well-known literary European fairy tales can be seen to uphold dualistic social structures, in particular the prevailing associations of women or Other with nature, and that this can be traced to the same period in history.

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[69] Duggan, 'Nature and Culture in the Fairy Tale of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy', p.149- 150.
[70] Duggan, p. 150.
[71] Duggan, p.150.

In 1697, when Charles Perrault published his collection of fairy tales *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*, counter to the work of writers such as d'Aulnoy, he in many ways affirmed the divisions of dualistic thought and offered reductive depictions of the 'natural' woman who must be tamed. Bacchilega and Duggan have acknowledged how Perrault's collection demonstrates his desire to encourage women to conform to specific 'natural' behaviours and to reject others. [72] Policing the behaviour of the victim (or seducer) Little Red Riding Hood and punishing the curiosity of the murderous Bluebeard's young wife, Perrault used his narratives to warn against the supposedly dangerous aspects of feminine 'nature' and reward goodness, passivity and virginity in his female characters. As Bacchilega observes, 'his fairy tales were written for the aristocracy, with a style designed to satisfy the highly cultivated adult reader, and morals meant to educate the young in civilized behavior'.[73] Civilised behaviour for women, was of course, very different to the civilised behaviour recommended for men, and as L. Seifert suggests, 'the existential oppositions imposed on folk- and fairy-tale women (mind versus matter, intelligence versus beauty, imagination versus virtue, among others) make femininity a site of bitter internecine and internal psychological conflict.'[74] Perrault's collection was one of many which affirmed such existential oppositions, pitting the natural against the preferable civilization of culture.

Evidence of nature/culture divisions such as these continue throughout the dominant canon of traditional literary fairy tale in Europe. From Perrault's desire to tame natural female urges, the removal of female flesh and sexuality in the Grimm tales, to Hans Christian Andersen's characters, who frequently traverse the borders between the natural and the artificial and meet with cruel ends. The fairy tale does not exist in a vacuum, immune to the assumptions of duality that have been so central to philosophical and theoretical discourse. That fairy tales have been used to further the divide between nature and culture and uphold the hierarchies of dominant social structures is without doubt, and yet, it is important to acknowledge that fairy tales and their creators did not all have the same agendas and many of the writers discussed in this section sought to challenge and subvert accepted models of behaviour, offering nuanced and complex depictions of nature, women and civilization that can be seen to

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[72] 'Perrault thus narrows down the oral tale to a heterosexual scenario in which the girls are "naturally" both victims and seducers' – Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p.57.
[73] Ibid, p.57.
[74] Lewis C. Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France, 1690-1715: Nostalgic* Utopias (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 218.

refute dualistic assumptions. Unfortunately, many of the fairy tales that 'stuck' – as Zipes put it – encouraged conformity to dualistic models of existence that served to perpetuate, rather than disrupt, hierarchies, and it would be the work of the postmodern fairy tale movement to both highlight the way that dualistic models of nature/culture, savage/civilised, mind/body had been upheld by the dominant narratives, and to demonstrate what ideological assumptions about nature and matter had been disguised by wonder.[75]

Postmodern Fairy Tales and the Construction of Nature

'There is an idea that fairy tales arise from the ground, like mushrooms,' observed novelist A. S. Byatt at the Royal Academy in London, 'but,' she added, 'that isn't the case'.[76] Of course, fairy tales, like any kind of literature, are constructed. They do not grow like fruit on trees ready to be picked from witches' gardens; nor do they roll up the beach with the mermaids or emerge from the snow like ice children. Though it often feels as though they materialized from nowhere - like the djinnis of the *Arabian Nights*, or the fairy godmother in Disney's Cinderella – in actual fact, fairy and folk tales were not born but *made;* created, shaped and moulded by the mouths and pens of those with the power to tell them – and with the power to define what is 'natural' and what is not. That fairy tales are literary constructions is now common knowledge thanks to the effect of the last fifty years of fairy-tale fiction and scholarship, but for many years fairy tales were associated with naturalness. The primary challenge of much of the work of fairy tale scholars and folklorists in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Jack Zipes (1979; 1985), Marina Warner (1995), and Cristina Bacchilega (1997), as well as the fiction of the 'fairy tale generation', was to highlight the tales as constructions.[77] Neither the anthropological fantasy of 'primordial, intact vessels of peasant wisdom', nor the archetypal narratives with valuable lessons about human psychology, or even innocent stories for children, the dominant fairy tale narratives of the past, the postmodern fairy tale movement asserted, far from benign, have, under a guise of

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[75] Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[76] A. S. Byatt, 'English and German Cultural Encounters: A.S. Byatt in Conversation with Martin Swales and Godela Weiss-Sussex', Senate House, London. 15th October 2015.

[77] Stephen Benson, 'Introduction: Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale' in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 1-19, p. 2.

wonder, reflected and enforced powerful ideological assumptions, reinforced through the stories as 'natural'.[78] In highlighting these assumptions, postmodern fairy tale writers challenged and undermined the fixed idea of nature in the traditional stories, offering radical reworkings of stories with the artifice behind the wonder openly revealed.

Angela Carter's *demythologising* project – much discussed but ever relevant – was crucial to destabilizing the perceptions of fairy tales as 'natural' and thus unchanging, fixed and – somehow – pertaining to an inherent 'truth' or 'natural law'. In defence of Carter's use of the fairy tale form to challenge patriarchy in the collection *The Bloody Chamber*, Merja Makinen asked: 'the question of the form of the fairy-tale: is it some universal, unchangeable given or does it change according to its specific historic rendition?'[79] The question was answered by her own paper but also by the myriad revisions of fairy tale that emerged over the decades that followed Carter's own, which disputed the assumptions of the fairy tale as being a fixed and universal medium. Folk and fairy tale scholarship during this time too came to embrace the fluidity of the genre, rejecting early suggestions of essentialism and fixity. The fixation with the earliest, supposedly least-contaminated versions of the narratives – as seen in the fairy tale-scholarship of the past – was replaced by a more interconnected and fluid vision of the literary fairy tale as a changing and changeable genre which, rather than reflect universality, could instead highlight diversity and intertextuality.

As well as disrupting the notion of a fixed fairy tale form, the focus on increasing diversity and intertextuality in contemporary fairy tale reworkings and criticism was too a way to challenge the assumptions of the fairy tale's *content* as reflective of what is 'universal, unchangeable given' – i.e. that women were naturally more passive and in need of rescue. To avoid the essentialism embedded in such assumptions, cultural perception of both the form and the content of the genre was shifted away from naturalness and the supposed truthfulness and universality of the 'folk', into the realm of the creative, cultural constructions of language. Fairy tale scholarship and rewriting thus consciously sought to 'denaturalize' the images relayed by the traditional tales to highlight their construction. Fairy tales were continually

[78] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 133, Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* and Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* and *Fairy Tales Transformed?*
[79] Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality' in *Feminist Review*, 42 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 2-15 http://www.jstor.org/stable/139512 [Accessed 5 June 2016], p. 4.

moulded and remoulded, interwoven with other fairy and folktales to deny their fixity and seeming 'naturalness' and instead demonstrate their conscious construction by humans. To free the princesses from passivity waiting in towers, they were made active, not fixed in one place, endlessly perfect, but fluid and flawed. Postmodern revisioning saw potential in transformation, fluidity and change rather than in those 'purer' or more 'natural' stories of the folk that had been the fascination of earlier scholars and creators, and in order to break down the hierarchies apparent in the dominant canon of European fairy tales, contemporary writers and critics used this fluidity to make what had seemed natural, cultural – that is, creative, constructive and fluid.

This shift was reflective of a more general shift in contemporary theory and philosophy to examine social structures – hierarchies, dualisms, stereotypes – not as naturally occurring and thus justified and unchangeable, but flexible constructions moulded and managed by the uses and abuses of power. As the poststructural and postmodern movements sought to destabilize the grand narrative of essentialism in relation to language, women, race, sexuality, class and the environment, this agenda was mirrored in the contemporary fairy tale, which highlighted the power of discourse to shape the world into an appearance of naturalness, to shape nature itself to fit the mould of the dominant ideological structures. What had been accepted as natural – such as the fairy tale and the images it depicted – shifted to demonstrate instead the unending capacity of language, discourse and storytelling to create what we *understand* to be natural. From character to plot device to form and function, the 'natural' was dismantled in fairy-tale fiction and scholarship, presenting the fairy tale as a form in which 'the numinous is artfully made to appear natural' in order to cloak dualistic, ideological agendas under a veil of nature, particularly in relation to women.[80]

The domestication of the female characters in stories such as Little Red Riding Hood – who is punished for leaving the civilized path – and Little Snow White –who finds shelter with the dwarves if she will keep house for them – reveal how supposedly natural behaviours for women came in many of these narratives to be tied to civility and goodness, which were then fixed by the idea of naturalness as being something inherent. As Bacchilega suggests,

> [t]o take an extreme case, when Snow White is presented as a "natural" woman, the artful construction of her image encourages thinking of her and other stereotypical heroines in pre-cultural, unchangeable terms. By showcasing

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[80] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 9.

> "women" and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/ them into man-made constructs of "Woman."[81]

The most desirable qualities in women (goodness, kindness, passivity) were revered as natural while the least desirable (curiosity, activity and desire) were deemed unnatural or else a dangerous natural instinct that must be civilized. Civilization – in the form of domestication, passivity and the quelling of desire – came, in these narratives, to be aligned with goodness, rightness and proper conduct. Just as Descartes had distanced nature from intelligence and rationality, the literary fairy tale tradition was used in many cases to distance nature and flesh from civilization, and thus, from what is 'good', often depicting goodness in domesticated visions of the natural. The entrenched morality of the good/evil dichotomies in the literary fairy tale enabled a moral essence to dualistic thought that was difficult to shake when goodness was equated with civilized behaviour i.e. culture, but was simultaneously deemed to be 'naturally occurring' and thus fixed, unchanging and justified.

It was these entrenched ideas surrounding what is 'natural' and therefore 'fixed' that the postmodern fairy tale worked so hard to undermine. If the dominant canon of traditional literary fairy tales could use the wonder and fluidity of fairy tale to 'teach where boundaries lie', the contemporary postmodern revisions of fairy tales were used to highlight the existence of those boundaries and reveal them as constructions.[82] And if, as Max Lüthi has noted, 'folk tales strike us as enigmatic because they mix the miraculous with the natural, the near with the far, and the ordinary with the incomprehensible in a completely effortless way', the fairy tales of the 1970s and beyond continued to blur boundaries but so often did so in order to consciously *reveal* the effort involved.[83] The modern reworkings of old fairy tale narratives consciously transgress the boundaries of time, space, matter, reality and fantasy to demonstrate the fluidity of linguistic constructions; blurring the distinctions that create those boundaries, and recognising what traditional fairy tales too acknowledged: that '[c]rossings bring new things into being.'[84]

Yet, despite the intent to blur boundaries, approaching nature 'as a sociocultural construct that had historically often served to legitimize the ideological claims of

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[81] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 9.
[82] Marina Warner, *The Absent Mother*, p. 17.
[83] Max Luthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. John D. Niles (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 2.
[84] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 31.

specific social groups' has its complications.[85] The complexities of the postmodern approach to 'nature'– that it is a fiction created by language, but that this fiction can be altered to give rise to newer, more diverse and inclusive depictions of existence – has the potential to deny the natural world altogether as mere myth. Postmodern fairy-tale writing could be accused of (albeit inadvertently) ostracising the natural world and the material body from the perceived agency, fluidity and creativity of the human mind through its emphasis on the constructive abilities of language. This bias is reflected in much of the contemporary scholarship on the genre, which often focuses on deterministic depictions of the 'natural' as a concept or idea, rather than on the natural (or material) world in and of itself. By focusing on the construction of nature, postmodernism sought to highlight everything as construction and thus remove the hierarchies, and yet, in so doing, it venerated the cultural over the natural and positioned it as creator of all. But just as it is easy to tell a story of the traditional European fairy tale as a genre that overwhelmingly upholds the divisions between nature and culture and the hierarchical structures such divisions enable, it is also easy to consider the postmodern fairy tale and its focus on construction as a homogenized collective with one (dangerously mythical) perspective on the natural world. The fairy tales of the postmodern era may highlight the constructedness of our ideas of nature, but they can too reveal the slippages between the borders of nature/culture. Though they reveal the artifice behind the wonder, they pave the way for reworkings of nature which may be constructed, but are also fluid, transformative and creative.

New Materialism v. Postmodernism? A Rejection of Dualisms

The dualisms that structured Western society were challenged by the postmodern and poststructuralist agendas of the latter part of the twentieth century, which used language to undermine their solidity. However, as cultural discourse turned towards a more materially-driven narrative of existence, theories of corporeal feminism, new materialism and posthumanism emerged. These theories sought to challenge the social-constructivist approach of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought, which were seen to be committing nature and biology to the realm of discourse, and to undermine dualistic thought without denying the material. Concerned by the 'flight from nature' in

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[85] Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism" in *Modern Language Association*, 121, 2 (2006), pp. 503-516, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486328> [accessed July 1st 2019], p. 506.

poststructuralist feminist attempts to close the gap between men and women, for example, new materialist thinkers came to see the 'linguistic turn' and its emphasis on demonstrating 'how cultural practices produce what is experienced as the "natural"' as a development that further denigrates nature by relegating it to a mere construction of language.[86] These new-material theories, I should add, also distance themselves from the historical materialism of Marxism because the desire to 'show that things which seem natural and thus unassailable […] are actually social, historical constructions' was, like the postmodern agenda, too firmly aligned with the social construction of nature and matter and was thus part of the problem, rather than the solution.[87] As Alaimo and Hekman argue: "[a]lthough postmoderns claim to reject all dichotomies, there is one dichotomy that they appear to embrace almost without question: language/reality"[88] Reality, as the natural, pre-given material realm, thus remains the Other of rational thought and language, maintaining the supremacy of humanity as the creator of language. Coole and Frost thus suggest that

> the more textual approaches associated with the so-called cultural turn are increasingly being deemed inadequate for understanding contemporary society; particularly in light of some of the most urgent challenges regarding environmental, demographic, geopolitical, and economic change.[89]

Though these 'textual approaches', then, had done incredible work in undermining social structures and assumptions, in light of changing global discourse, the drive to think with and around the material as well as the textual grew more pressing.

New materialist theorists often define their positions in response to postmodernism, but their emphasis on material agency does not inherently challenge social constructionism. 'It is entirely possible,' Coole and Frost argue, 'to accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse and that cultural artefacts are not arbitrary vis-à-vis nature'.[90] To think from a new materialist perspective is merely to think about how bodies, nature,

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[86] Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 4 and Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p.1.

[87] Coole and Frost, p. 27. It is not my intention to examine the differences between Marxist materialism and the new and vital materialisms that emerged in the 1990s – my focus in this thesis is on the differences and points of convergence between the postmodern and new materialist movements. Though I recognise that Marxism plays a role in this development, I do not see it to be strictly relevant to this study, not least because the new materialist trajectory I follow distances itself so thoroughly from historical materialist discourse.

[88] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory' in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Alaimo. S. and Hekman, S. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008) pp. 1-19, p. 2.

[89] Coole and Frost, p. 2-3.

[90] Coole and Frost, p. 27.

biology, material objects and nonhuman life are – interwoven with language and thought – actively participating in the construction of existence. In fact, such visions of nature and matter as active co-constructors of existence arise, in no small part, from the work of theorists such as Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze, who are frequently associated with the postmodern movement. While Haraway departed from the linguistic approaches to reality attributed to both postmodern and poststructuralist theories in her assertion that nature 'is made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans', Deleuze, who saw his work as 'vitalist', sought to radically reimagine existence as a material and discursive process of becoming.[91] And as Braidotti suggests, Deleuze is central because he 'provided lucid and illuminating guidance to those involved in the project of redefining that exactly is the "matter" that neo-materialism is made of.'[92] The vital materialisms that emerge from the linguistic 'landscapes of postmodernity' do not, then, arise to contest language's ability to construct reality, matter and nature, but to demonstrate how materiality impacts discourse, constructing existence collaboratively in a series of dynamic interconnections.[93] As Grosz suggests:

> If nature, biology, and the material world are imbued with activity, with their own forces and unpredictability, then our concepts of the subject, culture, and the social order need to open themselves up to, rather than see themselves in opposition to, the natural order.[94]

The natural order, like the cultural order, would thus be a dynamic, autonomous agency; not the Enlightenment vision of a deterministic, inert Other, but a fluid, creative co-constructor of existence.[95]

This fluid reimagining of 'nature' has implications not only for the natural world and the materials we consume, but also our own conception of the 'ideal' Humanist subject – the white, heterosexual, Western man. As the protofeminist fairy-tale authors of seventeenth-century France would surely attest, '[f]eminism has long struggled with the historically tenacious entanglements of "woman" and "nature"'.[96] Therefore, is it

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[91] Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics For Inappropriate/d Others' in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Grossberg, L., Nelson, C., and Treichler, P. (New York: Routledge 1992), pp. 295-337, p. 297 and Coole and Frost, p. 10.

[92] Rosi Braidotti, 'Interview with Rosi Braidotti' in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, eds. Rich Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012) (ebook), p.21.

[93] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses,* p. 13.

[94] Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 7.

[95] Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters', p. 297.

[96] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 2.

perhaps unsurprising that the recent surge in new material, posthuman reimaginings of nature and matter emerged from contemporary feminism. In response to the emphasis placed on language in much poststructuralist feminism, early 'corporeal feminists' such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti drew on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway as well as the monism of Baruch Spinoza, to call for a more 'embodied and embedded' vision of subjectivity and existence that acknowledged nature 'in terms of dynamic forces, fields of transformation and upheaval, rather than as a static fixity, passive, worked over, transformed and dynamized only by culture'.[97] Theories such as these, which came in time to be associated with new materialisms, determined that it was only by reimagining nature/culture and mind/body binaries as a 'continuum' or a 'Möbius strip' through which 'one side becomes another', that the dualistic hierarchies of social and environmental oppression could be truly dissolved.[98] This shift in thinking would involve, they conceived, a radical reworking of conceptions of matter and bodies, of course, but primarily of nature, which had been so contentious to feminists intent on avoiding the determinism of those pernicious 'natural laws'.

For the purpose of this thesis, then, nature will be analysed and conceived through a Deleuzian, new-material lens, as *in process* and multiple, rather than fixed as one whole that is the Other of human consciousness. Under these terms, nature, as the material world, encompasses not only the body as 'natural', but humans themselves, and is conceived as inseparable from the mind, subject or consciousness. '[M]an and nature' according to Deleuze and Guattari 'are not like two opposite terms confronting each other – not even in the sense of bipolar opposites within a relationship of causation, ideation, or expression (cause and effect, subject and object, etc.); rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product.'[99] The conception of nature in this way, as producer-product, contradicts the subject/object duality of philosophers such as Descartes, and reflects instead the Spinozist conception of the world as one substance, not divisible by or hierarchized into categories of matter and consciousness. Spinoza's philosophy was based on 'logical monism', which determines that, as one single substance, no part of the world can exist without the other parts, and thereby denies the

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[97] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013) p. 51 and Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 7.
[98] Braidotti, p. 2 and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. xii.
[99] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London and New York, Continuum: 2004), p. 5.

boundaries between nature and culture through its dissolution of binary divisions.[100] As Grosz suggests: '[a]n individual entity (human or otherwise) is not self-subsistent but is a passing or provisional determination of the self-subsistent substance in nature.'[101] There is no mind without matter, no culture without nature.

For, of course, the philosophical engagement with nature – telling stories of materiality and naturalness – has been as diverse as the fairy tales we love to homogenise. To say that Western philosophy has always denigrated nature and matter as the mind's lesser, inactive and inert opposite is to ignore the classical theories of Epicurus and Democritus, whose atomistic vision of materialism ran counter to the Ideal Forms of Platonic philosophy. It is to deny the monistic philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, who posited that existence was not divided into two distinct substances, as Descartes suggested, but one. And it is to disregard the work of Charles Darwin, whose theories of evolution saw humans as simply one species of animal, as well as the Romantic movement that declared nature to be inseparable from spirit. Such stories of nature and matter – as well as the many others that go unmentioned here – have challenged dualistic perspectives, often working towards freeing materiality from the constraints of the Platonic, Cartesian and Newtonian theories that have, nonetheless, endured. Just as the dominant canon of European fairy tales – those enduring stories of Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, etc. – remain embedded in Anglo-American consciousness despite the wealth of alternatives, the dominant canon of Western philosophy has, on the whole, maintained the pervasive dualisms born of classical philosophy, undeterred by opposition.

Deleuze and Guattari's project was primarily of dissolving and making multiple the so-called arborescent, dualistic structures that held humanity in that system of dialectic thought. As Colebrook suggests: 'Deleuze was […] critical of the dialectic whereby something (such as human life) becomes in relation to what it is *not*. The problem is that this dialectical difference begins from an opposition between human life and the material forces that shape it.'[102] Far from upholding dualistic determinism, the Deleuzian vision of existence is fluid, multiple, rhizomatic, in-process, in a constant state of becoming. His depictions of nature are reflected in this transformative fluidity, as he rejects the traditional associations of natural and nonhuman life as inert and

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[100] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1946), p. 560.
[101] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 10.
[102] Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 50.

passive, instead suggesting that it is endlessly connecting and interconnecting machinically with other processes, just as we are: '[a] plant, for example, is not a static thing, although we perceive it as such. The plant is the reception of light, heat, moisture, insect pollination and so on; it is a process of becoming in relation to other becomings.'[103] To envisage plants and other seemingly inanimate lifeforms or objects as subject to flows and changes just as we are is to deny the certainty of the matter/thought, human/nonhuman, nature/culture divides. As a system of interconnections, Deleuze envisages existence as a continual process of production/product relationships that destabilize humanity's superiority as the producer, creator and controller of all life, material and discursive.

The work of Haraway continues Deleuze and Guattari's agenda in its desire to create new models and words to understand existence that cannot be bracketed into dualistic categories. Coining terms such as 'naturecultures' to deny their separability, and viewing nature as a co-constructor with language, Haraway's brand of postmodernism does not deny nature as active participant in discourse.[104] Her work responds to 'the invention and reinvention of nature – perhaps the most central arena of hope, oppression, and contestation for inhabitants of the planet earth in our times.'[105] Her focus on identity leads her to imagine a new identity for nature as a 'coyote' or 'protean trickster' – a figure of folklore – constructing a figure of the 'world as witty agent and actor.'[106] Like Deleuze and Guattari, Haraway can see nature neither as fixed or inert, nor as a unified whole that can be categorised. She notes:

> nature is not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor as essence to be saved or violated. Nature is not hidden and so does not need to be unveiled. Nature is not a text to be read in the codes of mathematics and biomedicine. It is not the "other" who offers origin, replenishment, and service. Neither mother, nurse, nor slave, nature is not matrix, resource, or tool for the reproduction of man.[107]

The radical redefinition of nature distances it from its status in postmodern theory as ideologically constructed, but similarly denies that it is in any way pre-discursive. For Haraway, nature cannot be separated from the human, yet neither is it humanity's

[103] Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, p. 128.
[104] Donna J. Haraway, 'The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness' in *Manifestly Haraway*, eds. Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesote Press, 2016), pp. 91-198, p. 94.
[105] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.
[106] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 3.
[107] Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters', p. 296.

creation. The natural and the artificial are thereby indivisible, denying commonly held anthropocentric, phallocentric depictions of nature as the Other of human thought.

Haraway's conception of a nature that is inextricable from culture and yet not ideologically constructed grounds her work in the material and hinders the hierarchical structures that exist within dualisms. Her cyborg creates a space in theory where '[n]ature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world.'[108] Her engagement, from a feminist, biological standpoint, forms a crucial element of the new materialist debate, encouraging visions of matter as agentic – in the form of the coyote –, but also of theory as corporeal – she argues: '[o]verwhelmingly, theory is bodily, and theory is literal. Theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is anything but disembodied.'[109] This reconfiguring of both theory and matter are attempts to end what she has named the 'border war' upheld in Western philosophical thought, between organism and machine – the 'natural' and the 'constructed'.[110] Arguing that '[t]he boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical system of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other', Haraway's theories of nature deny its otherness, and affirm that the myths, stories and discourses of life are a part, but not the whole, of that life.[111]

Haraway's cyborg manifesto told a new story of nature, technology, human and animal that paved the way for the posthuman leanings of new materialists such as Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti's project, concerned with 'processes, rather than concepts', directs itself towards the blurring of the lines that binarize and hierarchize, and instead asks for a celebration of difference through a reconceptualization of subjectivity, asking: '[h]ow can one free difference from the negative charge which it seems to have built into it?'.[112] Inspired by Deleuze and his return to a monistic, Spinozan philosophy, as well as the work of Guattari and his three ecologies, Braidotti is similarly engaged in a vision of

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[108] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Manifestly Haraway*, ed. Haraway, Donna J., (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=4392065> [accessed July 20th 2019], p. 9.
[109] Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters', p. 299.
[110] Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 7.
[111] Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 33.
[112] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2002), p. 1 and 4.

becomings that enable the processual development of multiple visions of nature, woman, human, nonhuman, subject, object, etc. At the forefront of new material debate (and co-originator of the term 'new materialism' with Manuel deLanda in the 1990s) Braidotti is concerned with the 'cartographies' of human experience, and how power, in a Foucauldian sense shapes that experience.[113] For her, as for Deleuze, nature has been anthropomorphized, and the Deleuzian *becomings* (woman, animal, etc) are a way to alter this, and to bring the other (be that nonhuman, woman, racial other) out of its status of other and into a positive, affirmative status of difference. She argues that difference has always been 'sexualized, racialized and naturalized' and that the challenge to these assumptions is to look in between the dichotomies of difference that dualism dictates.[114] For her,

> [t]he definition of a person's identity takes place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flourish and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation.[115]

While Braidotti's focus is often on the cartographies of the body, her analysis of flesh as 'embrained', and of brains as 'embodied' through the 'neo-spinozist' perspective refuses to place the material outside the subject.[116] Subjectivity is instead multiple becomings, which has implications for the subject/object divide and therefore that of nature/culture and our conceptions of nature as outside of ourselves. Braidotti responds to the linguistic turn by '[t]hinking through the body, and not in a flight away from it,' which ultimately 'means confronting boundaries and limitations'.[117] Despite her interest in the female body, Braidotti's work on materiality engages postcolonialism, capitalism and ecology as well as feminism, encouraging a new materialist intersectional identity politics that avoids the hierarchies created by dominant theories of subjectivity and language by speaking only in multiples, and examines the space that exists between dichotomies to enable affirmative difference. Her work seeks to dismantle the dualistic structures that separate the materiality of life (human and

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[113] Rick Dolphjin and Iris van der Tuin, 'Interview with Kared Barad' in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, eds. Rich Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 48-71, p. 48.
[114] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 15.
[115] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses,* p. 2.
[116] Rosi Braidotti and Lisa Regan, 'Our Times Are Always Out of Joint: Feminist Relational Ethics in and of the World Today: An Interview with Rosi Braidotti' in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 28:3 (2017) 171-192, p. 177.
[117] Braidotti, Metamorphoses, p. 5.

nonhuman) from subjectivity, giving nature a place in the reality of the world as multiple, fluid and 'embrained' despite the knowledge that there is no adequate language from which to speak *as* the material.[118]

For Elizabeth Grosz, whose text *Volatile Bodies* (1994) came to represent one of the earliest expressions of 'corporeal feminism', the stories of nature's otherness have been limiting progress. Her work responds to the feminism of critics such as de Beauvoir and their perceived departure from nature, observing that '[w]ithin feminist scholarship and politics, nature has been regarded primarily as a kind of obstacle against which we need to struggle, as that which remains inert, given, unchanging, resistant to historical, social and cultural transformations.'[119] The problem with this, she argues, is that it denies matter (as nature or bodies) intelligence or agency, and enables the perpetuation of misogynous, racist, classist and heterosexist hierarchies based on these active/passive binarisms. According to Grosz, philosophers and theorists must restore 'ontology to its rightful place at the centre of knowledges and social practices' and must envisage bodies, flesh, matter and nature as becomings, in a Deleuzian sense, rather than oppositions to subjectivity; the mind and the body thereby entwined in the formation of the self as a process of various becomings.[120] Grosz began with a focus on the body and examined how, more specifically, the female body was being understood by and through discourses on nature with little suggestion of the body's materiality as an active agency itself.

Grosz's work highlights the ways in which new material feminism has struggled to remain focused on women when the issues raised were so clearly intersectional and regarding the power structures in place to oppress not only nature itself but anyone determined by a supposed 'natural role'. New materialist theory has since come to embrace (as fluid interaction) the scientific positions of physicist Karen Barad, the posthuman, technological leanings of Braidotti, as well as the more object-oriented, vital materialist studies of theorists such as Jane Bennett – all of which are central to the reworkings of matter in this thesis. From Haraway, Deleuze and Guattari, to Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, Stacy Alaimo, Susan Hekham, Braidotti, Bennett, Grosz and Barad, to name but a few, all of these varying angles on new materialist discourse

[118] Braidotti, 'Our Times Are Always Out of Joint', p. 177.
[119] Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 13.
[120] Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 5.

sought to create new narratives of materiality and nature. In all of these theories, the emphasis is on the interconnectivity of existence, the 'möbius strip' of life through which nature, culture, mind, body, thought and matter are inextricably woven.[121] As Grosz suggests:

> Perhaps it involves a new kind of materialism; or perhaps materialism is no longer an adequate term and we need to generate a new term. What I am seeking is a new concept of matter that also involves something incorporeal, a spark of virtuality that enables life to emerge.[122]

New Materialism and Wonder

These new conceptions of matter are really just new *stories,* and the creation of new stories is central to both new materialism and the contemporary fairy tale. While postmodern fairy tales have sought to retell traditional narratives to give voice to those previously denied such a platform, new materialist scholarship works to speak with materiality in mind, attempting to tell another tale of matter and nature that encourages a more fluid and active vision of the material world in cultural consciousness. Though postmodern fiction might have the tendency – as new materialists Alaimo and Hekman suggest – to uphold the language/reality dualism by demonstrating language's creative ability to construct the world, the telling of new stories of matter – in fiction or theory – can offer the potential for material agency within the linguistic.[123] As Serenella Iovino observes:

> [i]f the concept of agency is no longer limited, to quote Alaimo, to "the province of the human," and if matter emerges in formations of meanings and bodies on a time-space endowed with an "ongoing historicity," it is almost impossible not to see material agencies as makers of stories.[124]

Iovino refers here to the work of Jane Bennett, who is central to this thesis not only for her radical reimagining of materialities, but for the ways in which she embraces aspects of storytelling in her theoretical position.

Somewhat controversially, the language of Bennett's work directly engages with the language of fairy tales. 'The story I tell', she elucidates, 'is of a contemporary world

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[121] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. xii.
[122] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Life, Matter, and Other Variations' in *Philosophy Today*, 55 (2011), pp. 17-27, p. 18.
[123] Alaimo and Hekman, 'Introduction', p. 2.
[124] Serenella Iovino, 'Steps to a Material Ecocriticism: The Recent Literature About the "New Materialisms" and Its Implications for Ecocritical Theory' in *Ecozon@*, 3, 1, pp. 134-145, p. 139.

sprinkled with natural and cultural sites that have the power to "enchant.'"[125]

Enchantment, she suggests,

> entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound.[126]

For Bennett, wonder – as the 'temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' – is central to her theories of fluid and creative matter. Her use of 'enchantment' has been controversial due to its relationship with magic, but it links directly to her focus on the creation of 'onto-tales', 'counterstories' and 'alter-tales'.[127] For Bennett, narrative is (perhaps conversely) key to this material reimagining, and enchantment is central, not to imply that materiality has been endowed with magic via some external sorcerer, but to suggest matter's wondrous, immanent vitality and how we might use narrative to depict its vast potential and possibility. Bennett's 'temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' echoes Carter's suspension of 'natural laws', with both suggesting that in the space that narrative potential opens up, the old, constraining discourses can drop away to reveal a new story that disrupts the dominant dualistic paradigms.

Iovino observes that Bennett is not alone in highlighting new materialism's role in the creation of new 'counterstories'.[128] Alaimo and Hekman also '[stress] the dimension of what we call "storied matter."'[129] As does Donna Haraway, she notes, whose concept of the 'material – semiotic co-emergence in what she has elsewhere called "naturecultures" is expressed by the idea that our earthly life, the dimension we materially (and semiotically) share with nonhuman beings, is a cohabitation of stories, and that an awareness about this shared dimension can be enhanced by way of conceiving "inhabitable narratives about science and nature".'[130] That humans share the world – share a life – with nonhuman agents is the story Bennett tells so lucidly. Nature and culture are inseparable in this narrative: 'such as the way omega3 fatty acids can alter human moods or the way our trash is not "away" in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak.'[131] Life is the subject

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[125] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* p. 3.
[126] Ibid, p. 5
[127] Ibid, p. 15, 8 and 4.
[128] Ibid, p. 8.
[129] Iovino, 'Steps to a Material Ecocriticism', p. 136.
[130] Ibid, p.136.
[131] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. vii.

of storytelling, and yet, the stories philosophy has told have been overwhelmingly centred on humans. When Bennett asks '[d]oes life only make sense as one side of a life-matter binary, or is there such a thing as a mineral or metallic life, or a life of the it in "it rains"?' she opens up a conversation that fairy tales also enable – is there more to the nonhuman world than meets the eye?[132]

According to Marina Warner, fairy tales engage us through a kind of material, nonhuman magic: 'evoking simple, sensuous phenomena that glint and sparkle, pierce and flow, by these means, striking recognition in the reader or listener's body at a visceral depth (glass and forests; gold and silver; diamonds and rubies; thorns and knives; wells and tunnels).[133] In these magical stories, the new materialist vision of life as emerging through matter's enchantments – to use Bennett's term – does not seem so distant. Telling new stories of matter that deny the dualistic structures of existence is crucial in fiction, philosophy and theory because each is just a slightly different form of storytelling. The only way to tell new stories is through language, but that language need not be exclusively anthropocentric. Iovino notes that

> [t]he narcissism of our species is both material and discursive: humans, in fact, are not only in charge of the world, but also of the word. The counter-story that a vital materialism hands to ecocriticism is an exercise in "listening," we could say, using a Heideggarian concept: receptively listening to the others' voice, the others' stories, the stories of the different subjects populating with us the plane of existential immanence.[134]

Postmodern fairy tales may have attempted to speak with the voice of the Other – racial, gendered, aged, classed – but can they also listen to and speak with the multiple voices of materiality? Might those voices deny dualistic hierarchies at their very core? Both nature and matter in fairy-tale fictions are undoubtedly culturally mediated – as in all literature – but I contend that it is possible for the contemporary literary fairy tale, as 'counterstory', to at once highlight the cultural constructions of nature while also offering the potential for new materialist depictions of nature, matter and flesh which deny both the duality of nature/culture and the position of language as sole constructor of reality.[135] The posthuman and new materialist decentring of the human mind through an enlivening of the material realm can be examined through contemporary fairy tale fiction to reveal the complexities of the traditional fairy tale's depiction of nature – as

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[132] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 53.
[133] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p.xix.
[134] Iovino, p. 142.
[135] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 8.

fluid and active on the one hand (talking flowers and shapeshifting animals) and fixed and passive on the other (the deterministic depictions of the natural woman). With both the postmodern agenda to deconstruct assumptions of naturalness and the fairy tale's unbounded enthusiasm for nature and fluid depictions of material life, contemporary fairy tale fiction need not be confined by the linguistic tendencies of the postmodern era. It can, instead, challenge the traditional fairy tale's dualistic depictions of naturalness, while also channelling the potentialities of wonder to free nature from the constraints of 'natural laws', offering a radical reworking of subjectivity that hints at a lively and interconnected vision of existence.

Because, for all the fixed and deterministic depictions of nature perpetuated by the traditional European fairy tale, there exists too a vibrant and agentic natural world within those narratives. A world where flowers can sing, weather can alter based on a whim and animals and humans coexist and intimately relate. 'Animals speak,' observes Warner, 'especially birds, and no one in a fairy tale is taken aback when rocks and trees and streams and waterfalls act under their own volition or shape-shift from one form to another'.[136] It's a world of fluidity – where flesh transforms and bodies shapeshift – where fixity is reserved for morality but not for material bodies, which exist outside laws of biology. And, as Warner notes, '[w]hile magical life forces flow principally through natural phenomena – flora, fauna, bodies', 'the vehicle of magical effects does not however need to have possessed life in the first place: *inorganic* things are also animate and dynamic.'[137] From the talking matchsticks of the Hans Christian Andersen stories, to the punitive South West Wind Esquire. in the Romantic fiction of John Ruskin, and the singing birds and self-mopping brooms in Disney's princess films, the ongoing legacy of fairy and folk tale is its wondrously alive material world. For in the fairy tale, the laws of matter –organic or inorganic– are not fixed, but fluid –in flux– and endowed with wonder, and thus, the material world plays a role as active, agentic and engaged as do the humans who populate this landscape of enchantment.

Of course, the animated depictions of talking, singing, dancing matter are anthropomorphic, and thus, many would argue, anthropocentric and thus damaging to any alternate conceptualisations of existence. Anthropomorphism – the attribution of human characteristics to the nonhuman – is a common and long-standing feature of

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[136] Warner, p. 21.
[137] Warner, p. 29.

literature. From Ovid to Aesop, folk to fairy tale, Wordsworth to Tolkien, Rowling to Disney, the personification of nonhuman creatures, beings or objects is a prevalent trope in literature throughout Europe and worldwide. Anthropomorphic and personified depictions of nature have even been used explicitly – as in much Romantic literature – in attempts to connect humans with nature. Yet, as Bryan L. Moore observes, 'since Plato at least, anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism have long worked in tandem, the former representing the world in human terms and the latter in proclaiming the whole world for human ends.'[138] Circumventing human-centred views in the writing of humans for other humans is undoubtedly challenging when literature, by its very creation, relies on anthropocentrism. Fairy tales are invariably about human plights and journeys, and much of their magical animation of matter can be seen to further the superiority of man. Animals that assist protagonists, objects that come to life when certain words are spoken and dangerous woodlands that seem to exist only to cause human suffering, are all tropes of fairy and folktale which affirm human centrality and linguistic power.

Such anthropomorphic tropes complicate an approach to fairy tale involving new materialist theories. When Diana Coole asks '[i]s it possible to understand a process of materialization and the nature of its fecundity, to grasp matter's dynamic and sometimes resistant capacities, without relying upon mysticisms derived from animism, religion, or romanticism?' she highlights the key issue with such a project.[139] If we understand the animism of fairy tale to be that which is 'according inert material things conscious vitality', and consider such animism to be, as Warner suggests, an '[a]nimist vitality' that 'endows inert objects with active power', how can we distance these aspects of animism from the mysticisms of spirituality and their tendencies towards both anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism?[140] How can stories that depict matter, nature and nonhumanity as being anthropomorphically alive and endowed with magic and wonder disrupt anthropocentric thought when they are based in the fantasies of humanity? By imagining animals, trees, tables and matchsticks as beings with consciousness exactly like our own, don't we belittle the experience of the Other, rather

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[138] Bryan L. Moore, *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 12.
[139] Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh', p.92
[140] Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), p. 203, and Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 30. For the purpose of this thesis, animism will be understood through the lens of Warner's definitions, as connected to vitalism and suggestive of the 'life' within nonhumanity.

than attempting to really listen? Where does the fairy tale's propensity towards anthropomorphism fit within the contemporary *counterstories* we might hope to create?[141]

Despite anthropomorphism's potential for perpetuating anthropocentrism, it can – if only from a limited human perspective – open up the conversation about the vitality of nonhuman life. In fact, Bennett suggests that '[w]e need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world.'[142] While the anthropomorphism of traditional European fairy tale does not always enliven matter in a way that destabilizes matter/thought dichotomies, in contemporary literature that enlivening can take on a more vitalist significance. Contemporary authors, for all their postmodern concerns, can reveal in their own animations of a matter a far more complex and radical depiction of the agency of the nonhuman world. Though many authors of fairy tales are associated with the postmodern agenda, through a new materialist lens, even writers like Carter – with her fleshy, visceral fictions – may not entirely abandon the material to the discursive. The intricacies of fairy tale fiction can reveal the alliance of postmodernity with new materiality as authors grapple with the nature/culture divides in their own varied and wondrous ways.

Material Wonders: Fairy Tales and New Materialism

In this thesis, I define nature and matter through the terms of a Deleuzian, Harawayan nondialectical emphasis on co-construction and process and seek to assert nature's agency through the new stories of matter offered by the new materialists most influenced by their work. To do so, I rely on the varied theories of this fluid movement that are new materialist, vital materialist, posthuman and corporeal feminist – though I will predominantly use the terms 'new' or 'vital materialist'. Though I recognise the controversies involved in a discussion of wonder and new materialism due to wonder's associations with magic, I see potential in an understanding of wonder that is not relegated to fancy or fantasy. Wonder has long been diminished by supposed 'rational' thought, distrusted and disregarded just as nature and matter have. As Bacchilega

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[141] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 8.
[142] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvi.

suggests, 'the means of wonder, that is, magic, became a trick or childlike make-believe rather than the outcome of a way of knowing and being in the world'.[143] I therefore use wonder as a term meaning 'a way of knowing and being in the world'; of inhabiting a space of power and agency within the world of story and philosophy. Though the fairy tale sense of wonder may be magical, the new materialist reconceptualization of matter does not reside in the numinous – and yet, the narrative potential of wonder-as-magic does offer potentialities in storytelling that are not always possible in theory. So, while it is not my intention to confuse wonder with magic, I suggest that in the space between these concepts alternative narratives might appear. In fairy tales, this concept of wonder – as a way of knowing and being in the world – has the power to undermine dualistic 'natural laws'. By reading contemporary fairy tales through new materialism we might allow a 'breach in the membrane of awareness' in which radical counterstories of existence can develop.[144]

Wonder, in this context, then, 'has no opposite', as Marina Warner suggests, because it is the bridge between opposites. It is through the function of wonder as a blurring force – as the bridge between – that new materialist potentialities are activated and enabled and dualisms can be dissolved.[145] So, in my study of material wonders I look to the wonder, as I see it, in matter and nature as vitality and life. If magic suggests falsity, wonder suggests awe, a desire for knowledge and an acceptance that there are things that humans cannot fully know – and thus it offers a path away from the anthropocentric, dualistic models of the past. Material wonders include both the wonder of vibrant materiality and material knowledge, that is, having some comprehension, even without full understanding, of matter's agency and fluidity. I am too, attempting to use wonder to bridge the gap between theories of new materiality and fairy tale scholarship. For though new material and posthuman theories have been applied to literature and film more widely – as in Stacy Alaimo's *Undomesticated Ground* (2000), Braidotti's *Metamorphoses* (2002) and Zoe Jaques' *Children's Literature and the Posthuman* (2015) – and there has been some discussion of dualism in traditional fairy tales, as I acknowledge in my analysis of the lesser-known narratives of Basile and d'Aulnoy, for example, this study is, to my knowledge, the first to directly apply new materialist theories to fairy tale scholarship.

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[143] Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed?*, p. 194.
[144] Parsons, 'A Philosophy of Wonder', p. 85 and Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 8.
[145] Warner, 'Introduction' to *Wonder Tales,* p. 3.

In a Deleuzian sense,

> [t]he conjunction "and" helps us to think in terms of the middle, to escape the way in which thought is conventionally modelled on the verb "to be". "And" is a tool for producing a sort of "stammering" in thought and language: it is the possibility of diversity and the destruction of identity. Multiplicity is not the sum of its terms, but is contained in the "and".[146]

By looking at new materialisms *and* fairy tale I hope to escape the rigidity of the verb 'to be' and instead look to consider the myriad possibilities and multiplicities of narrative, materiality and experience. While the study of agency in fairy tales is usually concerned with the agency of the characters – specifically female characters – (bodily agency, sexual agency, agency within narrative and relationship) or the agency of the stories themselves (their power to shape the world) here I will consider the agency of matter and nonhuman life as a function of wonder. I will not discuss wonder specifically in each chapter, working with the understanding that wonder is the umbrella term for the agentic and enlivened depictions of matter. And though language constrains me in that I must discuss the natural and the cultural, thought and matter, as though these are separate-but-connected ideas, I hope, in this thesis, to highlight their inseparability and work with a Deleuzian understanding of 'and' as a bridge to alternate understandings.

For my study of nature and matter in contemporary fairy tale fiction I turn directly to the material. Each chapter of this thesis is an exploration of the depiction of a particular material (naturally *and* culturally constructed) within one prominent contemporary fairy-tale text from the UK. Despite using these materials singularly (one per chapter) I do not do so to affirm their inherent difference from each other, rather I acknowledge, as the chapters will hopefully attest, that they are all interwoven – divided only by that word 'and', with all its potential possibilities. Of course, discussion of each of these specific materialities invites discussion of bodies and materialities more broadly; of nonhumanity and humanity and the supposed lines between them. The focus on one material per chapter, however, allows me to concentrate my analysis, and to hone in on the different assumptions regarding nature that each material enables. It is too a nod to the fairy tale genre's material fascination, its use of motifs, landscapes and objects that linger long after reading – potions, glass, ice, forests, golden hair – visceral reminders of a material world alive with vitality.

The literary texts selected are similarly infused with the material world, and I have chosen them to demonstrate what as I see as a linear progression towards a more

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[146] John Marks, *Gilles Deleuze: Vitalism and Multiplicity* (London and Virginia: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 33.

new materialist vision of existence across the expanse of fairy tale fiction in the UK. My focus is on a British tradition because I see the UK's response to fairy tale as forming a relatively cohesive canon that enables me to trace the emergence of new materialist discourses. In each chapter, I will contextualise the material in question in Western philosophy and traditional fairy tale in order to consider its function in each contemporary fairy tale reworking. My study and its results therefore relate to this specific cultural corpus, but I would argue that this research has application elsewhere and is not exclusively British. There would be much to learn from an analysis of this kind of contemporary fairy tale from elsewhere in the world.

Chapter 1, 'Wood', is an examination of wood and forests as material agencies in Angela Carter's seminal collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* of 1979. Though Carter's work has been so often firmly categorised according to its focus on language as the constructor of myth, I turn again to the collection to consider how Carter's enlivened woodlands and her visceral, fleshy bodies counter a solely linguistic depiction of existence. *The Bloody Chamber* is the initial opening up of the potential for contemporary fairy tale to disrupt dualistic approaches to nature/culture boundaries in contemporary fairy tale fiction, and highlights how postmodernity and new materialism might be understood in relation to each other. In Chapter 2, 'Water', I consider Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* (1983) as a postmodern fairy-tale fiction confused by materiality and its effects, as the water and the land battle for dominance on those sodden Fens. Swift's novel highlights the inadequacy both of dualistic models of being and the discursive focus of postmodernism, highlighting the unavoidable materialities of existence. The novel offers a metaphor for the postmodern condition in its extreme, in which nothing is alive or real, only constructed, and therefore matter doesn't matter. Chapter 3, 'Metal', moves a decade on to Pullman's young adult trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) in which I focus on the fairy-tale inspired metallic objects that are so central to the stories and which complicate strict definitions of consciousness. Pullman's trilogy serves as the first of this study to move more firmly into new materialist/posthuman ideas, indicating a trajectory that would continue in Byatt's work. For in Chapter 4, 'Earth', I examine A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* of 2009 and suggest that her focus on earth – as clay and land –reveals a more material focus that denies language as the sole constructor of reality, and reflects the development of contemporary fairy tale into a genre that can subvert and undermine traditional dualisms through its use of the wonder of those traditional narratives. In so doing I track the

contemporary British literary fairy tale from Carter's ground-breaking text to the fairy tale fiction of this century, working to identify the development of the genre in relation to contemporary theories of posthumanity and new and vital materialisms.

The questions I am asking are as follows: how does wonder function in contemporary fairy tale as a vehicle through which matter/thought binaries can be disrupted? How do the fluid and active depictions of matter and nature in traditional fairy tales enable new visions of existence that blur boundaries between hierarchical dichotomies? How does reading contemporary fairy tale through new materialist theory highlight the fairy tale's capacity to dismantle dualisms and re-politicise the genre? And finally, can we bridge the gaps between postmodernism and new materialism to allow for alternate readings of texts supposedly defined by and through social-constructivist agendas? By using wonder as a vehicle for examining the agency of matter and nature, I will demonstrate how contemporary fairy tale authors have, in various ways, used the traditional fairy tale's enlivened depictions of nature and sense of suspended reality to disrupt hierarchical dualisms, offering alternative visions of existence that do not adhere to natural laws and in so doing, have encouraged a growing change in fairy tale fiction that refutes the primacy of language and celebrates the world of fairy tale as a space in which 'naturecultures' and embodied discourse can thrive.[147]

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[147] Haraway, 'The Companion Species Manifesto', p. 94.

A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter.'[148]

'Myth Today', Roland Barthes

'I have no fear,

nor no one should,

the woods are just trees,

the trees are just wood.'[149]

Into the Woods, Stephen Sondheim.

WOOD

Carter's woods are dark and deep; forests like 'a system of Chinese boxes'; ferns with thousands of watchful eyes; trees stark and straight as the bars of cages.[150] Endowed with the magic of metaphor, these forbidden forests are fantastic constructions of nature which, as Carter acknowledges, is always culturally mediated. Carter's attempts to destabilise the myths of nature and naturalness with regard to femininity are a well-documented part of her deconstructivist pursuit; her revisioned fairy tales credited with being the catalyst for the slew of postmodern reworkings of 'woman' in contemporary fairy tale fiction. Yet, despite her preoccupation with 'demythologising' ideological constructs in fantastical narratives, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) reveals Carter's belief that 'in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality.'[151] The woods of the collection may be linguistically defined and culturally mediated like the forests of the European fairy tale tradition Carter succeeds, but as the site and embodiment of a

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[148] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 109.
[149] *Into the Woods*, dir. Rob Marshall (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2014).
[150] Carter, p. 63. All subsequent references are parenthetical.
[151] Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, ed. Jenny Uglow (London: Vintage, 2013), pp. 45-52, p. 47.

fleshy, material kind of knowledge they have the potential to complicate the postmodern notions of discursive reality to which she is more commonly aligned. For wood, as the natural element so often associated in myth with the perceived duality of nature – simultaneously knowable and dangerously unknown – is reimagined in these tales. Emboldened with activity, these woods are alive with a material desire; hinting at both a fairy tale sense of material wonder and a fluidity and embodiment reflective of the postmodernity of Deleuze that paved the way for a vitalist materialism. These tales offer a vision of reality materially and discursively constructed, where knowledge and desire are inextricably woven through both flesh and thought.

Distortions and Deconstructions: Nature and Postmodern Fairy Tale

In *The Bloody Chamber*, the woods are not 'just trees', as Sondheim's Little Red Riding Hood suggests, and nor are the trees 'just wood'.[152] Our systems of signification demand that trees be more to us than simply matter - imbued as they are with meaning - and as the creator of postmodern fiction, Carter knows that woods in narrative are even further removed from such a claim. 'There is always something to look at in the forest' (133), she tells us, which can close upon you 'like a pair of jaws' – that is, if the 'wild beasts' (126) and wolfish inhabitants who 'cannot listen to reason' (130) do not reach you first. Forests in fairy tale are constructed landscapes of magic and danger, sites of terror and delight. 'You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are' (130), Carter's narrator warns knowingly, aware of the irony of such a myth. Of course, in the forests of literature, people are always present, crafting and shaping the wood to fit their stories; moulding them into finished items like carpenters at work. As in the paintings that line the walls of the castle in 'The Tiger's Bride', which unapologetically depict 'a fresco of horses, dogs and men in a wood where fruit and blossom grew on the bough together' (63) – an arboreal impossibility –, Carter acknowledges the construction of nature in literature and art as one of extraordinary distortion; her own no exception. From the vice-like grip of the verdant woodland of 'Erl King', the dangers that lurk in the woods of the three wolf tales: 'The Werewolf', 'The Company of Wolves' and 'Wolf-Alice', to the sense of sprawling forests surrounding the castles in the other elaborate stories, this collection – so famously 'about' and not 'of' fairy tales – is

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[152] *Into the Woods*, dir. Rob Marshall (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2014).

imbued with such distortions. Her demythologising project – felt so keenly in relation to fairy tales – consciously performs in an attempt to destabilise these distortions, particularly in relation to nature, which takes on socially constructed roles just as do the other characters in her narratives. As Betty Moss observes,

> Carter understands that transparent realism – that category of fiction which renders events "as if" the reader is looking through a window at the familiar world – is bound to *ideological presumptions* of what constitutes reality; that is, it reflects a *familiar, consensual reality*, thereby implicating itself in dominant political and social conventions.[153] (my italics)

But Carter is too aware that 'ideological presumptions' are present in fiction of all kinds, and those presumptions are the distortions of reality that Carter attempts to highlight. Her fantastical literary performances of nature are both a reflection of and a jolt away from that 'familiar, consensual reality' when the fairy tales we think we know are reimagined within and without the pre-existing frameworks of myth.

Carter's engagement with nature and human nature lead her to the woods in which the European fairy tale tradition is so firmly rooted, and to the stories that arose from its dense and penetrating landscapes. Her fascination with forests spans much of her literary career; her early collection of short stories *Fireworks* (1974) features intricately animate and enchanted woods, tempting like gardens of Eden; her 1982 story 'Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' reworks the Shakespearean text with its endless, trapping forests; and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) culminates in a stark, snow-covered Russian woodland. To be lost in the forest in Carter's novels and short stories is as much 'to be committed against your will – or worse, of your own desire – to a perpetual absence from humanity, an existential catastrophe, for the forest is as infinitely boundless as the human heart' as it is to be the guest of the Erl-King as he serves up the 'bounty of the woodland! Stewed nettles; savoury messes of chickweed sprinkled with nutmeg;' (98); constructions of a Nature well crafted.[154] Yet the regularity with which forests occur in Carter's fiction – and the breadth of their depictions – is telling of their ongoing importance in her work and her interest in nature as more than merely a construct.

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[153] Betty Moss, 'Desire and the Female Grotesque in Angela Carter's "Peter and the Wolf"' in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale,* eds. Danielle Marie Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 187-203, p. 188.
[154] Angela Carter, 'Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 2006), pp. 273-283, p. 276.

Of course, forests – and wood more generally – are an important and regular feature of the European fairy tales from which she draws, and so the use of forests in her work is reflective too of the landscape of the oral and literary fairy tale that precedes her. Sara Maitland has suggested that the tales of the European canon are rooted in the history of forests, just as are Europeans themselves: 'At our deep Teutonic roots we are forest people, and our stories and social networks are forest born'.[155] Maitland observes the site-specificity of fairy tales – acknowledged first by Jack Zipes – to suggest that fairy tales are informed by the landscapes in which they originate.[156] This is true most obviously of the Grimms' Märchen – collected from a country of vast forests – in which, she notes, 'over half the stories (116 out of 210) in the 1857 edition explicitly mention forests as the location of some part of the story, and at least another 26 have very clear forest themes or images.'[157] This affection for woodland and trees is true too of the literary tales of Hans Christian Andersen of Denmark, Charles Perrault and Madame D'Aulnoy of France and Giambattista Basile of Italy. Carter's *Bloody Chamber* may be a direct response to the tales of Perrault, but indirectly her literary constructions of and around the woodland are permeated with the woods of the entire European tradition, into which trees, wood, woodcutters, witches and wolves are intimately woven.

The European literary fairy tale tradition has consciously encouraged this sense of the tales materialising from the ground like trees. The combination of the magical with the seemingly ordinary is a potent mix, capturing the imaginations of adults and children alike with the effect of confusing the natural with the artificial and forging myths of fictional realities that signify as potential truths. As Bacchilega so eloquently observed,

> [w]e know that in folk and fairy tales the hero is neither frightened nor surprised when encountering the otherworld, receiving magic gifts, holding conversations with animals, or experiencing miraculous transformations. *The numinous is artfully made to appear natural.*[158] [My italics]

The tradition thus hinges on its attempts to conceal the extent of its magic and artifice under a veil of naturalness. As I mentioned in the introduction:

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[155] Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairytales* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 9.
[156] Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest*, p. 6, citing Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
[157] Maitland, p. 16
[158] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 8-9.

> [a]s folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation.[159]

Undoubtedly, fairy tales are influenced by the land in which they were created, and the enduring sense of the stories as being 'forest born' continues the project of the European writers and collectors for whom the appearance of naturalness was key to their constructions of magic and wonder.

It was the fairy tale's artful concealment of artifice and presumptions of naturalness that made it such a prime candidate for the postmodern feminist reworkings in the Seventies and Eighties, of which Carter was a leading voice. Bacchilega notes that '[t]he long tradition of representing woman both as nature and as concealed artifice contributes to the success and power of such images in the tale of magic', and sees the work of postmodern authors such as Carter as responding to those presumptions of naturalness.[160] Fairy tales – perhaps more so than other literature because of those enduring associations with the folk and the land – occupy a space of apparent timelessness, and like the magic in the stories themselves, have the appearance of naturalness rather than construction. But it was exactly such appearances that Carter challenged in her work. As Anna Watz suggests of *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, in *The Bloody Chamber* 'Carter is particularly interested in modern myths and the hidden ideologies behind them; she seeks to deconstruct "certain configurations of imagery", which are culturally produced to appear "natural" and timeless, or to rehearse Barthes, which attempt to transform "history into nature".'[161]

For Carter, 'all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice'.[162] These myths may seem to come from the land or be born of the forests; they might attempt to reflect the world truthfully or depict ordinary life and magical potential; they might be so artfully created that they seem possible, or be obviously constructed as fantasy; but whatever they are, they are artificially crafted. We must, Carter demands, see our literature – our stories, our discourse, our depictions of nature – for what it is: construction; artifice. When, in 'Overture and Incidental Music

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[159] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 7.

[160] Ibid, p. 9.

[161] Anna Watz, *Angela Carter and Surrealism: 'A Feminist Libertarian Aesthetic'* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 107. Watz cites Anna Katsavos, 'An Interview with Angela Carter' in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14, 3 (2004), pp.11-17, p. 12 and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957) (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 109.

[162] Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 47.

for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,' she deconstructs Shakespeare's woods, reimagining the fantasy as another, perhaps more realistic, construction, she reveals literary distortion with irony:

> This wood is, of course, nowhere near Athens; the script is a positive maze of false leads. The wood is really located somewhere in the English midlands, possibly near Bletchley, where the great decoding machine was sighted. Correction…oak, ash and thorn were chopped down to make room for a motorway a few years ago. However, since the wood existed only as a structure of the imagination, in the first place, it will remain.[163]

And yet, despite her social-constructivist emphasis, in *The Bloody Chamber* wood does not serve 'only as a structure of the imagination', but as a tangible, material presence. Though the intersections between the cultural and the natural, the material and the linguistic, may seem to be clearly defined, their boundaries are more permeable than they appear. As Bacchilega suggests, '[t]he wonder of fairy tales comes to reproduce its own workings and make them visible; in this way, Carter sustains and renders suspect her own revisions, showing that the magic of the fairy tale is its own beast'; a beast full of material possibilities.[164]

Postmodernism and Material Realities

The woods of fairy tale, like those of Shakespeare's plays, exist in literature as those 'structures of the imagination' and remain as such in Carter's work. The demythologising project to which she dedicates her fiction does not attempt to remove wood from the realm of the imagination – as her stories attest – because for Carter, in literature at least, such a thing is an impossibility. Instead, she attempts to highlight the artful construction of those imaginary woods, so that they might not be confused with reality. According to Brian McHale, postmodern fictions are often 'fictions *about* the order of things, discourses which reflect upon the worlds of discourse.'[165] While Carter's work can certainly be seen to reflect upon those worlds and their ideologically-bound order, unlike postmodern fictions that, as McHale continues, 'participate in that very general tendency in the intellectual life of our time toward viewing reality as *constructed* in and through our languages, discourse, and semiotic systems', *The Bloody*

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[163] Angela Carter, 'Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', p. 275.
[164] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 102.
[165] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 164.

Chamber demonstrates a focus on materiality that suggests a refusal to accept the postmodern implication that language is the sole constructor of reality.[166] As Anja Müller-Wood has observed, from inside the postmodern, linguistic turn of deconstruction, Carter 'reveals that the shaping influences of individual identity are not exclusively cultural, and the deconstruction of social codes is up against powerful material realities.'[167]

Although much of the existing literary criticism of Carter's work – including *The Bloody Chamber*, is concerned with her as a postmodern (and thus, the story goes, deconstructivist) author, Müller-Wood argues that '[c]ontrary to the enduring critical assumption that Carter was an out-and-out postmodern culturalist (cf. Pollock 2001: 35; Dennis 2008: 117), then, her work reveals more complex awareness of the integral relatedness of culture and nature, and one that is entirely germane to her materialist stance.'[168] For while critics such as Pollock and Dennis, and Patricia Waugh – for whom Carter's work demonstrates that '[n]ature has never existed and nurture is all' –, have made strong cases for their social constructivist analyses, Carter's attempts to highlight the social fictions which dominate our existence do not inherently deny reality as both materially and discursively constructed.[169]

Muller-Wood notes that Carter's interest in nature has been largely ignored by critics of her work in favour of a deconstructive focus, and yet, while this may be the case with nature, it is worth acknowledging that some of the most prominent Carter scholars have observed an unavoidable material emphasis in her fiction. In *The Rational Glass* (1998), Aidan Day theorized a 'materialist metaphysic' in Carter's work, arguing that unlike other postmodern deconstructivist authors, 'her materialism and her political engagement' lead her to become 'uneasy with the postmodern idea that authors have no unmediated access to a reality outside of language and texts.'[170] Suggesting that 'major aspects of Carter's metaphysical materialism are her empiricism and her passion for reason', Day considers how Carter's understanding of the way narratives shape the

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[166] McHale, *Postmodern Fiction,* p.164.
[167] Anja Müller-Wood, 'Angela Carter, Naturalist' in *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*, eds. Sonja Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.105 – 116, p.105.
[168] Müller-Wood, 'Angela Carter, Naturalist', p.106.
[169] Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background, 1960-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 195.
[170] Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 11-12.

world is interwoven through her materialist objectives.[171] He draws attention to another prominent critic who too sees Carter's work as materially engaged, observing that Warner 'makes the one move that the mythologizers do not when she points out that "[f]or a fantasist, Carter kept her feet on the ground…For her fantasy always turns back its eyes to stare hard at reality, never losing sight of material conditions."'[172]

Those 'material conditions' are seen most obviously in *The Bloody Chamber* as the flesh and blood of her characters – particularly, although not exclusively, her female characters. While postmodernism has come under fire from feminists for distancing women from their bodies by placing flesh into a purely textual, discursive realm (see Renate Klein 1996, p.349; Stacy Alaimo, 2000, p. 4), Carter's work has been praised by critics such as Bacchilega for its ability to inhabit a space both textually complex *and* materially oriented.[173] Bacchilega's focus in *Postmodern Fairy Tales* is on 'voice' and 'writing' as material practices, but she observes that while the fairy tales of Perrault and the Grimms often removed the flesh from tales such as 'Little Red Riding Hood', Carter's collection puts the flesh back into those scenes of desire in such a way that complicates the dichotomies of matter/language.[174] Of the scene at the end of 'The Werewolf' when the protagonist gets into bed with the wolf, Bacchilega suggests:

> [t]he outside and the inside, cold and warmth, the wild and the hearth are no longer separate. [..] Both will be naked, wearing only their flesh and hair: fiery sabbath, some would see; inevitable violence, others would say. But by acting out her desires - sexual, not just for life - the girl offers herself as flesh, not meat.[175]

Through this differentiation between desiring flesh and meat, Bacchilega – and potentially Carter too – distances the flesh from its associations not only with consumable product, but with inertia and passivity.

Of course, the inclusion and prominence of flesh in Carter's collection is a direct response to its removal from the traditional stories, and from the insidious endurance of the trope of the 'natural' woman as clean, sexless and passive which was endorsed by much of the early tradition. Yet, while the essentialist assumptions that held the female

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[171] Day, *Angela Carter*, p.12. While Day relates Carter's work to historical materialism rather than new materialism, noting her fervent socialism, I would argue that these ties to the material are still important, irrespective of the angle, in that critics such as Day acknowledge how she refuses to defer fully to language as the sole creator of the world.

[172] Day, p. 4. Day cites Marina Warner, 'Angela Carter' in *The Independent* (17 February 1992).

[173] Renate Klein, '(Dead) Bodies Floating in Cyberspace: Post-modernism and the Dismemberment of Women' in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, eds. Diane Bell, Renate Klein (Victoria: Spinifex, 1996), pp. 346-358, p. 349 and Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p.4.

[174] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 58-59.

[175] Ibid, p. 63.

to her flesh and her flesh to nature lead, during the 'linguistic turn', to what Stacy Alaimo has called a 'flight from nature', far from saying that 'nature has never existed', *The Bloody Chamber* demonstrates a postmodern approach that remains simultaneously committed to the material world and nature as a part of that world.[176] The woods, imaginary though they may be, remain present and active, and while Carter may be demythologising the myths of nature, the material conditions of that nature are always at work. After all, she admitted herself that she does 'like to reduce everything to its material base'.[177] Though admittedly a 'reduction', this interest suggests that while our ideas of nature might be constructed, the materiality of the natural world continues to exist; always and everywhere weaving through her discursive playground to open up the potential to challenge the myths of nature that limit it – as they do women – to the realm of passivity.

A *Philo*story *of Wood*

'A tree is a tree', Barthes noted; 'Yes, of course.'[178] But what is a tree, and can it be separated from its symbolic relevance, or is it perpetually distorted by the images applied to it? Our stories of trees – and wood – have defined them in social consciousness, but those stories are often diametrically opposed. Trees are the all-knowing World Tree or the Tree of Life, they are Yggdrasil, the connection between the heavens and the earth, the Mother of all life, the provider of all knowledge – the Buddha reached enlightenment beneath one; Eve plucked an apple from one and the world's knowledge came tumbling out with it. Yet, they are too the simplicity of a life lived naturally, an inert and thus knowable entity that can be shaped and cut and sculpted and used; a resource for the advancement of human life; passive matter from which we cut puppets and build furniture. And of course, trees are then also the dangers of the unknown, the darkness, a threat of unknowable, uncontainable nature; the Other of us; where different, hidden Others wait to consume us; where we must not stray from the path. Symbols of rooted fixity and fertile femininity as well as of passive matter and threatening otherness, the contradictions embedded in our cultural constructions of trees

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[176] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p.4 and Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 195.

[177] Angela Carter quoted in John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter' in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 76-96, p. 92.

[178] Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today' in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 109 -160, p. 109.

mean that 'a tree' is rarely only seen for itself, and is, like nature, always mediated by our ideas of it.

How might we distinguish a tree from wood, or wood from a forest, or a table, or a piece of paper? At what point does a tree cease to be natural and become a construction? When Aristotle considered the nature of being, he used an analogy of wood to argue that artefacts are such when a form is not aligned to its matter; i.e. in a table, the wood is matter and the table its form, which has been imposed upon it by humans; if wood remains in its 'natural' form of a tree it could still be considered natural.[179] Aristotle's theories of matter and form saw things in relation to each other, and in relation to the context in which they were used. As Helen Lang suggests:

> [i]n nature, matter must be intrinsically related to form – no artist is required to combine them – and so matter neither precedes form nor can it be without form. For example, the wood of a bed may have been an olive tree and so will always retain the nature of olive wood, for instance, the grain of the wood. And so, when we look at a bed, we may admire what the bed is by nature and what would grow if the bed could sprout, not matter, but matter in relation to form: olive wood.'[180]

The bed's inherent nature is wood – the natural element remaining present and consistent despite its transformation. Nature, Aristotle suggests, can be superficially altered to create other forms, but its pre-existing matter – that is natural – will prevail.

Wood and trees have been repeatedly aligned in Western consciousness with the fixity of nature. Trees, after all, are rooted into the ground; unlike water, wind, fire and sand, they are fixed to the earth and thus have taken on this position of solidity and inertia in the myths that surround them. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, Odysseus builds his marital bed with and into a rooted olive tree, thus ensuring its immovability, like the marriage he hoped to maintain. Lang suggests that Aristotle's use of the olive tree and bed in his analogy makes reference to Homer's epic, and demonstrates how artistic form and natural matter might be unified in a natural artefact:

> [t]he unity of form and matter in this sign, this immovable rooted bed, cannot be overemphasized. A tree is by nature rooted and immovable. The olive is associated with divine presence and longevity. But beds are normally made of "lumber," the wood sawn from a tree that has been cut down. Odysseus makes his bed immovable, and this immovability, both present in the olive tree as rooted and imposed upon the bed through the unique decision and construction by Odysseus, constitutes the crux of Penelope's test – her search for a clear sign.

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[179] Helen, S. Lang, *Aristotle's Physics and its Medieval Varieties* (SUNY Press, 1992), p. 30.
[180] Lang, *Aristotle's Physics and its Medieval Varieties,* p. 31.

> Only this unity of art and nature makes the bed operate as a sign absolutely clear between husband and wife.[181]

The given fixity of the tree is taken for granted in this analysis, for the tree is in fact only a metaphor for the unshakeable marriage between Odysseus and Penelope – a bed made in accordance with nature can withstand the trials of life, for nature, the story implies, is the unquestionable material presence holding it firm.

Images of trees as eternally rooted and fixed are present too in the European fairy tale tradition, often to affirm natural – and deterministic – behaviours, and to reveal the dangers of uprooting what is 'natural' and thus predestined. In Charles Perrault's tale 'Patient Griselda', Griselda – a shepherdess – is discovered living very simply in the forest by the prince, who marries her, before subjecting her to a series of abuses and injustices, throughout which she remains faithful and unquestioning of his will. Griselda's origins in the forest are here a symbol of her proximity to nature, her poverty and her patience and passivity, which are deemed a natural extension of her simplistic femininity. As Anne E. Duggan observes, 'her activity is directly tied to something natural (spinning *wool*, watching *sheep*) and is itself of a domestic – or domesticated – nature.'[182] As the wronged wife, she maintains her loyalty to the prince despite his behaviour, thus affirming her rootedness – steadfast in her love throughout any trials. In Hans Andersen's stories 'The Wood Nymph' and 'The Fir Tree' trees represent the natural in a similar way, but instead warn against the dangers of departing from those 'natural' origins. Both the Wood Nymph and the Fir Tree – unlike Griselda of Perrault's tale – long to leave behind their roots in nature and exist in a culturally oriented world of humanity, but by attempting to abandon their origins their lives become transient and falter.

The alignment of rootedness with nature furthers the assumptions about nature as deterministic matter and the supposedly 'natural' behaviours of gender, race and class promoted by the essentialist dichotomies of dualistic thought. The depictions of wood in these stories highlight dominant beliefs in the fixity of a nature that is ultimately knowable. Griselda and her father's life in the 'simple and unspoiled nature' of the forest – a shock to the cultured and wealthy Prince – is matched only by the unspoiled nature of Griselda herself: 'the prince discovered a simplicity, a sweetness

[181] Helen, S. Lang, *Aristotle's Physics and its Medieval Varieties*, p. 32.
[182] Duggan, 'Nature and Culture in the Fairy Tales of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy', p. 152.

and a sincerity which he did not believe possible in any woman.'[183] For many poststructural and postmodern feminist theorists, the associations of women with unspoiled nature embed the female in sexist presumptions that will only hold them down, away from the supposedly enlightened, heightened culture. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, suggested that the patriarchal system defines the female as 'flesh purely for its own sake. Her body is not perceived as the radiation of a subjective personality, but as a thing sunk deeply in its own immanence'; connecting the female body with wood rooted deep down in the earth, 'sunk deeply' in the deterministic conceptions of biology and what is 'natural', as do the tales such as 'Patient Griselda' that are steeped in the patriarchal stereotypes of naturalness.[184]

'Patient Griselda' is too demonstrative of how depictions of naturalness as simple and untainted are related to the perception of nature as a 'knowable' entity, which – like Griselda – can be controlled and dominated without recourse.[185] The Prince feels he knows Griselda upon looking at her and he is not proven wrong; the simplicity, sincerity and sweetness he instantly acknowledges in her eyes are truly her only characteristics in the tale, as well as an exceptional capacity for patience and loyalty. Griselda is a knowable, 'delightful object' to the prince-as-subject, just like the forest once it has been mapped for him.[186] The tale perpetuates the image of a nature that is knowable in that it is always present, a pre-existing landscape of 'awe', that can be used, ignored or delighted in.[187] As the extended matter of Descartes' dualistic vision, nature is ever the known rather than the knower.[188] Grosz observes: 'Descartes, in short, succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body.'[189] Under this doctrine, nature may be something to be admired but it will too be eternally fixed and rooted in passive, knowable simplicity; the Other of the knowing mind.

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[183] Charles Perrault, 'Patient Griselda', *Old-Time Stories told by Master Charles Perrault,* trans. A. E. Johnson, translator (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1921), edited by D.L Ashliman in 2003 at https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/perrault09.html [Accessed 20 May 2017].
[184] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 189.
[185] Halsey, *Deleuze and Environmental Damage,* p. 14.
[186] Perrault,'Patient Griselda', https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/perrault09.html.
[187] 'The place where his strange adventure had led him, with its clear streams and shadowy trees, filled the prince with awe.' Perrault, ibid.
[188] Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' in *Material Feminisms*, pp. 120-155, p. 131.
[189] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 6

Even in contemporary theory these associations of rootedness with fixity are maintained. Deleuze and Guattari use roots as a metaphor for the inflexibility of the arborescent structures of thought that determine and uphold a cultural obsession with the One. In *A Thousand Plateaus,* they argue that '[t]he tree and root inspire a sad image of thought that is forever imitating the multiple on the basis of a central or segmented higher unity'.[190] The tree as singular structure, with roots from which all stems, is here representative of the way the multiplicities of the world are boiled down to One, are contained and categorized and denied their differences by philosophical and psychoanalytic discussion, which cannot conceive that which does not fall into categories they have already previously determined.

Yet, if trees are the symbol of fixity and givenness – understood as nature that is a 'known' entity – it seems strange that they would too come to be associated with one of the most prominent philosophical questions concerning the nature of existence as dependent exclusively on perception. 'If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?' Bishop George Berkeley asked to wide acclaim, demanding that we confront our understanding of the world around us, and suggesting that that world can exist only through our perception of it. His assertion that '[t]he objects of sense exist only when they are perceived: the trees therefore are in the garden, or the chairs in the parlour, no longer than while there is some body by to perceive them' formed the basis for his theories of 'immaterialism' as he countered the empiricism of scholars such as Locke by denying matter's existence outside perception.[191] The fixity of matter as solid and immovable reality – and the wood that served to represent that – comes into question here, and Berkeley undermines the supposed 'givenness' of matter to offer in its place a material world constructed by the power of the mind. What is 'known' and 'knowable' is denied by the position of matter as construct of the mind and its ability to perceive/create the world. No longer an essentialist 'given', matter – as wood – is denied.

Berkeley's suggestion that the world only exists when it is perceived was rebuffed, but the suggestion that the mind is entirely separate from (and yet intimately affecting) material reality remained dominant in much of Western Philosophy and can

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[190] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.16.
[191] George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Thomas J. McCormack (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 54.

be seen in the later poststructuralist theories born of the 'linguistic turn'. The division between thought/matter or reality/language is emphasized by these claims, which see the nature/culture opposition further delineated. The implications for this denial of matter on our understanding of nature is to further our dominance over it, even when it seems to defy our will. As Vicky Kirby observes:

> [t]he assumption that the threat of nature can be put aside in some way has been justified theoretically by the linguistic turn itself, which promotes the belief that culture is an enclosed system of significations that affords us no immediate access to nature at all. According to this view […] cultural webs of interpretation, which include linguistic and even perceptual frames of legibility, are intrinsically enmeshed and cross-referenced, and this raft of mediations stands between any direct experience or knowledge of nature's raw facticity. Consequently, the difference between cultural and natural facts is impossible to adjudicate, and this is why we inevitably confuse cultural constructions of nature with "Nature itself."[192]

It is this confusion that Carter attempts to highlight in *The Bloody Chamber,* subverting, exaggerating and complicating her own constructions of nature and matter without relegating them to the position of pure imagination. Those stories of nature in philosophy are as much cultural constructions as those in fairy tale, reflecting the dualistic bias of the culture that creates them; the story of Humanism sees the human mind as both protagonist and author, and the traditional fairy tales are too born of those assumptions. Carter, with her firm belief that you 'cannot make statements that are universally true,' challenges the naturalised image of nature in order to confront our assumptions about it, ever aware that the 'truths' according to philosophy of nature's 'raw facticity' or as the construction of human perception are as mythical as a girl jumping whole from a wolf's belly.[193]

Dangerous Transgressions: Carter and Carnal Knowledge

'[W]alk nicely and quietly and do not run off the path', Little Red Cap's mother warned in the Grimm tale that came to crystallise – perhaps more than any other – the image of the European fairy tale as synonymous with forests.[194] Of course, Red strayed, tempted

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[192] Vicki Kirby, 'Natural Convers(at)ions: or, What if Culture Was Really Nature All Along?' in *Material Feminisms,* eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 214-236, p. 218.
[193] Angela Carter quoted in Haffenden, p. 92.
[194] Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Little Red Cap' in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 1st ed., trans. D. L. Ashliman <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0333.html#grimm> [Accessed 2nd May 2019]

by the wolf to smell and pick the flowers – believing his observation to be correct that '[i]t is very beautiful in the woods' – and complicit in the hints to the biblical narrative that preceded her own when she ignores her mother's warning to remain on the path so that she might not 'fall'.[195] To leave the path, away from that known, controllable route and into the vast, dense wilderness of the forest, is to cross the boundary between the cultivated safety of culture and the wild carnality of desire; to be made privy to the secrets of carnal knowledge. Perrault's tale hinted thus when he warned that the consumption of flesh signalled an irretrievable loss of sexual innocence, and as Carter's narrator in 'Company of Wolves' confirms with tongue firmly in cheek: '[s]tep between the gateposts of the forest with the greatest trepidation and infinite precautions, for *if you stray from the path for one instant*, the wolves will eat you' (my italics, 130).

The transgression of borders, as Maria Tatar highlighted in *Secrets Beyond the Door*, is central to many magically endowed narratives, and forests in particular have long been the site of such transgressions. From Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Hansel and Gretel', forests mark out the boundary between what is known and what is unknown, and often represent great challenge and learning for the characters who transgress their borders. 'Little Red Riding Hood', in its various forms, is a stark reminder that in some of the most enduring stories the learning that is found in the forest is not meant for women. As Warner observes, LRRH is 'a fairy tale of initiation, an allegory of carnal knowledge and social prohibitions, about innocent girlhood on the threshold of maturity, with the trackless forest standing in for the dangerous wolf, the predator for the seducer, the abuser of innocence.'[196] To step away from the path into that 'trackless wilderness' is to become fleshy and sexual – as suggested by the red cap with which Little Red is adorned – and experience a loss of innocence that, in the case of Perrault's version, leaves the girl no life left to be lived. It is to be the Baba Yaga of the forest, the witch who entices and cooks little boys in 'Hansel and Gretel'; women on the margins of society who have abandoned the civilised world for a more visceral and threatening existence in the uncontrollable nature of the woods. To leave the civilisation of culture, these stories suggest, is to enter the undomesticated, uncontrollable wildness of nature – the site of carnal knowledge – and to do so as a woman is deservedly punishable.

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[195] Ibid.
[196] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 114-5.

If the tale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' in those literary versions aligns the forest with knowledge and desire – carnal and dangerous – and warns little girls to steer clear, Carter's collection is a rallying cry to stray from the path and embrace the desires of the flesh. Her protagonists – whose transgressive border crossings appear as locked doors to bloody chambers, enchanted forests ruled by Erl-Kings and beds newly inhabited by wolves – are ever conscious that such transgressions (dangerous or not) must be enacted: '[i]t is the worst time in all the year for the wolves but their strong-minded child insists she will go off through the wood.' (132) Unlike the Grimm and Perrault narratives, the protagonists of 'The Erl-King', 'The Werewolf' and 'Company of Wolves' (all featuring women who stray from the path) are not made victims of their transgression, but instead reclaim their sexuality within the patriarchal structures of those old narratives through their strident pursuit of knowledge. Though the woods are dangerous and othered in these tales – 'the wood swallows you up' (96) – the danger lies not in the knowledge itself but in the patriarchal narratives that seek to limit that knowledge by telling women to stick to the path; the danger is in believing that any knowledge – carnal or otherwise – is purely the domain of men.

The traditional European narratives often tie the forest with an unknown, dangerous desire - vilifying old women who live there, warning against young girls who enter – while on the other hand simultaneously celebrating the simplicity of women like 'Patient Griselda' who live an innocent life in nature and embody a femininity that is at one with domesticated nature. The image of the forest through these two lenses – the simplicity of nature versus its danger – echo the dualistic perception of nature more generally as a controllable, inert medium that is ultimately always knowable, while also acting as a threatening example of the unknown. What becomes clear is that nature is only suitable for women in these tales when it exists in the realm of simplicity, inertia and the purity of motherhood – when it falls neatly into the box of the 'known' and the 'natural' – when it is culturally shaped and domesticated. When nature is wild and uncultivated, it is a threat because it represents the untapped carnal knowledge of desire – the potential for fluidity and fleshiness over fixity and submission. While Patient Griselda cannot be tempted to abandon the sweetness and simplicity she learned as a poor shepherdess no matter how she is tormented, and is ultimately rewarded for her bravery, Little Red Riding Hood is tempted to leave the path and enter the realm of knowledge, and is thus punished.

In *BC* Carter consistently affirms that knowledge is always something to be sought. Her female characters fearlessly search for knowledge; exploring their bodies, their sexualities and the untamed wilderness of the woods. 'The Erl King' begins with the myth that we know of woods and wolves from tales like LRRH, that straying from the path into the wildness of nature will lead to incarceration in one form or another:

> [t]here is no way through the wood any more, this wood has reverted to its original privacy. Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety; grass grew over the track years ago and now the rabbits and the foxes make their own runs in a subtle labyrinth and nobody comes. (96)

This is because the forest is the realm of the Erl-King, who 'knows all about the wood and the creatures in it' (99). As the personification of natural knowledge, the Erl-King proselytises to the protagonist about the natural world with which he coexists in such a way that animals flock to him as though he were Snow White: '[a] rusty fox, its muzzle sharpened to a point, laid its head upon his knee.' (98) As Harriet Kraymer Linkin has argued, the story depicts 'entrapment in a cage of Romantic subjectivity that at best confines and at worse silences the female voice', but it too highlights, through the final strangulation, that we must destroy the myths of nature that were created by patriarchy, for they are the trap, rather than nature itself.[197]

When Alaimo observes that 'nature' as both the natural world and supposedly inherent behaviour 'converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments. Woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature has made her so', she acknowledges the myths of nature as vertiginous traps.[198] In 'The Erl-King', Carter pre-empts Alaimo's assertion when she depicts the Erl-King's eyes as the vortex of patriarchal depictions of nature from which women cannot escape:

> [h]e spreads out a goblin feast of fruit for me, such appalling succulence; I lie above him and see the light from the fire sucked into the black vortex of his eye, the omission of light at the centre, there, that exerts on me such a tremendous pressure, it draws me inwards. (102-3)

In laying out the goblin fruits, the Erl-King means to tempt the protagonist towards the fleshy, carnal knowledge that she has been told to fear. His eyes are 'quite green, as if from too much looking at the wood' (98) but they are too a 'reducing chamber' (103), that vortex of circular arguments will, she fears lead her to disappear. Yet, despite the potential for reduction, Carter does not guide her protagonist away from temptation, nor

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[197] Harriet Kraymer Linkin, 'Isn't It Romantic?: Angela Carter's Bloody Revision of the Romantic Aesthetic in "The Erl-King"' in *Contemporary Literature*, 1 (1994), pp. 305-323, p. 308.
[198] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 3.

punish her for giving in to it. Instead, the woman takes the knowledge she desires and murders the Erl-King, intent on destroying the myths he wove around her too. As his hair calls out from the strings of the bow: '[m]other, Mother, you have murdered me!' (104) like the bird in the Grimms' 'The Juniper Tree' who rose up from the ashes, the myths of patriarchy die hard.

Neither Flight nor Fancy

As Alaimo and Hekman suggests, 'the longstanding, pernicious associations between "women" and "nature" in Western culture – associations that are rarely advantageous to either woman or nature – have made "nature" a treacherous terrain for feminism.'[199] In the tales of *BC*, Carter acknowledges that treacherous terrain, highlighting the danger of patriarchal constructions and yet refusing to herald the separation of women from nature or flesh as the solution. Instead, her characters journey forward – braving the wolves and falling headfirst into those vortexes of desire and the illusion of the woods so that they might alter the illusion (or, in the case of the protagonist of 'The Erl-King', strangle it), in a recognition that avoiding nature is no way to combat the assumptions about it. However, that Carter's narratives embrace the natural world and corporeal flesh is not to assume she favours a more earthy celebration of femininity or is to be aligned with the feminists who 'turned toward nature as a habitat for feminist subjects'.[200] If we can assume, based on her dismissal of healing, mother goddesses as 'consolatory nonsense', that she is not interested in a reversal of hierarchy that celebrates feminine 'nature', but is instead interested in dismantling the dualisms, what we can observe in *BC* is Carter's suspicion towards the myths of 'nature' that consume women in a vortex of 'naturalness', coupled with a her desire to avoid distancing women from nature and flesh and instead to distance them from a belief in the 'truth' of those illusions of 'nature'.[201]

Though we may associate attempts to distance women from nature with feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Anne Duggan observes that women in the French literary salons often saw the solution to the denigration of their sex to be

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[199] Alaimo and Hekman, 'Introduction', p. 12.
[200] Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature', p.240.
[201] Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 106.

separating femininity from flesh. She explains that '[i]n seventeenth-century France, the concepts of nature and culture were also used in debates about the status of women. Misogynous writers repeatedly associated women with animals or nature, usually to explain their lack of reason and need to be dominated by men' and 'insisted on women's inferiority because of their "bestial" nature'.[202] In response, many salon women

> embraced a philosophy that allowed them to dissociate themselves from their bodies – from their "animal" nature. According to Erica Harth, salon women were predisposed to Cartesianism due to their interest in neoplatonism and neostoicism, which "combined to aid the précieuses in their quest for relationships that would free them from the obligations and prejudices attached to their female bodies. A dualism that emphasized the separability of soul and body lent dignity to the intellectual enterprise of the salon and validated women as thinking subjects".[203]
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> According to Duggan, in a break with tradition, the French author of fairy tales,

Madame Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, challenged both the conflation of women with nature and the distancing of women from their bodies with her story 'The Bee and the Orange Tree', which 'redefines the relation between nature and culture'.[204] Reading the tale as a 'feminist response to Perrault's "Patient Griselda"', Duggan sees D'Aulnoy's depictions of female nature (and nature itself) to be 'animated, active, and powerful' in contrast to the passivity of Griselda's patient and simple femininity.[205] Aimée, the story's protagonist, is a princess shipwrecked on an island and brought up by ogres who maintains a 'natural' dignity and active nature despite her upbringing. When a prince (named Aimé, suggesting their equality) is shipwrecked on the island and he and Aimée fall in love, she is active in her attempts to be with him and escape the ogres. That they consummate their relationship demonstrates d'Aulnoy's refusal to deny women what the story suggests is a 'natural' sexuality in both sexes. As Duggan observes, 'd'Aulnoy's model of gender relations does not exclude some sort of physical relation between the sexes.'[206] The tree in the tale is the form the prince takes in one of their many attempts to escape the ogres, and when Aimee as bee and her prince as tree are fixed in those forms – though here the male figure is the fixed image of a tree while the female is active in insect form – Aimee stings a princess who swoons at the beauty of

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[202] Anne E. Duggan, 'Nature and Culture in the Fairy Tales of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy', p. 150.

[203] Duggan, p. 150 quoting Erica Harth, 'Cartesian Women' in *Yale French Studies*, 80 (1991), pp. 146-164, p. 150.

[204] Duggan, p. 150.

[205] Ibid, p. 154.

[206] Ibid, p. 150-1.

the orange tree to defend her claim over her love. Feminine nature, then comes to be associated not with passivity and endurance of abuse (as in the Perrault), but with traits expected of humanity more broadly– sexuality, jealousy and desire.

Carter echoes these sentiments in *BC*. Her female characters are flawed and physically attuned, happy to embrace the traits for so long thought unnatural to women. In 'The Erl-King', the protagonist delights in her stripping off at the Erl-King's hand, as does the Red Riding Hood who lies 'between the paws of the tender wolf' (139) and the '[p]oor, lonely lady' (82) of 'Puss in Boots' who leads Puss to note with irony: '[b]ut who is it steps towards the other first? Why she; women, I think, are of the two sexes the more keenly tuned to the sweet music of their bodies.' (88) Embracing their sexualities, Carter's protagonists often simultaneously embrace the natural world; walking deeper into the woods, living with wolves; they do not fly to the safety of culture for they know there is no safety there either. Carter's fairy tales acknowledge what d'Aulnoy may too have sensed: 'the more feminist theories distance themselves from "nature," the more that very "nature" is implicitly or explicitly reconfirmed as the treacherous quicksand of misogyny.'[207] It is only by entering the woods that women can claim their knowledge and alter the narratives.

Throughout the collection Carter demonstrates that a departure from nature (or the woods) is no saving grace. In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', when Beauty returns to her father in town, she enters a state of depression that Carter aligns with her inability to feel the effects of the natural world: '[s]ince the flowers in the shop were the same all the year round, nothing in the window could tell her that winter had almost gone.' (52) The artificiality of nature in the shop windows is a reminder of the importance of the changing seasons. The protagonist feels '[t]he soft wind of spring breathed in from the near-by park through the open windows; she did not know why it made her want to cry' (52), suggesting that a flight from nature and the feeling of the seasons changing against flesh is worth mourning. As the narrator of 'The Erl-King' notes, the birds that were once women but who now live in the Erl-King's cages, 'have *lost their flesh* when they were dipped in the corrosive pools of his regard' [my italics] and now cannot sing, but 'only cry because they can't find their way out of the wood' (103). Despite the pervasiveness of ideological forces, to see ourselves as purely discursive in order to eschew essentialism is to lose our materiality, which – like the birds stripped of their

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[207] Alaimo and Hekman, p. 4.

bodies and their voices – only leads to another kind of entrapment. Neither a flight from nature nor a fanciful construction of reality disguised as truth offer a route forward for Carter, the answer is a far more complex reimagining of nature/culture, flesh/thought, mind/matter relationships.

Timely Forests of Flesh and Blood

According to Barbara Bolt in *Carnal Knowledge*, theories that posit matter as active or agential – from Epicurus and Democritus to the scientific materialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the 'material turn' of recent philosophy – can be drawn together as 'materialist' due to an 'understanding or theory of the world asserting that: all entities and processes, including human beings, "are composed of – or are reducible to – matter, material forces or physical processes" (Stack 1998).'[208] Carter's self-conscious attempts to 'reduce things to their material base' – albeit intended to be aligned with socialist, historical materialism – foreground an agenda found in the new materialist theories that succeeded her.[209] Though postmodernists of her own time more often affirmed than challenged Alaimo and Hekman's assertion that 'the discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices', *The Bloody Chamber* evades such categorisation, as Carter weaves blood, bones, flesh and sex through those woods that are both natural and unnatural in such a way that refuses to deny matter's agency.[210]

> Alaimo suggests in *Material Feminisms* that
>
> the predominant trend in the last few decades of feminist theory has been to diminish the significance of materiality. Predominant paradigms do not deny the material existence of the body, of course, but they do tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter.[211]

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[208] Barbara Bolt, 'Introduction – Toward a 'New Materialism'' Through the Arts' in *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a "New Materialism" Through the Arts* eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (New York and London: I.B. Tauris &Co Ltd., 2013), pp.1 -13, p. 1-2. Bolt quotes George J. Stack, 'Materialism' in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998) <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/materialism/v-1> [Accessed 3rd May 2019).
[209] Carter in Haffenden, p. 92.
[210] Alaimo and Hekman, p. 3.
[211] Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature', p. 237.

While Carter's stories 'about fairy tales' pointedly highlight the way that *myths* are only 'products of the human mind', her emphasis on materiality ('*this* world is all there is') means that the bodies of her characters are far from 'passive, plastic matter', for they themselves are not depicted as solely the construction of discourse.[212] Flesh and blood come to play out their own material engagements in her narratives which do not denigrate bodies to mere linguistics. Though culture undoubtedly plays a crucial role in constructing reality as we know it, Carter demonstrates too a recognition of unavoidable material processes.

Like the blood on the key in 'The Bloody Chamber' that stains the protagonist's forehead, suggesting the endurance of the material that can be neither erased nor covered, the enduring legacy of the collection is the fleshy, visceral bodies of the characters; characters who, far from asomatous fictions, transform their skins to fur, lick the wounds of their enemies and drink the blood of their lovers. When the narrator of 'The Tiger's Bride' permits the Tiger Man to lick her, she finds that 'each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs.' (75) This ending (or beginning) reveals Carter's alignment of materiality not with a single, arborescent vision of corporeality as the Other of the productive mind, but a multiplicity of productive bodies that transform themselves collectively.

Licking has powerful creative function in these tales, as seen too in 'Wolf-Alice', when Alice's decision to lick the wounds of her vampiric captor humanises both him and herself: 'she leapt upon his bed to lick, without hesitation, without disgust, with a quick, tender gravity, the blood and dirt from his cheeks and forehead' (148) – while licking, she watches as the Duke's reflection appears in the mirror, suggesting that humanity is constructed through and by the flesh. Suzette A. Henke notes that these ministrations have been key to Carter critics' understanding of her fluid definitions of humanity:

> For Kimberley Lau, "Wolf-Alice's licking is…an erotically charged literary tumescence" suggesting that the "tongues of Carter's women and wolves move us away from language, speech, articulation and into a more sensory realm" (Lau, 91-92). According to Bacchilega, Carter is "redefining what "human" is, as these differently wounded beings inaugurate new reflections and song" (65). The "rational humanness" that both protagonists achieve at the end of this tale reveals, for Aidan Day, a "genuine humanity that is to be contrasted with…the incomplete humanity of the people who have shunned and persecuted them"

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[212] Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line' p. 47 and Alaimo, ibid, p. 237.

(166) – and that shuns, in turn, the judgements of society shame and mortification implicitly in a so-called "civilized" order.[213]

By removing shame from the act of licking Carter denies the shame of carnal knowledge and the pleasures of the flesh.

For bodies are not shameful in this collection, but '*enfleshed*' in a Deleuzian sense – 'in-between' – as Carter reimagines the genesis of subjectivity through blood in 'Wolf-Alice'.[214] Raised by wolves and then captured by humans, Alice's status as human is under question. Beginning a product of her environment; '[s]he had, as yet, no direct notion of past, or of future, or of duration, only of a dimensionless, immediate moment' (144), and yet, unable to be transformed entirely by her mind's eye – 'nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf' (141) – Alice's subjectivity is yet to be decided. Through the course of the tale, Carter constructs what serves as a challenge to the Lacanian 'mirror-stage'. Unlike Lacan's mirror stage, in which we understand our selfhood by looking in the mirror, Alice looks in the mirror and sees, at first, a companion. It is only with the commencement of her menses that she 'perceives an essential difference between herself and her surroundings' – her subjectivity is formed not in the mirror – the vision of the self – but by her own material blood, which gives her a sense of time: 'She learned to expect these bleedings,' (145). As Marion May Campbell suggests,

> [t]he recognition of the radical other is performed through the insistence on embodiment, on active, material interaction with the scenography (that Wolf-Alice defecates, for example, in the church corner) and, of course, through strategic syntactical and lexical choices and the metonymic-metaphoric work they support.[215]

This 'active, material interaction with the scenography' brings Wolf-Alice's flesh and blood into the cultural realm, highlighting the in-betweenness of the subject as a materially mindful entanglement.

Though Carter acknowledges – true to her social-constructivist pursuit – the ways in which language constructs the world (seen most overtly in 'The Snow Child', in which the girl is born of the Count's desire), 'Wolf-Alice' offers an example of the

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[213] Suzette A. Henke, 'A Bloody Shame' in *The Female Face of Shame*, eds. Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 48-60, p. 58-9. Henke quotes Kimberley J. Lau, 'Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter's Wolf Trilogy' in *Marvels and Tales* (2008), 22: 1, pp. 77-94, p. 90-91, Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 65 and Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, p. 166.

[214] Rosi Braidotti, 'Teratologies' in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, eds. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press, 2000) pp. 156 – 172, p. 159.

[215] Marion May Campbell, *Poetic Revolutionaries: Intertextuality & Subversion* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), p.150.

ways in which Carter demonstrates that those 'shaping influences of individual identity are not exclusively cultural, and the deconstruction of social codes is up against powerful material realities.' [216] Raised by wolves, Wolf-Alice has developed animalistic skills, for example, such as the ability to see better in the dark than in the light, which emphasizes the effect of her conscious belief about her own wolfishness on her physical being. Yet, her wolfish upbringing taught her nothing of human language – '[h]ow did she think, how did she feel?' (144) Carter's narrator asks with an irony that suggests that the ability to think and feel cannot be entirely the emanation of language. Neither does she learn about menstruation, yet her body begins the process that forges her subjectivity without her conscious awareness: '[s]he did not know what it meant and the first stirrings of surmise that ever she felt were directed towards its possible cause' (144), and thus the material leads to the discursive. Karen Barad notes that one of the key objectives of new materialism involves traversing that territory of the co-construction of life through matter and thought:

> [h]ow might we understand not only how human bodily contours are constituted through psychic processes but how even the very atoms that make up the biological body come to matter and, more generally, how matter makes itself felt? It is difficult to imagine how psychic and sociohistorical forces alone could account for the production of matter.[217]

Carter's insistence on the flesh and, in the case of Wolf-Alice, the blood of menstruation, reveals a recognition of those 'powerful material realities' that, alongside 'psychic and sociohistorical forces', are self-producing.

The implication of this depiction of Wolf-Alice's menses on the nature/culture dichotomy has to do with the way it introduces the girl-who-is-not-a-wolf to the concept of time. Often considered to be a human construct, time here is seen to be imposed on Wolf-Alice by her body. Grosz has observed how a conception of time as materially as well as culturally manifested is key to a reconceptualization of the material as active and self-producing:

> time is not merely the attribute of a subject, imposed by us on the world: it is a condition of what is living, of matter, of the real, of the universe itself. It is what the universe imposes on us rather than we on it; it is what we find ourselves immersed in, given, as impinging and as enabling as our spatiality. We will not be able to understand its experiential nature unless we link subjectivity and the body more directly to temporal immersion, to the coexistence of life with other

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[216] Anja Müller-Wood, 'Angela Carter, Naturalist' in *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*, eds. Sonja Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.105 – 116, p.105.
[217] Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 128.

forms of life, of life with things, that is, until we consider time as an ontological element.[218]

Far from 'ahistorical and timeless', as the stereotypes of nature and matter suggest, Wolf-Alice's body – as co-constructor of her subjectivity – opens up the potential for a radical reimagining that assumes that 'the biological induces the cultural rather than inhibits it'.[219]

The perceived timelessness of nature is one of the most pervasive myths of matter – one that traps the material in an eternal inertia. Anna Watz has written that '[f]or both Barthes and Carter, myth becomes the vehicle for bourgeois/essentialist ideologies that present themselves as "natural" and timeless.'[220] Carter's trenchant critique of the suggested timelessness and therefore 'truth' of myth also reverberates through those myths of nature as itself timeless. Myths are often seen to be 'natural' – like those 'forest born' fairy tales – and thus are considered to contain more viable truths because they are thought to pre-date artificial culture and can thus be used to affirm outdated and unhelpful stereotypes. At the same time, nature and matter are trapped in the image of timelessness and denigrated to the status of passivity and simplicity. Carter's stories deconstruct all images of timeless ahistoricity – in myth, in nature, in flesh – to highlight the dangers of any stereotypes of a natural 'truth'. As Steven Shaviro notes in *Doom Patrols*: "[w]here did we ever get the strange idea that nature – as opposed to culture – is ahistorical and timeless? We are far too impressed by our own cleverness and self-consciousness. We need to stop telling ourselves the same old anthropocentric bedtime stories.'[221]

Animism, Vitalism and Desiring-Production

Those 'old anthropocentric bedtime stories' are hard to avoid when literature, by its very creation, relies on anthropocentrism. Circumventing human-centred views in the writing of humans for other humans is undoubtedly challenging. Fairy tales are invariably about human plights and journeys, particularly – perhaps surprisingly – those

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[218] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.4-5.
[219] Steve Shaviro, *Doom Patrols: A Theoretical Fiction about Postmodernism*, (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997) Available on-line at http://www.dhalgren.com/ and Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely,* p.4.
[220] Anna Watz, *Angela Carter and Surrealism*, p. 110.
[221] Shaviro, *Doom Patrols*, p. 4.

that feature wood. Little tailors and little girls journey through forests and children are abandoned within them; bones are buried under trees and princesses are born from their bark; in Basile's 'The She-Bear' a piece of wood in the mouth turns the protagonist into a bear so that she might escape her incestuous father. Forests come, in these tales, to represent human sexuality or fears of the unknown, trees – as in 'The Juniper Tree' (KHM 47) – echo human gestation or take on the mothering role of those buried beneath them as in 'Ashputtle' (KHM 21), and wood often serves as a vehicle for human transformation or the site of human exploration. Avoiding anthropocentrism in the European fairy tale landscape is almost impossible and the same is true of the landscapes of Carter's revisions, which invariably centre around humanity, even if that humanity is more closely connected to animality than is perhaps usual.

Yet, in *BC*, environments may be anthropomorphic, but they are also charged, visceral and sensory. The earth is 'moist, heavy' (101); the approaching night has a 'cool smell' (101); milky moonlight falls and glistens on 'frost-crisped grass' (142); and the 'brown light of the end of the day' drains into the earth (101). Journeying across vast landscapes, the mist 'diminished the horizon, brought down the sky until it seemed no more than a few inches above us' (62) as an active rather than a passive participant in the story, the mist is the subject of the sentence not the object. In 'The Tiger's Bride' the narrator declares: '[h]e and I and the wind were the only things stirring' (63), aligning subjectivity simultaneously with human, animal and weather and defining them all as the collective 'things'. Carter's conscious enlivening of those varied manifestations of nature in such a way calls forth that fairy-tale tradition in which the birds, the flowers and the climate take on their own characterization irrespective of their nonhuman manifestation; a tradition of 'animist vitality', in which '[e]ven when a tree has been cut down and turned into a table or a spindle, its wood is still alive with the currents of power that charge the forest where it came from.'[222]

In 'The Erl-King', the wood feels alive with 'currents of power', despite the encroaching death of winter, due to its many eyes. The animals, alert and curious, watch the protagonist as she enters the forest, which itself watches with its own 'intimate perspectives' (97). Carter's descriptions of the plants and funghi growing slowly, imperceptibly, though at times pointedly eerie, encourage an engagement with nonhuman existence as alive with animism. The many gazes of the wood and its

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[222] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 30 and 21.

inhabitants are a crucial element of Carter's subversion of the finality of the 'male gaze'. While the forest and the creatures watching the protagonist may be anthropocentric in their focus, the many eyes of the forest also suggest a subjectivity for beings that are so often relegated to object status. In a Deleuzian sense, '[a]ny eye that sees is already a flow of life, anticipating a future and propelling from a past'.[223] Carter's watchful woodland, despite being anthropomorphic, enables this flow and offers possibilities for nonhuman, material agencies. When the narrator tells of the ferns that 'one by one […] have curled up their hundred eyes and curled back into the earth' the woods are made multiple, possessing myriad eyes with which to observe.

According to Lucy Tatman, vision is, for Haraway, a 'metaphor for knowing', and is therefore key to her attempt to reimagine the female body.[224] 'I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again' Haraway writes, even as she acknowledges the need for multiple visions and views.[225] For Haraway, Tatman suggests, '*all* views are partial […] There is no all-seeing, all-knowing eye, either in or above the world.'[226] The ferns and their hundred eyes are Carter's challenge to singular arborescence, and play instead on the multiplicity that offers many alternatives to the all-seeing eye of the Erl-King's patriarchal gaze and its constraints on the female body.

The curling of the hundred eyes too calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's 'thousand tiny sexes', suggestive of a desire that is multiple and fluid rather than fixed and singular.[227] As Colebrook notes, for Deleuze and Guattari, 'thinking a desire that traverses the human body, means thinking of the becoming of woman, not as *a* sex but as the opening to "a thousand tiny sexes".'[228] The many tiny eyes of the ferns and their sensuous curling motion evoke the desires of the wood and its inhabitants; desire – that is – as creative, productive force that is not limited to human beings. Mark Halsey notes that Deleuze's theory of immanent deterritorialization 'means that every*body* – whether it be a flower, bird, forest, regulatory institution, or whatever – continually faces, intermingles with, draws energy from, or opens onto other bodies *which are themselves*

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[223] Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 51.
[224] Lucy Tatman, *Knowledge That Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology* (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p.115.
[225] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' in *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3 (1988), pp.575-599, p. 582.
[226] Lucy Tatman, *Knowledge That Matters*, p. 115.
[227] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 249
[228] Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, p.143.

multiplicities.'[229] Carter's denial of a singular natural element through a detailed depiction of the multiplicities of wildlife as well as the differing behaviours of varying species of flora and fauna (which are all themselves actively engaged and watchful) encourages multiple flows between human and nonhuman gazes and desires.

The tale complicates the traditional image of desire, not only through the complicated relationship between the Erl-King as captor and the protagonist as willing victim/murderer, but through its depiction of nature. Vicki Kirby has asked, '[s]hould feminism reject the conflation of "woman" with "Nature," or instead, take it as an opportunity to consider the question of origins and identity more rigorously?'[230] Origins often come under question in 'The Erl-King': 'the homely wood blewits […] all spring up overnight like bubbles of earth, unsustained by nature, existing in a void' (98); the Erl-King's nipples are 'ripe as berries' (101), his skin 'the tint and texture of sour cream' (101)– amniotically reminiscent of Kristeva's Abject mother. But through this questioning of origins, Carter subtly challenges too the dualistic Western doctrines of desire. When the protagonist says she could almost believe that the Erl-King 'came alive from the desire of the woods' (98) we might see Carter playing not only with the artful construction of the artificial woods she has constructed to appear natural(!), but also with the idea that the woods have their own desires, and that such desires may be productive and creative. Colebrook argues that

> [d]esire, for Deleuze, is not to be reduced to sexual relations between persons. On the contrary, "persons" are formed through the organization of desire. I become a body through a relation to other bodies, eventually investing, perhaps, in an image of myself as an enclosed ego.[231]

Such a vision of desire is at odds with the traditional Western depictions of desire as defined by psychoanalytic theories of lack and heterosexual relations. As Betty Moss suggests, 'Angela Carter's artistic evolution moves toward the realization of an alternative vision of creative desire as positive and productive rather than driven by Lack – as in the dominant traditions of Western thought since Plato; Carter develops a fictional idiom adequate to the expression of such desire.'[232]

Desire in *BC* is complicated – neither solely physical nor solely linguistic, sometimes implicitly sexual, other times to do with the interconnection of species, the transformations of flesh – but it is certainly material. 'A single kiss woke the Sleeping

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[229] Halsey, p. 79.
[230] Kirby, 'Natural Conver(sa)tions', p. 234.
[231] Colebrook, p. 141.
[232] Betty Moss, 'Desire and the Female Grotesque', p. 187.

Beauty in the Wood' (112), Carter teases us as she pokes fun at the innocence we took for granted, whilst simultaneously asking us to question the power of the kiss – that physical touching of lips – if it is true that '[o]ne kiss, however, and only one, woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.' (119). The literary removal of sexuality from the folk narratives is rectified in Carter's tales, though not always in ways that are expected – when skin is licked away and animal/human relations are altered, the flesh becomes not the sole vehicle for desire, but a productive force of interconnection from which creativity is born. Grosz observes of the Deleuzian body that it is

> regarded neither as a locus for a conscious subject nor as an organically determined object; instead, like the book itself, the body is analyzed and assessed more in terms of what it can do, the things it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations it undergoes, the machinic connections it forms with other bodies, what it can link with, and how it can proliferate its capacities.[233]

The capacities of bodies are always multiple and interconnecting, and Carter's desiring fleshy bodies reflect those many inter*act*ions.

Bodies in *BC* echo this capacity for transformation and productive ability but also that multiplicity of interacting bodies. Bruno Bettelheim, with whom Carter famously disagreed, argued that *LRRH*

> deals with the daughter's unconscious wish to be seduced by her father (the wolf). // With the reactivation in puberty of early oedipal longings, the girl's wish for her father, her inclination to seduce him, and her desire to be seduced by him, also become reactivated.[234]

Yet, Carter's rewriting of the tale 'The Company of Wolves' calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's 'One or Several Wolves' in its suggestion that 'wolves travel in packs, at night, wandering,' and are not, therefore, a representation of the Oedipial father – the One –, but are instead multiple and machinic.[235] The protagonist of 'The Company of Wolves' hears '[t]en wolves; twenty wolves – so many wolves she could not count them, howling in concert as if demented or deranged' (137) and knows her own wolf – the one she will lie between the paws of – to be one of many, a multiplicity of flowing desire.

A multiplicity of desires is both linguistic and material, fleshy and mindful, and Carter's characters engage with desire as both matter and mind because desire is naturally cultural and culturally natural. As Deleuze summarises Spinoza: 'what is

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[233] Grosz, 'A Thousand Tiny Sexes', p. 1447

[234] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 175.

[235] Colebrook, Gilles Deleuze, p. 134.

action in the mind is necessarily an action in the body as well, and what is a passion in the body is necessarily a passion in the mind. There is no primacy of one series over the other".[236] Deleuze's refusal to give primacy to mind over matter aligns with his understanding of existence in terms of 'desiring-machines' – interconnecting webs of forces and flows that produce and create other forces and flows. It might be noted that Bacchilega declared that 'folk and fairy tales are ideologically variable desire machines', and that Carter too wrote of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and the production of desire for the benefit of the ideological status quo.[237] Yet, as Dani Cavallaro notes:

> [t]he phrase desiring-machine is used by Deleuze and Guattari to capture the mechanistic character of desire: a force operating as a kind of circuit breaker in the wider circuit of disparate machines to which it is bound. Concurrently, the desiring-machine is also capable of releasing a stream of desire from its own structure. [//] On this basis, Deleuze and Guattari conjecture a multi-functional reality consisting of inextricably interconnected machines: no desiring-machines exist without the social machines which they form and no social machines, conversely, exist without the desiring machines that inhabit them.[238]

Desire, then, is never relegated purely to the interconnection of human fleshes or human minds, but always and everywhere about the connection between the human and the nonhuman; between beings. Carter's *BC* sees these interrelated desires come to life in her tales in which the human and the nonhuman are seen to be indistinguishable, may change their skins and find their humanity in fur, but connect as equals whatever their being. Alaimo notes that '[c]rucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from [a] literal "contact zone" between human corporeality and more-than-human nature.'[239] When the Tiger's Bride sheds her skin to reveal her fur, and Wolf-Alice licks the blood of the vampiric Duke, we might see that '[t]he inside-outside border of the body – in its relation to the world and others – is not given once and for all but is an ongoing production and creation'.[240]

Beyond What is Given: Truth, Knowledge and Flesh

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[236] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley (San Franscisco: City Lights, 1988)
[237] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 7.
[238] Dani Cavallaro, *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), p. 54.
[239] Stacy Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature', p. 238.
[240] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 149.

For many new materialists, Deleuze's reimagining of matter and flesh as not fixed but flowing is key to a re-evaluation of dualistic hierarchies. Envisaging material forces to be desiring machines full of life and energy that are inextricable from those vibrant, discursive, social forces we take for granted sees the matter and language divide complicated, as the world is defined not through opposites, but through interconnection. For Braidotti, a 'nomadic vision of the body defines it as multi-functional and complex, as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings.'[241] No longer the fixed, eternal and passive machine of Cartesianism, matter and flesh under these terms are not controlled by the mind, dominated by cultural brilliance, but active participants – ultimately connected and connecting in ways that may well be outside our current realm of understanding, but are no less 'real'. 'Matter', as Barad suggests, 'feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers.'[242]

From the menses of 'Wolf-Alice' to the excited flesh of the protagonist in 'Erl-King' and the Tiger's Bride whose multiple skins reveal her animality, *BC* sees Carter depict flesh as interwoven with mind as her characters feel, converse, suffer, desire, yearn and remember with flesh, blood and thought, whether human or nonhuman, body or mind. For Carter, the body may be shapeshifting, layered and transforming, but it is never fixed. She toes the line that relegates matter to the realm of the imaginary or the realm of determinist fixity, refusing to commit to either, offering instead a confusion of boundaries that has echoes in new materialist agendas. As Barad suggests, '[o]n an agential realist account, matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather *matter is substance in its intra-active becoming* – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency.'[243] The connections that the collection enlivens between the human and the nonhuman, between matter, flesh, thought and mind are the vehicle through which she challenges our concepts of what is 'natural'.

Elizabeth Grosz notes that a reimagining of the flesh as active and desiring comes in part from the work of Merleau-Ponty, who posited a kind of fleshy knowledge for the material body that challenged the perceived machine-like mindlessness of bodies that dominated much of Western discourse.

> The notion of the body schema or postural models of the body outlined by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* anticipates or provides the origins of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*. The body is able to move, to

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[241] Braidotti, 'Interview with Rosi Braidotti', p.33.
[242] Barad, 'Interview with Kared Barad', p. 59.
[243] Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 139.

initiate and undertake actions, because the body schema is a series, or rather a field, of possible actions, plans for action, maps of possible movements the body *"knows"* how to perform.[244] [my italics]

That the body has its own kind of knowledge opens up the dialogue about flesh as intelligent, with its own kind of consciousness that aligns it not with passivity but with activity and agency. To know, to have desires, to feel and to sense potentially takes matter away from those associations with fixity and inertia that render it incapacitated.

However, I would argue that, for Carter, it is the idea of *knowing* that is the point at which her deconstructivist pursuit might be seen to meet with her potentially proto-new-materialist feminism. As Watz observes:

> [b]y the time she started working on *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter had identified myth, and its claims to nature and essence, as the primary instrument for this process of perpetuation. For Carter, it is precisely the binary nature of myth that produces and upholds commonly held "truths" about gender and sexual difference.[245]

As a social-constructivist, Carter's agenda was to deconstruct the 'truths' about gender and sexual difference, to challenge the way social fictions are held up as 'natural' and therefore truthful, and to destroy the image of 'nature' that held women trapped in a vortex of oppression based on feminine nature and biological essentialism. For many, Carter's work achieves this through its fantastical deconstruction of such myths, its reduction of everything to the imaginary, pointing out the artificial construction of all of existence. But *BC* offers too an alternative: a deconstruction of the concepts of 'truth', 'knowledge' and 'nature' *without* deconstructing the matter with which we associate those terms; a deconstruction, that is, of the ideas we have of knowledge/truth/nature as fixed and eternal, which is itself a new material and Deleuzian pursuit. Her attack then, is not, I believe, on material reality but on the idea of ultimate truth, and while her characters go out in search of the knowledge they have been denied and held back from, what they discover is far from stable or inert.

Carter's work is Deleuzian in its desire to 'think beyond what is given'.[246] She has long been acknowledged for her skill in thinking beyond myth and beyond 'universal truths' as well as the constraints of literary form. What is 'given' or depicted as 'truth', for Carter, is that which must be questioned, must be analysed for the ideological constructs that uphold it as such. Alaimo and Hekman have noted that Barad's work 'incorporates the material and the discursive, the human and the

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[244] Grosz, Volatile Bodies, p. 95.
[245] Watz, *Angela Carter and Surrealism*, p.107.
[246] Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, p. 36.

nonhuman, the natural and the cultural, while challenging these dichotomies and the givenness of the categories', and such observations might also be made of *BC*.[247] Nothing is taken for granted in Carter's collection, but that isn't to say that nothing exists for her. For Alaimo, it is '[o]nly by directly engaging with matter itself' that feminism might 'do as [Nancy] Tuana advocates: render biological determinism "nonsense."'[248] For instance, rather than bracketing the biological body, Birke insists upon the need to understand it as "changing and changeable, as *transformable*".'[249] Like the flesh of the tiger and his bride, the blood of the vampire, the humanity of the many wolves and the girl who is not a wolf, Carter's bodies, though existing only in the fantasy of her fiction are ultimately exactly that: 'changing and changeable, [..] transformable', and therein lies the power of Carter's challenge to the fixity of truth, and the truth of nature, flesh and matter.

Astrida Neimanis argues that only by acknowledging truth and knowledge as fluid and changing – and like nature, matter and flesh, not fixed, eternal, ultimately discoverable or conquerable – might we free ourselves from the dualistic hierarchies that are upheld by those visions of fixity. 'Truth' she says 'is partial and unfolding, and perpetually open to contestation.'[250] Like those folding and unfolding eyes of the ferns in 'The Erl-King', a truth that is not fixed would mean the end of 'nature's raw facticity' or the natural behaviours of one gender versus another or the belief in myths as truths to accept as rote.[251] Carter's challenge to the acceptance of 'universal truths' might be seen here as an attempt at what deconstructionists and poststructuralists sought to do, but without the denial of anything outside of language. Lorna Sage has said of Carter that she acknowledged that 'what we define as timeless ("human nature") hasn't that fixity or finality', and I would suggest that in her critique of myth – that supposedly 'timeless' and 'natural' phenomenon – Carter challenged the very fabric of our Platonic understanding of truth as timeless and fixed.[252]

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[247] Alaimo and Hekman, p. 11.

[248] Stacy Alaimo, Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 5.

[249] Linda Birke, 'Bodies and Biology' in *Feminist Theory and the Body*: A Reader, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 42-49, p. 45.

[250] Astrida Neimanis, 'Natural Others? On Nature, Culture and Knowledge' in *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Mary Evans, Claire Hemmings, et al (London, California and New Delhi: 2014), p. 41.

[251] Kirby, p. 218.

[252] Lorna Sage, 'Angela Carter' in *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1992), pp. 168-177, p.177.

Conclusion

That which is defined as fixed or given, the message might be from both Carter and the new materialists, need not remain so. The tree, that image of rootedness and fixity that is buried deep in the ground, and whose roots feed the system of the One, might also be understood as an intelligent, fluid multiplicity of becoming. Halsey suggests that

> [r]ecognising multiplicities is to admit that *being is incapable of subsuming becoming*. Trees, for example, are a multiplicity (and excess) in that they open onto a plethora of other machinic assemblages (construction machines, bird-machines, insect-machines, sun-machines, playhouse-machines, and so on). And these "secondary" machines all deterritorialise and reterritorialize around other multiplicities (resident-machines, worm-machines, leaf-machines, seed-machines, nostalgia-machines) and infuse different kinds of flows (familial, invertebrate, cellular, granular, neuronal). Wood is also an excellent example of the immanence of becoming-other. Under the right conditions and left long enough wood becomes stone or coal. Coal eventually turns to diamond. Diamond, with the continued movement of tectonic plates returns to earth. Earth becomes nutriment for seeds. Seeds, with a little bit of luck, sunshine and rain become trees. Over time, trees decay and become wood. And wood becomes coal, or canoe, or plank, or shelter, or bridge, or roost, or status symbol (mahogany). A rhizome rather than the root. Proliferation in place of arborescence.[253]

What is altered in this reassessment is not the tree, but our ideas about the tree; the 'truth' of the tree as we see it. What Carter demonstrates in *BC* is that the social fictions we tell ourselves are not fixed but changeable, and if they are true, they are only true if truth itself is changeable and fluid.

Carter's engagement with wood, flesh and nature in *BC* reveals an agenda that denies their truths as fixed, natural and therefore timeless, and instead sees existence as changeable and changing, transformable and fluid – endlessly interconnected. The knowledge – carnal or otherwise – that her protagonists seek is no more certain than anything else in her tales, but it is active, vital and engaging, like the flesh, skin, blood, hearts and minds of the women who long for it. After all, who has contributed more to the expanse of postmodern forests than Carter, whose female protagonists run headlong into woodlands, delighting in any opportunity to leap away from the confines of the paths, resolute in the responsibility they take in their own curiosities? It's hard to say. But what Carter's woodlands reveal in *BC* is her unfettered attempts to question the

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[253] Halsey, p. 78.

validity of the systems we accept, systems that divide us into dualisms – the lies about dialectical oppositions that have been sold as truth.

Interconnection serves in this collection as the key to heal those divides – between vampires and humans, wolves and wolf-girls, tiger-men and lamb-women, animals and humans, flesh and thought, *trees* and humans – and in the face of such interconnection it is hard to remember the delineations that existed previously. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari envisage a world in which humanity views itself as in interconnecting part of a whole:

> [n]ot man as the king of creation, but rather as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of beings, who is responsible for even the stars and animal life, and who ceaselessly plugs an organ-machine into an energy machine, a tree into his body, a breast into his mouth, the sun into his asshole: the eternal custodian of the machines of the universe.[254]

Such irreverence calls to mind Carter's own, and her desire to question – without fear – the myths being held up as truths.

When the Duke and Alice come to their humanity through the licking of his wounds, and the Lacanian mirror sees the reflection of the Duke that it was unable to reflect in his previous form, we see the machinic connections that make up the world in clear form, those connections that are in fact creative forces – desiring-machines of production.

> As she continued her ministrations, this glass, with infinite slowness, yielded to the reflexive strength of its own *material construction*. Little by little, there appeared within it, like the image on photographic paper that emerges, first, a formless web of tracery, the prey caught in its own fishing net, then in firmer yet still shadowed outline until at last as vivid as real life itself, as if *brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue*, finally, the face of the Duke. (149) [my italics]

Life is not the sole creation of language for Carter, as this final paragraph of her collection suggests, but is woven through that 'material construction' in which desire – fluid, machinic and multiple – brings more life into being. Humans are, after all, like all other life, simply beings who are 'in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of beings, who [are] responsible for even the stars and animal life'.[255] As Carter's Beauty in 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' daydreams on a life in the Beast's castle, she ponders how

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[254] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.5.
[255] Ibid.

> she would talk with the lion, under the patient chaperonage of the brown-eyed dog, on the nature of the moon and its borrowed light, about the stars and the *substances of which they were made*, about the variable transformations of the weather. (50-51) [my italics]

The world and the woods of *BC* are materially alive, substantial and interconnected. Though undeniably constructed (and deconstructed), Carter's fairy tales are not asomatous fictions, but viscerally corporeal and material, brimming with life. In that fairy-tale world, where 'natural laws' are suspended and truth is changeable and changing, her characters – human and nonhuman; fleshy and wooden – know that nature, like culture, is always transforming because life is a series of interactions, just like the moon and its borrowed light.

'the river in front of our cottage divided into two channels.'[256]

Graham Swift, *Waterland*

'What is at stake here is nothing less than a challenge to some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency, but also regarding its material practices such as the ways we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature.'[257]

Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms*

'Just as water animates our bodies and economies, so it also permeates the ways we think.'[258]

Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking With Water*

WATER

The Fens, Tom Crick declares at the opening of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, are 'a fairy-tale place.' (1) An area where water and land fuse, they are the site of a magical agency, where potent potions are born and brewed, and people live and die alongside tales of a malevolent natural world. As the Fenlanders endlessly strive to resist the water that threatens their cultivated landscape, they affirm old stereotypes of nature and its dangerous fluidity and uphold the divisions between nature and culture, reality and language. However, if Swift's postmodern narrator clings to the belief that language and reality are necessarily distinct entities, he struggles to situate himself within that dualistic framework. Unable to ignore (despite his best efforts) that as the water and land touch and combine, life emerges on the frontier between them, Crick paints the swampy landscape as a setting embedded with wonder, where the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, the water and the land, the human and the nonhuman, become harder and harder to distinguish.

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[256] Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 3. All subsequent references will be parenthetical.
[257] Coole and Frost, p. 3.
[258] Cecelia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis, 'Introduction' in *Thinking With Water,* eds. Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis (Montreal, Kingston and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, pp. 3 – 22, p. 10.

Just as the postmodern fairy-tale tradition often blurred the boundaries between good and evil, in *Waterland* water - the rivers, the rain, the beer and the ever-rising sea level – emerges as the catalyst for a dissolution of borders between matter and language, nature and culture. As the fluid, active form of material agency constantly merging with both the land and its various inhabitants, Swift's watery landscapes and their potential for wonder reveal that the membrane between dualisms is porous, and water, far from 'empty, is full of 'lively possibility'.[259] Through these complex entanglements, the novel works to dissolve the hierarchies of dualistic thought, revealing the futility of the war against nature, positing interconnection as the only antidote to the despair of the postmodern condition, and demonstrating that the delineation of borders is fraught with complications when '[c]rossings bring new things into being.'[260]

Divided Channels and Borderline Enquiries: Histories, Stories and Postmodernism

Tom Crick is a history teacher, son of a lock-keeper, his 'ancestors were water people' (10), and in the history of his life he sets his scene, knowing full well that history is a story and every 'fairy-tale must have a setting, a setting which, like the settings of all good fairy-tales, must be both palpable and unreal, let me tell you' (8). The scene – real in some senses but not others – is the lock-keeper's cottage on the banks of the river Leem, a tributary of the Great Ouse ('Say it. *Ouse*. Slowly. How else can you say it? (142)), and the houses and families that surround it on those drenched Fens. Crick is a man consumed by the blurring of boundaries, the definition of one thing versus another, the duality of existence and how to situate oneself within this incomprehensible reality of oppositions. '[T]he river in front of our cottage', Crick tells his class of school children, 'divided into two channels' (3).

As narrator, Crick is unreliable and insecure; his ideas flowing as part stream-of-consciousness, part scripted storytelling through the contradictions and paradoxes with which he struggles. As the postmodern subject – typified by indeterminacy – his project is one of deconstruction, as he undermines the notion of truth, questioning history, matter and language at every turn. 'I don't know what to guess, what to believe', Crick says, frankly; 'Superstition's easy; to know what's real – that's hard.' (58) His desire to

[259] Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[260] Bennett, *The Enchantments of Modern Life*, p. 31.

find what's 'real' leads him to history, but also – perhaps surprisingly – to fairy tales, to myths and legends, and how the telling of stories shapes reality. For this, his own telling of stories, Crick never strides too far from uncertainty, his narrative as lacking in ultimate truth as the rest. *Waterland*, Ronald H. McKinney observes,

> is a prime example of postmodern fiction since its metafictional structure is geared toward undermining the traditional aim of literature, that is, readers always have their expectations for achieving some epiphanic understanding of the meaning of human experience deliberately frustrated.[261]

However, *Waterland* is not just postmodern fiction, it is also postmodern fairy-tale fiction – the kind born of Carter and Sexton that subverts the traditional tales to create new possibilities. Unlike many fairy tales, which tend to come to rounded conclusions – if not always as happily as suggested – postmodern fairy tales 'deliberately frustrate' the expectations of their readers, as McKinney suggests of Swift, altering the narratives we think we know until they are almost – but not quite – unrecognizable, to challenge their previous incarnations. Bacchilega draws upon Linda Hutcheon's work for her analysis of postmodern fairy tale, observing how postmodern fiction works to counter accepted narratives. She notes,

> [s]ince they rhetorically and literally "incorporate that which they aim to contest" – modernism, history, the humanistic subject, other narrative texts and genre – Hutcheon sees postmodern fictions as "'borderline' enquiries" practicing "writing-as-experience-of-limits" (16-17), crossing borders between genres, and challenging "a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has ignored the role of history in art and thought (21-22)".[262]

It is a description that could have been written of *Waterland*, with its 'borderline enquiries' between water and land, fiction and history, its encroaching territories and its focus on the historical. This postmodern agenda aligns with fairy tale – a genre known for its oppositions – to contest even further the truths and divisions the traditional tales perpetuate. As Bacchilega goes on to say, '[i]n its multiple retellings, the fairy tale is that variable and "in-between" image where folklore and literature, community and individual, consensus and enterprise, children and adults […] face and reflect (on) each other.'[263] In *Waterland*, Crick's reflecting on history and fairy tale sees him face and reflect upon his own understanding of existence, as he embodies the postmodern challenge and demonstrates the simultaneous fragility and power of narrative.

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[261] Ronald H. McKinney, 'The Greening of Postmodernism: Graham Swift's *Waterland*' in *New Literary History*, 28, 4 (1997), pp. 821-832, 822.

[262] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 20. Bacchilega quotes Linda Hutcheon, 'Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism' in *Textual Practice*, 1, 1 (1987), pp. 10-31.

[263] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 10.

The use of fairy tale in postmodern fiction often comes, then, from a desire to contest traditional narratives, to subvert and reimagine them. Swift's novel is not a direct revision of one particular fairy tale, rather, fairy tales are infused in his plotlines. The father who wants to marry his daughter recalls tales such as Perrault's 'Donkeyskin' and Basile's 'The She-Bear', and we see reversed echoes of Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' in the character of Tom's brother Dick, who seems more at home underwater. Fairy tales often function too as commentary on the overall narrative, drawing parallels and making connections between the seemingly real events of the novel and the supposedly made up world of the fairy tale, continually subverting its tropes. Tom's kiss with his childhood love Mary 'is not a kiss which […] restores the girl who once lay in a ruined windmill. But nor is her kiss, so it seems to him, the kiss of a woman who still seeks Salvation.' (121) Unlike the fairy tale heroines who waited in towers for rescuers, Tom Crick's heroine is, Swift suggests, a real live woman, '(no girl)' (120), and certainly no passive archetype to buffer the ego of the hero. Swift's fairy tale references rely on our knowledge of such tropes: 'Once upon a time there was a father who fell in love with his daughter (now let's be clear, we're not just talking about ordinary paternal affection)' (226). By weaving fairy tale through the supposedly 'real' story of his life, Crick highlights the fictive nature of the tales that came to be accepted as archetypal, while also subtly questioning the truth of his own history and pointing to the potentiality of language to alter the world through its narratives.

The blurred borders between history and fairy tale serve as an echo of the man-made – and often insubstantial – borders constructed between water and land. The history of the Fens is that of land reclamation, the desperate desire to drain water from the land in order to make it more solid, and similarly, Crick's personal history involves the separation of history and fiction as he attempts to distinguish between them; to find the truth in the stories. To his class, he concedes:

> Children, you are right. There are times when we have to disentangle history from fairy-tale. There are times (they come around really quite often) when good dry textbook history takes a plunge into the old swamps of myth and has to be retrieved with empirical fishing lines. History, being an accredited sub-science, only wants to know the facts. History, if it is to keep on constructing its road into the future, must do so on solid ground. At all costs let us avoid mystery-making and speculation, secrets and idle gossip. And, for God's sake, nothing supernatural. And above all, let us not tell *stories*. Otherwise, how will the future be possible and how will anything *get done*? So let us get back to that clear and purified air and old Tom tucked up in his new white grave. Let us get back to solid ground… (86)

Despite his protestations, Crick believes very much, as the rest of his narration confirms, in the telling of stories, and he believes too that it is almost impossible to separate the 'dry textbook history' from the 'swamps of myth'. The use of 'good', 'dry' and 'solid' for history contrast with the more ambiguous and waterlogged 'swamps' of storytelling. Swampy, myths appear mysterious, with a dangerous potential for fluidity, for being neither one thing nor clearly another; watery, they disrupt order. The 'purified air' of the suggested 'truth' of the 'solid ground' of history, by contrast, is transparent, ordered and safe. The association of materiality with these alternate discourses entrenches assumptions of matter-related dichotomies, and yet the irony of the statements betray their alignments. Just as the solidity of land is in question on the swamped Fens, where water saturates and makes unstable the supposed fixity of earth, the 'facts' of history, Crick is constantly aware, are unstable themselves and all but inseparable from fiction, from the fairy tales we deride for being unreal. '[H]ow will anything *get done*?' Crick asks ironically, acknowledging the postmodern conviction that the only way anything is *done* in the world is through the telling of stories; through language.

Bacchilega observes that the fundamental concern of postmodernism is in the power of language to contest dominant discourses:

> [f]rom the perspective of these proliferating and contradictory narratives, History, like the other "master narratives," to use Lyotard's term, is de-naturalized and re-evaluated in the present as another made-up story. Complicity and challenge, "writing" and "voice" – postmodernism self-consciously activates this informing paradox of narrative.[264]

The self-reflexivity embedded in the postmodern agenda is brought to life in *Waterland* through the character of Crick, a history teacher aware both of the necessity of discourse and its power and ability to shape existence, but also its fragility and inadequacy. The 'de-naturalisation' of history, the deconstruction of its status as 'true', leads to an inevitable blurring of fact with fiction, and though Crick's desire to address the fictiveness of any discourse is palpable, so too is his reluctance to blur the boundaries enough to eradicate the dualisms. Like the land and the water that the Fenlanders so tirelessly work to delineate, the fusion of history with fairy tale does not come without resistance, for the borders, he endlessly affirms, are there for a reason: 'The last thing he wants to believe is that he's in fairy-land.' (148)

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[264] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tale*s, p. 20.

Tom Crick vs Graham Swift: Looking Beyond the 'Postmodern'

One of the foremost criticisms of postmodernism by new materialist scholars is voiced by Alaimo and Hekman in *Material Feminisms*: '[a]lthough postmoderns claim to reject all dichotomies, there is one dichotomy that they appear to embrace almost without question: language/reality.'[265] The charge against postmodernism and poststructuralism alike is that by focusing on the power of language and discourse to construct reality they denigrate - or ignore – materialities (nature, flesh, more-than-human agents), either denying the material realm altogether or depicting that realm as 'entirely separate from that of language, discourse, and culture.'[266] This, in turn, contributes to the dualistic binaries postmodernism claims to challenge. According to Katherine Hayles, the denial of material reality – 'radical constructivism' – posits 'everything we think we know, including "nature," [as] a construction emerging from historically specific, discursive, social, and cultural conditions.'[267]

A new materialist account of existence would thus distance itself – as do Alaimo and Hekman – from such a reduction, challenging the inherent Othering of matter, and yet, as I have mentioned, postmodern thinkers such as Deleuze, Guattari and Haraway have been shown to refute such reductions themselves. To see postmodernism as in opposition to new materialism is to ignore the intricacies of the postmodern approaches to reality. Crick's obsession with stories and history in *Waterland* is mirrored by his concern with the border between language and reality and can be seen to play into those assumptions about postmodernism's denial of materiality. However, perhaps, as Karla Armbruster suggests, '[i]t is precisely *Waterland*'s postmodern character that allows it to suggest something valuable and interesting about human relationships with the environment' and the material world more generally.[268] Or perhaps, more precisely, it is the postmodern character of Tom Crick that allows Swift to unpick the inadequacies of social constructivism and suggest something valuable and interesting about that

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[265] Alaimo and Hekman, p. 2.
[266] Ibid, p. 3.
[267] N. Katherine Hayles, 'Searching for Common Ground' in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, eds. Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington, D. C. and California: Island Press, 1995), p. 47.
[268] Karla Armbruster, 'Ecocriticism and the Postmodern Novel: The Case of Waterland' in *Green Letters*, 10:1 (2009) [Accessed June 6th 2020 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2009.10589042>], pp. 19-38, p. 23.

pernicious reality/language divide postmodernism is seen to inhabit.

Many critics of the novel have chosen to view the narrative voice of Tom Crick as synonymous with that of Graham Swift – or, at least, not to interrogate a distinction. Yet, to do so affirms Crick's distorted worldview without examining the potential within the narrative for an alternate assessment of reality and language and how they interweave. Though for McKinney, 'there is no evidence for any ironic disclaimer in the text itself' that would distance Swift from Crick, he overlooks the unreliability of Crick's narrative, and the persistent clues in the text that reveal the limits of Crick's worldview, suggesting that Swift's intention is not to posit Crick as the voice of reason, but a voice of confusion.[269] Armbruster observes, for example, that Crick's depiction of his elder brother Dick is often contradictory, and that the

> contradictions in his representation of Dick open the possibility of other ways of seeing Dick, reminding us that Dick's own voice and perspective are inevitably silenced and covered over by Crick's and challenging Crick's naturalized representation of him.[270]

Crick's naturalized representation of Dick, Armbruster suggests, is reflective of his naturalized depictions of nature itself as Other – unruly yet passive – and, as Dick is so often associated with water, the watery landscape that he relegates to 'a liquid form of Nothing' (13).[271] Crick's instinct for ridicule, both of his brother (a man with learning disabilities) for being different and the wetlands he grew up in despite their destruction by humanity, is far from enviable; must we assume that Swift upholds it?

Just as Crick's portrayal of Dick – as the 'potato-head' with 'no mind of its own' (38), who is the object both of Crick's scorn and his pity – is discovered to be an inadequate summary of Dick's capacities, so too should Crick's analysis of water and nature be interrogated for its own inadequacies. Reality, water and the swampy landscape of the Fens are, throughout the text, tied to each other: 'To live in the Fens', Crick declares, 'is to receive strong doses of reality. The great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality.' (17) Reality is a vacuous, 'empty' landscape overcome with water:

> [f]or what is water, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing? And what are the Fens which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing? (13)

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[269] McKinney, 'The Greening of Postmodernism', p.823.
[270] Armbruster, 'Ecocriticism and the Postmodern Novel', p. 33.
[271] Ibid.

This depiction of Reality is set up to directly oppose the flux and wonder of stories and language. Crick suggests on multiple occasions that the antidote to this watery tabula rasa, is to 'tell stories', for man, he declares, is 'the storytelling animal' (62) who must use his capacities with language to 'outwit reality' (17) and the watery 'equilibrium' (72) that threatens to consume him.

Though it is, of course, possible to take Crick's analysis of reality or nature at face value – as the blank page upon which culture must write – and as exemplary of the kind of postmodernism that new materialists and ecocritics reject, Swift's depiction of Crick is not one that implies a moral high-ground. Crick is cruel about his mentally impaired brother and insecure in his own beliefs, despite his dogged insistence on them, admitting: 'I don't know what to guess, what to believe. […] Superstition's easy; to know what's real – that's hard.' (58) After all, the Cricks 'spun yarns' (17); they've always told tales. Unlike the Atkinsons, the 'world-builders', the Cricks are the storytellers, and by Crick's own admission the stories are not always true (how could they be when every postmodern subject knows that there is no such thing as a true story?). Crick's assessment of the relationship between reality and language as distinct entities is thus simply one story among many, and his depiction of water is as fictional as his depiction of 'the Witch' (298), Martha Clay.

For Crick's depictions of watery 'reality' are steeped in the fairy tale tradition and its most dualistic depictions of water as the natural element – dangerous and threatening in its activity; pure and passive in its supposedly natural state. But as Crick speaks of the water that 'creep[s]', endlessly rising and swelling, bursting banks and flooding homes, Swift subtly reveals the narratives at the heart of Crick's threatening vision of nature: '[t]he Cricks see – but is this only some nightmare, some evil memory they have always had? – that the wide world is sinking, the waters are returning, the wide world is drowning in mud.' (19) That memory of evil is little more than a story of danger, a catastrophic human construction that aids in the containment of nature against the threat of its rising up to take revenge. After all, '[n]owhere is this dualism (man vs. water) more evident than in civilization's tireless efforts over the last 300 years to reclaim marshes and fens, drain moorland, rectify rivers and construct ever bigger dams.'[272] Water's 'evil' is embodied through its desire for 'equilibrium', a desire that seeks to thwart man's progress, and yet, as Crick himself acknowledges, '[t]here's this

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[272] R. D. V. Glasgow, *The Concept of Water* (R. Glasgow Books, 2009), p. 63.

thing called progress. But it doesn't progress, it doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away.' (336) For every condemnation of the natural world, Crick counters it with his own despairing view of society. Despite McKinney's belief that the novel demonstrates 'how postmodern praxis can avoid both mindless optimism and hopeless despair', Crick's postmodernity is almost entirely characterized by despair. It is only by considering the potential for a materially-oriented dissent in Swift's overriding narrative that we might move beyond such a despairing vision of existence.[273] Though Crick's 'humble model for progress' might be land reclamation, for Swift, the answer is more complex, as he reveals the ineffectuality of those outdated and dualistic stories of water's dangerous agency and passive inertia.

Watery Origins: The Reality of all Things

That Crick's narrative ties water to reality is little surprise considering that his ancestors were 'water people'; they have 'swampy origins' (17). For the Fens, now relatively solid, are land that 'was once water' (9). Such a claim is relevant not only to the Fens, but also as a metaphor for humanity and life itself. Theories of the world as a primordial soup have long tied existence on earth to primeval waters, waters which combined and activated to create life; developing into the world as we know it. Thus, the origins of our thinking about water return unavoidably to our own origins – water serving primarily as the substance we not only rely upon for survival, but from which we emerged. As the main component of our bodies, the hydrogen in the air we breathe, the irrigation of our crops, the nourishment of the trees that produce oxygen, water is the source and the matrix of the lives we lead, and its prominence in our lives is widely reflected in the stories we have created in order to explain our own existence. It is no coincidence that water was, in the earliest known philosophical thought, considered to be 'the reality of all things'[274]

Thales, thought to be the first of the Greek philosophers, was responsible for this influential assertion which, though met swiftly with alternate arguments (Heraclitus countered that it was in fact fire that was the genesis of life), has been acknowledged for its alignment with more recent scientific speculation. As Mark Halsey notes, Thales is

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[273] McKinney, p. 821.
[274] Halsey, *Deleuze and Environmental Damage*, p. 61.

thought to have considered water, 'rather than man or god', to be the source of reality; to be the primary and most essential element from which all else was conceived.[275] Thales' opinion was appropriated by many of the great minds that followed, but he stood alone in his suggestion that water preceded even a creator, and thus was the only true source of reality itself.

Glasgow traces the philosophical history of water and recognizes the influence of Thales' view in the work of noted scientists who followed much later. Paracelsus, for example, writing in the early 16th century observed: "[w]hen the world was still nothing but water, and the Spirit of the Lord moved upon the face of the waters, the world emerged from the water; water was the matrix of the world and of all its creatures."'[276] Similarly, a century after Paracelsus, Jean Bapista van Helmont, a Flemish alchemist – 'today regarded by some as the father of biochemistry' – suggested that water was the single, unifying substance of the planet: "All earth, clay, and every body that may be touched," he wrote, "is truly and materially the offspring of water only, and is reduced again into water, by nature and art."'[277] Subverting the Christian image of 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' (Genesis 3:19), as 'offspring' humanity is, in van Helmont's view, born of water and must return to it. As Macauley notes, our 'corporeal ties to elemental waters […] are more than mythic or metaphorical'.[278] After all, babies are born roughly seventy-five percent water, approximately seventy-one percent of the world's surface is water and seventy-five percent of a living tree is water. This unavoidable dependency on water through those corporeal ties has led to its continued reference in the stories we create to explain our existence.

When Jesus was said to have declared that one must be 'born of water and spirit' (John 3:5) in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, he may have been referring to the supposedly inherent innocence and naturalness of water. We are held in amniotic fluid and born after the breaking of waters in birth, before the ritual of baptism sees water cleanse us of our sins, suggesting water's abilities to return the sinful to their original purity. Stemming from water's undeniable purifying capabilities, these images of water as natural and thus godly (we need only look to the idiom 'cleanliness is godliness' to see how the two concepts became so staunchly interwoven) solidify water as the

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[275] Halsey, p.61.
[276] Glasgow, *The Concept of Water*, p. 16 -17.
[277] Glasgow, p. 16.
[278] David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire and Water as Environmental Ideas* (New York: SUNY, 2010), p. 45.

material of origins – cleanliness as the state to which we aspire, embodying the natural, untainted reality God created before sin and disease were let in.

European fairy tales reflect this image of water's purity and ability to return things to their natural order; appearing frequently as a life-giving fluid; a water of life. In Giambattista Basile's 'The Enchanted Doe' when twin brothers must be separated, one digs his dagger into the ground to release a fountain of water from the earth, telling his twin,

> [t]his is the best memorial I can leave you. By the flowing of this fountain you will follow the course of my life. If you see it run clear, know that my life is likewise clear and tranquil. If it is turbid, think that I am passing through troubles; and if it is dry, depend on it that the oil of my life is all consumed and that I have paid the toll which belongs to Nature![279]

The dry spring signals the end of his life, when his blood no longer flows, echoing the sense of water as life source. Water's ability to give life is often heightened in fairy tales; made magical. In the Grimms' 'The Water of Life' (KHM 97), three princes go out in search of the water that will save their dying father. When the water is switched and the King is given salty sea water, his condition worsens, but on receipt of the true water of life he is healed. Interestingly, in both the Grimms' 'Rapunzel' (KHM 12) and Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' it is the tears of the female protagonists that have healing properties, for while Rapunzel cures her Prince's blindness, Gerda melts Kai's frozen heart, suggesting that water – saline or fresh - has this innate capacity for healing and renewal.

These ideas draw parallels with that 'holy water' of baptism, often used for healing and cleansing. European fairy tales, though supposedly secular, often made biblical allusions such as these, as the authors' and collectors' attempts at morality aligned with the Christianity that was practiced across much of the continent. A similar morality appears later too in John Ruskin's Victorian fairy-tale inspired novel *The King of the Golden River or The Black Brothers: A Legend of Stiria*, when a boy is instructed to pour three drops of holy water into the source of the river so that it might become for him a river of gold, the holiness of the water is directly related to the kindness of its carrier. The brothers who do not share the water with the thirsty and dying are turned to stone, while the brother who does is rewarded by the King of the golden river, suggesting a God-like omniscience. Life and goodness come to be associated with clear, pure, clean water, while their constructed opposites – death and evil – find their

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[279] Giambattista Basile, *Stories From Pentamerone* (Frankfurt: Outlook, 2019), p. 40.

associations in salty, muddied water; a dangerous corruption of purity.

For Macauley, 'water possesses putative powers of purification', with 'the ability to mend, cleanse, and heal the cleavages between the natural world and society'.[280] Yet, strangely, those traditional visions of water as the symbol of purity distance water (and thus the natural world) from society, positioning it in opposition to the sins of human culture, as the saviour of humanity, rather than a part of it. Water's cleansing ability is used in those stories to deify the natural world, and to tie its supposed qualities of purity and innocence to the morality of goodness in humanity. This is echoed in the tales of 'Rapunzel' (KHM 12) and Andersen's 'The Snow Queen', where the female protagonists (both pure of heart) have tears with healing abilities: Rapunzel cures her prince's blindness, while Gerda melts Kai's frozen heart. Goodness, under these terms, comes to denote cleanliness and faultlessness, uncorrupted by sin, with water as the substance that might finally return us to that utopian, pre-cultural Garden of Eden.[281] Just as water returns the maiden's cursed face to its former beauty in the Italian fairy tale, 'The Fair Angiola', these associations of water with purity suggest a return to the 'natural' and thus to innocence.

The perceived purity of water and its connections to life in our narratives also echo Thales' suggestion that water is the 'reality of all things' – tying water to the fundamental reality of existence; of matter. If water is the pure, untainted substance from which we came and which nourishes and supports our growth, it can also therefore be understood as the truest depiction of the 'natural'; and the concept of natural is interwoven with the idea of reality – a baseline, unshakeable truth of existence. Life is held thus by the underlying solidity of a natural reality that underpins the flux and change of culture. If the reality of all things is water, and water is portrayed in our stories as a pure, innocent and natural substance that can cleanse away sin, then reality is separate from us; from consciousness. As a clean, clear slate, reality becomes the tabula rasa upon which we might create life as we know it.

Yet, as tabula rasa, water is often depicted as the matter from which either a creator or humanity constructed the world; a natural, passive, pre-cultural reality or truth that was moulded and shaped into its present state. Macauley observes that even

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[280] Macauley, p. 44.
[281] It might be noted that in the earlier editions of KHM, Rapunzel is not truly 'without sin' as she has engaged in sexual relations with the prince outside of marriage (and in some versions conceived his twins), however, these details were removed in the later editions, and so her purity remained intact.

the story of Genesis suggests that we are born of these pre-cultural oceans by suggesting that:

> in the beginning the world emerges from the matrix of a primordial sea – even if creation is ultimately *ex nihilo* – since God separates the water below from the water above to fashion the vaulting heavens and the dry earth, while *The Koran* asserts: "we made every living thing from water."[282]

These theological visions imply a creator working with watery matter to construct the world – the material as tool rather than an active participant in construction. As passive matter, water (and thus reality) becomes the material upon which life is imprinted by consciousness and must be ordered by it. As the 'reality of all things' this 'water of life' is relegated to the material of construction, not the constructor; its purity serving as a perfect, untainted base from which to begin, upholding a humanist vision of existence.

Theories of watery origins have also depicted this tabula rasa as a chaotic, primordial sea of opposing elements. Referring to Carl Jung's work, Lucy Huskinson describes

> the black *prima materia* or chaos, where all elements are in total conflict so that the opposites repel one another and no connection or relation between them is possible. This original state is symbolized in alchemy by many images. Perhaps the most common is that of water: it is "a whirlpool in chaos", the "material principle of all bodies" is "eternal water", the "water of life" (Jung, 1937a, pars. 433, 425).'[283]

To Jung, water is symbolic of the chaos of the pre-cultural, primordial soup, but he still envisions it to be the 'material principle of all bodies' or the 'water of life': that is, the fundamental reality of existence.

Hovering beneath these assumptions of pre-cultural chaos lies the alternate depiction of water in myth and fairy tale as dangerous Other. Behind every story containing a pure and rejuvenating 'water of life' or elixir of strength, there exists its suggested opposition, a potion that will turn a mermaid's tail to legs in excruciating pain or a sleeping draught that thwarts the heroine in finding her stolen prince. In Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', for example, the sea witch draws a potion from blood and snakes to create a dark and fearsome vision of water:

> [t]he steam that rose formed itself into such horrible shapes that no one could look at them without fear. Every moment the witch threw something else into the vessel, and when it began to boil, the sound was like the weeping of a

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[282] Macauley, p.45.
[283] Lucy Huskinson, *Nietzsche and Jung: The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites* (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 52.

crocodile. When at last the magic draught was ready, it looked like the clearest water.[284]

The danger of the witch's potion lies in its capacity to appear innocuous; it is disguised under a veil of purity; its chaos lies within. The image of watery danger is often depicted in this way in European fairy tales, which tell of fishermen convinced by wily water nymphs to give up their first -born children, just as legends told of sirens or mermaids guiding boats into the rocks. Sea monsters too illicit such fear in part because of their ability to hide beneath the surface unknowingly, disguising their full size and capacity until they are ready to strike. As the 'natural' element – and for many the primary element – water is dangerous when chaotic, unpredictable or uncontrollable, and stories of evil potions, threatening sea monsters or smiling, sinister mermaids reflect humanity's fears of an ungovernable natural world.

The role of water in fairy tales as powerful and agentic matter that exists in contrast with humanity is a common trope in literature. Exemplified by stories such as Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', in which the land and the sea occupy such separate spaces that transgression between them incurs huge costs, fiction has long reflected our collective fears surrounding the immensity and un-knowableness of the ocean, *Moby Dick* acting as one enduring example. In its otherness, water can occupy a space of both danger and wonder, roles that have been reflected in ancient myths and legends from Neptune to Poseidon, Melusine to Undine, Loch Ness to water sprites. Oceans in particular come to represent the enormity of watery matter's agency, but that agency is always inherently *different* to the agency of humanity. Our stories of water grapple with this difference, but our fascination with water must too arise from our sameness – that our bodies are mostly water, that we rely on it for survival, that our blood is almost the same salinity as the oceans we fear.

Though the dualistic associations with water as pure and innocent or unruly and threatening may be pervasive, in many fairy tales water can also be the vehicle for a magical alteration of fortunes. When drunk, shared or collected, water sparks a change in circumstance – a man is healed from sickness, a mermaid's tail transforms into legs – and this catalytic momentum is embodied most obviously in water's larger function within the narratives, as a border that must be crossed; a catalyst for change. Water is then, more often than not, found in these tales at the threshold of a change; on the

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[284] Hans Christian Andersen, *Fairy Tales*, Trans. Tiina Nunnally, Ed. Jackie Wullschlager (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 80.

borders of potential. A princess drops a golden ball into the pond and her life is forever altered; the runaway gingerbread man is finally caught when he comes to the river and needs a lift; selkie women with flesh and blood shed their human skin to become seals when they enter the ocean. The crossing of watery borders is present in so many stories as the start of adventure, a stimulant for an alternate set of conditions. It is when characters cross bridges, hitch boat rides, bathe in rivers that their lives begin to change; it is stepping into or out of an ocean, or a search for holy water that sets the path to adventure. The borderline that water creates between itself and everything else in these tales is a liminal space of magical potential, a life-giving, life-altering boundary that dares you to cross it.

The stories we tell and have told ourselves about water thus reflect our stories of nature and its history as the truth of reality; a reality that contains radical potential. Theories of water tie it to a pre-cultural reality, a basis for life, from which all other life sprung forth. But as Glasgow suggests, the centrality of water first proffered by Thales in his story of existence is not without merit:

> [t]oday's schoolchildren learn that a water molecule is not an element, but a compound comprising one atom of oxygen and two of hydrogen (the Frenchman Antoine Lavoisier, the founder of modern chemistry, having coined the termed *hydrogen* to mean "producer of water"), and this hydrogen – so essential to water – is not only the most abundant element in the universe and the first to be formed from the Big Bang, but also the simplest, consisting as it does of just one proton and one electron. As late as the early 19^h century, chemists were speculating that atoms of the heavier elements (i.e. of everything else) were produced by conglomerations of hydrogen atoms, thus making hydrogen the "first matter" or ultimate constituent of matter in general.[285]

Those myths of creation from water are myths that echo through *Waterland*, just as Crick's origins in water might echo the origins of life in broader terms. As a supposed point of origin, water can embody the role of mother, but with its fluid materiality, it can symbolize the disturbing flux of existence; uncontrollable and insurmountable chaos. Where are the borderlines in water? With the potential to literally and figuratively dissolve man-made borders, such as those dug into the Fens, water occupies that liminal space at which the natural and the cultural intersect, so that the reality of all things is not solid, but in flux, and otherness might be erased.

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[285] Glasgow, p. 13.

Shifting landscapes and Philosophies of Flow

According to Braidotti, a 'range of new, alternative subjectivities […] emerged in the shifting landscapes of postmodernity. They are contested, multi-layered and internally contradictory subject-positions. They are hybrid and in-between social categories'.[286] Those 'shifting landscapes of postmodernity' are reflected in the shifting landscapes of the Fens in *Waterland*, where nothing is stable and thus everything is possible. In *Thinking with Water*, Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis note: '[w]ater can evoke an uncanny space-time in many human myths – a place of others, or an *other* place. Our spatial and temporal relations to water may seem unintelligible, unruly, and vague, but they are also full of disturbing potential.'[287] As the site and vehicle of such disturbing potential, the wetlands of Swift's novel invoke the myths and fairy tales that told of water's otherness, but as a text born into and of those shifting postmodern landscapes, comes the potential for alternate stories of water. For it is only, Chen et al suggest, '[b]y drawing upon the reservoir of unknowability carried within all waters,' that 'we may situate ourselves in ways that challenge land-based preconceptions of fixity'.[288]

In its materiality, water tangibly embodies the idea of process. From liquid to solid to gas, as ice, water and steam, water alternates, creating manifestations that are molecularly in flux. Our language of water is evocative of this processual embodiment; water *flows* in rivers, downstream, out of taps; it is *fluid*, both adjective and noun. The philosophical concept of flow has served for centuries as an opposition to permanence, with water representing the very changeable nature of existence. As seen in Heraclitus' famous declaration: '[y]ou cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.'[289] Yet, while Mark Halsey suggests that Aristotle's assertion '"every animal's life begins in seminal fluid,"' makes man 'from the very "first" - the subject of a *flow* rather than a structure or teleology (Collingwood, 1960, p.31)', Western philosophy has often rejected the notion of water as the source of flow by separating matter from thought, instead relegating water to the fixity and eternal presence of reality.[290]

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[286] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses,* p. 13.
[287] Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis, 'Introduction' in *Thinking With Water*, p. 8.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Russell, *History of Western Thought*, p. 63.
[290] Halsey, p.61

Challenging those dualistic myths of water and nature requires a radically different vision of existence, and water – as fluid, flowing; ever in flux – has often been a vehicle for such reimaginings. In the work of Deleuze and Guattari and the new materialist collection *Thinking with Water*, water (as material rather than simply as metaphor) is re-envisioned not as the passive matter of pre-cultural reality or a dangerous opposition to thought, but as a fluid, processual agency – capable of making change and co-creating existence. As Grosz asserts, the concept of pre-given, pre-destined, pre-cultural natural reality is inadequate for an understanding of life; she notes, '[n]ature is open to any kind of culture, to any kind of "artificiality" for culture itself does not find pre-given biological resources, but makes them for its own needs, as does nature itself.'[291] The flow and vitality of water enables new materialists to examine the agency and 'needs' of nature and thus open up the potential for the consideration that nature and culture, matter and thought, reality and language are, and have always been, a series of multiple processes and open-ended connections. As Colebrook observes:

> [f]rom a transcendental point of view, though we cannot assume real interests, nor some *pre-social* and essential individual that we might discover underneath power and images. The first step of transcendental method for Deleuze is to show how persona and interests are produced from the chaotic *flows of desire*.[292] (92) [my italics]

Although Colebrook refers to Deleuze's argument against the concept of ideologies more specifically, it demonstrates his dismissal of pre-social reality. Through flows, waves and slippages, the language of water forms the basis for the work of Deleuze and his collaborations with Guattari. Like tributaries and streams, the material qualities of water run elaborately through his radical philosophies of rhizomatic vitality. Flows of experience; flows of desire; waves of becoming; his is a vision of life as creative and constantly in combination, machinic multiplicities and processes that cannot be reduced to dualistic oppositions of existence before and after culture.

Life, far from a series of binary interactions, is for Deleuze and Guattari a 'dynamic flow of experience' and, as Mary Bryden observes, their 'geographical process of becoming is characterized not by operations of seismic realignment or of

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[291] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, p. 72.
[292] Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, p.92.

transubstantiation, but by waves, flows and slippages'.[293] Watery imagery enables their reimagining of existence, as the borders between our constructed categories are washed away. 'Waves are vibrations, shifting borderlines inscribed on the plane of consistency as so many abstractions', Deleuze and Guattari suggest, and with these shifting borderlines comes the ultimate manifestation of a rhizomatic vision: deterritorialization; when the world is a multiplicity of flows of desire.[294] As Colebrook notes,

> [t]he supposed real world that would lie behind the flux of becoming is not, Deleuze insists, a stable world of being; there "is" nothing other than the flow of becoming-life. *The* obstacle to thinking becoming, according to Deleuze, is humanism and subjectivism.[295]

His theories of flows, waves and slippages undermine the idea of a pre-existing solid reality, thus freeing water, matter and nature from the status of given, passive and inert.

Similarly, Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis also look to water to reconsider humanistic doctrine; attempting as they do so 'to enter into a more collaborative relationship with the aqueous, actively questioning habitual instrumentalizations of water' and proposing 'that waters enable lively possibility even as they exceed current understandings.'[296] The lively possibilities of water are evident even from the language we use, depicting it as flowing and fluid rather than fixed or inert. While acknowledging water's connection with origins: '[i]n some sense, we all emerge from and return to waters', the editors of this text offer this narrative not as an othered, pre-cultural existence but to highlight the potential in that story. They suggest that water has the 'capacity to challenge our ways of knowing, both by crossing conventional disciplinary boundaries and by revealing the ways in which "nature" and "culture" are always co-constituted.'[297] Water becomes, then, the co-creator of dynamic life, and the recognition of our origins in it are a world away from a pre-cultural ideal. Just as the contributors to the collection think *with* rather than *of* or *about* water, so too did we emerge *with* it, rather than simply *from* its fixed, given state.

Within these watery reconfigurations and machinic landscapes of flow, the material has agency as a part of the dynamic process that is life, and water, as fluid matter, enables that reconfiguration. Jane Bennett cites Bergson's view that

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[293] Colebrook, p.6 and Mary Bryden, 'Deleuze and Anglo-American Literature: Water, Whales and Melville' in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* ed. Jean Khalfa (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 105- 113, p. 107.
[294] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 294.
[295] Colebrook, p. 125.
[296] Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[297] Chen et al, p. 8 and p. 5.

> "materiality" is a flow, an indivisible continuum of becomings whose protean elements are not only exquisitely imbricated *in* a flowing environment but also *are* that very flow. Extensive and intensive forms swirl around and become an open and living whole, "a whole that is not given".[298]

By recognizing the flow of matter, theory can reimagine thought/matter dualisms, and, as the source of flow, water embodies that capacity for reimagining and wonder. Water, animate and alive, participates in the creation of existence; if it really is the 'reality of all things', it can only be so as the flow and flux of process.

Land Reclamation: The Fight Against Flow

'[T]he destiny of the Fens,' Crick declares, is 'to strive not for but against water' (13); to withhold the inexhaustible flow of the rivers, the rain and the ocean from overcoming the constructed solidity of the land. That the river in front of their family home 'divided into two channels' (3) acknowledges the history of Crick's upbringing in a watery landscape where dualities are central and the war between the water and the land is pertinent and unavoidable. Despite Crick's insistence on the necessity of such dualities – as the Fenlanders work ceaselessly to hold back the force of the encroaching water – the novel reveals the inevitable slippages between dualisms, and the inefficacy of a divided worldview created by mankind. In the process of carving up the waterscapes of the fens, Crick reveals,

> Vermuyden did not foresee that in cutting new courses for the rivers he reduced, not quickened, their flow; since a divided river conducts at any one point a decreased volume of water, and the less water a river conducts the less not only its velocity but also its capacity to scour its channel. (11)

The process of land reclamation – of delineating divisions – hinders flow. Such divisions are not without consequence, and as the war against the flow of the water continues to define the landscape and its inhabitants, the novel reveals how withholding the flow of water might too withhold a Deleuzian flow of life.

The Fens are 'flat, rain-swept, water-logged land' (18). They are swampy, earth that 'was once liquid' but that exists now as solid ground – it is suggested – due to the 'digging, ditching and entrenching' (18); due to the redirection of rivers, the diversion of waters, the pumping, draining, drudgery of that endless process of land reclamation. The solidity of the land is always in question on these wetlands, and the inhabitants are

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[298] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 92.

resigned to the ongoing attempts at reclamation. But the 'waterland' of the title suggests a confusion of oppositions, that the fens are neither fully one thing nor the other, but a combination of both. Combining two words to make one, Swift attempts to combine the two seemingly distanced worlds of water and land and in so doing implies the missing 'and' that joins them. According to Deleuze,

> AND is neither one thing nor the other, it's always in between, between two things; it's the borderline, there's always a border, a line of flight or flow, only we don't see it, because it's the least perceptible of things. And yet it's along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape.[299]

This idea of thinking with and through the 'and' allows, according to John Marks, an 'escape [from] the way in which thought is conventionally modelled on the verb "to be"'; instead revealing the potential for fluidity in the middle of things.[300] And just as Maria Tatar declared that 'magic happens on the threshold of the forbidden', for Deleuze, the borders are where things take flight.[301]

The border between water and land is constantly in flux in Swift's novel, and as Armbruster suggests, although

> the novel's central analogy between constructing historical narratives and creating and maintaining the Fen landscape seems to rest on a familiar opposition between nature and culture, one in which Crick takes the side of culture, […] ultimately, the novel suggests that this opposition is an unstable one.[302]

It is the instability of the dualisms that reveal their potential. After all, the process of land reclamation is necessary only because of the deeply interwoven natures of these seemingly oppositional forces. Past and present, water and land, fairy tale and history, nature and culture, Crick demonstrates, are fluidly embedded in each other in this landscape that is 'water-logged', where 'the past is always tugging at the sleeve of the present' (160) throughout 'the hocus-pocus of this self-same History.' (21)

Reflecting the waterlogged landscape, the narrative style is similarly revealing of Swift's emphasis on flow and flux. The chapters run into each other – 'let me tell you' (298), Crick begins at the end of a previous chapter, leading into the next. They are non-linear; Crick's narrative has its roots in a *stream* of consciousness, as his memories and theories merge, creating new flows of thought. He narrates as though to tell a story,

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[299] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1975-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 45.
[300] Marks, p. 33.
[301] Tatar, p. 1.
[302] Armbruster, p. 25.

but the stories are many and difficult to distinguish as they overlap, reflecting the fluidity of the rivers and the capacity for flooding. Swift's fluid style creates slippages in the language as well as the storyline, suggesting an agenda of flow and flux rather than stasis and fixity. Though there often seems to be a linear narrative that resembles a history lecture, Crick jumps from history to present to fairy tale, ultimately undermining the solidity of any ideas of a fixed system, or even a linear time. The entanglements of space and time in the novel echo a Deleuzian sense of time as flow, as the multiplicities of Crick's stories – of rivers, oceans, eels, beer and humans – commingle and create an almost rhizomatic web of engagements. Although this style of writing is characteristic of the postmodernity of the time, with its confusion of narrative certainty, it can also be seen to reflect a fluidity that aligns with the Deleuzian and later new materialist emphasis on flux and process over fixity and offers the potential for further blurring of lines between nature and culture, those 'unstable' oppositions. Resisting the flow of Swift's novel and Crick's narration is as difficult as to resist the water that endlessly washes over the Fens; to fight the flow, as the Fenlanders do, is futile.

Even land reclamation, that seemingly cultural pursuit in fact began with an assemblage of silt in the oceans: '[t]he silt accumulated, salt-marsh plants took hold, then other plants. And with the plants began the formation of peat.' (9) And 'what silt began', Crick declares, 'man continued' (10), explaining the watery history of the 1600s when the Dutch were hired by the English to construct waterways in that swampy landscape and divert rivers straight to the sea: '[t]hey dug subsidiary cuts, drains, lodes, dykes, eaus and ditches and converted 95,000 acres into summer, if not winter, grazing.' (11) Yet, despite these early successes, Crick argues, soon 'nature […] began to sabotage [their] work' (11) and the waterways collected mud and silt, but most importantly, it became clear what had not been previously acknowledged: 'That reclaimed land shrinks – as anything must shrink with the water squeezed out of it.' (12) Once the land had shrunk, it began to sink; and so began yet more pumping and draining, and the endless work of reclamation continued. '[W]ho would choose dredging for their calling?' Crick asks, 'Who would opt for this endless and stationary war against mud? This dredgery-drudgery, sludgery-sloggery. It would sap even the stoutest spirit. It would dull even the brightest soul.' (346) Perhaps only those who believe that they have, now, no choice: '[b]ecause if you construct a stage then the show must go on.' (93). There is little joy in this endless fight against water, Crick's despairing tone suggests, and while 'nature' is the most obvious opponent in this

constructed war, the novel reveals that the distinction between nature and culture is always in fluid interchange and the flow is necessary, not the Other.

Amphibians, Silt, Mud and Phlegm: Occupying the In-Between

Despite the apparent certainty of so much of Crick's narration, his distinctions between land and water, or man and water, or nature and culture are as muddied as the 'fairy-tale' (1) land on which he was brought up. His ancestors have 'swampy origins' (17), and when land reclamation began and their attempts to waylay it were shut down, they became 'amphibians'; living on the land, working with the water, perpetually torn between the two. Seeming to have risen from the waterlogged land themselves, their boots are 'perpetually mud-caked' (13), from their 'muddy labours' (17) which tie them to the 'flatness' (2) and 'watery nothing' (177) of the Fens. They are 'fixed in' mud, 'glued to it even' (17), inescapably bound to that soggy border that is neither entirely earth nor water, living as never fully one thing nor another, telling stories of a life once lived. Such, perhaps, is the nature of origins in water, an element constantly in flux, ever combining and altering the elements around it, creating and constructing. Through the emphasis on the in-betweenness of amphibians, silt, mud and phlegm, Swift challenges the possibility of fixed dualisms and highlights the difficulties that arise from implementing such divisions.

Though he may now cling to his constructed life on land, Crick's existence is founded upon an in-betweenness that arises from his lineage in water and his present life on land. According to Newton, the fluidity of water's engagements demonstrates its unanimity:

> that rare substance water can be transformed by continued fermentation into the more dense substances of animals, vegetables, salts, stones and various earths. And finally by the very long duration of the operation be coagulated into mineral and metallic substances. For the matter of all things is one and the same, which is transmuted into countless forms by the operations of nature.[303]

That Swift ties the Crick family irrevocably to their material past, calls them 'amphibious' (207), suggests this transmutation of matter may not be a purely

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[303] Rupert Hall and Marie Boas-Hall (eds.), *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 341.

nonhuman capacity, but may be true too of humanity, who in their own way transform and coalesce with the natural world as matter that is all 'one and the same'.

Paul Smethurst observes that throughout *Waterland*

> oppositions appear to be set up between natural/artificial, water/land, story/history, and these seem to privilege the first term; natural, water, story. But really, these pairs of opposites are always held in a creative tension, the point being precisely not to exclude either term.[304]

The swamps, the mud, the silt and the boggy peat are the physical site of such 'creative tensions'; tensions whose active creativity is both philosophical and physical; fruitful breeding grounds for new thought and new life. Crick informs his class:

> peat is the second vital constituent of the Fens and the source of their remarkable fertility. Once it supported great forests which collapsed and sank when climatic changes caused water to re-immerse the region. Today, it forms the rich, black, beet-and potato-bearing soil which is second to none in the country. (9)

As early myths attributed the birth of humanity to the waters or the earth, the mixture of water with land results in 'remarkable fertility', and within the novel this fertility infiltrates simultaneously the minds of the people who exist on that watery earth:

> [b]aked mud smells, river smells, a hot-blue sky, a warm wind…Not to mince matters, and to offer you, in passing, an impromptu theory, sexuality perhaps reveals itself more readily in a flat land, in a land of watery prostration, than in, say, a mountain or forested terrain, where nature's own phallic thrustings inhibit man's, or in towns and cities where a thousand artificial erections (a brewery chimney, a tower block) detract from our animal urges. (182)

Or perhaps, in a 'land of watery prostration' the blurring of borders between land and water offers the potential for a blurring of bodily borders; sparks a desire for other creative tensions. Crick's theory that it is from the land's flatness that activity springs ignores the underlying activity of such seemingly inert, flat land; the borders that are constantly blurring beneath the surface, creating tensions that in turn create life.

As Peta Mitchell has argued, *Waterland* presents 'space, place, and landscape as having a palpable influence on history and memory' (71). Just as humanity and culture has undoubtedly affected the natural world, nature, far from the 'empty wilderness' Crick describes, constructs and effects humanity. '[I]t is strange' Crick suggests, '– or perhaps not strange, not strange at all, only logical – how the bare and empty Fens yield so readily to the imaginary – and the supernatural.' (18) The strangeness of the concept in Crick's mind reveals his reinforcement of the humanist denial of material agency. As Bennett observes, even when it is impractical, humans are more keen to notice our own

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[304] Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotype: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), p. 152.

effect on the world than the more-than-human world's effect on us: 'Latour makes this point when he notes that we are much better at admitting that humans infect nature than we are at admitting that nonhumanity infects culture'.[305] The novel's depictions of those substances that exist in between the dualities of water and land – mud, silt, phlegm, swampland – reveal a material capacity to shape the world that Crick's human-centred narrative struggles to embrace.

Though silt may be for our narrator 'a word which when you utter it, letting the air slip thinly between your teeth, invokes a slow, sly, insinuating agency', as Armbruster observes, silt denies the natural/cultural opposition that Crick tries to apply to it through its capacity to create land as well as dissolve it.

> Silt, seemingly the ultimate force of nature which humans must battle in the Fens, turns out to have a more complex relationship with human culture, sometimes even supporting the human goal of creating land out of water; as Crick points out, "it is simultaneously accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay…Just as it raises the land, drives back the sea and allows peat to mature, so it impedes the flow of rivers, restricts their outfall, renders the newly formed land constantly liable to flooding and blocks the escape of flood water" (9).[306]

Silt denies categorization, it 'obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes' (11); existing on that border between water and land it cannot easily be contained; it co-constructs the landscape, affecting the flow of water, the shape of the earth and the lives of the inhabitants – human and nonhuman.

Silt's position on the border between nature and culture reflects Crick's own position on the border between water and land. As a man who comes from 'water people' his depiction of the land reclamation he was brought up with is tinged with regret:

> [i]s it desirable, in the first place, that land should be reclaimed? Not to those who exist by water; not to those who have no need of firm ground beneath their feet. Not to the fisherman, fowlers and reed-cutters who made their sodden homes in those stubborn swamps, took to the stilts in time of flood and lived like water-rats. (10)

His ancestors, who 'speared fish and netted ducks' (10) were not readily open to abandon their 'natural' existence and thus did not – unlike Andersen's Little Mermaid – go willingly to a life on land. They were part of the resistance against the reclamation, fighting those early efforts; they 'broke down the medieval embankments and, if caught, were buried alive'; 'cut the throats of King Charles's Dutch drainers and threw their

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[305] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 115.
[306] Armbruster, p. 26.

bodies into the water they were hired to expel'; they were 'summarily dealt with for sabotaging drainage works' (10). Some were even hanged.

Eventually, the Cricks adapt; become 'amphibious' (207). The capacity to '[j]ump from the one realm to the other, as if they shut each other out' is a fantasy reserved for children, and thus the Cricks know that they must 'put the two together. To live an amphibious life.' (207) Because although Crick declares that his ancestors 'ceased to be water people and became land people', he also notes:

> [o]r, perhaps they did not cease to be water people. Perhaps they became amphibians. Because if you drain land you are intimately concerned with water; you have to know its ways. Perhaps at heart they always knew, in spite of their land-preserving efforts, that they belonged to the old, prehistoric flood. (13)

As amphibians the Cricks must exist as toads or salamanders, ectothermic, constantly adapting to their environment, and it is clear too that the environment – that matter – greatly affects them – their minds and their bodies; the physicality of phlegm – the 'mucus. Or slime. An ambiguous substance' (344) that gives them a 'muddy, silty humour' (15) – changing their temperaments. Though Crick is so concerned by the effect of language and humanity on the world, it is clear too that the world also affects them. Turning from water people to amphibians the Cricks internalize and physicalize the material realities of their existence; it shapes them as they shape it. Despite his postmodern preoccupation with language as a constructor, Swift does not ignore the agency of matter, instead opening up the potential that the blurring of borders might give way to a more active vision of nature.

For Crick, his watery heritage is a bind: '[h]ow do you acquire, in a flat country, the tonic of elevated feelings […] if you are born in the middle of the flatness, fixed in it, glued to it even by the mud in which it abounds…?' (17) And yet, for all his condemnation of those 'natural' origins and its 'nothingness', he connects this heritage to his storytelling capacity – '[d]own to the last generation, they were not only phlegmatic but superstitious and credulous creatures. Suckers for stories' (17) – a trait in which he takes great pride. Where storytelling is usually reserved for the creativity of culture as opposed to nature or materiality, the Crick family's watery origins – their phlegmatic natures – are key to their ability to create and construct new worlds – water, as the flowing, fluid potential enlivens their minds in a way that the land-based inhabitants cannot emulate. In many ways, Crick's contradictory image of the nature/culture divide reveals a desire to conform to the culturally-oriented life he feels he should have. Crick sees that other families without the watery ancestry 'make

history' and struggles with the in-betweenness of his upbringing that he fears held him back. But, as the novel demonstrates, those families are no happier than he is, perhaps highlighting the inadequacy of solely cultural pursuits. Counter to the postmodern suggestion that language constructs the world, *Waterland* demonstrates the inseparability of language from reality, or nature from culture, as Crick attempts to side with culture but is always found lacking.

Swampland: Blurring the Borders

Crick's resistance to being 'in-between' is reflected in the cultural resistance to swampland – that space between water and land – found both in the novel and in the wider world. Often deemed sinister or foreboding spaces, swamps have existed in the cultural imaginary as places to conquer – as with land reclamation – or to avoid. Fairy tales have long reflected this tendency to malign such in-betweenness with their portrayal of repulsive amphibians and dangerous, active wetlands, portraying the dangerous potential of the blurring of boundaries. Stephan Schaffrath observes that '[f]rom a traditionally patriarchal point of view, woman and marshes are regions of chaos and the realm that is to be conquered for the benefit of humanity in general'.[307] When Crick suggests that a blank reality is '[w]hat every world-builder, what every revolutionary wants a monopoly in: Reality. Reality made plain. Reality with no nonsense. Reality cut down to size' (206), he reflects the human desire to find a malleable and distinct reality that can be dominated fully, rather than an unruly swamp. Such a view is made manifest in land reclamation and the endless struggle to exert power over the chaotic waters the inhabitants fear – the swamp that threatens to consume them.

Andersen, in particular, demonstrates in his stories a repulsion to the agency of those who exist on the borders. In his tale 'Thumbelina', the amphibious toads are disgusting, 'vile, big and wet' creatures from whom the tiny girl must escape.[308] The image of the mother toad sneaking in through a broken window to steal Thumbelina is almost uncanny, evoking a sense of Abjection, the transgression of the border from the water to the human house – a domain solely of land – disturbing the notions of the

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[307] Stephan Schaffrath, 'The Many Facets of Chaos-versus-Order Dichotomy in Graham Swift's "Waterland"' in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 4, 2 (2003), pp. 84-93, p. 87.
[308] Andersen, *Fairy Tales*, p. 34.

solidity of such divisions. Similarly, in 'The Little Mermaid' the lair of the Sea-Witch is a deeply unsettling place, characterized by its slimy, uncontrollable instability. Journeying to it, the little mermaid must traverse the 'crushing whirlpools' and the 'hot, bubbling mire' where '[a]ll the trees and shrubs were polyps, half animal and half plant. They looked like hundred-headed snakes growing out of the ground. All their branches were long slimy arms, with fingers like slithery worms; they rippled, joint by joint, from their roots to their very tips.'[309] The half-animal, half-plant incarnations – unlike the half-human, half-fish form of the mermaid herself – here prompt further disgust at the in-betweenness of the marshy landscape. In a final attempt at revulsion, Andersen describes that beyond the polyps': '[t]here sat the sea witch, letting a toad to eat from her mouth, the way humans let little canaries eat sugar. She called the hideous fat water snakes her little chickens and let them swarm over her big spongy breasts.'[310] As Kristeva suggests, '[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'[311] The transgression of the borders is disturbing in these tales, suggesting that the only place of safety is on one side or the other, not what is bubbling ominously in-between. These slippages are not transformative or lively, but offensive, threatening.

Just as the little mermaid longs to escape the violent transgressions displayed by the sea-witch, the characters of *Waterland* strive to delineate the borders, to rid the land of the interminability of its in-betweenness, but the novel reveals that the swampland they resist is unavoidably a part of them too. As Crick finds it more and more difficult to separate history from fairy tale, so too does it become obvious that any separation of land from water is a temporary fix, for our connections to waters and nature are embedded in our very existence. To face the reality of this in-betweenness is scary, when the human world is consumed with domination and duality: '[h]is eyes encounter a brown and silent fog. Suspended silt. Stirred up silt. A domain where earth and water mingle. His limbs struggle, his throat makes little gulps. He must come up (what must it be like to drown?), he must come up' (188). Land reclamation, Crick reveals, is still happening to this day, for '[s]trictly speaking, they are never reclaimed, only being

[309] Ibid, p. 77-78.
[310] Ibid, p. 78.
[311] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Uni Press, 1982), p. 4.

reclaimed' (10). This endless process, though wearisome for the fenlanders, reflects a sense of the Deleuzian process of becoming. As John Marks suggests, becoming is always 'a question of being in the middle rather than at the beginning or the end'; the reclamation of land never fully happens, it is always in the process of happening, like existence itself: there is no end result.[312]

While Andersen's fairy tales tell of the dangers awaiting in the swampy middle ground, the inhabitants of the fens have built their lives on that liminal space that is always in process – that unstable ground. The fusion of land and water is crucial to the fertile peat that gives the area its agricultural fertility, just as it is crucial to the stories, histories and material lives of those who live upon it. Rather than finding either danger or emptiness in the watery land, it is possible to see the combination as a fluid engagement between dichotomous divisions. Diana Coole observes that life (and, I would add, creativity) emerges from physical matter through

> a surging forth that opens a spatiotemporal field, with life itself now being described as "a fold." Nature's capacity for productive relationality and reflexivity is derived by Merleau-Ponty from Husserl's account of two hands touching: "When I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too." In the flesh of my fingers, each digit is both objective and phenomenal: "outside and inside of the finger in reciprocity, in chiasm, activity and passivity, coupled," mutually encroaching, with things touching me as I touch them and myself. This reversibility is nonetheless an "ambiguous set-up" because the reversal between touching and touched "always miscarries at the last moment," such that there is a "shift" or "spread" (*écart*) between them.[313]

As the land and the water merge, so too does the human and the nonhuman, interacting and constantly working with and against the difference; creating 'folds' that deny dualism through their interconnection.

Drawing on the concept of the 'fold', Deleuze notes that '"[m]atter thus offers […] an infinitely porous , spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness," with each body being elastic, "pierced with irregular passages" and dependent for its cohesion on the pressure of external forces.'[314] The emptiness that Crick tries to pin to the watery landscape is consistently demonstrated to be inaccurate, for though the postmodern agenda asserts that it is the telling of stories that enables humanity to 'outwit reality'

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[312] Marks, p. 33.
[313] Diana Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter', p. 107. Coole quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 93 and Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 261.
[314] Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter', p. 111.

and the 'watery nothing' of the flat landscape, the materiality of the fens plays a role in his life far greater than that of mere tabula rasa. As the physicist David Bohm proposed:

> we find that even in what is called a vacuum there are "zero-point" fluctuations, giving "empty space" an energy that is immensely beyond that contained in what is recognized as matter…[M]atter may then be compared to a set of small waves on the immense "ocean" of the vacuum state."[315]

Bohm uses water imagery to elucidate the argument that even what is perceived as 'empty space' is full of material energy, like waves on the ocean. The 'empty Fens' are not the vacuum they seem, but an agentic force that is impossible to contain.

For despite all of humanity's attempts to control nature, still '[t]he waters rise. They wash up rumours and strange reports of many kinds, but they also flow over them again and sweep them aside.' (103) Water – or the nonhuman world – can be seen thus to create and construct the world as subject as well as being constructed and controlled as object; both left hand and right, porous and connected. As Crick observes, while the Fenlanders of the past were shaping and moulding the landscape, 'something else was shaping and altering the world around them at the same time: water; endlessly shifting those landscapes they sought to control; destabilizing the solidity of the land they were constructing' (103). The agency of matter makes it impossible to truly contain; in other words, we might see how the depiction of water's power over the fens reveals that '[m]atter is no longer imagined […] as a massive, opaque plentitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways.'[316] As William Howarth puts it:

> [w]e cannot essentialize wetlands, because they are hybrid and multivalent: neither land nor water alone, they are water-land: a continuum between terra and aqua. In rhetorical terms they are not syntax but parataxis, phrases placed side by side without apparent connection, a term Joseph Frank used to describe spatial forms that evoke a great variety of response. In their wildness, wetlands dispossess readers of old codes and lead toward new syntax, where phrases may begin to reassemble.[317]

Those hybrid forms of the fens are the creative and fluid landscapes of a matter/thought, language/reality borderline in which life can flow. 'Swift's wetlands' as Mitchell suggests, 'can neither be essentialized nor reduced.'[318] The 'waterland' is the creative

[315] David Bohm, 'Time, the Implicate Order and Pre-Space' in *Physics and the Ultimate Significance of Time* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), pp. 172-208, p. 187.
[316] Coole and Frost, p. 10.
[317] William Howarth, 'Imagined Territory: the Writing of Wetlands' in *New Literary History*, 30, 3, (1999), pp. 509-539, p. 520.
[318] Peta Mitchell '"The Stratified Record Upon Which We Set Our Feet": the Spatial Turn and the Multilayering of History, Geography, and Geology' in *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of*

heart of the novel, more than just the backdrop, as the liminal space of swamp reveals the slippages between our perceptions of solidity and fluidity and the potential for wonder in the in-between.

Material Agencies: Weather and Beer

If the postmodern assumption is that language and culture construct the world as we know it, Bennett notes that 'the vital materialist points out that culture is *not* of our own making, infused as it is by biological, geological, and climactic forces.'[319] The material world, in these terms, is deemed as active, agentic and fluid as the words and discourses humans have created to describe it. Armbruster observes of *Waterland* that:

> [u]nlike the postmodern position most feared by ecocriticism, the novel does not reject the existence of a reality beyond what we can perceive or express, […] But it does remind us that our ideas about nature and culture, including the practice of seeing them as two separate realms, are constructions[320]

The watery reality of the novel is potent and tangible, albeit infused with the fairy tales and myths of Crick's narrative, but the separateness of that reality from language is Crick's own construction, a construction based on the cultural consensus of land reclamation and the stories of nature's otherness that the inhabitants struggle to shake. Liquid, however – in the form of rain and beer – appears in the novel as further complication of the borders between nature and culture, highlighting the impossibility of such divisions when the material is constantly infusing both culture and the stories a culture creates. As transformative agencies with a power over humanity that can be both positive and negative, the beer and the rain can be seen, in their different ways, to depict a catalytic watery matter that fuses the cultural and the natural.

'[Y]ou do not need to remind a Fenman of the effects of heavy inland rainfall, or of the combination of a spring tide and a strong nor'easter' (10), Crick explains; life on an unstable landscape will make you all too aware of the effects of weather upon human life. Though weather is often assumed to be separate from us and (particularly in the case of climate change) a problem to be fixed or an inconvenience to be guarded against, many new materialist scholars have sought to bring about an engagement with

Place, ed. Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, et al (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp.71 – 83, p. 75.
[319] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 115.
[320] Armbruster, p. 27.

weather which embraces the sense of what Alaimo has called 'transcorporeality', that is, a concept of 'movement across bodies' that considers 'the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"'.[321] In *Waterland* the sense of the weather's connection to human life can be seen to echo this 'movement across bodies' as the human and the nonhuman realms are continually interwoven, both producing and experiencing the effects of the weather.

One such example of this engagement with weather – or, in this case, rain – comes around the time of Sarah Atkinson's funeral. The Atkinsons are a story of capitalist success for Crick – the earliest of them invested in land that, once drained, was sold at huge profit, the latter of them started a lucrative brewer. That is, until that success turned sour, when Thomas Atkinson flew into a jealous rage and hit his wife, causing long-lasting brain damage from which neither ever recovered. Just before Sarah's funeral many years later (years during which she was confined like a madwoman in the attic to a room at the top of the house) the rain begins to fall. Though initially not heavy, it has 'a steadiness, a determination that Fenlanders have come to know cannot be ignored.' (97) The Fenlanders are suspicious of such rain, beginning their practices to avoid flooding and keep the land drained, all the while watching over the course of time as the rain grows heavier. To these inhabitants, it is 'malignly heavy' (100), a monstrous other that evokes great fear, and it responds to these accusations by flooding the land. Like the sea monsters of myth lurking beneath the surface, ready to destroy life as they know it, water seems to hover beneath the seeming safety of the Fens' solid ground; ever present in the lives of those who resist it, threatening to pull them down to its depths. It's a fear that is not unwarranted, for the land upon which the Fenlanders have built their lives is on borrowed time; the water truly is rising, for the land is sinking. And as Crick acknowledges: 'When you labour to subdue [water], you have to understand that one day it may rise up and turn all your labours to nothing', and perhaps take you with it.

Pathetic fallacy? Of course, and yet the novel reveals too that the agency of the weather is more than these stories of danger or reflection of human emotion. Not the passive matter of a Cartesian *res extensi*a, the rain is crucial to the processes of the soil, not only for the fertile peat that feeds the land (and helps create the area's beloved beer), but also to the decomposition of bodies: 'where the rain, soaking the soil, is already

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[321] Alaimo, Bodily Natures, p. 2.

beginning the process by which their dust will be commingled' (103). It is metamorphic in its agency as it 'transforms the lands around the Ouse and Leem into an aqueous battlefield, it turns them back into the old swamp they once were' (105). For the inhabitants, it is a battlefield, because they have long ago waged their war against nature, but this rain is not separate from the work they do. The draining and digging and cultivation of such watery land has an impact on its climate. Just as Neimanis and Loewen Walker argue '[t]here is no escaping climate change, for our bodies are both the products and the vehicles of its iteration', there is no escaping the weather for these Fenlanders, or for anyone else, no matter how much they might wish to subdue it.[322]

Culture is unavoidably altered and shaped by what we perceive to be 'natural' forces; and weather is just one example of the impossibility of any exclusive duality between human and water. As Chen et al., argue:

> [w]e experience circadian and seasonal rhythms most prominently through water's phase changes: from rain to snow, from morning dew to afternoon humidity. Even otherwise "invisible" phenomena like climate change become immediately tangible through the volatility of weather patterns and the intensity of floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, and droughts.[323]

We are affected by the weather and its tangible agency. During the floods that follow the monstrous, funereal rain after Sarah Atkinson's death, her grandchild is born prematurely. Though the two events seem distinctly unconnected, Crick offers a theory that sees the water as the catalyst for the breaking of waters that lead to the birth, asking,

> was it that the swelling waters of the Fens, the bursting dykes, the rising river – already through the window, visibly lapping at the foot of Water Street – awoke a mysterious affinity in Mrs Atkinson's system and caused her own waters to break in sympathy? No one knows. (105)

Though Crick's narrative often does the opposite, by, for example, implying that the rain is a manifestation of the tears shed at the funeral, his question hints at a nonhuman agency at work on human beings that we may be incapable of understanding, but that couldn't be ruled out. In so doing, Swift encourages a complication of the linguistic construction of materiality and blurs the boundaries between the human mind and watery matter.

Neimanis and Loewen Walker call for a process of 'weathering' in our engagements with the climate and its fluctuations, by which they mean to 'grasp the

[322] Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker *Weathering*: Climate Change and the "Thick Time" of Transcorporeality' in *Hypatia*, 29, 3 (2014), pp. 558-575.
[323] Chen et al, p. 5.

transcorporeality of weather as a spatial overlap of human bodies and weathery nature'.[324] The manifestation of this weathering might be, they suggest, to think of rain extending 'into our arthritic joints' just as 'sun might literally colour our skin, and the chill of the wind might echo through the hidden hallways of our eardrums.'[325] This concept can be seen to extend to the novel in the 'phlegmatic' (344) natures of the Crick family, which 'made sluggish their spirits, despite the quantities of it they spat out' (17), but also to the effect of the climate of the Fens on the inhabitants:

> [a]dded to my grandfather's (surely no longer conjectural) inward sorrowfulness was the succumbing of his wife, Rachel, my grandmother, to a severe asthmatic complaint for which the damp atmosphere of the Fens may have been partly to blame, and her subsequent early death in April, 1908. (160)

The Fens have a tangible effect on those who live on them, they are not passive matter or inert nature, but a catalytic agency to which humans respond. After all, whether we resist it or not, '[a]ny of us who have been flummoxed by a flooded basement or a camera battery that won't work in the cold knows that the weather – hardly inert – *does* something.'[326]

Just as the depictions of weather in the novel can be viewed through the lens of transcorporeality, so too can beer – that most potent of natural/cultural agencies – which undoubtedly does something to those who drink it. Though beer is a human construction, as a combination of land (hops) and water, it too has the potential to complicate dualistic binaries. Beer in the novel is the image of the cultural advancements of the Atkinsons, who brought much wealth to themselves and the area through the opening of their own brewery, and serves as a kind of capitalist opposition to the 'naturalness' of the water Crick sees as his own: 'whereas the Cricks emerged from water, the Atkinsons emerged from beer.' (64) The beer plays a key role in the novel because of the death of Freddie Parr at the opening, who is believed to have fallen into the river in a drunken state, when he was, in fact, pushed. Painted throughout as a remedy for boredom, beer is seen by Crick as a way to 'assuage emptiness. Lifting sunken spirits. Kindling fire and ferment out of watery nothing…' (177); an alternative to telling stories. Like the story-telling he favours, however, beer has a dangerous capacity to shape the world.

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[324] Neimanis and Loewen Walker, p. 560.

[325] Ibid.

[326] Ibid, p.563.

The agency with which beer is endowed recalls fairy tales and their magical potions, which can both harm and help those who drink them. The Atkinson beer is made of fenland malt, extracted from their own barley, which 'was not only exceptional but there was magic in it.' (64) Like the stories of a 'water of life' it is a 'magical liquor', which, when 'cupped in their hands' left the fenlanders 'winking and beaming even as they spoke' (66). But as in those stories of magic, this wondrous liquid has a dangerous potential: '[t]here's potent, there's fiery stuff inside' (321). It's a potency heralded by Atkinson himself who, Crick describes, chose a motto - *Ex Aqua Fermentum* - with multiple possible translations, for though it 'does indeed mean, simply, "Out of Water, Ale". […] can even be construed, as perhaps Thomas intended, "Out of Water, Activity"; but it can also be interpreted, as surely Thomas never meant: "Out of Water, Perturbation".' (86) In these alternative translations Crick acknowledges that beer is a natural/cultural watery agency which creates chaos, that very thing he would most like to control.

In their discussion of weathering, Neimanis and Loewen Walker refer to Barad's work to consider the ways in which the natural or material and the cultural can be seen to be co-creating effects through 'intra-actions'.[327]

> Barad's thesis indicates that it is no longer the "thing" – "the weather pattern," "the molecule," or "the human" – that serves as the basic unit of analysis, but the *phenomena*: the *happenings* of multiple relations as they co-create "differential patterns of mattering" (140). This means that the body and the weathering seed plants above together make an allergic event, their intra-actions taking shape as a loud sneeze, a watery eye. Although our traditional mechanisms of understanding retroactively search for causes and effects (seed plants cause hay fever), in a world of intra-activity the *hay-feverish body* cannot be *traced back*. It was not once an autonomous body whose borders have been breached, but rather an expression of transcorporeal collaboration as plant and human orifices together weather a season's change. The body (a human body, a gust of wind, striations of rock) can no longer be understood as an autonomous entity, unaffected by (and ineffectual in) its environment. Instead, the very conditions of its possibility rely on its entanglement with a dynamic system of forces and flows, and as we shall see below, these forces and flows cannot be conceived of outside of a temporal frame.[328]

The description here of hay-fever might easily be compared with the asthma that afflicted the grandmother that Crick suggests is at least in part a result of the dampness of the fens, but it might also be compared to the effects of beer on the human body.

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[327] Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 138.
[328] Neimanis and Loewen Walker, p. 565.

Though a culturally-created phenomenon, beer is an example of watery matter that counters Crick's vision of reality as an empty vacuum, instead offering what Bennett describes as 'the lively powers of material formations', and also, through a Deleuzian lens, the chaotic flows of life.[329] Creating pockets of turbulence that deny those dominant narratives of material inertia, beer has materially tangible effects on the human mind and body, suggesting not only an entanglement of flows between matter and mind, but an agency that denies the perceived fixity of the material realm. The beer in the novel is often central to the chaos that arises; from the death of Freddie Parr, to the fire that followed the flood and burnt down the brewery. What drives a man to drink, Crick suggests, is emptiness, a desire to 'make things happen' (61) and 'conjure up, with all the risks, a little token urgency' (61), and while some use stories to satiate this desire, others use beer. But just as Crick fears the emptiness, he fears too the chaos, and the 'potent' and 'fiery' agency of beer is the route to a chaotic oblivion, as the drinkers of the novel – such as Freddie Parr – reveal.

Crick's desire to control and order such chaos is proved fruitless, and rightly so. As Stephan Schaffrath observes, 'Swift's novel exposes the constructedness of order-versus-chaos dichotomies' and reveals their impossibility.[330] For new materialists, chaos theory is a significant move away from the dualities that keep matter in the position of subordinate fixity. Coole and Frost recognize that:

> [t]heories of chaos can undermine the idea of stable and predictable material substance, hastening a realization that our natural environment is far more complex, unstable, fragile, fragile, and interactive than earlier models allowed.[331]

Through a model of chaos rather than inertia, we might acknowledge the agency of bodies in complexly woven entanglements with other bodies, natural and cultural. Timothy S. Murphy observes that 'Deleuze has postulated that the universe is "chaos," enfolding in each point infinite speed and energy'; the watery 'reality' of the material realm cannot be either chaos – in the form of beer – or emptiness – in the form of the waterscape, and neither can humanity and language be the 'order' that opposes them, for the beer, as Barad's 'transcorporeal collaboration' suggests, is always in process, engaging with other bodies in a complex and chaotic universe.[332] Just as the 'hay-

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[329] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. vii.
[330] Schaffrath, p. 84.
[331] Coole and Frost, p. 13. nt
[332] Timothy S . Murphy, 'Quantum Ontology; A Virtual Mechanics of Becoming' in *Deleuze & Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture*, eds. Eleanor Kaufman, Kevin Jon Heller

feverish body' Barad cites is not an example of the cause and effect relationship of pollen on humanity, the drunken men of Crick's tale are not 'autonomous entities' at the mercy of the beer that corrupts them, but are engaged in that dynamic system of flows that are the crux of life.[333]

Conclusion

Crick paints the swampy, uncontrollable landscape of the Fens as a magical setting, where the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, the human and the nonhuman, are porous and fluctuating. Though he longs for order – to believe in the safety of language, the security of those constructed dualisms –, his conflicted and confused narrative reveals that such divisions are elusive and inconsistent in a world where water, like the stories he grew up on, is 'neither one thing nor the other' (2), but is always in process, always becoming, and ultimately, always agentic. Though the wetlands of the fens may be a 'fairy-tale place' (1) in their capacity to evoke myth and legend, they are also a force of materiality, no mere fiction. As Crick's despair becomes more difficult to ignore, it is clear that his dualistic depictions of reality and nature are deeply flawed, as are the fairy tales themselves. As Schaffrath suggests, 'Swift's narrator, Tom Crick, is not intended to be someone who has all the answers.'[334] Instead of blindly trusting this unreliable narrator, '[r]eaders are then challenged to not only make their own sense of the plethora of information contained in Swift's work but also find themselves confronted with their own likely applications of dichotomous constructs.'[335]

As the postmodern subject, Crick grapples with the idea that discourse, language, stories, construct the world – a concept that severs language from reality – but finds it lacking. Though he tells his students that it is crucial 'to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trailsigns of stories' (63), to mark the world with language, he says too, that man 'has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all

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(Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998), pp. 211-229, p. 219. and Neimanis and Loewen Walker, p. 565.
[333] Neimanis and Loewen Walker, p. 565.
[334] Schaffrath, p. 89.
[335] Schaffrath, p. 84.

right. (63) But as the novel unfolds and we see Crick's life fall apart, it becomes apparent that it isn't alright at all. His wife has lost herself in religious stories, he himself is stuck telling those unhappy tales of the past; if postmodernism is supposed to defend the language/reality separation, Crick's narrative is unable to do so. His narrative is no celebration, but a miserable depiction of a life soaked in stories with no access to the world they discuss. By othering the landscape and fearing the blurring of borders, Crick remains trapped fighting the material realities of existence that are unavoidably woven through the stories and language that he longs to distinguish from 'reality'.

For while Crick is often determined to highlight the power of language over the world, the slippages between water and land demonstrate the power of matter that cannot be ignored. As Schaffrath suggests, despite their attempts at land reclamation, '[i]n the end, the simultaneously destructive and creative forces of water control the people of the Fens, rather than the people controlling the waters.'[336] The same is true, Crick knows, of language and reality, for no matter how many stories we tell, we cannot control the world entirely, for we cannot protect ourselves from the 'Here and Now', those unavoidable collisions with 'Reality', and nor would we want to – for, as well as 'horror' and 'confusion' (77), they bring 'both joy and terror' (61), existing as they do on the border of those oppositions. The 'Here and Now' is the blood that pours down Mary's leg after she gives herself an abortion, the boat hook through Freddie Parr's temple when he washes up at Henry Crick's lock and the burst river banks that flood the land, but it is also the moment of the baby's conception, the 'free and airy present tense in which we are always longing to take flight into the boundless future' (60). It is the jolting reality of Reality as Crick sees it. Language meets its limits at the Here and Now, both Swift and Crick seem to suggest; it can only take us so far. And though Crick, as is his wont, suggests too that '[i]t is the Here and Now that turns out to be the fairy-tale,' whereas history 'is at least for ever determined and unchangeable' (60), if the landscape of the fens has shown us anything, it is that the deterministic view – the view of containment – will never be strong enough to withhold the material realities of life.

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[336] Schaffrath, p. 86.

Those material realities, Crick knows, have yet to be conceived of in a way that is appropriate, because they are always documented and constructed in stories through limited human experience. George Landow observes that *Waterland*

> finds wanting the Neoclassical view of nature that takes it to be divine order, the Romantic one that takes it to be essentially benign and accommodated to our needs, and the Victorian one that takes it to be, however hostile or neutral, something we can shape to our needs and use for the material of a tale of progress.[337]

These stories of nature's otherness manifest in various ways, and appear throughout Crick's narrative, but they are all ultimately found wanting because they posit the natural world as inherently different or separate from humanity; a separation that the water/landscape itself denies. Veronica Strang suggests that

> [w]ater itself plays a role in inspiring contraflowing ideas, regularly asserting the ephemerality of human agency. No amount of desperation or desire can break a drought or halt a flood, and attempts to "hold" water illustrate a central tension between "cultural" efforts to dam the flow and water's fundamental elusiveness and fluidity. This brings us back to the idea that cultural creativity represents attempts to manifest human agency in the face of temporal pressures. Individuals and communities beaver away to build their dams, only to be overcome, eventually, by the currents of time.[338]

Just as the Fenlanders strive to control their watery landscape, we, like Crick, have – through our postmodern dualistic arrogance – envisaged a world under our control, and like Crick, we have found it impossible.

The waterlands of the novel are a 'fairy-tale place' (1). Not a place that doesn't exist, but a place that is both 'palpable and unreal' (8), neither one thing nor the other; they are a place where 'crossings bring new things into being', and the relationship between stories and histories, land and water, human and nonhuman, are indistinguishable.[339] To fight to delineate borders is to drudge, dredge and become stuck in the mud; in the fixity of dualistic ideas. To live freely, on the other hand, is to accept the agency of the nonhuman world in all its difference; to see not the nothingness or the flatness, or believe stories of primordial chaos that must be controlled by man, but to recognize matter's fluidity and agency; to find a new story of water that recognizes the ways in which it differs from us, but also the ways in which it is us and we are it.

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[337] George P. Landow, 'History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's *Waterland*' in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 23 (1990), pp. 197-211, p. 208

[338] Veronica Strang, 'Conceptual Relations: Water, Ideologies, and Theoretical Subversions' in *Thinking With Water*, pp. 185-211, p. 205.

[339] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, p. 31.

In *New Materialisms*, Coole asks: '[i]s it possible to understand a process of materialization and the nature of its fecundity, to grasp matter's dynamic and sometimes resistant capacities, without relying upon mysticisms derived from animism, religion, or romanticism?'[340] For this, his own story of history, Crick cannot help but fall hard on those mysticisms, those dualistic stories of water that he learned as a boy – of chaos or inertia, emptiness or danger; nature vs. culture. But as Swift's postmodern fiction creates something new from those old stories – the myths, the legends, the fairy tales – he does so fluidly, with stories running through histories as the water runs through land, flooding the borders and bursting the banks, highlighting the slippages between not only matter and language, but also postmodernity and new materialism. *Waterland* blurs the dichotomies of reality and language, nature and culture, human and nonhuman, land and water through its watery structure, its denial of fixity, its fluidity of thought and matter in this place where nothing is ever one thing or another, because all of existence is porous and interwoven. Through this linguistic construction of slippages and flows, the novel reveals the 'dynamic and sometimes resistant capacities' and the 'lively possibilit[ies]' of water that deny deterministic and dialectical difference or otherness even as it highlights those mysticisms.[341] The watery landscapes and the stories of history offer us blurred borderlines as a site of magical potential – the potential of wonder – which demonstrate that the entanglements of material reality and stories are, however hard we might try to solidify them, always fluidly, continuously in flux, intent on merging.

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[340] Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter', p. 91.

[341] Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis, 'Introduction', p. 4.

'Not everything is metal, but metal is everywhere, metal is the conductor of all matter.'[342]

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

We are but 'walking, talking minerals'; redistributions of "oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon, sulphur, phosphorous, and other elements of Earth's crust into two-legged, upright forms.'[343]

Vladimir I. Vernadsky

'She knew what she would see; they would seem to be made of living gold.'[344]

Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*

METAL

In the multiple worlds of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, metal is active, responsive, it has 'intentions' (798); it is *alive*. In a continuation of the fairy tale animation of typically inanimate objects, Pullman's epic adventure glistens with metals that act with a kind of conscious agency. The alethiometer that seems to think, the subtle knife that 'knows' (505) and the armour that serves as the 'soul' (168) of the panserbjørn are metals in intelligent, active forms whose effects on the events of the novel are complex, catalytic and characterful. Embodying traditional technology (the compass), weaponry (the knife) and protection (the armour) but given seemingly magical abilities that tie them to thought, these instruments offer complex and processual subjectivities that suggest alternative, if imperfect, depictions of material life. In contrast to the fixed, passive inertia of traditional visions of metal and the celebration of language over materiality, *His Dark Materials* draws instead from the vibrant animation of objects in European fairy tales in order to reimagine metal as

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[342] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 479.

[343] Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, quoted in Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 49.

[344] Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials: Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass* (London: Everyman's Library, 2011), p. 1049. All subsequent references will be parenthetical.

active and conscious; existing as part of a material, rhizomatic universe. That the close of the trilogy sees Will and Lyra appear to be made of 'living gold' (1049) evokes the life endowed upon metal in this epic story of interconnection, where thought is woven through matter and metal acts as conductor, catalyst and vehicle for a radical reimagining of subjectivity itself. Through his complex depiction of 'living' metal, Pullman's enlivened matter serves as a challenge to dualistic philosophy, offering instead the potential for a Deleuzian, vitalist materialist vision of machinic process in which nature and culture are inextricably bound.

Dark Materials: Objects, Fairy Tales and Philosophy

In Pullman's philosophically-engaged trilogy, matter is central because existence is undeniably material. Daemons (the animal manifestation of the human soul) are *cut* or *torn* away; Will cuts holes in the '*almost* intangible edges of the air' [my italics] (526) acknowledging their tangibility; the 'uncountable billions of parallel worlds' (319) are 'fabric' (367), you can touch, feel, cut and tear them; and the depiction of Dust evokes the primordial dust – dust to dust, ashes to ashes – the characters and their very existence are held to matter and flesh. Far from the Cartesian conceptual reality of *res cogitans*, existence within these texts is physical, material, decidedly embodied – as William A. Oram suggests: '[t]he center of Pullman's epic is the telling of a story about life lived in the body – a nourishing account of full being' – reflective of Pullman's personal belief that,

> [t]he physical world is our home, this is where we live, we're not creatures from somewhere else or in exile. This is our home and we have to make our homes here and understand that we are physical too, we are material creatures, we are born and we will die.[345]

Thus, the physical realities of the world flood the trilogy; *things* unite with minds as Lyra and Will grapple with the material interconnectedness of the multiple universes they discover. In a multiverse inhabited by fairy tale-inspired characters and objects, Will and Lyra must battle with the purveyors of dualism and deny the oppositional goodness and evil attributed to consciousness and materiality.

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[345] William A. Oram, 'Pullman's Matter: Lucretius and Milton in *His Dark Materials*' in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 1 (2012), pp. 419-435, p. 430 and Philip Pullman in 'Faith and Fantasy' for ABC Radio National (Sydney: 2002) [Accessed 12 June 2020] http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/faith-and-fantasy/3513418#transcript

Though heavily influenced by Greek myth and Biblical scripture, *HDM* also engages generously with the literary fairy-tale tradition, particularly that of Europe. Pullman's interest in fairy tales is well known, and confirmed by his collection of Grimms' tales and his children's novels such as *Clockwork*, *I Was a Rat! or The Scarlet Slippers*, which draw heavily from the tradition. From the miniature humanoid Gallivespians reminiscent of Tom Thumb or Thumbelina, to the malevolent Mrs Coulter's capture of children to take them to the snow-covered North – a reimagining of Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' – the novels of *HDM* are embedded with fairy tale tropes and images. And Pullman's use of fairy tale is often materially demonstrated, through human to animal transformations or ordinary objects with magical powers; through his evocation of vast, visceral landscapes or tiny rooms filled with everyday treasures. Warner notes that fairy tales often contain

> imagery of strong contrasts and sensations, evoking simple, sensuous phenomena that glint and sparkle, pierce and flow, by these means, striking recognition in the reader or listener's body at a visceral depth (glass and forests; gold and silver; diamonds and rubies; thorns and knives; wells and tunnels).[346]

Pullman's fairy tale worlds glisten in this way, combining the real world with the fantastic so that the two are almost indivisible – as, of course, do fairy tales themselves.

The imagery and landscapes of *HDM* might be those of 'strong contrasts', but the narrative is founded upon the question of the validity of dichotomous thought, challenging from all angles the prominence of dualistic philosophy. Pullman's characters battle their way through the minefield of traditionally affirmed oppositions: good/evil, nature/culture, human/animal, self/other, mind/body, some of which are often upheld by the literary fairy tale (good/evil), while others may be dissolved (human/animal). But it is the alignment of good/evil with spirit/flesh respectively, affirmed so thoroughly in the novels by the Magisterium (a militant strand of the church), that frames the narrative, demonstrating the dangers of duality and the hierarchies that occur in their wake, particularly when accepted 'morality' affixes goodness to the disembodied spirit and evil to the pleasures of flesh. Anne-Marie Bird observes that

> [r]eligious dualism – the doctrine that the world comprises two basic diametrically opposed principles – is generally associated with Gnosticism. For example, Gnostic myth and metaphor centre around the [115] dualities of light and dark, spirit and matter, and good and evil: the fundamental belief being that the spirit is "good" and matter is "evil". […] There are no such simple

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[346] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p.xix.

theological dichotomies in Pullman's texts. Rather, his work strives to convince the reader of the interconnectedness of these particular conceptual opposites.[347] As Lyra, aware of the pervasive link between these interconnected dualisms, tells Mary: '[y]ou can't investigate Shadows, Dust, whatever it is, without thinking about that kind of thing, good and evil and such' (435).

Pullman's reimagining of matter – seen most obviously in the conception of Dust – is then crucial to his attempts at dissolving the dualisms of Gnosticism and the Western philosophical tradition that upheld them. For Bird, Pullman's depiction of flesh/soul or good/evil is reminiscent of William Blake; 'the notion being that opposites are inadequate unless synthesized' and separation is limiting.[348] As Bird has noted:

> [u]nderpinning the concept of Dust is Milton's metaphor for the mass of unformed primal matter left over from the construction of the universe; in other words, the "dark materials" of *Paradise Lost* (11, 1. 916). In Pullman's narrative, however, Dust contains much more than the beginning and end of humanity's physical existence or the origins of the universe.[349]

The radical reworking of this dark 'primal' matter sees Dust as a thinking, loving, understanding vision of materiality that continually and actively affects the multiverse. Oram notes in 'Pullman's Matter: Lucretius and Milton in *His Dark Materials*' that:

> [m]atter is more fully embodied in the Dust […] because in Dust matter becomes conscious. The angel Balthamos says, "Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed."[350]

This conscious material embodiment realigns matter with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, thus destabilizing the dualisms entrenched in the myths of Christianity.

Pullman's attempts to call into question the validity of Christian myth are central to the novels and much of the scholarship that surrounds them, and while they are not central to this study, they are relevant in their illustration of his desire to dissolve the dualisms upheld within scripture and Western philosophy. That *HDM* demonstrates an interest in challenging duality is evident, but as other scholars such as Bird have, in various ways, suggested (and is most relevant to this thesis), what he offers in its place is of even greater importance: multiplicity, inclusivity and synthesis.[351] Rather than simply upholding the dualism but adjusting the hierarchy – associating matter with

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[347] Anne-Marie Bird, 'Without Contraries is no Progression": Dust as an All-Inclusive, Multifunctional Metaphor in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials'* in *Children's Literature in Education*, 32 (2001) pp. 111-123, p. 114-115.
[348] Ibid, p. 122.
[349] Ibid, p. 112.
[350] Oram, 'Pullman's Matter', p. 422.
[351] Bird, p. 122.

goodness and thought with evil – Pullman's elevation of matter does not diminish the mind, and instead suggests a complex and indivisible relationship between the two, effectively dissolving the borders between them.

The multiplicity and interconnectedness of Pullman's multiple worlds of inextricable minds and materials opens the trilogy up to Deleuzian comparison. Santiago Colas' essay 'Telling True Stories' examines the trilogy through a philosophical lens, tracing a line of descent from Plato, into Spinoza, through Hegel and Heidegger, culminating in his use of Deleuzian theory, as he ties materialism to the concept of truth in the novels. Colas positions *HDM* within the philosophical tradition that does not see the truth of existence as separate from the material world, but very much a part of it. He notes: 'Dust, then, the cosmic force binding all that there is within Pullman's story, like the truth of the alethiometer, arises contingently and immanently in the course of matter's relations with itself.'[352] The novels are, for Colas, a welcome counter argument to a classical dualist philosophy, because 'Plato's story of truth (like any correspondent story of truth that has been formulated since) assumes a division and an opposition between subject (the thinking entity) and object (the stuff out in the world the subject is thinking about).'[353]

The dividing line between subject and object is one that Pullman steadily occupies in *HDM*. His objects, anthropomorphically enlivened as they so often are in the fairy tales that clearly influence his work, subvert the dominant binary opposition through their conscious behaviours, denying the thinking subject as separate from inert matter. It is through his material objects – of which so many are metallic – that the reimaging of matter, and all the complications that come with such a reimagining, are played out within the narrative. Objects and subjects are interwoven through the interconnection of the many universes to unhinge the nature/culture, mind/matter divisions at their root. By reimagining matter – and, most specifically for the purpose of this thesis, metal – Pullman questions the validity of our dualistic conceptions of existence, and suggests that if our ethical framework centres around goodness and evil pertaining to thought and matter, it will always be morally bankrupt and inadequate. Pullman's varied depictions of metal within the trilogy suggest an alternative, intelligent

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[352] Santiago Colas, 'Telling True Stories, or The Immanent Ethics of Material Spirit (and Spiritual Matter) in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*' in *Discourse*, 27, 1 (2005), p. 50.
[353] Ibid, p. 42.

vision of objects that echoes the fairy tale whilst opening the trope up to materially fluid, rhizomatic subjectivities.

Metal: Natural Status and Fixity

When Plato presented his concept of the Noble Lie he did so with a story. The story he told was of the earth as mother to all citizens, citizens as brothers to each other, brothers separated by class, and class metaphorically determined by metals. In Plato's tale, often referred to as his 'Myth of Metals', metal is the metaphor through which pre-destined class structures are defined, with social positions ordained by the Demiurge who is said to have mixed specific metals into the characters of all citizens. Those whose characters are mixed with gold, the story advised, should live as rulers, and all others, whose characters are silver, iron, brass, would be destined to live as helpers: soldiers, farmers, craftsmen. However, such metallic destiny may not, Plato suggests, be defined by heritage, for a 'golden parent' might have a 'silver son', or vice versa.[354] Social positioning, or class, then, becomes personal, aligned with the innate character of an individual, rather than the system into which they were born, and these innate characters are endowed by the creator, and are thus everlasting and unchanging.

Plato's Myth of Metals ties metal to nature and nature to fixity. The tale posits this 'natural' order as solid and eternal, comparable easily with the predetermined, 'given' permanence of metallic structures. Such structures are seen as fixed, static, unchanging and essentially determined, and thus serve Plato well in his suggestion of the stability of a person's natural destiny, character and role in society. To believe in Plato's Myth of Metals is not only to accept your place without question, but also to accept the categorization of nature and metal with fixity and stasis, with unchanging matter and eternal, pre-cultural destiny. But importantly, it is then to believe too that all natures, personal and physical, human and non-human, are unavoidable certainties; that there are realities in life that are set, like the sword, in stone.

That the essentialist views of Plato's story are solidified through the use of metals affirms the position of metal as natural and born of the earth and therefore fixed, unchanging, predestined, while also tying it to is cultural association with strength,

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[354] Plato, *The Republic*, eds. Paul Negri and Joslyn T. Pine (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2000), p. 87.

wealth and class. These simultaneous associations are not easy to dissolve; not least because metal's physical durability has awarded it a host of mythical alignments. The Incas, for example, believed that gold was the sweat of the sun, and silver the tears of the moon. By marrying metals with the most revered and crucial images of existence, but simultaneously affirming their status as unchanging and invulnerable nature, these myths affirm metal as something inherently different from humans, that is, natural, fixed and eternal.

Fairy tales too have tied metal or metallic colours to the concept of natural status. Characters with golden hair tend to be royal born or destined to become so; the sword can only be removed by the true king; royal children are born with silver limbs. Like Plato's Myth of Metals, European fairy tales often depict wealth as a 'natural' or innate destiny for some and not others, and precious metals are frequently an indicator of success and great fortune in the stories. This emphasis on gold, silver and jewels in the European fairy tale canon was then echoed, Marina Warner observes, in the early European versions of the Arabian Nights: '[t]he resemblances of style are marked: the frieze-like structural repetitiousness, exaggerated effects of splendour and luxury, heightened passions and other manners of the arabesque-baroque.'[355] The 'splendour and luxury' that floods the tales published in Europe in the 1700s is evoked in large part through precious metals, with gold as the most highly sought after and the most often associated with wealth or beauty, highlighting the 'true' wealth or social class of characters as high status.

The connection between metal and nature in many fairy tales is a dominant one, both as a person's nature and as the raw naturalness of metal as of the earth –we might assume to justify extraordinary wealth. The Grimms' tale 'Iron Hans/John' (KHM 136) sees metal tied continually to nature and wildness in the form of a 'wild man' of the forest who is found with iron-like skin(indicating another stereotypical assumption about wildness and dark skin) and has a magic well that turns everything that touches it to gold. These associations continued in later reincarnations of the fairy tale such as Mary de Morgan's short story 'On a Pincushion' (1877), in which the rawness of metal is connected with truth – implying a pre-cultural 'truth' in nature – when her animated and vocal brooch character begins to tell a 'true' story, knowing it to be so because it

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[355] Warner, *Stranger Magic,* p. 15.

occurred 'before I was cut and polished'.[356] The telling of stories as though they are true is traditional to the literary and oral fairy tale – engaging the listener in the expected game of wonder. That de Morgan's brooch attributes the 'truth' of the story to its being connected to the time *before* it was 'cut and polished' reflects a desire for rawness – for the *natural origins* of things, before culture's influence. These ideas respond to the Romantic images of nature's wholeness and spiritual truth and the concept of a pre-cultural reality, a natural state of truth that has been contaminated by the human race; a more natural state of metal.

Metal is thus often aligned with a fixity of either truth or status in traditional fictions. While the wild man is metallic coloured - and we later discover a royal himself who had been under a spell, the brooch considers its current state (shaped and moulded) as less truthful. These ideas reflect both the fixity of the natural status of matter that Plato's 'Myth of Metals' offered, and the Romantic interest in the natural world as a spiritual place of truth and beauty that is threatened into falsity by cultural developments and constructions. The fairy tales of the 1800s are a product of these cultural assumptions about naturalness and status, using the concept of natural to justify 'truth'. Metal, then, is often the device through which these alignments might be solidified, the seemingly fixed, static nature of the element enabling its legitimation of societal structures and assumptions.

Metallic Life: A New Story of Animism and Vitality

Despite those associations of fixity and naturalness, in the vast and vivid material world of the European fairy tale, metal glistens. Hair is flung from towers like golden rope; an iron pot floods a village with porridge; a boy is born with silver limbs; a snake vomits gold pieces. Fairy tales tell us that a simple touch can turn a thing to metal, that it may be spun from straw by enterprising imps, lain by enchanted geese, or found in pots at the end of rainbows. Whether ordinary or magical, matt, dull or shimmering, metal in its various and varying forms is present and participating within fairy tales; alive with the magical currents that flow through the stories of life and its wonders. And though in everyday life the metallic objects that surround us will not move of their own accord –

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[356] Mary de Morgan, *On a Pin Cushion, and Other Fairy Tales* (London: Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1877), p. 3.

they will not talk or dance, make decisions or be deliberately obtuse – in fairy tales, like the trees, the animals, the porridge pots and the matchsticks, metal can be made living, can be made active.

Literary fairy tales have always demonstrated a fascination with the metallic, with its shine and gloss, its strength and durability, seen most obviously embodied in manifestations of metallic body-parts, animals, automata, machinery and inordinate wealth. Whether symbols of luxury, fertility, technology or strength, metals are often materially vital within the tales; moving plots forward, altering destinies and engaging actively. In these stories, metal embodies the cultural contradictions at play in the natural/cultural dualistic worldview that has been so prevalent in Western culture. Reflected in so many of these tales are fears of industrialization juxtaposed with the worship of change and machinery; the exaltation of art, culture and beauty but the desire to return to the natural; the devotion to precious metals and the tangible desire for wealth that undercuts the moral warnings against greed and vanity. Metals enable, through their varied cultural usages and their associations with endurance and solidity, a consideration of the vulnerabilities of the human subject, and as fairy tales bring metals to life, so might they bring matter to the forefront of the debate.

The myriad material forms of metal that are manifested in fairy tales reveal, in various ways, the tensions and the borders at the heart of philosophical debate about nature, matter and consciousness. Though depictions of metal vary dramatically, what the stories enable with their magically endowed, agential objects is a space in which metal might be reimagined by other means, where it might be considered vital and even intelligent. These stories of metal open up a dialogue about matter and life; about the vital agency of the nonhuman that is so often denied. For in these stories, as Marina Warner notes of those in the *Arabian Nights*, '[l]ike the dull metal of magnets, objects pack inherent power.'[357]

HDM echoes these fascinations with the metallic and the power of objects. As Elizabeth Teare has acknowledged, in the U.S. versions '[e]ach volume of the trilogy is named for the marvellous instrument its heroes receive or construct: *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass*', and two of such instruments are

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[357] Warner, *Stranger Magic*, p. 199.

made from metal.[358] The novels centre around these objects; Lyra and Will must navigate their way through their personal and collective journeys with the instruments much as fairy tale characters are wont to do with their own magically endowed – and often newly acquired – possessions. Along with the sky-iron armour of the panserbjørn and the other technologically advanced instruments scattered through the novels, the metallic objects of the trilogy are far from inert, passive matter; occupying a space that is both conscious and material they dissolve the security of the Cartesian subject.

In European fairy tales metal has three prominent and dualistically embedded functions: to promote culture over nature in the form of wealth and luxury, to affirm 'natural' status, and to warn of the dangers of man-made machinery. In its myriad manifestations within these stories, metal serves, in these ways, to perpetuate the opposition of nature and culture. And yet, the abilities afforded metal within the magical framework of the tales arouse potentially subversive depictions of matter as subject. *HDM* sees the fairy tale fascination with the power of objects extended to a conclusion that enables metal to blur the boundaries between the dualisms of nature/culture, mind/matter, subject/object that traditional fairy tales so often affirm. It is through these metal objects that we might consider Pullman's reimagining of matter as aligned with the new or vital materialisms that disrupt that pervasive humanist subject.

As Bennett notes, metal is not an obvious choice for a consideration of vital materialism and the ways in which matter can be envisioned as fluid and intelligent, not least because of its stoic associations with fixity and mechanism. 'Who would choose *metal* as a symbol of vitality?' she asks.[359] Having long maintained its pervasive image of solidity, stasis and invulnerability and been appropriated for myriad cultural constructions, metal does not necessarily invite fluid associations with activity and flux. Yet, as the iron in our blood, the points of electricity in our homes, the minerals in our vegetation and inevitably – pressed against our ears or semi-permanently affixed to our palms – the way in which we choose to communicate with each other, the status of metal as organic but artificial blurs the lines between vitality and stasis, opening up radical reimaginings of materiality.

[358] Elizabeth Teare, 'Harry Potter and the Technology of Magic' in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*, ed. Lana A Whited (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 330.
[359] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 55.

Metals are organic matter, found occurring in the earth, like the wood of the trees and the water of the oceans. But, more so than perhaps any other element, they are moulded, altered, shaped almost beyond recognition into objects of human construction. The steel frame of a window, the gold bracelet on a wrist or the intricate systems inside a computer resemble so little the organic forms from which they originate that they seem distanced from their organic status, more a part of the cultural milieu than the natural. The major electrical, electromagnetic and technological developments that have occurred over the last few centuries (though many of these developments echo complex technologies of the natural world) have pushed metal further into the realm of the artificial and bound it to the intelligence and craftsmanship of the human in the cultural consciousness. For this reason, metal is a fascinating element to consider when examining the solidity of the border between the natural and artificial, the material and the mindful.

Who *would* choose metal as a symbol of vitality? Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.[360] As Bennett observes, 'in a short section of the "Nomadology" plateau, they name metal as the exemplar of a vital materiality; it is metal that best reveals this quivering effervescence; it is metal, bursting with a life, that gives rise to "the prodigious idea of Nonorganic Life."'[361] In an attempt to disaggregate metal from the social imaginary of passive matter convenient for human advancement, and instead suggest its activity and engagement, they declare: '[n]ot everything is metal, but metal is everywhere, metal is the conductor of all matter.'[362] Under these terms the two seemingly oppositional depictions of metal as naturally passive and inert vs. culturally and technologically active dissolve to reveal a vitally engaged and engaging substance with an embodied agency; a *life*. As a *living* process, metal's capabilities and culpabilities within the world become manifold – it becomes an active and vitally present participant of an ever-changing existence.

The technological advancements of the modern age make metal an almost unavoidable element of human existence, and metal's prominence is reflected in the growing body of contemporary fantasy and fairy-tale literature and cinema that sees metal often actively embodied and anthropomorphized. Over the last century, metal has been appropriated in storytelling to various ends. Ted Hughes' modern fairy tales for

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[360] Ibid.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 479.

children *The Iron Man* (1968) and *The Iron Woman* (1993) attempted to clean up environmental destruction with metallic giants. More recently, Disney's *WALL-E* (2008) followed suit with a similar message, featuring a robot piling up towers of rubbish after an apocalypse – a recycling fable for a modern generation. In futuristic, fantasy films cyberbodies still draw in the crowds as Arnold Schwartzenegger reprised his role as the *Terminator* again in 2019, more than thirty years after the first film was released. Novel *Cinder* (2012), for young adults by Marissa Meyer, puts a modern spin on an old tale with a cyborg Cinderella, offering a posthuman reimagining of a traditional story. In Disney's *Cars* (2006) series, anthropomorphized cars are the protagonists of the films; they talk, eat and fall in love as the animation of inanimate metal objects comes to a new generation.

These revitalized metallic embodiments can be seen first in fairy tales and the magical possibilities they gave to metals; the agency they afforded it, the spells under which it was cast. Pullman revitalizes the trope in *His Dark Materials*, endowing metal with powers to challenge the inertia of objects and the passivity of matter and thus the concept of the subject itself. When Bennett cites Vladimir Ivanovich Verdansky and his humbling dictum that humans themselves are 'walking, talking minerals' she pulls the metallic away from the passive inertia of natural Other and into the realm of the intelligent, malleable human subject.[363] As mineral, metal forms the basis of all matter, as Deleuze and Guattari affirm, but the vision of walking, talking minerals brings matter to life in a very tangible way; blurring the lines between the constructed human subject and the constructions of life itself.

In his essay "Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Open-Ended Becoming", Manuel de Landa attempts to envision an earlier manifestation of metal:

> [w]e can imagine our planet, before living creatures appeared on its surface, as populated by metallic particles which catalyzed reactions as they flowed through the Earth, in a sense allowing the planet to "explore" a space of possible chemical combinations, that is, allowing the planet to blindly grope its way around this space, eventually stumbling upon proto-living creatures, which, as many scientists now agree, were probably autocatalytic loops of materials, that is, proto-metabolisms.'[364]

De Landa's vividly anthropomorphic depiction of intelligent metallic matter consciously – if 'blindly' – forming the earth through its catalytic capabilities reads a

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[363] Vernadsky, quoted in Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?*, p. 49.
[364] Manuel De Landa, 'Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Open-Ended Becoming' in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory and Futures*, ed. Elizabeth A. Grosz (New York: Cornell University, 1999), pp. 29-41, p. 37.

little like a fairy tale beginning 'once upon a time'. The metallic particles in this tale are enlivened, made active, curious even, intent on knowledge – not unlike the feminist princesses we come to expect from our modern fairy tales or Pullman's Dust – and serve in this way to counteract the popular story of inert matter that is acted upon. To credit metallic matter with these claims of vitality is to create a new story of materiality, a story in which metal can play a part in the consciousness of life, the construction of life through human and nonhuman *actants*, to use Bruno Latour's term.[365] These reconfigurations of metal and matter, these 'counterstories' of materiality, have wider implications for the human subject, dismantling the subject/object, self/other dichotomies altogether.[366] If we are minerals and minerals are intelligent and active, our subjectivity, and life itself, becomes at once not mind over matter, us versus metal, but a fluid engagement of multiple and varying processes.

The human corporeal connection to metal is explicit; the metallic taste and smell of blood reminding us of our mineral composition. That we are physically made from the compounds of the metals we see as being so Othered from ourselves is an indictment of the extent of our perceived separation from matter – even (perhaps especially) our own. Such concepts have been at the heart of posthuman theories of cyborg bodies, from Donna Haraway to Rosi Braidotti. The posthuman 'meta(l)morphosis' Braidotti describes, for example, starts from the point of view that

> [t]he posthuman predicament is such as to force a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural difference, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems.[367]

She affirms Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that all of life is process, artificial and natural, and so the hierarchies and assumptions which have pitted one above another, given status to mind over matter, are irrelevant.

Metal as process; matter as process. The processual vision of life outlined by Deleuze and Guattari is – ironically enough – *machinic*. But now the machines are not an image of fixity and universal laws, but connection. The machinic processes of all

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[365] Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2004) p. 237.
[366] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 8. Offering an alternate viewpoint is central to Bennett's idea of positive anthropomorphism, which involves telling the *stories* of nonhuman (or more-than-human in Alaimo's terms) agencies.
[367] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 89.

life, constantly creating, constantly in flux; rhizomatic body-machines. Although, as Braidotti notes:

> the greatest misunderstanding about Deleuze and Guattari's body-machines is that they are often taken literally, as actual pieces of wires, silicon, metal and circuitry, or else they are taken figuratively, as if automata and cyborgs best exemplified the philosophical concept of body-machine

in this discussion of metal and philosophical machines they are integral.[368] Dissolving the dualism of matter and mind, creating new concepts of connection and difference, metal and machines take on new meaning.

These stories of metal – both in fairy tales and in Pullman's trilogy – are complex. Like the element itself they take varying and multiple forms; they will not sit neatly in pots at the bottom of rainbows; they refuse categorization. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, 'metal is everywhere', even in stories – perhaps *especially* in stories, where it is so often found hovering beneath the surface of the tale, far from the starring role – it is the gold coins that reward the tailor for his bravery or the brass lamp from which the jinni bursts forth.[369] In stories, metal can be anything, it can be the metaphorical essence of a person's worth, as in Plato's myth, it can be magic, animate, with immense power, and it can be small and ordinary but with great effect. Stories have the power to change assumptions. Pullman's new stories of metal, though not without complications, challenge the old ones through depictions of metal as empowered and intelligent matter, catalytic and connecting with all kinds of life to reimagine matter and subjectivity itself.

The Armoured Bears: Metal and Masculinity

The panserbjørn of Svalbard are the Armoured Bears – leviathan, sentient polar bears with human abilities – and their armour, Iorek Brynison tells Lyra, is their 'soul' (168). When asked about the difference between the bears' armour and another kind of armour, Iorek replies: "'[m]y armour is made from sky-iron, made for me. A bear's armour is his soul, just as your daemon is your soul. You might as well take *him* away" – indicating Pantalaimon – "and replace him with a doll full of sawdust. That is the difference"'(168). As the soul of the bears, the armour is a physical manifestation of the

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[368] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses,* p. 253-4.
[369] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 479.

imagination and character of the panserbjørn themselves. The bears are strong, masculine (possibly solely) and fierce, and their armour, forged by their own paws from the mythical-sounding sky-iron, reflects these traits. They are anthropomorphized animals with complex social structures, a monarchy and a territory that they protect with brute strength. Embodying a traditional model of invulnerable, fixed, arborescent metal, the bear's armour does not offer the same vital materialist parallels as will be explored in the alethiometer and the knife, and yet, its inclusion is key.

The panserbjørn are undoubtedly fairy-tale inspired creatures. The Norwegian tale 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' features a great talking 'White Bear' as a handsome prince under a witch's curse, and the interaction between the huge polar bear and a young girl in the fairy tale is evoked by Pullman in his portrayal of Iorek and Lyra. However, he subverts the tradition of transformation and curse by giving the bears a life of their own. The bears' metallic armour can also be seen to be influenced by fairy tale, as metal and animals have often been connected in unusual ways in such stories. Golden geese, silver swans, golden asses, golden feathers, ants that dig for gold, elephants that offer magic jewels and creatures that excrete gold pieces appear within global fairy tale traditions; one particular Indian tale tells of a snake that vomits jewels. These types of metallically-endowed creatures from around the world often reflect the literal value animals have to humans – as meat and as the producers of milk and fertilizer, but Pullman's panserbjørn are matched with iron, a symbol of strength, rather than wealth.

Iron occurs most often in European fairy tales as the metal of containment and durability. Tales such as the Grimms' 'The Iron Stove' (KHM 127) depict iron as an impenetrable prison, reflecting the role of iron in folklore and superstition as having the ability to contain or deflect magic; building an iron fence around a cemetery, for example, is traditionally believed to contain the spirits of those buried inside. Similarly, it is iron which is clamped around the heart of a servant whose master is missing until he is found in 'Iron Hans/John' (KHM 136) – a symbol of the unending love he has for his master. These tales of iron align it with the general conception of metal as strong, enduring, invulnerable and fixed. Jane Bennett has discussed how metal's affiliation with enduring strength is, like the metals themselves, hard to break. She notes: '[t]he association of metal with passivity or a dead thingness persists', referencing the 'adamantine chain' as 'one of a long line of tropes that will come to include the iron cage, brass tracts, steely glares, iron wills, solid gold hilts' to demonstrate metal's

inexhaustible solidity, and soliciting the chain to which Promethius must yield as a prominent example of the perceived strength and fixity of metal.[370]

The bears' sky-iron armour does little to resist these traditional assumptions of metal's fixity and is thus potentially problematic for an examination of metal's vitalism. Though for the bears their armour is as alive as a soul is, in the first introduction to Iorek he is not wearing his armour and, therefore, exists without his soul. The existence of a creature without its soul is one that the novels overwhelmingly condemn; when the human's daemons are taken from them they are mindless, empty, unfeeling: '[a] human being with no daemon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense.'(184). The separation of souls from bodies is traditionally an 'unnatural' and repulsive concept, as can be observed in the Italian folktale 'Body Without Soul', collected by Italo Calvino, in which the sorcerer who has contained his soul outside his body so as to avoid death is portrayed as a murderous villain. The suggestion that the man's humanity is lost when his soul is separate from his body exemplifies the assumption that it is the soul, rather than the flesh that is honest and good.

Pullman's iron souls are complicated and imperfect reworkings of metal. Though they might, on the surface, suggest a cyborgian vision of animal, nature, culture and metal, the danger with such a comparison is with the bears' trenchant masculinity (there seem to be only male pansenbjorn; a point that is problematic, not least for their survival) and how little their hyper-masculine traditions are questioned in the novels. Braidotti observes that

> [i]n his seminal work on masculinity, fascism and war, Klaus Theweleit has suggested that the "metallization" of the male body expresses an increasing sense of fragility and a crisis of masculine identity. By way of compensation, and even at the risk of complete loss of humanity, the male subject protects his corporeality with an armour of impenetrability. […] The impenetrable metallic body defies the blurring of boundaries, is impenetrable and uncontaminated: a sort of techno-fascist fantasy of self-sufficiency.[371]

The bears can very much be seen to fit this model. Representative of a traditionally masculine society, they are often engaged in physical combat, they work for money, and wear armour to further solidify their brute strength – Lyra observes that they do not even seem to feel the weight of the iron protection they wear despite its weight. Without

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[370] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 55.
[371] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 251-2.

his armour, Iorek is 'formidable', but '[w]ith it, he was terrifying. It was rust-red and crudely riveted together: great sheets and plates of dented discoloured metal that scraped and screeched as they rode over one another' (297). Self-serving and relatively sufficient, they avoid the politics of other beings where they can – they are disinterested in the interconnectedness of Pullman's multiverse –, and their impenetrable armour is reminiscent of those traditional, fixed visions of matter. They are animals almost entirely anthropomorphized to embody masculine human culture, and they are, surprisingly, deified for it.

Adored by Lyra and respected by humans generally, the bears occupy a space that leaves little room for fluidity of gender or material in their masculine armour of soldiers. Yet, though the bears seem to be a decidedly cultural depiction of existence, they can also be seen to question nature/culture divisions if not from a new materialist perspective through the metal itself, then through a postmodern lens. The bears, ironically, struggle with the trappings of culture, though their iron armour seems to distance them already so acutely from their animality. When the new king Iofur Raknison becomes intent upon acquiring human wealth and status, Iorek suggests the bears are being lead away from their own 'natures'; becoming 'uncertain semi-humans' (300). Iorek's concern that the bears are going against 'nature' when they are already so obviously culturally constructed challenges, in a postmodern sense, the concept of 'natural' itself. The bears highlight the difficulty in conceptualizing naturalness because while armour might be seen as a distinctly cultural phenomena, for the bears it is natural, not least because it comes from the earth, and in this way they complicate the duality.

Metal's status as 'natural' has always been slippery – not least because of the complexity of the world 'natural' itself. According to Bernadette Bensuade-Vincent and William R. Newman in *The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity*, when Aristotle proffered in *Physics* what he saw as clear delineations between that which was natural and that which was artificial via the point at which 'human impositions' are involved with the product, he was met with resistance in the case of metal.[372] They note that:

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[372] Bernadette Bensuade-Vincent and William R Newman, 'Introduction: The Artificial and the natural: State of the Problem' in *The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity*, eds. Bernadette Bensuade-Vincent and William R Newman (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2007), pp.1-20, p. 5.

> [in] the example of alchemy, the scholastic practitioners of that discipline were often wont to say that they did not make artificial precious metals but genuine natural ones, since they merely perfected the base metals, achieving what nature could have done beneath the earth if there had been enough time and sufficiently pure materials.[373]

The definitions are not clearly cut, as metal resists the traditional models of identification, complicating the dualism. The bear king, Iorek, further complicates these definitions within the text by considering precious metals to be less natural – and thus more human – than the iron of his armour.

The bears and their armour, then, – deified despite their overt strength, masculinity and departure from their animality – are a problematic depiction of metal, despite the potential for a postmodern disruption of the 'natural. The traditional vision of metal as inert matter is not disrupted by the implication of a soul within the armour and cannot be seen to reflect a vital materialist standpoint. Yet, that the armour is not, ultimately, the most powerful metal in the trilogy, finding its strength diminished before the intelligent 'intentions' (798) of the subtle knife, suggests that the traditional models of metal as strength are inadequate in the face of a vital materialism of conscious matter. It is metal with life – rather than soul – that wins, revealing the armour of the bears to be a model that, though honoured for its traditions, must surrender in the face of the catalytic vitalism of the alethiometer and the subtle knife.

Living Objects: The Knife and the Alethiometer

Though vastly different objects, one a golden, truth-telling compass, the other an iron knife so sharp it can cut through the fabric between worlds, the alethiometer and the subtle knife embody most clearly within the trilogy the 'life' with which Pullman enlivens metal. Belonging to the two protagonists, the objects are at the centre of the narrative, changing and altering the course of events not only for Lyra and Will, but for the entire multiverse. The objects are 'logical' developments of the magical objects seen in fairy tales, reflecting a material vitalism that ties conscious thought to matter. The objects have what Jane Bennett has called a 'metallic life', in which life is the active, 'destructive-creative force presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body'.[374] Life, in these terms, is the manner through which objects and subjects can be

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[373] Ibid.
[374] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p.53.

understood collectively – as part of the same system – rather than relationally. The metallic life of metal, through the knife or the technology of the alethiometer, is observed via *intentions*; conscious desires typically reserved only for animate matter.

Objects in fairy tale are often endowed with personalities and intentions, frequently affecting the course of the protagonist or, in some cases, acting as protagonists themselves, so the alethiometer and the knife are rooted in a fairy-tale history of dynamic, animate objects. This animation of metal is a part of the more generalized enlivening of many, often mundane, objects of everyday life within folk and fairy tales. As Warner observes, it is not always animal or plant life that is given an active 'life' within these stories, but ordinary objects too. She notes:

> [a]nimist vitality endows inert objects with active power (Princess Badoura's talisman and Aladdin's lamp in the *Nights*, Bluebeard's bloody key, Cinderella's glass slipper); the plots are carried forward by self-moving objects often in combination with the right formulae (the flying carpet, the magic club that attacks all comers, the magic tablecloth that always spreads a feasts, the magic mirror in "Snow White", which tells the wicked queen the truth).[375]

Objects, then, can be catalysts for great change within the stories, catalysts that can profoundly affect the trajectory of the characters. While Warner's examples are of metal that is catalytic without the added element of its having a personality of its own – the lamp; the key – metal objects can also be characters in their own right, can speak and transform and hold the narrative. Made animate, anthropomorphic, metal objects in fairy tales can converse as humans do, with personalities and objectives.

In *Stranger Magic*, Warner attributes the trope of inanimate objects made animate to the *Arabian Nights*, whose popularity in Europe, with their talismans of stone or other enlivened objects, initiated a trend for fabulist tales. The effect of this trend in literature and storytelling was 'to give voice to anything, especially to small moveable goods – tools, baubles, toys, love tokens'.[376] She notes that fairy tales by European writers such as Andersen – famed for his animation of objects – were in fact inspired by the *Nights* and their sympathy to non-human beings.

This trope of animate objects appears most obviously in Andersen's work as he 'animates inanimate things and turns them into active agents' far more often than do the Grimms or Perrault. From 'The Flying Trunk', to the talking flowers in 'The Snow Queen' both organic and inorganic materials are brought to life in his work.[377] And

[375] Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 30.
[376] Warner, *Stranger Magic,* p.242.
[377] Ibid, p. 248.

Andersen's animate objects, more so than other writers, are often found to be metallic, with walking, talking agency. Stories such as 'The Steadfast Tin Solider', 'The Metal Pig' and 'The Nightingale' all highlight the different ways metal is given life in his stories. The animation of metal in European fairy tales often merges with another common device of nineteenth century literature for children: the animation of toys. Tales such as 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier' encourage sympathy with toys – even metal ones like the soldier – by giving them personality and emotions and, in the case of Andersen, causing them to suffer great tragedy.

In *HDM* Lyra's alethiometer and Will's knife are objects that function – at least initially – as an extension of this traditional animation of toys. Lyra is still a child when she is first given the golden compass. The first appearance of the knife is at the hands of a teenage boy trying to fend off spectres. Both Lyra and Will carry their objects with them at all times, like childhood toys, and Lyra particularly sees the alethiometer as a kind of confidant – echoing the friendship children develop with teddies, imagining conversations and responses such that fairy tales have often engaged with. Yet, the responses of the knife and the alethiometer are not imagined, and their status as toys is diminished by their extensive power and knowledge. When Iorek Brynison tells Will '[w]hat you don't know is what the knife does on its own. Your intentions may be good. The knife has intentions too' (798), he confirms what has already been becoming steadily apparent, that the metal of the knife, as well as that of the alethiometer, is charged with some kind of *person*ality. Lyra confirms that 'the alethiometer's like a person, almost', it responds thoughtfully to her questions, sometimes with character, rebuking her for asking the same question twice, and it 'has moods, like a person' (421). Similarly, the knife chooses Will as its owner, severing his fingers with its claim; he is informed that it 'knows when to leave one hand and settle in another' (505-6).

The connection between these metallic objects and personhood is important; the objects, like all those crafted by conscious beings, are surrounded by Dust, the 'particles of consciousness' (428) that are drawn to matter, and we learn that the alethiometer is able to know the truth because of the connection between Lyra's mind, the Dust that answers her questions, and the compass itself. For both the alethiometer and the knife, the connection to thought is crucial. Will is told, '[i]t's not only the knife that has to cut, it's your own mind' (507), and when they mend it his attention is as important to its repair as Iorek's physical abilities with iron. The material, then, is not enough without

the mind, and neither is mind sufficient without the material, they cannot be distinguished from each other, but have a mutual interdependence.

The idea of a metallic life is at odds with the common perception of objects in the contemporary western consciousness, which affords little, if any, agency to the material. Pullman's depiction of metallic life is anthropomorphic; the personality, the human responses and behaviours are echoes of the human brain, and yet, his alethiometer and knife do reflect a vision of the sort of vital materiality found in the work of Bennett and Deleuze and Guattari. Unlike the techniques of sympathy for objects found in the work of fairy tale writers such as Andersen, Pullman's enlivening of metal is, despite its hints of anthropomorphism, a more complex rendering of objects as not *feeling*, as such, but having a material intelligence. It's a materiality at odds with the passive inertia of matter in hylomorphic dualistic philosophy but one that also distances itself from the sympathy-invoking narratives of active fairy tale things. The metallic life is not one with which readers ought to identify, but one that hints at a material consciousness.

The subtle knife is an object of wish-fulfillment that you might expect to find in a fairy tale – one that can cut through anything – '[n]othing, no one, matter, spirit, angel, air – nothing is invulnerable to the subtle knife' (616). But the knife itself is vulnerable – Will breaks it in a brief moment of distraction – and it is this vulnerability that connects it to living. The vulnerability of the knife's metallic life complicates the invulnerability associated with metallic matter in the traditional myths (Prometheus, for example) that serve to exemplify its inertia and persistent 'dead thingness'.[378] It is worth noting too, that the knife is broken not by excessive force or by a physical opponent, but by a slippage in Will's concentration. Pullman's living metal offers, through the alethiometer and the knife, a vision of matter woven inextricably through consciousness.

Warner has noted that the potency of objects within Andersen's work gives them the ability to affect and alter the characters' states of being. Of 'The Snow Queen' she suggests that the piece of the mirror in Kai's heart combined with the kiss of the Snow Queen mean that his 'very consciousness – composed of faculties like imagination and reflexivity – loses energy and substance.'[379] Here Warner explicitly ties the active

[378] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 55.
[379] Andersen, p. 249.

material of the object (the broken mirror) to Kai's conscious sense of *being*; suggesting that the physical placement of the mirror has caused his mind to lose *substance*. The material and the mindful are envisaged as interwoven through the activity of the object.

Like the mirror in the snow queen, the metallic life of these objects can, it must be noted, have unsavoury implications, as Iorek suggests with his warning about the knife's intentions. In a nod to Aristotle's theory of causes, he clarifies: '[t]he intentions of the tool are what it does. A hammer intends to strike, a vice intends to hold fast, a lever intends to lift. They are what it is made for.' (798) But, he notes, as Pullman hints at the metal's own agency, 'sometimes a tool may have other uses that you don't know. Sometimes in doing what *you* intend, you also do what the knife intends, without knowing.' (798) As Colas observes:

> [t]he only hint we have that the subtle knife might be anything other than an unambiguously good thing to have and to use comes when Will accidentally breaks the knife. Iorek Brynison, king of the bears, master blacksmith, protector of Lyra and now ally to Will, expresses resistance when Will and Lyra ask him to mend the knife. Though he is capable of doing so, and trusts Will and Lyra's good intentions, neither he nor Will can perceive the edge of the window-cutting side of the blade, and Iorek believes they therefore cannot know the knife's "intentions" and fears that use of the knife may have unintended effects.[380]

The knife will cut through worlds, but will also make Spectres, the soul-sucking ghostly beings that prey on adults. The knife is a weapon capable of great harm as well as great good, as Lyra and Will become steadily aware, and Pullman once more complicates the dichotomies of good and evil and matter and thought through the knife's subtle and potentially dangerous desires.

That the knife's intentions do not always align with the intentions of its user suggests a metallic, material autonomy that cannot be dominated or overruled by human intention. This agency within metal is reminiscent of the assertions of metallurgists and blacksmiths, who have long denied the passivity of metals, and instead recognize the need to feel the tensions within metals, the resistances, the flow; the agency at work within the matter itself. Deleuze and Guattari note that what 'metal and metallurgy bring to light is a life proper to matter, a vital state of matter as such, a material vitalism that doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable, dissociated by the hylomorphic model'.[381] As a weapon subverted to be

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[380] Colas, p. 58-9.
[381] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 479.

agential in order to undermine the mind/matter dualism, Pullman's knife suggests such a vitalism.

For Colas, the knife is 'a means of transcending the constraints imposed by matter', implying that the knife's material agency denies the solidity and fixity of matter itself.[382] Importantly, it is the battle between the knife and the bears' armour that the intelligent matter of the knife comes to succeed in the face of the outdated tradition of the armour. Will is *only* able to beat Iorek with the knife because Iorek accepts that his armour is no match for it, the battle seeming to take place between the metals themselves rather than the humans. When Will cuts Iorek's helmet in half, the bear immediately recognizes his own defeat, for the metals themselves have fought, and the winner has been decided. The knife's victory leads to a recognition and respect for that 'metallic life' and the intentions that lead its action. In fact, it is due to the knife and the alethiometer that the usually apolitical bears alter their course and join the war against the Authority. The armour, the knife and the alethiometer unite for the final battle in the war against the separation of matter and thought, physicality and consciousness.

The Alethiometer, however, is a truth-telling compass of gold. Its messages take years of study to decipher, but for Lyra they come naturally, the dial changing and pointing to images that show her the way. If, as Santiago Colas suggests, Plato's story of truth 'assumes a division and an opposition between subject (the thinking entity) and object (the stuff out in the world the subject is thinking about)', then the alethiometer dissolves this division as the thinking, autonomous, objective material that knows – and tells – truth. As a compass – an object created by man that works in direct communication with the poles of the earth –, it resists categorization as cultural or natural, and its conscious abilities further the blurring of those borders. Unlike the hylomophism of the classical philosophers and the dualisms and mechanistic visions of Descartes and Newton, the alethiometer is a technological mechanism with metallic life, subverting both the organicism of Romanticism and the fixity of matter to offer instead a rhizomatic process of living metal and a blurring of borders between human and machine.

As both an object constructed by man but one that would traditionally work in relation to the earth, the compass is an interesting choice for Pullman's truth-teller, challenging the notion of passive, mechanistic matter, but also refusing to deify the

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[382] Colas, p. 59.

organic and any suggestion of naturalness. Far from a passive, fixed mechanism, the alethiometer is alive and constantly aware, altering and responding to its environment and the actions that occur throughout the novels. Instead of the truth of natural status that Plato's myth of metals affirms, Pullman uses the alethiometer to offer an alternative kind of reality that sees the dualism of mind and matter eroded by a process that is neither solely subject nor object. As Colas suggests:

> [w]hen she reads the alethiometer, Lyra both concentrates and empties her mind. In this respect the alethiometer seems to mimic her with its three fixed and one errant, wandering needle and in so doing to remind her (and us) that we are not separate from what we would know or from the technologies we use to know. In view of this, a true story in Pullman's universe, like the true stories that Lyra tells in combination with the alethiometer, might be characterized by their openly disposed but purposive, inventive engagement with the material world, rather than by their perfectly faithful polished mirroring of a world of reality that they remain outside of.[383]

This reworking of mechanism sees matter reconceptualised as working in collaboration with the human mind. The technology of the alethiometer in this way subverts the fixity of matter as mechanism that framed much of Western philosophical discourse.

From Dangerous Automata to Fluid Technologies

Pullman's emphasis on technologies and the morality behind their use draws on the tradition of European fairy tale, which often reflected social anxieties around technological advances. Technologies such as automata, for example, began to appear most obviously in European tales in the 1800s when the Industrial Revolution occurred across Europe and the landscape of production and technological development was altering dramatically. The stories of Andersen, as well as many Victorian short stories inspired by fairy tale that followed, often highlight the complexity of the relationship between humans and the technologies they created – a relationship that is embedded with questions concerning the natural and cultural divides. In *HDM* Pullman draws on these dualistic approaches to nature/culture in order to reimagine the ways in which we understand our relationships to the technologies we use.

Andersen, whose tales often rejected cultural progress over the natural, took on the subject of technological artificiality in the tale of 'The Nightingale', first published in 1843. In this story an emperor worships an artificial nightingale over a real one. Only

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[383] Colas, p. 43.

on his deathbed, when the artificial nightingale has long stopped singing, does the real bird return to him – bringing him away from death's clutches with her song. Andersen's thinly-veiled warning against the celebration of artificiality echoes the growing concern at the time around automata upsetting the divide between the natural and the artificial and human and machine, but also suggests an anxiety that humans might become too reliant on machines – a valid concern in light of the developments in technology and machinery that had been sweeping the Western world. Holly Blackford notes that this kind of rejection of automata is typically Romantic:

> [w]hereas the creation of automata reaches back to the ancient world, the intellectual "golden age of automata" was 1637-1748, when automata – usually simulating the human, the musician, or animal – reflected the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment, wondrously capturing ideas of the universe, state, and human body as masterfully and divinely ordained machines (Kang 112). This mechanistic worldview was overwhelmingly rejected by the Romantics, many of whom depicted automata as uncanny, lifeless simulacrum, registering the impotent efforts of uncanny inventor-artist figures.[384]

'The Nightingale' offers Andersen's response to the 'golden age of automata' and its mechanistic worldview; that even the most beautiful or intelligently designed automata cannot compete with the joyous intricacies of the natural world. His view echoes the Romantic move away from industry and artificial machines and toward the spirit and the natural world.

In Mary de Morgan's fairy-tale inspired short story, 'A Toy Princess' (1877) the fear of automata is played out with a similar celebration of the natural over the cultural. Hers is the story of a princess whose fairy godmother commissions a magical toy replica of the princess to take her place due to her unhappiness at court. Far from reject this toy imposter, the kingdom rejoices at the princess's supposedly sudden change of personality into the quiet, passive girl. When the deceit is revealed, the King and his advisors choose for the toy princess to remain with them, believing it is far more suited to the role. De Morgan's powerful critique is not only of the patriarchal desire for passive women, but of society's exaltation of the artificial over the 'real', echoing Andersen's fear that humans can be so easily swayed by the appeal of technology.

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[384] Holly Blackford, 'Puppetmasters and Their Toys: Transformation of Tabula Rasa in Tales of Hoffman, Hawthorne, Alcott and Baum' in *Romantic Education in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: National and Transatlantic Contexts*, eds. Monika M Elbert, Lesley Ginsberg (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 89-103, p. 90.

In her analysis of 'A Toy Princess', Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests that de Morgan's tale aligns itself with the divisions between natural/artificial that were rife at the time:

> [s]peaking automata magnified, in fact, the way in which the development of technology inevitably upset the divide between the natural and the artificial. The debate on what was "human" was particularly encapsulated by automata which seemed more and more able to take the place of humans.[385]

Automata and technology were seen, in the Romantic view, as directly at odds with the spirituality of the organic world. As the interest in automata, machinery and technology grew, the forms themselves destabilized the fixity of metal, which in turn created the fear that permeates narratives such as those. The blurring of borderlines between the natural and the artificial makes technology a potentially disturbing and uncanny disruption of dualisms.

In light of such fears, Pullman's depiction of technology within *HDM* offers a more rounded response, not of fear or of worship, but of the risks and gains that technology affords us. Challenging the fairy tales he draws from, while appropriating the animism they proffered, he offers metal in fluid and processual forms, working with and against the humans that use them. When Lyra and Will understand the true intentions of the knife – to create Spectres – they know that they must destroy it. With its two sides and dual uses it cannot continue to exist in the multiple worlds that they know now to exist. While the destruction of the knife could suggest that its presence on earth is damaging to the planet – as suggested by Elizabeth Teare – the knife, for all its potential for damage, is crucial in the fight against the Authority, as is the alethiometer.[386] In the Deleuzian war-machine against the State, all matter and material must be present, all have a part to play because everything is connected. The agency of the metallic objects in these texts enabled the Authority to be defeated, and perhaps there is a balance at work – for every alethiometer that gives Dust a voice, there is the knife, which leads Dust out of the worlds and into the abyss. The technology that humans create, Pullman acknowledges, is not without risk.

As Braidotti notes, the inclusion of technology in the discussion of fluid subjectivity is not a flight from the biological into the technological, and the inclusion

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[385] Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2014) p. 76.

[386] Teare, 'Harry Potter and the Technology of Magic', p. 330

of metal and machinery in our concepts of ourselves does not mean we reject the flesh in favour of the machine. She argues that posthumanism

> is as far removed from the capitalist hype about technology as the future of humanity as can be. The latter constitutes an all-pervasive master-narrative of flight from the human embodied self, into the fake transcendence of a machine that strikes me as molar, Oedipalizing, despotic and exploitative. It is against this social imaginary that I want to argue for a more dissipative, eroticized and flowing interaction between the human and the bio-technological as evolution of the non-telelogical but nomadological kind.[387]

A vital materialism that includes metal, machines and technology does not need to stand for violence and a flight from nature in contrast with a pastoral setting of natural relations. It merely recognizes the agency and power of the material in all its forms. Technology, of course, has its dangers; there is no blind celebration of metal and machine, only an acceptance of an active, metallic life working in connection with our own; a series of relations between matter and thought; between metal and life.

Unlike the Romantic derision of the machine and desire to return to a pre-cultural nature, Pullman refuses to suggest a return solely to the earth or the 'natural'. His metallic objects deny the 'border war' 'between organism and machine' posited by Haraway as the legacy of Western science and politics, demonstrating a desire rather to consider the way that the natural and the cultural, the mindful and the material are interwoven and indivisible.[388] The alethiometer and the knife are objects crafted by humans out of materials that ultimately work, despite their faults, to save the multiverse. There is no perfection offered in either object, nor in the status of natural or cultural, as Pullman depicts only a fluid and processual metallic matter that is subject and object combined. Pullman's characters are imbued with objects as objects are imbued with them in a transferential relationship of agency. Metal is not as inert as it might seem, nor matter fixed and eternal, but a continually and fluidly altering material being: 'a swirl of cloudy colours seemed to live just under the surface of the metal: bruise-purples, sea-blue, earth-browns, clustering shades at the mouth of a tomb as evening falls over a deserted graveyard' (506).

Mulefa, Rhizomes and a Machinic Paradise

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[387] Rosi Braidotti, 'Teratologies' in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press, 2000) pp. 156 – 172, p. 229.
[388] Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 150.

The use of the knife and the alethiometer, as well as the myriad other 'inventive technologies' including 'gyropters' and the 'intention craft' Asriel develops that is powered by the mind, in the 'bloody universal war' against the Authority is something that Elizabeth Teare has briefly discussed as undermining the value of such technologies, not least because the knife is destroyed at the end of the trilogy. Teare suggests that although Pullman comes close 'to celebrating the complicated technologies' of his trilogy through his focus on the key objects: the knife, the compass and the spyglass, the war in which they play a crucial part contrasts dramatically with the basic technologies of the mulefa, who seem to live in a 'paradise' that has little need for metal.[389] The mulefa's basic technologies, however, are worth exploring even though they are not metallic, because they exemplify the machinic existence of Deleuzian philosophy that contrasts so dramatically with the classical mechanistic, dualism of Western thought, and that is reflective of Pullman's multiverse more generally.

The mulefa, appearing in the final novel of the trilogy, function as an example of existence as process and machinic connection. Life, in this multiverse, is machinic; a series of rhizomatic processes connecting beyond the definitions of mind and matter and spirit and substance and nature and culture. As Braidotti observes:

> [r]adically immanent philosophical nomadism […] sponsors a subject that is composed of external forces, of the non-human, inorganic or technological kind. It is territorially based and thus environmentally bound. The "machine-like" in Deleuze's thought refers to this dynamic process of unfolding subjectivity outside the classical frame of the anthropocentric humanist subject, re-locating it into becomings and fields of composition of forces and becomings.[390]

Nowhere is this so clearly demonstrated than in the world of the mulefa, whose bodies and minds are interwoven, their abilities so intricately connected so as to be indivisible from the world around them.

Zoe Jaques has noted that the trilogy 'encourages a complete erasure of human-nature hierarchies via his invention of a new species': the seed-pod wheeling mulefa.[391] The mulefa's existence is so thoroughly tied to the world around them, specifically the trees, that Mary is left wondering 'which had come first: wheel or claw? Rider or tree?' (752). Embodying the Deleuzian concept of the machinic; they are both the subject and

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[389] Teare, p. 330.
[390] Braidotti, 'Teratologies', p. 228-9.
[391] Zoe Jaques, 'States of Nature in *His Dark Materials* and *Harry Potter* in *Topic*, 57 (2011), pp. 1-16, p. 6.

the object, their use of the seed-pods as wheels is essential for the existence of the trees, and the seed-pods are the objects which serve their own existence. There is no boundary between self and other, there is no point of origin; the world in which they live is a series of processes. The natural and the cultural are tied to each other within the mulefa, woven as thoroughly as one and the same, reflecting what Haraway suggests when she argues that '[t]he boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical system of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other.'[392] The mulefa are tool, myth, thought and matter – embodied 'naturecultures'.[393]

Just as Haraway's cyborg manifesto enables recognition of those blurred boundaries, Deleuze and Guattari's evocative description of the wasp and the orchid is similarly useful here, as the wasp is part of the orchid's reproductive system and the orchid part of the wasp's, an interconnection of 'heterogeneous elements' that, they suggest, forms a rhizome.[394] This rhizomatic engagement, such that disables the arborescent structures of Western binaries, creates the machine that is wasp and orchid as one, and through this machinic process, they can engage fluidly together in a state of becoming. The mulefa and the trees echo this rhizomatic image, and what occurs is a becoming-tree of the mulefa and a becoming-mulefa of the tree. Mary cannot clearly define them without each other, for their existence is so thoroughly interconnected, but she also acknowledges a 'third element […], geology' (752). When asked if the mulefa made the roads, she responds: 'I think the roads made them, in a way […] I mean they'd never have developed the use of the wheels if there hadn't been plenty of hard flat surfaces to use them on. I think they're lava flows from ancient volcanoes.' (1016) The mulefa and the seedpods cannot be separated from the geography of the land, born of the earth, they maintain their triadic connection to it.

Interwoven with the landscape and their tools, the mulefa's world has been compared with a 'utopian pastoral' existence or a kind of 'paradise', and yet, the mulefa only exemplify what is occurring more subtly across all the other worlds in the multiverse.[395] The attachment these creatures have with the land is obvious, but the connection humans have with their environment is just as integral, even if humans

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[392] Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 164.
[393] Haraway, 'The Companion Species Manifesto', p. 94.
[394] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 9.
[395] Jaques, p. 5 and Teare, p. 330.

themselves are less aware of it. The links between Will and the knife, Lyra and the alethiometer, and the characters and the fabrics of the worlds are examples of the blurring of boundaries that the mulefa so clearly embody. What the mulefa offer is a rhizomatic understanding of subjectivity, recognizing their place in the system which includes not only themselves as single subjects but the trees, the land, the animals, the weather too – they recognise the *intentions* of all life, not just their own.

Though they have the name 'mulefa' for themselves, their understanding of that self is only in relation to each other and the trees and their seed-pods and the roads. Just as their language is not only vocal but physical, and Mary must learn their bodily movements as well as their words, their subjectivity is not only themselves but also their environment. While learning about the importance of the seed-pods to the mulefa, Mary notes that 'they seemed to be saying that the oil was the centre of their thinking and feeling;' (754) – the physical matter is bound to their thoughts – their consciousness is not relegated to their minds, but instead tied to the extended matter, a direct challenge to the Cartesian theory of consciousness as distinct from materiality.

However, the mulefa are not living in a utopian paradise, for the whole multiverse reflects this continuing engagement of matter and thought, as Pullman indicates through Dust. When Colas compares Dust with Spinoza's concept of the substance of all being with no division between thought and matter, he suggests that '[t]he universe of Dust is a self-creating, self-organizing, and self-sufficient one and it [like Spinoza's substance] grounds itself in relations.'[396] The mulefa, I would argue, are only a more clearly defined embodiment of these self-organising relations, highlighting the realities of all existence and the reliance of all life on other life of varying kinds. The mulefa's machinic, rhizomatic subjectivity is not a utopian dream of a return to simpler times but a parable of how humans might see their own lives, as in process, and environmentally dependent, if only they could listen to the intentions of the world around them.

Conclusion

Manual de Landa talks about metal as being 'the most powerful catalyst on the planet. […] a substance capable of accelerating or decelerating a chemical reaction, without

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[396] Colas, p. 49.

itself being changed in the process'[397] And the knife and the alethiometer are both catalysts for great change in the trilogy, the greatest of which occurs only when combined with the forces of Lyra and Will – because as we know by now, there is no mind without matter, no matter without mind. In *HDM* Pullman weaves matter through mind, spirit through flesh, nature through culture, metal through thought, and vice versa, and in so doing fights his own war against the hylomorphic model of dominant Western philosophy to create a multiple, processual, *machinic* life across myriad different worlds. For the worlds themselves are also connected, are themselves machinic. Braidotti observes that

> [t]he ordinary sound of well-oiled machinery spells out the rhythms of eternity – it paraphrases and mimics the notion of living organisms and thus functions as a metaphor for life. In this respect, the "machine", understood in the abstract sense proposed by Deleuze, bears a priviledged bond with the becoming-imperceptible, in the sense of an empirical transcendental yearning for dissolution into and merging with one's environment.[398]

The subject's merging with environment takes place over and over again in the trilogy, until the environment is almost inseparable from the subject and the thought, and thus the metal, the machine and the technologies are endowed with agency and woven into the narrative like fairy-tale characters in their own right.

While not without its complications, Pullman's metal draws on the animistic, anthropomorphic depictions of fairy tale to create instead a catalyst for change, an agentic force that is tied to the world around it – not only the physical world, but also the world of thought and intention, as they weave through one another. From the alethiometer to the subtle knife, the armoured bears and the machinic mulefa, Pullman's trilogy enlivens metal with a thoughtfulness that denies the fixity of the material and instead suggests a radical, 'embrained and embodied' vision of metal as matter with agency, power and life.[399] As Pullman's characters find, metal is not alone in its vibrant materality, but existing in a world full of catalytic connections, relations and bonds, as extension and thought are rhizomatically woven: '[l]ittle by little, Mary came to see the way everything was linked together.' (753) The abilities of metal in the trilogy are based in the European fairy tale tradition, but they transcend it, creating new stories from the old. If metal is a material wonder, Pullman seems to suggest, it is so because

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[397] Manuel De Landa, 'Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Open-Ended Becoming', p. 37.
[398] Braidotti, 'Teratologies', p. 225.
[399] Rosi Braidotti,'Our Times Are Always Out of Joint', p. 177.

life itself is full of wonder. Because of course, as Lyra and Will discover, '[e]verything out there is alive' (280) in this universe 'full of intentions' (280).

'The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit.'[400]

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

'But where may hide what came and loved our clay?'[401]

Robert Browning, 'Dramatis Personae'

EARTH

According to A. S. Byatt, 'pots are at the heart' of her novel *The Children's Book*, which follows the lives of the Wellwood family and their friends across the turn of the twentieth century.[402] Pots and pottery feature throughout the text, as do potters themselves, shaping clay into works of art. But the emphasis on clay and pots is reflective of Byatt's broader interest in the earth itself, in matter and material realities and their relationship with language and how their abilities invite wonder. In the novel, earth is matter that must be touched; felt with fingers; burrowed in and lain upon by bodies (human and nonhuman); moulded at the hands of potters. The construction of pots is mirrored throughout the novel by the construction of fairy tales; one of matter, the other of language; and while both may be shaped by human consciousness, Byatt refuses to give primacy to language and humanity, instead depicting a fluid reality through which matter and thought are inextricably woven.

Earth – as clay, soil, mud, stone and dirt – and fairy tales – are both central to Byatt's glittering portrayal of a world that is made, shaped, constructed by a collective process both linguistically and materially embedded. Though Byatt's work has been keenly aligned with the postmodern canon, in *The Children's Book* Byatt complicates nature/culture, thought/matter divides with a vital materialist vision of life as processual and embodied, challenging the postmodern tendency to see life as constructed through

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[400] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1878), p. 330.
[401] Robert Browning, 'Dramatis Personae' in *The Poems of Robert Browning* (London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), p. 467-519, p. 519.
[402] A. S. Byatt in A. S. Byatt, Tanya Harrod and Glenn Adamson, 'Interview with A.S. Byatt', *The Journal of Modern Craft* , 4, 1 (2011), pp.65-83, p. 72.

discourse and instead offering a vision of nature and matter as collaborative and agentic. Neither denying the power of language, nor calling for a return to either the nostalgic, utopian fantasy of the Edwardians who 'wanted to go back to the earth' or the fictional depictions of earth in myth and fairy tale, the novel depicts the earth and the material through a vital materialist lens that highlights the slippages between cultural and natural constructions.[403] Byatt's depiction of life is materially grounded, depicting reality as co-constructed, and while her characters battle with the dualistic models they have inherited, she reveals her challenge both to the traditional fairy tale tendency to posit fiction as reality and the poststructural and postmodern tendencies to declare reality a mere fiction. Through her enlivened depictions of earth, flesh, pottery and fairy tales, Byatt examines the nature/matter of construction and the construction of nature/matter, dissolving the dualistic models of Western philosophy to reveal an embodied, embedded and discursive philosophy of existence that sees reality and language as crucially interwoven.

Writing Fairy Tales: Postmodern Storytelling?

'Tales are tales, […] endlessly retold and re-forming themselves, like severed worms or branching rivers of water and metal' (143) believes Olive Wellwood, one of the central characters of the novel. While Byatt's author of fairy tales argues for the fluidity of stories to assuage her guilt at using elements of her own children's lives in her published work, she is also voicing an oft-noted trait of the fairy tale tradition: the capacity of the tales to shapeshift and transform. As Philip Pullman once noted, fairy tales are in a 'perpetual state of becoming and alteration', and ever since Carter declared her agenda to 'put new wine into old bottles' that state of becoming and alteration has been even more pronounced.[404] Yet, Olive's remark – though true – is used to suggest that because of their malleability, fairy tales are *just* tales, powerless words which can be altered and told with little consequence. On the contrary, Byatt's novel forcefully

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[403] A. S. Byatt, *The Children's Book* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 391. All subsequent references will be parenthetical.

[404] Philip Pullman, 'The Challenge of Retelling Grimms' Fairy Tales', *The Guardian* (September 2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/21/grimms-fairy-tales-philip-pullman>[Accessed 16 June 2020] and Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 45.

acknowledges, with a nod to the postmodern theories that preceded it, stories are incredibly potent, with the power to shape reality.

Published in 2012, *CB* is critically aware of its lineage in that dominant tradition of postmodern fairy tale writers – deconstructing the stories to refute their 'natural' or 'archetypal' models of behaviour. With her short-story collections *The Djinn and the Nightingale's Eye* (1994) and *Elementals* (1998), which challenge the gendered roles of traditional fairy-tale narratives and offer alternatives for a postmodern generation, Byatt is part of that well-worn tradition of highlighting the tales as constructions and constructing her own in response. Novels such as *Possession* (1990) and *CB* have fairy tales woven through their realist narratives, and the stories are discussed, dissected and parodied by Byatt's articulate and literary-minded characters. Byatt's work has thus been a cause of debate regarding the extent of her postmodernism, particularly in relation to her novels. Though for many critics Byatt's work has aligned itself with postmodernism, for others, such as Philip Tew, Byatt is one of a number of 'novelists [who] are increasingly responding to postmodernism and challenging its self-determining features, and in fact have baulked at its restrictive interpretive code.'[405] But as Byatt herself acknowledged: '[p]eople are always writing essays on how I'm a postmodernist.'[406]

These enduring associations with postmodernism stem, understandably, from the perpetual enmeshing of fantasy and fiction, fairy tale and realism, that defines so much of her work, coupled – perhaps even more importantly – with her desire to pointedly reveal the construction of her narratives. If realism is, as Boccardi suggests, 'the effect of a self-aware process of selection and combination of elements to give the impression of naturalness' then Byatt disrupts her own realism to deny that sense of naturalness by highlighting 'what is unavoidably a text.'[407] Byatt calls this approach 'self-conscious realism' rather than postmodernism, refusing to align herself with the postmodern movement and instead describing any process of deconstruction in her work as serving only to reconstruct more forcefully than before.[408] Interestingly, although her work tackles what has come to characterise the postmodern fairy tale, that is, the reshaping of old narratives to challenge ideological models, Byatt is wary of times at which such

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[405] Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), p.10.
[406] Byatt, 'Interview with A.S. Byatt', p. 80.
[407] Mariadele Boccardi, *A. S. Byatt* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 147.
[408] Byatt, 'Interview with A.S. Byatt', p. 80.

reshaping simply encourages a different ideological agenda, such as 'the more doctrinaire "resolute feminist rewritings" that have "designs on the reader".'[409] Her use of fairy tale with realism instead serves to open up the potentialities of narrative fluidity, rather than offering a vehicle to enforce an alternate ideological model.

Elizabeth Wanning Harries observes that '[t]he interplay of fairy tale and fact, of made-up worlds and fragments of history, has become characteristic of her work', and *The Children's Book* is no exception.[410] Byatt's fictional characters may live in a historical past littered with real-life political, artistic and literary figures and events, but this past is too suffused with the history of fairy tales (European and otherwise), which are woven artfully through the discussions, descriptions and plots; even featuring in full as the work of her children's writer Olive Wellwood. Byatt's use of fairy tale in her novels is often considered to be structural, as Tiffin suggests when she notes that Byatt's 'Realism, or rather the fictional representation of reality, becomes structured in literary or fairy-tale terms, emphasizing Byatt's interest in fairy tale as simply the most structured text'.[411] Harries similarly draws attention to this connection, highlighting that Byatt herself 'has called fairy tales (and classical myths, bible stories, and other legends) a '"structuring" element' in her work.[412] However, Byatt's use of fairy tale is not limited to a structural engagement, as her plots and characters simultaneously echo and subvert the tradition. *CB*, for example, 'is inhabited by the fairy story about the father who wants to marry his daughter', and Byatt notes her desire for 'that idea to run through all the relationships in the book.'[413] Her literary techniques involve the fairy tale in various ways, as she draws both from that metamorphosing narrative tradition and the traditional realist novel of 'the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', which 'has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them'; a creative tension she assimilates in her own work.[414]

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[409] Jane Campbell, *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2004), p. 22. Campbell quotes A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 143.
[410] Elizabeth Wanning Harries, '"Ancient Forms": Myth, Fairy Tale, and Narrative in A. S. Byatt's Fiction' in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 74-97, p. 76.
[411] Jessica Tiffin, 'Ice, Glass, Snow: Fairy Tale as Art and Metafiction in the writing of A. S. Byatt' in *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 20, 1 (2006), pp. 47-66, p. 48-9.
[412] Wanning Harries, 'Ancient Forms', p. 75.
[413] Byatt, 'Interview with A.S. Byatt', p. 73.
[414] Byatt, *On Histories and Stories,* p. 130.

Fictive and Material Realities in Byatt's Fiction

It has long been acknowledged that Byatt's work reveals a fascination with language and its ability to shape and reflect the world, but there is now too an emerging consensus of Byatt as a writer who has an interest in material existence as well as linguistic interpretation. In 1997, Jane L. Campbell argued that: '[t]he short fiction of A.S. Byatt, like all her work, is an exploration of the relation of language and narrative, with their tug toward symbolic representation, and the shapelessness of reality that resists form.'[415] But in *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* of 2004, she notes that 'Byatt constantly reminds herself and her readers of the duty not to lose sight of "things".[416] For Byatt, who has said she 'mistrusts language', 'language can be trusted if it has enough things in it', and the 'duty' Campbell mentions is an apt description of Byatt's perceived role in the creation of her fiction, viewing humans as duty-bound (as the creators of discourse) to use language to try to depict life in all its material and discursive glory; not simply to relegate everything to the construction of language.[417]

In the world of *The Children's Book*, life is materially oriented. Through the clay pots, the bodies (human and nonhuman), the myriad works of art that line the cabinets of the South Kensington Museum and that ever-present natural world – the earth – with its 'juxtaposition of textures in the grass' (57), the novel draws continued and deliberate attention to matter and earth. 'Byatt's instinct for the particularity of fiction, of language, and of the assemblage of its effects' perhaps surprisingly peaks in her material engagement.[418] Through this particularity of objects and specificity of flesh, Byatt's careful use of language reveals the material aspect of her linguistic constructions. Boccardi writes that the novel 'includes both metanarrative and concrete elements' and that if 'its self-referential component is specifically concerned with fairy tales, […] the counterpart to textualisation is the physical craft of pottery.'[419] While pottery is certainly central to Byatt's material 'counterpart to textualisation', it is not alone, as she weaves materiality through all aspects of the lives of her embodied and

[415] Jane L. Campbell, 'Confecting Sugar: Narrative Theory and Practice in A. S. Byatt's Short Stories' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 38, 2 (1997), pp. 105-122, p. 105.
[416] Campbell, *Heliotropic Imagination*, p. 7.
[417] A. S. Byatt, 'German Culture and *The Children's Book*', Senate House (15th October 2015), panel talk.
[418] Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, p.13.
[419] Boccardi, *A. S. Byatt*, p. 144-145.

embedded characters, demonstrating time and time again her belief that 'things run into ideas and out again'.[420]

This focus on 'things' as well as ideas is not specific to *The Children's Book*. Many critics have noted Byatt's fascination with collections as well as her tendency to list objects, or species of flower or creature in her other works. Elizabeth Hicks observes of the short story 'Body Art' that the 'listing of objects exemplifies one of Byatt's recurring themes – that of materiality.'[421] Boccardi also notes the focus on matter, particularly in Byatt's short story collections, which, she suggests,

> abound with proliferating stories, lived stories, remembered and forgotten stories or untold ones, all of which are nevertheless still anchored to the solidity of the world by Byatt's emphasis on its material aspects, particularly objects lovingly listed in taxonomic arrangements.[422]

Her interest in things and the material world has been observed too in her novels, such as *Angels and Insects* – with its Darwinian specificity of species – and in *The Biographer's Tale*, which Campbell notes centres around a protagonist – Phineas Nanson – who 'abandons first poststructuralist theory and then biography in pursuit of "a life full of *things*" (4) and finds what he needs in the world of nature.'[423]

If the characters of *The Children's Book* are already inhabiting a 'life full of *things*', like the fairy tale characters that infuse the narrative, they also inhabit a world where things are full of *life.* Byatt's focus on things is reflective of her engagement with the fairy tale tradition, in which objects are often central to the stories. The literary fairy tale has always, even more so than myth, depicted the ordinary objects of existence, as well, of course, as the not-so-ordinary objects of fantasy, endowing materiality with agency and 'life'. Hicks considers that

> [t]he prominent role of objects in [Byatt's] fiction may be observed in her reference in the short story "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" to "things made with hands […] that live a life different from ours, that live longer than we do, and cross our lives in stories".[424]

These objects – those made my hand and those made my other means – have a life in the fiction and the reality; and as Boccardi suggests, the fact that there are such tangible

> material objects in the story, as evidenced by their minutely described binding and their physical presence in cabinets, on tables and in people's hands, points to

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[420] Byatt, 'German Culture and *The Children's Book*'.

[421] Elizabeth Hicks, 'Public and Private Collections in A. S. Byatt's "The Children's Book"', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 44, 2 (2011), pp. 171-185, p. 172.

[422] Boccardi, p. 144-145.

[423] Campbell, *Heliotropic Imagination*, p. 7.

[424] Hicks, 'Public and Private Collections', p. 172. Hicks quotes A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 277.

the possibility that they may not just be a thickening of the main plot, but rather an independent presence in it.[425]

Like the fairy tales on which she draws, Byatt's literary constructions abound with material life, as 'she shows her readers that there is more than one way to see and narrate the world', she demonstrates that her own way is materially engaged; grounded in the earth.[426]

Solid Earth: Transcending Materiality in Philosophical Thought

The Roman stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger once asked while discussing the phenomenon of earthquakes, "[w]here, indeed, can our fears have limit if the one thing immovably fixed, which upholds all other things in dependence on it, begins to rock, and the earth loses its chief characteristic, stability?'[427] That the earth's chief characteristic is stability is often taken for granted. As the planet, the earth is the home and origin of all life as we know it; as substance, it is the source from which life grows and the fundamental grounding of our existence; as the landscape, it informs our sense of the world around us, creating the space in which we exist. Our perceptions of earth as stable and consistent emerge both from our own enduring existence (humanity is yet to be entirely wiped out by a flood or an earthquake) and from the tangible stability of that remarkable *terra firma* that only occasionally shakes us from our reverie of inherent trust.[428] The earth has been for many what Derrida (writing on Husserl) describes as 'the *exemplary* element (being more naturally objective, more permanent, more solid, more rigid, and so forth, than all the other *elements*'[429].

The story of earth's solidity and permanence underpins the dominant narratives of nature and naturalness as fixed and 'given', and as the primary image of nature and naturalness, earth is both the root and subject of the dualistic depictions of nature. To come from the earth is, traditionally, to be natural, not constructed by humanity but emerging from the organic world. Wood and metal are often tied to those assumptions

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[425] Boccardi, p. 124.
[426] Wanning Harries, p. 91.
[427] Seneca, 'Book VI: Which Treats of Earthquakes', *Seneca, Naturales Quaestiones* <http://naturalesquaestiones.blogspot.com/2009/08/book-vi-tr-john-clarke.html> [Accessed 20th June 2020]
[428] I refer here to the dominant perceptions of earth as stable, recognising that in many parts of the world the earth is not secure.
[429] Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 81.

of fixity because of their origins in the earth. The prevalent stories of earth have held it in a deterministic system of natural laws, attributing its changes, movement and forces to cause and effect; it is 'naturally objective' as Derrida posits, and as the natural object, the earth – like all that comes from it – can embody for humanity all the dualisms that bind the natural: stability and danger, life and death, passivity and turbulence.[430] It can be at once the stasis and inertia of permanence and the tumultuous power of the earthquake Seneca feared; as the embodiment of pre-culture it is the purity of untouched origins, but as the messy earth in which we decay it is the symbol of corruption. Mother and monster, intimately knowable and ultimately unknown, our stories of earth see it take on roles that uphold the hierarchical systems of oppression, roles that are often competing and contradictory, but that perpetuate the dualistic systems that maintain nature's objective otherness.

These stories of earth are almost unavoidably framed by dualistic thought. Macauley observes that the earth has long been imagined as the opposite of the sky, noting that '[t]he stolidity and reliability of the often rock-solid earth lies in contrast with the overarching and ever-fluctuating sky. One is mostly stationary and stable; the other is transitory and largely transparent.'[431] Though the opposition of sky and earth was historically nonhierarchical, the perceived opposition of fluidity and stasis they embody serves as a precursor to the dualisms of mind/body and nature/culture that would later arise in philosophic discourse, with the earth embodying the role of the natural flesh, the constant and eternal matter to which things are done, and the sky representing the fluctuating human mind, the intelligence of thought and the transforming wonders of active culture. The earth, in relation to the sky, is still, solid, an eternal presence, and under these terms may be acted upon, may be the recipient of change rather than the purveyor of it.

Plato's 'Allegory of The Cave' affirms early on the earth and sky's binary relationship and the transcendence from matter that the sky represents. In his allegory of the importance of education, Plato offers 'the sunlight here, the ascent and the view of the upper world [to] the rising of the soul into the world of the mind' as the moral lesson to which men should aspire.[432] That upper world; the sky; the sun; represent the

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[430] Derrida, p. 81.
[431] Macauley, p. 19.
[432] Plato in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, eds. E. H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse, trans. W. H. D. (New York: Rouse, 1956), p. 315-6.

intelligent space which the material world of the cave can never occupy by result of its base materiality, elevating the mind over the material. By recommending transcendence from this lower world of ignorance – the material world of the cave, made of rock and earth – Plato delineates the mindless earth from the thoughtful sky, the matter from the mind, affirming the hierarchy already apparent. For Plato, the material world is the cave full of moving shadows, and life, then, is a struggle to transcend our origins in the material earth for the divinity of the Forms.

To transcend the earth is to accept our origins in it, but to envisage those origins as beneath us, to comprehend our difference from whence we came; from the fixed, earthbound cave to that fluid intelligence of thought; abandoning nature and matter for the cultured mind. The Cartesian cognitive subject elevated humanity over the material object, natural or artificial, and the earth as that object of beginnings is no different. That the earth had once been 'posited as a creative matrix, material base, or generative mother for both human civilization and philosophical speculation' did little to preserve any sense of its agency in the face of such convincing solipsism.[433] And while many religions and myths have depicted humans as born of the earth – 'but a handful of shaped dirt (Adam is Hebrew for red clay) that will return to the dust' – the metaphors the Western world came to live by were those that saw the earth, all it produced and all associated with it as the binary opposite of the rational human mind, elevated from those origins in clay to transcend the inertia, passivity and corruption of earthy matter.[434] Those natural origins came to embody the otherness of nature we must seek to transcend into a life of culture, and thus the separation of earth from mind becomes a separation of nature from culture. Transcendence from the earth is inevitably transcendence from nature, flesh, dirt, blood and material processes in favour of the 'civilised' world of thought. In serving as a rejection of all seemingly 'natural' objectivity, it turns to the conscious, cultural realm of the human subject.

Fairy Tales and the Domestication of Earth

While the literary European fairy tale embraces the natural in its depictions of animals, plants and flowers, as well as its scenic landscapes, many of these tales – particularly

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[433] Macauley, p. 15.
[434] Ibid.

those of the nineteenth century – demonstrate a tendency to depict a domesticated, anthropomorphised, or polished vision of nature over the messy materiality of the earth. Earlier literary tales from Europe, such as those by Giambattista Basile, portrayed bodies in their lived experience and depicted materiality in a way that reflects the folkloric tradition from which the stories emerged. However, overtime fairy tale writers began to portray sanitized versions of the narratives, projecting a controlled and contained vision of existence that was 'cleaner' and avoided overtly sexual or fleshy references. The pressures on fairy tales to serve as morally didactic tales for children in the nineteenth century famously led to the systematic 'cleaning up' of some of the more violent, bloody, sexually explicit or dirt-ridden tales of the previous centuries, reflecting a desire to transcend the flesh and the earth itself and portray nature as clean and controllable.

Writing in the early 1600s, Basile's tales from his collection *Il Pentamerone* offer insight into the literary fairy tradition as it was before that sanitization occurred. Basile relished opportunities to portray his characters – particularly those royal born – with fully-functioning bodies, and his depictions of earth were often messy, featuring dirt and defecation – that stuff of earthy, fleshy matter. Carmela Bernadetta Scala describes Basile's frequent references to his characters' physiological needs, including defecating, urinating and vomiting. [435] While noting that it is unlikely that Basile had read the work of François Rabelais, his contemporary, Scala draws parallels between the work of both authors and the way they embrace the corporeal functions that often invite repulsion. Scala suggests that Basile's narrative choices ground his characters in their human realities, despite the often fantastical plot lines: '[r]epresenting people while they perform the most natural bodily functions is a way to stress their "being human" and mortal'.[436] This depiction of humanity is materially connected to the earth, and Scala observes that:

> defecating […] indicates a moment of "transformation", or better yet, "creation". It is known that excrement is amongst the best fertilizers, and once absorbed by the earth it contributes to the generation of new crops (new life). In literature, and especially in Basile's case, the action of defecating is not an isolated episode, rather it is a pivotal moment that generates new events that will radically transform the life of the protagonist of the tale.[437]

[435] Carmela Bernadetta Scala, *Fairytales – A World Between the Imaginary: Metaphor at Play in* Lo cunto de li cunti *by Giambattista Basile* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 37.
[436] Scala, *Fairytales*, p. 38.
[437] Ibid, p. 38-9.

Rather than advocate a transcendence from matter, Basile's narratives see the earth as transformative and regenerative, crucial not only to the stories themselves but to human existence.

Other stories have also surfaced that echo Basile's material focus, such as an early version of 'Little Red Riding Hood', called 'The Story of the Grandmother' and documented by folklorist Paul Delarue. In this version, the young girl enters the house of her grandmother to find the wolf in bed, who directs her to eat the meat and wine left for her on the counter; but as these are in fact the flesh and blood of her grandmother, the girl becomes an unwitting cannibal. Under the suggestion of the wolf, the girl begins to strip off her clothes before climbing into bed. Just as he is about to eat her, she declares her need to relieve herself and is permitted to go outside briefly, thus enabling her escape. Bacchilega offers an excellent analysis of this text and the stories that followed it, demonstrating how the authors of later collections stripped the narrative of its material presence.

Firstly, she observes, 'Perrault's "Red Riding Hood" bans the flesh and the body from the scene of seduction. No partaking of flesh as vital exchange, no hairy grandmother-wolf, no defecation or urination: the flesh can only be the mark of damnation and the body of impropriety'.[438] But perhaps crucial to this is the removal of the defecation or urination implied by the folkloric narrative. Writing on Rabelais, Bakhtin notes that during the sixteenth century, '[e]xcrement was conceived as an essential element in the life of a body and of the earth in the struggle against death. It was a part of man's vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth.'[439] But by the end of the seventeenth century, when Perrault was publishing his tales, references to excretion or urination in fairy tales were fading, particularly in relation to little girls who were more commonly socialized into behaviours that reflected chastity, passivity and cleanliness.

By the nineteenth century, the domestication of the literary fairy tale saw further distance arise between nature (as the earth and flesh) and culture, most overtly with regard to women, who were overwhelmingly distanced from their own bodies and any manifestation of earth that could soil their purity. Bacchilega observes how the tale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' was altered again in the Grimm collection, noting:

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[438] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 57.

[439] Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Inidnaa University Press, 1984), p. 224.

in the Grimm's version, all bodies must be regulated, contained, or rendered as unfeeling and sterile as the stone-filled belly. The girl never undresses, never lies in bed with the wolf, and never eats anything […] Even the wolf's devouring of the two females is a punishment with no bloodspilling, no crunching of bones, thus allowing the bodies to emerge intact from the wolf's belly precisely because their consumption is not an experience of the flesh.[440]

Similarly, some of the most memorable images of the European fairy tale – such as Snow White's glass coffin– demonstrate the narrative strategies in place to maintain the cleanliness of female characters and separate them from any associations with earthiness. When Little Snow White is found "dead" in the Grimm tale (KHM 53), the dwarves declare that they 'cannot bury her in the black earth' and instead place her in a coffin made of glass.[441] This plot device, as well as enabling the prince to easily find and kiss her, removes any element of decay and distances Snow White from the 'black earth' – which is contrasted with her 'whiteness' – keeping her flesh clean, civilized and pure for her imminent rescue.

The sanitization of fairy tales in this way not only reveals the emergence of cultural trend toward the domesticated and cultural over the natural and bodily, but also emphasizes the hierarchies implicit in such divides. The postmodern fairy tale tradition has in various ways sought to give voice to the denigrated Others of Modernity – including the earth and nature. As Braidotti observes:

> [p]ostmodernity is notoriously the age of proliferating differences. The devalued "others" which constituted the specular complement of the modern subject – woman, the ethnic or racialized other and nature or "earth-others" – return with a vengeance. They are the complement to the modern subject, who constructed himself as much through what he excluded, as through what he included in his sense of agency or subjectivity.[442]

However, the challenge for the contemporary fairy tale is to look once more to how narrations of earth in fairy tale might enable a reconfiguration of existence that embraces nature and materiality not as Others who must be avoided, sanitized or defeated – as in the case of many of the more dangerous depictions of earth in fairy tale –, or even celebrated as 'compliment to the human subject', but as a crucial part of life. Fairy tale fiction might instead look to matter and earth as a series of processes as regenerative and transformative as the words that depict them. Under these terms the earth might be understood less as the 'natural object' of Derrida's depiction, and more

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[440] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p.58.

[441] Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Little Snow White' in *Kinder und Hausmarchen*, trans. D. L. Ashliman <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm053.html> [Accessed 24 June 2020]

[442] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 174.

as one part of a subject that is 'a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole'; an assemblage of bodies.[443]

Constructions: Earthed, Fleshy and Linguistic

Tiffin has suggested that 'Byatt's writing, realist as well as fairy tale, highlights constructedness as inherent to narrative in a way that problematizes reality itself as well as the literature that represents it.'[444] Yet, in *The Children's Book* the constructedness of Byatt's storytelling does not necessarily problematize 'reality itself' as much as the issue of writing it, and far from depict reality as a purely discursive construction, Byatt's constructions are material too; fleshy and embodied. As an author for whom language has great influence, but who 'mistrusts' it alone, Byatt turns to the writing process of Olive – her own fairy tale author – not only to highlight the constructive potential of language, but to demonstrate that such constructions are never free from material engagement:

> [s]he took up her pen and began writing, on a new sheet. Blood flowed from heart to head, and into the happy fingertips, bypassing the greedy inner sleeper. She would begin with the baby. Sometimes the baby in the tale was a royal prince, and sometimes a sturdy son of a miner. Today, she settled for the prince. (143)

Olive – a contemporary Mother Goose figure, telling stories to wide acclaim – engages with the history of fairy tales in her writing, acknowledging the repetition of tropes and motifs just as Byatt might. Her engagement is constructive, but the construction is physical as well as mental. As postmodern fairy tale fiction, *The Children's Book* acknowledges fairy tale traditions whilst affirming the importance of language and the power of stories and myths in the world. But the novel also offers a material input to such linguistic constructions. The blood flowing and the 'happy fingertips' reflect a corporeal engagement with the act of writing, as words and blood flow through Olive and onto the page, reflecting Byatt's own belief that 'you write with the whole of your body. We think with the whole of our body. We have privileged the eye excessively. And I think I invent people, increasingly, with the whole of my body. I sit there and I think their fingers with my fingers.'[445]

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[443] Derrida, p. 81 and Bradotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 82.
[444] Tiffin, p. 48.
[445] Byatt, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', p. 78.

Byatt's depictions of corporeality in the novel are crucial to any discussion of earth. More so than any other element or material, earth has been steeped in associations with flesh. The desire to distance humanity from the earth was a desire to delineate the mind from earth. Born of the earth and destined to return to it – as dust to dust, ashes to ashes – the material body is that malleable, passive stuff of nature, determined by laws from which the mind is free, but these associations of earth and flesh are particularly prevalent to the flesh of the female. Though the trope of Mother Earth has dwindled somewhat in the contemporary Western consciousness, the myth has a long and enduring legacy that connects women to the earth. As the fertile land, able to birth the plants, grain, fruit, vegetables and trees that maintain the ecosystem and nourish the world, earth's association with birth, women and motherhood has been unavoidable, appearing in myths across the world. Despite a handful of male exceptions, the image of mother bringing forth life from the earth appears in the wealth of female goddesses who were made responsible for the earth's fertility and nurturing capabilities, from the earth goddess of ancient Greece, Demeter, to the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis, to Gaia, an enduring image of the 'personification of the physical earth'.[446] For the Greeks, the landscape was the form of Gaia made manifest; '[t]he mountains were her breasts, the caves her womb, the earth's waters her female fluids', so inseparable was she from the earth.[447]

In *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* Jane Campbell observes Byatt's mistrust of mother earth narratives which appear to elevate the position of femininity but instead maintain dualistic hierarchies. She notes that Byatt

> rejects simple polarizations, such as reason/feeling, which have been used to privilege women but which in fact do them a disservice; she thinks that feminists who follow "earth religions of the Mother" ("True Stories" 111) are misguided. In a similar vein, she is critical of the gnostic belief held by Mondrian, that "the inner, the spiritual, element in man is male, and is enclosed in the solid, the material, which is female"; such ideas, she says, are "silly" ("Fashion for Squares" 17).[448]

Fairy tales have too tied women to the earth with womb-like caverns full of bloody corpses and folktales such as the Inuit tale 'Kakwushuk' in which women find their children by digging in the earth. But the implication of the earth/woman's creativity in

[446] Tamra Andrews, *Legends of the Earth, Sea and Sky: An Encyclopedia of Nature Myths* (California and Colorado: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1998), p. 91.
[447] Ibid.
[448] Campbell, *Heliotropic Imagination*, p. 16.

bringing forth life has little value for Byatt if such creative capacities are solely material.

In a nod to those stories that tie women to the earth, Olive says 'that children connected you to the earth, and therefore weighed you down, a little. She felt, she said, like a farmyard hen, clucking' (183). But with the aside that follows: '[t]hough it was Violet, at a little distance, who was wiping Florian's sandy face after a fall, and sponging Robin where he had dirtied his pants' (183) Byatt highlights the inadequacies of such myths. Olive, more so than many of the other mothers in the novel, is hardly weighed down (or, as the implication might be, back) by her children. Motherhood is central to the novel, but through the complicated portrayals of mothers, Byatt refuses t§1   xs o glorify the state, and ridicules Olive's attempts to play the role of Mother Earth. Olive is a constructor of life and a constructor of words, and the two are interwoven, as her stories are written for and inspired by her own children, generating and igniting the creative sparks of thought through bodily experience.

Throughout the text Byatt plays with the lines between thought and matter, challenging notions of deterministic flesh and questioning the philosophical predilection that language alone makes the world and the mind is the sole constructor. Though she will not deny the postmodern emphasis on language and its power, noting that 'words have their own life' (102) and 'once it was *said* it was in the world' (314), she also complicates this narrative, creating a dialogue between language and matter that suggests that life is not purely mindful. When considering her recently discovered pregnancy, Olive ponders:

> she knew about amniotic fluid – the unborn creature did not *really* float in blood – but blood went to its, her blood, down a livid rope that could give life, or could strangle. These things were not spoken of or written about. They were therefore more real, and more unreal, intensely, simultaneously. (142)

Olive's awareness of the corporeal processes of birth suggests not just the creative ability of the body, but a terminative ability, a choice made by the flesh. The 'livid rope' is alive, with intentions of its own, as Byatt plays on the dual meaning of livid as a physical appearance and a violent emotion. The reality that Olive grapples with is reflective of the tensions in the mind/body split and the sense of the physical being neither more real nor less real. The bodily processes are not brought to life by her understanding of them or her ability to speak of them, they are always occurring in reality. Olive's mind is *embodied*; her body *embrained*.

In his phenomenological reimagining of the human subject, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that '[t]he perceiving mind is an incarnated mind', thus denying the Cartesian elevation of thought over the corporeal.[449] For Merleau-Ponty, as Grosz outlines, '[t]he body is able to move, to initiate and undertake actions, because the body schema is a series, or rather a field, of possible actions, plans for action, maps of possible movements the body "knows" how to perform.'[450] The actions, or agency, of the material body are key to the dissolution of the dualistic vision of matter and thought in favour of a vitalist perspective on subjectivity. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and his assertion that 'an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends…to the whole sensible world', can be seen in Byatt's frequent engagement with the senses, with the perceptive abilities and activities of her character's bodies. [451] Her mindful bodies are an attempt to recalibrate subjectivity to encompass matter and mind, and when Olive writes it is with blood and flesh; her thoughts and body inextricable.

Byatt is, crucially, not afraid to write her female characters into their bodies. Alaimo and Hekman have noted that:

> [e]ven though many social constructionist theories grant the existence of material reality, that reality is often posited as a realm entirely separate from that of language, discourse, and culture. This presumption of separation has meant, in practice, that feminist theory and cultural studies have focused almost entirely on the textual, linguistic, and discursive.[452]

This is true too of much postmodern feminist fairy-tale literature, which played with language and fantasy to demonstrate how stories have shaped our idea of naturalness. *The Children's Book* counters this narrative. Although Olive suggests that 'children connected you to the earth, and therefore weighed you down, a little' (183) applying weight to motherhood, later in the novel that weight is applied to language: 'I prefer pots. They don't have to be weighed down with meaning. They are what they are, earth and chemistry' (266). Byatt disrupts the depiction of bodies and matter as heavy and earthbound, confusing the image with pots that are lighter and freer than language.

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[449] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *A Prospectus of his Work*', Trans. Arlene B. Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 3-11, p.3.

[450] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 95.

[451] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 230.

[452] Alaimo and Hekman, p. 3.

Byatt's bodies (female and male) are woven through thought as she muddies the waters of classical dualistic thought and the later feminist 'flight' from the flesh.[453] As Ladelle McWhorter has argued, '[b]odies descended from the bodies of Descartes and Locke are not political agents or well-springs of political strength; they are simply sites of domination, much like geographical territory or natural resources.'[454] In *The Children's Book* bodies are not sites of domination but active, agentic processes that feel and think and desire: '[l]ittle currents of anonymous desire ran all over her, and contradicted her mind.' (493) Julian Gitzen suggests a tendency for Byatt's characters to

> remain tirelessly alive to both the bond and the gap between words and their referents and between art and its subject. Her fiction persistently dramatises this distinction by making it either a significant feature of the narrative or the very focus of action. [455]

Yet, Byatt's depiction of these gaps and bonds between what is and what is said or known serve only to highlight the complexities of the connection. When Olive's eldest daughter Dorothy wonders about choosing the life of a surgeon over having children and asks, 'is knowing better than doing?' (401), she not only comments on the double standard for women of her era but also highlights the separation of thought from action that seems to dominate society despite the 'knowing' and the 'doing' seeming to be so intricately connected.

Though the association between earth and women has been used to affirm biological essentialism and dualistic hierarchies, the bodies of the women in *The Children's Book* are corporeally engaged and even earthy without suggesting determinism. The young Elsie Warren 'had reached an age where every surface of her skin was taut with the need to be touched and used' (277), while the potter Benedict Fludd realises his profession through a relationship with a prostitute: 'fingers in clay running with water, fingers puddling in divine female flesh' (114). Flesh is as alive as thought here: 'Florence's muscles conducted their own purposeful, involuntary dance' (539). Byatt's elevation of the earth and bodily matter to be intelligent, desiring and active dissolves the notion of essentialism as it dissolves the dualisms themselves. As Alaimo observes,

> If nature is no longer a repository of stasis and essentialism, no longer the mirror image of culture, then the female body need not be misogyny's best resource. Disrupting the opposition between nature and culture opens up spaces for

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[453] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 13.
[454] Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies & Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 143.
[455] Julian Gitzen, 'A. S. Byatt's Self-Mirroring Art' in *Critique*, 36, 2 (1995), pp. 83-95, p. 84.

feminisms that neither totally affirm nor totally deny difference. Feminism can instead cobble together a myriad of adulterated alternatives that neither seek an untainted, utterly female space outside of culture nor cast off bodies, matter, and nature as that which is forever debased.[456]

By reimagining subjectivity outside the binaries of mind and matter, women and nature need not be relegated to the status of passivity. Olive is in touch with her body (as are the other female characters in the novel) as a mother, a sexual being, but also as a thinking, living person with a subjectivity that is in process.

In 'A Thousand Tiny Sexes', Grosz calls for an alliance between feminism and Deleuzian rhizomatics to challenge the persistence of dualistic subjectivity and the resulting essentialism or denial of the body that endures in postmodern and poststructual feminism. She notes that in Deleuze and Guattari's work:

> [f]ollowing Spinoza, the body is regarded neither as a locus for a conscious subject nor as an organically determined object; instead, like the book itself, the body is analyzed and assessed more in terms of what it can do, the things it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations it undergoes, the machinic connections it forms with other bodies, what it can link with, and how it can proliferate its capacities.[457]

Matter, under these terms, bodily or not, is given agency and denied its previous status of passivity; it is creative and fluid. Women are freed from the constraints of biological essentialism, without being distanced from the corporeal and the earth. Instead, Byatt's female bodies are constantly doing and feeling, performing, transforming, connecting with other bodies, and they are able to do so because they are not tied to a passive, inert, 'natural' matter, but fluidly and rhizomatically engaging; experiencing the world as earth, flesh and language, as Byatt's own narrative construction relays the 'sense of female identity […] expressed […] through the bodies, minds, and voices of her characters.'[458]

'A real pot': Earthy Constructions of Vital Life

That Byatt declares pots to be 'at the heart' of *The Children's Book* – a novel ostensibly about upper-middle class Edwardian culture – reveals the centrality of earth, materiality

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[456] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 10.

[457] Elizabeth Grosz, 'A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics' in *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Gary Genosko (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1440-1463, p. 1447.

[458] Campbell, *Heliotropic Imagination*, p. 21.

and the construction of art to her literary creation.[459] Just as the formation of stories is corporeally grounded in *The Children's Book*, so too is the construction of pots, which are shaped and moulded not only by the potter's minds, but their thoughtful hands. Like Olive, the potters Benedict Fludd and Philip Warren are connected to the material by their profession – that is, '[t]o work with the stuff of the earth itself' (77) – and freely attribute thought to their bodies, valuing the feel and sense of an object over the description of it. In her essay on the work of potter Edmund de Waal, Byatt writes, '[p]ots are tactile before they are visual – they are made by fingers and need to be touched.'[460] For Philip Warren, the apprentice potter in the novel, life is tactile – 'he felt better the moment he had his hands on solid things' (24) – and as his vocabulary is limited, Philip feels more often than thinks, experiencing 'a feeling, again not in words' (38). Philip *thinks* with his senses; when Imogen Fludd teaches him to read, '[h]e thought with the tips of his potter's fingers about the contours of her breasts, which were round and full.' (132) And his desire to 'make *something*. A real pot' (63) is a desire to express himself materially, when language is inadequate. The pot is 'real' while words are slippery, highlighting Byatt's own 'mistrust' of language alone.

Pots act within the novel as metaphors for creativity, art and construction more broadly but they also act as things in themselves. Byatt has said that '[g]lass is both a thing and a metaphor in [her] work' (72) and this is true too of clay and pots. The pots, created with thinking fingers, must be felt as well as seen. Dorothy holds one of the pots Philip shows her, and immediately understands its importance as a physical object:

> Dorothy stood with the pot in her hands, which held the cool light weight of the shell. The moment it was between her fingers, she felt it three-dimensional. It was a completely different thing if you measured it with your skin instead of your eyes. Its weight – and the empty air inside it – were part of it. (512)

The idea of measuring with a sense of touch gives agency to the body, suggesting a physical reality that denies the rationality of classical mathematical measurement in favor of a more instinctive, corporeal measurement. Byatt engages frequently with such bodily sense perceptions in her characters' understandings of the world.

Like skin, clay is also given agency; brought to life, and is thus involved in its own construction. As the potters shape the clay with their knowing fingers, the clay shapes itself: '[t]he clay was wet and clammy and dead, and yet it had a motion of its

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[459] Byatt, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', p. 72.

[460] A. S Byatt, 'The nothing that is' in *Edmund de Waal*, ed. Edmund de Waal (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2014), pp. 155-165, p. 159.

own, a response, a kind of life.' (188) The response of the clay is indicative of a vital materialist vision of earth – moulded and yet simultaneously moulding itself – as well as the fairy tale animation of inanimate objects. Rather than passive matter in the hands of thinking minds, Byatt's clay is thinking matter in the minds of thinking hands. In fact, the fingers and the clay are almost inseparable at times, as the flesh and the wet earth simultaneously create:

> [b]rown clay ran over his fingers as though they were becoming clay, smooth and homogeneous, or as though they were clay becoming flesh, with living knuckles and pads. The clay under his hands rose and grew into a thin cylindrical wall, higher and higher, as though it had its own will. (128)

Even when fired, the external artwork on the pots reflects the activity of the clay itself; this is no inert natural world, no dead earth made living, but a vibrant depiction of life and earth and art as one: '[t]hese are turbulent pots. Seething pots. Storms in teacups and vases. Creatures running through everything like maggots in cheese. Stately vessels with storms raging on them.'" (512) Far from moulding dead matter, potters (as the potter Benedict Fludd teaches his protégé Philip) must learn 'to recognize the form to which the clay aspired' (129), as Byatt gives clay –and earth itself – intentions that are not gentle and sedate, but alive with vitality and consciousness.

This sense of the clay having its own aspirations is reflective of the modernist view of matter in art around the time of the novel's action. Art theorist Barbara Bolt observes that:

> [w]hilst each artistic form has a unique relation to the matter of things, the humanist view of relationship of matter to form was codified in modernism's notion "truth to materials". In 1911, the modernist visual art critic Roger Fry claimed that in order to get at material beauty it is "necessary to respect the life and quality of the material itself" (Fry quoted in Hiller 2003: 68-69). The emphasis on "truth to materials" in modernist discourse reached its apotheosis in Clement Greenberg's formalism and his claim that the character of an art form – painting, for example – should be determined by its material medium.[461]

These claims, Bolt notes, though seeming to herald a materialist engagement with matter, have been challenged by critics such as Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock, who suggested that modernist formalism of this kind 'championed notions of the artist's genius, originality and self-expression and the Kantian notion of taste' and failed to account for the social aspects to the creation of art.[462] However, those social aspects were later more than accounted for, Bolt suggests, in the social constructivist movement

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[461] Bolt, 'Introduction' in *Carnal Knowledge*, p. 4.
[462] Bolt, p. 4. Bolt quotes

that swept not only through literature and theory (as we have seen) but also the art world: '[w]here formerly art had been understood in terms of art history and aesthetics and was vested with the power to re-present reality, it now became framed (along with a multitude of other social and cultural activities) as a "cultural production".'[463]

According to Bolt, social constructivism championed the view that 'art is constructed in and through language', suggesting that 'there is nothing outside of discourse and language is its vehicle', but for Byatt the truth is more complex, as she infuses *The Children's Book* with the dialogues of modernism and a contemporary evaluation of materiality.[464] That Benedict Fludd and Philip feel for the clay's aspirations in their creation of art aligns more closely to a new materialist and even, as Bolt describes, a Heideggarian understanding of the relationship of form and matter, in which 'art is a co-collaboration, not a form-matter synthesis and matter as much as the human has responsibility for the emergence of art', than a modernist formalism.[465] When Philip attempts to throw a pot and fails, the two potters laugh, with Fludd attempting to reassure Philip that 'many master craftsmen never threw a pot, but confined themselves to the decoration.' (129) But Philip rejects the idea of claiming mastery of something without getting a fuller, material sense of it: 'Philip said, how can they not want to know the feel of the clay', suggesting a desire to sense and touch the earth as collaborative matter. If, as Bolt suggests, 'Heidegger's rethinking of createdness and his re-interpretation of causality shifts our understanding from the "form-matter" thesis to a notion of care and indebtedness between co-responsible elements', Philip's question reflects this care and indebtedness he feels to the material elements of his creative practice – *how* can they not want to know the feel of the clay?[466] While for those other artists, the clay is secondary to their own creative abilities, for Philip, the clay is intimately tied up in his collaborative vision of creation, as Byatt challenges those constructivist assumptions that art is constructed entirely 'in and through language.'[467]

Byatt's rejection of the social constructivist approach to the creation of art is thus coupled with a reflection of those criticisms waged at modernist formalism. Though Benedict Fludd is declared a 'genius' (110, 341, 76 and 155) on many

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[463] Ibid.
[464] Ibid.
[465] Ibid, p.6.
[466] Ibid.
[467] Ibid, p. 4.

occasions throughout the novel, reflecting the elevation of artistic genius and Kantian 'taste', his genius is tainted by his abuse of his daughters, and, importantly, his work is said (with admiration) to turn the activity of life into 'a chilly, still world' (341). On the other hand, the young potter Philip – free of worrying sexual or psychological predilections – reflects a move away from such veneration of the artist as man, instead suggesting Byatt's own attempt to enable the materialism of the modernist era to morph into a more fluid interaction between matter, art and construction. In contrast to Fludd's frozen artistic realities, when Philip tells Dorothy that '[p]ots are still,' (511) she replies: '[n]othing keeps still on your pots' (511), hinting at the life that infuses his work and remains present despite its apparent solidity. Grosz describes Deleuze's depiction of art as

> the becoming-sensation of materiality, the transformation of matter into sensation, the becoming-more of the artistic subjects and objects that is bound up with the subject's cross-fertilization with the art object. Art is that which brings sensations into being when before it there are only subjects, objects, and the relations of immersion that bind the one to the other. Art allows the difference, the incommensurability of subject and object to be celebrated, opened up, elaborated.[468]

Philip's relationship to materiality opens up such a dialogue over subject and object relations, as his body 'cross-fertilizes' with the clay through his own sensate responses to reality, and belonging to the generation in the novel to which we are most encouraged to identify, his attitude offers a celebration of subject/object relations in which life might be 'opened up' and 'elaborated' through touch, thought, flesh, matter and mind.

The conflation of earth and clay with bodies and thoughts throughout the novel enables slippages between concepts that are usually considered distinct. By endowing earthly matter with aspirations and desires, Byatt calls to mind Bennett's conception of 'thing-power', which seeks to give language to the vast spectrum of material experience and activity that occurs with each moment of existence.[469] Bennett describes 'thing-power' as a 'tale' or 'story' that 'will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other.'[470] In *The Children's Book*, the clay is physically slippery – wet and malleable – and figuratively slippery, demonstrating the potential for boundaries to be blurred between

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[468] Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 75.
[469] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 2, Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 138 and Latour, p. 237.
[470] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 4.

objects and ourselves. The shaping of the earth into pots becomes a fluid interchange; a creative pursuit born of the natural and the cultural interwoven.

Like the fairy tales that Olive writes, the novel makes clear that pots are not harmless; they have an effect on the world, as does any art form; they may be constructed but they also construct. The liveliness of the pots, particularly in reference to their depiction of living creatures references the work of real potters, such as Palissy, known for making his casts from live creatures. Of Palissy, Fludd says, '[h]e loved the earth, […] He worked with the earth and he loved it. He got his hands dirty, and improved his mind.' (131) He is said to have 'loved the *earth*' (131) and yet his relationship with the earth is based on mastery, dirtying his hands for the sake of his mind's creative pursuits. Byatt's condemnation of these acts of creation are subtly evident in Olive's response when she is told of such works in which 'the ceramic creatures are built round real creatures – real toads, eels, beetles' (11), to which she replies, '[d]ead, I do hope' (11) invoking unpleasant visions of live creatures suffocating under the clay, wriggling against their death-provoking coffins. To use life to make art in such a way, with little consideration for the impact of such creations, Byatt seems to warn, is irresponsible and dangerous; a danger reflected in the seething pots that are 'still warm, about blood heat. […] The creatures were little demons, with nasty, snarling expressions, full of life' (105). Ossified in a fantasy of human mastery, the creatures snarl, demon-like, depictions of fairy-tale evil, echoing Byatt's rejection of the right of humans to construct from life without respect for the life in itself.

The depiction of reality in art – or, in other words, the construction of the nonhuman by the human – can have real-world effects, as the potency of language in the novel is mirrored in the creation of pottery. Nowhere is the shaping of reality into an artistic creation more dangerously embodied than in the private work of Benedict Fludd – the potter whose daughters and wife appear to be 'under a spell' (111) – which includes perverse pottery made in the likenesses of his own growing daughters, naked and exposed:

> [t]he pots were obscene chimeras, half-vessels, half human. They had a purity and clarity of line, and were contorted into every shape of human sexual display and congress. Slender girls clutched and displayed vase-like, intricate modellings of their own lower lips and canals. They lay on their backs, thrusting their pelvis up to be viewed. (279)

Fludd's detailed constructions of his daughters' bodies are an explicit example of material abuse provoking psychological effects. The creation of the pornographic

images acts as the equivalent of Palissy's life casting; Fludd's daughters (Pomona and Imogen) struggle to live when a part of them been violently cast in clay, themselves half-human like the 'chimeras' in the locked room.

Byatt has said that 'the novel is inhabited by the fairy story about the father who wants to marry his daughter' (73) but Fludd is too a Bluebeard figure; a man with terrible secrets hidden behind a locked door. His construction of the girl's bodies into clay solidifies and intensifies his sexual fantasies as it turns the girls themselves to inert matter. Like the animals cast on the side of the pots who become snarling demons, Pomona and Imogen are irrevocably altered by their experience, cast in fairy-tale roles that reflect their slippery grip on reality. Pomona and Imogen embody such a sense of 'lifelessness and inhibition' (111) that '[i]t is as though they have a sleeping sickness or are under a spell' (111). Their beast-like Bluebeard father, at whose hands the girls were made to suffer years of abuse, has created his own fairy tale princesses – 'Imogen was the Sleeping Beauty', while 'Pomona was all the Cinderella daughters in the hearths, woebegone and unregarded' (133). The construction of feminine sexuality is at play here, as Byatt explores the perversions that come from such powers of creation, but more than that, she considers the responsibility of construction. When pots and the stories are constructed from life – from the physical and the mental, the earth and the words that make the world – they must be responsibly constructed, collectively created, so that nothing is lost.

Utopian Fantasies of Earth and Nature/Culture Divisions

Byatt writes earth into *The Children's Book* not only as sculpted clay, but as the vast, sprawling landscapes that permeate the novel and the ways in which her characters respond to her visceral evocations of nature. It has been observed that 'the conflict between body and mind runs all the way through Byatt's work' but the novel also reveals a challenge to the dichotomy of nature and culture.[471] While Byatt's depictions of writing fairy stories and making pots from clay conveys her desire to blur the boundaries that sunder mind from body, thought from matter, her portrayal of her characters' interactions with the land suggests an attempt to challenge nature/culture

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[471] Katharina Uhsadel, 'The Continuity of Victorian Traces: A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*' in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17, 1 (2012), pp. 71-79, p. 75.

binaries through interconnection. With the backdrop of the Edwardian nostalgia for an untainted earth, Byatt offers instead a quieter, more materially-driven experience of the land that denies the fantasy of such sentimentality. By sensing, feeling and touching the earth, Byatt's characters connect with their environment as thinking, feeling minds and bodies who are in and of the earth. Despite her emphasis on the fairy tale, Byatt's agentic depictions of nature and earth deny the fantastic and consolatory myths of the natural in favour of a more embedded and embodied relationship with the natural world as not a magical fantasy but a tangible reality constructed by both human and nonhuman agencies.

The Edwardians, Byatt's narrator declares, 'looked back […] They wanted to go back to the earth' (391), but while they 'loved the earth, […] they loved it for something irretrievably lost, as well as for its smells and scents and filth and bounce and clog and crumble.' (392) Nature, Byatt acknowledges, is rarely without its narratives. At the start of the novel, when the Wellwoods decorate their garden for their annual Midsummer party, the children hang lanterns that swing from branches, decorating (and contrasting with) the 'unkempt, raggedy' orchard 'with moss and lichens on the twisted branches of old fruit trees, and brambles snaking in from the wild and in places smothering everything' (37). Dorothy tells Philip, the young boy discovered living in the basement of the South Kensington Museum, of their tree-houses, and while leading them through the gardens tells him of the 'magic trees from the story. The golden apple and the silver pear. You can only see the gold and silver in certain lights, you have to believe' (37). Philip, an outsider to the Wellwoods' familial fascination with fantasy, looks at the trees for the 'shapes of the snarling of their branches' (37), wishing he had a pencil with which to draw them. For the Wellwood parents and their children, the landscape of the Kentish Wealds in which they live is a place of magic, a romanticized image with a Midsummer-Night's-Dream-like sheen.

The sense of a shared fantasy of earth is prevalent throughout the novel, as seen through the nostalgic eyes of the Edwardians. Reminiscent of the Romanticized depictions of nature as a dynamic whole, the desire to return to a pre-cultural Eden – 'to the running rivers and full fields and cottage gardens and twining honeysuckle of Morris's Nowhere' (391) – is one born of a rejection to the industrialization of society, Byatt's narrator suggests, acknowledging the cultural yearning in England and other parts of Europe for 'The Golden Age', 'when no humans interfered with anything' (392). As Peter Broks observes:

> [t]he Edwardian "crisis" is apparent in the declining faith in Progress and the rising fear of denigration, in the retreat from technology and the return to nature. The growth in "sensibilities" towards nature had a long history, but by the early twentieth century the idealization of the countryside became firmly established in an increasingly urban society. Nature was in demand. Descriptions and interpretations of it may have differed, but by common consent it was to be pursued, observed, and protected.[472]

The characters in *CB* in many ways reflect this cultural tendency, throwing sumptuous parties in their country gardens, setting out to explore the great outdoors. Like the Germans of the era who 'went back to the earth […] hiking and singing up mountains into the wood. They were *wandervogel*, going back to Nature (an ambivalent goddess) […] They worshipped the Sun and the earth mothers who had preceded patriarchy' (393), the young generation of *CB* come of age and set out to camp together on the land, bathing naked and cooking by the fire, finding themselves awash with those 'innocent pleasures' (414) of the earth. Kate Rigby identifies that

> [a]t the heart of the romantic reanimation of nature lies the shift from a mechanistic to an organismic model of the natural world. In place of Descartes' clock, the romantics called on earlier imagery – including that of the goddess Natura, or Mother Earth – to convey their new understanding of nature as a dynamic, living, self-transforming whole.[473]

These ideas of nature experience a resurgence in the novel, as the characters grapple with the desire to reconnect with nature in the midst of such huge technological and industrial advances.

These advances are best encapsulated by the Grande Exposition Universelle in Paris at the turn of the 20th century, which many of the characters attend. The style of the event is that of Art Nouveau, and Byatt's narrator comments on the way the artistic movement encapsulates the cultural paradoxes of the time:

> the New Art, was paradoxically backward-looking, […] But it was radically new also, in its use of spinning, coiling, insinuating lines derived from natural forms, its rendering in new metal or tree-shapes newly observed, its abandonment of the solid worth of gold and diamonds for the aesthetic delights of non-precious metals and semi-precious stones, mother-of-pearl, grained wood, amethyst, coral, moonstone. It was an art at once of frozen stillness, and images of rapid movement. It was an art of shadows and glitter that understood the new force that transfigured both the exhibition and the century to come. Electricity. (246-7)

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[472] Peter Broks, 'Science, the Press and Empire: "Pearson's" Publications, 1890-1914' in *Imperialism and the Natural World*, ed. John MacDonald MacKenzie (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 141-163, p. 159.

[473] Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 24.

The 'series of paradoxes' (245) that the Exhibition encompasses is reflective of the confusion over the nature/culture binaries in place and how to exist within that dualistic system.

The inclusion of the Paris Exhibition in the novel is, perhaps surprisingly, an echo of a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen called 'The Wood Nymph', which centres around a wood nymph who lives in a tree in the countryside just outside Paris and who longs to attend that year's exhibition. Paris, in this case, is the manifestation of what the wood nymph sees as the pinnacle of human culture, with its annual Exposition and she eventually sacrifices her life for a day as a human in that glistening world of culture. The split between the city and the countryside in 'The Wood Nymph' comes to represent a division between Andersen's conception of the Natural – that which was created by God – and the Cultural – that which was constructed by humans, solidifying the nature/culture dualism that posited organicism as the opposite of cultural and technological progress.

The construction of the Paris Exposition is at the forefront of the tale, and though a symbol of cultural extravagance, Andersen's imagery fuses such excess with images of nature. The Exposition is described as a 'fairy-tale flower, […] a colourful lotus plant spreading its green leaves out across the sand like velvet carpets that burst forth in early spring', thus weaving images of culture with those of the natural world; the velvet carpets are luxuries of human creation but they 'burst forth' like the 'green leaves' of the 'colourful lotus plant'.[474] The exposition grows and moves seemingly of its own accord, animalistic and animate; it 'unfurls', 'rising up' like 'Aladdin's palace' – a magical growth –, while crowds of people 'swell' in 'currents' and the palace 'hums and buzzes'.[475] It appears to spring up organically from the ground before the wood nymph's very eyes: '[w]hat changes! What speed! The buildings seemed to shoot up from the earth, more and more of them, closer and closer together. The chimneys rose up like flowerpots'.[476] The Exposition appears natural, but is only cleverly designed artifice, depicted as exciting but excessive and false: 'stalactite grottos, artificially constructed, surrounded by pools of both fresh- and saltwater'.[477] This culturally constructed experience is only an image of nature, a feat of mimicry, and to give up a

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[474] Andersen, *Fairy Tales*, p. 384-385.
[475] Ibid, p. 385.
[476] Andersen, p. 388.
[477] Ibid, p. 385-386.

life in the countryside for this false life of culture is to be tricked by the falsity,

Andersen implies.

Byatt's depiction of the Paris Exhibition in *CB* is remarkably similar to

Andersen's own mix of natural and cultural imagery:

> [w]onderful illuminated portals, *curving like the vegetation* of an artificial paradise, led down to the flashing electric serpent of the new Metro. The whole exhibition was encircled by a moving pavement where citizens could travel at three different speeds, squealing with amazement, clutching each other as they moved from strip to strip. There was incandescent writing in magazines about the "fairy electricity". (my italics, 247-8)

The artificiality of 'paradise' as it is envisioned by the Exhibition's organisers reflects

the excess and artifice implied by Andersen, and yet, in Byatt's tale 'The Palace of

Electricity' is 'set about with warnings. *Grand Danger de Mort*' (248), her depiction of

the artifice of naturalness in the exhibition serves less to highlight the dangers of

culture, as Andersen hints with his heroine's disintegration, and more to demonstrate

the undeniable entanglements of the natural and the cultural in a world changing so

rapidly.

Despite the similarities, in 'The Wood Nymph' Andersen ultimately glorifies the

natural over the cultural, while in *CB* Byatt's depiction of nature and culture is more

complex, as she refuses to posit the natural in opposition to cultural life, even in aid of

venerating nature. Just as Braidotti reveals a scepticism for the contemporary ecological

movements such as those of 'deep' ecologists Arne Naess and James Lovelock, whose

'geo-centred theories [such as the "Gaia" hypothesis] […] propose a return to holism

and to the notion of the whole earth as a single, sacred organism', Byatt acknowledges

those nostalgic desires to return to 'Nature', but cannot posit them a solution to the

problems that separate humanity from the natural world.[478] As Braidotti suggests,

> [w]hat is problematic about [the holistic approach to earth] is less the holistic part than the fact that it is based on a social constructivist dualistic method. This means that it opposes the earth to industrialization, nature to culture, the environment to society and comes down firmly on the side of the natural order.[479]

Thus, she adds, such an opposition 'paradoxically reinstates the very categorical divide

between the natural and the manufactured which it is attempting to overcome.'[480] Rather

that uphold the dualistic structures that keep nature and culture segregated, Byatt

acknowledges the impulse to elevate the natural over the artificial in the minds of the

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[478] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 84.
[479] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 84-5.
[480] Ibid, p. 85.

Edwardians, but hints at its futility, noting that these images of untainted nature are always mediated through nostalgic fictions: '[p]astoral was always at another time, in another place. Even the green pool and the long walk, over the Downs, would not become pastoral until they were past.' (412) Constructions of a utopian nature, she suggests, are unsustainable outside the imagination, and attempts to find such venerated glory in nature leaves the characters feeling 'silly and humiliated' (415), sick with food poisoning from undercooked sausages; the fantasy of nature cannot sustain itself.

Living Landscapes: Vital Materialist Stories of Earth

Where fantasies of earth fail, Byatt offers instead a more subtle, visceral engagement with nature and the land as animate and material that sees her characters actively engage with the materiality around them, not simply the romanticised image of it. The weather, the landscape and the material world are tied to sensation in her prose, they must be touched, felt and sensed, not only imagined:

> Hedda felt as she felt, walking in the countryside, when the weather turned wild. First, you put your head down, and try to protect the dry places inside your damp garments. Then, as damp becomes drenched, and fingers and toes cool and numb, you put your head up, open your mouth, and *eat* the weather, tasting the sting of the air and the water. (485)

Hedda's experience of nature is physical here; the tangible reality of air, water and the earth beneath her seem to become her when she comes to embrace them, 'embodied and embedded' in the environment.[481] Philip too feels the physical and emotive presence of nature not as fantasy but as an immersive material shift when he visits the ocean for the first time, and feels, just standing on the beach, 'the mass of water in his bones, and was changed, but found nothing to say, and stood there looking stolid.' (135)

Philip's relationship with the world around him is unlike the other characters of the novel as he embodies a material engagement with his surroundings. Elizabeth Hicks observes that "Philip is largely defined in the novel by his relationship with objects', and these objects are not always the cultural constructions of pottery, but also the 'objects' or things that make up the world around him.[482] Engaged with feeling and materiality, Philip invariably sees life in textures: 'Philip was not really listening to the conversation, he was looking at the juxtaposition of textures in the grass, the flowers,

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[481] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 49.
[482] Hicks, p.178.

and the silks, and the very rapid colour changes that were taking place as the sky darkened.' (57) His relationship with the material world is posited throughout the novel as an appropriate response to the realities of existence, reflecting Braidotti's assertion that

> [t]he human organism is neither wholly human, nor just an organism. It is an abstract machine, which captures, transforms and produces interconnections. The power of such an organism is certainly neither contained by not confined to consciousness.[483]

While many of the other characters seem blind to the materiality of existence, intent on creating their own realities in their minds, Philip is a character whose relationship with the world is both enviable and enlightening, as he enables Byatt to bring to life the textural evocations of matter through textual wordplay: 'He picked up a piece of seaweed, interested in its texture and little bursting cushions of water' (136).

David Abram observes that '[a]fter three and a half centuries spent charting and measuring material nature as though it were a pure exterior, we've at last begun to notice that the world we inhabit (from the ocean floor to the upper atmosphere) is alive', and Byatt acknowledges this living materiality through characters like Philip with his non-nostalgic perspective.[484] When he visits Dungeness, the narrator describes 'the stony surface, which is in fact full of *strange life*, plants and creatures, which prosper and suffer in extremes of weather' (my italics 136). The life of this landscape is 'strange' in its capacity to survive and flourish in challenging conditions, but through the strangeness of existence, Byatt draws attention away from the solipsism of the narrative voice to a landscape less often noticed, highlighting the life outside language. When Philip stands on the beach contemplating existence in relation to the mass of water before him, Byatt describes how

> he hadn't ever considered the fact that the earth was round, that he stood on the curved surface of a ball. Here seeing the horizon, feeling the precariousness of his standpoint, he suddenly had a vision of the thing – *a huge ball*, flying, and covered mostly with this water endlessly in motion, but *held to the surface* as it hurtled through the atmosphere, and in its dark depths, blue, green, brown, black, it covered other colder earth, and sand and stone, to which the light never reached, where perhaps things lived in the dark and plunged and ate each other, he didn't know, maybe no one knew. The round earth, with hills and valleys of earth under the liquid surface. It was pleasant, and frightening, to be alive in the sun. (137)

This description of the earth is active; 'flying', holding the water to its surface,

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[483] Braidotti, 'Teratologies', p. 226.
[484] Abram, David, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 157.

hurtling 'through the atmosphere', it has agency, as do the unknown 'things' living in its depths. This living agency is not a dangerous, fantasy of terror, only 'pleasant, and frightening', engaging Philip with his own sense of being alive. Byatt's depiction of earth here echoes the 'Geophilosophy' of Deleuze and Guattari, which, according to Peta Mitchell, offers 'a release from the restrictive subject-object dualism: "[t]hinking," they argue, "is neither a line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of one around the other. Rather thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth."'[485] Geophilosophy for Deleuze and Guattari serves then 'as a phenomenon of the spatial turn, is founded upon an awareness of geography as active and strategic rather than descriptive'; the earth is actively living, participating, rather than existing as inert and passive matter.[486]

The life attributed to the material world throughout the novel is, like the clay that participates in its own construction, almost taken for granted, as Byatt invokes the fairy tale animation of inanimate objects to vital materialist ends. Bennett notes that '[i]n *Critique of Judgment*, Kant famously insisted that matter as such can have no "spontaneity": "We cannot even think of living matter as possible."'[487] But Byatt's characters, even when frightened by the sense of material life in their surroundings, tend not to question it: '[t]he strings were, *after all*, alive. Horribly alive. Once, with Tom at the brook, [Dorothy] had tried dowsing with a hazel fork, just for the fun of it, and had been terrified when the dead wood lurched at her fingertips, and pulled' (my italics 374). As Bennett asserts:

> [a] life thus names a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body. A life tears the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully "out" in a person, place, or thing. A life points to what *A Thousand Plateaus* describes as "matter-*movement*" or "matter-*energy*," a "matter in variation that enters assemblages and leaves them."[488]

The engagement with matter in *CB i*s unusual for its acceptance of material energy. Without falling into the fantasies of fairy tale animation, Byatt hints at the life present in nonhumanity – in earth and all its facets – to suggest that life is not the sole possession of the human mind. As Margaronis suggests, '[i]n fables' Byatt 'has found a way to

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[485] Peta Mitchell 'Stratified Record', p. 73. Mitchell quotes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 85.
[486] Mitchell, p. 73.
[487] Bennett, Vibrant Matter, p. 65. Bennett quotes Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), p. 276.
[488] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 54

contain the paradox of realism – its necessary artifice – without giving up on reality. Her most extravagant visions depend on precise representations of a palpable world.'[489]

Tom Underground: Dangerous Fantasies of Earth

In the opening of the *CB* Julian Caine leads a reluctant and fearful Tom Wellwood in search of an incongruous scruffy-looking boy in the dusty vaults of the South Kensington Museum. As they descend into the building's depths, the boy and the expedition to find him morph into a fiction – he 'does the Indian rope-trick' (4); he 'disappears' (4); he '*concentrates*' (said with great suspicion) (4); Tom worries they will encounter a 'savage and dangerous boy' (6), while Julian assumes his role as the 'successful seeker or catcher in games of pursuit.' (6) When the boy finally emerges, 'on all fours', shaking himself 'like a beast' (7), he reveals himself as Philip Warren and is taken above ground to explain his presence to the awaiting adults, where '[e]veryone looked at the dirty boy as though […] he had risen out of the earth.' (13) Tom and Julian's descent below the earth and the fiction they create around that descent sets the tone for Byatt's acknowledgements of the way that earth is so often fictionalised in our constructions of it; made magic; made wondrous.

As previous sections of this chapter have shown, in *CB*, Byatt reveals a reality both materially and linguistically constructed; the earth is not brute matter, but neither is it a fictional Other, a place of danger or delight. In her depictions of the spaces below the earth, however, Byatt draws on the fairy tale tradition in which princesses dance in magical palaces beneath the earth and little tailors discover caves full of promise or danger. In these terms, the earth – and that which exists below it – functions in the novel as a liminal space of discovery and wonder – a world of imagination which, Byatt suggests, can– in isolation – be dangerous, for unlike Philip Warren, not everyone can escape. By depicting her underground worlds as a space of fantasy, Byatt warns against the suggestion that everything is constructed by and through language, implying that painting the earth as pure linguistic construction – pure fairy tale – is as dangerous as depicting it as pure matter. In a play on the philosophical desire to transcend the

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[489] Maria Margaronis, 'Where the Wild Things Are', *The Nation* (May 27 2004), < https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/where-wild-things-are/> [Accessed June 9th 2020].

material realm for the realm of the mind, Byatt depicts the underworld as the metaphor for fiction and linguistic construction, advocating transcendence not from earth, but from the fictions of it; from the dangerous wonderland of language and the trappings of any postmodern thought that denies the agentic material realities of existence.

In the European fairy tale tradition, the earth contains many secrets, discoverable only when delving below its surface, where magic awaits. When the twelve dancing princesses of the Grimm tale descend for their nightly visits below ground they find a world of fairy tale forests, underground lakes and all-night balls in enchanted palaces. When Bluebeard's curious wife wonders down to the locked room in the bowels of the castle, she discovers the decomposing bodies of her husband's previous spouses. When the three huntsmen of the Grimm tale 'The Gnome' go in search of the princesses who disappeared below the earth after eating poisonous fruit, they enter the realm of the mannikins (gnomes or elves) who beat and tease them but eventually reveal the princesses' whereabouts so that they might escape. The fairy tale depictions of the world underground are neither consistently benevolent or malevolent, but the earth often exists as a realm of magical otherness in contrast with the world above – featuring creatures who live only below the earth, or mystical princes who cannot emerge from the ground, or haunting visions of death. Going underground can mean entering the world of the fairy tale in these stories, where the 'natural laws' of the world are suspended, and though appealing and enchanting, such a world is not somewhere anyone of the 'real' world can live.

For Philip, his ascent from below the earth echoes this fairy-tale tradition while releasing him from the fantasy, enabling his life as a potter to begin. Far from transcending the material, Philip embraces the matter above ground, never forgetting those material origins in the dirt. Just as the romanticised ideals of nature cannot sustain themselves in reality, Philip cannot remain in the fiction that was painted of him as a suspicious, magical creature haunting the depths of the museum, and instead he chooses an embodied position on and of – rather than under – the earth, in which feeling and touch dictate his experience more than words ever can.

> Philip lay in the disgusting and fascinating smell, and let his muscles go, one by one, so that the earth was holding up his limb body, and he could feel all its roughness, the squashed stalks the knotty roots of trees, pebbles, the cool mould under. (27-8)

His relationship with the earth morphs from a hidden existence living as a mysterious vagrant in the vaults of a museum, into an engaged materialist celebration of earth as active, living process.

However, for the fearful boy Tom Wellwood, the fantasies of earth are all-consuming. Growing up in the metaphorical shadow of his mother's fairy tale 'Tom Underground', Tom – who 'was neither audience nor muse, exactly, but he was the life of the story' (197) – finds it increasingly difficult to live outside the fantasy she has constructed, unable to see the wood for the trees; the reality for the fictions. While his fictional counterpart must journey underground to find his shadow – stolen at birth by a 'great rat' –, Tom retreats from bullies by hiding in the underground boiler room of his boarding school and is there sexually assaulted. In the wake of his assault he runs away, living for weeks on the land and, when found, will only say he was '[h]elping a gamekeeper' (203). The experience leaves him deeply connected to the natural world, withdrawing steadily from his own life in favour of one based in nature. However, this connection is not based on the kind of material embodiment Philip experiences, but a fictionalized vision of a magical Nature as separate from culture. His withdrawal into nature is – perhaps conversely – not a withdrawal into the material world, but a withdrawal into fiction – the fiction of his mother's own narrative, the fairy tales he grew up on, and the romantic image of the spirit of nature – and Tom's relationship with the earth is thus depicted as an escapist fantasy that sees him steadily losing his grip on reality.

As the Tom of Byatt's narrative withdraws from society and culture into the natural world as a place of escape, the Tom of the fictional story descends underground to find his stolen shadow and the lines between the real Tom and his fictional double begin to blur:

> [h]e had a favourite place, where a clump of birch trees surrounded a small mound, where he would sit, and watch the busy insects going in and out of their holes under the earth, or read a book, or look at the sky through the leaves. He called it a magic place, in his mind, and always felt that the air had a different quality there, was full of movement and sparkles, in the stillness. (190-191)

Tom Underground's 'favourite place' is 'magic' to him; it 'sparkles' like a dreamworld. Recognising the magic of nature is no indicator of a life lived in fairy tale, and yet, these childlike descriptions of the 'sparkles' in the air echo Tom Wellwood's own retreat into a fantasy world outside of normality. The suggestion that he 'felt unreal in London, as though his flesh and blood were in abeyance, as though he was a simulacrum of a boy'

(169) highlights his desire to extract himself from human culture, to return to the safety of the world of nature in which he finds such comfort. But as the novel wears on, Tom's fears that he might be 'a simulacrum of a boy' (169) take root. More and more he begins to take on the role of a fairy tale character; compared with the earth: 'Tom was baked and golden-brown *all over*. His hair was bleached and his body was like gilded branches' (412) he reflects the natural world he longs to be part of, his outer appearance embodying his inner desires, seeming to morph into the romantic vision of the man at one with nature. In conversation with his practically-minded sister, Dorothy, Tom reveals:

> 'I like the sounds. The trees. The creatures. The creakings. The wind, coming and going. Sometimes, Dorothy, I wake up and think I'm not there.'
> 'Frightening?'
> 'No. I like it. I'd like to be able to vanish into the hedge, like one of those things you can't see, if they don't move. The hedge sparrows. Mothers. I'd like to be speckled and freckled like a mother.' (473)

His description of mothers, 'speckled and freckled', evoke fictional mother hens and, with the revelation that he feels he is 'not there' and wishes to be become invisible, reveal his sense of disconnection from himself and a retreat into stories of the natural world.

In many ways, Tom's connection to nature and the earth could be seen as that of a naturalist for whom the world in nature is more real than those vacuous trappings of culture. Yet, Tom's engagement with the natural world is based in fantasy, with little sense of any material reality that could make his rejection of culture a rejection of anthropocentrism. When Deleuze and Guattari wrote of the concept of 'becoming-animal' they saw it as a way to dissolve the anthropocentricism of Western thought by attempting to expand the realms of thinking to include that outside the human. Colebrook explains:

> [t]his is why Deleuze and Guattari favoured the literature of Kafka: stories where Kafka imagined being an insect, a burrowing animal or a machine. Here, we can imagine life from an inhuman perspective. Instead of being an image set over against the world, such as a mind that receives impressions, we recognize ourselves as nothing more than a flow of images, the brain being one image among others, one possible perception and not the origin of perceptions.[490]

The idea of imagining the impressions of a nonhuman being would reveal, they believed, the interconnectivity of life; the myriad perceptions of being outside the

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[490] Colebrook, p. 128.

human realm. Towards the end of *CB*, Dorothy asks Tom – no longer a boy – if he has ever been in love, to which he explains that he was once in love with a vixen.

> [o]h, a real vixen. A young one, very graceful, covered with soft red fur, with a thick brush, and a creamy white chest. She knew I watched her every day. She *showed herself* to me, all the graceful things she did, curving this way and that. They seem to smile, foxes. I thought I *was* her, and she was me. I don't know what she thought. She stopped coming, when she had cubs. I'm not telling you very well. It was love, that was what it was. (474)

Like the fairy tale characters who have interspecies relationships (usually until a spell is broken and the animal's humanity can be revealed), Tom convinces himself that he had a relationship with a vixen, and that they *became each other* in that experience.

> Unlike the becoming-animal that Deleuze and Guattari posit, in which we do not actually want to *be* a molecule or animal, for this would mean not writing at all. But by *approaching* or imaging the inhuman point of view or animals, machines and molecules we no longer take ourselves as unchanging perceivers set over and against life,

Tom's imagined relationship with the fox involves an exchange of being that remains anthropocentric in its approach, as well as anthropomorphic – 'they seem to smile'.[491] Tom attributes the experience to 'love' from a distinctly human perspective, and learns little about the experience of being fox, only projecting his own desires onto the animal. To imagine nonhuman life as the projection of human desire in this way neither 'entails the displacement of anthropocentrism' as Braidotti suggests, nor 'the recognition of trans species solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species (Margulis and Sagan, 1995)' (67).[492] To attribute human characteristics to animals or the nonhuman world, she argues, is to be reduced to the 'metaphorical habits' that 'feed into the fantasmatic dimension of human-animal interaction'.[493] The fairy tale image of nature or animals as the Othered wonders of the world maintains the dichotomy of nature/culture that separates human life from nonhuman vitality; the vitality of life ought not to be confused with the fantasies of humanity.

After Tom reveals his love affair with the vixen, Dorothy becomes 'suddenly very irritated with Tom' (474), breaking away as he tries to initiate more fairy-tale inspired discussion of 'trees that walked' (474). As one of the central voices of Byatt's brand of embodied realism, Dorothy reveals her scorn at Tom's descent into the fairy tale world. Dorothy is distanced from Tom in this refusal to delve into fantasy: '[f]rom

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[491] Ibid.
[492] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 66.
[493] Ibid, p. 69.

quite early, she had refused to play Olive's game – to live in a fairy story, not on the solid earth with railway trains and difficult exams. Olive wanted to love her as a hedgehog, and she wanted to be human and adult' (365). As Alexa Alfer and Amy J Edwards de Campos observes,

> Dorothy is […] in many respects the Eldest Princess of *The Children's Book*. Like the Eldest Princess in Byatt's eponymous tale, "sharp Dorothy' (*CB* 177) is deeply "ambivalent about fairytales" (*CB* 344) and just as determined to throw away the script. Her challenge to the conventional plot here, however, raises the narrative stakes by insisting on a decidedly realist twist to the tale. '[I]nterested in the human body' (*CB* 149) from an early age, Dorothy rejects both escapist fantasy and fantasies of escape: "Tom had run away. Running away was what children in stories did. There was no point in hurrying off to be a wild woman in the woods. She wanted to be a doctor" (*CB* 347). And she will be. Unlike Tom, she resists the pull "towards the dark queen weaving her webs, and snares, and shrouds" (*CB* 235) and decides that instead of words, "[w]ork was what mattered" (*CB* 514).[494]

Unlike Tom, Dorothy leads a fulfilling life as a result of this choice, resisting that pull of darkness that eventually overcomes her brother. However, while Alfer posits the decision to work as the antidote to fairy tales and fiction, Dorothy's work, like Philip's, is physically engaged, connected to corporeality and the material world. To work, as, for example, Olive does – writing stories –, is not the antidote to those 'escapist fantasies' that Dorothy fears. Byatt's suggestion is that connecting materially with the world around us is of more value than a life of the mind.

For escapist fantasies are to be rejected, Byatt suggests, when they begin to take over from life itself, elevating the mind over all else. Uhsadel observes that, in contrast to Dorothy, Tom 'withdraws more and more into the fairy-tale world created between him and his mother. Significantly, his reading is limited to books by naturalists and Morris's romances, both idealizing life and nature'.[495] His seeming retreat into nature then is in fact a retreat into language, which – as the new materialists too suggest – is no solution to the pervasive dualisms of nature/culture, mind/matter. Tom's idea that he can hide in 'Nature' – a fairy tale realm like the underground one in which princesses dance until dawn – and therefore remain separate from 'culture' is a fiction in itself, a trick of anthropocentric illusion. True connection to nature in *CB* is embodied and interconnected, not a fictitious escapism. To choose the path of escapism is to venerate the mind over the body, language over materiality, which in itself is to risk 'becoming

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[494] Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards, *A.S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 125.

[495] Uhsadel, 'The Continuity of Victorian Traces', p. 78.

unreal' (399), the very thing Tom fears. As Tom and Dorothy's cousin Griselda acknowledge when she notes: 'sometimes I think a women's college is like the tower Rapunzel was shut in, or even the gingerbread cottage. I don't want to become unreal' (488), the life of the mind is no salvation for the children or the adults of the novel. The fairy tale realm, whether at the top of a tower or in the tunnels of rats or in the natural world full of walking trees and flirting foxes, is a realm in which it is possible to lose touch with materiality, and thus, existence itself.

When Olive is writing an early draft of that encompassing fairy tale 'Tom Underground', Byatt reveals of Olive's writing process that '[s]he vaguely remembered that there were existing fairy tales about lost shadows', before asking, '*[w]hy* was it frightening to have no second self, to cast no shade?' (145) Her son Tom is the vehicle through which that question is answered. Of course, to have no 'second self', to 'cast no shade' is to be immaterial. The other characters in Olive's story who do not have shadows are the elves; to be human, she suggests, is to be material and embodied. To exist as only mind – to cast no shade – is to attempt to live without corporeality, which, Byatt suggests when Tom finally takes his own life, is impossible. The character of Tom thus embodies Byatt's critique of postmodernism and the social constructivist view that all is language. The blurring of lines between fantasy and reality in postmodern fiction leave little room for the material world and, as Tom's decline reveals, it is dangerous to see life as only a story. In Olive's tale, the Elf-Queen explains the dangers of living as mortal with no shadow:

> [t]here are ratholes everywhere, even in palaces, and they lead underground, into the world of shadows, where the queen of the dark elves weaves them into webs, to trap mortals and other beings. […] All this kingdom, when you are King, can be ruled by them, through the manipulation of your shadow in the shadows. Bit by bit they can draw the whole land into the shadows and take it from under the sun. (192)

The story of Tom Underground's lost shadow might also be a story of the risks of the social-constructivist depiction of reality. When the world – the earth, the flesh – is mere simulacrum, not solid but simply shadowy illusion, then nothing exists: '[b]it by bit they can draw the whole land into the shadows' (192); into oblivion.

Just as Byatt is critical of the Edwardians who are characterized by a desire to return, *CB* sees her too criticize the postmodern traditions that posit the fictional as creator of the material. Tom, who morphs into the fictional character his mother wrote and named for him, who is '[t]hroughout the novel […] associated with the secret, imprisoning darkness of the underworld', reveals the dangers of accepting the

postmodern veneration of language over reality.[496] Byatt's 'self-conscious realism' describes landscapes where materialities are central, but 'the fact that the real Tom will, over time, find it increasingly difficult to resurface from this fantastical underworld escapes Olive's notice until it is far too late' and has fatal consequences.[497] To exist, Byatt suggests in *CB*, is to live as an embodied being, embedded in the world around you, not as a fictional worshipper of Nature, but as an interconnected being in which mind, body, thought, matter, fantasy and reality are balanced and interwoven. The choice to live in the fairy tale is not sustainable, we must engage with the world around us, with our corporeality, with the materialities of existence, so that we can be whole and stable: '[t]his ability to achieve a balance "of human and inhuman, vision and artifice"', Byatt suggested in an essay on Van Gogh, is the ability to maintain '"human sanity" ('Van Gogh" 330).'[498]

War, Earth and Flesh

In the final part of the novel – ominously entitled 'The Age of Lead' – the world of the Wellwood family and their friends becomes fatally unbalanced as Britain enters the First World War. Walking into no man's land, the soldiers (including all of Olive's remaining sons) 'stumbled over the dead and wounded, over men, and pieces of men, and were reduced to crawling, so mashed and messed was the earth and the flesh mashed into it.' (588) In this state of war, men are unavoidably material. The boundaries between the earth and humanity are dissolved and slippages appear in the distinctions of matter. It's a place where '*no shapes hold*' and '*men were mud*' (595). Through these visceral depictions of flesh and earth in the context of war, Byatt ridicules the suggestion that language could be the sum of experience or that mind has primacy over matter as men are killed in droves, their bodies left decaying in the earth, highlighting how inseparable humanity is from the material world. However cultural we might consider ourselves to be, *CB*'s final moments reveal, we cannot resist the material processes of existence; even our fairy tales of golems and buried bones acknowledge the unavoidable certainty that '[e]verything comes from dirt and eventually everything

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[496] Hicks, p. 182.
[497] Alfer and Edwards, *AS Byatt: Critical Storytelling*, p. 37 and p. 121.
[498] Campbell, *Heliotropic Imagination*, p. 8.

becomes dirt again; ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'[499] But just as Byatt acknowledges that unavoidable materiality of existence, the devastation caused by the war simultaneously highlights that any reduction to pure matter is as dangerous as a retreat into language and fantasy. Existence, *CB* suggests, relies on a balanced interconnectivity between matter and mind, thought and flesh, nature and culture. When Julian Caine remarks amid the horror of the war that '[n]ames are getting away from things' (590), he acknowledges the dangers of separating what Byatt depicts as complexly and necessarily interwoven.

Fairy tales have long depicted the connections between earth and both life and death. The earth is the fertile womb, the giver of life, providing enormous vegetables for lucky farmers such as the one of the Grimm tale of 'The Turnip' (KHM 146), but it is too the resting place of the dead – and the not-so-dead. In Basile's *Il Pentameron* a deceitful slave is buried alive and pregnant with only her head above ground and left to die there. In the Grimm tale 'The Willful Child' (KHM 117) a disobedient child dies due to God's displeasure, but when he is buried, his arm continually reaches up out of the ground, no matter how many times it is reburied, until finally his mother beats it and it withdraws into the earth. But stories of earth's magic were also told to highlight the rejuvenating elements of the earth after burial, such as in the Grimms' 'The Juniper Tree' (KHM 47) and 'Ashenputtle' (KHM 21), in which the buried bones of the dead merge with the earth to enable the dead to be reborn in new form. Death and life are intricately connected to the earth in these stories, but the lines between them are rarely definitive, suggesting a fluid vision of existence in which death, life, earth and flesh are complexly entangled.

The entanglements of humanity and the material world are central to the new materialist revisioning of nature and materiality and in those visceral depictions of war in *CB*, Byatt reveals the inseparability of the human and the nonhuman environment. Coole and Frost observe that

> [a]s human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We ourselves are composed of matter. We experience its restlessness and intransigence even as we reconfigure and consume it.[500]

Though the war is a devastating and needless event, it reveals the extent of our embeddedness not only in our own corporealities but also in the corporeality of earth. In

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[499] McWhorter, *Bodies & Pleasures*, p. 166.
[500] Coole and Frost, p. 1.

her essay 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina', in which she considers the wake of Hurricane Katrina using an 'ontology that *rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural'*, Nancy Tuana explores – through a similarly catastrophic topic –the fluidity between flesh and earth in her concept of the 'viscous porosity of flesh'.[501] 'This porosity,' she suggests, 'is a hinge through which we are of and in the world.'[502] The flesh, for her, plays a role in the earth's multiple and fluid interactions, and, as with the soldiers of Byatt's no man's land, the physical matter of soil or mud is in that moment not separate from humanity, but equal to it, part of its very fabric. The destruction caused by both the First World War and Hurricane Katrina figuratively erase the perceived separateness of the flesh and the earth.

Byatt's war is one in which the delineations of matter are indistinguishable, and though this is not reflective of the 'positive and constructive' new materialisms that suggest the blurring of boundaries a route to new, emancipatory concepts, it does reveal the ways in which those boundaries dividing flesh and thought, human and nonhuman, are not as clearly defined as we might imagine.[503] With horror, Byatt's narrator describes,

> [t]he dead, or parts of the dead, decayed in and around the holes, and their smell was everywhere, often mingled with the smell of mustard gas, a gas which lay heavily in the uniforms of the soldiers, and was breathed in by nurses and doctors whose eyes, lungs and stomachs were damaged in turn, whose hair was dyed mustard yellow. The peaceful polders had become a foul, thick, sucking, churning clay, mixed with bones, blood, and burst flesh. (605)

We might suggest that Byatt's war argues against the blurring of boundaries, and yet what would be more accurate is that it argues against the horrors of war; the boundaries are not blurred by the war itself, the war simply reveals their fragility. As she describes the effect of the mustard gas not only on the men but on the nurses and doctors through the uniforms of the soldiers, we are reminded of the power of nonhuman agencies, reminiscent of Bennett's reminder that 'our trash is not "away" in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak.'[504] The attacks, though human-centred, involve a wealth of material agencies rarely considered, which have effects far beyond those intended.

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[501] Nancy Tuana, 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina' in *Material Feminisms,* pp. 188-213, p. 188 and 199.
[502] Ibid, p. 199.
[503] Coole and Frost, p. 8.
[504] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. vii.

Alaimo's concept of 'transcorporeality' is useful here. Byatt's war reveals that humans cannot escape from the material processes they so often align with nonhumanity. As Braidotti notes, '[t]raditionally, the self-reflective control over life is reserved for the humans, whereas the mere unfolding of biological sequences is for the non-humans', and the novel reveals how little self-reflective control over life humans maintain in such circumstances.[505] Alaimo suggests a way to view existence outside those concepts that differentiate the human from the nonhuman by proposing

> that we inhabit what I'm calling "trans-corporeality" – the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment." Trans-corporeality, as a theological site, is a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways. Furthermore, the movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature necessitates a rich, complex mode of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual.[506]

Though undoubtedly a horrifying conclusion, the inclusion of the First World War in the novel does illuminate those complexly 'entangled territories' of matter and discourse, mind and body, nature and culture, asking: where does one end and the other begin?

The cyclical process of such entanglements of matter have been explored by McWhorter, whose examination of dirt considers the relationship between soil and the human body, as well as attempting a radical reconfiguration of dirt as active and enlivened. To counter the image of dirt as 'inactive, inert' and 'nothing more than the place where plants happen to be', she suggests that:

> [d]irt circulates; it never stays put or settles down. […] Dirt isn't a particular, identifiable thing. And yet it acts. It aggregates, and depending upon how it aggregates in a particular place, how it arranges itself around various sizes of empty space, it creates a complex water and air filtration system the rhythms of which both help to create more dirt from exposed stone and also to support the microscopic life necessary for turning dead organic matter back into dirt. Dirt perpetuates itself.[507]

McWhorter's analysis of matter enlivens it without anthropomorphism, revealing the myriad agencies of dirt – agencies we might not usually reserve for the earth. As Alaimo's theory of 'transcorporeality' suggests, the environment is not 'out there', separate from us, nor is the earth and the nonhuman world merely an inert backdrop for

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[505] Rosi Braidotti, 'The Politics of "Life Itself" and New Ways of Dying' in *New Materialisms*, pp. 201-218, p.207.

[506] Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms', p. 238.

[507] McWhorter, p. 166.

human relations, and the vivid entanglements of Byatt's war illuminates the inadequacy of those old dualistic ideas.

Comprehending the inseparability of the natural and the cultural, the nonhuman and the human, are necessary in the case of war because, as Alaimo notes:

> [c]rucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from this literal "contact zone" between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment." It makes it difficult to pose nature as a mere background for the exploits of the human, since "nature" is always as close as one's own skin. Indeed, thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the "environment," which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a "resource" for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between variously Bodily Natures. But by underscoring that "trans" indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality opens up an epistemological "space" that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world, and at the same times acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies, allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late-twentieth-century/early-twenty-first-century realities in which "human" and environment" can by no means be considered as separate: environmental health, environmental justice, the traffic in toxins, and genetic engineering, to name a few.[508]

Considering the effect of mustard gas on the lungs of those who breathe it, and those who breathe it from fabric; reflecting on the way that '[s]hells came over' and 'changed the earth from minute to minute' (584), Byatt's war highlights the necessary politicization of our relations with the material world – both natural and cultural – that affects us as we affect it. War, like life itself, is not immune from materiality simply because it is the result of human politics. The earth and the material agencies found in and on it exist in this politicized time and space just as we do.

If Byatt's war offers a warning, however, it is that the separation of matter from thought is a dangerous delineation, whichever side you favour. As Alfer and Edwards note, the novel suggests on the one hand that the wilful ignorance of material realities has devastating results: 'the willingness of a whole generation to suspend its disbelief, to cling to myths in the face of urgent physical realities leads to dire and far-reaching

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[508] Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms', p.238-9.

consequences for all.'[509] But Byatt's war also reveals overwhelmingly that when material realities are divorced from thought and language, the world is faced with oblivion. When men are used as cannon fodder their bodies are given little value and, reduced to pure matter, they are destroyed: '[h]e dreamed he was being buried alive in a dugout, and could not free himself from the weight of the earth, steadily increasing.' (592) The earth's weight is too much if all is matter, just as the fantasies cannot hold when all is language. As Braidotti suggests,

> we actually inhabit a nature-culture continuum which is both technologically mediated and globally enforced. This means that we cannot assume a theory of subjectivity that takes for granted naturalistic foundationalism, nor can we rely on a social constructivist and hence dualistic theory of the subject which disavows the ecological dimension. Instead, critical theory needs to fulfil potentially contradictory requirements.[510]

Those contradictory requirements involve a more complicated vision of existence that is the result of both social constructions and material agencies in perpetual process with each other to render them inseparable.

The dangers of any reduction of pure matter, Byatt suggests, is the separation of language and reality – when 'names are getting away from things' (590) we relinquish our ability to differentiate. For while blurring boundaries is key to the new materialist agenda, this does not mean a refusal to recognise any differences. As Braidotti observes, the idea of 'difference' has been used to affirm hierarchies and solidify dualistic systems of oppression. But in order to reconceptualise the subject, we must attempt to 'free difference from the negative charge which it seems to have built into it?'[511] For the Deleuzian vital materialist, a positive recalibration of difference enables the image of subjectivity as multiple and processual. Colebrook affirms that '[f]or Deleuze […]the whole of life is difference.'[512] As Braidotti suggests,

> [i]n Deleuze's radical philosophy of temporarily inscribed immanence, subjects come in different mileage, temperatures and beats. One can change gears and move across these coordinates, but it cannot claim all of them, all of the time. This is extremely important to prevent ritualism and self-destruction.[513]

These ideas of difference reflect a monistic conception of the world, in which we might view the world as one substance without reducing it to sameness. Thus, '[m]onism results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of

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[509] Alfer and Edwards, p. 128.

[510] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 82.

[511] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 4.

[512] Colebrook, *Deleuze*, p. 13.

[513] Braidotti, 'Teratologies', p. 159.

differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others.'[514]

Byatt's war reveals how the reduction of life into the separated constructs of language and matter enables a reduction of difference. In Julian Caine's poetry he writes 'I stared indifferent at the stumps of wood/And stumps of flesh and metal. All was one.' (596) Unlike the monistic conception of one substance, Julian's vision of oneness is an Eliot wasteland, an oblivion of despair in which, '[i]t's all mad. Mad and muddy and bad and bloody.' (607) Maintaining a balance between the material and the linguistic, the natural and the cultural, remains key to Byatt's vision of 'human sanity'.[515] But as Bernd Herzogenrath argues in *An [Un]likely Alliance: Thinking Environment[s] with Deleuze and Guattari*, we need a 'Deleuzian/Guattarian version of ecology' in which nature is 'seen as that dynamic, open whole posed not in balance, but more in what Ludwig von Bertalanffy has termed "*Fliegleichgewicht*" (flowing, turbulent balance).'[516] To imagine balance as a consistently even process is to deny the fluctuating processes of existence, in which linguistic, material, fleshy, earthy agencies are constantly interweaving and engaging with each other. The one substance of vital materialism's monistic vision is not one devoid of difference, but one in which active agencies are flowing with a kind of turbulent balance through one another.

Conclusion: Death and Life

At the end of the war, the potter Philip Warren is pulled from the mud of the trenches, encased with clay and brought to Dorothy, who works in the hospital. 'The face was the face of a golem' (608), Byatt's narrator describes, 'the ambulance men had made breathing holes and eye holes but the hair was caked solid and the eyebrows were worms of mud, and the lips were thick and brown' (608). Though Philip is now a grown man who can shape clay into his own constructions, in this instance, he is shaped by the clay; turned into a vision of folklore; a living, breathing incarnation of earth. As one of the prominent voices of Byatt's materialism, he tells Dorothy that when considering his own death he thought: '[i]t's a good end for a potter, to sink in a sea of clay. Clay and

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[514] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 54.
[515] Campbell, *Heliotropic Imagination*, p. 8.
[516] Bernd Herzogenrath, 'Introduction' in *An [Un]likely Alliance: Thinking Environment[s] with Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 1-22, p. 2-3.

blood' (608). His response to death is neither terror nor ambivalence, instead he recognizes that the return to earth for him is merely part of the process of living. Philip's assessment of the end of his life reflects the 'nonanthropocentric view' of living, as Braidotti describes it, that 'expresses both a profound love for Life as a cosmic force and the desire to depersonalize subjective life-and-death. This is just one life, not *my* life. The life in "me" does not answer to my name: "I" is just passing.'[517] Philip's relationship to death is thus much like his relationship to life – materially embedded.

Death, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not life's binary opposite, but 'is what is felt in every feeling, in what never ceases and never finishes happening in every becoming…Every intensity controls within its own life the experience of death and envelops it.'[518] Byatt has described, of the time of writing *CB*, a 'glorious moment' when she 'bought a book about making pots in Rye, and it really did say that the best potter's earth comes from the graveyard. It is things like that that put my metaphor exactly where I want it – but it wasn't a metaphor.'[519] As Margaret D Stezt observes of the mud of the trenches – the mud making a golem of Philip – 'this is the clay out of which art will be made'.[520] If art is 'a mode of intensification of living bodies, bodies both human and animal, a mode of resonance in which the forces of the earth, cosmological, climatological, regional directly impact on and transformed the lived forced of bodies', then Byatt's materially engaged novel recognises death as a process of life, as the pots, the flesh and the earth actively construct new life, new art, new realities.[521] Maria Margaronis suggests that in Byatt's collection *The Little Black Book of Stories* '[d]eath is not so much a human event as a copula – boatman and border guard between animate and inanimate, flesh and memory, life and art.'[522] When life can be mutually constructed by all forces –material and linguistic – the idea of natural or artificial becomes defunct. 'Life', according to Braidotti, 'far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and

[517] Bradotti, 'The Politics of Life Itself', p. 210.
[518] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 363.
[519] Byatt, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', p. 76.
[520] Margaret D. Stetz, 'Enrobed and Encased: Dying for Art in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*' in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17, 1 (2012), pp. 89-95, p. 91.
[521] Herzogenrath, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[522] Margaronis, 'Where the Wild Things Are'.

open-ending.'[523] And as the war reveals the proximity of life and death, her novel reveals the inadequacies of dualistic thought. Like the new materialists who cannot see the world dualistically even in relation to life and death, instead '[t]hinking through the fluidities of either "life" or "death" that seem to run across borders of animate and inanimate,' Byatt's epic and glittering portrayal of life, death, earth, flesh, thought and language reveals that existence is complex, multifaceted and processual.[524]

To think of earth is not to think of pure matter, nor to think of idyllic, wondrous fantasies of Nature, but to think of active, constructive agencies that refuse to adhere to the boundaries philosophical language has created. Byatt's universe is one where the dualisms of humanistic thought are dissolved. Stories, minds, bodies, nature and pots construct the world indivisibly, as one, part of a life that is multiple and fluid. Solidity is no longer a vision of inertia or passivity, relegated to the unchanging, ahistorical natural world, but a reality that may too be part of the endless processes of the world. To be solid, to 'cast shade' Byatt implies, is crucial to existence, and this extended matter is not fixed but fluid, unavoidable and self-perpetuating. Language and matter continually dance through the narrative, unable to escape each other. Once retrieved from his golem-like clay coffin, Philip says to Dorothy: 'I don't really believe you're here. I often wished you were. I mean, not in the mud, in the abstract.' To which she replies: 'Not in the abstract. Concrete.' (609)

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[523] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 60.

[524] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 17.

CONCLUSION

The fairy tale is a story of interconnectivity, metamorphosis and process. Narratives cross geographical and cultural borders, shape-shifting, interweaving and evolving, reinventing themselves and making *new*. The wonder of fairy tale enables this process of combination and reinvention; when almost everything else has been made unrecognisable, we recognise wonder in our narratives, and we know it as fairy tale – it glistens, revealing itself as a site of potentiality and excitement. It is the stream that runs clear in good fortune, the wood nymphs who live in the trees and the jewels that fall from maidens' mouths; and it denies the supposed fixity and solidity of existence, offering not the inertia of the world, but its endless possibility. Wonder, as I have examined it, is the spark that attracts fairy tale authors to this medium, and as the stories tell of transformations and connections, they echo the genre itself, transfiguring and interrelating through time, space and form. Fairy tales, through wonder, have the potential to transform our visions of existence and experience; their legacy of possibility is disruptive and subversive. Just as the stories themselves are fluid, so too are the creatures, plants, objects and humans who live within them; interconnected, in process, and beyond material constraints.

As I have outlined, contemporary fairy-tale fiction has engaged in various ways with the European fairy tale's legacy of wonder to disrupt assumptions of natural laws and nature/culture divisions. The fluidity and agency that such wonder enables in both the form and the material content of the fairy tale is a vehicle through which contemporary authors can challenge hierarchical dualistic systems and offer a vision of existence that echoes new materialist discourse in its vibrant manifestations of matter and embedded interconnectivity. In the fictions discussed here from Carter, Swift, Pullman and Byatt, materiality is not static and inert but fluid and interwoven, in-process and transformable, and through these varied responses to fairy tale we can see the trajectory of the discourse around matter and nature shift away from a predominantly social-constructivist approach to a more embodied and enlivened depiction of matter/thought engagement reflective of our current cultural concerns.

In the opening of this thesis I set out to contextualise my study of matter, nature, and new materiality in contemporary fairy tale fictions. To do this, I examined the concept of wonder and its relationship to the fairy tale, considering how it enables a

blurring of borders between dualistic systems and alternate understandings of existence. I highlighted Cartesian dualism as central to the Western conception of matter and nature and identified the issues with the traditional models of materiality as bound by 'natural laws', as well as the ways in which dualistic narratives of nature/culture, matter/thought have been used to dominate and oppress all those associated with the term 'nature'. I observed how wonder might function as a way of reimagining natural-cultural potential. I then examined the literary European fairy tale and its engagements with matter and nature – emphasising that while the dominant canon often reflects hierarchical borders between dualisms, by looking to some of the lesser-known narratives of the tradition, we might observe the wealth of potential in the fairy tale as a genre that can disrupt traditional models of existence. I then considered the relationship of 'nature' to the postmodern fairy tale and how contemporary authors have sought to undermine and 'denaturalise' the myths of the traditional narratives. I followed this by charting new materialist discourse and its radical potential for re-examinations of materiality, emphasising that although new materialism often distances itself from postmodernism, there are bridges between the two. I then considered the relationship between 'wonder' and new materialism, emphasising how contemporary fairy tale writers can tell new stories of matter and nature that deny hierarchical dualisms and challenge the fixity of materiality.

In the first chapter, Wood, I focused on the varying depictions of wood in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* and how her enlivened depictions of wood and woodlands reflect fairy-tale animism, postmodern deconstruction and Deleuzian and vital materialist theory. I began by acknowledging Carter's social-constructivist agenda and desire to undermine assumptions of 'nature'. I identified Carter herself as a writer concerned not only with deconstructing linguistic models, but with material realities and conditions. I then charted the dominant Western philosophical and fairy tale narratives that engage with the material of the chapter: wood – highlighting how these engagements often underline the fixity and inertia of such seemingly passive 'natural' matter. Next, I considered the nature of transgression in Carter's fiction and how it relates to woodland narratives such as 'Little Red Riding Hood', identifying Carter's emphasis on carnal and physical knowledge. I positioned Carter as a writer who, for all her postmodern, social-constructivist tendencies, does not abandon materiality or embrace the supposed 'flight from nature' that some postmodern

writers and critics posit.[525] Analysing the emphasis on flesh, blood and sexuality in Carter's woodland narratives, I used Deleuzian and new materialist theory to highlight the ways in which the stories reimagine nature as an active participant, emphasising multiplicity and process and the reworked conception of desire as being material and multiple rather than cultural and singular. I concluded by identifying Carter's engagement with 'knowing' as the key to her approach as both socio-constructivist and vital materialist, suggesting that thinking beyond the accepted norms or laws of reality enables her to value both language and matter as creative co-constructors. Through wood, I highlighted Carter's engagements with materiality and knowledge as interwoven and processual – filled with the potential for blurring dualistic borders.

In 'Water' I followed with an analysis of Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* and the depiction of water as a material that disrupts dualistic hierarchies. I began by outlining the postmodern credentials of the novel and its emphasis on blurring borders between history and fairy tale, fiction and reality. I then went on, contrary to much of the scholarship on this text, to separate the novel's narrator from the author, suggesting that the author is critical of the narrator's stance on duality. I turned, next, to the philosophical and fairy tale narratives of water, considering the ways in which the material has been associated with origins, purity and innocence at the same time as chaos, danger and uncontrollability. I observed how water can be reconceptualised through new, vital materialisms and philosophies of flow. Examining the novel itself, I considered how the theme of land reclamation highlights the inadequacy of dualistic thought, then how the emphasis on materials or animals that deny categorisation on either side of a dualism (silt, mud, phlegm, etc.) suggests that blurred boundaries lead to creative possibility. I then considered the material agencies in the weather and the region's famous beer, demonstrating that the seemingly 'magical' agency of these material processes complicates notions of inertia and fixity of nature or matter. Ultimately, I suggested that *Waterland*, though often identified for its postmodern agenda, actually reveals the slippages between language/reality dualisms, suggesting that life is a co-construction of matter and thought.

In 'Metal', the third chapter, I looked at the material most often associated with culture and how it functions in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy as a catalyst for reimagining nature/culture divides. I began with an analysis of the trilogy as a

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[525] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 4.

materially-driven narrative, influenced by fairy tale, theology and philosophy. I then examined metal as an image of fixity and status in Western philosophy and fairy tale and followed this by suggesting that the depiction of metal in traditional fairy tale has enabled Pullman's enlivened metals that are full of wonder, offering a radical perspective on nature/culture boundaries and telling a new story of what metal is and does. I then analysed the various forms in which metal appears in the trilogy, beginning with the armoured bears, who embody traditional masculinity, and moving into the more flowing and processual visions of metallic existence in the knife and the alethiometer. From there, I examined technology and considered how the novels engage with posthumanism in their characterisation of machines. I ended with an analysis of the mulefa, who are indistinguishable from the tools they use and the landscape they inhabit – offering a rhizomatic, machinic example of existence that furthers Pullman's project of denying nature/culture boundaries.

In the final chapter, 'Earth', I considered A. S. Byatt's use of earth in her novel *The Children's Book*. Again, I positioned Byatt as a writer in touch with postmodern concerns, who is often cited for her 'self-conscious realism' and an emphasis on the capacity of language and story to be shaped and reshaped.[526] However, as with the authors in previous chapters, I also acknowledge the material emphasis in her writing. I considered the depictions of earth in Western dualistic philosophy, followed by traditional European fairy tales, highlighting the ways in which the dominant narratives sought to domesticate 'nature', flesh and earthy materiality and make it 'clean'. I then examined Byatt's emphasis on construction and bodies in the novel and considered how the depiction of flesh and earth as co-constructors of reality alongside language and thought disrupts hierarchical dualisms and assumptions that have been used to oppress women. I considered how Byatt's focus on pottery reveals a vital materialist engagement with matter as active, processual and inextricable from thought, highlighting the pots as participants in their own construction. I turned then to the earth as landscape and examined the ways in which Byatt plays with the utopian models of 'nature' in order to undermine them as fantasy but then offers a more active, participatory vision of nature that counters those outdated utopian narratives. In order to examine how Byatt engages with narratives of the earth as a place of danger, I looked at the character of Tom and his relationship with nature and physicality to highlight

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[526] Byatt, 'Interview with A.S. Byatt', p. 80.

Byatt's warnings against drifting from materiality towards those outdated fantasies of the natural world. Next, I examined the closing action of the novel – the First World War and its harrowing effect on the characters – and how the war demonstrates the impossibility of life as a purely cultural or purely material manifestation. Finally, I considered how Byatt's blurring nature/culture boundaries can (and perhaps must) encourage a reconceptualization of life/death, and that through this reconceptualization of existence we might understand life as a series of interconnections in which earth, flesh, thought, matter and language are inextricably interwoven.

In this analysis I have identified that contemporary fairy tale authors have been using the wonder of traditional fairy tales (via the suspension of reality and animism of matter) as a vehicle through which 'natural laws' and assumptions about materiality as static and fixed can be suspended, so that hierarchical dichotomies of thought/matter, nature/culture, human/nonhuman can be disrupted. I argued that reading contemporary fairy tale with and through new materialist theory sheds new light on fairy-tale texts previously studied, as well as bridging gaps between postmodernism and new materialism and offering a new way to think about the potential of fairy tale as a vehicle for political and positive change. I also highlighted that this change is reflective of much earlier literary narratives in which the fairy tale functions as a vehicle for cultural challenge. The fairy tale emerges here as a site of political action; a medium through which we might reimagine existence.

By looking through the specificities of wood, water, metal and earth at these fairy tale texts that span nearly half a century of contemporary fairy-tale writing, I was able to examine the broader complexities of the relationships between matter, flesh, language and thought. In each of the texts examined, wonder functions to enliven a material realm so often cast as inert and thus blur borders between nature, culture, mind, body, thought and all of the dualisms of male/female, European/non-European, human/nonhuman, black/white, subject/object, etc., that have been so pervasive and pernicious in Western thought. Though I recognise that there are many other avenues that this research could have explored – particularly in relation to race and nonhumanity, as well as the breadth of texts considered – I consider it the starting point for a new way of thinking about the impact of fairy tale on contemporary writing, and suggest that new materialist engagement enables discussion of nature and matter not only in contemporary literatures that follow its theoretical conception, but also reassessment of those earlier texts, offering new ways of thinking about supposedly

postmodern texts, for example. There is also huge scope for looking beyond the traditional European fairy tales and Western philosophical traditions – how do Eastern philosophies depict these materialities, and how does folklore from other parts of the world reflect and/or challenge dualistic models? My findings here from analysis of these particular texts and materials should only serve to highlight the potential for other considerations of how dualisms of nature/culture, thought/matter have and can be reimagined through other fairy-tale inspired works.

As the first study on new or vital materialism and contemporary fairy tale, this thesis most obviously brings together scholarship on fairy and folk tale and theories of vital and new materialisms, posthumanism and a Deleuzian dialectic – suggesting that fairy tale wonder can and has been reimagined in contemporary fictions through the lens of process and interconnectivity. It bridges gaps between postmodernism and new materialism as theoretical positions commonly regarded as antithetical, highlighting where these two discourses can be seen to align. It also works to consider texts such as Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* from an alternate, modern perspective – shedding new light on old criticism, perhaps. By looking at texts that span fifty years of fairy-tale writing, I hope to have demonstrated that the trajectory in this genre is moving further and further towards a new materialist agenda, whether intentionally or not, as fiction echoes the supposed 'material turn' of theoretical discourse.

The impact of this research is two-fold. Firstly, following the wave of postmodern fairy tale fiction and scholarship, it has become almost customary to scorn the 'messages' of traditional European fairy tales for their depictions of women or otherness. Though this approach is not prominent in scholarship today, the enduring legacy of European fairy tale as sexist or racist, for example, has left its mark on the tradition, leading it (as a supposedly homogenous and definable genre) to be discredited as representative of a conservative and damaging worldview. By reading fairy tale for its fluid and active depictions of matter and nature, we can recognise the potential in this form for radical and progressive change as well as for upholding conservative views. Secondly, the issues discussed in this thesis are in many ways more critically important today than ever before, as concern about 'Nature', nonhuman animals and materiality (i.e. what we do with our 'stuff' and what it *does* to us) becomes more prevalent. We look to our narratives to help us understand the world, and in response to the growing awareness of the Anthropocene, a study such as this can help reveal the radical potential of fairy tale to show us the material possibilities of the world and

disrupt anthropocentric, dualistic thought. In an age where our relationship to the nonhuman world is being more and more widely recognised as embedded in our political, social, ecological and economic structures – stories which engage with such concerns highlight our continued attempts to write new ways of seeing the world. I am interested too in the ways in which using new materialism to read a culturally 'friendly' topic such as the fairy tale might bring the theory (like Rapunzel) out of its ivory tower and into popular culture.

I see the work of Carter, Swift, Pullman and Byatt to be at the forefront of an emerging trajectory in contemporary fairy-tale from Britain – but also elsewhere – that echoes this interest in nature, bodies, materialities and blurring borders. In the UK, short story writers such as Sarah Hall ('Mrs Fox', 2013), Kirsty Logan (*The Rental Heart and Other Stories*, 2014) and Daisy Johnson (*Fen*, 2016) have followed Carter's lead in their tales of femininity and flesh, as nonhuman and human collide and nothing is easy to define. Similarly, American writer Karen Russell's collections *St Lucy's School for Girls Raised by Wolves* (2006) and *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* (2013) often disrupt the boundaries of dualistic thought through her tales of metamorphosis and rebirth. Contemporary art has too reflected this interest in the borders between nonhumanity and culture in sculptures by Kiki Smith (in which women are birthed from deer (*Born*, 2002) or step out from the abdomen of wolves (*Rapture*, 2001)) and Tomoko Kōnoike (her six-legged, mirrored wolves walk – kaleidoscopic – away from pelts and into real forests, reflecting and refracting the world around them in *The Planet is Covered by Silvery Sleep*, 2006 and *Donning Animal Skins and Braided Grass*, 2013). And films inspired by fairy tale such as Studio Ghibli's *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013) (in which the landscape feels as alive as the princess born of a bamboo shoot) and the Netflix film *Okja* of 2017 (the tale of a genetically engineered super-pig) reflect the growing concern for the world around us and our impact upon it. Novels too are drawing more and more from the material or physical as well as the psychological in their approach to fairy tale and folklore, appealing to a generation of consumers that feed off the physicality such fictions provide in a world somewhat numbed by technology - as attested by the bloody depictions of nonhuman/human interrelations in Marlon James' recent fantasy and folklore-inspired epic *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019). As our interest both in fairy tales and in how we can exist as part of a global, interconnected system continues to rise, the narratives that engage with these cultural fascinations (particularly in a fantastical context) – narratives that ask us to think about

where we end and *everything else* begins – become more prevalent, and even more necessary.

In *The Natural Alien*, Neil Evernden argues that 'we are not *in* an environmental crisis, but *are* the environmental crisis,' because it is 'our way of knowing and being in the world [that] is the problem.'[527] If postmodernism revealed (and worked to challenge) the chasms in society in relation to human social structures – race, gender, class and sexuality, predominantly – new materialism enables analysis of text that considers all of these issues as a response to the dualistic narratives of subject/object, nature/culture, thought/matter, offering a holistic response to positive change in which conversations about gender and race are also about nature – what it means to be 'natural' as well as how we are part of the 'natural world'. The human preoccupation with our own knowledge and existence has perpetuated dualistic and hierarchical engagements with nonhumanity (and humans deemed to be less-than-human) in all its shades, with human superiority (predominantly White, Western, cis male, heterosexual, etc.) as the model through which our lifestyles, our policies and our stories have been shaped. But if our sense of being and knowing in the world is to change, it will do so through the stories we tell. As a site of magic and transformation, the contemporary fairy tale can be a vehicle through which we explore the possibilities of material fluidity, inter-species relations and metamorphosis in ways that do not further anthropocentric, patriarchal and dualistic Western assumptions, but create new, disruptive visions of interconnectivity and experience outside the confines of the human and nonhuman dichotomy.

When fairy-tale creators combine fur with flesh, objects with thought, matter with language, blurring the boundaries and creating hybrid forms from the seemingly oppositional, they do so with the magical traditions of fairy and folktale behind them. Our representations of the material world (and of ourselves) will always be representations, but envisioning materiality as "changing and changeable, as *transformable*", just like the fairy tale storytelling tradition itself, might – if we pay enough attention – enable us to reimagine our ways of 'knowing and being' in the world.[528] And as Coole and Frost suggest, the importance of such reimaginings are high:

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[527] Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and the Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 134.
[528] Birke, p. 45 and Evernden, p. 134.

> [w]hat is at stake here is nothing less than a challenge to some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about the human agency, but also regarding its material practices such as the ways we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature.[529]

At this point in time, examinations of how we interact with and understand materiality (human and nonhuman) are central to any reconceptualization of how we might live in a way that respects not only our fellow humans, but the planet we all share. After centuries of associating agency with humanity alone – and particularly with a rational, white, male subject – by re-envisioning agency as embedded in life itself, in the very 'stuff' of this life, we can redefine our relationships to the world, hopefully for the better. As Barad argues:

> [a]gency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring material–discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulation and exclusions that are marked by those practices.[530]

As fairy tale wonder denies boundaries and depicts living agency in all things, the genre inhabits Barad's 'matter of possibilities', reconfiguring material/linguistic, natural/cultural binaries and reconfiguring existence at the same time.

What draws us to the fairy tale is its sense of wonder, and it is the wonder of such narratives that sticks with us – stays in our minds and solidifies in our collective consciousness. We remember the parts of those narratives in which borders are transgressed – when the wolf is sliced open and Granny and Little Red step out, when a tree root comes to life and eats its way through a village, when a murdered boy becomes a bird and sings of his suffering – when the plots don't follow our logic and plants give directions we feel the spark of potential that wonder ignites – we know that things can be different, here in this world of possibility. And as the contemporary writers in this study have demonstrated, we can use this sense of possibility to reimagine our own experience of existence and agency – we can look for wonder in the world where we might only previously have seen stasis. Kate Bernheimer, the fairy tale scholar, has said:

> I have a sense that a proliferation of magical stories, especially fairy tales, is correlated to a growing awareness of human separateness from the wild and the natural world. In fairy tales the human and animal worlds are equal and mutually dependent. The violence, suffering, and beauty are shared.[531]

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[529] Coole and Frost, 'Introduction', p. 3.

[530] Karen Barad, 'Interview with Kared Barad' in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, p. 54.

[531] Kate Bernheimer, 'Introduction' in *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales*, ed. Kate Bernheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), p. i-xix, p. xix.

The human, animal and *material* worlds are equal, she might have said; the trees, the rivers, the oceans, the metals, the land – life in all its forms. Wonder in fairy tale is not reserved for those with *mind*s, but those with *matter.*

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