

**The Sense of Space in a Small Country:  
Nature, Nation, Self in the Writing of John  
Burnside, Robin Robertson and Kathleen  
Jamie.**

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## **Abstract**

Issues of nationhood and place have been central to critical writing about twentieth century Scottish Literature. The recent independence referendum, along with devolutionary and nationalist political issues across Europe has lead to renewed interrogation of the concepts and outcomes of such movements and requires alternative explanations for their character and enduring application in Scotland. This thesis examines iterations of nation, nature and self in the works of John Burnside, Robin Robertson and Kathleen Jamie. It does so via a theoretical framework that utilises Timothy Morton's theory of the ecological as a counterpoint to Romantic conceptions of the environment in order to posit a philosophy of being in the world that not only encompasses issues of environment and sustainability, but that sees itself as a way to examine the structures of built and social environments. The thesis attempts to show the ways in which the poets offer an ecocritical theory of space that proposes an optimistic and potentially radical understanding of the role and significance of nation, nature and self in contemporary poetry in the wake of large scale socio-political shifts in Scotland and the wider world. It finds that they use the ecological as a way to connect these concepts to issues of representation and responsibility in an attempt to offer a poetics that centres empathetic and interactive responses to such issues and tackles the damaging structures that currently uphold them. It argues that poetry is well placed to do so as it is a form that creates self-contained textual ecologies to examine and represent our wider material environments. This offers a contemporarily relevant way of examining nationalist and ecological subjects in recent Scottish poetry by aligning it to on-going socio-political and literary contexts.

## **Impact Statement**

This thesis offers the opportunity for interdisciplinary research in the social sciences. It combines literary, political and social concerns that might provide fruitful crossover internally, in conferences and research groups, or outside academia between researchers and institutions. It offers the basis for dissemination in journals, as well as the potential to structure lecture courses around the issues it raises. The research expands upon existing debates within the field of Scottish Literature and allows a space for a contemporarily

relevant reading of current critical issues that offer interesting developments for researchers. Locally, this offers further material to the subject's current study. Its concerns are globally-scalable and so offer the chance for international research, immediately, and going forward in providing an ecocriticism that takes in international concerns and issues of globalisation as key, thus offering a view of environmentalism in literature that is not tied solely to the experiences of one location.

The issues raised in the thesis also have resonance within current political and social projects within Scotland. Given this fact, the literary concerns of the poets may find expression alongside issues of policy, and highlight wider concerns amongst citizens for political action. They see comparison with sociological research, and research into current neoliberal models of space and public access to it. It offers the possibility of collaborative projects with policy-makers, with researchers and with writers, either in conference, scholarly articles, or audits, that chart and examine the issues raised by the poets within wider socio-political frameworks.

Further, its exploration of space provides the means to examine attitudes to issues of urban planning; this could have fruitful impact within regeneration projects in the UK and further afield, for example. Its approach to poetry offers the opportunity to engage with both academic and creative bodies. Institutes such as the Scottish Poetry Library for example, alongside universities, may find it opens up areas of discussion and potential for events and projects that combine figures from across disciplines.

## Contents

### **Introduction: A Sense of Space in a Small Country: Nature, Nation and Self in the Works of John Burnside, Robin Robertson and Kathleen Jamie. 8**

Scottish Spaces: Land and Environment in the Contemporary Nation	10
Nationalism and Scottish Literature: A Critical Position/The Critical Climate of Scottish Literature	15
New Semiotics: 'Place Markers' for Scotland	25
Setting a Scene: the Work of Edwin Morgan and Douglas Dunn 1964-1984	28
Spaces of the Self	41
Establishing Place as Problematic	45
A Poet's (Market) Place	47
Wild Spaces and Unknown Places	48
Theory and the Politicising of Place	51

### **Chapter 1: 'A Body in the World, Breathing': Burnside and the Creation of Space for a Sustainable Self 53**

'By which we create ourselves from moment to moment': John Burnside's Spiritual Ecology	53
Spaces Apart: Insanity and Disengagement	58
Refining Identities: Recursion, Relativity and Remembrance	65
Seeking Authentic Space: Nature and Neoliberalism	73
A 'Continuum of Being': Meetings with the Wild	78
Using and Losing Space: Class, Capital and Environment	82
Masculinity as an Unhealthy Environment: Hostility, Empathy and the Ecological	89
'Spirit' and Modernity: a Politics of Empathy	93
Conclusion	100

### **Chapter 2: 'Born to a Life of Dying': Robin Robertson and the Negotiation of the Entropic 104**

'I am almost never there': Vulnerability, Humanity and the Ecological	104
The Breakdown of a System: Selfhood, Entropy and Damage	108

Naming Spaces: Myth, Memory and the Narrative of Place	113
Internal and External Spaces: Inextricable Ecologies	117
Textual Ecologies: Meaningful Spaces?	121
(Inter)National Myth-Making: Globalisation, Greek Myth, and the ‘Swithering’ God	123
Vulnerability as Offering: Sacrificial Relations with the Natural World	132
The Mythic Everyday: Self and Place in Modern Scotland	135
Space and Simulacra: Memory, Representation and the ‘Unnatural’	143
Remaking the Self: Robertson’s Bodily Ecology	148
Conclusion	156
<b>Chapter 3: ‘An Autonomous Region’: Kathleen Jamie’s Conjugations of Place, Self and Gender</b>	<b>159</b>
‘I never could explain myself’: Person and Place	159
Jamie’s Scotlands: Aspects of Nation	162
Reading the Landscape: Place and Meaning	169
Journeys Within and Without: Jamie’s Personal Autonomy	172
Gendered Autonomy	175
Autonomous Regions? Place and Identity in ‘Real Terms’	181
Artefacts and Remembrances: Nation and Representation	185
In Our own Words? International Vernacular as Subaltern	189
Scotland as Point of Comparison: Jamie’s Internationalisms	190
‘Had you never considered how the world sustains?’ The Human and Natural World	197
Her own Space: Gendered Ecologies, Femininity and Illness	202
Conclusion	209
<b>Conclusions: The Space for the Ecological Lyric</b>	<b>212</b>
Utopian Thinking: Ecological Lyric as Potential and Political	214
The Space that is Changed: Scotland’s Contemporary Sense of Self	216
Integration: The Natural Reconsidered	217
Entropy as Empathy: Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Change	220

Borderline: Refiguring Place and Nation	221
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>236</b>
Appendix 1, Fig. A	236
Appendix 1, Fig. B	237

**The Sense of Space in a Small Country: Nature, Nation, Self in the writing of John  
Burnside, Robin Robertson and Kathleen Jamie.**

This thesis will argue that ecological and nature writing are not separate from politically engaged writing of or about contemporary Scotland and the wider world, and in fact offer a radical poetics and politics that seek to restructure the ways in which we relate to the world critically and politically. It will examine how the broader terms of nature, the ecological and Scottish/national poetry apply within the work of three of the most critically-acclaimed Scottish poets of the last twenty-five years. It will argue that these writers do not utilise place only to examine anthropocentric vs. ecological modes of being and understanding, nor just to situate Scotland within a literal or political geography of nations. Instead, they construct and further a poetics that underpins a new conception of the national that is removed from the conservative ethnogeography of twentieth-century nationalism. These poetics offer a way of constructing an ontology of place and belonging that seeks to limit human impact, restore a sense of balance (be it environmental or spiritual), and to maximise civil engagement and freedom within a broadly leftist, and potentially radical political-literary setting. The work of these poets shows that by using ‘the ecological’ as a critical-philosophical framework, a left-leaning neo-lyric reconfigures ‘space’ — which is multiple, international, fluid — paradoxically and specifically by making ‘place’ (fixed and material), its concern.<sup>1</sup> The specific, tangible landscapes of its conception (ranging from the Scottish East Coast to the mountains of Pakistan) do not require a conflation of ‘place’ and ‘space’ within particular ethnographic or geographic landscapes, and therefore the poetry does not posit insight or approval via a set of characteristics inalienable to that ‘place’.

By using the term ‘ecological’ with regard to the work (both prose and poetry, though this thesis will argue that the latter, through its formal qualities, can be a powerfully ecological form in ways that prose is not) of Jamie, Burnside and Robertson, this thesis aims to discuss three main aspects. Firstly the conception of ‘interconnectedness’ that is intrinsic to the term; this is both to speak of connected (eco)systems at work in the poetry and criticism of the writers, and the wider philosophical concern with connectedness that allows

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<sup>1</sup> See Burnside ‘Poetry and a Sense of Place’ 205

these poets to posit a radical poetics of place. Secondly, the importance of social responsibility and sustainability; this is linked to interconnectedness but is its pragmatic arm. All three writers use their work to explore the impact of living in the world as humans and to posit a philosophy of living that is less rapacious than current neoliberal late capitalist models. Lastly, these factors are linked by the overarching environmental awareness inherent in this position. Environment is at various times natural, manmade, spiritual or political and each writer attempts to navigate these terms in creating a holistic, or 'ecological' thought. It examines the poets in the ecocritical context of 'New Nature Writing', which Graham Huggan has noted,

is in constant search of its own object – an object it will never quite manage to capture or define. It is also attuned to what Bill McKibben grandiloquently calls the 'end of nature': not so much the wholesale destruction of the environment (though this destruction is certainly part of it) as the seemingly irreversible demise of an idea of nature as stable, reassuring, and above all independent. (*Prose Studies* 38.2 154)

Further to this, it will make extensive use of Timothy Morton's conceptions of 'Ecology without Nature' and 'dark ecology', which acknowledge the 'end of nature' as the impossibility of accessing the Romantic ideal 'it will never quite manage to capture or define', and look at the difficulty of pursuing interconnectedness.<sup>2</sup> Mistrust of a reified 'Nature' is especially prescient with regards to the formation of nationalist discourse within contemporary Scottish literature. The concept of 'Nation' can be well served by the Romantic ideal of 'Nature'. However, in the work of Jamie, Burnside and Robertson, there is a tempering of nationalist agency with a philosophy that replaces 'Nature' with 'Ecology'. Morton claims that to give credence to the conception of nature as separate is to allow

another version of Romanticism's rage against the machine, a refusal to engage in the present moment. Like imperialism, ecocriticism produces a vision of the text as a pristine wilderness of pure meaning [. . .] Ecocriticism wavers between the 'apolitical' or quasi-political ersatz religion of a call to care for the world, and the

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<sup>2</sup> See Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007 and *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

New Left inclusion of race, gender, and environment in socialist thinking [. . .] In sitcoms, canned laughter relieves the audience of the obligation of laughing. Nature writing relieves us of the obligation to encounter non-identity, sometimes called ‘nature,’ the ‘more-than-human,’ the ‘nonhuman’ [. . .] its mode is one of avoidance rather than escapism. (*Ecology without Nature* hereafter *EWN* 122-125)

As such,

‘Nature’ fails to serve ecology well. [Morton’s use of capitalisation in this text serves] to highlight its ‘unnatural’ qualities, namely (but not limited to), hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery. Ecology can do without a something [. . .] ‘over yonder’, called Nature [. . .] Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. (*The Ecological Thought* hereafter *TET* 3-6)

This is political and socially applicable and relevant, too, since ‘Thinking ecologically isn’t simply about nonhuman things. Ecology has to do with you and me [. . .] *The ecological thought* is the thinking of interconnectedness.’ (*TET* 7) The new nature writing of Burnside, Robertson and Jamie attempts to understand the environment not as a stable and reassuring backdrop, but as a dynamic part of our existence within a late capitalist and hyper-developed environment; ideas of nation and self are contingent on changing and interconnected environments, natural and otherwise. Examined ecocritically, their work posits a more nuanced view of nature, nation and self than the ‘quasi-political’ tendency that Morton mistrusts, and offers a fruitful means of examining contemporary literary and political concerns within contemporary Scottish poetry.

### **Scottish Spaces: Land and Environment in the Contemporary Nation**

The political, philosophical and narrative ways that space is used and conceived of in Scotland are tied to a concrete set of land uses, historical and contemporary. Four hundred and thirty-two individuals own over half of Scotland’s non-public land, and there are one hundred and forty-four estates of over ten thousand hectares across the country; its largest private landowner remains the Duke of Buccleuch. It is also worth noting that

In Scotland – as the sale of the Cluny estate showed – it’s still not always known who owns what. The ownership of huge tracts of Highland land is obscured by shady

offshore accounts and secretive trusts. It was also suggested that government ministers should be empowered to intervene where the scale of land ownership or the conduct of a landlord was blocking sustainable development. (Jamie *London Review of Books* 37.8 26)

Attempts to counter such anonymous private holdings have been made via initiatives such as the 2003 Land Reform Act, and the creation in 2012 of a Land Reform Review Group. The former lent greater power to inhabitants of Scottish land and to the devolved parliament in Edinburgh; the latter was established to examine the various types of land ownership at work in Scotland, and the ways in which the devolved Scottish Parliament should seek to manage land in future. In social-political terms, this reform aligns with the leftist conceptions of an independent Scotland that pursues such schemes as public ownership for local land, and that focuses on sustainable and affordable housing for citizens in Scotland.<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion of the report states that ‘the Scottish Government and local authorities should have a right to register a statutory right of pre-emption over land where that is in the public interest’ (45). Space as a commodity is politicised and deployed in ways that are determined by the owners of that space; the questions therefore of who has access to what space, to which ends, and in what ways, are politically pertinent and central to the narratives that the poets craft and interrogate in their work. Kathleen Jamie for example, explicitly addresses the return of land to public ownership in the essay ‘In Fife,’ in which she recounts the loch by her home being bought by the community as a result of the 2003 Land Reform Act’s ‘provision for a community right to buy scheme [giving] the local community [. . .] first refusal [should a landowner wish to sell].’ (*London Review of Books* 37.8 26) Jamie’s understanding of space is shaped by questions of access and belonging, of resources and how they are used, for and by whom. She notes too that, coming in the wake of the 2014 independence vote, ‘Those of us who had voted yes in September felt that this was what we’d been voting for: land reform, accountability, participation, ministers who have some relationship with the people they serve’ (ibid.). Space is both a reflection of the politicised relationship Jamie (and other citizens) have to the land they walk on, live on, vote on, and the literal embodiment of our human relationship to nature and the spaces we inhabit more broadly. The act of ‘buying back’ land and reverting ownership to a community places the

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00451087.pdf>

abstract notion of home into black-and-white contracted legal truths. In poetic terms, these questions are made manifest in the poetry of ancient spaces, cleared highlands, renamed roads, landmarks and villages, and the post-industrial vistas of late twentieth-century Scotland. Philosophically, these issues link to the conception of the ecological as a way of accepting responsibility for the space one takes up; the understanding that nature and humanity are inextricable parts of a wider ecosystem, and that huge environmental events (e.g. climate change, nuclear proliferation) and small-scale interactions with each specific space one inhabits are part of the same necessary quest to engage soundly with the world. This thesis forms an ecocritical perspective that sees the intersections of cultural, economic and ecological conceptions of space; it is aware of globalisation's effect on border and access and sees within the poets' work the championing of creative border-crossings, and support for the removal of borders, both economic and theoretical, to reshape the spaces in which we live. The way we interact with our environment is to an extent dictated by the access we have to it, and the ways in which we are persuaded to conceive of it.<sup>4</sup>

Scotland is 'a small country' physically and demographically; it is approximately eighty thousand square kilometres with a population of just over five million. Its 'small' status further serves as an ideological appellation aimed to distance it as a contingent part of the United Kingdom, another small country that has in cultural discourse refuted and refused the term, adopting the idea of 'punching above its weight' as a national marker aligned to globalised and imperialist conceptions.<sup>5</sup> It also applies critically. As Michael Gardiner observes, 'in Deleuzean terms, both Scotland and England are *minor* nations within the UK state, and are forced into *becoming*, a process which has long seemed much more urgent in Scotland' (*From Trocchi to Trainspotting* 5). This urgency has been attributed to on-going debates about devolved powers and full political independence for Scotland from that same UK state, and has been frequently critically configured as a Scottish versus English (literature, culture, politics, identity) debate. The consistent position of Scottish government in opposition to Westminster policy in recent years has been perhaps most pronounced with regards to the Brexit vote; Scotland voted to stay in the EU in contrast to the overall

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<sup>4</sup> See Timothy Morton. Wayne Leys Memorial Lecture, S. Illinois University, Carbondale. 2011. YouTube: 'Hyperobjects are those large and incomprehensible objects as exist relative to humanity— the biosphere, star systems, plutonium etc. [they] are real things, really existing in this physical realm.'

<sup>5</sup> See David Cameron cited Jamie *New York Times* n.p.

UK-wide result, with all thirty-two council areas voting Remain.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of the vote, especially coming so close on the heels of the 2014 independence referendum, in which ‘No’ won by a narrow margin (partially on the grounds of Scotland’s lack of EU and European trade market access should they leave the UK),<sup>7</sup> the concept of Scotland as ‘a small country’ has been used to further the image of the nation as collaborative, outward looking and realist; this is pitched against the image of the UK state as one obsessed with past perceptions of itself as a global imperial power, as a damaged and myopic nation-state that places isolationist self-aggrandisement above co-operative internationalism.<sup>8</sup> In twenty-first century Europe (and beyond), a ‘small country’ by these terms is an ethical thing to be. The mandate for Brexit has been laid down as a case of ‘returning sovereignty’ to Parliament and ‘representing the will of the people’;<sup>9</sup> the irony of that has not been lost on the Scottish Parliament, many of whose arguments for Scottish independence, when made along those lines, have been repeatedly rejected by Westminster and featured prominently in the Better Together campaign material.<sup>10</sup> This posits nation (and space more broadly) as a neoliberal construction, which requires economic and cultural definition. Ecocriticism pushes back against this and seeks alternative narratives for place and space.

So, in the current climate, the ‘small country’ is one that is broadly leftist, that is outward-looking, that is collaborative and open-bordered; its poetry of place therefore reflects this openness and interaction. This image is not always compatible with the realities

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information>

<sup>7</sup> <https://web-beta.archive.org/web/20140910074416/http://bettertogether.net:80/the-facts/entry/eu-membership>

<sup>8</sup> See Bell, E. *Questioning Scotland*: 67-69, which examines Tom Nairn’s assertion that Englishness has not been separable from Britishness since the eighteenth century, and the failure of Blairite politics to effect lasting or radical sociopolitical change in favour of devolution to give the impression of the same. This also chimes with Scott Hames’ views on devolution. See Hames *The Bottle Imp Supplement 1* (March 2014): 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://leave.eu/>

<sup>10</sup> ‘There are already substantial new powers agreed for our Parliament. [. . .] All three parties that support Better Together have published detailed proposals to deliver new powers for the Scottish Parliament [. . .]having our own parliament works for Scotland [. . .] the nationalists’ plans would spell the end of devolution’ <https://web-beta.archive.org/web/20140827030158/http://bettertogether.net/the-facts/entry/further-devolution1>

of a globalised nation-state, at odds with the poets' approaches to ecological concerns within their work. Ursula Heise explains that environmental justice ecocriticism

rejects economic globalisation, which it understands to be dominated by transnational corporations, but welcomes cultural border crossings and alliances, especially when they are initiated by the disenfranchised in the current economic world order. The interdependencies of these two forms of globalisation, however, deserve closer theoretical scrutiny. (*Ecocriticism* 173)

Though the social stance of the SNP has been more left-wing than that of the current Westminster government, Scotland remains at base a neoliberal nation.<sup>11</sup> This construction of the national is something that the poets (especially Burnside) expose in their treatment of space. This socio-political aspect of independence (albeit deferred or denied) has shaped the sociopolitical climate of the 'small country' that they write from, and informs writing around border-crossings, of both changeable identities and spaces, and issues of vulnerability and empathy. Burnside, Jamie and Robertson all use these concepts to explore the ideas of nation, nature and self within their writing. Burnside frequently writes poetry of the suburban, the sub-suburban and the factory town, the half-spaces and what have been dubbed 'Edgelands'; transitional and interstitial spaces, hangovers from heavy industry or the eerie vacant lots of late capital.<sup>12</sup> He is concerned with notions of the human as an interloper into 'the real world' outside of the rule of current society, and the effect of industrial and post-industrial spaces on the psyche of (particularly male) inhabitants of Scotland and the UK. He shares this concern with Robertson, who examines modern masculinity within Scottish landscapes alongside the paradoxical fragility of human life in modernity. The liminal qualities of the spaces Burnside's poetry inhabits are key to the neo-lyric poetry that he writes. Form, whilst not in any measure avant-garde in any of the poets' work, is aptly tied to the thematic concerns that they raise.

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<sup>11</sup> For analysis of the tension between the SNP's environmental justice policies and their neoliberal approach, see Eurig Scandrett, 'Environmental Justice in Scotland: Incorporation and Conflict.' *Neoliberal Scotland: Class and Society in a Stateless Nation*. Eds. Neil Davidson, Patricia McCafferty and David Miller. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. Print: 183-202.

<sup>12</sup> See *Edgelands: Journeys Into England's True Wilderness*. Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley. London: Vintage 2011.

The liminal quality of the lyric makes it an ideal form to tackle the poetry of a changing place.<sup>13</sup> Robertson writes about the ways in which the narratives we build around certain spaces sustain imagination and identities even when the physical reality of those places change, or the language we use to relate to them is altered. He also writes about the body as ecology; the realities of a well and unwell body, and the ways in which one negotiates the space one inhabits when those spaces break down inform how he shapes selfhood in contemporary writing. Jamie, too, writes from a physicalised sense of self in the world, and her experiences of living in a sick body. Her work has the added facet of her gender; her interaction with space and selfhood as a woman forms potent parts of her oeuvre. For Jamie, further, the poetry of place is more explicitly politicised with regards to the mechanisms of Scotland's political present than is the case with Burnside and Robertson. Space to her is necessarily a question of responsibility and interaction (as she lays out in 'In Fife'); one must care for the land one has a stake in. Jamie utilises travel in her work as a way of communicating how she broadens the terms of that investment, and as a way to situate her 'small country' within wider global parameters when discussing concepts of nation. Burnside takes almost exclusively the 'small acts' of a life in the world to scale up to wider national and global concerns of space, and Robertson writes poetry that is firmly located in the physical spaces of its depiction, attuned to the narrative power that we lend to place via our tellings.

### **Nationalism and Scottish Literature: A Critical Position/The Critical Climate of Scottish Literature**

Following the resurgence in Scottish Literature in the early twentieth century (the 'Scottish Renaissance', spearheaded by Christopher Murray Grieve as Hugh MacDiarmid), along with the modernist interest in cosmopolitanism, place, and the pathologising of origins, national and linguistic-focused criticism set the groundwork for how much of Scottish Literature has been talked about since 1900.<sup>14</sup> The two persisting attributes of the nation-centric or nationalist approach to Scottish literature (and poetry specifically) in the later twentieth century are: Scotland as a politically separate entity, a multivalent and international-looking

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<sup>13</sup> See Burnside 1996: 'The lyric poem is the point of intersection between place and a specific moment or moments' (201).

<sup>14</sup> See McCulloch, Margery Palmer Ed. *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918–1939*. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004. Print.

nation state apart from England or the Anglo-British state identity (devolution, cultural and political, being key to this characterisation); and Scottish writing examined as a minority literature (often one removed from the canon except for when its achievements can be co-opted by it, as Craig lays out in *Out of History*).<sup>15</sup>

Morton explains, '*Nature and nation* are very closely intertwined [. . .] ecocritique could examine the ways in which nature does not necessarily take us outside society, but actually forms the bedrock of nationalist enjoyment.' (EWN 15) When the natural world is seen as resource or commodity, it exists to serve the interests of 'the nation'. Jamie, Burnside and Robertson continually challenge conservative political and social conceptions of statehood, place and the arts. Michael Gardiner charts and problematises this development:

One dubious legacy of the 1990s boom, partly because of critical academic methods which eschewed theory, was a resurgent tendency to nativise the canon, fixing Scottish literature to Scottish history, preferring to be diagnostic about the origins of writers, or of characters. Literature has sometimes been reduced to a cipher for national identity. [. . .] More fundamentally, even during the devolutionary phase Scottishness was still often seen as an ethnic belonging, stretching back unbroken [and] the welding of language to nation is both a great weakness and an ethical

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<sup>15</sup> See Shaffer, E. S. *Comparative Criticism 19: Literary Devolution: Writing in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print; Sassi, Carla *Why Scottish Literature Matters* Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 2005; Carruthers, Gerard and Liam McIlvanney Eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Print; Watson, Roderick. *The Literature of Scotland, ii. The Twentieth Century*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 [1984], Print; Nicholson, Colin Ed. *Poem, Purpose and Place: Shaping Identity in Contemporary Scottish Verse*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992. Print; Morgan, Edwin. 'MacDiarmid's Later Poetry against an International Background'. *Scottish Literary Journal* 5.2. Aberdeen: Scottish Arts Council & Scottish Literary Studies, 1978. Print: 20-35; Marsack, Robyn. 'A Declaration of Independence: Edwin Morgan and Contemporary Poetry'. *About Edwin Morgan*. Eds. Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990. Print: 23-38; Lindsay, Maurice Ed. *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance 1925-1975*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1976. Print; *The Bottle Imp 10: Tartan Nation*. Enstam, Gwen and Duncan Jones Eds. Glasgow University, 2011. Web; Hames, Scott Ed. *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*. Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2012. Print; Kelman, James. 'The "Britain is a Country" Fallacy'. Word Power Books, 13 May 2013: Web and Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* [1975]. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. Print.

problem, since it privileges some languages and turns the nation from state-political to ethnic-nostalgic. In other words, as national redefinition was spread in the 1990s by a new confidence, the marketing of that new confidence sometimes tended to close down the very liberating possibilities that were so needed. (*The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* 192)

Burnside, Jamie and Robertson all respond to this framework by removing the potentially stifling focus on Scotland-as-nation as it has been repeatedly examined. Instead, they transfer their attention to issues of place, environment and identity on a more ecocritical level. This can be political-national, but is also frequently at odds with a hegemonic conception of nationalism and of Scottishness. For all three, place, the sense of one's connection to and experience of a given landscape, offers scope to examine the importance of such subjects as sustainability, ecology, identity, political and cultural exigency and personal ideology. Their work highlights the potential for 'small countries' and 'forgotten places' to offer new templates for understanding self, nation and nature in the globalised twenty-first century. Statehood and identity have been repeatedly politicised and examined in Scottish writing; following the failed 2014 referendum vote for independence, this approach seeks to explore how 'the small country' of Scotland is imagined in current ecological, political and poetic terms. As Tom Bristow claims, 'the relation between thought and perception is something that ecocriticism is well positioned to analyse from its expertise and interest in energy from Romantic "directiveness" to the post-structuralist "eternal moment"' (*Green Letters* 51), as well as how such philosophy comes to bear more incisively on questions of space and nation, combining the material realities of land use, political power and economic systems alongside issues of environmental degradation and social justice.

Place is a key concern of Scottish literary criticism, especially as it pertains to the construction of a national character for Scotland and its writing. It has been seen alongside other factors such as language, class and gender, and those subjects frequently intersect with ideas of place and geography to construct a sense of identity and inquiry in Scottish literature. In tracing the ecological and the political concerns of Jamie, Burnside and Robertson, it is perhaps helpful to situate this thesis alongside some of the prevailing concerns of recent critical study before specifying further my own focus.

Positioning cultural independence as a result of a lack of political independence has often been cited as key to Scottish literature; in particular with regard to the recognition of language as a political tool that allies it to nationalist agency within writing. There is a tendency to use vernacular literature as a marker of Scottishness that pushes back against British (English) hegemony in the wake of political sublimation. That is to say, it must be recognised and used not just as a means by which status and inclusion in canons can be traced, but as a tool to exclude non-national literature and so something to focus on as indicative of 'true' or 'representative' texts in the building of new national pride in a canon of one's own.<sup>16</sup> Criticism moves from the literary consideration of 'fit' and 'unfit' vernacular to the idea that non-standard vernaculars become politically powerful and exigent by their mere existence. Linguistic methods of defining self and separateness give way to the more abstract positioning of nation as one 'product' amongst many, looking more globally to ideas of identity and accepting nationhood as granted, whilst still exploring what that nation means, interrogating economic and ecological globalisations. Poetry is especially well placed to confront, examine and rework these tropes and assumptions via its choice of language and subject matter.

Language and class have been inexorably linked in critical discourse; class is used as an alternative way of understanding the political distance between Scotland and England (i.e. not the nation/nation-state paradigm, so much as a working/middle class split or a left/right wing split, or a populist-political vs. elitist-apolitical framework).<sup>17</sup> While these aspects are especially strong in the drama practitioners of the period and its critics (partially due to the established idea of the politically-literate theatre audience within Scotland,

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Brown, Ian and Alan Riach Eds. *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009; *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*. Colin Nicholson and Matt McGuire, Eds. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. Edinburgh Companions to Scottish Literature Ser. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Findlay, Richard J. 'Unionism and Dependency Culture Politics and State Intervention in Scotland, 1988-1997.' *Unionist Scotland 1800-1907*. MacDonald, Catriona M.M. Ed. Edinburgh: John Donald, 1998. Print; Harvie, Christopher. *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Scotland 1914-1980*. London: Edward Arnold, 1981. New History of Scotland Ser. Ed. Jeremy Wormald. Print; Lamond, Ian and Kath Doherty. 'From Cultural Heritage to Cultural Enterprise: the Transition from Major to Blair and its implications for State Intervention in Culture', 2012. Web; Davidson, Neil, Patricia McCafferty and David Miller Eds. *Neoliberal Scotland: Class and Society in a Stateless Nation*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010. Print.

which has a strong tradition of working class and politically active dramaturges, that is not seen as existing on such a scale for other genres), the poets in this thesis also examine their own (and by extension their communities') class-positioning.<sup>18</sup> John Burnside's autobiographical *A Lie About my Father* (hereafter *LF*) charts Burnside senior's struggle to reconcile his individual unhappiness with the broader prejudices of class and parentage, while poems such as Jamie's 'Child with Pillar Box and Bin Bags' (*The Queen of Sheba* 15), unsentimentally and perceptively delineate on-going class (and gendered) divides in contemporary Scotland.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of Scotland as a nation subsumed by a nation-state has led to critical parallels with postcolonial theory. Critics such as Gardiner are careful to stress the obviously problematic discourse of equating the Scottish experience of the British imperial mission (from which it benefitted heavily) with that of colonised people, instead examining Scotland in terms of reading the postcolonial as 'an index of modernity's configuration of political space' (Gardiner *Scottish Studies Review* 2.1 24). Ideas of cultural resistance, and of the validity of minor and 'peripheral' cultures, and the re-evaluating of Eurocentric and Enlightenment worldviews, are an avenue of criticism in which Scottish literature has found fruitful expression.<sup>20</sup> As with nationalist and class-based readings, language use and prestige are often invoked in postcolonial readings, along with the politics of translation and

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<sup>18</sup> Kershaw, Baz. 'Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999.' *Theatre Journal* 51.3 (1999): 267-283. Web; DiCenzo, Maria. *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre Ser. Print; McGrath, John. *A Good Night Out*. London; Nick Hern, 1996. Print; Brown, Ian and John Ramage. 'Referendum to Referendum and beyond: Political Vitality and Scottish Theatre'. *The Irish Review* 28 (2001): 46-57. Web.

<sup>19</sup> See Winning *Contemporary Women's Poetry* 232-233

<sup>20</sup> Findlay, Alec and Kevin MacNeil Eds. *Wish I Was Here: A Scottish Multicultural Anthology*. Edinburgh: pocketbooks, 2000. Print. Gardiner, Michael. *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Gardiner, Graeme Macdonald and Niall O' Gallagher. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Print.; Connell, Liam. 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Post-Colonial Theory'. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23:1, 23:2. Duke University Press, 2003. Web; Bell, Eleanor. *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, and Postnationalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004; Bell, Eleanor and Gavin Miller Eds. *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. Print. Burnside, John. 'The Tyranny of the World's "Centre"'. *New Statesman* 26 June 2014. Online.

dissemination.<sup>21</sup> As such, the line along which Scottish writers are both othered and complicit is often a socio-linguistic one. Where Scottish literature is at once demotic and literary, it can exist as both intrinsically part of a wider imperialist/mainstream 'EngLit' canon, as a marginalised minority literature, and a source of literary 'flavour' in an increasingly saturated market. Scotland and its national identity, and therefore its relationship with the outside world both political and environmental, is something that is defined by a sort of universal specificity; in being unique and demotic, it resonates with minority languages and cultures the world over. Within ecocritical frameworks it is possible 'to bring postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance' (Huggan and Tiffin *Ecocriticism* 179). Scotland as conceived in literary terms becomes both independent and interactive in its conceptions of self and its relationships with the wider world and its systems.

These attributes have been assigned to the 'Scottish Psyche', giving us the enduring theory of 'Caledonian Antisyzygy', the supposed dual nature of Scottishness—violent and reserved, Presbyterian and Pagan, Enlightened and uncanny— which has long been a critical touchstone.<sup>22</sup> The heterogeneous nature of Scotland has been used to bolster a cultural-national identity that has pushed for devolution, and has announced a cultural independence in the face of political disenfranchisement. However, a more careful conception of this identity might be to align it less with ethno-national or pseudo-anthropological formations and instead see beyond this trope to a consistent and intriguing political and ecological-philosophical approach that allows for political and philosophical engagement beyond the national lens. That this paradoxically forms the basis for renewed

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<sup>21</sup> Krause, Corinna. 'Gaelic Scotland – A Postcolonial Site? In Search of a Meaningful Theoretical Framework to Assess the Dynamics of Contemporary Scottish Gaelic Verse.' *eSharp 6.1, Identity and Marginality*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2006. Online; Lehner, Stefanie. 'Towards a subaltern aesthetics: Reassessing Postcolonial Criticism for contemporary Northern Irish and Scottish Literatures. James Kelman and Robert McLiam Wilson's Rewriting of National Paradigms'. *eSharp Issue 5 Borders and Boundaries*, Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2005. Connell, Liam and Victoria Sheppard. 'Race, Nation, Class and Language Use in Tom Leonard's *Intimate Voices* and Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*'. *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Gardiner, Graeme Macdonald and Niall O' Gallagher. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Print

<sup>22</sup> See G. Gregory Smith. *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*. Whitefish, Montana: 2007 [1919]. Print.

nationalist or pro-independence sentiment (and a workable model beyond the essentially conservative one of Devo-Max e.g.) is not so contradictory when it is considered as a stance that coalesces over time with a particular political aim, but that nevertheless offers an alternative, more rigorous option for its eventual realisation (and therefore sits outside of the prevalent political discourse in some ways).

In a 2010 anthology Alec Findlay and Kevin McNeil challenge the idea of Scottishness as an intrinsically white, European identity, or as one (rightful to be chary of) ethnically-derived at all.<sup>23</sup> They refocus debate on writers of various backgrounds and cultural-linguistic heritage and reposition Scotland within a political framework that seeks to reject a mainstream British identity that is politically affiliated with wider neoliberal ideals. This conception of nation and nationalism (i.e. one that is not tied to the sort of ethnogeographies that Britishness still carries with it) also underpins much of the way that the Yes campaign framed Scotland and Scottishness in the run up to 2014's vote. Gardiner attempts to untangle the problematic aspects of conflating Scottish writing and the Postcolonial as it is more widely understood. He claims:

Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature are less separate trends or two sets of texts, than intricately related and often conjoined critical positionings in relation to a much longer history, which has as one of its main objectives a critique of the jurisdiction of the imperial mode of British state culture. (Capital letters here reflect a disciplinary or counter-disciplinary status, rather than merely text arising from specific nationalities.) (*Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature* 1)

This identity is a politically constructed one, and is illustrative of a growing trend that rejects nationalist focus, and instead seeks to align political ideals and the cultural-critical history of the postcolonial movement as a basis to create a new nation-specific set of theoretic approaches to literary and societal issues. Broadly, there is a move through the subjects

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<sup>23</sup> Findlay, Alec and Kevin MacNeil Eds. *Wish I Was Here: A Scottish Multicultural Anthology*. Edinburgh: pocketbooks, 2000. Print. Interestingly, the collection also contains a CD from Aeolus recordings, of three of the featured poets reading 'out in the "real world"' (*Wish I was Here* 208). The recording 'aims to create a sense of place, the place of the recording, and the place that is the individual voice and experience.' (*ibid.*) This is true of much of the work of Burnside, Robertson and Jamie, and is especially pertinent here in the case of writers of colour being centred as writers of Scotland.

outlined above that usually starts by positioning itself within the cultural-political framework of 'a Scotland' or 'the nation' but that constantly seeks to move down into the many internal structures and divisions that exist. Whilst the colonial cannot be applied to a country that was so complicit in the British imperial project, the effects of dominant cultural, racial and social hegemonies within the increasingly globalised space we occupy can be.

The ecological relates to this thesis as a philosophical model outlined by Timothy Morton and as the sphere of environmental science and awareness; both facets underpin its approach to the poets' work and their literary and political stances. Ecocriticism which focuses on the political facets that affect the spaces we inhabit, and that examines issues of environmental justice alongside conceptions of the natural world, also underpins this thesis' approach. Interconnectedness is crucial to all three poets; the ways in which we interact with other beings and the world at large forms the basis of much of their work. Morton's definitions connect with Burnside's own philosophy on the purpose of lyric and his writing of the same; echoing almost verbatim Morton's definitions of the ecological and the concerns Morton outlines as its purview, Burnside suggests that

the lyric poem is the point of intersection between place and a specific moment or moments [. . .] the poem of place always contains an implied observer, whose identity is inextricably linked to whatever is being observed [. . .] indistinguishable from the things perceived [. . .]The enterprise of the lyric is, in fact, to identify home [. . .] the distinction between place and space [. . .] lyric 'poetry of place' concerns itself with specific locales [. . .] to set up a kind of metaphysical space, which is essentially empty, a region of potential in which anything can happen. (*Poetry and a Sense of Place* hereafter *PSP* 201)

Burnside offers a critical approach that dovetails with Morton's philosophical interrogation of the ecological. Morton's definition can be applied to the work each of the poets undertake, wherein the ecological thought takes a material view of the surrounding world and seeks a way of reworking our relationship with the natural world and the processes of the human as they intersect with and impact on it. Robertson and Jamie both explore the subjects that Burnside outlines. As well as centring interstitial spaces in terms of

understanding place (the paradoxical necessity of specific 'space' as catalyst for this again), Burnside notes that in order to create and interact with this 'region of potential', one must abandon the concept of oneself as exceptionally individual. He goes on to note:

Experiments in sensory deprivation have shown that, when external stimuli are withdrawn from an object, the subject effectively disintegrates, losing all sense of self. Identity, in other words, can only be sustained via transactions, whether with human beings, or with a living and changing environment. (*PSP* 202)

Jamie has spoken about her approach to poetry as a 'writing towards' (*Telegraph* n.p.), claiming 'more and more [. . .] I think the job is to listen, to pay attention.'

(*BooksfromScotland* n.p.) For Jamie too, the role of observer is key. Poets for her 'use language as a form of seeing' (*ibid.*), and in doing so come to recognise that to situate the human as apart from the nonhuman is redundant, and that instead one must locate oneself as part of an ecological whole; an ecosystem of which one is as intrinsically a part as a starling, a birch, a system in potential in itself, 'in our anatomy and mortality.' This enables us to avoid 'regarding nature as other, different, an "outdoors" an "environment" [which perpetuates and signifies] our alienation from ourselves' (Jamie *BooksfromScotland* n.p.)

These realisations are powerful because they, at base, upset fundamental conceptions of the self, and the human, and the role of that self within a wider world. As Nurit Bird-Davis posits, the poetical socio-political power of a rejection of the modernist 'individual' provides us with a new way of speaking about the relationships at play in modern existence. In recognising and resisting damaging structures, trying to understand and reorient concepts such as nation, autonomy (both political and social), and to reconfigure the way in which these hopes can be transmitted and achieved, the ecological provides a critical basis that the language of epistemology can support. Bird-Davis suggests the idea of 'dividuation' to communicate this development:

When I 'individuate' a human being I am conscious of her 'in herself' (as a single separate entity); when I dividuate her I am conscious of how she relates with me [. . .] attentive to what she does in relation to what I do, to how she talks and listens to me as I talk and listen to her, to what happens simultaneously and mutually, to me,

to her, to us.<sup>24</sup> (72)

This idea is one that Robertson, Jamie and Burnside have posited in their work. Morton has admitted that ‘the ethics of the ecological thought is to regard beings as people even when they aren’t people. Ancient animisms treat beings as people, without a concept of Nature. Perhaps I’m aiming for an upgraded version of animism.’ (TET 8) Bird-Davis gives us the vocabulary to treat such upgraded animisms as relational epistemology, explaining that

to ‘talk with a tree’ — rather than ‘cut it down’ — is to perceive what *it* does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree [the hope therefore, is that one’s interaction will permit for] growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility. (77)

This aligns directly with Morton’s ecological configuration of ‘zones’ as areas of effect called into being by the innate relationship between humans and objects in the world. Similar to Bird-Davis, Morton asks

What if [such an epistemology] was just the way, ontological, one object apprehends another object? Not that this pen is alive, but that what I do when I think about the pen is like the pen resting on the table. So that actually it’s incredibly default and we’ve been looking in the wrong place [. . .] The next step looks a little bit like some kind of Animism, but it’s not really Animism, because we know too much [. . .] about objects [. . .] I call it Age of Asymmetry [. . .] tremendous scientific knowledge, and tremendous strangeness, at the same time (*Wayne Leys Memorial Lecture* hereafter *WLML* n.p.)

To state explicitly the aim of such thinking:

If the object of modernist epistemology is a totalising scheme of separated essences, approached ideally from a separated viewpoint, the object of this animistic knowledge is understanding relatedness from a related point of view, within the

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<sup>24</sup> This idea is derived from ‘[Marilyn] Strathern’s “dividual” (a person constitutive of relationships)’ which Bird-Davis utilises to conjugate ‘the verb “to dividuate”’ (Bird-Davis, 72) See *Property, Substance and Effect. Anthropological essays on persons and things*. London: Athlone Press (1999)

shifting horizons of the related viewer [which requires] developing the skills of being-in-the-world with other things [. . .] dividuating the environment rather than dichotomising it (Bird-Davis 77-78)

These two phenomenological, epistemological approaches give a sound critical groundwork and explanation for the impetus behind much of Burnside, Jamie and Robertson's work over the last thirty years. Morton subscribes to Shelley's idea that 'a poem is a message in a bottle from the future' (*WLML* n.p.) and Burnside et al certainly treat the poem as in itself a sort of hyperobject; their poems exist as ecological entities, which demand a space to be opened up in potential in order for the reader to engage with them on their most transformative level. They pose ecocritical questions of how human and nonhuman beings interact, and the ways in which our social and political systems shape our environments. The poets' writings 'see the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present' (*ibid.*). This is doubly true of poetry that deals with aspects of ecological catastrophe and epidemic inequality. In using them as a basis for examining their texts, one can tease out a philosophy of place and self that provides a potentially radical and certainly necessary approach to ideas of the nation-state, of power structures and of relational dynamics that is timely. In utilising the potential within the lyric for self-examination, fluidity and movement within a given moment or space, this traditional, even unchallenging mode, when aligned to the ecological, provides a canvas on which challenging philosophies or questions can be placed.

### **New Semiotics: 'Place Markers' for Scotland**

The awareness of structures in the wider environments of modernity lends an increasing sensitivity to Scottish literary criticism. By looking again at place and how ecological modes of poetic engagement can create new political spaces, the three poets the thesis studies open this critical discourse up yet further, and attempt to reconcile their application with the wider understanding of Scottish Literature between devolutions and the potential socio-political position of the poets as we move into the twenty-first century.

For all three poets, the connection with the landscape and in turn that landscape's connection with nation, is not the ethnocentric, mythologised Celtic Twilight of Yeats' Ireland or the Lallans Renaissance of Hugh MacDiarmid. For none of the writers does Scotland in its physicality offer a connection to 'A Scotland' in its entirety. The land often

offers a glimpse of a world order that passes on without human intervention, or that struggles to recover as a result of that intervention. The snow, hills, waters and woods of Scotland are places of forgetting, of quietude, of revelation and of sorrow. They also are universal places; each wood in Scotland has a parallel with a forest in Sweden, each hill a mountain in India, each coastline an ocean reaching the opposite shore.<sup>25</sup> The motifs of Scotland in each poet's work are ambivalent, nuanced and multivalent. Robertson for example, returns often to the amnesiac quality of snow in his poems, for example the night in 'Hammersmith Winter' that is

too cold for snow,

and yet it snows. Through the drawn curtain shines the snowlight

I remember as a boy, sitting up at the window watching it fall. But

you're not here, now, to lead me back (*The Wrecking Light* hereafter *TWL* 90)

Memory and landscape are not intertwined in the ways one might expect. Memory is not present within the land; in fact, nature and the landscape work against each other to hide that potential remembrance. The memory that returns Robertson to his childhood is also one triggered by a London night; the specific space of his remembrance does not require that it take place within a Scottish winter, merely that the poet be able to interact with the place he finds himself within to draw parallels. This is a direct break from the idea of nature as a way into the history of a place; the people that can connect with 'their' land will somehow know themselves. This same sense of connectedness and place leads Jamie to conflate the travels she herself undertook through Tibet with those of others in *The Autonomous Region* (hereafter *AR*), her 1993 poetry collection. In it, Jamie parallels her own journey with the fictionalised travels of two (non-fictional) historic figures; Wencheng, a seventh-century Tang princess and later queen of Tibet who is said to have brought Buddhism to the region, and Fa-Hsien (Faxian), a fourth-century Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled from China to India on foot. Ancient national history combines with modern-day political upheaval and ideas of nation (her travels coincided with the Tiananmen

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<sup>25</sup> See for example Tomas Tranströmer. *The Deleted World*. London: Enitharmon Press, 2006 [2006]. Trans. Robin Robertson. Print; Jamie. *The Golden Peak*. London: Virago, 1992. Print.

massacre) and she links the image of the ‘traveller’ across various geographies, cultures and timeframes.

For Jamie, the history of a landscape is not to act as a legitimisation of a lineage or an affirmation of specific nationhood. Rather it is to posit a communion between the settlements of the past and present, and to attempt an understanding of how humans have and will interact with and live on the land they populate. Jamie is also attuned to the importance of human imagination in transforming and sourcing meaning from the natural and the archaeological, and the subtle and inextricable ways this information shapes concepts of self, nation and environment. She writes in her 2012 collection of essays, *Sightlines*, that: ‘because of the earthfast notion that time is deep, that memories are buried, the Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts occupy the windowless basement level of the National Museum [of Scotland, in Edinburgh]’ (43). Her ability to translate the symbolically-constructed meanings of the past, both natural and archival, lends nuance to poems like ‘Excavation and Recovery’, which asks:

what were you to them, river [ . . . ]

*an estuary with a discharge of 160 cubic metres of water per second*

as per the experts’ report?

*or Tay/Toi/Taum – a goddess;*

the Flowing (?), the Silent One (?) (*The Overhaul* 8)

Jamie’s exploration of the river’s changing meaning is based firmly in a materialism that acknowledges the mutable relationship of humans to places and artefacts over time. She both mourns the loss of a more ‘poetic’ interpretation and acknowledges her distance from it. The only answers we are left with at the poem’s end are the river’s names as a signifier for the trademark inscrutability of the natural world. The Tay, despite our excavations, literal and literary, remains ‘silent’. There is no sense that the presumed ‘we’ of present day Scotland can be easily identified with or inheritors of the ‘them’ of prehistoric Tayside. Burnside’s relation to the landscape is even less anthropocentric; there is no hint of national lineage being traced, only the understanding of an irrecoverable ecological philosophy and

of a potential for human intervention or interference; often in his writing, he finds that 'This could be a world/ of perfect balance [. . .] and we appear / only by chance' (*The Hoop* hereafter *H* 17). In each case the landscapes of Scotland (and beyond) offer liminal spaces of poetic discovery, the theoretical and literal ground on which the poets place their philosophy and attempt to write a poetics that is ecologically minded and politically engaged.

### **Setting a Scene: the Work of Edwin Morgan and Douglas Dunn 1964-1984**

The ecological is a concern to be found in Scottish poetry beyond the work of Burnside, Jamie and Robertson. There are precedents in the work of both Douglas Dunn and Edwin Morgan; Dunn's socially-conscious and considered lyricism and Morgan's wide-ranging ecologies and explorations of self both speak to an ecocritical framework, concerned with environmental and social justice, that informs much of Burnside, Jamie and Robertson's work. Dunn and Morgan are both integral figures to twentieth-century Scottish poetry; both appear in the anthology *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance 1925-1975*, categorised as members of the golden age of Scottish writing; later, in 2000, both are included in the Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah-edited *Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (even with some overlap; two of the same poems, Morgan's 'King Billy' and Dunn's 'Landscape with One Figure' are printed in both volumes). Both have held long academic careers and both have written over a dozen works over five decades.<sup>26</sup> Born in 1920, Edwin Morgan perhaps casts the biggest shadow over twentieth-century Scottish poetry since Hugh MacDiarmid.<sup>27</sup> Douglas Dunn was born a generation later in 1938, and published his first collection of poems in 1969; the generational gap plus Dunn's formalism and tendency toward more pastoral or nostalgic subject matter, make him an interesting counterpoint for

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<sup>26</sup> See James Kidd 'Bibliography' *Reading Douglas Dunn* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1992: 182-285 for a complete list of Dunn's works up until that date (Collections *Dante's Drum Kit* [1993], *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* [1995], *The Donkey's Ear* and *The Year's Afternoon* [Both 200] as well as Dunn's *New Selected Poems 1964-2000* [2002] followed. See also: Hamish Whyte. 'Edwin Morgan: A Checklist' *About Edwin Morgan*. Eds. Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990. Collections *Hold Hands Among the Atoms* [1991], *Virtual and Other Realities* [1997], *Demon* [1999], *New Selected Poems* [2000], *Love and a Life* [2003], *Cathures* [2002] and *A Book of Lives* [2007] followed.

<sup>27</sup> *Strong Words* p. 190

the stylistic and thematic concerns of writers coming to maturity in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>28</sup> As Jamie, Burnside, Robertson will do later, both Morgan and Dunn utilise the landscapes of Scotland within an international and global framework to underscore the necessity of responsibility, or dividuality, of creating a poetics out of not just the spaces that are most amenable to a mythologised Scotland, but out of the reality of slums, flyovers, mouldering islands and the fields required of commercial farmlands. Their ability to see the poetic and political potential in the spaces of contemporary capitalism is mirrored in the ecological poetry of Burnside, Jamie and Robertson.

Dunn's first collection can be seen as a blueprint for how Scottish poetry in general has been approached critically in the twentieth century: left-leaning, socially-involved, lyrically-constructed and with a strong sense of place.<sup>29</sup> *Terry Street* (hereafter *TS*), though set in Hull, is in many senses typical of Scottish poetry. As with 'Hammersmith Winter', the universal specificity of 'a certain type' of place leads to an examination of the experience of life under globalisation. Dunn is also arguably a traditional exponent of what can be seen as the archetypal 'Scottish Poet': white, male, rural, working-class yet educated, socially-engaged, and able to balance the unlearned truth of his Scottishness with the anglicised patterns and presentations of poetry, constantly looking to explore or reconcile the two 'polarities'. Dunn's *TS* was very-much focused on the English quotidian, and Dunn seeks to explore, as Jamie et al will do in their own work, the spaces to which we are granted access, and the lives they allow for in poems like 'A Removal from Terry Street':

[Pushing], of all things, a lawnmower.

There is no grass in Terry Street. The worms

Come up cracks in concrete yards in moonlight.

That man, I wish him well, I wish him grass. (5)

Or 'Incident in the Shop':

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas Dunn talking with Robert Crawford. *Verse* 4. 12 June 1985: 26-34

<sup>29</sup> Though, as discussed below, this idea is not met without challenge by Dunn, the poet has been explicit on his political stance, claiming in a 1985 interview with Bernard O' Donoghue published in *Oxford Poetry* 2.2: 'my political instincts have been republican for as long as I can remember and they've always existed in relation to Scotland' (44).

I feel the draughts on her legs,  
The nip of cheap detergent on her hands. [. . .]  
Her husband beats her. Old women  
Talk of it behind her back, watching her.  
She buys the darkest rose I ever saw,  
And tucks the stem into her plastic belt. (4)

In 1968, just before Dunn released *TS*, Morgan released his collection *The Second Life* (hereafter *SL*), widely regarded as a seminal work in terms of his maturation as a poet, and a microcosmic example of the subject matter that has formed the basis for his poetic interests over his entire oeuvre. Morgan is aware of the deterritorialising effect of twentieth-century globalisation, and takes a putatively ecological view of issues of location and interrelation across borders (cultural and international). Morgan states that American poetic thought, and in particular the Beat movement, opened up new possibilities for his writing at the time:

[**Morgan:**] In Ginsberg it was equally a freedom of spirit and of form. [Of] a new amalgam of liberation towards the end of the 1950s [. . .] [**Herbert:**] Ginsberg demands a dimension of social responsibility, of direct comment. Does that appeal? [**Morgan:**] Yes [. . .] the ‘direct comment’ [. . .] guards and guarantees the ‘social responsibility’. That is what the Americans have to give us, peculiarly [. . .] you can write poetry about anything [. . .] world, history, society, everything in it, pleads to become a voice, voices (*Nothing Not Giving Messages* 114).

Morgan too recounts observances of urban scenes with compassionate distance and humanity, such as his elegy to the artist Joan Eardley and the streets she painted in ‘To Joan Eardley’, in which Morgan extols the capacity of art to regain what is lost as well as to document the present (a pressing concern of his):<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Marsack: ‘Morgan’s approach to [history] is very different from Dunn’s. His perspective on it is often geological: not the landscape worked by man, rather what was

Such rags and streaks  
that master us! –  
that fix what the pick  
and bulldozer have crumbled  
to a dingier dust [ . . . ]  
No window opened  
as the coal cart rolled [ . . . ]  
But the shrill children  
jump on my wall. (*SL* 25)

His interest in voice is pronounced in *SL*. Unlike Dunn, Morgan's poetic subjects often speak for themselves, the poet acting less as observer/interceder and more as an as-near-to-invisible-as-possible conduit for the subject's words to reach the reader. In 'Good Friday', the poetic voice is approached at 'Three o' clock' as 'The bus lurches/round in the sun' (26) by a second speaker who inquires 'D's this go—/ [ . . . ] right along Bath Street?' (*ibid.*). He goes on to explain

I've had a wee drink, ye understand – ye'll maybe think it's a – funny day  
to be celebrating—well, no, but ye see  
I wasny working, and I like to celebrate  
when I'm no working – [ . . . ]  
ye see today,  
take today, I don't know what today's in aid of,

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given, and what might be left [ . . . ] Political desire and scepticism informs Morgan's work [ . . . ] but not the desire to narrate one particular struggle, or to meditate on the dissolution of a community or an empire.' (34-5)

whether Christ was crucified or was he—

rose fae the dead like, see what I mean?

You're an educaitit man, you can tell me [. . .]

the working man [. . .]

he jist cannae [. . .]

he's jist bliddy ignorant (*ibid.*).

Like Dunn, Morgan is focused on the humanity of his subjects and the crises they find themselves in. We see a suggestion of an ecological focus on space and self in his interest in the spaces his subjects inhabit; the later poets deal explicitly with this interaction. Morgan does not explicitly align this crisis with urbanity or modernity, instead using those as conditions by which new experiences of living must be examined, but not by which they are necessarily threatened. Neither poet deals simplistically with the effect of modernity, and (especially for Dunn)<sup>31</sup> modernity as an end in itself is seen as insufficient; poetry must interrogate these effects to find meaningful poetic sustenance. We see echoes of this in Burnside's work particularly; he like Dunn distrusts the relationships we are able to form with the spaces that modernity opens up for us in many cases, and seeks something beyond (though not necessarily 'before') to counteract this enervation. Stylistically, Robyn Marsack claims that unlike Dunn

Morgan did not pick up on the element in American poetry [of] the return to centre-stage of the biographical element, the rage for confession—however imperially handled and set against the backdrop of a raging history, as in Lowell's case. [Morgan] could make some sense of Williams [via his newfound interest in the Beats]. The importance of Williams for Morgan [. . .] lies in the way [Williams managed] to anchor his larger vision in the quiddities of everyday life, without trivialising them. He often celebrates a quality of stubborn endurance, in humanity as in nature, with an optimism akin to Morgan's own (34).

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<sup>31</sup> See 'Douglas Dunn talking with Robert Crawford 12 June 1985'. *Verse* 4. Eds Robert Crawford and W.N Herbert. Oxford: 26-34.

Indeed, Williams summarises many of the ideas Morgan's work in the 1960s and 1970s examines in 'On Measure—Statement for Cid Corman' when he claims:

The very grounds for our beliefs have altered. We do not live that way anymore; nothing in our lives [. . .] is ordered according to that measure; our social concepts, our very religious ideas, certainly our understanding of mathematics are greatly altered (83-84).

Williams' 'mathematics' can be read as analogous to Morgan's 'science' and what will become the formation of Morton's 'ecology without nature'; the respective disciplines in which new discoveries and advances are being made which change one's wider perception of the world. Morgan's space-travel narratives in *SL* and his post-apocalyptic scenes of Scotland in *Sonnets From Scotland* (hereafter *SFS*) work by displaying these 'altered' states and looking for a common thread of belief or understanding that can be poetically exploited. Dunn's response to these sonnets is not always warm; he feels that the recycling of images like the abandoned Scottish parliament or the overgrown Princes Street of 'The Age of Heracleum' become in the 1980s somewhat of a cliché that detracts from the poetic weight one should feel in examining the issues of Scotland's past and present.<sup>32</sup>

Both Morgan and Dunn released collections that deal explicitly with Scotland and its literary-cultural state in the 1980s. This is perhaps unsurprising; Dunn published *St Kilda's Parliament* (hereafter *SKP*) in 1981, two years after the failed Devolution referendum of 1979 and two years into the Conservative Thatcher government. Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* was released in 1984, in the middle of her tenure. Dunn's poem 'St Kilda's Parliament 1879-1979: The Photographer Revisits his Picture' focuses on the rural community of St. Kilda and the restoration of its local parliamentary powers as observed by the (time-travelling) photographer who first documented the parliament 100 years previously in 1879, opening on 'a rock-paved lane' in 'soft mists/with rain, with roaring gales'. Morgan's *SFS* trace 'Scotland' from pre-history to poetic present to the imagined far-future. Both deal with what Scotland could be, and with how it has been represented up until this point. In interview with Robert Crawford in 1985, Dunn claims:

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<sup>32</sup> See Dunn, Douglas. 'Review: Edwin Morgan, "Sonnets from Scotland"'. *Times Literary Supplement* April 26 1985. London: The Times, 1985: Print: 470.

I think it could be argued that remote communities manage to sustain an ethic which when contrasted with the priorities of more up-to-date sophisticated contemporary societies and communities looks increasingly valuable. [. . .] The appearance of a countryside dramatises so much about changes in life, livelihoods [. . .] suggests what's permanent about what people do, and those things which are temporary (*Verse 26-7*).

In a similar vein, Burnside has said: 'in a city [. . .] you don't see the power structures as clearly. In small towns, you see those power structures very clearly; you are born into them, and, unless you move away, it's very hard to get out of them.' (*The Bottle Imp 13 1*) This at-a-glance conservative or unthreatening setting, instead of giving way to parochialism, can be repurposed to explore deeply-entrenched structures within wider society, and in doing so to create a shared political-philosophical space out of a specific and contained — even insular— literal one. This awareness of space radiates outward from the 'small town' and individuals within it, to the nation to the world, to the hyperobjects; the constructions of each space are laid bare and therefore those spaces' attendant power structures and their effects are made visible and vulnerable to critique. Both Dunn and Morgan deal with ideas of loss, nostalgia and belonging in their works.

Dunn had dealt previously with Scottish settings and explicit reflections on his nationality as opposed to his status as an outsider, in his 1974 collection *Love or Nothing* (hereafter *LON*). In 'Renfrewshire Traveller', Dunn's speaker is

Scots, a tartan tin box  
Of shortbread in a delicatessen of cheddars  
And southern specialities.  
I am full of poison.  
Each crumb of me is a death. (22)

He muses on his status as defined by those facets of Scottishness that permeate the culture of the small English city he lives in, and that permeate a wider cultural consciousness, outside of his immediate home, where he is 'Not this visitor,/To a place of relatives,/A place

of names' (23). Unlike Morgan, for Dunn it is the unreality of the city rather than its concrete fact, '[rising] from its brilliant lack' with 'skyward tenements' that make him aware of himself as something at once unreal and tangible and quotidian (the shortbread tin 'full of poison' for example). The material realities of the spaces that they inhabit inform the poetic-philosophic responses of Morgan and Dunn. Later, in 'Caledonian Moonlight', Dunn finds the 'white moon' with its 'prodigal rays' works better as a connective (if still melancholic) symbol; it shows him 'the last wildcat in the county', 'the beautiful white face of a secretary / [. . .] in the shut eyes of a bachelor caretaker' (*LON* 38), his mother 'handing a plate of sandwiches to the minister' (*ibid.*). All of these moments of contact are longed-for or abortive, but the moon functions as a better connective device than the train line Dunn's 'Renfrewshire Traveller' rides, or the lights of the city he encounters. They reflect to him only his isolation; the moon in 'Caledonian Moonlight' becomes infinite, proverbially changeable, as Dunn's speaker concludes that 'There are more moons in the night/Than eyes of those that see them' (*LON* 38). The natural world provides more 'reality' for Dunn; whilst its appearances are still metaphoric they are also absolutely experienced and observed in the diegetic worlds of the poetry as tangible objects in real landscapes. He finds them resonant, more so than the urban landscapes of the collection, which do not serve as a backdrop to actual lives and events but become psychological sounding boards and representations of disconnected identity.

In *SKP*, he explores similar themes: his settings are rural, pan-historical and imbued with psychological and social significance. For Dunn the natural world is not so much 'out there' as it is the arena which houses representative parts of the inner life of the poet/poem; the natural world is the real background to Dunn's imagined spaces, and so we see again a prototypically ecological underpinning to his work. The island's 'derelict byres and barns' (26) have called back the speaker and recall to him, in the Heaney-evoking 'Washing the Coins', 'hands on which the earth had dried in layers' (24). The lost past is recoverable through the act of memory and poiesis, as triggered by the connection to the landscape and its historical signifiers. This stays true for Burnside et al; signifiers of past and memory permeate the poetic spaces of their writing; they act on, change and effect the inhabitants of this space, and they in turn shape their environments. This dialogic relationship is one that is personal, ecological and sociopolitical. It speaks to the ways in

which we create home and (de)value the places defined as 'out there' as we struggle to remain 'here'.

Morgan's focus remains in the built environment and its immediacy and towards the repositioning stance of MacDiarmid, and more further afield, the work of Hart Crane: 'Crane gives us a very real bridge in the city of New York but Eliot looks at the crowds going over London Bridge and finds it unreal. Can you believe it? Can you believe that a man like that existed?' (*Edwin Morgan: An Interview* 12) The material fact of the environments Morgan writes about is crucial to his philosophy and his aesthetic. His attempts to energise both the sonnet format and/or the urban landscape of Glasgow (depending on which side of the argument you fall) are testament not only to his belief that the 'real thing' be present in itself as well as in its mythologizing/poeticising, as he says of Glasgow in Gray's *Lanark*, but that also the essential humanity of poet and place be displayed via form and intent. This connection to the real also lends Morgan's conceptions and representation of nationality within his poetry a deal of consideration:

**[Crawford:]** Did it matter to you to attempt a poetry that was both joyous and Scottish? **[Morgan:]** I suppose so [. . .] partly a temperament thing and partly a sense of Scottish poetry- I think there has been a good deal of recognition of the comic in the whole Scottish tradition, which I liked. If I was reading Dunbar or Burns or MacDiarmid, comedy was obviously important to all of them, even though they were serious poets [. . .] Maybe the energy of language that you get from satire can be in a way positive although you're attacking something (*Nothing Not Giving Messages* 127).

The specific socio-linguistic space that can be created by demotic or culturally informal language use reorients readers and poets to the spaces of their language's creation and deployment. There is a delight in language and its possibilities, a playfulness in its use that realises his ambitions of a joyful Scottish poetry. W.N Herbert summarises his approach by explaining that

Morgan has attempted to respond to the successive waves of the communications explosion. He has created forms which mimic modern technology's mouthpieces [. . .] invented his own extra-terrestrial (and sub-aquatic) gibberish. He has even put

himself in the stylistic corner of the sonnet for several extended sequences. The obvious question is: to what extent is this because he is Scottish, and how far does his work exhibit a Scottish attitude towards language? [. . .] the linguistic self-mutilation enacted by such illustrious Scotsmen as David Hume and Tobias Smollett, R.L. Stevenson's scrupulous creation of his 'style' and Hugh MacDiarmid's various apologies for his 'incorrigibly maladroit terminology' all suggest that a verbal supersensitivity is one continuing trait of the Scottish sensibility (*About Edwin Morgan* 65-6).

In ecological terms, such supersensitivity is a democratising impetus; it seeks to renew and remodel language to express within established and elite generic forms (poetry, or essay in this case) the possibility of interrelation, insight, and truth via demotic means. It is not a gimmick or a problematic 'characteristic' but instead a radical marker of democratic engagement within philosophy and poetics. In his concrete poetry and his science fiction work Morgan is able to subvert the expectations of language to bear on ideas of poetic form but also of national linguistic traits and status. Herbert goes on to talk about 'The First Men on Mercury' in this regard, claiming that the Mercurians are representative of a Scots/Glaswegian paradigm vs. the English spacemen, and they wield the upper hand 'in their ability to appropriate and redirect language.' (ibid. 67) Crawford also sees Morgan's 'linguistic translation [as] bound up with physical translation—travelling from Earth to Mercury. Another version of the translation that changes is seen clearly in the poems "In Sobieski's Shield" where the survivors of a dying world are translated across the galaxy, and changed in the process' (ibid. 18). His fascination with sci-fi also suggests Morgan's to be a proto-ecological voice in the sense that this thesis applies the term to Burnside, Jamie and Robertson.

Morgan's work frequently deals with what Morton will later term 'hyperobjects'. By writing of these objects, placing poetry within and about them, Morgan communicates the ways in which our conception of ourselves, our 'place' in the universe as it were, has been radically shifted in the course of the twentieth century, and suggests ways in which that change should be utilised to best effect. That 'The First Men of Mercury' centres around an attempt at communication is another endorsement of dividuation, of the ecological; finding meaning becomes possible only by attempting interaction. The power balance shifts

between the explorer-colonisers and the Mercurians; this too supports the reading that a shift in understood and reified structures of power is necessary and the importance of new voices becomes literalised. In Dunn's work, language is more formally constructed and, primarily, English rather than Scots. He says that in terms of Scots usage, the only words he'd use are those for which he says he knows no English equivalent (*Verse 4 31*). He focuses on the formal qualities of language, 'the music of words, the up-and-downness of the language or metre [. . .] in free verse I think there should be something to take the place of that' (*Verse 4 29*).

Dunn's photographer-protagonist is another nod to his long-time interest in photography, and its ability to be the humane and subtle bridging point between artistic subjectivity and the wider world. His speaker returns to St Kilda after a career taking photographs of 'distressed cities [. . .] portraits of successive elegants' to stand 'and look at them/ As they, too, must always look at me'. The effect of his observation and of his distance from the event and its documentation are continually worked through in *SKP*. Dunn recalls looking at a photograph of his friends taken at Niagara before their fatal crash and the eerie quality it took on after the fact and muses on the relationship between visual records and emotional responses to them.<sup>33</sup> We see a similar concern in Robertson's 'Album' (*TWL 3*), where the evidence of an event is contrasted with its on-going mutability in the subject's memory. The question of what can and cannot be preserved or revealed in material terms underlies shifting attitudes to formative events and personal histories. It is interesting to note that in the case of *St Kilda's Parliament*, Dunn does in some ways opt for the values of the past, or at least factors the issues of the present through that nostalgic lens. The paraphernalia of a life remembered is often at odds with the subjective personal experiences of that life; memories distort and shift and artefacts remain inexplicably constant.

As has been previously mentioned, the importance of these two poets in shaping the styles and responses of the poets that take Scotland into the twenty-first century is that their Scotlands occupy often overlapping but noticeably distinct spheres. Robert Crawford notes that there is in Dunn a tendency to use the canon of Scottish poetry

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<sup>33</sup> See Jane Stabler, 'Biography'. *Reading Douglas Dunn*: 8

[to carry] out an act of enlivening homage [. . .] or (riskier still) [. . .] to achieve a vintage poetic tone [. . .] this tone which sometimes vitiates his writing [his] too-literary library language hints that Dunn's wished-for Scotland has an elegiac or even archaic quality (*Reading Douglas Dunn* 113).

On the other hand, as Robyn Marsack observes, Morgan's 'movement into the far future of science fiction [. . .] does not mean a dismissal of history, but [his] approach to it is very different from Dunn's' (34), and she uses *SKP* as the counterpoint to Morgan's *SFS* to outline this distinction:

Dunn refers to his speaker in 'St Kilda's Parliament' as 'A suitably ashamed/ Observer of the poor', and risks the charge of exploiting the same people as material for his art. Morgan escapes this by his position in the poems: there is no patronising because there is no observing 'I', simply the voices of others speaking [. . .] in denying no one, except the powerful whose voices too readily find their channels, he expresses the humanity that is the constant pulse of his art (32).

Dunn's nostalgia must translate into an integrated (though not homogenised) history; the past and its spaces (literal and psychological) build today's environment. Therefore they must be seen as a series of decisions that have weight; the past is not a myth, not a lost golden age and not another country that cannot be identified in one's contemporary nation. Burnside, Robertson and Jamie deal directly with the configurations of past and nation that Dunn writes in *SKP*. In *SKP* the voices of the past impress upon the speaker in the present and make it necessary for him to act as an intermediary between his poetic historic experience and his more conflicted public-social interaction in the present. Morgan's far futures and mythologised pasts conversely set up an examination that roots itself in the possible outcomes rather than the lived legacies of the past. This approach is not without its problems; Dunn himself notes of Morgan's *SFS*, that he finds the latter's post-apocalyptic stylings trite, claiming 'some way has to be found of by-passing the cinema-dominated images with which the public mind is familiar' even as he acknowledges that 'Morgan's selections from the past are highly literary' (*TLS* 470). For Dunn, the necessity of 'being-in-the-world' is a fundamental one. He works with the imagery, places, and concerns of his tangible surroundings. His poetry and its concerns need to be situated within that world in

order for him to explore potential meanings for it. He does however note a concurrence of attitude and approach in Morgan's ability and desire to trace Scotland from prehistory to distant future.

The same mix of the pop-cultural and the mythologised informs Kathleen Jamie's *The Queen of Sheba*. It is also interesting to note that this is one of the most overtly political of Jamie's collections, and that her later work moves into a politics that is, if not broader, then more nuanced in its focus, and if not cynical, then keen to observe the ways in which neoliberal systems may fail us on a level beyond mere representation. Dunn is able to act here as a progenitor, to provide a focus that is immediate, local, and political, and as the political and social (and literal) climate of Scotland changes, we see the threads of these concerns woven into the work of Jamie et al, in a way that makes explicit the ecological and philosophical grounding that Morgan and Dunn lay down in their work.

Even at the risk of canonising past or older poets and therefore stultifying new expression in Scottish writing, Morgan, merely by his existence as a gay (albeit not out publicly until 1990) writer within an otherwise (up until this point) heteronormative and often pastoral scene, is a valid figure to represent a poetics that alters and critiques hegemonic modes of living, as a visible contributor to creating 'a platform which gives a larger national and sexual identity' (Joanne Winning *The Crazy Jig 1*) within Scottish writing. His poetry has dealt with issues of sexuality, eroticism and social unease, and well as more explicitly with ideas of social progress, urban living and the thrill of possibility for Scotland's future endeavours—always as part of the world at large. Space flights and world wars are dealt with in the same spirit as Buchanan Street shoppers and Glasgow Park rough-sleepers.<sup>34</sup> The attributes of the poetry inaugurated by Dunn and Morgan include a fascination with the new, a critical and engaged relationship with the historical, a focus on the urban, a regard for the emotive resonance of the pastoral, a formal regard that adapts verse form and relishes free verse and speech cadences, and that is concerned with reflecting locality and domestic ideologies within (and with frequent reference to) an international canon of influence and theory: predominantly American, Irish (in Dunn's case)

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<sup>34</sup> See Morgan *Instamatic Poems; New Selected Poems*.

and European (Morgan).<sup>35</sup> For them, 'Scotland' is no longer enough of a subject to debate; their poetic maturities must be rooted in their ability to look into and beyond this often problematic, even prescriptive identity, and, once again find ways to make relevant and revealing commentary on the world and our places within it. This poetry is proto-ecological in its formation because it explores the limits of what is 'natural' and seeks to understand modernity's relation to the world at large.

### **Spaces of the Self**

Emerging from this poetic background, the three poets that this thesis examines are careful to write from a considered and multivalent position on questions of nature, nation and self. Kathleen Jamie's work has often followed travel narratives and reimagined historical settings. These narratives have also led to a critical coalescence around subjects of nature, gender and place within her work, and more broadly that of the Scottish poetic canon. The idea of gender as existing separate from a national identity is common. Female experiences of nation recognise the divisions inherent within any seemingly holistic or given identity merely by their existence as non-male. Dorothy McMillan charts women's poetry throughout the twentieth century, and emphasises that:

debates on gender and place, have been well rehearsed over the past thirty years which have seen a number of national anthologies and an even larger number of anthologies of women's poetry, although Catherine Kerrigan's pioneering *Scottish Women Poets* remains the only anthology that covers both categories for Scotland.  
(xxi)

For women writers, writers of colour, women writers of colour even more so, 'the nation' is not an unproblematic idea; the invocation of femaleness to embody the nation is a trope that is well-worn. Criticism that examines gender charts the ways that women have attempted to subvert and reengage with these stereotypes and images. This is certainly something that Jamie does in her work, and it continues to be a major part of the criticism that surrounds it.<sup>36</sup> The concurrent strands of ecology and feminism that can be traced in

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<sup>35</sup> See Morgan, Edwin. *Wi The Hail Voice: 25 Poems from Vladimir Mayakovsky Translated into Scots by Edwin Morgan*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1972 [1913-1930]. Print.

<sup>36</sup> Geok-lin Lim, Shirley. 'Language, Race, Nation and Gender'. *Chapman72: Ivory Towers*

Jamie's oeuvre have led to critical engagement within the ecofeminist critical school; for writers like Laura Severin, Jamie's encounters with the natural world in her work are not only (or even at all) demonstrative of a national reimagining or a sense of place within a modern and anthropocentric world, but are also a charter of her feminist credentials.<sup>37</sup> Her success in interrogating the tropes and questions of the 'natural' as it pertains to femininity are another layer of engagement to be sought in her work. Margery Palmer McCulloch has pointed out that although such 'imagery has [. . .] been regarded with some suspicion by radical feminists, [. . .] many women writers have found themselves drawn to natural world images and scenarios.' (18)

While it has been perceived as a male or even chauvinist concern, nationalism has often been an explicit focus of Jamie's. Her work engages with the promise inherent to the imagined independent Scotland wherein 'principles of accessibility and inclusiveness' (Winning *Contemporary Women's Poetry* hereafter *CWP* 227) will render the Scottish Parliament and by extension, Scotland 'more accessible, less stuffy, more *female* [as opposed to] the macho boys' club at Westminster.' (Ibid.) Beyond her optimism for the a small country that resists the hegemonies and oppressions of the UK state, Jamie uses the semiotics of place and displacement to turn her gaze inward and examine internal stratifications of place and identity in Scotland:

the Bakhtinian notion of 'another culture' [which, it is hoped, enriches and enlightens the poets' understanding of their own culture and so writing in and about it] might be extended to include the past of your own culture, or might mean the

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*under Siege*. Edinburgh: Chapman, 1993. Print; Lumsden, Alison. 'Jackie Kay's Poetry and Prose: Constructing Identity'. *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*. Eds. Eileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. Print: 79-91. McGuire, Matt. 'Kathleen Jamie'. *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*. Colin Nicholson and Matt McGuire, Eds. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. Edinburgh Companions to Scottish Literature Ser. Print: 141-153; Murray, Isobel Ed. *Scottish Writers Talking 4: Jackie Kay, Alan Massie, Ian Rankin, James Robertson, William (Bill) Watson*. Kilkerran: Zeticula, 2008. Print; Severin, Laura. 'Feminism and Environmentalism in the works of Kathleen Jamie and Valerie Gillies'. *Feminist Formations* 23.2, 2011: 98-110. Online.

<sup>37</sup> See Severin, Laura. 'Feminism and Environmentalism in the works of Kathleen Jamie and Valerie Gillies'. *Feminist Formations* 23.2, 2011: 98-110. Online.  
<[http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/journals/feminist\\_ formations/v023/23.2.severin.htm](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/journals/feminist_ formations/v023/23.2.severin.htm)>

sense of otherness brought about in a geographical move, such as travelling [. . .] It is possible, particularly if one is a woman, or black, to be 'outside' even when one is within one's own culture. In this case perhaps 'home' becomes a somewhat more difficult terrain to claim. [Robert] Crawford notes, but does not ponder the following observation: 'The poetic celebrants of home at the moment tend not to be women'.<sup>38</sup> (Winning *CWP* 233)

For Jamie, the focus on place is a way of framing the 'assertion that Scotland needs to attend democratically to "difference" both within and outwith its borders' (Winning *CWP* 234). Jamie uses the imagery of place, and one's movements through it, to chart possible means of resistance to dominant socio-political hegemonies, in this case the (British) state and as a way of envisioning potential new rationales for such a relationship to that state as it is (potentially re-) constructed. Increasingly, Jamie's 'nature writing' moves further from a human-centred, political-cultural focus, to a more classically ecocritical response even as she resists the idea that the natural world provides unchangeable or essential truths, nor stands in for the societal, where 'notions of identity and "home" are never stable or static' (Winning *CWP* 242).

The interaction between the human and the natural world is also politicised and shaped by narratives of nature, nation and self that distort our relationships to the nonhuman world in service of constructed ideologies. Burnside uses the example of 'the myth of the indefatigable honeybee' (*Nature* 29) to illustrate the way that human and animal labour were conceived and devalued in order to forge a society based on the prevailing systems still in play today:

As the Industrial Revolution unfolded, this anthropomorphic and mechanistic view of bees as little machines of honey production came to obscure their importance as the means through which more than 30% of our food crops and 90% of the world's wild flora survive [. . .] The causes [of widespread colony collapse disorder] are not yet clear, but in my view the myth of the indefatigable honeybee has played a part. What is happening serves to highlight how dangerous our stories about other animals can be, if they warp our understanding of the animals' real nature and

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<sup>38</sup> Crawford, Robert. *Identifying Poets*: 144.

needs. [Alongside such crises, Burnside claims, art] restores our sense of wonder, and so increases our respect for other life forms [. . .] writers and artists can also actively contribute new knowledge. (*Nature* 29- 30)

The ways in which we have failed to chart or check our relationship with the natural world has implications for the ways in which we ourselves are exploited and diminished by our current establishments. Burnside's analysis chimes with Morton's examination of the Romantic ideal of 'Nature' and its problematic reification. In doing so, the poets find apt allegorical bases from which to explore resistance to capitalism's exponential growth, and find parallels for many of the metanarratives of the 2014 independence referendum. For example, a broader human-nonhuman interaction is politicised within Jamie's desire for independence for Scotland. Writing for *The New York Times* in February of 2014, she stated that under the British state apparatus:

our social contract [has been] torn up, the fabric of our communities assaulted [. . .] I'm writing from the Orkney Islands in the far north of Scotland, a place of sea and hills, with a dynamic economy based on agriculture and oil, with as many links to Norway as to London.<sup>39</sup> Here the terms 'British' and 'United Kingdom' already feel remote. It is odd to hear them used as rallying cries; they awake no sentiment any more. [. . .] We seek a fresh understanding of ourselves and our relationships with the rest of Europe and the wider world. If Scotland were independent, we would have control over our own welfare and immigration policies, look more to our Scandinavian neighbours and rid ourselves of nuclear weapons [. . .] We find the prospect of being a small, independent nation on the fringe of Europe exciting, and look forward to making our own decisions, even if that means having to fix our own problems. (n.p.)

The approach of poets like Burnside, Jamie and Robertson is framed in terms of a nation that exists within a strata of wider nationalisms, within a world of varied political and ecological needs, and as a philosophy that demands humility and perhaps most crucially, sustainability. In all three poets' writing, the natural offers the pull on the end of the line; it

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<sup>39</sup> There is an irony in an independent Scotland's economy being reliant in part of fossil fuel extraction whilst Jamie also looks to environmentalist concerns such as denuclearisation.

is the figure to which one walks in the dark, the waiting voice on the phone that does not speak. In writing this experience, it is possible to refigure one's relationship with a dominant social paradigm, to reimagine modes of being that, because new, are radical. Even without stating an explicit political focus or taking as one's subject a political act, it is possible, via the experience of the poem and the experience transcribed within it, to provide the reader with a socially radical alternative to hegemony, and critics such as Gardiner have made a compelling case for the interpretation of new Scottish (inter)Nationalism as a leftist movement.<sup>40</sup>

### **Establishing Place as Problematic**

In refusing British state hegemony and seeking political independence as an economically and environmentally small-scale, sustainable national unit, Scotland could divest itself from the right-wing connotations of empire, state and history contained within the concept of 'Britain'. By filtering this work through a more nuanced set of assumptions and theoretical possibilities, we can access more politically exigent or radical modes of understanding. Gardiner explains:

[If ScotLit] departments, schools, or subject-area units merely change the writerly line-up, but continue to identify themselves in terms of the English literature method – the lives of individual authors, the 'instinctual' canon, and so on – they risk being drawn right back into the methodological gravity of empire-era English Literature. There is a real danger of a kind of Celtic Leavisism. On the other hand, these departments could reflect the lessons of the postcolonial in problematizing [sic] the creation of cultural value, and represent a new understanding of disciplinarity. [. . .] Scottish Literature could *de-invent* English literature, where postcolonial studies has often tried but frequently found itself mired back in that discipline. (*Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature* 7)

In refusing the established concerns of a national literature when talking about place, in refiguring one's relationship to both one's immediate surroundings and the state, a

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<sup>40</sup> See Gardiner 'Democracy and Scottish Postcoloniality'. *Scotlands* 3.2 (1991): 24-4; *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006 ; *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

politically powerful 'national' writing is possible. In much of Burnside's poetry and prose, the removal of oneself to an 'undesirable' space (within the terms as defined by Late Capitalist, bourgeois society) comes with an inherent political power. Whilst the inhabitants of these places are not always there by choice (with the exception of *Living Nowhere's* protagonist, who travels the UK for several years), their removal from society and their proximity to either nowhere-ness or the unnatural, industrial places that exist only to furnish factories with labour, grants insight into the way that human worlds are created and connected, and what systems of value are at work there. They also mean that the natural becomes a rare and revered thing; interactions with it constitute moments of realisation, hope and insight, or are charted as acts of resistance. For example, *Living Nowhere's* Tommy attempts to grow a garden in the shade of the plastics factory, much to his son's disdain, only to finally succeed in his old age; the garden becomes a symbol of the renewal and life his own human existence as a labourer (now suffering illness presumably related to that labour) denied him. The relationship of each of these characters to their surroundings moves from potential, to prescribed, to immovable, to oppressive, to finally, mutable and even, perhaps hopeful. Each character's relationship with the world and themselves is intimately shaped by their quotidian interactions with their own specific 'places'.

Burnside's poetic-psychological landscapes are also mapped onto the landscape of Scotland, and of the American and Scandinavian journeys he undertakes. In travelling through the world, internal and external, Burnside increasingly posits a theory of reconciliation that comes out of realising exactly how one's isolation from nature is cultivated, and how one's experience of late capitalism might be ameliorated. From an ecocritical perspective, it is not overreaching to map onto his work a political element, nor to examine this potential in the light of his position as a 'New Scottish Poet' and one of the foremost cultural figures in the Scottish literary scene.

### **A Poet's (Market) Place**

Burnside's editor at Jonathan Cape, Robin Robertson, is also a key figure within the Scottish literary scene. He has been a publisher and editor for longer than he has been a poet; his first collection, *A Painted Field* was released in 1997, at the age of forty, after nearly twenty years working in the publishing world. It went on to win that year's Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and Robertson has been one of the most critically-lauded Scottish poets of

the last twenty years, being the first person to win all three iterations of that Prize. His work returns often to the landscapes of north-eastern Scotland, and he has said of his connection to 'place' in his work: 'I grew up with a very strong sense of place, in a landscape that seemed freighted with significance, mystery and power. Everything since has seemed a displacement: a deracination.' (*Open Letters* n.p.)

His position within the publishing world also grants him insight into the commercial and cultural 'place' of Scottish poetry in the twenty-first century. Noting the shift in editorial style over the last twenty years he states:

When I first came to London there were established power-bases at various periodicals that were linked to certain publishers and which promulgated certain *types* of poetry by certain types of people. The poetry editors were all very English, very 'Oxbridge', very urbane and very male. Much of this has gone, but *you could argue that it's still male, it's still white, and it's too Scottish* (emphasis added). The audience for poetry is smaller, and probably getting smaller – given how reluctant people are to countenance the idea of engaging intellectually with art. Good art does not give up all its riches immediately; it requires an intimate communication, a communion. (ibid.)

That Robertson sat at the centre of these bases for many years before becoming a published poet himself speaks to the potential shift of the 'place' of Scottish poetry within the arts establishment in Britain over the last few decades. Fellow New Generation Scottish Poet Don Paterson at Picador edits Robertson's work, and their contemporary Robert Crawford was Polygon's poetry editor through the 1990s.<sup>41</sup> Robertson is a central figure in the representation of Scottish poetry within the establishment. This is significant, since much discourse around Scottish literature has defined its status as a reaction to centres of production or culture, and of gaining its power from the periphery it supposedly inhabits; this perhaps imbues the poets' explorations of place with an awareness of the tension between cultivated and marginal spheres of influence and creation. Robertson's writing

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<sup>41</sup> Jamie and Burnside were two of the twenty poets named in the 1994 list of 'New Generation Poets' chosen by the Poetry Society and the Arts Council. See <http://nextgenerationpoets.com/previous-generations/127-2/> and <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/new-generation-of-writers-presents-poetry-in-motion-some-of-todays-best-poetic-talents-tend-to-1399610.html>

remains focused on the peripheral; geographic, historic and philosophically remote settings recur through his oeuvre, though he himself occupies a position of centrality and power.

### **Wild Spaces and Unknown Places**

The concept of the wild and the remote are interrogated by all three writers. Jamie has written about the politicisation of wild spaces; the concept of re-introducing species and re-wilding areas, versus the compartmentalising of landscapes, given over to conservation efforts yet remote from the people they could benefit.<sup>42</sup> Robertson frequently translates Tranströmer and parallels imagery of the wildernesses of Scotland with that of Sweden. The innate bleakness or hostility of such landscapes also infuses some of the actions of his poem; often Robertson is concerned with the emanations and repercussions of violence, threat and sexuality. His long poem 'At Roane Head' for example, opens with a sinister fairy-tale mysticism: 'You'd know her house by the drawn blinds –/ by the cormorants pitched on the boundary wall,/ the black crosses of their wings hung out to dry./ You'd tell it by the/ quicken and the pine that hid it/ from the sea and from the brief light of the sun' (*The Wrecking Light* 87). The poem culminates in a drunken and deliberate act of slow violence against the children of the household by their father: 'thick with drink, saying/ he'd had enough of this,/ this witchery,/ [. . .] He went along the line/ relaxing them/ one after another/ with a small knife'.<sup>43</sup> (88) The uncanny, the mythic and the spiritual all sit alongside each other for Robertson. His landscape is one that is irrevocably steeped in history, myth, and meaning. He has said himself that 'myth or spirituality, or religion — if one has to be narrow and proscriptive — and poetry are similar ways of making sense of our lives'. (*Guardian* 2008) He concludes that, ultimately, the poet's role is to find a way to reveal 'the refreshed world and, through a language thick with sound and connotation and metaphor, make some sense: some new connection between what is seen and felt and what is understood. (Ibid.)

The substitution of natural myth for proscribed religion is a thread that connects Robertson and Burnside's writing, and Jamie has written similarly about the pull of potential truths or insights in nature in poems such as 'The Whale Watcher', whose protagonist observes the animals

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<sup>42</sup> See 'Crex Crex', *Findings* (2005).

<sup>43</sup> Although actually not, and cuckolded by the poem's speaker.

till my eyes evaporate  
and I'm willing again  
to deal myself in:  
having watched them  
breach, breathe, and dive  
far out in the glare,  
like stitches sewn in a rent  
almost beyond repair. (*The Tree House* 25)

All three writers use this instant —the edge of understanding, the abortive epiphany— as a way of parsing the connection between the natural and the metaphysical; they use these interactions to better ground themselves and their writings within the world as it exists, and to philosophise on the world as it could or might better exist should we learn to comprehend and assimilate such moments. The potential for profound thought suggested by the philosophical rendering of these encounters with the natural has bases within several schools of thought. Heideggerian methodology, when applied to Burnside's work, allows us to posit a theory of being in the world that notes our existence as transitory, and collective, not privileged,<sup>44</sup> whereas Deleuzian theory would cite these instances as a point of deterritorialisation and therefore of potential radical renewal and social impact.<sup>45</sup> As a canon, Scottish literature has been often read as explicitly political, and explicitly concerned with the granting of independence as the key component of this politics (at least in the last forty years). It is possible, without needing or forcing a reading that is obviously engaged with the question of independence (or its failure for the second time to materialise, at the time of writing), to see the ways in which these writers engage with place and self as potentially disruptive to the on-going metanarrative of Britishness and the UK state.

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<sup>44</sup> See Bristow, Tom. 'Negative Poetics and Immanence: Reading John Burnside's "Homage to Henri Bergson"'. *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 10:1. 2012: 51-61.

<sup>45</sup> See Clay, Jon. *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities*. London, Continuum: 2010. Print.

For example, Gardiner writes, from the nineteenth century on, ‘the national can be understood [. . .] as the active and historical attempt to break, or at least to make visible, the bond between class and state’ (*opendemocracy.net*). This is the political and methodological framework within which many Scottish twentieth-century writers have worked, published, been read, taught and critiqued. Much Scottish literary and cultural nationalism is posited and appraised as a way to divest Scotland of the overarching British state structure, in order to more evenly distribute power, wealth and resources. The ideal nation becomes less and less central to the idea of an independent Scotland as the twentieth century progresses; the clichéd question ‘what is a Scot?’ or ‘what is Scotland?’ evolves in the work of writers like Jamie, Burnside, Robertson and their contemporaries to look more like a question of ‘where does Scotland find itself?’, ‘what can Scotland be?’ Jamie certainly is vocal about this potential as the driving force behind her vision for a Scottish independent state, as mentioned above. As such, ‘for English Literature right up to New Criticism and beyond to the 1980s Scottish fiction renaissance, writing has been an especially dangerous form of *action*, troubling the apparently natural bond between cultural value and the unreachability of tradition’ (Gardiner *opendemocracy.net*). All three writers are concerned with the mutability of truth, both in a personal-philosophical sense, and in terms of how they define and experience self, place, and more broadly, nation.

### **Theory and the Politicising of Place**

Methodologically, alongside Morton’s work, Heideggerean theories of being-in-the world support the sense in all three writers that the revelation of meaning is changing, provisional and unfixed.<sup>46</sup> To filter these philosophies through wider Marxist applications also helps to align the ecological and the political strands of this thesis. The cultural theory of Gilles Deleuze provides an apt and helpful lens through which to coalesce these elements; in terms of their social and critical application via a worldly or political viewpoint. That is not to say that the writers themselves are Deleuzean, but that Deleuze’s theory of deterritorialisation is useful in terms of combining the theoretical approaches outlined above.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See Heidegger Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. Print.

<sup>47</sup> See Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014

It is possible, through reading the nature writing and the place-relations of each of the three writers that this thesis studies, to chart a way through the political and critical receptions of place as intrinsic to nation and ideology. The poetry of Jamie, Burnside and Robertson is potentially deregulating and deterritorialising, philosophically attuned to and developed by renewed understanding of modes of being in the world. Jamie's understanding of place often follows lines of de- and re- territorialisation. Her earlier travel prose and poems revel in border-crossing, in new experiences throwing familiar ones into relief, and in expanding her reach and autonomy as both a writer and a woman. She returns this sense of expansion and of deterritorialisation to her later nature writing, which emphasises the possibility of resistance and innovation that is possible by reconnecting with the natural world. Jamie is also aware of the potential reterritorialisation (that is to say the forcible replacing of borders, or of the writer's crossings being beyond their own control) that exists when the natural is essentialised or blithely politicised. Her most nuanced interrogation of this comes in her later volume *Frissure*, which charts her reclamation and recovery from breast cancer. Her body becomes a radical site of deterritorialisation, a reaction to the Deleuzian reterritorialising effect of the illness. In this work, she coalesces the concerns of her early works regarding autonomy, feminine identity, sexuality, place and possibility, with the semi-spiritual and analytical focus of her later nature writing, to great effect.

The bodily and its potential for betrayal or corruption also form central parts of Robertson's oeuvre; he too charts the ontological effects of living in a sick body, and the physicality inherent to ecological concepts of being. Burnside looks through the eyes of drunken, addicted, psychotic, dissociated and disaffected (usually) men, and in doing so posits his work as keenly concerned with drawing out the interruption between life and lived experience. Nature and place are ciphers that allow insight into minds that are increasingly unattached to societal and psychosocial mores. The self for Burnside is engendered and antagonised by the various external stimuli of the natural and manmade environments that surround it; our inability to accurately read and establish these stimuli form the central conflict that his writing seeks to understand. Conflict for Robertson is also

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(1994) [1968]. Trans. Paul Patton. Print; Gilles Deleuze and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1980]. Trans. Brian Massumi. Print.

often linked to the signs present in the landscape and the human misunderstanding of those same signifiers. His work utilises a vocabulary that is closely tied to the evocative, expansive vistas of his settings. The potential for violence, disruption or obliteration are recurring motifs. The visceral and animal nature of the human form and its vulnerability to those outside environmental factors are seen in his use of recurrent characters such as Dionysus and Actaeon, and of settings, such as coastal Scotland. For Jamie, becoming aware of the boundaries we cross, geographic, physical and social, leads to a poetry that understands the need to exploit our unique status among animals to affect change.

The sense of place in the work of these poets covers a wide swathe, and the relationship forged between people and place is a central and abiding tenet. They all figure this relationship in differing and adaptive ways; via ontological, ecological, political and metaphysical approaches. Their findings are rarely trite or complacent, nor their relationships imperious or straightforward. In presenting us with a body of writing that so frequently applies, adapts and codifies these symbols, semiotics and relations, Burnside, Robertson and Jamie offer a politically charged and environmentally-focused poetry that speaks to the ways in which citizens and states are attempting to reconsider their relationship with the wider environments of our creation and continuation. It links to ecocritical concerns of environmental justice, social parity, ecological crisis and the imperialist tendency within much of the environmentalist discourse of the global north. The thesis aims to chart the poets' work in terms of their connection with the natural, their sense of themselves as grounded within certain settings at certain times, their understanding of how one's sense of place is shaped by outside forces, social, political and metaphysical, and to examine the space opened up by such poetry to reconsider and resist neoliberal models of nation and environment within contemporary criticism.

Self

**'By which we create ourselves from moment to moment': John Burnside's Spiritual Ecology**

Burnside's conception of nature, nation and self centres on the ability to find within each of these constructions a means of connecting to the present moment and environment to identify and nurture a compassionate part of oneself within it. The natural world, and specifically a renewed respect for and relationship with it, offers to him the chance for a fully-integrated self. This relationship provides a mitigation of the isolating effects of contemporary modernity. By acknowledging and developing this awareness, he comes to an understanding of self, nature and nation to form a poetics of place that frequently stands in opposition to the overarching contemporary social and political systems in the global north. Asked to summarise his approach to poetry for the 2000 essay anthology *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (hereafter SW) Burnside writes that

from the beginning, I was interested in the spirit [. . .] an imaginative [. . .] process: an *inventio*, by which we create ourselves from moment to moment, just as the world round us creates itself out of nothing. [By spiritual] I mean a way of thinking both reverent and inventive in its vision of nature (and so, of necessity, of the other). (259)

Burnside's manifesto and his motivation are succinctly captured by the constructs of '*inventio*' and 'spirit'. Not only does the rhetorical conception of *inventio* provide the key to Burnside's rigorously self-analytical writing, it also acts as the touchstone for the profoundly ecological nature of his work. Burnside's is a poetry whose thinking is ecological in both traditional terms (i.e. concern with the environment around us and its preservation) but also in the specific theoretic way that Morton lays out. His and Burnside's 'ecological thought' is one that can be more accurately understood and examined as a meaningfully political and social ecology, 'abandoning the idea of Nature [as] an ideological barrier to realising how everything is interconnected.' (Morton ET 99) Burnside's writing consistently

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<sup>48</sup> Burnside *All One Breath* 14

looks for points of connection and creation, the internal argument to link experience and possibility. He attempts an approach to the natural world that is 'both reverent and inventive in its vision of nature' (Burnside *SW* 259), and his work maintains 'a near-obsessive curiosity about what the world [is] like for other creatures' (Burnside *New Statesman* 142 30). He is also aware of the capriciousness of such a concept. These connections and impressions are sustained from 'moment to moment'. Here, Burnside echoes Robin Robertson's emphasis on 'swithering'; issues and images of changeability, the within-and-without-ness of identity and environment permeate both poets' writing.<sup>49</sup> This is a strongly ecological way of thinking and writing; it recognises the inherent connectivity of all life, and refuses to other 'the natural world'. Instead, it sees humanity as part and parcel of that world in all our affected unnaturalness.<sup>50</sup>

For all this, Burnside's *inventio* diverges from Derrida's 'invention of the other'; for Burnside, it is the interrogation *of* that invention.<sup>51</sup> The other is not just the 'natural' (read: nonhuman, the 'out-there' to humanity's 'in-here'), but our own conceptions of selfhood and space. Our memories and philosophy all 'create [them]selves out of nothing' (*SW* 259); any separateness we experience is created, destroyed, accessed and lost 'from moment to moment', and is only reconciled by counting ourselves under the aegis of 'other'. In this way, Burnside's starting point is that of all three writers discussed in this thesis; from their various angles and to their swithering conclusions they approach and insert themselves into the web of the ecological, in hopes of providing poetic, social and spiritual developments. According to Burnside, it is only by recognising the 'spirit', that we grant ourselves access to the arguments that will facilitate our lives, and if not our wellbeing, then at least our survival. This is the factor of our relationship to nature, nation and self that Burnside sees as vital. He explores the possibility of locating within these constructions, the 'spirit' that will

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<sup>49</sup> The title of Robertson's 2006 poetry collection, a Scots word meaning to vacillate or be in two minds, but also to appear changeable or indeterminate.

<sup>50</sup> Jamie also subscribes wholeheartedly to this philosophical grounding; she has said 'we are nature. Regarding nature as "other", different, an "outdoors", an "environment" speaks volumes about our alienation from ourselves' (2006 n.p). Jamie's body of work has moved increasingly from national or gendered focuses, to an approach that also encompasses identity within an ecological political and theoretical context similar to that of Robertson and Burnside.

<sup>51</sup> See Derrida, Jacques. *Psyche*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007 [1987]. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Print.

connect him to the whole, and allow him to integrate into the wider web of existence and so see the world differently. Burnside has consistently returned to the possibility of the spirit; he sees this as something enriching, inherent in the connective places, times and moments that we experience. His writing claims that awareness of such possibility is necessary not only for fulfilment, but for existence. 'As a child,' he writes, 'I thought Beath woods were magical: so close to home, yet so dark and damp, they were haunted by tawny owls and foxes; haunted, too, by strange noises and movements in the dark that nobody could explain' (LF 40).

The inexplicable, the transcendent, and the uncaptured qualities that Burnside finds in these natural or newly 'wild' spaces are not only poetically powerful to him, but part of a political and ethical (re)education that is of paramount importance. As he states,

Clearly, some changes in that proprietorial view of the world as 'resource' and 'natural assets' have been slowly and painfully formulated over the past four decades and, with this gradual shift in attitude, new ways have emerged of imagining our relationship to what we think of as 'nature' (an entity from which, it seems, we still feel at least partly exempt). (31)

The same central tenet of connectivity, present in moments where one experiences the lack of distance between one's self and the space one inhabits, informs the political philosophy behind Burnside's prose. He sees malaise arising from mis- or dis-placement, and it is through prose that this rhetoric finds its most discursive expression. Burnside often uses his novels to focus on inhabitants of industrial suburbia.<sup>52</sup> He writes towns that exist to serve factories, quarries, or that no longer serve any meaningful 'purpose' under capitalism.<sup>53</sup> The way that space is bought up and transformed to bring commercial value is something Burnside sees as inherently wrongheaded and unhealthy, stating that 'to enclose is capitalism's central intention' and that 'whatever *actual* forms they take, enclosures are

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<sup>52</sup> Burnside's novels *Glisters*, *The Mercy Boys*, *Living Nowhere* and all take place within such settings. *A Summer of Drowning* is an interesting exception, relocating the action to a remote island in the Arctic Circle, another 'abandoned' and inhospitable place, and another environment with the potential to be vastly affected by the movements of capital.

<sup>53</sup> "'Empty" space—space that capitalism has left relatively undeveloped—is intrinsic to capitalism, since the laws of capital may dictate that a vacant lot is more profitable over a certain span of time than one that has been developed. *Plot* is a potential space, a limbo waiting to generate value.' (Morton EWN 86)

always presented as *improvements*' (*New Essays on John Clare* hereafter EJC 81-2).<sup>54</sup> The fascination with, fear of, and attempt to intervene in, a reified (un)natural order from one's position outside of that order, permeates Burnside's work.

Interactions between nature and the human in Burnside's prose especially are explicitly political in nature; the abortive relationships of the characters within his novels dramatise the types of people we are becoming in our current and constructed environments. His poetry consistently presents moments at which these relationships might be instigated or revealed. Although Burnside's poetry and prose does not engage overtly with debates of independence, it is possible to trace a connection between his work and a theory of nation and nationalism pertaining to Scotland. Burnside mistrusts nation as an umbrella under which global capitalism operates and can disguise its workings.<sup>55</sup> He unpacks this in his work via his frequent focus on working-class protagonists. Many of the labourers within his novels for example, are Scots who have moved away to work, or working-class Scots in Scotland living within deprived suburbia. Place is inherently politicised when Burnside writes about such spaces. Such conurbations are seen as intrusions on the landscape; part of the capitalist apparatus that sickens the environment; examples include the mysterious disused chemical plant in his 2001 novel *Glister*, or as in *Living Nowhere*, holding pens for an unwanted and disenfranchised (and overwhelmingly male) populace. Burnside insinuates that the idea of ourselves as discrete entities within such a landscape is fraudulent, a conceit as damaging as it is seductive.

In his debut collection, he utilises the language of enclosure to underscore the anaesthetic qualities we have ascribed to privatisation of our environments, and of our bodies-as-dwelling-spaces that are removed from the wider web of the natural world:

Nothing soothes us more  
than hedges and doors  
and the sense of ourselves /

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<sup>54</sup> In reference to the Enclosures of the eighteenth Century which saw newly bought up private land changing public access to once shared spaces. Smallholdings of rural communities were bought up to create larger farms to the financial benefit of the new landowners.

<sup>55</sup> 'I don't like nations. [. . .] The more monolithic are the nations the bigger [. . .] capitalist power structures which are then oppressive to people.' (Burnside qtd. *Dósa Scottish Studies Review* 4.1 17)

as secret rooms. (*The Hoop* hereafter *H* 33)

The separation of the self, and the creation of identity as 'apart-from', is a comfort, a hedge to partition us and 'soothe'. The idea that we can exist as 'secret rooms' is tantalising and untenable; after all, any doors defining the boundaries of ourselves must open both ways. Any inhabitant, human or other, is part and parcel of its surroundings for Burnside, whether it realises or not. He seeks a way to integrate spirit and world, and to find a relational poetics that opens up the spaces in which this relationship can be made possible. In an enervating environment, there is only so long that the 'spirit' can be preserved from ill-effects. For example, one of the protagonists in his second novel, *The Mercy Boys*, (hereafter *MB*) has a wrenching epiphany on studying his surroundings that:

he would become a man like his father, a man who would have to work stuck in some pit or mill all day, or in some factory amongst the roaring and screaming of machines, then come home to a house that wasn't really his, an alien space that others had occupied all day and made their own, a place with secrets and special codes, fragments of mystery and magic he wouldn't understand. (218)

Being a 'secret room' in this instance is just to cut oneself off from any liveable environment, leaving no space to combat 'the harm done: whole, complex terrains cleared' (*New Statesman* 142 30). The lack of liveable space, since so much is dedicated to commercial enterprises, and therefore often held in stasis for economic reasons, leaves sections of society without a place; in Burnside's work a working-class and often male group have no *oikos*, no ecology, no connection to a wider community or environment, and therefore no 'spirit' or access to it. Even the making of a home is not permitted to these men; they can find no space to occupy that will align spiritually or personally with their sense of self. His novels chart the results of this philosophy as Burnside sees it; the poems chart the meanings of this philosophy, its presence in action and its potential. The possibility of connection, change and transformation is present but never achieved for the characters in his prose.

There is the continuous suggestion that it is stagnation that underlies the processes of violence in the novels; unhealthy places engender unhealthy spirits:

[Alan] realised Rob really was sick. Sick in his body, and sick in his mind, but most of

all, sick in his soul. People didn't believe in that kind of thing so much anymore, but Alan knew there was something there, a soul, a spirit, something that made you who you were, something original, something that couldn't be changed by the ordinary events of a life. (*MB* 246)

The death of the soul, (or spirit, and what here might critically be equated with or termed as 'the ecological') is laid squarely at the doorstep of late capitalism. Burnside's poetry is concerned with the display of his unease about the processes of capitalist enterprise. The political *mise-en-scène* of Burnside's prose suggests the draining presence of capital is most keenly felt in its ability to denature and deconstruct place. For example, Burnside puts *MB*'s only suggestion of progression in the mouth of a man who lives outside of the 'dead land' of the town. It is 'something in Woodruff's voice' that suggests to Alan 'other possibilities, ways of being that were different from his own' (*MB* 88). It is possible to read the events of Burnside's prose as charting abortive attempts to escape this socio-political situation to attempt to reconnect or discover the spiritual impulse that Alan sees as so perverted within Rob. If his prose writes abortive attempts to escape, his poetry offers the spaces to and in which that escape might be realised. The desire for escape and transformation finds expression in the poems Burnside writes about the refusal to exist in the world as it is made for us, and in the potential to bring into our existence the world that is held at arm's reach. For Burnside, the desire to reconcile body and mind, built and nonhuman environments, takes on a pressing metaphysical importance in his writing.

### **Spaces Apart: Insanity and Disengagement**

Burnside has written that 'refusal is the first step in constructing an alternative order' (*EJC* 93), and that, without glamorising the events or implications of the alcoholism or violence enacted by Burnside's male protagonists, their 'performed madness is an attempt to live according to some improvised, but meaningful, law in a social milieu where even the most fundamental laws have become corrupt' (*ibid.* 87-8). For want of any other way to engage with or connect to the vast spiritual power inherent in the natural world, the only option is to opt-out of the world constructed for you. A similar exploration of the idea that insanity manifests as a rejection of untenable social environments features in Burnside's autobiographical writings, which recount his own alcoholism and drug use. However, Burnside seems to suggest that the pollutant nature of present day capitalism is such that

this refusal can be at the least problematic, indeed lethal, even as it works to offer us a substitution for the connection and meaning that the environment of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century stifles.

Burnside's ecology seeks to explore the various external stimuli of the natural and manmade environments that surround the self. Our inability to accurately parse these stimuli forms the central conflict that his writing seeks to understand. In response to Burnside's philosophy, Tom Bristow claims that the poet

questions what it means to live as a spirit, and what a poetics of ecology can offer to the human-centred subjective lyric, including the need to transcend the human into the collective [. . .] the human process of determination, i.e. how experiencing beings constitute world. [. . .] The progression toward the metaphysical and the ecological can be read as a single move by the poet showing what it might be like to reconcile mind and matter, and being and world. This is formulated within his inquiry into the interdependent exchange between mental ecology and physical ecology, and his belief in a contingent self and a non-contingent soul. (51)

The philosophical trajectory traced above certainly maps onto the events of *MB* well, and centres the tension between the contingent and non-contingent aspects of self in a landscape that actively works against dialogue between those parts. Bristow suggests that Burnside has developed an ecological poetics that borrows from deep ecology's spiritual, non-anthropocentric approach, but that is in fact concerned with the relationships between humans and between us and the nonhuman.<sup>56</sup> Burnside refines his consideration of the 'contingent and non contingent' factors of selfhood within the world, to a more pointedly ecological stance that requires us to consciously engage with the systems of the world around us, built and environmental, in order to conceive of more fulfilling and responsible ways of living. This concern for the reconciliation of body and spirit, and that spirit with the world at large, is present even before the midpoint that Bristow identifies. In his earliest collection, Burnside muses that

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<sup>56</sup> Deep Ecology, a term coined by philosopher Arne Næss, posits that human beings and their lives are no more important than any other species, ecosystem or other natural process. See Næss, Arne. *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Trans. David Rothenburg. Print.

The soul is a woman perhaps.

Or else a dialect,  
the local variation of  
a common tongue.

[. . .]

The earth is netted in song.

The soul is a dialect, perhaps. (*H* 11)

Here is it something to court ('a woman') or something to perform ('a song', 'a dialect'). The clumsy semantics of this give way to an assurance that it is in fact via dialogue that one might find 'a common tongue' to speak to one's existence. In each case, dialect or woman, song or accent, the 'soul' is that which engenders difference and communion; immanence is contained within the realisation of the soul as created in the act of connection. The 'song' that nets the earth is the result of *choir*, voices working together and creating a harmony. Burnside's 2014 collection *All One Breath* (hereafter *AOB*) takes Ecclesiastes' assertion that the breath of all life is shared (and therefore warns against exceptionalism on the part of the human) for its epigraph, and builds towards a thematic climax in which 'most everything runs on/as choir: all one, the living and the dead' (*AOB* 82).<sup>57</sup> In this sense, Burnside's human relationships are as important as the nonhuman; in both he seeks 'harmony', whether it be the literal song of the choir, or a philosophical balance within the ecological. This integration supports the self as a sustainable and spiritual dimension in Burnside's poetry.

Such balance can only be achieved by rethinking our relationship with the natural world, and by finding a productive method of resistance to the systems of contemporary life under global capitalism. In 'Travelling South, Scotland August 2012' anticipates the time when 'the land returns/ — with or without us' (*AOB* 55). There is no hint of national lineage being traced; indeed, 'Travelling' inverts the trope of organic nationalism, where the land is gifted to 'its people' in a mythic and providential sense, claiming that 'we could have known/ but failed to see [. . .] this kingdom-at-hand' (*AOB* 53). Instead, Burnside presents us with an exploration of an irrecoverable ecological philosophy and the potential for human

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<sup>57</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:19: 'For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast'. [King James Version]

intervention or interference: ‘this could be a world/ of perfect balance [. . .] and we appear / only by chance’ (*H* 17). What Burnside presents through his urging of connection is a spirituality of the Anthropocene. He seeks to use his prose and poetry to crystallise and confront our specifically ‘human’ responses to our world and to posit an alternative to late capitalist, globalised and mechanised society ‘where agribusiness and “development” has rendered such scenes [of diverse meadows with prolific plant and insect life] defunct’ (Burnside *EJC* 79). Burnside is frequently dismissive of capital’s attempts to co-opt ecological stances for profit and survival, branding it mere ‘PR greenwashing’ (*New Statesman* 142 31).

The rejection of what he sees as ineffectual and piecemeal gestures from commercial and political entities is outlined in extensive and sensitively drawn terms. Burnside is comfortable using his ‘madness’ as a deconstructive tool in his interaction with this issue. In his youth he suffered acutely from a schizoaffective disorder that he characterises as apophenia.<sup>58</sup> He has often imbued his poetry with the defining apophenic qualities of significance and symbolism, frequently returning to the image of houses and places haunted by barely-felt and unseen presences. In ‘That Game of Finding’, Burnside’s speaker tells us ‘I pretend something has just melted from the room/ when I walk in, sensing the pinprick chill/ of kindred skin.’ (*H* 14) In searching for the source of this ‘kindred skin’ as if enacting an existential game of hide-and-seek, Burnside reiterates the frequent blurring of the lines between self and other that marks his poetry. In this case, that blurring becomes a performative thought experiment, a ludic assumption of a role, ‘Only a game’ (*H* 14). The connection he seeks, via a refusal of the constraints of modernity — rationality, materialism, sanity even — becomes impossible to separate from the act of performance; he sees his own madness as much as he finds a (potential, and self-created) connection, and is forced to enact the process of tracking a non-existent presence in order to justify his own. The application of an apophenic mind to such puzzles means that via these acts, the

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<sup>58</sup> Burnside uses this descriptor of his disorder to convey a quality of perception characterised by seeing patterns in and/or attributing heightened significance to random events, places, things: ‘When I *was* a full-scale lunatic, I suffered from a condition called apophenia. This condition, this unease [is described as] *the unmotivated seeing of connections*, coupled with the *specific experience of an abnormal meaningfulness* [. . .] For the apophenic, it means a wild and unrelenting search for the one vast order that transcends all others, a hypernarrative, an *afterlife*’ (Burnside. *Waking up in Toytown*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2010: 5-6)

mundane is given meaning and the detritus of the everyday becomes a series of patterns to trace, codes to decipher; a future just out of reach holds answers to which, if one can merely assume the correct frame of mind, one might become privy.

Burnside's apophenia is itself a somewhat 'ecological' disorder. As he explains:

Apophenia is usually talked about in terms of excess sensitivity, which would make the apophenic symptomatic of some wider malaise, just as the loss of an indicator species like a filmy fern or a long-eared bat serves as an early warning that the wider environment is being degraded. The mad are symptomatic of a societal failure, not random episodes of perversity. (*LF* 215)

The insane are the indicator species of the human ecosystem; their presence, or the loss of their sanity, to better fit this metaphor, serves to denote sickness, trouble, creeping cataclysm within the wider community. In his choice of metaphor and his conception of society, Burnside displays ecological thought as Morton envisions it. He posits a sense of self that relies on communion with the wider environment of one's life, natural and constructed. To develop the point Burnside himself makes above, the concomitant result of rejecting the values of society is one's rejection by that society. In 'My Grandmother's House', Burnside recalls that the 'druidic greens/ and greys' of the woods surrounding the house were things he would 'only learn from being lost'. He then directly correlates this loss-and-recovery narrative with sickness, wishing 'if only the body offered such/ taxonomies: a name for every shade/ of fever.' (*AOB* 7) By losing one's self physically, one makes a journey of recovery, and is enlightened by the experience.<sup>59</sup> In parsing one's own difficulty in assimilating to or thriving within modernity, the speaker laments the lack of success in naming, or categorising each successive 'fever' or malaise. In both cases it is necessary to recover a new set of values and connections. Fittingly then, in Burnside's writing it is often via solitude that this connection is most clearly suggested or encountered. A sense of elation at the prospect of abandonment strikes Burnside in his essay 'Alone', when he notes 'I felt something close to happiness. I was lost – though surely not very lost – on the high tundra, with snow falling around me and visibility about half what it was when I set out, and I was happy' (*London Review of Books* 23). Burnside's construction of solitude chimes with

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<sup>59</sup> See also Robertson 'The Halving' (*Hill of Doors* 36-37) and Jamie, *Frissure*.

Robertson's, for whom solitude and forgetting are some of the most powerful impressions we can take from the natural world. In this he also resembles Jamie, who also finds herself able to observe and interpret in moments of solitude.<sup>60</sup> Even when combined with the mythic or mythologised, Burnside's invocation of nature does not act to evoke a sense of space as commodity, meaningful only in potential as land that will become 'a nation', nor does it paint the relationship between a place and those persons who live there as something reified and inevitable. Rather, it examines the universal pull of alienation and erasure that the human world finds within its encounters with nature as something resistant to those philosophies of ownership, and tries to draw from these encounters a philosophy that will situate him in the places he inhabits.

Burnside has stated that 'every time a human being encounters an animal, or a bird, he learns something new, or remembers something old that he had forgotten [and so] being a successful man, in worldly terms, is the ultimate in pyrrhic victories' (*LF* 7-8). To accept worldly success is to engage with a system of capital and technology that robs you of yourself. As with the protagonists of *MB*, those who accept and embrace the success of a worldly man not only lose the 'lessons' of the natural but find their space within the manmade world increasingly untenable. As for Robertson, the natural world in Burnside's writing holds a compelling yet unnerving power.<sup>61</sup> The apophenic tendency that Burnside has confronted and enlisted many times in his writing is most strongly felt when he is in contact with the natural world, and when its symbols and signals seem to exist just on the edge of communion or understanding.

Fiona Stafford has noted that the conception of place, particularly of placing oneself within the 'natural' landscape of a country, brings with it a distinctly spiritual-ontological capacity, where the 'humility inspired by the natural world, and the sense of what man has made of it, suggests a kind of contemporary devotional poetry' (237). Though Stafford is referring explicitly to Jamie above, the rise of the 'secular devotional' is also something that has been applied to John Burnside's poetry. Paul Volsik has recognised how the two poets' philosophical, formal and thematic concerns often find parallels in each other's works,

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<sup>60</sup> See Robertson 'Tokens' (*A Painted Field* 15), 'Fugue for Phantoms' (*A Painted Field* 34), 'Signs on a White Field' (*The Wrecking Light* 4-5); Jamie, 'The Buddleia' (*The Tree House* 27), 'The Galilean Moons' (*The Overhaul* 34-35) for example.

<sup>61</sup> See Chapter 2.

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the idea that man should [. . .] learn, through a process of self-forgetting, how to comprehend nonhuman perspectives, how to give a living sense of the animating relatedness between man and the universe he finds himself in—something Burnside insists, is not to be confused with traditional nature or landscape poetry. To use Jamie’s categories, it is not the poet’s role to talk about, but to attempt to talk from and toward. (348-355)

Burnside frequently writes ‘towards’; connection, exploration and an approach to culpability, rather than an attempt at proselytising, are the markers of his work. Ideas of responsibility and interrogation also impact the way he approaches placing his work within a political context. He firmly believes that ‘poets have to write, not only out of a sense of celebration of the land, but also in response to events that drive us to genuine despair [. . .] I find it impossible to believe that poetry makes nothing happen’ (*EJC* 80-81). He is a self-described ‘politically and ecocritically motivated poet’ (*EJC* 82). This self-image underlines Burnside’s approach to questions of nation in his work.

In a recent lecture given at the Scottish Poetry Library, Burnside addresses poetry in an age of climate change and the return and rise of authoritarian governments. He describes himself as ‘an anarchist’, mistrustful of any poetry that does not seek to offer ‘an atmosphere of moral nourishment [that encourages] dedication to the land instead of blind appreciation of the nation’ (‘Crazy Kings and Rising Waters’ hereafter *CK* n.p.).<sup>62</sup> As such, his poetry configures the nation as a space to which we bind ourselves, having learned its material and spiritual significance as ‘the land’ and not ‘our land’. He writes spaces that offer an opportunity to shift one’s perspective on current systems of governance, capital and education that privilege an approach he sees as damaging and restrictive. While ‘poetry cannot stop a chainsaw’, it can ‘nourish us while we do the work of changing society’ (*CK* n.p.). Burnside posits the Heideggerean assertion that ‘poiesis is the art of right dwelling’ (*ibid.*), and that the most transformative quality of poetry is to offer us ‘a creaturely sense of inter-animation’ (*ibid.*). This is the paradigm shift that Burnside chases; to fundamentally

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Crazy Kings and Rising Waters’ was delivered at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh on Thursday 26th April 2018. The quotations from it comprise the author’s transcriptions.

alter the lens through which we view our position within the wider world, and through his poetry, to create spaces in which 'right dwelling' becomes not only possible, but persuasive and enlivening to the reader. The nonhuman informs and persists in much of Burnside's writing; he asserts that 'the one thing that could stop us being coarsened to other lives - is that we feel a great, living wave of animal life all around us, covering the earth.' (*New Statesman* 141 41) This 'living wave' is what suggests to us 'here is Wolf. He rustles in the night./ Only the wind, but you switch on the light.' (*H* 29) Despite our sense of detachment from and mastery over the natural world, there is an innate part of our humanity that recognises our complicity and vulnerability. Burnside's poetry emphasises that we need to interact with it in order to meaningfully experience our life on earth, since in his own words, 'the making of poetry and the making of a world are continuous' (*CK* n.p.).

By writing a poetry that seeks to return reverence to the relationship between self and world, Burnside's poetic-psychological landscapes are also mapped onto the landscape of Scotland, and of the American and Scandinavian journeys he undertakes. In travelling through the world, internal and external, Burnside increasingly posits a theory of reconciliation that comes out of realising exactly how one's isolation from nature is cultivated, and how one's conscription into the 'civilisation' of late capitalism might be resisted. He seeks to learn 'how not to be governed' (*CK* n.p.) and instead desires to cultivate reciprocal interactions with the world around him. As Louisa Gairn has noted, 'when poets like Burnside and Jamie talk about poetry as "a line of defence", they are [. . .] suggesting that poetic modes of observation and expression are important for the "world out there" with important questions to ask about how we live in that world.' (158) This chapter will attempt to chart and unpack the overarching thematic issues outlined above, to show how Burnside's sense of place and self are irrevocably tied into a conception of the lived space we inhabit and change. He hopes to explore such conceptions to arrive at a workable contemporary spirituality that can stand in opposition to the enervating quality of life under contemporary socio-political systems.

### **Refining Identities: Recursion, Relativity and Remembrance**

The latest works of Burnside differ fairly little from the early in terms of their subject matter and overall style. Instead there is a marked sophistication of both; Burnside hones in on the arguments he wishes to make, and the language in which he wishes to make them. Parallel

to his poetic canon, his prose works chart a long-form development of these themes, alongside an increasing public engagement, which circles back to inform his later writing, even if it does not dramatically alter the way Burnside approaches it. His constant return and refinement makes the recursive model of ecology one that applies aptly to his body of work.

Recursion, as the subsidiary set of instructions that may be used any number of times throughout the duration of a longer program (simultaneous to input/output processing), is chosen to model a Bergsonian metaphor for the development of consciousness and life: one long stream with many sub-components transforming endlessly (Bristow 53).

Burnside's thematic and stylistic interest in recursion serves a similar philosophical purpose and effect as Robertson's in entropy; in each case, these foci serve to illustrate the poets' relationship to the questions of nature, nation and self within their work.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, those natural laws are ones that map directly onto the mythos by which we as humans impart meaning to our own actions: we seek progress as a series of discrete, evolving actions, when in fact we operate more accurately via series of 'subsidiary instructions' that recur and react continually, and attempt to live alongside this process with an eye to our impossible immortality. We reject both recursive and entropic systems of thought whilst we are indelibly bound by them, in order to access the kinds of successes (monetary, career, social) that structures of contemporary global capitalism ascribe to a modern life. Burnside writes a poetry of nation, nature and self that seeks to offer resistance not just to those goals but by extension those thought-systems; the aim is to approach our actions ecologically, tying them to a larger web of action and organisms, writing poetry that encourages an outlook that does not privilege the socio-political harm that contemporary Scotland (and beyond) commits.

There is an ecological reasoning for the interest in Bergson's conception of 'duration' that Bristow identifies in Burnside. It necessitates a dialogic conception of self and surroundings; we must be prepared to give ourselves over to a communication we will never be able to parse or identify in its entirety, even as we acknowledge it. Bergson states

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<sup>63</sup> See Chapter 2

that each duration may be perceived differently, but each and every one is made up of 'eternal' or empirical moments, no two of which are the same; once one attempts to catalogue or measure that moment however, it is gone. In this way, we can never accurately perceive of a moment whilst we are within it, since time is a continuous and evolving process, and memory is constantly created and impressed upon our consciousness.<sup>64</sup> Because of this, we are forced to interrogate those moments after the fact, to place and replace ourselves intuitively and continually. Bergson's theory is disputed by Bachelard in light of Einsteinian relativity, since an understanding of relativity and an increase in scientific methods of observation render it demonstrably possible to measure the moments within a span of time, and to account scientifically rather than epistemologically, for their changeability. Burnside borrows from both metaphysical approaches in his work; his poetry is concerned with the attendant liminality and timelessness of in-between spaces. Further to this, Burnside's experience of time is vastly relative; time is a fluid concept that moves in his work with a telescopic quality. His work seeks to place the reader with a specific time and space of revelation or experience, and often switches back and forth between the spaces of memory and experience, holding them there beyond the boundaries of each, combining present perception and remembrance simultaneously.<sup>65</sup>

These seemingly opposed qualities frequently work together to underline his ecological approach to poetry, wherein spaces and the objects within them (and without, such as the hyperobjects of the milky way or the ozone layer) must remain material and tangible realities. Burnside utilises the disorienting effect of 'lost time' whilst simultaneously using the lyric to position the reader in just the sort of eternal present that Bergson describes; time exists as both a theoretical dimension and as a relational characteristic which is given meaning by the person experiencing and relating to it. As Burnside has stated, within the writing of lyric poetry, 'each thing defines each other thing but, the locus of

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<sup>64</sup> See Henri Bergson. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. T.E. Hulme. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999 [1912]. Print.

<sup>65</sup> Robertson too utilises this telescopic approach to memory, reliving and replaying memories as current events in his work. See Chapter 2; '1964' (*Hill of Doors* 5-7); 'Album' (*The Wrecking Light* 3). For Jamie, memory and time are moulded by pressures of political agency, which allow for certain narratives and not others to be assimilated into wider culture consciousness, while personal memories remain difficult or unwelcome to articulate. See 'Forget It' (*Jizzen* 5); Chapter 3.

change, or of the definition, cannot be determined.’ (*PSP* 204) The lyric poetry that Burnside writes is concerned with the opportunity that engaging with liminality provides us in our experiences in contemporary life, and with the potential for change inherent in that space (or time). Here Burnside is echoed by Morton in his philosophy of the ecological, which posits that ‘the appearance of something is the past, the essence of something is the future [but] between is not a measurable dimension.’ (*WLML* n.p.) It is within this transitional space and time that Burnside operates. So, even in recalling past events the poem always exists in potential, offering a future space wherein these issues might be aligned. Whilst within a moment, or within the confines of a time-specific place, or a geographically unique space, it becomes impossible to say when the second of revelation gives way to a wider epiphany, or when the action repeated in a space becomes a habit of association, or when a specific occurrence becomes the representative of a seminal moment; these poetic objects take on the same quality as the sorites paradox.<sup>66</sup>

‘Similarly’, states Burnside, ‘just as linear time melts into eternity on examination, so place — the defined, the fixed, the mapped — becomes space — the fluid, the shifting, a region of unexpected potential — when it is considered within the context of the lyric.’ (*PSP* 205) So it is this Bergsonian fluidity that becomes necessary within the lyric in order to explore the potential suggested by each scenario Burnside wishes to present us with. Further to this, the ‘poem of place speaks of the relationship of the individual to a specific point in times, and invites the reader to identify, not with the poet, or with the poet’s experience, but with the space in which that experience unfolds.’ (207) In both cases, this is an earnestly ecological standpoint; we are being asked not to identify with the poet’s experience, but to see via the recounting of that experience the arena within which it is made possible. In doing so we become able to relate to this space more honestly. His earlier works (and later his more recent collections) return to a series of images and settings that stand in as ciphers for Burnside’s abiding thematic interest in the liminal, the remembered and the potential, and the ways in which this interstitial space of hopeful development is frequently lost in the spaces allowed to us within modern civilisation.

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<sup>66</sup> That if one removes a grain of rice or sand for example, one at a time from a pile it is impossible to distinguish the moment at which one goes from a pile to a non-pile; does a single grain of sand remain a heap? If not, at what point do we make the distinction between those two possibilities? See Burnside ‘Poetry and a Sense of Place’ (204)

Burnside claims to have ‘a very weak notion of time,’ (*LF* 37), to ‘still remember—so little’ (*ibid.*). In refuting time’s hold on his experiences, Burnside seeks to divest himself of the responsibilities and oppressions that dictate life as an ‘ordinary person’ under late capitalism. This ‘weak notion’ also serves as a potential threat; to forget is only helpful in as much as it offers a chance to unlearn the self that one’s past experiences have created. However, to be unable to chart that change, or that self-forgetting, is to be completely untethered at points, and to be left with a space that, instead of being full of the potential of a new country, is instead off the map completely. In ‘Travelling South, Scotland, August 2012’, Burnside notes that ‘*late, out here,/ has a different meaning.*’ (*AOB* 51) Time as a construct appears as a comparison between personal and metanarrative historical timescales, between the human and the nonhuman experience of those scales.<sup>67</sup> In this case, Burnside’s ‘weak notion’ is reconfigured as an awareness of the shifting perceptions of time and therefore also of questions of timeliness and of urgency. This suggests the ecological drive behind the majority of his work; he returns again and again to the consideration of different timescales of hyperobjects, metanarratives, and those creatures — human and otherwise— caught within, perpetuating their own timeline of experience in infinite recursion. It is this ability to switch between temporalities that suggests the desire for integration (of spirit, world, self and nature) that Burnside places at the centre of his poetry.

His shaky grasp on temporality, which sees Burnside lose hours, days even, to alcohol and drugs, or to apophenic fugues as recounted in his autobiographical prose, comes to bear on his poetry as the recurrence of several symbols and thematic concerns; the enduring presence and return of the dead, the pervasive impact of childhood and the perverse impossibility of its accurate recollection, and the separation of human environments from the abiding patterns and timescales to which nonhuman inhabitants of the planet are beholden.<sup>68</sup> This disconnection creates for Burnside a sense of urgency in denying that same manmade isolation; as we come see the patterns of the nonhuman as something we can in fact be in dialogue with, we must become aware again of the patterns

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<sup>67</sup> Similarly, see Jamie ‘Pioneers’ (*Jizzen* 34), ‘Hoard’ (*Jizzen* 36) ‘Excavation and Recovery’ (*The Overhaul* 8)

<sup>68</sup> See for example ‘Desserts’ (*The Asylum Dance* 19); ‘Birth Songs’ (*The Light Trap* 45-51); ‘The Dead’ (*The Myth of the Twin* 8)

to which we have made ourselves beholden. The world that we are born into is one that, Burnside observes, 'is already defined for us by our parents, teachers and authority figures' (*Bottle Imp* 13 2), and so in writing his poetry, it becomes imperative for him to address whether or not we can 'unlearn that, and come to the world afresh' (ibid.). In his latest collection, the poem 'Hendrick Avercamp: A Standing Man watching A Skating Boy' (*Still Life with Feeding Snake* hereafter *SFS* 30-31) observes wistfully that 'For those without power, this is what passes for wisdom: a homespun mechanics/ of knowing how much of the world is already decided' (31). Burnside's realisation of the ways in which systems of living in the modern world create this type of predetermination is the impetus that propels all of his poetry of place. He has been searching, throughout his work, for a way to reconcile the oppressive mechanics of modernity with the ecological necessity of living responsibly *in* modernity, to find a sense of self within this current space and time which can exist despite those oppressions, without perpetuating more. The 'spirit', so crucial to Burnside's poetics, is enriched and enacted by finding this balance. Burnside frequently turns from the social mores of his surroundings, and explores the self in those moments when we are outside of human observation or civilised expectations. Accordingly, the natural often exerts a power of spiritual renewal and is treated with near-religiosity in his poetry. As Morton observes, the

more we study it, the more we see [. . .] nature in itself flickers between things – it is both/and or neither/nor. This flickering affects how we write about it [. . .] It is both the set and the contents of the set [. . .] Nature becomes supernatural. (EWN 18-19)

This flickering, the same 'swithering' that will form the basis for and name of Robertson's 2006 collection, is the very aspect of the natural that takes residence as the 'spirit' in Burnside.<sup>69</sup> He sees the power inherent in this 'both-ness' as one that offers us as humans the fullest potential access to our humanity. As such, his later works, which consider 'development' and scientific categorisations of the natural in modern life, return consistently to the disaffection he feels that this categorisation brings. Nature, environment, and ecology become religious in the purest sense; as in animism (a term, Burnside has mused, he may in fact be searching to rework in his writing), the bodies and sites of

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<sup>69</sup> Robin Robertson. *Swithering*. London: Picador, 2006. The collection takes its title from the Scots word meaning to vacillate, to shift between things.

nonhuman lives in his work become imbued with spiritual resonance.<sup>70</sup> Humanity's disinterest or casual disregard of this animistic power is something that Burnside sees as irrefutably weakening and corruptive. His poem 'Joseph Wright of Derby: *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air-Pump, 1768*' (AOB 26-28), which takes the painting of the title as its subject, confronts and unpicks this thesis (one that has been the baseline of all Burnside's work to date) with a directness and subtlety that is highly successful, more so than in earlier collections when perhaps his sentimentality (or the description and attributions of such sentimentality) have tended to dull the impact of what is an intellectual, as well as keenly emotive, philosophy.

In this poem, the languid lines and the interruption of shifting authorial voices work to give the duality of thought-process and revision; they add a scientific legitimacy to the poem, in attempting to capture the conflicting impulses within the spectators of the experiment. Burnside recalls that

As a child, I was consumed with a near-obsessive curiosity about what the world felt like for other creatures. How did the moles in our neighbour's garden experience the bottles he buried over their runs to catch the wind, and so fill their domain with eerie howls and whimpers? What was the poisoned mouse thinking when it crawled into the corner of our kitchen to die, much more slowly than I had been led to believe, the horrified, intrigued child huddled over it, unable to take the decisive step of 'putting it out of its misery'? (*New Statesman* 142 30)

In 'Experiment', he transposes this unease and fascination onto several of Wright's onlookers; one 'stares in fascinated/ horror', (AOB 27) another girl 'covers her eyes', while 'a well-dressed man in the foreground' watches 'utterly rapt' (ibid) as the bird (a cockatoo in this case, 'a rare and theatrical/ flourish' (AOB 26)) is suffocated. The drama of this act is underpinned by the way that Burnside's lines progress cinematically across the scene of the painting, panning as if a camera recording in real-time. They are expansive and densely

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<sup>70</sup> In a 2017 interview, Burnside claims 'I see it as the true Scottish religion or spirituality. Underlying the way we live with the world is a kind of pagan animism, and, of course, overlaid on top of that, is a crust of Christianity, and on top of that a post-Christian morality, but also, corrupted now because of commercialism and capitalism.' (Tishani Doshi. 'Enrolling fairies in the revolution'. Online. thehindu.com)

worded, moulding the ecology of the page into one that feels at close quarters to the reader, and at the same time one that is moving steadily and inexorably alongside the narrative voices' gaze

at the dying cockatoo;  
another girl covers her eyes, while her father  
points as if to say that grace will come  
when the showman opens the vent – though grace delayed  
is ever its own reward and, besides  
that well-dressed man in the foreground  
is utterly rapt,  
as is the boy  
who might be his son and heir, their immaculate faces  
half in the rouge-coloured shadows, their arms  
akimbo, it seems, as they wait for the end to come (27).

Even as this section of the poem progress as a detached commentary, it also utilises almost reverential terms to describe the scene. The high stakes of the experiment are deftly drawn, and the experience gains a religious quality, reinforced by Burnside's rapt audience, made 'immaculate' by their proximity to 'the game of life and death' (26) played out before them. The image that Burnside recreates here is a painting executed as a 'History', a style of artwork reserved initially for scenes from Biblical or Classical stories.<sup>71</sup> The composition of 'Experiment' is reminiscent of a Nativity; the light emanating from the bell jar that holds the cockatoo becomes a morbid recreation of the Christ-child's glow in paintings such as Geertgen tot Sint Jans' fifteenth-century work *The Nativity at Night*, in which the faces of the Holy Family and the animals in the deep dark of the stable are illuminated by the light of the infant Jesus in the manger.<sup>72</sup> Here, the tableau Wright presents us with offers a veneration of science as a transcendent, almost holy moment, one that can transform its observers and imbue them with a sense of the divine by 'playing god for an hour' (AOB 26).

Interestingly, the main natural light source in the painting is the moon, glimpsed

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<sup>71</sup> See <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-wright-of-derby-an-experiment-on-a-bird-in-the-air-pump>

<sup>72</sup> See <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/geertgen-tot-sint-jans-the-nativity-at-night>

through the window painted in the top right hand corner of the piece. The light from the bell jar is the main focal point however, and Burnside is careful to note that ‘the moon is full tonight, though we barely see it’ (28), emphasising that ‘nobody here can know the world it illumines’ (28). ‘Can’ places the audience to the experiment in a double bind; they are denied both permission and agency, neither allowed nor able to access that world illuminated outside. That space is one of ‘fox cubs crossing the lawn,/ the owl floating out from the quincunx of elms’ (28), and is moved by rhythms of life and death that are in step with nature. As such, Burnside offers the reader an alternative space for devotion, more reverential than the scene of morbid religiosity that Wright (and later therefore Burnside) creates inside the room. Outside, there is ‘the silence that follows a kill’, a ‘held breath over the land/until the dead move on’ (28) rather than the held breath that he describes inside the room, in anticipation of a death curated.

### **Seeking Authentic Space: Nature and Neoliberalism**

The inability of humanity to grasp the responsibility we hold for the fates of other species still concerns Burnside in his most recent work. ‘The Lazarus Taxa’ (*SFS* 58-61) offers the resigned and reproachful assertion, following a list of endangered whale species, that

In years to come,  
the market will experience  
a glut in holy relics, scraps of bone

and slivers of dubious tissue, hermetically sealed  
in ampoules (59).

Burnside acknowledges the deep opposition to neoliberal models of living<sup>73</sup> that he holds as an ‘ecocritically motivated poet’ (*NEJC* 82); such systems as construct current modes of living and interacting with the world at large are unsustainable, unethical and paradoxical.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Neoliberal here refers to the philosophy that privileges free market capitalism as the arbiter for the success or ultimate development of a society. That is to say, the greater the share of global markets one has access to, and the fewer impediments to engaging with those markets the better. In this case, the conception of interactions as transactional, and these modes of living as unsustainable, underpins Burnside’s poem.

<sup>74</sup> Current estimates of ‘Ecological Footprint’ track how much ‘biologically productive area’ it takes to absorb a country’s carbon dioxide emissions and provide resources. Earth Overshoot Day calculates when the yearly supply of resources would be used up if all of

The market stokes a public appetite for goods that represent a natural world that they would see destroyed, then reify and sanctify as protection against the same for themselves. The only way that these species can be resurrected as the titular namesake was, is as commodity. In death, their bodies become representative of a reverence and power that they were not granted in life; the process of their death becomes an implied martyrdom, even as no responsibility is claimed. The irony of the market being 'glutted' with the remains of animals that were driven to extinction again underscores the pernicious nature of global capitalism and the profound threats it poses to the sustainability of other species and of a humanity that can understand themselves as anything other than consumers. Burnside laments that we can only conceive of demand and supply in market terms, the surplus of body parts obscenely mocking the morbid dearth of those animals who provided them. The sadness that Burnside feels as a result of this disconnection (or to extend the devotional metaphor of stewardship in his work, this dereliction of duty) is also seen in 'Travelling South, Scotland, August 2012' (*AOB* 51-53), wherein the speaker observes that 'It gets late early out here/ in the lacklustre places' (51). This not only acknowledges the temporal fluidity of Burnside's poetry, but the role that apathy plays in the degradation of our environments; Burnside sets the clock ticking on the idea of a sustainable future. The relative timelines of self perception, national narrative and natural process, centred around our interpretation of the word 'late', combine to offer a quietly sombre atmosphere. The degenerative quality of this environment is supported by the following line, which tells us 'The animals are gone/ that hunted here' (51). The poem acts as a linchpin for Burnside's moral and aesthetic position; he traces the past and present of a specific place, and draws out concerns over the increasing detachment we cultivate to the world around us, thus leaving us with less and less to insulate ourselves with, to enrich our spirit. As the speaker observes:

we've been going at this for years:  
a steady delete of anything that tells us what we are, a long  
distaste for the blood-warmth and bloom  
of the creaturely. (52)

Burnside suggests that the most human thing we have cultivated is a lack of humanity, of

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humanity consumed at the rate of that specific country. The UK's current Overshoot Day is 4 May, for example, while Honduras' is Dec 31. See <https://www.footprintnetwork.org>

animal contact and mammalian warmth, that leads us to wipe out species and sell the remains as charms against our own extinction, or to view death as an experiment to be observed in other animals; in doing so, we imagine ourselves removed from the process. For him, the natural world serves as a touchstone to ‘tell us what we are’ while the mechanism of life in contemporary society more often than not assigns values of neoliberal capital to the spaces around us and our interactions with them. For Burnside it is necessary that we refuse to remove ourselves from the web of life that we tend to assign solely to the nonhuman, and become aware of the various methods by which this remove is facilitated and endures. The overwhelming supremacy of our species shapes the Anthropocene, and so privileges human life as a separate entity; as a result this insulates us from what Burnside sees as truthful and necessary facets of our existence; that we are animals— unique and unprecedented, yes, but in need of the same ‘creaturely’ realities as other less paradigm-shifting lifeforms, and that our disproportionate impact on our environments is damaging, to ourselves as much as to the environments we see ourselves as exempt from. For Burnside, our removal from the ‘creaturely’ begins in removing our own bodies from the list of ‘animal bodies’, of the spaces we inhabit as ‘natural spaces’,<sup>75</sup> and ends with the conceit of space as a commodity, and our removal from being part of any ecology at all, instead becoming mere consumers of its ‘resources’.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, this realisation is a profoundly motivating factor in the political slant of Burnside’s writing. Of the propagation of ‘cultural centres’ with art and literature (and by extension of culture and capital), he writes:

Surely by now, with a wealth of post-colonial studies behind us, we could all see that to create a centre is also to create a periphery; and, as power is established, that periphery is inevitably reclassified as ‘resource’ (human labour, minerals, natural gas, dammed rivers, endless agri-industrial monocultures), a harvest to be reaped in order to keep those at the centre well lit and cosy in their superior culture. [. . .] We know that, in order to dine on beef and chicken as frequently as it does, the centre

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<sup>75</sup> Jamie shares this concern. See Chapter 3.

<sup>76</sup> This is an issue at the heart of the tension inherent between movements for environmental justice as overarching socio-political and environmental change, and the prevailing neoliberal models of capital and to an extent government in the global north. See Scandrett.

destroys vast areas of forest and prairie to grow fodder for its livestock. We know that somewhere else, poor farmers are denied water so that luxury golf resorts can be well irrigated. We know that fish stocks have been exhausted all over the world, that precious rivers have been dammed to provide cheap electricity to major cities. No wonder the centre's concerns seem so callow; the only philosophy it seems to have espoused is 'out of sight, out of mind' (*New Statesman* 143 61).

This is a way in which the ecological poetics of nature, nation and self has active implications in explicating and offering a critical literature of resistance. Burnside uses the language of the literary discourse that has frequently classified and examined Scottish Literature, to acknowledge and actively critique the fact that cultural centres are also centres of wealth and privilege. Resources and capital are collected here and engender yet more social and political capital, so propagate further inequitable use of social, cultural, literal and economic space. These centres shape thoughts of what 'civilised' and therefore aspirational and therefore *valuable* spaces look like and become, what becomes 'natural' to humanity. This means that capital (cultural and literal) is invested in places, people and ideas that are shaped by and continue to perpetuate the values of and maintain the power enjoyed by, those structures that have appropriated and unfairly distributed those resources. An ecological poetics seeks to examine and expose this as a construct that can and should be challenged and dismantled; for Burnside, this starts in a refusal to accept such structures as natural or ineffable, and ends in offering an alternative philosophy and politics to those structures.

Burnside is rightly attuned to the classist divisions and structures that deny and deprive vast numbers of people; his focus on commonality, of the dialogic nature of the lyric and the liminal spaces it opens up, offers both the opportunity for subaltern rhetoric and the danger of ventriloquism. Louisa Gairn astutely notes:

The 'liminal' or the 'borderline' has long been an important concept for post-colonial theory, giving a voice to the marginalised racial or geographical 'other', and it is clear that a similar process can be applied to the natural world, which has been similarly marginalised, exploited or 'spoken for' in modern Western societies. Burnside is certainly aware of these theoretical implications, pointing out the correspondences between ecological theory and the post-structuralist discourses of post-colonialism

and feminism (174).

Burnside is concerned with issues that find overlap in both discourses. The environmental justice movement for example was born out of anti-racist work from groups that identified and sought to reverse the trend of environmental hazards (pollution, poor housing, dirty industry) being overwhelmingly situated within proximity to communities of colour in the USA.<sup>77</sup> Burnside addresses these issues more often as a function of poverty and class in Scotland, though he seems (increasingly as his career progresses) attuned to the colonial inheritance and racialised structures inherent to capitalism. Gardiner has attempted to reconcile these problematic distinctions in his writing, by focusing on 'the dual relationship of congruence and conflict centred on the form of the British Empire' (*Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature* 3) in literary criticism. As a theoretical designation this can be useful in terms of discussing specific acts of oppression within the history of Scotland, as separate from the racialised violence inflicted by the British Empire on the peoples of colonised nations in the global south. The questions of the ecological are not just questions of spiritual stagnation or the limiting humanity of capitalism, but of global catastrophe perpetuated by that system that requires attention on a specific, localised scale, one that values a subaltern poetics and carves out critical spaces for resistance.

Burnside uses the politics of naming to call attention to the processes of occupation and subjugation in his poem 'The Wisdom of Insecurity' (AOB 60-61) which sees the narrator scrutinise a map, finding that

Place names are bleeding slowly from my mind till nothing is left but  
Uruguay- which someone told me once means 'river of birds'  
in the language of those who were killed to make it ours. (60)

Burnside has before remarked upon

the unwarranted power we grant ourselves when we name things, the widespread notion that, once a living thing has been named, or categorised, or genetically decoded, it belongs to us, ours to do with as we please. (*New Statesman* 142 31)

Burnside feels that we have sublimated our participation within the world into an attempt

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<sup>77</sup> Scandrett 185

to assert control via cataloguing and assigning terms. This serves as a marker of imperialist notions of place and belonging, prevalent for example in Victorian ideas of taxonomy and geography; places in the global south inhabited for generations are ‘discovered’ and renamed in the wake of imperial exploration, and this is the narrative of ownership that is produced for consumption by the centre Burnside mistrusts. To name is to control; we recognise this trope, as with the wolf at the door, from Burnside’s canny evocation of myth and fairytale. To know the name of a thing is to summon it, to possess it, or reveal its true nature.<sup>78</sup> It is increasingly untenable to hold such a viewpoint, especially in an age of pressing environmental and political concerns, which demand we reframe our relationship with the spaces we inhabit.

### **A ‘Continuum of Being’: Meetings with the Wild**

The transformative potential of the natural world is critical to a renewed political-social focus within Burnside’s poetry. He has claimed that ‘the lyric should suggest a sense of the continuum of being’ (*PSP* 212). The continuum that he invokes as part of his poetic manifesto is a keystone to much of his poetry of the wild. In these works, the speaker meets with the nonhuman, and is transported, however briefly, into that potential space where access and integration is made possible. The presence of the animal brings us back to our (constructed) humanity; it is in dialogue with the nonhuman that we are best able to see ourselves *as* human, and understand the ways in which that identity may be lacking.

Each space in which such a meeting takes place is a waypoint along that continuum. In the spaces where the human and the nonhuman meet, Burnside is able to advocate for an ecological approach that demands rigorous self-examination as well as hopeful communion. His disavowal of the wild as innately separate or simplistic is made possible by these moments of connection which are reminders of our complicity and culpability in perpetuating our isolationism. Jamie approaches the ‘wild’ with a similar ideology, and Robertson’s poetry seeks to examine the ways in which our self-forgetting works as a negation of ego (necessary to our rehabilitation), and as an abnegation of responsibility when we should shoulder it. As Gairn has noted:

This potential for poetry – and poetic prose — to negotiate the boundaries of

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<sup>78</sup> Rumpelstiltskin is perhaps the most well known tale of this type.

categorisation is important for Burnside, as it is for Jamie [. . .] boundaries are constantly collapsed or rendered ambiguous in these writers' representations of individuals and the natural world, recognising the most fundamental construction of 'Other' as the natural world itself. (174)

This chimes with Morton's assertion that it is necessary to leave the category of 'Nature' behind in order to meaningfully engage with the questions of ecology posed by contemporary global realities. For Burnside and Jamie, recognising the necessity of dissolving those boundaries that keep the natural world held at arms' length is the first step to realising a poetics of the ecological that can effectively deal with questions of nation, of environment, of identity, within contemporary Scotland. In Burnside's work, the natural world suffuses the environments and structures built by society, if one is able to look for these points of connection.

For both poets, bats take on a symbolic resonance as messengers between these worlds in their work. In Burnside's 'Echo Room' and 'Rain', they serve as reminders for the eras-long connections drawn between man and beast in making sense of their surroundings. Burnside's bats 'flicker from tree to tree' (*The Hunt in the Forest* hereafter *HF* 23), embodying the swithering quality that is the natural world in its most familiar and dialogic form. He recounts the meanings that have been assigned the creatures; to 'the Ancient Chinese, they meant luck; / to the Flemish, affection' (*ibid.*), and concludes that 'here, what they most resemble is desire' (*ibid.*). The natural world is offered up as a series of signs to read, a 'skitter and echo' (23) of a message not quite parsed, but to which we nonetheless strive time and again to assign meaning. 'Rain' also sees this attempt to unravel one's own reactions via the example of the wild. This time the speaker removes himself from the human world 'when everyone is sleeping' (*HF* 26) to 'drive out into the meadows to watch the bats, / alone in the car' (*ibid.*). This time, it is necessary for the speaker to escape entirely from the trappings of his everyday life, to the extent that within the car he keeps 'the window all the way down / for the cool of the air and the quiet beyond the / village' (26). The literalisation of his need to allow the natural world *in*, leads him to remove as many barriers between himself and the meadow as possible, to try and find 'the quiet' that is only accessible to him once he is 'beyond' the limits of human conurbation. The 'spirit [. . .] creeping' into the foundations of that settlement, is made accessible via this combination of

spaces, the collapsing of barriers 'through/mortar and blood' (26). Burnside reconfigures his relationship to that place; his communion with the natural is seen as 'unpicking the fabric, renewing the face of the earth.' (26)

In Jamie's 'Pipistrelles' (*The Tree House* 30-31), the bats are 'cinder-like, friable, flickering' (30) visitors to the 'sheep field' (ibid.) in which Jamie's speaker observes the animals. Their presence marks a moment of reflection for the speaker as the bats coalesce into 'a single/ edgy intelligence' (30), a body of creatures in a flight path that suggests to her 'a new form/ which unfolded and cohered // before our eyes.' (Ibid.) The moment is one of palpable gravitas and wonder, but the speaker finds this feeling of connection or communion impossible to dissect. Whilst left with the impression that 'the world's mind is such interstices', she struggles to know if that is in fact 'what they were trying to tell us' (30). Instead the pipistrelles leave, 'before we'd understood' (31), and the speaker finds herself alone again in the 'elegant and mute' (31) circle of the trees. The whole poem takes place within a space replete with symbolic weight; Jamie alludes to fairy circles (mythic passages between worlds) as she describes the 'circle of the trees' that stands, 'in the centre of the sheep field,' an 'enclosure like a vase' held between 'a line of Douglas Firs' (30). The car becomes its equivalent in Burnside's poem, a bathetic interstitial space the speaker makes do with in the environment at hand; the car is ugly but necessary, since the bats might transport him between natural and spiritual spaces, but the Volvo has to get him there in the first place. In both cases, within this liminal space — of poem and setting-within-poem— the bats represent the desire to cross the threshold between the human and the nonhuman, the material and the profound. Jamie suggests that this profundity is accessible if only we can take the time to observe and respect the workings of the natural world, but she worries that merely feeling such awe will not be enough without understanding it, and that the time in which one might ask and be understood is gone before we can process its significance. The uncertainty characterises the places that are no longer contingent on the 'fabric' of life under contemporary socio-political structures; this wildness offers a 'renewed' integration of self and world.

For both Jamie and Burnside, these unlooked for moments within wild spaces hold power due to the narrative that they allow for. There is the sense that these numinous experiences are as much about chance as they are about the nonhuman; the sight and transformation of the bats that fly overhead into the 'spirit' that Burnside seeks, is catalysed

by the very unlikelihood of being able to witness them in the first place. Our human understanding of likelihood lends significance to these moments that connect us with the nonhuman. Within our own conceptions of self and place, these meetings act as reminders of past lives, or as tokens from stories of a past reality; things that were once literally true that now are important because they are representative of that truth. They allow us to connect with a story of ourselves that we can only now understand from a point of removal. Burnside's poetry attempts to bring the narrative of how we live and write our lives in contemporary Scotland closer to the surface. His 'Poem on a Line of George Seferis' (*SFS* 78-91) outlines exactly this philosophy. Burnside claims, 'Whatever I know of houses/ I learned from the creatures.' (84) The creation of a house is a necessary shelter, once against predation and now against isolation; it is necessary in both cases to remain attuned to the ecosystem within which you build your home. Whilst we now see ourselves as separate in such a way as to relate such historical concerns to the realm of fairytale, Burnside claims that it is still a valuable narrative process, asks us to

leave the door ajar  
for what will come:

fires on the border at nightfall;  
wolves at the treeline. (84)

The environments of contemporary society, in which we live daily, make this kind of revelation difficult for Burnside. He has stated that his approach to the world has been characterised by his 'unrelenting search for the one vast order that transcends all others, a hypertext, an *afterlife*' (*WT* 6). The interstitial space of the afterlife is the most potent space of his imagining, both as a stylistic choice and function of his lyric poetry, and as a spiritual-ideological stance:

If there is an afterlife, for me it will be limbo, the one truly great Catholic invention: a no man's land of mystery and haunting music, with nobody good or holy around to be compared to – they will all be in heaven—just the interesting outsiders, the unbaptised and the pagan, and the faultless sceptics God cannot quite find it in Himself to send to hell. (*LF* 42)

This space offers solace and exemption from the value judgements of quotidian life and the power structures that determine worth and influence within it. Burnside remains committed to this vision throughout his oeuvre; *Waking up in Toytown* opens with him considering 'the road that leads to the afterlife' (6) outside his house. This road is the one that runs from his house out towards the woods nearby, the marker to another natural and interstitial space. It is fair to say that Burnside seeks an afterlife in all of his poetry of place; a life beyond and after the constraints and damage imposed by the disappointments he has blamed on late capitalism, and his own difficult years in the working class and patriarchal environments of his youth. His search is stymied consistently by the reality that he finds himself constrained by, since:

even if from time to time I experienced a supreme connectedness, a profound sense of *being there*, after a few minutes, or an hour, or an afternoon [. . .] I had to go back to the office. I suppose this banal truth was the origin of my afterlife fantasy: all the afterlife was, in the end, was a state where you didn't have to go back to the office.  
(WT 143)

The afterlife exists as an alternative to (or an eventual escape from) the realities of contemporary life, as a space where the spirit can be housed and enriched; it manifests as an escape from the pointless office work, the 'banal truth' of Burnside's existence contingent on these systems. The process of writing evinces a space of escape in itself; this is labour and time given over to creating and sustaining creative and philosophical spaces that stand in opposition to 'the office'.

### **Using and Losing Space: Class, Capital and Environment**

Moments of unexpected epiphany, of unsought connection and interaction, are important because they work to highlight the solution to and function of contemporary society's banality in rendering us strangers to the 'spirit' that Burnside sees as fundamental to our humanity. The world at large is a profoundly isolating environment, constructed of intricate systems of capital, class, race, gender that we must work within and negotiate. This world, Burnside argues, separates us from ourselves and from the people around us, in service of an overarching narrative benefiting an elite ruling class that cannot seek to serve the majority of us well. It is also, he suggests, necessary to distance, disconnect and divest

ourselves from this system, in order to renew ourselves and to be able to see with a degree of objectivity, that 'another world is possible'.<sup>79</sup> As such, his approach to questions of nature, nation and self is one that seeks to expose and extrapolate those divides, and use them to establish how and where they are constructed and so what relevant connections might be made in order to combat them. Of Scottish independence, for example, he has said:

Perhaps more is made of the Scottish/ English divide than is necessary [. . .] I'm far more inclined to think that working-class people throughout Britain have more in common than say an ordinary Scottish person and a member of the landowning class in Scotland would, for example [. . .] In a very sort of Old Left way, I find the whole Scottish Nationalist issue an irritation [. . .] the indictment [of voting for independence] is an idea that we will somehow be free (*Bottle Imp* 13 2).

This attitude is vastly more representative of a pre-1979 conception of society and community, where within Scotland, more Scots saw themselves as having something in common with working-class English Brits than with Scots of another class.<sup>80</sup> This trend shifted over the 1980s (largely due to a widely-held conception in Scotland of the positioning of Tory Britishness as Englishness), and has provided the language of much of the accepted media and critical discourse for the conception of independence as discussed within political, social and literary arenas.<sup>81</sup> For Burnside, the concerns of representation and independence are aligned with a broadly socialist conception of freedom from the apparatus of capital that reduces swathes of society to serving the needs of the economy without a representative share within it. Burnside rejects the space allowed to working class and other disenfranchised peoples in contemporary Scotland (and beyond) as insufficient. As a result, his writing seeks to expose this deficiency within the spaces we allow certain members of our society to occupy, to reconfigure our approach to 'a good life', and to rework the places we can call 'home', be that a national or intrinsic space. In so doing, the

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<sup>79</sup> Taken from McNally, David. *Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti Capitalism*. Winnipeg: ArbeiterRing Publishing, 2005.

<sup>80</sup> See Appendix 1 Figs. A and B: Table 2, Table 3 Osgun 2012.

<sup>81</sup> See George McKenchnie 'The Decline of Britishness in Scotland since 1979'. MA Swansea University, 2007: 72. Online. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

way that Burnside conceives of lived and liveable spaces is a utopian one.

As *AOB*'s 'Nocturne' posits, 'say what you will, all making is nostalgia' (75). Burnside's lyrics of home rely deeply on the invocation of *nostos* — the return to one's home— and *oikos* — the environment that comprises that home. The way in which we create and relate to that space is dictated by the conditions (material, economic, social) of our existences. So, his poetics is one that writes nostalgia as the ache for a return to a place that cannot or has never existed; the utopian space that must consistently stand in for the real thing, especially in the working-class reality that Burnside writes from. In his work, the pain of being away from home is often something that is caused by the very place in which one lives being some distance removed from the conception of home one has created and desires. Living in an altered state of being is a reaction against the reality of living within an altered *oikos* that precludes return, since the space to which one is returning is impossible. Burnside's *nostos* is an abortive journey, whose narrative relies on fabrications of 'home' within real-world environments which cannot on their own sustain such philosophical or poetic hopes. For those people forced to migrate for work, to leave homes as refugees, or those like Burnside's family moved into new towns that feed industry, this creation is fundamental to survival at the same time that it is a fiction which destroys its creators. He recalls his grandmother saying of her family's move from Ireland to Cowdenbeath;

*But that was our home*, she said, by which she meant  
that the harder it is to begin with, the prouder we are  
to call a place our own (*AOB* 44).

The idea of 'civilising' a place and developing a new self in order to carve out a home is a necessary part of the metanarratives that displaced peoples, or migrant workers, must use to sustain a link to a utopian idea of home; home is always a place to return to, or a place that one will cultivate. The realities of society under late capitalism make this an increasingly fragile narrative, and are a large source of the disaffection with which Burnside imbues the inhabitants of his poetic renditions of such spaces.

As touched on earlier in this thesis, a primary function of capital and the neoliberal appropriation of space and place is the creation of dead space. It is necessary within a capitalist economy to create a system which values empty land, and space held in potential is more valuable (read profitable) than land which is open to public use, left 'to nature' etc. Land that is occupied by communities of people or wildlife is vastly less profitable than that

given over to industry, or held in the expectation of future use. The ecology of capital therefore is a perversion of 'living space'— to live is not profitable, when space equals money, and so the spaces into which humans are forced become increasingly anathema to the cultivation of a 'life well lived'. In urban planning, the way that 'public space has been cultivated is often not ideal, especially in low-income areas, where it is less profitable again to let the inhabitants of a space utilise the land around them as a community rather than commodities to be sold to more middle class commercial ventures.<sup>82</sup> Our own ecosystems have become toxic to us, not only in the ways that they have encroached on forests, waterways and wild land, but in the ways we are forced to live within them. Burnside has written critically of this function, finding himself in dialogue with the nineteenth-century poet John Clare, borrowing his terminology to bemoan the contemporary proliferation of the handing over of public land to private capital.

Much of Burnside's poetry of space features and investigates these 'enclosures'. He bemoans the fact that 'I live in a land where agribusiness and "development" has rendered such scenes [of diverse meadows with prolific plant and insect life] defunct'. (*EJC* 79) It is frequently these spaces given over to 'agribusiness and development' that Burnside's prose protagonists inhabit, and it is these ideas and processes that he laments in poems such as 'Erosion' which observes one such individual appropriating the neighbourhood to capital:

Soon he'll have turbines up; soon he'll buy out  
my better neighbours, building, field by field,  
his proud catastrophe  
of tin and mud.  
I loathe him, but it's nothing personal;  
he's only one of many, motherless  
and carefully indifferent  
to all he cannot buy or use, a friend  
to no one, and yet not enough in him  
of worth or life

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<sup>82</sup> See Paton, Kirsteen. 'Creating the Neoliberal City and Citizen: The Use of Gentrification as Urban Policy in Glasgow'. *Neoliberal Scotland: Class and Society in a Stateless Nation*. Eds. Neil Davidson, Patricia McCafferty and David Miller. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2010 Print: 203-224.

to qualify as foe.<sup>83</sup> (AOB 68)

The poem pits its narrator against an unnamed landowner, a 'motherless' and faceless antagonist, who is so detached from all possible sources of identity as to be intangible; only his actions produce concrete effects. He himself is made other, and Burnside goes on to show how his new neighbour is working to other the land and community of 'better neighbours' he has come to inhabit. This nameless neighbour intends 'regeneration' at the expense of the space around him, the gentrification of the surrounding countryside, effectively standing in for the overarching systems of capital and industry that seek to monetise land instead of inhabiting it, to occupy instead of to live. Burnside also evokes the threat of the nameless interloper of land speculation in 'Peregrines' (AOB 67) where he explicitly draws the parallels between profitability and destruction within neoliberal conceptions of space. He notes, dispassionate, that 'soon they will kill the falcons that breed in the quarry. It's only a matter of time: raptors need space// and, in these parts, space equals money.' (67)

The space that the falcons, and by extension the speaker, inhabit, is 'mortgaged land' (67); by using this language, Burnside establishes a debt 'unto death' and underscores the slow death of a free and unmanned relationship to the land, catalogued in acres lost and species displaced. Burnside charts the development of power over our environments in a global and industrial sense alongside the concurrent powerlessness of vast swathes of people in response to the demands of such developments.<sup>84</sup> The combination of these phenomena leads to what Burnside sees as a critical disaffection and 'exemption' from the natural world. Broadly speaking, Burnside's examination of this disconnection takes two forms in his writing; those works wherein the problem is one of exploitation — the takeover of wetlands for oil pipelines, the disconnection of a factory worker in a prefabricated house — and of disassociation— the resultant disconnection experienced when those environments of exploitation lead to a new psychosocial environments of isolation, violence

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<sup>83</sup> It is unclear, but can be assumed that Burnside means wind turbines. This creates an interesting tension between his environmental concerns and his distaste for what he has called 'PR greenwashing'. There is the sense that this figure is not trusted to 'improve' the environment in any meaningful way, even as his building project appears to have the trappings of responsible environmental credentials.

<sup>84</sup> We see this too in the disproportionate effects of climate change on nations which themselves do not contribute to the problem on a comparable scale to those in the global north.

and altered consciousness.

Exploitation arises from what Burnside has termed our tendency to 'occupy' rather than inhabit space. The terms in which we frame our living spaces, and ourselves within them, markedly shift the perspective by which we are able to view ourselves in the world. For Burnside, such semantic distinctions are crucial:

I say occupy, rather than inhabit, to indicate a world of resources, rather than living things, a world we doggedly refuse to leave to its own, wild devices. It is 'community' that decides who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out; it is 'community' that tells us what is beautiful (well, ornamental, in most cases) as opposed to 'an eyesore', and, because 'community' is usually dominated by those who like things neat and tidy and tame, the community garden is a clipped, mown, straight-edged and utterly lifeless space, regularly sprayed with herbicides and maintained with noisy, gas-guzzling trimmers and leaf-blowers. (*New Statesman* 140 57)

Established concepts of living, of community and beauty and worth, are for Burnside frequently overseen by those with an eye to claiming 'resources' and maintaining the exploitative and elitist status quo that keeps people beholden to social elites and conservative mores.<sup>85</sup> The spectrum that demands a neatly-trimmed 'community garden' is the same sliding scale that at its other end houses people like Burnside's father in prefabs that live under the smoke of a factory. The *appearance* of the natural world, within a delineated and rigidly controlled 'ornamental' capacity, alongside policing who can enjoy such spaces 'properly', is preferable to the actual thing intruding upon the simulacrum. One exists to create an illusion of inhabiting, of inclusion and stewardship, the other demands acknowledgement of our 'occupation', our hermetic approach to the natural, our consumption and commodification of the same.

The mistreatment of the nonhuman world illustrates the sociopolitical effects of the proprietary and harmful appropriation of resources, space and (in a broader sense) 'lifestyle' that characterises the exploitative nature of contemporary society's attitude to space, influenced as it is by decades of neoliberal and globalised structures of capital. Those who have high standing find better and more cosseting spaces open to them; those without

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<sup>85</sup> See Paton 206

must be grateful to have a space at all. Neoliberal policy renders the working class merely ‘a flawed consumer [and instead] denies the existence of class by suggesting structural inequalities are in fact problems of people *and* places.’ (Paton 206-7) The burden of living next to pipelines that might damage water supplies, power plants that might pollute the air to unbreathable levels or factories for dirty industries, is placed disproportionately upon the poorest inhabitants of society<sup>86</sup>. Those with money and influence can maintain immunity from these spaces, and instead curate the simulacra of wildness, an ornamental ‘nature’ within a strictly controlled built environment that exists by exploiting the people and the landscapes that provide the resources and labour to create it.

The protagonists in Burnside’s prose work come up against this realisation frequently. The awareness of such exploitation, combined with the innate sickness that Burnside ascribes to the psychogeographies of those places within his works,<sup>87</sup> acts as catalyst for the self-destructive actions of their protagonists, prompting their introspection and disaffection. Such moments of realisation inevitably focus on the reality of such inadequate physical, social and emotional environments, which leave a man ‘forced to dwell with, not mortality so much as squalor, every day of his life.’ (*MB* 188) These moments generate pathos and highlight the damaging nature of a polluted space. They also allow for the expression of tenderness, the potential for communion and empathy within such a brutalising space. For example, this realisation leads *MB*’s protagonist, to feel ‘a surge of pity, for this man and every other man like him’ (*ibid.*). These moments, whilst tragic, are instances of connection; the erosion of the self to such a degree that suffering (both one’s own and others’) is rendered insignificant, stalled. Burnside focuses on the compassion that exists within a community frequently seen as an emotionless and brutal monolith. Disaffection and dissociation give way to moments of deep and anguished empathy, and it is this trait that Burnside sees as critical to spiritual survival. The curated environment, be it the exploitative one of a factory town, or the hermetic unreality of a community garden in St Andrews, acts as a buffer to these realisations, and must, for Burnside, be seen through and rejected. However, the way that such rejection is communicated frequently manifests

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<sup>86</sup> See *Pollution and Poverty- Breaking the Link* 2001

[https://friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/pollution\\_poverty\\_report.pdf](https://friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/pollution_poverty_report.pdf)

<sup>87</sup> Such as the sinister liminal land of the abandoned works in *Glister*, the factory in *Living Nowhere*, or the dilapidated housing blocks in *The Mercy Boys*.

violently for oneself and others as a result of the structures of the surrounding environment.

### **Masculinity as an Unhealthy Environment: Hostility, Empathy and the Ecological**

For Burnside, dissociative spaces within contemporary life are inextricably tied to the disaffection and arrested development that form the basis of the masculinity produced by those exploited and exploitative environments. To be a man, for Burnside, is to fight against a world which has dealt consistent violence to you, without resorting wholesale to perpetuating the same. This is not something he has always managed, and as he has written, the concomitant fear and desire at the heart of his understanding and poetics of masculinity have been marked by alcoholism, mental illness and abortive romances. In 'First Signs of Ageing' (AOB 49), Burnside muses that

Being was never my forte; cold red wine  
and glimmer of herd instinct bearing me into a night  
that any fool could travel, if he chose. (49)

Burnside's speaker struggles to conceive of a purposeful existence, a constant present life-energy beyond the pull of 'herd instinct' and the anaesthetic of 'cold red wine'; the poem suggests he is searching for a refutation (or at least reconception) of something analogous to Heidegger's *Dasein*. The 'Being' on offer here is somehow shallow, but we are offered potential by the indefinite-articled 'night', only one of innumerable syntactically-possible others. The poem suggests a choice to be made that will allow the speaker to come to a way of being that can align him with more ecological viewpoints. The speaker's masculinity is rendered an immutable quality— something that, counter to established patriarchal and normative discourse, renders him other. The sense of loss and incapability which precludes the blissful ignorance of becoming just another fool is perhaps an example of what Tom Bristow has identified in the poet's work as a form of 'mourning [which] resonates with Heidegger's meaning of "apartness" as the beginning of home rather than its decay.' (58) For the speaker, the rejection of such 'herd instinct' is the catalyst for rendering himself other, and, to read hopefully, the beginning of discovering a space for oneself apart from the environments and structures that up until now have constructed that self at the expense of his genuine and authentic being-in-the-world.

With this realisation, suggests Burnside, we are able to make the choice to minimise the violence done to ourselves and others by the attitudes and structures that we are surrounded by; in this he and Robertson often find themselves in agreement. For Burnside, the impact of childhood, its traumas and experiences, and the role models and aspirations presented during it, are key to this realisation; he sees childhood as a time when he was made aware of 'all the forms that suffering can take' (*SFS* 34). In interview, he has said that

For my father, cruelty was an ideology. His own life had been hard, so there was a logic to him wanting to kill off my finer – and so, weaker – self. [. . .] The older I get, the happier my childhood becomes. When someone asked me in my late twenties what my childhood was like, I could only remember how angry and unhappy I was, how little money we had, my father drinking half of it. But now I can remember the good stuff: my mum teaching me how to bake, and listening to old love songs on the radio together. (*Independent* 2014 n.p.)

The nature of memory informs much of Burnside's poetry of childhood, especially in his 2014 collection *All One Breath*, which opens with a sequence entitled 'Self Portrait as Funhouse Mirror' in which he explores its ability to shift our focus and to crystallise around different points of importance as we age. To see oneself is always to see through a glass darkly; memory, perspective and the ideologies that surround us distort and throw back images of ourselves that we must struggle to see anew, to recognise and ultimately reconcile to ourselves. His father's cruelty underpins this distortion that Burnside attempts to resolve. He writes that often 'The one thing you want to portray/ Is the one thing [a self-portrait] lacks.' (*AOB* 6) Remembering and self-realisation are two necessary yet hard-won sides of the same, impossible coin. Looking back, the image will always be distorted, and there is no way of telling whether the disturbance recalled is part of the degradation of that memory or whether it represents the truth of the remembered event. The poem is the perfect form in which to render a memory; its purpose is to open up a space wherein the scene and its construction equally affect the readers' experience, and one which changes upon their repeated visits. In viewing our reflection, we turn the gaze that otherwise processes the images and information that exists outside of ourselves onto the body in which we walk through that observed world.

In the first poem of the sequence, 'Hall of Mirrors, 1964' (3) Burnside recounts the

image of himself and his mother, transformed by the glass. In the moment of looking, his mother becomes

some new flora growing wild  
in infinite reflection, while I turned  
and turned, and couldn't find myself until  
she picked me out: a squat  
intruder in the garden she had made,  
blearfacéd and discontent, more beast than boy,  
more fiend than beast. (3)

The mirror's distortion allows something transformational to occur; the poet's mother is rendered 'some new flora'; her patterned dress gives rise to a garden of her own creation. The reflection that the boy sees transmits to him the wonder and strength of her motherhood; she is the creator of an 'infinite' garden, bright and abundant amid the surroundings of the fair that is in fact 'just an acre of clay on old man Potter's land' (3). In contrast, his own reflected self is one that he cannot find at all 'until // she picked me out'. The revelation of his image, 'a squat/ intruder' in the colourful, joyful impression his mother has made, rendered, to his eyes, 'blearfacéd and discontent', and essentially lacking in humanity. The speaker sees himself as animal, demonic, before he sees himself as himself, as the boy that he was expecting. Without an integration of those parts, his reflected self seems threatening and aberrant, rather than (as his mother's does) transformational and enriching. In these stanzas, the mirror serves to draw out an impression of quiddity for the poet. His mother's vibrancy and beauty is allowed an outlet that the surroundings of daily life do not otherwise permit. And, for the speaker, a self-reflection surfaces that serves to highlight his own deepest suspicions and insecurities. Though the image is warped, and, he says, 'That wasn't me: I knew that much' (4), the reflection nevertheless offers a figure that 'I knew [. . .] gazing back at me *ad infinitum*' (ibid.). Whilst not the body's self the poet knows walks out with him in the world, he still feels

I knew him better: baby-facéd  
pariah; little criminal,  
with nothing to confess  
but narrow innocence  
and bad intentions. (4)

The figure in the glass is both unrecognisable and intimately familiar; an 'otherself/ suspended in its caul of tortured glass' (4) that the poet is forced to recognise, 'the male homunculus' (ibid.) that looks back out at him. The literal truth of the reflection being merely an image of the thing and not the thing itself ('*That wasn't me*') is undermined by something that the speaker feels could be true on a more visceral level; that this representation might in fact be a more accurate likeness of his essential self than the body whose altered image is captured in the glass. Until this point of revelation, he has been a boy, or more accurately a child, and therefore a thing apart from the men around him. In this moment he finds himself forced not only to see himself, his male form and the body that will morph and become unrecognisable again through adolescence, but also to see the future potential that this realisation (and this male self) transmits to him. He sees

What I was  
beyond the child she loved, the male  
homunculus she hoped I'd never find  
to make me like my father, lost  
and hungry, and another mouth to feed  
that never quit its ravening. (4)

In discerning and identifying with his masculinity, he realises the part of his psyche that is tied to his father and to the men 'like' him, and to the part of him that he sees reflected back in them and his own 'squat' and 'blearfacéd' image. The poet names the fear that comes with this realisation; that he has *been seen*. His masculinity, the part of himself he fears places him 'beyond' his mother's love, has been noticed; it is shown to him and his mother in infinite permutations in the 'tortured glass'. (4) The environment that allows for this revelation is such that not only does the act of observing become a perverse revelation through a funhouse mirror, but the very sign of masculinity is shown to be a distortion and a warping of the self in a way that terrifies and shames the viewer. However, the poem closes with the discovery that, although 'convinced she'd seen,' (4) and therefore fearful of her disgust, the poet's mother remains instead 'all/ reflection, printed roses and a blear/ of Eden from that distance in the glass,/ where anything can blossom' (5). By finding the reflection of this mother unchanged by his discovery, the speaker is able to recast the mirror and the planes of its reflections as a liminal space of transformation and potential. The integration of masculine and feminine, human and creaturely, represented by the speaker's mother,

offers respite and comfort; he is reconciled to himself. By accepting that the observer and observed are changed by the act, but seeing within his mother's reflection hope for a reflected self that is not so harmful, the poem closes on the hopeful note, that within this space now opening up, there is the possibility of communion and connection, a meeting of self and other, 'till everything/ is choir.' (AOB 5)

Adolescence especially is a space where the innate sense of 'spirit' that Burnside seeks to imbue his work with, and the public (and private) social concerns of gender, class and sexuality are increasingly forced to coexist. Coming of age for Burnside is not just coming into your adult self but coming into that self from the freedom and potential of the liminality of childhood; once the real world takes precedent over the spaces we construct for ourselves, the demands of that world set to work; they outweigh the pull of the natural, and impose themselves on the priorities/wonder we may have felt prior in these liminal, wild or 'uncivilised' spaces. In childhood, we seek to construct spaces of discovery and wonder in the world, and are able to explore and return to the safety of home; in adolescence, we realise that the home we have been given is in itself fraught, and as adults, we spend our lives constructing for ourselves homes within other people, places, and desires. The environments Burnside's adults inhabit engender an attempt to return to the sense of wonder and potential inherent to the time when we knew exactly what and where our home was.

### **'Spirit' and Modernity: a Politics of Empathy**

The years between childhood and adult life open up a lived liminal space, a temporal and emotional potential in-between that, for Burnside, is often cut off from us once the demands of an adult life supersede our ability to get lost among the spaces at the edge of town, at the edge of consciousness, at the edge of expected behaviour. This ties into the religiosity that permeates his writing; for him this time and space are sacred, and offer a doorway to a place where all things remain possible, and all dialogue remains open. To be one thing or another is to become static; the spaces that men like his father, women like his mother, inhabit are defined by that stasis, and so, like Morton and Robertson, he privileges the swithering, the changeable and changing spaces of the ecological. The poetry of his childhood therefore often focuses on this time as a place between stalemates, that looks to the living and the dead, the child that was and the immediacy of the experiences of

childhood within the man Burnside writes as today.

In his latest collection, Burnside articulates the resonance that the semantic field of afterlife has come to grant both his memories of childhood and his thoughts on how that childhood has shaped his later adult years. 'With the Discovery of Cosmic Background Radiation, my Brother returns from the Hereafter as a Russian Cosmonaut' (*SFS* 25-27) is a haunting and effective ode to his late older brother, the child his mother lost before he was born.<sup>88</sup> The poem's opening lines introduce him to us, and the speaker explains that in relation to himself,

You were the boy in cautionary tales  
and problems in mathematics,  
your voice entirely theoretical (25)

The 'theoretical' voice of the boy who never lived grants Burnside's brother infinity as a home. The presence of this unmet brother, who never inhabited the world as Burnside and his sisters did, is addressed as a reality nonetheless; like mathematics or a 'cautionary tale' he becomes a construction of knowledge and narrative, a puzzle to be resolved, and a voice to conjure from existing sources of data. By addressing himself to those theoretical collections of data and possibility, Burnside's brother becomes present. The computations that add up to 'my brother' offer a way of understanding someone outside of the intangible realities of their absence in the world at large. This suggestion is supported by the poem's title too, which posits the 'discovery of background radiation' as a means by which Burnside's brother might 'return from the hereafter', however unfamiliarly. In this case he becomes a Russian cosmonaut, an imagined story, an equation left unbalanced.

The spiritual possibility of the afterlife is conflated with developments of quantum physics; a new dimension where the lost boy yet exists stands in for religious models of paradise. The space for connection between the living and the dead is opened up by the discovery of the hyperobject of cosmic radiation, which offers to transform the physical realities of those things that come into contact with it. Perhaps this is the kind of space to which a soul is consigned, Burnside suggests, or where we might image one into becoming: the conflation of the religious and the scientific offers an infinite universe of possibility. This space (real and imagined) is where he has placed the memory of his brother, stating that 'all

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<sup>88</sup> See *A Lie About my Father*

this time/ I've barely pictured you,/ small-boned and far in the dark,/ like a sleeping bird.'

(26) The speaker has 'barely' allowed himself to conceive of an image of his brother, leaving, we must assume, the eponymous moment of 'discovery' to provide the catalyst, bringing those images into clear focus. The brother is likened to 'a sleeping bird'; his vulnerability renders him animal, fragile, small-boned, a creature to be left to the mercy of the speaker. Burnside rehabilitates darkness similarly to Jamie; both view it as something beyond merely 'the metaphor of our mortality' (Jamie *Findings* 24).<sup>89</sup> It becomes a safety net, not a veil under which to enact violent and shameful acts, and the space that is held in darkness and safety allows for the 'background radiation' of Burnside's poem to mirror the 'beam of midwinter light [sent] in among our bones' (Jamie *Findings* 24) that Jamie cherishes at Skara Brae. This darkness, as conceived of by both poets, is that of the pre-dawn of time, of the universe uncreated, of the womb, of sleep, of the afterlife. It provides an interstitial space that is characterised by the lack of outside forces; the darkness creates its own hermetically sealed environment, full of potential and to the exclusion of threat, intrusion or distraction. Here, 'in the dark', Burnside can finally allow the image of the lost brother to coalesce, and to confront and appreciate the stunning fragility of his image.

In another shared metaphor with Jamie, the meaning of this reappearance is greeted by the wisdom of the animal, the nonhuman world; within the mysteries of the natural world, we might find a way of attributing a soul, or to understanding our concept of one, via a reconstituted animism that sees personhood and spirituality outside of a solely human form. The vision of his brother is explicable to Burnside as

some animate distortion caused by  
 silver-haired or red, or long-eared bats  
 -who knows *exactly* when they stopped to comprehend  
 that most of what we thought we knew for sure  
 was now in doubt (*SFS* 27).

The psychopomp bats return as messengers and guide, who almost verbatim echo Jamie's pipistrelles in comprehending something just outside of the speaker's reach. The speaker's

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<sup>89</sup> See Jamie. *Findings*. London: Sort of Books, 2005: 'I had been asking around among literary people, readers of books, for instances of dark as a natural phenomenon, rather than as a cover for all that' wicked, but could find few. It seems to me that our cherished metaphor of darkness is wearing out. The darkness through which might shine the Beacon of Hope. Isaiah's dark' (3).

brother both becomes and is transmitted by the 'animate distortion' of the bats' presence. They as nonhuman creatures seem to Burnside to have a greater comprehension of the impossible reality that the speaker now finds himself in. The return of the dead as part and parcel of a living ecology made possible by a shift in dimension, perspective and physics, spreads 'doubt' for the human but has already been accepted as part of the world's processes (perhaps since time immemorial) by the nonhuman. The poem's closing line offers up the image of the brother coloured 'blue in the folds of your heart, / where my blood is sealed.' (27) The spaces within the poet are enmeshed with the spaces of the long-dead-or-never-living sibling, so that they become part of the same flesh in literal terms. The only way to comprehend all that 'we thought we knew for sure' and that is 'now in doubt' is by returning to the realities of shared blood, the physical and tangible link between their genes as one boy lies 'in the dark/like a sleeping bird,' and the other lives within the waking world. When one sibling is given over to the world of the afterlife, the natural the nonhuman, the still-living and still human sibling remains in a position from which he cannot see all possible realities and outcomes; he watches the 'long-eared bats' and seeks to understand.

The idea of death as another dimension, or altered space, recurs several times in this collection; for Burnside the process of losing something is to find it has gone to another place. In 'Anecdotal Accounts of the Last Northern Dynasty' (38-39), the eponymous bloodline's loss of supremacy sees the human ruling classes subject to an approximation of the natural rhythms that continue throughout the poem. Though 'No one has said/ they're the last' (*SFS* 38), Burnside presents us with a word that is becoming less and less known, less familiar, less connected to the 'world' that exists under their rule:

Crocuses bolt through snow, a new foal  
spills into a blear of warmth and straw,  
but all the birds he ever knew by name,  
lapwings and finches, pintails, the several larks  
are flitting away to the light of a different world. (39)

The recurring focus on nameable space, on calling the flora and fauna of our habitat by name and therefore knowing if one owns them, is centred again. The migration of 'the birds he [. . .] knew by name' suggests the transference of power from him to another. The very space he inhabits is darkened by their passing; they 'are flitting away to the light of a

different world', one without the supremacy of the northern dynasty, and without the names and rituals of their rule. At the same time that this loss is charted, Burnside suggests a comfort. The death of the dynasty occurs as winter turns to spring, as flowers bloom and new life arrives. The world around the poem's protagonist is renewing itself, the hopeful undercurrent of these rhythms implying a natural transition. It is only the loss of taxonomic conceits of nature that suggests the fear or pain of the loss that is imminent. No longer able to name the nonhuman animals around you, you lose control over them. We are left to wonder if this is true of people too; to as at what point one stops noticing that things are changing, only to look up and find that everything has changed and one is left without the language to articulate that change. The suggestion seems to be that human structures of power and supremacy are inherently constructed as artificial and temporary; to lose one is not the tragedy that losing an entire species would be. Indeed, the greater pain comes from the protagonist losing the knowledge of himself and his position through the loss of 'lapwings and finches', than through the loss of political power. To lose yourself as a worldly figure, suggests Burnside, is not such a loss; to lose oneself by being unable to find a relationship with the natural spaces and patterns around you, is to be in 'another world' entirely. Integration into the systems and processes of this change, natural and otherwise is one's best hope.

'Still Life with Lost Cosmonaut' (*SFS* 42) reinforces this idea; Burnside feels that there are processes and forms of loss that remove one entirely from the known spaces that one has hitherto inhabited. In this poem, which chimes thematically with 'With the Discovery of Cosmic Background Radiation, my Brother returns from the Hereafter as a Russian Cosmonaut' (*SFS* 25-27), Burnside addresses the figure that he has previously transmogrified his infant sibling into, and finds that 'If I imagine you dead, there is no love / immense enough to bring you back to earth' (42). The land of the dead is literalised; in this case, the depths of outer space serve as a fitting metaphor for the vast expanse of the afterlife. The dead occupy a space that, while removed from the spaces that the living are contained by, allows Burnside to conceive of his lost cosmonaut/brother within the same tangible universe, and so tell him that 'I see you drifting in the selfsame light/ that I inhabit' (*ibid.*). By imagining room for the departed, the 'lost' within a universe of the real, a space that exists undeniably, and physically in our lived reality, but is inaccessible, becomes another hyperobject, because the afterlife is a space that sits outside of our current physical

environment. By doing this, Burnside also casts himself as a lost soul; ‘the selfsame light’ illumines them both, and he finds himself looking for a man, already thematically twinned with his constructed poetic self, who is beyond the reach of any ‘love/immense enough’ to call him back. In this poem Burnside deftly collapses images and implications on top of one another so that the literal and spiritual spaces of his poetic manifesto exist inextricably. The dead are those lost to the reach of those left on earth whose love pours out into space, and those within that same sphere who cannot help but drift, untethered to that love in each and any plane of existence that Burnside here lays out for us.

The profound difficulty of learning empathy within a system that denies it recurs consistently in Burnside’s work; from his attempts to humanise and rehabilitate his late father’s harmful masculinity as a product of deep isolation and fear, to his conviction that poetry must deal with issues of ecological depredation and damage in order not only to restore us to ourselves but to literally avoid our own extinction, he writes towards a compassionate interaction with the world. In ‘Still Life with Feeding Snake’ (*SLFS* 32-37), he progress poetically through much of the thematic and critical concerns that have informed his oeuvre; the world allowed to us if we do not engage with the fullest ecology of our existence; the violence done to ourselves and other species in service of our isolation to maintain the illusion of superiority; the way in which we come to realise these things from a past that is murkily recoverable at best, yet has shaped us indelibly until now. When the eponymous animal encroaches on the consciousness of the poem’s central figure:

he was far away from the given world  
when she came in out of the yard  
and told him, that, somewhere below,  
in the crawl space  
under his feet,  
some kind of snake  
was swallowing  
some kind of bird.     (33)

The protagonist is allocated to ‘the given world’, and so situates the reader within a domestic, terrestrial scene. Burnside’s specification maintains a degree of ambiguity however; since he is called by his wife who has been ‘out [in] the yard’, and he is ‘far away’

as this occurs, there is a point at which ‘the given world’ is concurrently the outside world, the surroundings of his house, the constructed environment of society, or the emotional-social space of his own presence within that society. Drawn out of that space, and into the garden and then the crawl space, he takes on the position of a creator figure, at odds with the reality of their creation. We learn through his wife’s report that ‘somewhere below’ unbeknownst to them, a snake has caught a bird. The snake has been moving to and fro on the earth, and up and down in it,<sup>90</sup> beneath the man’s feet and he has had no notice of it; he is painted within this semantic field of paradise and the fall, as a kind of absentee father, a negligent god or ignorant product of one, once again brought worldly wisdom via a snake and a curious woman. He has been ‘far away’ and unaware of the reality unspooling right ‘under his feet’. Both he and his wife lack awareness and deeper knowledge; this is revealed in the vagueness of his wife’s tale. To her, the animals are just ‘some kind’ of each of their respective species, cause for fascination and horror but not (yet) something recognisable as themselves.

The process of looking is seen as an active state by Burnside. Like Jamie in *Frissure*, the quality of the gaze each time is altered by the intent and understanding of the observer. Neither poet allows that it is possible to be a passive onlooker; instead, gaze is reciprocal, and so subject to judgement. Burnside’s speaker confesses he wishes to see the scenes his wife relays,

and yet he had always felt guilty  
looking at animals,  
even at the zoo, when he was  
young, the seals  
distracted from themselves by being  
watched so much, the elephants  
so alien  
he never saw them clear. (34)

The human gaze on the nonhuman is inherently affective. The act dehumanises the observer and denatures the observed. Zoo animals end up ‘distracted from themselves’ and ‘alien’ to the man’s eyes. It is also worth noting that in this case, those animals have been

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<sup>90</sup> Job 2:2

placed within a purpose-built environment *for* the consumption of that gaze. There is the implication that even ‘when he was young,’ the speaker identified an innate wrongness to the ways in which we view and utilise the nonhuman, even if he could not articulate it fully. Instead, like the animals he was never able to see clearly; that feeling therefore manifests as guilt, before true realisation or connection could render it empathy. Childhood is a time in which the inherent vulnerability of the body and mind is able to reach toward that empathy more easily, to sense a parallel.

Burnside succinctly summarises the sense of unease that exists as a product of human conceptions of the role of the nonhuman when relating the man’s reaction to finally watching the snake feeding on the bird. He finds himself at a loss, since ‘There was nothing to do here, / nothing to rescue, or kill.’ (35) The normalised relationship to the nonhuman world is seen as one of Biblical stewardship at best, and insensible mastery at worst. The dichotomy of ‘rescue, or kill’ is again the purview of a nascent god, and not one that can accurately convert to the responsibility and reciprocity that underpins an ecological connection with the world at large. The move toward empathy that this poem tracks results in the divesting of the ego and the exceptionalism that characterises the speaker’s initial relationship to the nonhuman world. Instead of being a dispassionate observer, or a benevolent master, he is instead reduced to the level of the snake, the bird, the zoo animal. In doing so, he is able to see clearly

all the forms that suffering can take  
in such a world, where everything must feed  
and anything can be  
demoted, in the merest  
instant, to the role  
of fodder, strayed, or careless  
in its path (37).

## **Conclusion**

Burnside chases a poetics of empathy and integration that seeks authenticity as honesty; essentialism is discarded for ‘spirit’, a sense of wonder and connection that any creature, person, culture or nation might exhibit, and in so doing, reach an understanding through which they might live responsibly and meaningfully. His work is truthful, so it is authentic;

his work is authentic in the only possible way that it can be in such a heterogeneous and changing time, by recognising the conflicting parts of our current systems of living as they pertain to questions of nature, nation and self, and by attempting to reconcile these tensions by refusing to allow those concepts to ossify or pass themselves off as inevitable and entrenched. Burnside's work recognises that 'The last word about the authenticity of anything from a bronze rapier to a new nation remains a proverb: "This is my grandfather's axe. My father gave it a new handle, and I gave it a new head."' (Ascherson 8) All poetry is artefact, and the spaces within which Burnside writes are artefacts of a new and changing nation; his grandfather's axe, his own new head. 'Authenticity' that is essentialist, or that relies on ethnographic constructions of lineage, or that sees the natural world as immutable, untouchable and impassive, is in fact denial, and the perpetuation of the selfsame violence that such narratives seek to confront. Burnside seeks the integration of past and present, interior and outside, spirit and world.

In terms of his political stance, this understanding sees Burnside's poetics reject the easy co-option that nationalist and essentialist models of criticism attribute to much discussion of independence and Scotland apart from the UK. An 'us versus them' narrative of nation, of gender, of class and of environment is repeatedly taken apart by Burnside, seen as damaging and inadequate and as part of a system that works through violence. What Burnside chases instead is the revelation of responsibility; to be as much a part of one's environment as possible. His poetry seeks to find a reason for our reluctance to engage, and to renew our sense of self within the world and *of* the world. It is absolutely necessary he argues, to take responsibility for one's actions within that world; to allow for empathy to be a defining trait, both in understanding the structures that have shaped you, and the ways in which your actions shape the structures and ecologies around you. Human existence in its current form is interrogated as a profoundly problematic sociopolitical phenomenon, as well as a potentially profound spiritual-philosophical one. Burnside aligns with Morton's ecological view, which posits for example that a factor in 'assuming direct responsibility for global warming will be abandoning the idea of Nature, an ideological barrier to realising how everything is interconnected.' (ET 99) Politically, this means that, as he has previously stated, Burnside cares less about the Scottish versus Englishness debates and independence rhetoric in terms of the singular characteristic of Scottish sovereignty,

but is concerned politically with the promulgation of an equitable and progressive stewardship of the place one inhabits. His approach is traditionally leftist in its conception, and undoubtedly concerned with the lessening of our negative collective impact, environmentally, socially and ethically. In this sense, the rejection of the neoliberal values that drive much of our interactions with space in our daily lives is inherent to his work, and in terms of the rhetoric of nationhood within Scotland, much of the idea of being a small nation in a big world would sit well alongside his poetic manifesto. This means, when it comes to political positioning, the critical approach to contemporary Scottish writing which seeks to posit such work within the debate about independence and nationhood inevitably falls short of articulating a truly progressive platform.

Burnside's writing of self and of nature appears to be consistently aligned with Morton's political-philosophical approach. Burnside attempts to locate the 'spirit' in his poetry; he writes a poetics that privileges empathy, humility and a deep desire to see the damage of past structural and psychological violence repaired. The bedrock upon which a progressive politics might be advocated through the poetics and work of Burnside is perhaps most succinctly put in Morton's call for 'a phenomenological experience of coexisting with other beings.' (*WLML* n.p.) For Morton, and arguably Burnside, 'That's enough.' (*Ibid.*) It is this phenomenology that demands empathy and refuses dereliction, refuses claims of ignorance. Being there, being privy to and accepting that experience as phenomenon, is key to much of all three poets' work. Their writing causes us not just to ask "who is the narrator?" but "who does the text expect me to be?" (Morton *WLML* n.p.) Through Burnside's lyric of place, we are consistently tasked with 'locating the subject position' (*ibid.*) and relating to it. In the current climate (literal and political), Burnside's work evinces such a keen distaste for late capitalism's uses and abuse of space. He refuses to accept that 'since no one person's actions will solve global warming, [it is] better to do nothing [and] await the revolution to come.' (Morton *WLML* n.p.) And so Burnside, within the ecological paradigm at the core of his philosophy, seeks to write poetry that is capable of 'defeating cynicism with its own tool' (*Ibid.*) to offer an earnest and hopeful poetics of space that advocates for humane and conscientious constructions of the natural and human world. The age of disaffection, of dissociation, has bred in Burnside a desire to seek connection with the natural world, in the most earnest way; his work celebrates the

boundless hope and crushing responsibility of being human, being 'A body in the world, breathing. A centre of balance, a breath of air.' (Burnside *Living Nowhere* 14) His poetry is that breath contained, and the promise of that centre holding.

## 'Born to a Life of Dying':<sup>91</sup> Robin Robertson and the Negotiation of the Entropic

### **'I am almost never there':<sup>92</sup> Vulnerability, Humanity and the Ecological**

Robertson's poetry thrives on metamorphosis and responses to change; he investigates the uncertainty of defining the self, the mutability of the spaces we inhabit, the art of self-forgetting. He shares this sense of uncertainty and trepidation with Burnside, who also sees the discovery of the individual self as a process of charting a problematic relationship between the world and the spirit. Robertson's poetic spaces show continued interest in the fragility of the systems we inhabit, and the spaces we construct. Robertson's poetry looks towards empathetic connection; he finds this by accepting the vulnerability and changeability inherent in our experiences and environments. Entropy, vulnerability and physicality are key to his work; the processes of fear and threat are often central. Robertson is concerned with exploring the awareness that the body is capable of incurring damage and loss; he is interested in the fact that we are vulnerable to the systems that surround us, and to our own inherent impermanence. The potential for our bodies and surroundings to change constantly, due to our own or outside intervention, has a strong link to the way he writes about selfhood; he is particularly fascinated by the narratives we craft to explore this.

Nothing to Robertson is permanent nor especially unique; he sees the nation recreated and narrativised via the mythos of various canons, understands (him)self through a failing body, and experiences the natural world by observing our alienation from it, rendering it 'unnatural'. The poetics of entropy and change underscore Robertson's conception of nature, nation and self across his oeuvre. To return to the critical question of the ecological in relation to this issue, Morton's definition of 'Phobia [as] repressed desire' (WLML n.p.) aligns well with Robertson's poetry of self. Morton claims 'I fear heights because I visualise jumping.' (ibid.) Robertson recognises fear as a pull towards something recognisable within us and the spaces we inhabit. He looks to uncover the vulnerability of our hold on ideas of civilisation and control, to expose the connections between the human and nonhuman by confronting fearful, threatening or unfamiliar spaces. The spaces

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<sup>91</sup> Robertson, Robin. *Hill of Doors* London: Picador, 2013: 68

<sup>92</sup> Robertson, Robin. *The Wrecking Light*. London: Picador, 2010: 3

Robertson's poetry inhabits become both homes and 'environmental factors'— settings for and creators of those things that shape a life. He is alert to the methods we use to construct and uphold identities and environments, and mistrusts the idea of any 'natural' way of being that is in fact merely reliant on maintaining the appearance of being innate.

Robertson's fear is focused on the implicit violence in the unknown locations of his poetry and his pull towards it. He writes a poetry that draws out the parts of our experience that bring 'the subconscious [. . .] nosing out of the dark' (*Open Letters* n.p.). Robertson's formal exactitude, his densely evocative lyric, his precise eye for cultivating an affecting image, all speak to his poetic sensibility. His work 'attend[s] to certain buried concerns and anxieties, in much the same way as dreams do' (*Open Letters* n.p.). Robertson is adept at casting scenarios that seem at once realistic and somehow uncanny, possessed of an indefinable quality of curiosity or threat.

Understanding our innate vulnerability and figuring out the ways in which we arrive at empathy within chaotic and shifting circumstances becomes the underlying thematic quest for Robertson's poetry of place; he wishes to find a narrative for being a man in the world who can live in tune with those wider systems, ecological and otherwise, that sustain and break down the human body and spirit. *Swithering's* 'Park Drunk' (3) embodies his understanding of the entropic, in which vulnerability, change and self-forgetting are processes of empathy. The poem explores the difficulty of understanding the self when one is mired in an act of self-forgetting that negates the necessary history to which we must have access in order to form or alter that sense of self. The drunk sits among 'what the snow has furred/ to silence, uniformity' (3). Attempting to blend with that uniform nothingness, 'he drinks/ like the snow falling, trying/ to close the biggest door of all' (ibid.) in order to let go of the knowledge that ties him to an inadequate self. In the poem's closing lines, the bodily processes of the drunk and the ecological phenomenon of the sunrise are metaphorically blurred, and we close the poem on 'the low pulse/ of blood-orange' (3) that seems to represent at once the potential, renewing quality of the new day, and the entropic, waning beat of a failing body. By having all of this take place within a snowfall, Robertson not only explores the dichotomy of fear and hope which is at the root of his poetry of self, but mirrors for us the same fear and empathy that propels the act of writing. The *tabula rasa* of a fresh snowfall is important; absences create awareness of the space that we inhabit.

The snow's 'silence [and] uniformity' (*Swithering* hereafter *S* 3) acts to cover over the disordered and chaotic aspects of self and space, and offers up the park as a ritualistic space; a stage upon which the drunk can perform the rituals of abnegation and self-destruction. The religiosity of the scene presented here can be compared to the pagan-ecological soul searching explored in 'Plague Year', which asks 'what is there left// to trust but this green world and its god' (*TWL* 12). Robertson's placement of the stanza's line break, the syntax of the enjambment that only becomes clear on connecting the two verses, presents us with a potential answer to the question posed before, as well as the possible resolution. The abnegation of a self that is set apart from such natural rhythms and prerogatives might be the only way to find a sense of identity that is tenable. The speaker sees, dispassionately, 'My place taken by a white-tailed deer' (*TWL* 12); he suggests the relief in potential substitution, the revival inherent in living as a changeling, as a thing inextricable from the switching of the natural world around it. This also links productively to an interrogation of Burnside's continual return to the idea of living outside of mainstream society, of the 'holy fool', freed by madness to declaim on society's hypocrisies and ills, while rendered wretched by the realities of civilised modernity. As conceived of in Robertson's work, natural cycles function as a holding pattern against the violence done in pursuit of humanity's conceptions of self and place.<sup>93</sup>

The speaker in 'Plague Year' finds himself less and less secure in human environments, aware of his fragility and seeking reassurance; the speaker in 'Entropy' is also vulnerable, laid bare in an absolving shedding of agency which leaves the poem's speaker 'not praying, just on my knees in the dark.' (*Swithering* 34) Selfhood and agency are linked inexorably to entropic force; Robertson makes clear the futility of a self realised via resistance to outside forces, and the way we conceive of ourselves within the world must be examined. The ecological interpretation of this anxiety would posit that the 'more you think about the body, the more the category of nature starts to dissolve' (Morton *TET* 107), since

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<sup>93</sup> It also upends our sense of 'allocated space'; we see that order has broken down and that this space and time is incomprehensible, because people are not inhabiting their proper or given spaces. Robertson's speaker finds himself 'down here in the playground/ with the other adults on the roundabouts and swings [. . .] while the children were kneeling to be shot' (*TWL* 11). This adds to our sense of unreality and underlines the ways in which constructed spaces of humanity and identity offer psychological protection to our images of ourselves, but are ultimately permeable and changeable.

no longer can we see 'the natural world' as outside of us or subject to alternative forces; we become implicated in this system when we seek to examine the way in which our physicality betrays our removal from it. Robertson's attention to the physical impact of living in the world segues well into those aspects of the ecological which explore concepts of selfhood, such as the way in which the body

is a special version of metaphysics. It is literally not 'beyond' (meta) the physical realm. But it is conveniently mysterious and compelling, and other terms gravitate towards it. Its 'in between-ness' is just as peculiar, on reflection, as the 'beyond-ness' of the metaphysical. We need a word like mesophysical to register this strangeness. [Recent criticism has linked] marginal spaces such as wetlands [and] the body. (Morton *TET* 107)

We can compare this to Robertson's poems of illness and injury and to Jamie's *Frissure*, which incorporate both the body and images of the natural world as sites of change and liminality in an attempt to understand the whole. Both poets write a form of bodily eco-poetics in order to explore the ways in which liminal and marginal environmental spaces inform our relationship to the physical. Positioning the body as a marginal space informs and enriches the understanding of ourselves by connecting a discrete body to a wider ecology or system, thus opening up a space in which to examine the fear of our complicity in that system. For Robertson, the body (masculine, ageing, sexual, a site of violence inflicted and offered) is a means of demarcating this phobia. The nature of masculinity transmutes fear to violence, that which is enacted by the body onto other bodies. For Jamie, it is more a case of writing and recovering the body as a new site of invasion or othering; her collection deftly unpicks a trope of sexual violence, reworking it via her experience of serious illness, and links it to her poetic and political conjugations of nation and space.<sup>94</sup> The illnesses of Robertson and Burnside are a failing heart and a failing mind respectively. Poeticising these literal sicknesses utilises the metaphorical nature of masculinity to reconnect to the importance of the ecological and recover a sense of balance. Robertson's willed amnesia (as in 'The Park Drunk') becomes a way to renew oneself, to escape the cycle of violence and disappointment. In Burnside this cycle is transmitted via sick landscapes to increasingly sick

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<sup>94</sup> See Jamie, *Frissure*

men, and his desire to absent himself from them.<sup>95</sup> For Robertson, it is through patterns of isolation and repetition that deny progress, change or the evidence of vulnerability to manifest.

### **The Breakdown of a System: Selfhood, Entropy and Damage**

Robertson is consistently conscious of 'the instability of the flesh' (*Open Letters* n.p.) in his writing, and the ways in which this instability informs conceptions of the human as related to the wider environment and the nonhuman. To view the body as ecology, it is necessary to view the spaces of the body and the psyche literalised in poetry as part of a wider system of lifeforms. The body becomes a space within which the self inhabits a psychological environment informed and shaped by the physical world and the body's own relationship to that world, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to reasonably separate the two. *Hill of Doors*' 'The Key' utilises a rather traditional locked-room metaphor to stand in for the heart, wherein

the door  
to the walled garden, the place  
I'd never been,  
was opened  
with a simple turn  
of the key  
I'd carried with me  
all these years. (77)

This links Robertson's compartmentalised metaphorical geography of the self, and the philosophical underpinning of bodily ecology, an ecocritical stance that locates the self in a body in a world. It suggests that one can parse the experience of being-in-the-world only by accepting and including the effects of that world upon the physical self. Robertson also engages with the 'dark ecology' that Jamie's *Frissure* also studies and applies so deftly.

Morton states that dark ecology

puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking.  
The form of dark ecology is that of noir film. The noir narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to

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<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 1

discover that she or he is implicated in it (*TET* 16-17).

Robertson's latest work, *The Long Take*, is in fact a novel-length narrative poem that combines this focus thematically and generically; it is written in the style of a film noir, and follows this same genre's rise in post WW2 America. Robertson charts the breakdown and recovery of his protagonist Walker, alongside national crisis within America, with both poem and the intertextually referenced films coming to bear on the narrative as product of and mirror for, the protagonist's journey. Robertson refuses to allow space to the myth of invulnerability or immutability; both nation and inhabitants are materially affected by the systems at work within and upon them, and must chart their course through events in which they are irrevocably implicated. In *Swithering's* 'A Seagull Murmur' Robertson focuses on those same processes in microcosm, recounting

the mewling sound of a leaking heart  
the sound  
of a gull trapped in his chest. (48)

The visceral is joined with the poetic, the metaphor of the trapped bird aligning the mesophysical reality of a damaged body with the metaphysical caged bird of trapped potential. The sense of unreality wins out, as we learn

To let it out  
they ran a cut down his belly  
like a fish, his open ribs  
the ribs of a boat (48).

The human body becomes a fish's body and the agency and invulnerability of the human animal is denied and exposed; the nautical metaphor is extended to encompass the medical intervention which finally renders the subject, (in this case a version of Robertson himself)

caulked and sea-worthy now  
with his new valve; its metal  
tapping away  
the dull clink  
of a signal buoy  
or a beak at the bars of a cage. (48)

Robertson's continual thematic focus on entropy is another marker of 'dark ecological' thought within his work; the poetics of entropy inform much of Robertson's writing about

the self, and that self's relationship with the world it inhabits. *Swithering's* 'Entropy' deals with the questions of identity and mortality that shape his philosophy. It deals with the idea of breakdown, of losing energy and focus, of the dissipation of order and creative force into chaos. In the poem, the speaker watches 'crowds in/ Brownian motion, eight million magnets/ repulsing or attracting,/ hackled like attack dogs' (*Swithering* 34), an attempt to impose control on the random movement of the populace, who are rendered animal in the attempt, until 'the colour wheel spins to white' (*ibid.*). Robertson here reworks his motif of snow as amnesiac, as the abnegating quality of entropic motion takes centre stage. This idea resurfaces throughout the collection, again in 'Sea-Fret (Tynemouth Priory)' (35-40) which presents the image of

the unchanging view  
from this camera obscura  
never the same [. . .]  
reducing  
all this handiwork to a shell  
all the shells to sand. (37-40)

The poem 'Cat, Failing' develops this focus into a study on the conflation of human and nonhuman suffering, and the necessary mental processes required to undergo a realisation of empathy for that life — to see reflected in an animal's illness and death elements of kinship. Beyond anthropomorphism, Robertson presents the reader with an event in which an ontological significance is lent to the nonhuman. Initially, the cat is presented to us as a 'maquette' (18) in an ironic nod to the idea of a craftsman creator, as juxtaposed in this poem quite brutally with the degenerative reality of organic life. This signifier also offers up the idea of the animal as a test run, and proceeds to dismantle this proprietary and certainly anthropocentric conception of consciousness and life. The poem sets up a series of conflicts, those between animal and human, sick and well, alive and dead, and asks why it is that animal suffering needs to be filtered through human (artistic) agency and involvement to be understood by an as yet functioning human (consciousness and) body.

The animal strikes the speaker initially as 'something brought in from outside' (*TWL* 18), a literalised aspect of the transgressive quality that nonhuman suffering enacts upon the speaker; something has come in from 'out there' to make him aware of the ways in which it is like him. In addition, the cat itself now *is* 'what the cat dragged in', a gallows joke.

The nonhuman, the 'natural', brings itself inside and is offered up to the (now no longer) hermetic civilised space of the house. The cat, its death and its illness are the 'something' that brings to bear on the poet's conception of self and the safety which is inherent in his separateness. His implication in the natural reality of life and death is now undeniable, untenable and he must encounter and acknowledge the 'something' nonhuman, un-looked for, animal, threatening. The recognition of the cat's suffering is offered up as a moment of realisation that posits the animal as at once part of himself and not; since it's been 'brought in', it is now inside and the logical inference of this transition suggests that the cat has become part of the speaker's purview. This realisation leads Robertson to speculate that the cat, in acknowledging the speaker's eyes on him, 'has turned human' (*TWL* 18). In the final line, humanity is bestowed (literally and symbolically) after the poet reads 'shame' (*ibid*) in the cat's face. The moment of empathy and awareness elicits a connection between the human and nonhuman. This speaks to Jamie's struggle with the gaze of others on her own sick body, as detailed in the foreword to *Frissure*, in which she says that under the scrutiny of both doctorly and artistic 'gaze [. . .] I had to relinquish myself just as surely as I had during my medical treatment.' (vii- xi)

The recognition of one's mortality is held in the literal gaze of the patient, the doctor, the artist, or the inadvertent witness. Just as Robertson's epiphany comes when he and the cat see one another, the act of seeing is what offers meaning and the eventual potential for creation, from Jamie's own 'failing' body:

Throughout, I tried to keep looking. Because I expressed an interest, I was shown my own mammogram images. [. . .] The image was rather beautiful, a grey-glowing circle, like the full moon seen through binoculars. The tumour was an obvious density. (Jamie *Frissure* v)

The reality of her sick self becomes something creative and 'rather beautiful' under the sight of others, even as it maintains an aura of threat. We and Jamie are at once beguiled and horrified by the banality of the life-threatening experience she observes and recounts. Robertson too makes use of the mundanity inherent to acts of violence and threat upon the bodies in his work.

Robertson's poem 'Kalighat' combines the topics of violence, entropy, humanity and body-horror. In watching the ritual sacrifice of a goat, the poem's speaker is drawn to the

separated parts of the just-now-alive sacrificed animal. He observes 'the blood [that] comes out of his neck in little gulps./ The tongue and eyes [. . .] still moving in the head' (34) The breakdown is played out gruesomely; the effects of violence on a body and the reality of a dying animal are given (as with 'Cat, Failing') a philosophical quality, which transfers the violence to the narrator's consideration of his mortality. The speaker notes that following such a swift execution,

Neither of his two parts can quite take this in.

The legs go on trembling,

pedalling at the dirt – slowly trying to drag

the body back to its loss: the head

on its side, dulling eyes fixed

on this black, familiar ghost;

its limbs flagging now,

the machinery running down.

There's some progress, but not enough, then

after a couple of minutes, none at all.

The last thing I notice is a red petal

still in his mouth, and another,

six inches away, in his throat. (34-35)

Here, the breakdown of the system is methodically reported to us; the trembling legs, the roving eyes, the slow ebb of energy and co-ordination from the carcass. The lingering image of the 'red petal', the last meal and the temple adornment, creates a grotesque sort of funerary offering, a bouquet for the departed. The attempt to humanise is not as pronounced as with 'Cat, Failing'; instead, we see the overlaying of ritual and philosophy

toward human and nonhuman death, to the point that the banality of both becomes impossible to separate from either specific act. Alongside the understanding of the inherent frailty of identity as tied to the body and the propensity for violence within that identity, Robertson is likewise interested in explaining and subverting the ways such identities are tied to place, and specifically the stories and significance with which certain places are imbued.

### **Naming Spaces: Myth, Memory and the Narrative of Place**

Robertson is interested in the finding spaces in which (awareness of) the entropic leads to insight. He writes poems in which changeability and disorder open up spaces for understanding and connection due to the fragility of their becoming. For us to gain a renewed 'sense of space', the places that we inhabit necessarily must decay; the body ages, the past fades, the hegemonic is challenged and redrawn. The changing function and use of spaces in contemporary life is something that shapes perceptions of the world at large and dictates the actions and approaches of each space's inhabitants. As the natural world becomes increasingly remote, the cultivation of purpose-built environments to serve populations that migrate according to criteria of capital and resources means that even our relationships to the built environment are in a constant state of flux as we progress into the twenty-first century. Such conglomerations of manufactured and 'natural' spaces, and the rapidity with which they are established, altered and destroyed is a unique facet of modernity.

Capitalism has brought all life forms together, if only in the negative. The ground under our feet is being changed forever, along with the water and air. So along with the political radicalisms that seek to create new forms of collectivity out of the crisis of climate disruption, there must also be a rigorous and remorseless theoretical radicalism that opens our minds to where we are, about the fact that we're here. This radicalism is almost religious in its passionate intensity. [A] religious vocabulary is risky: it might set up ecology as another kind of superbeing outside the mesh, outside the obvious impermanence and evanescence of reality. (Morton *TET* 104)

Any religiosity Robertson evokes sidesteps this problem to a degree by looking to pagan and Celtic myth, using ancient sacred language and symbolism to flesh out the poems of his that deal with the need for spiritual succour. In utilising a pagan backdrop for such explorations,

Robertson remains aware of 'the mesh' of the world, and is intrigued by how our relationship to place is altered by changing linguistic and social hegemonies. In frequently tying spirituality in his work to the mythos of Scotland, Robertson is able to interrogate the ways in which this myth-making has occurred and the ways in which it can be both sinister and nurturing.

*Swithering* features the poem 'At Dawn' in which the speaker relates: 'I took a new path off the mountain/ to this ruined croft, and went inside' (5). The opening lines present us with a pilgrimage of sorts, though instead of an established sacred or spiritual hub, we already find ourselves led towards an obsolescent, 'ruined' dwelling. Choosing a croft makes explicit the links to the Clearances of Highland Scotland; this historic focus brings to bear both a crucial element of national mythmaking *and* serves as an indictment of the savagery with which capitalistic reforms were implemented, and the damage inflicted on the landscape of Scotland. As such, the resultant expectations of what may be discovered within this space take on a sinister edge. Within, the traveller is presented with 'a biscuit tin of human hair/ and a urine sample/ with my name and date of birth./ In each corner, something else.' (5)

The relics are not only mundane, but intensely personal. Beyond these specific and material offerings, we also discover 'five blackthorn pins' and 'five elder twigs', a 'blade bone of a sheep', a roe deer's 'lopped head', and a photo of the speaker 'looking slightly younger, stretched out, on a trestle table.' (5) The blackthorn has meaning as a portent of struggle or challenges ahead, and in Scotland, elder was seen as a 'fairy-tree', and along with rowan offers protection from evil.<sup>96</sup> In Scottish folklore, elder's significance varies from a ward against evil, to a symbol of the Devil, associated with the tree from which Judas hanged himself and known as the 'bour-tree'.<sup>97</sup> This derives from a recasting of the tree and its significance from pagan to Christian traditions; from a nexus of power to a representation of evil. Robertson shows the ways in which social systems break down, and are reworked; symbols shift in meaning, we find ourselves beholden to changing myths. The jawbone of the sheep calls to mind the Passover ceremony and the deer head recalls pagan

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<sup>96</sup> The word 'strife' is said to have originated from the early Irish Ogham name for Blackthorn, 'Straff'. See also McKillop, James (1998). *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Oxford Reference Online. <http://www.oxfordreference.com>

<sup>97</sup> See Dictionary of the Scots Language. Online. <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/bourtrees>

ritual and the Celtic god Cernunnos, for example.<sup>98</sup> Robertson uses these symbols to examine the tension between ancient and adopted ritual and religion and the violence inherent in the sacred pasts shared by both. The poem further draws this out by walking the line between threat and revelation in its tone; we are not sure if something magical or terrible is about to take place, and are left with a sense of foreboding and anticipation.

The vulnerability we encounter in spaces that are not easily categorised is explored in 'Under Beinn Ruadhainn' (8-9), which paints the titular hill under a veil of 'black snow' (9), and tells a story of violence and destruction that has come back to haunt the perpetrator of those acts.<sup>99</sup> The speaker recalls the death of a 'havering and glaikit' (8) man, 'drowned in Sawtan's Bog' and the speaker's subsequent rape of his wife,

Jennie,  
  
still in her widow's weeds  
  
gilping into her  
  
whenever I could. (8)

The assaults, we learn, produced 'two or three [children] at least' (8) and that Jennie 'sank each one in a lobster creel.' (8) The horrendous cruelty perpetrated on the widow is recalled dispassionately, her suffering only marked by the speaker inasmuch as it left her 'as mad as her man / and no good to [him]' (9). She too

sleeps now  
  
under Beinn Ruadhainn,  
  
covered in ivy,  
  
scab and sticky-willow. (9)

Though it is not made explicit, the location of Jennie's body, overgrown with weeds at the

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<sup>98</sup> See McKillop, 1998.

<sup>99</sup> Beinn Ruadhainn: (Gaelic) 'summit of the red place' — 'Ruadhainn' pronounced 'riven', anglicised as 'Ruthven'; horn-daft: quite mad; havering: babbling, speaking nonsense; glaikit: vacant, idiotic; gilping: spurting, spilling.

bottom of the hill, suggests that her death was an unnatural one. It is this death which prompts the dream-vision of the hill under black snow, and the flaming waters of the loch at its foot, a haunting by the wronged woman. As with Burnside's malign towns and their repressed and violent men, it is via the psychogeography of a dream that the manifestations of the speaker's violence are made clear in 'Under Beinn Ruadhainn', and it is in this created liminal space that the consequences of that violence are enacted. Robertson's psychogeography is also a manifestation of the effects of strident and cruel self-interest. By rejecting one's responsibility to others in one's community, one alters the way in which that space comes to appear in reflection of that self. The speaker is finally confronted by the drowned, 'hands furred with grey-mould', (*HOD* 9) Jennie 'star-naked, hatching/ in the herring-nets' (*ibid.*) until the dream culminates in his hanging at 'Sawtan's Brae' (*ibid.*).

Throughout the poem the conception and creation of place is crucial. The speaker constructs an environment embodied entirely by the violence he has perpetrated on others, and for which he has not suffered in the waking world. In a reversal of Robertson's usual trope of snow as forgetting, the 'black', negative snowfall serves to represent memories which refuse negation or absolution. We see the snow's equal and opposite paradox in the burning loch, which is 'full of bairns' (9), bodies of the children killed by the rapist landowner at the centre of the poem's narrative. The snow is metaphorically turned to ash in connection to this impossible body of water, and linked semantically to the speaker's claim in the poem's final line that the 'matches were put in my hand' (9) upon reaching for them after his terrifying dream-vision. The closing line leaves us with the idea of purification via burning, penance for his sins, or a ritual cleansing via fire, again evoking the pagan mythology which permeates much of Robertson's poetry of place.<sup>100</sup>

The importance of naming a place, of looking at a thing and knowing what it is called, opens up a psychological space that is inseparable from the physical reality of that place. In this poem, Robertson also focuses on the ways in which constructed identities (of gender in this case, and of class and privilege) cultivate an inability to accurately name the condition in which one is living; he explores the amnesiac state of being that destructive masculinities work upon men and the ways in which this fear and forgetting manifest as violence. As with other works, the motif of snow (sinisterly inverted to threaten and expose

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<sup>100</sup> Beltane celebrations involve walking cattle and people between bonfires or leaping them to provide protection.

rather than conceal) is deployed to place the reader in mind of a forgetting; of a (psychic) landscape made new, painted over. However, in this case forgetting is denied; it arrives in the form of a dreamscape, a non-physical reality, that then seeps over into the 'real world' of the final stanza, which ends, ghost story-like with the return of the avenging spirit to the murderer's bedside. 'Under Beinn Ruadhainn' features an uncanny silent observer who watches the realisation of intimate truths via a constructed or unreal landscape; this figure recurs in Robertson's poem 'At Dawn', where the speaker finds the photograph of himself 'younger, stretched out on a trestle table' (*Swithering* 5) in amongst other ephemera. Robertson offers the sense that the protagonist's actions have been observed, weighed and measured in the balance by an unseen force. The photograph itself skirts the line between the erotic and violent, the intriguing and disturbing; why does the seeker see himself on a trestle table, spread out— as if to be consumed, as if to be touched, or merely dispassionately observed? Like the other items in this poem, and the paradoxical natural elements to 'Under Beinn Ruadhainn', there is a duplicity of symbolic possibility inherent in this image; it could be a lover's keepsake or a murderer's trophy—a memory of oneself at a younger, more exciting time, or a more vulnerable one.

### **Internal and External Spaces: Inextricable Ecologies**

In another of *Swithering's* poems, 'Drowning in Co. Down' (19), these tropes are combined to present a crystallisation of place and perception that illustrates a people at the mercy of their lived environments, wherein each are as vulnerable as the other, symbiotically so, to degradation over time. The poem sees a sort of supercharged pathetic fallacy take shape, opening with the assertion that 'This place can't hold enough rain./ The land rots houses just to/ get them out of the way.' (9) The way that we conceive of the encroachment of the 'natural' into attempted civilisation is a recurrent concern of the ecological; Robertson and Burnside both see this as a kind of inevitability, like erosion. In this case, such action is repeated and reflected within the psychology of the land's inhabitants, who 'drink all day if they can,/the water-table their only gravity.' (19) All natural laws are superseded by this co-dependent thirst, the perverse attempt by the human inhabitants of this particular ecosystem to align themselves with the geography of their surroundings and achieve an equilibrium dictated by the 'outside' forces of nature they deny. The result of such attempts is that 'they come back/ thirsty, missing the pints, that/ loose decay of light' (19). The rampant alcoholism that this setting provokes is presented as an endemic quality; a

conflation the human and nonhuman that removes the distinction between ‘a whiskey glass,/ the softened mouth/ of this swollen ground.’ (19) Syntactically, no extrication is permitted; the imagery bleeds into metaphor via the ambiguous enjambment of the poem’s closing lines. As for Burnside, in this instance Robertson finds that unhealthy environments beget unhealthy inhabitants. The two become functionally inseparable; we oscillate between being the inhabitants in and symptoms of our environments. Ecological and social health is conflated, each interacting with and dependent on the other.

The saturated ground is that of the land and the alcoholic population both; each struggle to feel slaked and are ‘drowning’ under the circumstances of their environment. Throughout it all, the dispassionate eye of the observer hints at a potential political interpretation of the work; the decisions about which environments are left to drown, observed and unaided, are implicit in Robertson’s choice to present the reader here with an omniscient lyric voice, knowing and apart. Robertson recalls Burnside’s interrogation of ‘making a home’ in the place you end up as a necessary part of the diaspora that lead to his grandparents coming to Scotland (and later his father moving the family to Corby). The settlement of such unforgiving land is a necessary and inevitable part of the shifting demands of capitalism, agrarian work giving way to industrialisation and commercialisation, leaving behind dwindling towns and diverted, diminishing subsidies, trade and potential. It is also pertinent that Robertson in all of the place-poetry examined above, does not seek to engage in mimetic imagery, rather attempting (much like ‘Under Benn Ruadhainn’) to create a psychological and philosophical landscape that chimes with the physical features of the space the poem inhabits. This tendency creates an atmosphere in which the poetry of place can offer a radical reworking of our conceptions of place within national and geographical constructions. As Morton summarises, if ‘Ecomimesis is a rhetoric that generates a fantasy of nature as a surrounding atmosphere, palpable but shapeless [. . .] a unified, transcendent nature’ (*EWN* 77), then ecological writing recognises the reality that ‘Nature cannot remain itself, it is the flickering shapes on the edges of our perception, the strangers who disturb us with their proximity.’ (*EWN* 81) Here, Morton’s philosophy aligns directly with Robertson’s concerns; his third collection, *Swithering*, takes its name from the Scots word meaning ‘to flicker’, ‘to shift’. This underlies the fragility that nature, nation and self display in Robertson’s work. As mentioned above, he comes to know a thing via its opposite in many cases; the body is experienced through its failures, nature through its strangeness, nation

through its fictionalised spaces. Swithering is a central philosophical tenet of Robertson's oeuvre, and the unknown quality of interacting with the nonhuman is also a crucial thematic focus that Robertson develops into an empathetic and considered poetics of the fragility of place and self.

In the poems examined above, the indistinguishable distance between speaker and environment and the dialogic way in which these facets interact, is crucial to Robertson's conceptions of space and self in his poetry. The task of understanding lies in how we process our communion with the world around us. In 'Tillydrone Motte' (70-71), a Gaelic place name is eschewed in the poem's title (as opposed to 'Under Beinn Ruidhainn') only to be reclaimed and reaffirmed. The speaker maintains that the hill is

not Tillydrone either

– this place where

stood my pale cross –

but tulach draighiorn, which means,

and has always meant, 'the hill of thorns'. (S 71)

Robertson emphasises the connection not only to place, but to the language of those who named and interacted with it, who noted and embraced its physical reality, its defining features and its relevance. He does so by stripping the layers of semantic and linguistic distance between the unchanged (on a human timescale at least) and immutable natural physical structure, and the appellations attributed to it. They create meta spaces within certain geographic and cultural locations; certain places can only be known via specific linguistic constructions, and so their removal from wider cultural awareness is an act of ecological as well as social violence. Spaces are erased from the landscape, cleared and denatured. Narratives of renaming acknowledge the breakdown of linguistic and social systems and the violence that disrupts them. They undermine teleological narratives of nation but also offer hope that such enforced hegemonies can be revealed and reshaped and do not merely fall to chaos by being resisted. It is only by giving the place its 'right name' that the speaker can access the meaning he attempts to access, and take part in his

desired interaction with that specific space. Poems that do not feature or focus on the wild or liminal places of Scottish (pre)history are also philosophically resonant. No longer the mythologised spaces of Gaelic myth and ancient legend, the no-man's lands of late twentieth-century Scotland dovetail with more obviously aesthetic spaces in Robertson's work. Neoliberal topographies feature with almost as much frequency as reworked pseudo-pagan sites.<sup>101</sup> Roadsides, city streets and built environments are invoked to explore the same questions of mortality, identity, violence and inheritance as the natural landscapes above, and Robertson evokes the claustrophobia and tension inherent to the conditions of living in such spaces. In this sense, Robertson aligns with Burnside's psychogeographical spaces of enervation and decay.

Robertson's poetry of coastlines and seascapes also links back to the entropic focus of much of his bodily-situated work, to his fascination with change, with impermanence. It is merely the scope, or perhaps more accurately the scale, that shifts, though Robertson finds the same sometimes-answers to the same big-and-getting-bigger questions in a Northumberland coastline as in a faulty heart-valve.<sup>102</sup> It is clear that for Robertson as for Burnside, the space one inhabits becomes a reflection of the internal spaces one embodies. However, Robertson sees the connection between the human and the nonhuman to be found in the realisation of our shared mundanity, rather than seeing nature as containing a hidden spirituality that is in essence unlike prevailing human conceptions of place and self. Where nature for Burnside offers balance, for Robertson it offers commiseration; we see that we are experiencing the same crisis. The ecology of your existence and the work you do within that ecology are inextricable after a certain point, and one must attempt to reconcile those spaces, and to understand and engage with the place in which one exists. Reconciliation does not necessarily bring insight and consolation as it does for Burnside and his 'spirit'; rather, it offers Robertson a perspective from which one might be able to treat oneself and the nonhuman with empathy and humility in the face of universal vulnerability.

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<sup>101</sup> See for example 'Night Driving' (*Slow Air* 10), 'Anxiety #2' (*Slow Air* 28), 'Tulips' (*TWL* 8), 'Ghost of a Garden' (*S* 20), 'Samhain' (*S* 27), 'Old Ways' (*S* 25), 'Playgrounds' (*Hill of Doors* 41), and 'Hill Fort' (*A Painted Field* 40-41).

<sup>102</sup> See 'Sea-Fret (Tynemouth Priory)' (*Swithering* 35-40); 'A Seagull Murmur' (*Swithering* 48).

### **Textual Ecologies: Meaningful Spaces?**

In *Hill of Doors* (hereafter *HOD*) Robertson ironically literalises this struggle. The collection has a poem listed in the contents as 'Robertson's Farewell', which appears only as a blank page in the actual collection. The index of poems works as expected until the page that 'Robertson's Farewell' has been allocated appears; the 'poem' is in actuality, an unnumbered, untitled, unmarked page. As a study of poem-*as*-ecology it is one that either melds so seamlessly with the physical means of its production as to become them, or it is an abortive action; writing that has literally failed to make a mark. It, like the space it attempts to categorise, swithers. It flickers between poem and not-poem, and is irremovable from the circumstances of its creation. It belongs to Robertson and does not, says and does not actually say 'farewell'. It takes up space in the collection but perversely, not on the page; the interactions we expect never materialise and so we are left with a poem that is at once broken and broken down into its constituent parts, namely its impact on the page, the reader, and the (negative) space it opens up. Robertson has left the reader with a textual ecology that cannot fully articulate the ways in which we should relate to it; we are left uncertain and exposed in our attempts to engage with the poetic space opened up for us. The philosophical and rhetorical implications of this 'mistake' depend on the intent that the reader ascribes to the poem's creation; it exists simultaneously for the reader as a marker of the abstract problems Robertson has been grappling with through this and previous collections, a possible printing mistake (it is not), or a potential foray into self-indulgence. The reasons for accounting for a blank space range from a study on the reification of unused space, to the personal admission that the best goodbye for a person who deals in wringing every drop of meaning from a word as is possible is perhaps to stay silent.

Regardless of which intention lies behind this exercise, that the 'poem' exists gives a clear indication that the naming of a space imbues it with a meaning, and that in engaging with that space, it, like the void, stares back. 'Robertson's Farewell' acts as an 'object' in a more literal sense than any other poem studied here, since the verbal, semantic level of interaction with it has been removed. The philosophical level might remain, the physical one certainly does, but the way in which we are primed to interact with a collection of poetry has been rendered redundant. Instead, we find ourselves perhaps in the kind of philosophical headspace that Morton outlines when he declares that 'objects emit "zones"'

and that, 'wherever I find myself, a zone is already happening.' (2011 n.p.) This poem is more immediately an object than those that have gone before it because the reader can only interact with the initial physicality of it. With this 'poem', Robertson outlines a perception and writing of space that rejects that idea that any physical or conceptual space is 'yonder'.

The way that one relates to the spaces one inhabits or enters is borne out by Robertson's continued focus on the ways we experience and assign meaning in those spaces. Emma Strang has observed of Burnside's work a quality that is also true of Robertson's approach, stating that

when we dwell in the world in Heideggerean terms, we are neither 'one with the earth' nor are we definitively separate of other; we are instead profoundly aware of our interrelationship with other beings. In this awareness, there is a felt understanding as well as an intellectual one; a knowing that is a pairing of mythos and logos. (33)

This is achieved with the greatest subtlety in 'Wedding the Locksmith's Daughter', which utilises the same metaphorical tools as both the above poems to present the reader with the mechanics of a lock, a poem, a relationship in a collapsed, multi-levelled metaphor:

The slow-grained slide to embed the blade  
of the key is a sheathing,  
a gliding on graphite, pushing inside  
to find the ribs of the lock.  
Sunk home, the true key slots to its matrix;  
geared, tight-fitting, they turn  
together, shooting the spring-lock,  
throwing the bolt. Dactyls, iambics—  
the clinch of words— the hidden couplings

in the cased machine. A chime of sound  
on sound: the way the sung note snibs on meaning  
and holds. The lines engage and marry now,  
their bells are keeping time;  
the church doors close and open underground. (*Slow Air* hereafter SA 5)

Here the mythos of intimacy as an unlocking, a collaborative mechanic, is linked to the logos of poetic progression; the central image of a lock being opened is written out in the way the 'dactyls, iambics' of the poem 'turn together' to spring the lock, alongside the suggestion of growing intimacy between the imagined couple. When the poem's lines 'engage and marry' alongside the bolts of the lock and the words of the marriage ceremony, the 'underground' doors of the self, the psyche that is constantly concealed, close and open (in a heartbeat-mimicking rhythm of iambic pentameter), and the form and content of the poem both work together, lock and key, to bring the metaphor to realisation. The pairing of mythos and logos informs much of Robertson's work, perhaps most obviously in his imagined histories and Scotlands; a poetry of place that situates itself within the named spaces of Celtic prehistory and myth and extrapolates from there. Robertson also explores the conflation of beliefs and judgements as they inform our relationship to the world around us in his return to Greek mythology to explore questions of mortality, self and nature; spaces that seem immutable and timeless, but that operate via cultural, formal and social methods of relation and interpretation.

### **(Inter)National Myth-Making: Globalisation, Greek Myth, and the 'Swithering' God**

As Strang has observed in her monograph,

There's been a marked re-engagement in contemporary British Poetry of recent years with classical Greek myth (Simon Armitage's *Odysseus* (2006), Don Paterson's *Orpheus* (2006), and Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011)), and non-classical mythopoesis (for example, much of the work of John Burnside, Robin Robertson, Pascal Petit and Susan Richardson). It's as though the bigger frame that myth allows is needed to contemplate and confront our place in the world and our relationship to self and

other, at a time of cataclysmic change. (32)

Certainly, Robertson's use of Greek mythology as frequent subject matter alongside Celtic legends in his work suggests that he utilises this mythopoetic canon to approach questions of self and belonging, and the relationship between human and nonhuman in the modern age.<sup>103</sup> Strang suggests that the turn is in part due to the fact that there is a contemporary need for 'stories that can take our weight in dark times' (32). The Hellenic canon is a weighty one and mired in enough bloodshed, violence and loss as to withstand the needs of an era which feels constantly on the brink of catastrophe, natural, political or otherwise. The need for work which offers a legitimacy of emotional intensity perhaps explains why Robertson's engagement with Greek mythology focuses on the god Dionysus, who recurs in poems across his oeuvre. By centring his works within the Greek mythic canon on Dionysus, Robertson reconfirms his commitment to the exploration of otherness, of duality, and of fragility. Dionysus is revered as the god of wine, of the harvest and the vineyard, a symbol of joy, revelry and the fertility of the earth; alongside this he was worshipped as god of theatre, of ritual madness and religious ecstasy, honoured in bacchanal. Robertson picks a figure who is immortal whilst imbued with fundamentally human desires (food, sex, altered states of consciousness) and mitigates his religious and cultural decline by replacing him within a contemporary canon to explore liminality and change. Fittingly, Dionysus is a shape shifter, of gender and of species, though he is most commonly associated with the images of an androgynous young man or satyr.

In *The Wrecking Light's* 'Pentheus and Dionysus' Robertson relays the wildness at the heart of the god as the unlucky king of Thebes meets with 'the god made manifest' (38). The god is rejected by Pentheus as 'a weaponless pretty-boy' and yet defended by his acolyte as 'a boy as beautiful as a girl [. . .] no mortal' (39), who appeared to his followers tormentors with 'a wand, tight twisted with vine [. . .] at his feet, the slinking/ phantom shapes of wild beasts:/ tigers, lynxes, panthers' (41). When this account still fails to sway

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<sup>103</sup> This is a feature Burnside's poetry too, and Jamie's prehistoric mythologizing alongside the mythic 'false history' poems that make up much of her earlier and explicitly nation-focused work. See for example, Jamie's 'Republic of Fife', (*Queen of Sheba* 50-52); 'Mr and Mrs Scotland are dead (*Queen of Sheba* 37); 'A Dream of the Dalai Lama on Skye' (*Queen of Sheba* 53); Burnside's *A Lie about my Father*; 'Settlements' (*The Asylum Dance* 20-23); 'Varieties of Religious Experience' (*Gift Songs* 23-36).

Pentheus to honour the god, he is chased and slain by his own mother who, we learn, 'took his head in her hands/ and in a throb of rapture/ twisted it, clean off.' (44) Thus, we are told 'was piety learned,/ and due reverence for the god Dionysus.' (Ibid.) Dionysus exists as a cipher for our inherent duality— the rigour of cultivation versus the wildness of inebriation, the sexless sexuality of his form versus the wild eroticism of his cult celebration, the feminine harmlessness of his looks versus the feminised violence of Pentheus' slaying. Even his conception and birth are a dual process, lending him the epithet 'twice-born'.<sup>104</sup>

This possibility for duality, for the changeable and undecipherable, is both acutely ecological and strongly political. It is interesting that Dionysus should become a focal point of Robertson's work as an extant figure of another society's myths at a time fraught with questions of national permeability and fragmentation. The swithering form of Dionysus, which resists categorisation, which desires to permeate and to transgress, becomes a potential site of subversion for questions on the role and interpretation of identities, literal and otherwise, in Robertson's writing. There is vulnerability at the point of change, both in the moment of transformation and in the moment that new difference become visible to others. By envisaging a god who embodies and elevates this (human) vulnerability and writing it as divine, Robertson places difference and renewal path the centre of his conceptions; once again he writes towards empathetic and self-aware views of nature, nation and self that embrace and examine their vulnerability.

As such, figures that straddle the cultural and historical canon and that exist in constant states of flux and negotiation remain central to Robertson's work. In 'Asterion and the God' (SA 40-42) Robertson focuses on another dual-bodied figure from Greek mythology, the minotaur, and conflates the story of Theseus' slaying of the beast and that of Ariadne as consort to Dionysus to weave the two figures together and draw parallels between the god and the monster. The poem's stanzas flip between the voices of the monster and Dionysus, further blurring the lines of the human and nonhuman within the poem (which has no 'human' voice, but concerns itself with the humanity of both titular characters). Robertson explores the painful ironies with which the figure of the minotaur lives, opening with the bitter lament; 'Asterion, his name is, King of Stars./ Some joke of his father's, who now/ stables him [. . .] in this walled-up palace' (40). The minotaur himself

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<sup>104</sup> He was said to have been taken from his mother's womb and subsequently birthed from Zeus' thigh, when his pregnant mother, Semele, died after looking upon Zeus' true form.

laments *'This is a house of many corners/ but only one room, made of stone./ I live inside this stone.'* (Ibid.) Within the confines of the maze, we (through Dionysus' eyes) observe Asterion *'looking at his emptiness from new directions [seeing] himself at last, in the stone/ of the running walls: lustral,/ horned, bearded with blood'* (40-41). This horror becomes transmuted to something almost holy; to the god, Asterion is a ceremonial figure. His bloodiness is an act of purification; his unwitting murders become acts of unknowing sacrifice to the god, and he becomes a figure of potential, something sacred as well as horrific.

However, for Asterion within his captivity it is impossible to know oneself other than as a prisoner and a monster; the beast asks, *'Where did I lose my life?'* (41) It is only through the impressions and judgement of others the beast comes to know a vision of himself:

*I hear through the walls what I am,*

*what I do: sparagamos,<sup>105</sup> they call it,*

*whatever that is.*

*They say a stranger comes*

*to release me. Let him come soon. (41)*

The link to Dionysus' cult is made explicit here. Robertson references the act of ritual rending, the same method used to kill Pentheus of Thebes, and frequently related to images of the god's followers in revelry. The monster becomes both enactor and victim of this destruction, the ironic champion and casualty of Dionysus's wrath and power. This link is further underscored in the poem's penultimate stanza, where Asterion-the-Minotaur reflects:

*Sometimes we speak, sometimes*

*we let the gods speak through us.*

*I am half; he is twice-born.*

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<sup>105</sup> The act of tearing apart, rending , from the Ancient Greek *σπαραγμός*, from *σπαράσσω* *sparasso*, "tear, rend, pull to pieces".

*My grief still here*

*and I am gone. (42)*

That which diminishes Asterion elevates Dionysus: the ability to be both/neither. Whilst Asterion's body and its difference are seen as dangerous and chaotic, Dionysus' allows him to transcend categorisation or restriction. It becomes a matter of perspective, and Robertson is keen to draw sympathetic parallels between the two figures; he highlights the inherent tragedy of seeing one's difference and one's mundanity simultaneously. This realisation allows us empathy for Asterion, and offers space to accept and deify such fallibility. The final stanza belongs to Dionysus, and circles back to the parallels Robertson has emphasised between the god and the monster. Indeed, throughout the poem it has been implied that in this case the minotaur is the son of Dionysus (and not as is generally acknowledged to be the case, the Cretan Bull), who refers to Asterion as 'my beast of a boy' (40), '[Ariadne's] half-brother. My son. My self.' (41) The two become distorted mirror images of each other as the poem continues;<sup>106</sup> the god instructs us, and the now-slain Asterion to

Imagine me as the wind — the force

animals and birds know

is there, but does not threaten:

part of their world, but other.

The god who comes; the god who disappears. (42)

The divine is emphatically connected to the phenomena of the natural world; the wind

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<sup>106</sup> The poem as a whole has much to relate itself to Burnside's poetry of adolescence, for example *All One Breath's* 'Self Portrait as Fun House Mirror' (1-17), which explores the dissociative effects of both the mirror and of puberty. Burnside has mistrusted or grappled with adult masculinity in much of his work. Similarly, the figure of the Minotaur, shut up in the Labyrinth, 'in these stones', the 'one room' of the 'walled palace' (Robertson SA 40) recalls Burnside's exploration of the self as a collection of 'secret rooms' in his poem 'Us' from his debut collection *The Hoop*. This is a concept Burnside has refined but essentially returned to, throughout his work, and something that Robertson too seems keen to draw out in his poetry.

becomes the god made present in the world, more so than his physical manifestation (as a human or a satyr for example) could be. 'The force' of Dionysus' puissance and energy, is attributed via the placement of this clarification at the end of a line, cut off by enjambment. Robertson's assignation of the definite article to locate it marks it out as inseparable from the world of Asterion as well as that of the 'animals and birds' who 'know' this power is there. This approaches the ecological perception of 'some sort of animism' (*WLML* n.p) and of a human relationship to the natural as key to a philosophy which makes that relationship the accountable modern equivalent of the divine. Again, Robertson sees this as inevitable; understanding arrives when we see that we are not unique in this respect. This realisation offers clarity but not relief; the natural does not promise the immanent spirituality of Burnside *per se*, but instead an uncompromising, earthbound poetics of empathy; our mortality is shared by all lifeforms, and within human acts of poiesis which embrace the nonhuman, becomes mitigated and powerful. To use Classical myth to advocate for this relationship is to return divine thinking to a place and time where gods were much closer at hand than in a Judaeo-Christian tradition whose godhead has not been physically present for over two thousand years.

The god in whose image Asterion is made is neither human nor animal, and in his own envisaging aligns himself with the invisible yet tangible force of the wind; he sees the beasts of the field and of the sky, and the 'half' form of the Minotaur as fitting oracles of his presence. This position becomes more explicit in the following lines. Dionysus is 'part of their world, but other'. He is of the world, but not anything familiar in it. His divinity is born of an interstitial presence within each of the environments he occupies; of the woods, of the skies, of the deep and bloody maze of the minotaur. He is 'the god who comes; the god who disappears'; his mercurial presences and intrinsic duality frame his identity. The same is true of Asterion. The two then stand as sides of the same coin; in attempting to see this as a meaningful quality of our existence, we see the facing side — the divine raised up and exalted— and the obverse — the wretched and displaced. However, Robertson seeks to place the divine, the hope for spiritual or ontological understanding, within the scope of the 'real world'. To look beyond this is impossible, when the god who comes and disappears in the world is already 'the wind'. Anything *less* human (or paradoxically less animal) only serves to remove us another step from being able to see ourselves within wider constructs (place, nature, nation) and to approach them with understanding.

Dionysus is a fitting icon for Robertson's myth-making because he is the divine in human form rendered at its most visceral; his appetites are for wine, for drama, for violence and sex, and he is all things at once— revered and reviled, beautiful and gory, human and not. To search for a sense of self in the modern world, Robertson returns to a national mythos that allows for its gods to be flawed, and that celebrates a pantheon of divinity that is grounded in the world in which we all must live as mortals. Dionysus 'spends his life dying [. . .] shatters us to make us whole' (*HOD* 69); he embodies the transformational power of the entropic, and the potential for renewal even in the breakdown. Through his engagement with Dionysian legend, Robertson denies the egoism of selfhood that sees itself as inviolate; this approach to the world around us and ourselves within it only increases the entropic threat with which Robertson populates his poetry. Increasing atomisation, isolation from the processes that provide our daily resources (meat, textiles, power e.g.) and our relative insulation from the catastrophic environmental changes wrought by the last two hundred years of modern civilisation have removed us from registering this threat. It feels impossible to exist knowing on a daily basis the cost of existing in this way. So, to effect a return of sorts to the kind of dialogic relationship between the human and nonhuman that characterises the Ancient Greek religious pantheon, or Animist religious practices, we need a narrative hook upon which to hang our renewed perception. The 'combination of myths and logos' contained within the return to Classical (and non-Classical) mythology and legend here provides one such hook that may bear the necessary weight.<sup>107</sup>

'The Daughters of Minyas' also frames Dionysus in terms of duality. The poem's opening stanza, like the closing verse of 'Asterion and the God', lists Dionysus' pedigree; it is at once holy and profane, ineffably visceral and insubstantial at once:

Son of Zeus, son of the thunderbolt,

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<sup>107</sup> The key to ecological thought is relational. It is necessary to comprehend of each part of one's experience as not transactional but dialogic, and to be conscious of impact from a micro to a macro scale: 'Not only am I having phenomenological experience [. . .] the pen also has phenomenological experience. [. . .] consciousness [is not] some special high-up thing [. . .] What if it was just the way, ontological, one object apprehends another object? Not that this pen is alive, but that what I do when I think about the pen is like the pen resting on the table. So that actually it's incredibly default and we've been looking in the wrong place [. . .] The next step looks a little bit like some kind of Animism, but it's not really Animism, because we know too much [. . .] tremendous scientific knowledge, and tremendous strangeness, at the same time.' (Morton *WLML* n.p.)

Iacchus the twice-born, child  
of the double-door, Bromius  
The roaring god, the coming one,  
the vanishing one, the god  
who stands apart; the god of frenzy  
and release, god of the vine.  
The one  
of many names and faces.  
The horned god. Young  
beyond time.  
The god  
that changes. The Other.  
Dionysus. (TWL 46)

The incantatory quality of the poem's opening calls into being 'The Other' that in this instance is the god 'twice-born', 'beyond time', who wears 'many names and faces'. The divine in this poem lays the groundwork for a way of exploring and approaching the other, in order to gain a degree of ontological insight that is otherwise impossible; Dionysus is caught in between the acts of arriving and vanishing. To avoid living in such a way as to definitively render all experiences not inherently one's own as 'other', it is necessary to write from and towards the interstices that sit within the parts of one's self and the world that 'stand apart'. In socio-political terms, to devote so much space, recurrently, to a character — divine historical, mythic— you then explicitly name as 'The Other' is to both accept that othering is a construct (a mythos of its own), and to apply that mythos to reconfiguring conceptions of ourselves and the wider structures that shape us in a globalised world and a contemporary nation state.

The other in this poem is 'the god who changes'; this suggests the mutability of those epistemological concepts which shape our understandings of self, of the known and of what is and is not outside of those formations. In this case, that which is changing or which cannot be known is a god. Allegorically however, that unknown quantity becomes for us anything which sits outside of full comprehension, and which changes as our perceptions, cultural and scientific, change along with time (which of course the god himself sits 'beyond'). To utilise another society's myths, the founding narratives by which they understood and articulated themselves, is an implicit promotion of intertextual, international and dialogic conceptions of self and nation. To utilise as his focal character from such myth a god of duality, of the natural world tamed and unleashed, is to accept such duality and dialogue within the conception of human relations with the nonhuman as well. It is also a way of subverting the absolutism of historical metanarratives of nation and place; Robertson's poetry of the Hellenic mythological canon does not offer a justification for modern western ideals but instead shows their continual construction and deconstruction, and the cruelty, violence and fallibility at their core. This knowledge then offers us a way to talk to the violence inherent in those ideals. Finding a hopeful humanity within the pre-historic, chthonic and ancient myths that fed into that canon (and indeed later ones) is a subversive means of rewriting these otherwise well-worn and potentially restrictive myths.

In Robertson's writing within or of the Greek pantheon, his particular focus on the god Dionysus and to a less degree the hunter Actaeon, represent the difficulties with writing jingoistic or simplistic narratives of the past, especially when it pertains to 'national heroes' or representative characters. Both god and hunter represent this dualism; we see two figures who are master of and subject to the powerful natural world respectively, yet within each the qualities of divinity and humanity (aspirational and shameful both) are embodied. Actaeon also has been viewed as a symbol of sacrifice, of human curiosity and of transformative acts. Robertson has stated that he sees the hunter's fate in myth as a 'spectacular cruelty' (*Open Letters* n.p.), an arbitrary punishment for an unknown transgression, as a result of 'simply being in the wrong place' (*ibid.*). In his account 'Actaeon: The Early Years' the huntsman once again finds himself in the 'wrong place', transplanted to 1960s Scotland. Instead of offering up a causal or philosophical link between present day Scotland and Ancient Hellenic mythology however, Actaeon is left at the mercy of a mother

who burns him with scalding milk to ‘be rid of changelings [. . .] send [him] hissing up the chimney’, and a childhood spent ‘haunt[ing] the harled beach/ with its broken toys.’ (S 52) It is only playing dead ‘in a boy-sized/ hole in the ground topped with corrugated iron/ and brambles’ (S 53) that the young Actaeon can feel any sense of happiness; his joy is achieved by literally digging himself into the landscape, becoming ‘dead [. . .] untraceable’ (ibid). Here, the desired communion between self and landscape is a sacrificial exchange; by giving oneself over to it, one can unlearn humanity, and be lost.

### **Vulnerability as Offering: Sacrificial Relations with the Natural World**

Sacrificial relations towards the natural world are also the focus of Robertson’s poetic reworking of Adam of Bremen’s recounting of the Temple at Uppsala.<sup>108</sup> This poem bridges the gap between Robertson’s Classical mythological poetry and that which borrows from Celtic mythology; here we get a snapshot of Pre-Christian Europe wherein the Norse mythological pantheon bears witness to the sacrifice. ‘The Great Midwinter Sacrifice, Uppsala’ (TWL 58-59) depicts the gruesome sight of a tree hung with the corpses, animal and human, in service to the eponymous event. It combines the aspects of Robertson’s poetry of place and his poetry of mythology; it features the named location, the traceable effects of human intervention within the landscape, the point of violence (destruction in paradoxical service to narratives of renewal and growth) which makes the human impossible to distinguish from the nonhuman, the transcendent quality of the unseen divine, and the humanity that is indulged and exposed by the relation it seeks with the divine. The poem opens just after the turning point of the year, the darkest day; Adam of Bremen’s arrival is

too late.

The cart-tracks leading

down the hill to the old town

are frosting over, already filling with snow. (58)

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<sup>108</sup> Adam of Bremen was a German Medieval Chronicler, active in the eleventh century. A Repository of his works can be found at the German National Library Database: <https://portal.dnb.de/>

The marks of the event are visible, but the landscape is already beginning to reclaim them; snow, that motif of abnegation, of the constant breakdown and renewal of the natural world, is already filling the tracks. The ground shifts back to a frozen road, no longer warmed and malleable from the disturbed tracks left by the carts of the townspeople. This reset of sorts by the weather patterns of winter in Sweden almost threatens to deny the events that Adam of Bremen comes to document; he finds himself doubting the purpose of his trip, seemingly 'too late' to relate the events of the sacrifice. The environment's ability to disperse the evidence of human activity continues to dog him, as he recounts 'If the temple is gold, as they say,/ it's too dark now to tell' (ibid.), and that while there are 'mice among the grain, and dogs, [there are] few people anywhere.' (Ibid.) All that is left is the altered evidence of a feast, 'ice between the cobblestones/ where drink was spilt — some scraps of bread,/ chicken bones — that's it.' (Ibid.) It is only the effects of bloodshed (literally in this case) that leave a lasting enough trace to alert Bremen, having altered the environment long enough to provide sensory evidence even under the cover of darkness. On approaching 'a tree so huge it's blotted out the moon' (ibid.) he finds

As I near the tree I feel the ground soften, start  
to suck at my boot-heels, and I can  
make out shapes in the high branches:  
long, hanging shapes that seem to  
turn slightly in the breeze, which is sweet now  
beyond the frost, and I almost  
sense some drops of rain. (58-59)

This is the tree from which the offerings of the great midwinter sacrifice are hung (animal and human as we learn), and it is ironically the volume of blood seeped into the soil that both softens the frozen ground and lends the 'sweetness' to the air, the particles of it on the breeze mistaken grotesquely for the cleansing feel of soft rain. The results of ritualised and horrendous violence offer respite from the violence of the Arctic midwinter inasmuch as

they are experienced here without full knowledge. Ironically, here is the embodiment of the prayed-for end of winter seeped into the landscape; the bloody scene approximates the return of a 'sweet' breeze, the feel of new rain, the softening of once-frozen ground in the spring thaw. We see in the immediate aftermath of the ritual its desired results in shocking immediacy, the promise of the transformative season change to come. 'Moving around it,' recalls Bremen, 'I see it's as high/ as the temple, fully green and thick with gifts' (59) These offerings are recounted with a dispassionate horror:

At the top, what look like cockerels, rams  
and goats, then dogs and pigs, and hooked  
to the lowest, strongest boughs — their legs  
almost touching the earth— horses and bulls.  
  
I count nine of each of them, and nine  
that aren't animals but hang there just the same,  
black-faced, bletted, barely  
recognisable as men. (59)

The structure of the poem, whose languid free verse has until now offered a meandering sense of observation and anticipation, becomes more focused; the stresses that align with the listing of bodies, (beginning with the iambic listing of the smaller animals) building to the final descriptor, 'black-faced, bletted, barely', trochaic and off-kilter, and the half-finished clause of that same line, all serve to convey the disorienting realisation of violent sacrifice. Violence as a catalyst for myth-making is seen as something that is inescapable; it leaves those bodies rotting and overripe (the impossible to dismiss semantic links of hanged bodies to lynched bodies to strange fruit, left hanging too long, 'bletted').<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> This is a process of over-ripening used for fruits such as medlars, which do not rot once passing their initial stage of ripeness but instead undergo another conversion of flesh to sugars. This process is undertaken usually by removing the fruits from the tree and allowing to further ripen somewhere cool and dark.

## The Mythic Everyday: Self and Place in Modern Scotland

From the myth-making of ancient Celts and the Greek pantheon, Robertson goes on to examine the ways in which the quotidian of contemporary life is mythologised and parsed to construct an understanding of one's place within society. In particular, he looks at how this pertains to gender, to spaces of maleness, and to the narratives that inform our sense of home. In '1964', Robertson writes an account of everyday life in a small Scottish town, in particular the secret spaces of male friendship and social communion. In this case, the focal point of such observation is a small town barber's shop, a habitat replete with associations of maleness, a stage for the discussions and interrelationships between men, intergenerational and intimate. The poem opens on the town, resolves the opening stanza's images of the 'gritted lid of winter' (5) lifting on 'the slow dawn/ its developing tray' (ibid.) to coalesce in the second verse around 'the barber shop mirror', which offers us a reflection of 'this museum of men/ through glass' (ibid.).

The shop's interior becomes a diorama; the speaker recounts with a cataloguing eye

Their shaving brushes, talc and whetted razors,  
  
the bottles of bay rum, hair tonic, astringents; long  
  
leather strops; those faded photographs of hairstyles,  
  
that blue Barbicide jar on the counter  
  
dense with pickled combs and scissors like a failed aquarium;  
  
The special drawer full of Durex, copies of *Parade*. (HOD 5)

The image that 'develops' is that of the barbershop, within which another set of 'faded photographs' seek to record the aspirational men into whom the invisible customers could yet be transformed. It is interesting that Robertson seeks to study the space of men in this poem; for him as for Burnside, the discomfort felt by many men within the spaces offered to them is a recurrent theme, frequently focused on the fact that for their male characters all negative emotion is transmuted to violence. In '1964' we see the barber's as a sacred space abandoned; it is a place of potential peace, though one that perhaps only exists as long as it

remains in a time where masculinity is a close shave and a copy of *Parade* magazine. It remains a space that can only be approached via the lens of memory or by the propagation of other, more damaging and violent methods of identifying that are incompatible with a meaningful (or at least a non-harmful) existence.

This is corroborated by the panorama presented in the next stanza; it zooms outward from the window of the shop to a wider vista, tracing 'the plane from England [. . .] across the icy sky' (6) to lend a backdrop to 'the promenade' that hosts 'the day's first Labrador', away from 'the quarantined city' (ibid.) from which we have come that sits 'bilge-deep in cobbles,/ listing: flying the Yellow Jack' ( ibid.) The suggestion of infirmity, of sickness and contamination spreading outward from the initial central point of the hermetic room of the barber's suggests an environment that is past its prime; the city has fallen into obsolescence and is now merely a backdrop to the worthier journeys represented by the plane 'from England' that carries a new era's promise and vigour. The use of 'Yellow Jack' as a symbol for quarantine is also intriguing; if we are to take the setting of the poem as 1964 as the title states, then it is indeed representative of that status.<sup>110</sup> Robertson evokes the revelatory quality of sickness; it puts you in the world and reorients your humanity as beholden to that world. By suggesting the overlaid memory of the past onto the place that still stands in the present day, it becomes more complex. Contemporary usage of the flag signals the opposite; a ship awaiting inspection at port, proclaiming itself *free* of diseases.

In layering past and present, the dual status of the city as both quarantined and sick *and* now purged of sickness and waiting for contact draws the twin aspects of the poem's nostalgia and mistrust into dialog, and presents a space which stands for both isolation and communion. It also literalises the concept of 'unhealthy spaces' that Burnside attributes almost solely to the effects of capital and masculinity in his works, and which Robertson links here to the impossibility of nostalgia; the utopian quality of memory and the inability to hold a place accurately in recollection underscores the poem, as shown above, and permeates much of his work. This draws a parallel between the ways the two poets conceive of place, self and the problems inherent to finding a way to forge a stable identity in contemporary Scotland.

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<sup>110</sup> Yellow Jack was also the colloquial name for yellow fever; the flag is also known as 'Quebec' presumably due to its meaning in the phonetic alphabet as the letter Q standing for 'Quarantine'.

The first three stanzas also work in a structure that underlines an ecological philosophy in relation to conceptions of modernity; we see a concentric and interconnected web of being as the poem regresses through its locations. As we read through the opening stanza, from the specificity of 'each ice-puddle' (5) and out again to the backdrop of the dawn, into the second, the window of the barber's with its museum-display, and then back out again to the third which offers us the view of the 'quarantined city' from the sea-wall or the aeroplane, the poem's locations expand and contract around the centre point of the poem's lyric observer. They follow from object to hyperobject; we move from the puddle to the dawn, from each and every tiny piece of barber shop ephemera to the passing plane and its vapour trail, to England, to sky, to stratosphere, contained (impossibly) again, right back to the start in a photography 'developing tray' (5). Throughout, the reader is aware of the world beyond each observation but is made to acknowledge the dizzying effect of such banal minutiae existing on the same plane of reality as a sunrise and therefore a sun (billions of tons of burning hydrogen out in space). A plane passing begets the question of flight, begs knowledge of the atmosphere, of climate and on to the realisation of sickness beyond the city under the Yellow Jack, to a global quarantine, pollution, smog, manmade consequences both immediate and personal, and all-consuming and ecological. Robertson once again centres the entropic as the point around which all of these phenomena circle. He forces reader to include themselves in this infinite series and to acknowledge the power and fragility of the whole, made as it is of perishable and material constituent parts, even as they range for the minute to the inconceivably vast.

In reading the poem this way, action is only meaningful as *interaction*— textually and intertextually — of the object within the poem and of the poet and reader. By becoming aware of one's vulnerability in the world through the violence and vulnerability suggested by other objects and beings, we cultivate empathy: 'a forest path issues directives to my body to walk at a certain pace, listen for animals, avoid obstacles. A cigarette butt demands that I put it out.' (Morton *WLML* n.p.) By understanding the potential for the actions that come after the engagement with each thing in the world, we are changed, disposed to react in a certain way. A burning cigarette threatens a forest fire, and while we can conceive of a cigarette abstractly, a forest fire is more unimaginable. Nevertheless, the knowledge of one invokes the fear of the other and reminds us of our fragility. We are made part of the space in which a forest fire becomes possible, and so we are preconditioned to respond. In this

way the object of the barber's shop speaks as much of the passing of a certain attitude and its necessary quarantine and extinction as the sound of an aeroplane passing overhead suggests we look up to the sky and briefly consider the atmosphere.

The poem continues with a series of vignettes that shift between past and present tenses, fleshing out the contemporary reality of the city and its environs, and recalling memories of the speaker's childhood there. They explore the innate childhood fascination with violence and the grotesque, and the connection to those processes that modern life often insulates us from. The speaker recounts taking the 'blood buds' (*HOD* 6) from the butchers floor, where 'the blood has rolled through the sawdust and become soft and round' (*ibid.*), taking 'the biggest ones in handkerchiefs' 'to the woods, to break them open for their jelly' (*ibid.*) Another encounter with the visceral side of life in a small coastal town is recalled in the present tense: 'there's a fox/ nailed to a fence post; the tricked god hanging from his wounds.' (6) The constant switching of tense disorients the reader; it suggests both the continuity of natural rhythms that mark time and the impossibility of leaving a formative memory in the past as it informs one's actions and ideologies in the present. The transformation of death on living tissues here harkens back both to entropic quality of memory and nostalgia, and to the shifting forms of Dionysus, referenced throughout the collection. The 'coming god' (*HOD* 2) who could 'match the jink of a coursing hare' (*ibid.*) and by 'boyhood's end was dressing in their skins' (3) is recalled here in the image of the god as his own prey.

The claustrophobic nature of the poem's violence ratchets up; the next stanza offers us an eternal present 'in the kirkyard/in amongst the graves. One boy/ holds the other's hair so he can kick him in the face.' (6) Out towards the coast, 'all you hear is the ice tightening back together/ and the cats crying that dreadful way they have' (7). The increasingly plaintive note of the recollections culminates in the closing stanza's vulnerable confession:

I knew how children came, so I look for the stork  
in the cliffs over the mussel pools,  
in the quarry ledges, the chimney stacks,

all along the walking pylons —

search for her everywhere in the gantries of the storm woods, in the black pines,

that she might take me back. (7)

The compressed tenses of the poem seek to suggest an on-going unease as a result of the childhood recollected here; the speaker 'knew' and yet still looks.<sup>111</sup> The knowledge of childhood is proven demonstrably false (the one past participle assumes he now knows his mistake), and provokes the desire to find this proxy maternal presence, the figure of the stork that might take him back into pre-birth, redeliver him to a new life. The stork is also the only female presence in the entire poem; that the feminine pronoun is only attributed to a fantastic figure, one of folktale, or parochial myth, is suggestive of the enervating nature of the male myth that the speaker has otherwise had access to. There is also enough ambiguity within the closing line to hint at a wistfulness for the town recalled in these vignettes, for the child that inhabited those spaces. Coming of age is a series of losses, predicated on the realisation that the relationship one has to the structures around oneself has changed, with no outward sign until the change is already wrought. It is not possible to go back; the stork remains looked for and unseen, the graveyard remains the scene of a perpetual fight, the fox is still hanging on the fencepost, the sound of the waves underscores it all, and the 'plane from England' passes by without any awareness of any one of these events that have coalesced to make and mark a life.

The cumulative effect is an almost anti-sublime, where each piece of minutiae coalesces to form an incomprehensible whole, against the backdrop (the sea) that would traditionally generate this reaction. In this case it remains merely literal background noise to the tiny interactions and realisations that lead to awe; the lyric of Robertson's '1964' and its interaction with nature and place is a markedly non-Romantic one. It invokes an earnest, painful and introspective interrelation with nature that sees it as a category not of separation, or awesome landscapes that exist outside of human environments to engender

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<sup>111</sup> Robertson again chimes with Burnside's configuration of time and memory here, as something simultaneous and utopian; events and their recollection are layered on top of one another, perpetually disorienting the rememberer. See Burnside, *Something like Happy*: 'I am a millisecond behind the moment — and part of me is further back still, sitting in an empty cafe, watching a woman turn away [. . .] and out into — Eternity.' (67)

philosophical revelation, but instead as a zone of implication, chaotic and inescapable. The natural is an awe into which our own existences are woven, the spaces we inhabit have potential to deliver such shocks to the system as a Himalayan peak. The power inherent in the sublime is not the philosophical faculty innate to human rationality, but is in fact a relational exchange that requires belief in the thing being observed as much as the person observing, and gives way to a hopeful and vulnerable relationship with nature and place. Jamie has stated that the focus of such writing

might be the outermost reaches of the Universe, the innermost changes at the bottom of a lung, the words on a page, or a smear of blood on a slide. I think it's about repairing and maintaining the web of our noticing, a way of being in the world (LRB 39).<sup>112</sup>

The vignettes of '1964' all fall within a 'web of noticing' and seek to mend the rifts between past and present, between nostalgic memory and a realistic, damaged man in the present. Coming of age becomes another interruptive part of natural cycles; an understanding of it as such doesn't lessen its impact, but does perhaps provide a way back after the fact, to live compassionately, and to try and heal the worst of the damage done by experiencing that process in the environment Robertson's '1964' provides. For Robertson, entropy and empathy invoke one another; in his poetry of remembrance, the degraded images of self and the spaces that self inhabits act as catalysts for his desire to empathise.

'1964' gives us an intimate portrait of the kind of environments that young men like Robertson grew up in. The poet examines the way that the environment interacts with its inhabitants, and how these (built and natural) spaces evoke and complement the internal psychological processes of growing up within them. Masculinity has its own hermetic spaces that cycle through enacting violence and withdrawal; Robertson finds these conflicting and enervating actions mirrored in the slow erosion of a coastline, the changing name on a signpost, the storm out at sea. Masculinity has a home in much of Robertson's poetry of the northeastern coast. For him, the land unequivocally makes you and the relationships you forge, those ways in which you are or are not permitted to experience the world around

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<sup>112</sup> Jamie, Kathleen. 'Diary: Counting the Cobwebs'. *London Review of Books* 24.11. 6<sup>th</sup> June 2002: 38-39. Online. [lrb.co.uk](http://lrb.co.uk).

you, have lasting consequences.<sup>113</sup> In 'Maryculter, 1972', Robertson explores the impact of such an experience:

I wanted to become a man  
badly, like him. He used to say,  
'That's the trouble with women,  
all they think about is love.'  
Later that summer, in a field,  
the cone of flies attendant  
on my first liquefaction  
told me three things:  
that sex is death;  
that life is not drawn,  
but traced; and that  
all theft is the theft of love. (SA 19)

The opening lines immediately alert us to the navigation of the problematic masculinity that Robertson skirts; to 'become a man/ badly' is at the heart of 'the trouble' not just with women, but with the adolescent boy the poet ventriloquises here in memory. The essence of the spaces that men make for themselves and in relation to each other are shown to be

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<sup>113</sup> See *The Scotsman*. 12 Feb 2010. 'Interview: Robin Robertson Poet and Publisher'. Robertson claims that 'Wherever you grow up leaves a mark, particularly if it's a place as powerful as the North-east coast of Scotland. I spent a lot of time walking around Old Aberdeen, following the river out to the sea. Most of my time was spent plodding miserably along the strand and trying to have a great thought.' (n.p.)  
eftab720<https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/books/interview-robin-robertson-poet-and-publisher-1-474043>

inadequate. This unsettling enjambment directs the reader to ask how one badly becomes. We are invited to consider the process of adolescence, of the images and roles we seek to emulate, that we try on in the hopes that they will fit our newly unfamiliar selves. Following on, we must wonder at what point is the metamorphosis from child to adult made and when (if ever) it is possible to judge the success of the readjustment. Robertson utilises a disjointed call-and-response in answering this, allowing the second stanza to return to the questions raised by the first, and flesh out this uncertainty. The speaker's father has become a man badly, though the dramatic irony of this means that the speaker cannot realise the fact until 'later that summer', after his first sexual experience.

The first of the speaker's concluding revelations— that 'sex is death'—is laid out for us in the imagery of the 'cone of flies', rendering the evidence of the encounter analogous to a corpse; love becomes something that decays and is consumed as a process of that decay.<sup>114</sup> The physical realities of life run up against the metaphysical significance of the act and the speaker is once again recalled to his inadequacy in the face of overarching narratives of self and sexuality. Alongside this epiphany, the insufficient quality of what the speaker has hitherto learned is made clear; 'life is not drawn,/ but traced', he opines. The idea that he would come into his maturity and start his real life has been proven untrue, and he is left tracing the lines of his father's life, the lives of those around him, laid out and visible underneath the layer of his own experience despite his best efforts. The final realisation, 'that/all theft is the theft of love', calls back uncomfortably to the first stanza, and suggests that considering sex as something that is 'taken' is the root of 'the trouble with women' or rather, the trouble with men whose blueprint for adult masculinity sees 'love' as an impossibility, and the acts of love as appropriative and therefore inherently nonconsensual. It also underlines the inherent tension between the animal self, which is embodied in the conflation of sex and death as primal forces of existence that govern all lifeforms— and the human, who ascribes meaning other than this to those acts. 'Theft' is a human act, a human concept and a philosophical one. An ecocritical approach suggests a

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<sup>114</sup> The conflation of death and sex is also explored in the poem 'A Gift' (*TWL* 19), in which the speaker's lover comes to him dressed entirely in poisonous plants, in 'a dress of true-love and blue rocket' and 'a garland of cherry laurel, herb bennet, dwayberries and yew-berries'. The natural and the feminine are combined and rendered deadly even as they are seductive; this is a more adult, if still unreconciled view of the same questions of intimacy, threat and isolation that 'Maryculter, 1972' poses.

way of examining the 'natural' aspects of humanity that act to serve specific and constructed systems of power, sexual and social.

Vulnerability is key to conceiving of the self within a wider web of nature, the nation or the world at large in a fundamentally more responsible and hopeful fashion. Living in a human body, it is necessary to reach an acceptance that violence can and will be done to that body. A human body is not immune from the processes of the 'natural world' despite humanity's unique awareness of its position in the world. Living in a body read and experienced as male by society and self, it is necessary to reach another even more unwelcome truth: that violence will be inflicted and borne by that body as a result of it. It must be acknowledged that the inherence of masculinity within patriarchal norms means that it is a vessel for and the result of huge and systemic violence, and that to find an understanding of self that allows for more hopeful, equitable and dialogic relationships with the surrounding world, this realisation must be reached and confronted. This is not just an epistemological question, that asks how we learn to be men and how we confront the values assigned to masculinity that allow for such violence, but also a political one. It directs us to examine how we unpick and administrate the legacies of this violence, how we interrogate the kinds of self-conceptions that have built the foundational myths and institutions of much of our current existence, to what we turn to unlearn this.

### **Space and Simulacra: Memory, Representation and the 'Unnatural'**

The lack of preparedness for the humanity inherent in sex is what undoes the speaker of 'Maryculter, 1972' as a direct result of problematic ideologies of masculinity. The cultural environment of this time and place does not allow him access to that specific humanity; he is trapped knowing that the 'natural' is not enough and that the 'conceptual' and transcendent aspects of the act are out of reach, both denied love and unable to offer it. The way that each interaction is catalogued and transposed almost cinematically to a scene, location and time, becoming the catalyst for two pivotal moments, reinforces the way that Robertson seeks to define selfhood by the ways we are permitted to interact with the environments that surround us and stay with us indelibly, indexed and inviolable, as evidence of our becoming. This sense of inviolability or stasis that surrounds the spaces of our formative years, is deftly covered in 'The Long Home' (SA 48-49) which opens with the admission

I hadn't been back in twenty years  
and he was still here, by the fire,  
at the far-end of the longest bar-counter  
in Aberdeen— some say Scotland. (48)

The space of the pub, a traditional meeting place and social sanctuary for men since time immemorial, is both rendered somewhat pristine, unchanged and therefore sinister. There is something at once comforting and deeply troubling about a scene which could be positioned any time in the last twenty years. It speaks to a fantasy of unchanging and eternal identification with a place, self and time. To be confronted with a reality so unchanged is jarring; stasis is anathema, and we are left with an uncanny impression of resistance, an attempt to hold on to something already gone. The pub provides impossible and sinister nostalgia made manifest. The figure that the speaker meets with again after nearly a generation serves as a role-model-cum-cautionary tale, a man the type of which the speaker may have become or once been. He relives his time as a feature of the scene he now sees repeated, stating

I remember him telling me,  
with that grim smile,  
'I'm washing my wounds in alcohol.'  
I liked a drink too,  
but would always leave before him,  
walking home, as if on a wire. (49)

The speaker's distance from the barfly is years-since established; he clearly found it necessary to avoid the 'grim' attempts at self-healing through self-obliteration (that peculiarly male affliction that Robertson and Burnside encounter again and again). The physical proof of this necessary maturation, the distance that must be kept, comes in the lurid reveal of the final stanza:

I'd heard about what happened  
but wasn't ready for the terrible wig,  
all down at one side, the turn  
of his mouth and his face's hectic blaze.  
He'd left here so bad  
he could barely stand.  
He'd got through his door, back to his room  
and passed out for the night,  
sleeping like a log with his head in the fire. (49)

Here, the familiarity of the place and its inhabitants is violently shattered by the results of the ways in which, as in 'Drowning in Co. Down', a place's behaviours and problems have been internalised and have done harm to one of its inhabitants. When the speaker returns to this space he is no longer able to see the comfort and familiarity of it once the manifestations of its violence have been made clear to him, written as they are on the physical body of the apparently (at first) 'unchanged' human representative of that space. Robertson deploys a similarly sardonic literalisation of a previously well-worn idiom as with 'Cat, Failing', when he describes the drunk's injury. He becomes Morton's burning cigarette, the marker of threat to come or disaster just averted. Robertson's speaker is confronted with the way we interact with specific situations and environments, and how easily behaviours learned within those environments can supersede our identity to the point of returning us to them even after such horrific incidents.

Similarly, 'March, Lewisboro' (SA 12-17), explores a moment of interaction between time and place, and the specific psychological state achieved by noticing and engaging with that moment. These poems of place convey moments that demand the realisation of the speaker's immediate and lasting position within them. Here Robertson subverts tropes of nature writing and presents a poem of 'nature-as-simulacrum';

The estate at dawn hangs  
like smoke; the forest  
drawn in grainy bands  
of smeared, cross-hatched,  
illegible trees: a botched  
photocopy of itself. (12)

This poem recalls Jamie's 'Scotland's Splendour' (*Bonniest Companie* 49), which also sees real places become overtaken by their own representative images; she writes the nation as spaces to which our access is moderated and controlled on paper and in the world.<sup>115</sup> The concept of a reified landscape that exists as a backdrop to personal revelation is exposed as unsustainable and instead the uncanny strangeness of being (out) in the world become the poem's focus. 'Nature' is curated as the space outside of 'the estate' and becomes illusory, 'like smoke'. It is a bad copy of the real thing, a replication of itself to serve a Romantic ideal of the outside world that leaves the meaning of such things 'illegible'; to the observer nature signifies nothing, since the meaning of the term has been sanitised and replicated so often as to be rendered obsolete. It is a result of identities held in stasis, of nature and of the self, reiterating the necessity of accepting the entropic quality of self and environment in order to engage with it meaningfully. This is another example of privileged removal embodied by the upper class 'estate' the poem opens on. In such a sterile environment,

The frost's acoustic [is]  
futile against such silence.  
A dog's bark, like a gun,  
just ricochets. (13)

The resonance of nonhuman or natural encroachment on this landscape becomes 'futile'; it

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<sup>115</sup> See Chapter 3

is indistinguishable from the violence of a gunshot, echoing back on itself to 'ricochet' without finding a target. The poem moves into a contemplation of the ecological with the consideration of

the necessary dead:

the drenched mop of a rabbit,

its eyes (which would have dimmed

like the drying of ink) not present:

the crow's umbrella spokes

abandoned in a pool of stress.

The soil's peristalsis

gives up baseballs, glass bottles (14).

The ecosystem at large becomes an extension of the systems that control its component parts and inhabitants. The ground unearths the proofs of human impact and damage; a rabbit's death is understood via imagining the processes of its death as narrative. The necessity of such interactions and patterns grounds the speaker within the environment, rather than seeing it solely as simulacrum (though the allusions to ink suggest still that something performative informs their perspective). The uncanny characteristic of the grounds is reinforced by the speaker's impression of the rose garden, whose 'flower varieties, painted on sticks,/ people the hollows' (15). The observation that 'Manon Lescaut is here,/and Jules Verne,' (15) simultaneously embeds the speaker within the natural world and returns to the performative quality of naming plants and animals in order to confer a sense of kinship to those things.<sup>116</sup> The speaker continues to catalogue these names of people-roses until the italic interjection of an anthropocentric concern, which demands '*check the mail! / I'm expecting a letter.*' (16) The encroachment of the civilised is a distraction from the sense of connection that the speaker is seeking (and tentatively

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<sup>116</sup> See Chapter 1

beginning) to build. The unreality of the scene resurfaces ('the colours are too bright' (17)) and the speaker is left alone with only his 'grey notebook./ This glossy magazine and mail.' (17)

The attempt to first catalogue, then connect with, the not-quite-wild outdoors of the estate is eventually stemmed by the return and interruption of those markers of his inability to do so; the voice from the house, the stack of post in hand. These interventions put him firmly back within the hermetic space of the civilised, the human; as with the earlier revelation of 'Cat, Failing', we are made aware of the thresholds that must be crossed between the human and nonhuman worlds to achieve this connection. The abortive moment of communion is located within a set space and time, as if one might be able to return there and attempt to puzzle out what was impossible the first time around. It is also notable that 'March, Lewisboro' presents a male voice that feels acutely, and yet cannot parse his radical isolation from his surroundings; the ecological perspective demands that humans learn to see themselves in dialogue with each object that they encounter. We see the beginnings of this awareness, but the responsibilities and distractions of the 'civilised' pull him back again and again; both environments end up seeming equally unreal, and the speaker is left feeling untethered.

### **Remaking the Self: Robertson's Bodily Ecology**

The culmination of Robertson's philosophy— his keen interest in the entropic, his exploration of the mythic nature of our personal and cultural histories, his fascination with attempts to understand and articulate humanity's position relative to the world around it— can be seen in the poems of his that deal with the physicality of our identities. Robertson is acutely attuned to the corporeal reality of the bodies we inhabit. Through his recurrent writing on Dionysus, the god whose physical forms shifts and alters, Robertson is not only able to work mutability into national metanarratives, but also to work through the relationship between the physical and psychological aspects of identity, and of the processes we enact in order to come to terms with ourselves. Robertson uses Bacchus to do this in several poems that feature in *Hill of Doors*: 'The Coming God' which charts Dionysus' infancy and childhood, the growth of his power and strength; 'Dionysus in Love' in which the 'boy-god [. . .] came of age' (14), and 'Dionysus and the Maiden', wherein the god embodies the worst qualities of adult male entitlement (the trope of rape by divine beings in Greek myth notwithstanding). If we see Dionysus as Robertson's stand-in for the mythic

figure of national-historical metanarrative, and as the symbolic focus of the possibility of an ecological understanding of the same, then this is its worst aspect; this is the representation of the toxicity that such national and social myths and metanarratives breed.

Certainly the two poems (situated at either end of the collection) suggest that the worst of men is found in the change from boy to man; in 'Dionysus and the Maiden' Robertson fears that to come of age as a man is to become inured to violence, to endure it done to oneself to achieve the status of a man, and to enact it on others as one's inheritance as a man.<sup>117</sup> 'The Coming God', in contrast, focuses on the childlike and wild aspects of Dionysus' being. His infancy is marked by joyful and exuberant shows of power and skill, 'double-born into risk, guarded/ by satyrs, centaurs', already the embodiment of duality. For him, childhood's metamorphoses become fantastical shape-shiftings: 'he'd become a new-born kid, shivering in the corner' (2), and 'as a gown boy he'd show himself/ as a girl, in saffron robes and veils' (ibid.) For the god, the nature of self is one that can be altered at will; questions of gender, identity and belonging, of understanding one's place in the wider world, are moot; he can become each thing that he might wish to know more intimately. Dionysus' power is to take the part of himself that would trouble the human (changeability, uncertainty) and harness it for his own pleasure. This power, the knowledge of himself as part of any creature he sees, means that as a boy, 'he tamed wild beasts, just by talking, /and they knelt to be petted, harnessed in.' (3) The issues of identity surrounding adolescence become 'wild animals' to tame; the final stanza presents the young god with 'a maddened she-bear'(3). He is able to 'put his white fingers to her mouth, her teeth, his fingers gentle at the bristled jaw,' and calm the bear; the final lines see her 'covering the hand of Dionysus with kisses, / wet, coarse, heavy kisses.' (3) To extend the metaphor, the ability of Dionysus to shift, to become and accept those disparate parts of himself, leads to the sexual and psychical struggles of adolescent identity being tamed; the slight threat of the 'coarse, heavy kisses' persists, but the sharpest danger of 'her mouth, her teeth' is neutered by this youth whose power is to be unburdened by the uncertainty of a life in the world. 'Dionysus in Love' confronts this aspect of adolescence directly, beginning as 'the boy-god/ Dionysus came of age.' (14) Here the most human aspects of the god are explored:

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<sup>117</sup> As Burnside also considers in the sequence 'Self Portrait as Funhouse Mirror' in *All One Breath*. See Chapter 1.

And as his own body changed  
his eyes grew wider, and turned  
towards the bodies of others.  
Ampelos was the one, above all:  
most beautiful boy, most beautiful  
of satyrs. (14)

The opening line of the second stanza details to us that Dionysus' 'body changed'; the implication is that this time it does not happen at will. The changes that are demanded of growing up are overlaid onto a body that heretofore (and otherwise still) has changed itself as it wanted. The object of the god's affections being a satyr seems fitting for a god who has embodied the wild and the human, and who has flitted between each effortlessly, for whom bodily beauty has encompassed many forms and has been something to put on as desired.

The gradual realisation that the body exists alongside and apart from the whole self and as part of wider ecologies and invisible systems is something that Robertson also writes about in more mundane terms. As with Jamie's *Frissure*, Robertson has written poetry that addresses the issues of identity and self when the body one lives in is a sick one. As discussed above, his poetry acknowledges that all systems break down, and he himself has charted his own bodily collapse unflinchingly in several works. Robertson has undergone open-heart surgery to correct a heart murmur, and has examined the effects of his illness in poems that range from body-horror to metaphysical investigations of the self and interrelations between body and soul. In *Hill of Doors*' 'A&E', Robertson evokes a vivid and visceral poetry of the self, focused on the disorienting and nightmarish experience of a body breaking down:

It was like wetting the bed  
waking up that night, soaked through:  
my sutures open again

and the chest wound haemorrhaging. (40)

The first emotional response invoked is, somewhat absurdly, shame; the sense-memory that is initially brought to mind is that of 'wetting the bed'. This moment of embarrassment recalls 'Cat, Failing', naming shame as a definitively human aspect of illness; it marks the realisation within the sufferer that their previous ideas of integrity or humanity have been inaccurate, naive. In 'A&E', the rupture in the speaker's stitches is initially recalled as a failing of the body that has led to an embarrassing mistake, a mess that one should be able to prevent. The opening line's stresses recall a stuttering heartbeat, the asymmetry of its four stressed and two unstressed syllables, followed by the final stressed single syllable of bed, coalesce to evoke an anxious, impatient rhythm. The clause of the opening line sits apart from any wider content initially, slipping over into the more relaxed rhythm of the second verse as the perspective tracks outward from initial perception, to locational awareness to, finally, situational understanding; the rise from sleep and the marshalling of bodily response to stress and trauma plays out in the structural flow of the poem's opening.

The speaker heads into 'Camberwell and/in through shivering rubber doors' to arrive at 'that Saturday-night abattoir/ of Casualty at King's on Denmark Hill.' (40) The hospital itself becomes a sort of beating heart; the 'shivering rubber doors' call to mind atrial valves. The dactylic phrase beats with a pulse-like urgency, suggesting the threat of fibrillation in the sound and image association of the word 'shivering'. Further, the hospital as an abattoir reinforces the image of the body as meat, an animal presence and a visceral object, alerting us to the threat of death, and of violence, and of the sanitation of that violence. 'I presented myself' (40) says the speaker, I walked willingly onto the killing floor; the ends must justify the means, but the inherent violence of emergency medicine is not overlooked. It is often necessary to do tremendously traumatic things to a body to save it, and the life inside it; open-heart surgery is brutally violent, cardiopulmonary resuscitation cracks ribs, and we can only be stitched together again after we have been sliced apart.

The second stanza, also ten lines long and the equally balanced counterweight to the first, situates us within the A&E reception. We learn,

At this front-line, behind her desk

and barred window, the triage nurse was already waving me away —

until I parted the tweed to show her  
what I had going on underneath.  
Unfashionable, but striking nonetheless:  
my chest undone like some rare waistcoat,  
with that lace-up front — a black *échelle* —  
its red, wet-look leatherette,  
those fancy, flapping lapels. (40)

Compounding the unsettling, nightmarish quality of the imagery that the poem has so far relayed, the metaphor shifts to one of a war zone— having phased through building, body, and slaughterhouse in the previous stanza— and then again within the space of two lines to a prison, the ‘barred window’ of the reception emphatically demarcating the separation between sick and well, patient and healer. The moment of reveal (having been at first dismissed, ‘already [waved] away’) is darkly humorous, initially presented as a sort of grotesque flirtation; the speaker opens his jacket to ‘show her/what I had going on underneath’, a grim subversion of a sexual and romantic overture and a way of temporarily modifying the perspective on the speaker’s injury through his and the nurse’s eyes simultaneously. We are caught in a horrendous meet-cute, looking back and forth between the pair as we wait for the moment of revelation, end-stopped. The fifth line acts to bridge the first and second halves of this stanza, providing the segue into the imagery upon which the whole work turns; the final metaphorical shift makes the speaker into a Frankenstein’s monster or a macabre tailor’s dummy. His chest is laid bare at last, presented to us ‘like some rare waistcoat/with that lace up front’ (40). His body becomes an object under construction; the skin is a fabric worked by unseen hands, and his current situation no longer just a catastrophic failure of medical suturing, but instead a creative act of a totally new kind that has rendered his torso ‘red, wet look leatherette’ and his pectorals ‘fancy, flapping lapels.’ There is a perverse sense of pride in the sheer horror that Robertson manages to grant those four final lines.

The body becomes understood as a transformative object, part of the whole person

and apart from him at the same time, subject to outside forces that have rendered it basically incomprehensible as part of the self that went to bed that evening, and is now standing bleeding in King's A&E, presumably horrifying a nurse. The body breaking down as a catalyst for self-reflection is something that Jamie also experiences and writes from in her collection *Frissure*, charting her recovery from breast cancer. For both her and Robertson, the profoundly alienating effects of serious illnesses or injury serve to raise questions of mortality, communion and interrelation when the human body is forced to be seen as an animate, *animal* body. Robertson's experience of his own surgical site (albeit in his case forced under a specific traumatic emergency situation) is one that removes the body as a dwelling and instead renders it a garment, worked by other hands and placed on to the self now wearing its own skin and watching it unravel. In *Frissure*, Jamie approaches her changed body as a *fait accompli*, the aftermath of trauma and intervention. In 'A&E' the wound is much newer, opened again physically and psychologically.

Robertson explores the alienating effects of bodily injury, and the surgeries he underwent as part of his treatment for a heart condition, again in *Hill of Doors*. 'The Halving' recounts his initial recovery from heart surgery, and focuses on the sensation of regaining consciousness, of coming back to oneself after such an event. As with 'A&E', Robertson's eye on the vulnerability of his own body and of the trauma endured by it is unflinching. The poem recounts

a median sternotomy  
achieved by sternal saw; the ribs  
held aghast by retractor; the tubes  
and cannulae drawing the blood  
to the reservoir, and its bubbler;  
the struggling aorta  
cross-clamped, the heart  
chilled and stopped and left to dry. (36)

The body itself is left 'aghast' by this intrusion, the 'struggling' aorta symptomatic of disease and (*in medias*) cure; the heart is 'chilled and stopped' as the reality of surgery slips seamlessly into the figurative language of fear and shock. The violence of the surgery is underscored throughout; the impossibility of grasping the reality of such a procedure suggested by the description of the replacement heart valve being fitted:

— a carbon-coated disc, housed  
expensively in a cage of tantalum—<sup>118</sup>  
is broken from its sterile pouch  
then heavily implanted into the native heart,  
bolstered, seated with sutures.  
The aorta freed, the heart re-started.  
The blood allowed back  
after its time abroad,  
circulating in the machine. (36)

The implant valve is fittingly named after Tantalus, who stole the secrets of the Gods and brought them back to earth. Robertson wryly acknowledges the godlike capacities of modern medicine, and again invokes the Greek pantheon to bring divinity and human weakness closer to one another. The arduousness of recovery also finds an apt if cynical allegory in the myth, of striving for what seems unobtainable. The second stanza of the poem shifts from the strongly physicalised descriptions of the first to examine the psychic results of such a profound bodily experience that is ironically rendered an out-of-body experience due to the anaesthesia and bypass procedures.

The speaker awakes after the 'Four hours I'd been away: out of my body. /Made to die then jerked back into the world.' (36) It is only by coming back to consciousness within his body that the speaker can conceive of himself as beholden to that body. He sees himself,

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<sup>118</sup> A metal which causes no immune response

the essence of his identity, as having 'been away', chased out by anaesthesia and removed from existence, until consciousness 'jerked' him 'back to the world', and back to himself. As the speaker returns more fully to awareness, the metaphysical implications of the surgery overlay the physical reality of his situation

as the morphine drained, I was left with a split

chest that ground and grated on itself.

Over the pain, a blackness rose and swelled;

'pump-head' is what some call it

— debris from the bypass machine

migrating to the brain— but it felt

more interesting than that. (36-37)

The physical sequelae of the procedure gain a philosophical-spiritual dimension. Left with a 'split' of self and other within the same body, the speaker finds his bones now 'ground and grated' on each other, the comfort of his innate ignorance of the body he inhabits forcibly shattered. The after-effects of the bypass machine all take on a metaphysical quality; the 'blackness' he experiences somehow 'more interesting' to his perception than the explanation of its case allows, leaving him 'Halved and unhelmed,/ I have been away, I said to the ceiling,/ and now I am not myself.' (37) This sense of displacement relates strongly to the ecological; to be within a body in the world and then have that means of interacting with and negotiating that world changed is to experience a fundamental shift in the perception of self.

As Morton posits, the body is frequently written and conceived as 'a little world, a floating island. But it is easy to deconstruct this body: where does it start and stop? [. . .] How about when we subtract things from the body? Is it still my body when I lose the hand, the arm?' (*EWN* 108) For Robertson it certainly seems that the shift in *his* bodily reality has left him grappling with this same question; he has been 'halved' — bilaterally sawn apart and stitched back up— but the syntactic choices of the poem's closing lines allow for that

past participle to become a continuous present, a change that persists, that echoes into potential futures. The speaker is left 'unhelmed'; this is a subtle and efficient adjective, which almost tenderly communicates the vulnerability and disorientation of the moment, calling up images of armour removed, and of a ship left adrift, and so simultaneously acting as a dreamily evocative and deeply vulnerable admission of the body as a vessel. The process of 'halving' has somehow removed him from a part of himself at the same time it has brought a new level of awareness to the speaker as regards his relationship to the body that is now irrevocably altered.

Robertson's medical poetry inhabits the philosophical space that Morton outlines as 'dark ecology'. Within the poems of his that detail life-changing illness or injury, the impersonal detachment of scientific diagnosis gives way to the experience of living within the confines of this altered body; one becomes irrevocably 'implicated'. Heredity is implication to its extreme end; this relates to both 'hale-and-hearty' philosophical conceptions of the self, and to the dark ecological fears inherent in the intergenerational ability to 'pass on' physical limitations, whereby the same cycles of disorder and degradation play out.<sup>119</sup> The entropic exists as an epigenetic haunting that manifests as the physical effects of that inheritance finally start to make themselves known. So, the actions and conceptions of identity as they are shaped by place take on an expectant quality; dark ecology's implication demands responsibility and vulnerability in our interactions with the world, and a refusal to excuse ourselves from the systems and inheritances that constitute it. Robertson's poetry demands an awareness of our tenuous hold on the idea of ourselves as apart, authoritative and un-animal, and his bodily ecologies, open to injury, illness and alteration, create spaces of engagement with the world that are visceral and formative. He is aware of human limitations, and the ways in which we might come up against those limits in the wider world.

### **Conclusion**

Robertson interrogates nature, nation and self in order to find the point at which they interact at points of fragility and change in creating the narratives that we use to understand our place in the world. He is consistently drawn to figures of transformation and duality, in service to a hopeful poetics that sees mutability as fundamental to finding a way

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<sup>119</sup> See Morton. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*: 107

to live that does less harm; like Burnside, he is attuned to the violence inherent in systems of our becoming, both social and economic. His poetry acknowledges the frailty of the human self, and the seemingly unassailable nature of the natural and political world at large, but sees in this vulnerability the key to engaging with these systems; our mortality and our conditioning provide us in his work with the impetus to resist and to reach beyond. His is poetics of dark ecological and personal truths, that shows us the ways in which we construct our myths of self and environment, and how we might come to write new stories in the wake of this revelation. The self and its vulnerability form the nexus of Robertson's ecological writings. It is through the very subjective, specific experience of living as a human man that he is able to extrapolate the precariousness and power of other life forms and see the ways in which metanarratives of nation and belonging are constructed to offset this vulnerability and finitude.

His approach is resolutely centred in the human and humane. His interest in physicality and damage align with Morton's dark ecological, as well as Deleuzian models of deterritorialisation; Robertson's human subjectivity is unique to all humans and therefore unifying. From this unified understanding of his human self, he is able to reach across to empathise with and elevate the nonhuman. Robertson's continued writing on Dionysus and the Greek pantheon overlays the paradox of our global atomisation at the same time as unfettered access to the world that characterises modernity onto a mythos in which that access was far more limited and yet the divine was immediate and recognisably human. The nonhuman world for Robertson is another facet of our own alienation; he does not see it as a cipher to crack, nor an untapped spirituality that modernity has removed us from. Rather, it is rendered as complex and unknowable as we are to ourselves. The human animal returns frequently in his works; from Asterion the minotaur, to the humanised cat observed by Robertson's protagonist, to the self-referential poems of Robertson's surgeries and recovery which revel in the visceral reality of his deteriorating body.

As such, what Robertson offers is a poetics of nature and self that is introspective and empathetic and tethered to the territorial and the degenerative; he recognises violence and fragility in his configurations of the natural world and the human constructs within it. The human inability to be comfortable with their own animal nature is something that for him leads, somewhat ironically, to increased sympathy for the suffering of the nonhuman, and a desire to ameliorate that suffering for oneself and the wider (natural, nonhuman)

world. This leads into Robertson's approach to questions of place and more broadly nation in his work, which, similarly to Burnside, do not focus on the party political or even socio-political elements of nation, but instead examine the nation as mythos, concerned with the way in which such (meta)narratives are constructed, sustained and worn down.

The nation in Robertson's work is often more a collection of places which hold personal and cultural significance; his examination of the changing meanings behind place names, the linguistic and cultural shifts in a town's history, the lasting effects of capital and social interest in certain locales and not others, all feed into the central focus on vulnerability of much of his writing, and lead to the empathy and consideration he writes for all questions of place and belonging. Robertson is attuned to the ways we create space, and how they enrich certain of us and not others. This concern stretches to the relation between the human and nonhuman, and examines the structures within broader narratives of nation, such as class, gender and culture. He remains convinced of the possibility to rewrite and reinscribe meaning over dominant narratives, and sees the importance of resisting ossified and nostalgic readings of place and self in his work. The men trapped in small towns and cycles of violence are an example of his refusal to become nostalgic for a Scotland he insists can be rewritten and reworked with each corruptible remembrance.

His work offers a mournful and compassionate view of nature, nation and self. It is rooted in the need to confront and feel deeply the damage we are capable of, in our mythologising, our interactions and our self-reflections. Robertson consistently offers a poetics that not only acknowledges the chaotic but finds hope for renewal and transgression in the breakdown. He writes poetry that might accept the ways in which we all deteriorate, but that looks clear-eyed for the transformation of that past into the new; even as we ask 'how much more of this life and death/ and these, their beautiful endless dress rehearsals?' (*TWL 80*) The breakdown of the system is not just inevitable, but instructive. It offers up beauty in its fragility, a potential that shows us not just the choice between swithering possibilities but the opportunity, one day, for both.

'An Autonomous Region':<sup>120</sup> Kathleen Jamie's Conjugations of Place, Self and Gender

**'I never could explain myself':<sup>121</sup> Person and Place**

Jamie's poetry reaches out from a Scotland she consistently refines and revisits, returning consistently to themes of identity, communication and selfhood within globalised and global structures. More so than either Burnside or Robertson, Jamie's poetics reject the 'kind of environmentalist ideology that wishes we had never started to think – ruthlessly immediate, aggressively masculine, ruggedly anti-intellectual, afraid of humour and irony' (Morton *EWN* 8) She interrogates the 'constant assertion that we're 'embedded' in a lifeworld [which is] paradoxically, a symptom of drastic separation.' (ibid.) For Jamie, 'a nation' becomes the rubric by which she understands issues of deterritorialisation. Via various crossings, she initially understands her 'own space'. From this, she is able to dissect the nation as a narrative and move beyond it as the primary level of engagement with the wider world; once she does so, her focus on the questions of nation nature and self examine the structures at work within that space of nation as well as the micro- and macro-ecologies that we must exist within and alongside. This approach also extends to her conception of (her)self as an 'autonomous region'. The way she sees her body (as a woman, as a white woman travelling in the global south, later as a cancer patient, as a mother) not merely as an island entire of itself and under her command, but something (as for Robertson) implicated in the world at large as one creature among many. Like Burnside, Jamie gains a sense of the space beyond her physical and geographical limits by attributing a spiritual dimension to the natural world.

In Jamie's writing, place, travel and history work outwards from Scotland to take in the world, and to offer a distinctly ecological poetics of place, nation and political engagement. Jamie's ecologies are aware and interrogative of contemporary life; her articles and writing about land ownership, management of estates and the democratic power available to citizens in Scotland form an example of her explicitly political-ecological conception of nature and nation. Jamie's writing as an essayist and travel writer as well as poet frequently includes the subjects of identity, place and difference (cultural, geographic

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<sup>120</sup> Jamie *The Autonomous Region* 6

<sup>121</sup> *The Bonniest Company* 57

and temporal). In her later work, she moves from an overtly political and nationally-based focus to consider in more abstract terms issues of place, society and the natural world. The nation acts as a nexus for these considerations; it produces a critical basis for Jamie's questions of place, belonging and impact in contemporary life. These issues maintain a broadly ecocritical approach that deals with how we access and manage our environments, and how institutional, systemic and social constructs shape and limit these relationships—to ourselves, our locality, and the global networks of political and ecological structures we must navigate. Language and history, gender and female identity and the relationship of humankind and the natural world are abiding themes in her work. Her figuring of place returns to gendered conceptions of place and being (most explicitly in her 2012 collection *Frissure*) and, unlike much of Robertson and Burnside's work, deals explicitly with the subject of Scottish nationalism and the independence referendum of 2014.

Joanne Winning observes of Jamie's 1994 collection *The Queen of Sheba* that she 'writes her "Scottish book", with its dedication to her ain folks, after several years of travel in North Pakistan, China and Tibet. [. . .] Jamie's travel allows her to reach back to Scotland' (CWP 233-34). Winning touches on a fundamental aspect of Jamie's oeuvre. Whilst it would be limiting to state merely that one has to leave a place to come back to it, and to read Jamie's work as that of the poet able to see from afar the issues of her own nation as she could not before, travel brings clarity to questions of her Scottishness as it allows for Jamie to draw parallels between issues of political representation and identity globally. It also allows her to see herself as a woman in the world, and to view this in politically powerful terms. The issue of how her body is viewed as it moves through the spaces of the world informs much of her writing about agency, self and the overarching social and political structures that shape these definitions.<sup>122</sup> The ability to leave a place and return is a privilege afforded to Jamie as a white European woman of comparative wealth, and allows her to both exploit this privilege and view it at work in her own society and that of the cultures and countries she visits. As a result, Jamie's writing and 'thoughts on Scottish identity are [. . .] inflected by thoughts on gender and race.' (Winning CWP 234) These thoughts certainly move and mature throughout her work; Jamie sees progressively less and

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<sup>122</sup> See for example, *Among Muslims* [*The Golden Peak*] 57; 'Abir' (*Black Spiders* 12); 'The Bogey-wife' (*Jizzen* 10); 'Karakoram Highway' (*The Way we Live* 25-37); 'Pioneers' (*Jizzen* 34)

less separation between the mechanics that govern national identity (and more pertinently, agency) and those which sublimate representation and identity as benign formations of selfhood within those structures. For her, the realisation of identity is not enough; there must be a representation in concrete terms, an agency politically catered to, rather than a rumination on the nature of one's Scottishness or femaleness that ultimately leaves the status quo intact; place is tied to agency since to be able to identify and control the space one inhabits, be it political, physical or ecological, is key to the autonomy and reciprocity Jamie's poetry of place evinces.

Jamie's work aligns with Scott Hames' position: that 'it is [. . .] possible to understand devolution as a highly conservative state process, one that openly figures "cultural representation" as the containment and deferral of democratic empowerment.' (*Bottle Imp Supplement 1*) She writes about this concept *Among Muslims*, which relates her travels in Pakistan. Jamie at first equates cultural identity with political representation; her initial interpretation sees the 'political' question as really one of accurate representative language. Of her arrival there, she writes

Northern Areas. It seems hardly the most imaginative of name for an area redolent with romantic-sounding kingdoms: Baltistan, Dardistan, Kashmir. At first I avoided using the term, because I imagined it to be as offensive to the people here as the term 'North British' to the Scots: a denial of their cultural identity and difference. I was right in one thing—it is politically loaded, but not in the way I'd supposed [. . .] The people of the Northern Areas have no representation in the Pakistani Parliament which administers them. They can't vote, because the question of to whom, India or Pakistan, their area should belong has yet to be resolved. (*Among Muslims [The Golden Peak]* 30-31)

A nation here moves from the space within which one lives and learns to identify oneself and becomes a system that dictates the spaces in which one may operate, identify and engage. For Jamie, whose initial understanding of nation is as the place one identifies with and finds explanation of oneself, the issue of naming is initially sensitive because of the sense of identity it might elide. For the people she meets, it is sensitive because they have no access to representative political structures; what for her is a mark of cultural identity denied is for the people living there actually a marker of their powerlessness as long as they

have no recourse to administer and shape their own environment. Jamie's travels allow her to begin to form a poetics of nature, nation and self that requires the reader to engage with the question of 'to whom we should belong' on personal and political levels; to be displaced, geographically, socially and politically is to be vulnerable, but also to be open to fruitful shifts of perspective. This displacement, and her desire to see continuous shifts in position both political and geographic, is what allows her to 'reach back'; it informs Jamie's poetry of place, which examines the poetic possibilities inherent in the connection between humans and their respective environments, as well as the relationships we have to social and political structures. Through these poetic crossings, she is alert to stereotype and trope, often using and subverting accepted images, especially with regards to gender and national concerns in her earlier works. In these, there is sometimes an inclination to conform to what Hames identifies as the 'general tendency to locate (and often confine) the politics of contemporary Scottish writers within the relatively narrow horizons of the constitutional debate they are credited with re-energising' (*Bottle Imp Supplement 1 1*), the national debate of Scottish devolution and independence.

### **Jamie's Scotlands: Aspects of Nation**

As Jamie's work progresses she deals with this aspect of her canon with increasing sophistication, creating a nuanced view of Scotland and Scottish nationalism which is concerned with ecological, political and sustainable self-governance in the face of the twenty-first century's overwhelming environmental challenges (in every sense). In what may initially seem a paradoxical argument, Jamie displays her concern and commitment to enacting a truly ecological 'big-picture' way of living via increased separation in political terms. As Morton notes, 'Environmentalism is a set of cultural and political responses to a crisis in humans' relationships with their surroundings' (*EWN 9*). Ceding from an overarching neoliberal state apparatus is the means by which Jamie considers 'Scotland' better able to live in a more sustainable and ethically sound manner. Jamie's earlier work, which focuses more explicitly on Scotland and its contemporaneous political realities and mythologised pasts is not always as adept at transcending the 'empty or parodic' (Boden 33). Conceptions of nation however are so deeply rooted in conservative, imperial discourse as to be innately reductive and semi-parodic and therefore resistant to transformation. As Jamie relates in an essay penned in the run up to the 2014 referendum, political orations of nation and

nationality within the UK, and calls to uphold them, barely peer over the parapet of the farcical:

Mr Cameron told us that a move by Scotland for independence would undo ‘centuries of history’. Actually, it’s only three: England and Scotland entered into a political union in 1707. Mr Cameron also appealed to something he called ‘fusion of bloodlines’, as if we were racehorses. [. . .] The prime minister also appealed to the security of being part of ‘something bigger’ and argued that a disunited United Kingdom would no longer be a ‘major global player’. We would no longer have ‘the finest armed forces on the planet’. We would no longer be ‘world-beating’ — whatever that means. [. . .] Many believe that under ‘Team G.B.’ our industries have been swept away (under a Cameron predecessor, Margaret Thatcher), [. . .] our poor demonized [sic], our immigrants deported, and our social services starved, withdrawn, privatized [sic]. (*New York Times* n.p.)

The goals laid out by Cameron represent the conservative trappings of a nation-state. Jamie’s conception of nation and the question of independence as it pertains to Scotland is, as for Burnside, a question of political parity and representation rather than national ‘identity’, and its accurate parsing by the powers that be as a quintessential facet of democratic independence. Her writing seeks to understand the ways that such terms are presented and manipulated in service to overarching power structures, and how we might best come to unravel and replace such thinking and such structures. For her, independence is a means of starting to do so; the nation as it stands is the ‘UK’, and as it could be, ‘Scotland’. This forms the spacial and political basis for Jamie’s approach to questions of autonomy, deterritorialisation and sustainability. As a poet, Jamie skilfully and successfully (increasingly so as her career progresses) blends symbol, myth and image from many ‘cultural environments’, and attributes greater emphasis to the conditioning inherent in place, featuring as it does in most of her travel poems, based on her visits in Asia to countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal, Tibet and China.

The way we conceive of and express ideas of self and nation are not neutral or intrinsic; they are mutable, ideological, and prone to manipulation and commoditisation by prevailing institutional and cultural parties to whom a specific meaning and expression of

those 'values' or 'qualities' is more expedient. Jamie is alert to questions of who benefits from being a 'major global payer' in this current global environment. She examines what that actually means within the confines of a neoliberal state, or on the wider playing field of global capitalism. Within the frame of neoliberalism, whereby the market is the arbiter of value and influence, identity becomes less about the means by which a group of people are represented or administrated for in socio-political terms, and more about how that identity is perceived and commodified, and how identities stack up in terms of 'market value'. Some identities become worth more than others.

As a result, ingrained systems of privilege continue to work while incorporating marginalised identity as a way of sublimating resistance; instead of a threat to hegemony it becomes a selling-point.<sup>123</sup> Jamie's writing works towards an understanding of how we shape and attribute meaning to these identities, and how we can better understand and adjust these conceptions, and their consequences, to engender lasting change in the perception and structures of our governance. There is a tension between how national borders are conceived and approved of in nationalist, neoliberal and global capitalist systems, versus borders within an ecological ideology and what I have tentatively broached as the leftist (inter)nationalism attributed to Scotland and explored by Jamie. She is more allied to the ecological than the current political left of centre neoliberalism that has pervaded much modern discourse on the subject, and her travel writing displays a shifting consideration of how she envisages nation, border-crossings and global identities.

To expand: deterritorialisation in global capitalism and deterritorialisation in ecological poetics sit as diametrically opposed ideologies, since relative and absolute instances of the phenomenon are forced to exist in tandem. Whilst in 'Deleuze's

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<sup>123</sup> 'Raymond Williams [writing in "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory"] described how a new cultural intervention reflecting the emergence of a class or class fragment, tends to affect the dominant, corporate culture of a society, through the incorporation of those elements which are compatible with the hegemonic bloc' (Scandrett 184). This chimes with Hames' analysis of devolutionary work in Scotland. Identity within these structures (such as the contemporary UK of Jamie et al) is a variation of product, subsumed as merely another 'USP' and therefore made apolitical, contained within dominant cultural and commercial constructions. The overarching state or corporate model benefits, and those within either affect that culture, neutering their potential politicism, or continue to sit outside of whatever 'market', 'stage' or 'playing field' is standing in for the global structural framework at any given time.

metaphysics the deterritorialized [sic] is that which has not been subsumed by law and can thus enable desire to flow freely as a separate economy to that of power' (Bristow 56), the way that neoliberal deterritorialisations work is often directly in service to the very power that Deleuze sees them subvert on an individual, philosophical level.<sup>124</sup> One requires the sense of deterritorialisation to form a homogenous global market predicated on a lack of borders, national assignation or confinement for goods and services, for brands and for labour, but absolutely denies them for human *bodies* (e.g. migration, asylum), whose presence is acknowledged by this deterritorialisation but whose difference is enforced and weaponised in practice. The other demands that freedom of movement be without these limitations as a body is not worth its cost-labour value, but is in fact inherently valuable and already a part of global systems of philosophy, experience and culture that reject such modes of separation as global capital exert. The sense of non-local events, ideologies and societies' impact on life under global capital is affected by both deterritorialisations, but to opposite philosophical effects. That is to say for one, things and humans may move inasmuch as it is profitable for them to do so, and the effects of that movement must permeate global markets, both cultural and commercial, but all other methods of border crossing (literal, societal, ideological) are to be opposed. For the other, this movement and permeability is crucial, in literal and cultural-political terms, and in order to do so it is necessary to oppose the former in ideology and action. When these borders exist for people and resources, but not for goods, trade, money, how we enforce borders and attempt to cross them are key to the ecological and central to Jamie's conception of Scotland. A post-referendum and impending-Brexit Scotland has set itself as a nation of open borders in relation to the UK state; the SNP has maintained an opposition to withdrawal from the EU, made pledges to accommodate Syrian refugees, and has maintained a wide-ranging approach to defined Scottishness in the run up and wake of the referendum.<sup>125</sup> However, it

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<sup>124</sup> See Jon Clay's discussion of deterritorialisation as a process of innovative poetry, for him best understood or explained via Deleuzean theories of sensation and the univocal. Jon Clay. *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities*. London, Continuum: 2010. Print.

<sup>125</sup> See 'Nicola Sturgeon's statement 'EU negotiations and Scotland's Future' 26 June 2017.snp.org. Online.  
irnaturalhttps://www.snp.org/nicola\_sturgeon\_s\_statement\_on\_eu\_negotiations\_and\_scotland\_s\_future  
'What is the SNP's Response to the Refugee crisis?' snp.org. Online.

is not possible to maintain a functionally ecological approach to nation alongside a neoliberal system of governance, and so poetic and cultural interrogations of such ideological and environmental tensions bridge the gap between rhetoric and policy, and carve out a space for this tension to be unpacked and challenged.<sup>126</sup>

*The Queen of Sheba's 'Mr and Mrs Scotland are Dead'* examines the semiotics of nationality, through the lens of historical material cultures and national kitsch, an obvious and knowingly postmodern parody, yet one imbued with an awareness of place as something which moulds identity. The deceased couple leave behind 'postcards sent from small Scots towns [. . .] pattern for a cable knit [. . .] joiners' tools,/ SCOTLAND, SCOTLAND, stamped on their tired handles' (37). Even within these few lines, there is an awareness of the gap between the 'small Scots towns' and presumably the people who live, work and visit there, and the idea of a national identity that is exported globally (though even that 'pattern for a cable knit' has a self-effacing homeliness to it). The couching of identity within the objects of everyday mundanity certainly places the speaker's conception of nation at odds with the UK parliament's vision of Scotland as a constituent part of a 'major global player'. Jamie's title characters are 'dead', representatives of a relationship to place and nation that is no longer possible for the speaker; they and their conceptions of self as a part of 'Scotland' have been rendered obsolete, perhaps through their very attachment to the place so emphatically stamped on the tools of their (or at least Mr Scotland's) trades. The space that identity takes up dwindles: from the national, to the personal, to a small section of a small object left behind and now debated. Jamie's speaker asks 'do we take them?' (ibid.)<sup>127</sup> In this poem, Jamie directly deals with the multiplicity inherent within the code-building of person and place. She uses these cultural, material touchstones to identify and distance herself from an idea of the 'postcard' Scotland, by both utilising and questioning the simulacra which pass for meaningful markers of identity in a globalised nation. She goes on to highlight the contemporary obsolescence of these tools, and her sense of unease or unfamiliarity with their economic markers; the tools become a signifier of how a country

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[https://www.snp.org/pb\\_what\\_is\\_the\\_snp\\_s\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_refugee\\_crisis](https://www.snp.org/pb_what_is_the_snp_s_response_to_the_refugee_crisis)

<sup>126</sup> See Scandrett, Eurig. 'Environmental Justice in Scotland: Incorporation and Conflict.' *Neoliberal Scotland: Class and Society in a Stateless Nation*. Eds. Neil Davidson, Patricia McCafferty and David Miller. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2010 Print: 183-202.

<sup>127</sup> See 'The Latter-Day Noah (*The Way we Live* 49)

exports 'itself' not only economically, but in cultural and imaginative terms, its symbols and imagery, and the 'cyclical purging [that] suggests that national identity never remains static.' (Winning *CWP* 234). Not knowing whether to 'take them', Jamie's poem considers the reduced meaning these once-prevalent (or at least prevalently exported) symbols of place now have to her lived reality in 1990s Scotland.

Jamie's poetry of place searches for symbols of meaning in modern society; she writes about the possibility of a 'good life' and of the connections between humans past, present and international. Jamie dismantles the rhetoric that exists around nation and nation-building, refusing to simply conflate political-national focus with the narrative of nation she claims that referendum 'yes' voters actually seek to reject:

Many Scots believe an alternative narrative: That even though the referendum was brought about by the Scottish Nationalist Party, it is less about nationalism than about a crisis of democracy that has built up over the last 30 [sic] years [. . .] Those of us who want Scotland's independence want it because we have no further interest in being part of a U.K. 'Brand'; we no longer want to punch above our weight. We seek a fresh understanding of ourselves and our relationships with the rest of Europe and the wider world (*New York Times* n.p.).

Jamie's nationalism (and her support for independence) is built on a conception of Scotland as a sustainable 'small country', which consciously removes itself from typical late capitalist or neoliberal national concerns and rejects a 'brand' identity as the conflation of the national and the personal. However, as touched on previously, this stance is fundamentally contradictory, since arguably the ideologies and actions espoused by this hope are in opposition to the actual policy and approach of the current Scottish government.<sup>128</sup> Additionally, Jamie's nationhood is also still figured in terms of 'narrative'; Jamie's rejection of present national ideals still utilises their language; constructions of narratives and metanarratives chart country-forming as a sliding-scale of progress. However, it remains a take on nation (or at least governance) which prioritises

registering the feeling of being surrounded by others, or more abstractly, by an

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<sup>128</sup> See Scandrett *Neoliberal Scotland 182-202*.

otherness, something that is not the self [. . .] considering groups and collectives [. . .] in continuity with other beings such as animals and plants. (Morton *EWN* 17)

In 'Glacial' (*BC* 4) Jamie marries the continuity of the human and the (natural) environmental, opening the poem with

A thousand foot slog, then a cairn of old stones –  
hand shifted labour,  
and much the same river, shining  
way below. (4)

In this landscape, the landmarks of the Anthropocene and the geological formations of then and beyond bracket each other, causing the speaker to register precisely that 'being-with' that Morton expounds; we come to see immediately the conceit of 'human surrounded by nature' (Morton 2007 17). Jamie's speaker then suggests 'Let's bide here a moment,/ [. . .] and see for miles, all the way hence/ to the lynx's return, the re-established wolf'. (4) Within the poem's span of sixteen lines, Jamie highlights both the intractability of the natural world—'much the same river' flowing below— and the undeniable impact that we as humans have had on our surroundings. In this time, in this space, we must await 'the lynx's return and the re-established wolf's' (4); animal presences are returned and managed by our hand, after our initial destruction of their populations.<sup>129</sup> We have made spaces within the world simulations of themselves; re-wilding is a key tool in returning ecological balance to environments that have suffered from human intervention (deforestation, hunting, habitat destruction due to agriculture) but has become so due to our unwillingness to accept 'being-with' as a contingent part of our existence alongside other species. The lynx and the wolf become symbols of the new Scotland, representative of what being a small country in the real world might look like and suggest. They are 'real' national animals to replace the mystic unicorn, itself only there as an enemy to the (English) lion. 'Glacier' implies a Scotland that (independently or not) seeks a return to a way of being that allows space for nonhuman animals, and that recognises the seismic shifts in human (built) environments and civilisations as at once insignificant alongside natural timelines (that cairn

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<sup>129</sup> See Burnside 'Where the Wild Things aren't'. *New Statesman* 140.5080. Nov 21, 2011: 57

versus the river's lifespan, for example) and disproportionately damaging (the loss of entire species from an ecosystem). It demands a reworked perception of the space we inhabit and the citizenry's relationship with it. There is also the question about how we might now understand such symbols: is a returned lynx to us what a lynx was before they had ever left? What now is our relationship to the wolf, so many years since their banishment?<sup>130</sup> Is a 'new' Scotland what nation was to us before, and have we successfully rehabilitated the idea of the national alongside the natural? These symbols not only of Scotland as it is or has been, but how Jamie would wish to see it, and the philosophical implications of these ideas, inform her work throughout her career.

### **Reading the Landscape: Place and Meaning**

Symbols and the difficulty we often face in discerning their meanings (as with Mr Scotland's tools, the returned wolf) are concepts she returns to frequently.<sup>131</sup> In her writing, the natural world does not offer up its symbols easily, or without planting doubt in the observer; the eponymous 'Water Lilies' (*The Tree House* 34) are 'almost heart shapes, / almost upturned hands', but not quite. The natural world remains communicable but not necessarily comprehensible by established human metrics, and therefore demands a commitment to engage with and observe it. As such, Jamie's work calls attention to the importance of observation and inspiration inherent in the natural but denies understanding or conviction as an easy reward; Jamie unpacks the Romantic conception of 'Nature' as reified, apart and 'out there', favouring an ecological approach that takes in a fractal view of human communities within wider global human and nonhuman ones, that sees 'the forms

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<sup>130</sup> John Burnside has also dealt with the potential for exploitation in such returns, stating 'We may succeed in reintroducing wombats or sea eagles to places that have lost them, but [. . .] are they our sea eagles? Are they our hairy-nosed wombats? If they are, then they depend on our goodwill for their survival, so we can easily predict what will happen to them if they even hint at interfering with some local worthy's commercial interests.' (*New Statesman* Vol. 142 31)

<sup>131</sup> See for example *The Queen of Sheba's* (1994) 'One of Us', 'Sad Bird', 'A Shoe', 'Royal Family Doulton' and 'Flashing Green Man'; *Jizzen's* (1999) 'Crossing the Loch', 'Ultrasound', 'Suitcases' or 'Rhododendrons'; *The Tree House's* (2004) 'The Buddleia', 'Alder', 'Water Lilies' and 'Basking Shark'; *The Overhaul's* (2012) title poem, along with 'The Bridge', 'A Raised Beach', 'The Spider' and 'The Lighthouse', and her essays: 'Darkness and Light', 'Surgeon's Hall' and 'Skylines' from *Findings* (2005), and 'Moon', 'Pathologies' and 'Three Ways of Looking at St Kilda' from 2012's *Sightlines*.

concealed inside, the intimate unknown' (Jamie *Findings* 141).<sup>132</sup> This awareness of communities within communities, ecosystems at work in plurality down to the microbic level,<sup>133</sup> chimes with Burnside's interest in this same recursion as part of the human system, and as it shapes understanding of our place as part of the wider world and as environments entire in ourselves.<sup>134</sup> 2012's 'The Stags', for example, sees Jamie's speaker and friend only held 'in civil regard' (16) by the stags which look 'toward, /but not to us' (ibid.). Her essay 'Cetacean Disco' also underscores the process that Jamie sees as intrinsic to her relationship with the natural. She claims 'cetacean-watching proceeds like a kind of theology—by glimpses, sightings, a dorsal fin, a rolling back [. . .] all might-have-beens and what-did-we-miss?'<sup>135</sup> (186) Person and place, and the often uneasy relationship between the two, underscore her writing across the span of her career.

The human world too offers difficult relationships between place and self; built environments are no less replete with hidden or potential meaning as a forest clearing or a pond's surface, and once again, Jamie is mindful of the dangers inherent in viewing oneself as merely a passive presence in any of the spaces we inhabit. Her essay 'Skylines', from 2005's *Findings*, exemplifies the dialogue between place and identity that Jamie, increasingly sophisticatedly, draws out; 'I'd never realised before that [the vanes] we catch sight of on the city roofs are symbols. An eight-pointed star, for example, is a symbol of regeneration—but who knows that? I had to look it up' (158). Even in the self-assigned role she gives herself as poet 'to listen, to pay attention' (*BooksfromScotland* n.p.), she constantly communicates her own failings or struggles in developing this attention into a meaningful conversation between herself and a readership, between herself and the symbol. The awareness of the symbolic power of our built environment is also a starting point to consider the socio-political implications of an ecological view of (constructed) place. 'Wild spaces' in Scotland are in actuality frequently parts of estates under private ownership of a privileged few, and so offer the illusion of accessibility; the urban environments we build are delineated between the privileged spaces of financial centres, airy apartments,

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<sup>132</sup> See Morton. *The Ecological Thought* 3.

<sup>133</sup> See 'Surgeon's Hall' (*Findings* 129-145); 'Pathologies' (*Sightlines* 21-42); *Frissure*.

<sup>134</sup> See Chapter 1: 'Burnside's Oeuvre as a Sophistication of Recursion'.

<sup>135</sup> This 'theological' aspect is also a marked component of Burnside's work: he too finds spiritual promise potential within nature but denied realisation due to our inability to parse it, to communicate ourselves to nonhumans.

town houses and parks, and the edgelands of industrial centres, warehouses, prefabs and tower blocks.<sup>136</sup> Burnside looks at this as a failure of spirituality— a blow landed on our psychic spaces via the lack of appropriate physical spaces. Jamie also sees this as a means to examine the idea of autonomy, how we transcend and establish the borders of ourselves given the ways in which the environments we inhabit (nation/city/society/body) determine to remove us from consideration of our own space.

The access we are permitted to spaces within the conurbations of capitalism is dictated by pre-established structural systems, imbued with a broader symbolism that we are able to read innately.<sup>137</sup> Certain types of building connote wealth, aspiration, comfort; others are uninspiring, are to contain, to corral, are ‘eyesores’. In seeking to ‘pay attention’ to the spaces around us, not just to break down the distinction between out there and in here in regards to the natural world and the world of ‘city roofs’, but within that city itself, Jamie is alert to the various claims on the spaces we inhabit and have access to within contemporary society. This interest in and need to understand the symbols we live with is a marked feature in Jamie’s work in both poetry and prose. Jamie’s focus on the material processes of various ecologies—the physical proof of whales, or of Neolithic settlements, or of an architect’s piety— communicate a view of nation with an ecological understanding of the world at large. As Neal Ascherson notes, in real terms nation is a collection of ‘artefacts’, narrative and physical incidents and items that, over time and shared cultural understanding, collectively shape the state of our response to them:

[Nations] are artefacts too, but they have two sorts of biography. One is the narrative ‘story’ of the territorial community which, in this case, goes under the title of Scotland: the battles and families and kings and coal mines. But the other biography is that of an abstraction, of a supposedly changeless artefact named Scotland, and that biography in turn becomes a rumination about origins and processes of creation. (10)

The political potential of viewing nation, nature and self like poets such as Jamie do, is that

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<sup>136</sup> See <http://www.whoownsscotland.org.uk>

<sup>137</sup> See for example Paton, Kirsteen. ‘Creating the Neoliberal City and Citizen: The Use of Gentrification as Urban Policy in Glasgow’. *Neoliberal Scotland: Class and Society in a Stateless Nation*: 203-224.

by understanding the dual narrative of the nation as object, as myth and as artefact, they are able to chart and challenge the ways in which certain narratives have been privileged and instead write towards a more equitable (and because of that potentially radical) form of understanding. A nation for Jamie must be aware of itself as an entity that takes from the world it exists within and affects it in turn. Her stance on nature, nation and self emphasises that

We can't make distinctions about what to admit, about 'good' and 'bad' nature. The plastic of your pen has its resource in oil, which is part of the natural world. The breast milk of polar bears has chemicals in it. There is nothing untouched. To hanker after the truly wild is a fantasy. We have to accept what we have and deal with it. [. . .] Our relationship with the natural world has changed [. . .] Before, nature was bigger than us, something that would be here beyond us. Now, we know we can affect it. We are affecting it. The new nature writing comes out of that perspective, or should do. (*Scotsman* 14 April 2012 n.p.)

Nature writing and nation writing are not removed for Jamie; each is an aspect of place and of relational understanding that is deeply entrenched in the other. For Jamie the only way out of our contemporary crises, political and ecological, is one that takes account of the interlaced concerns of environmental and societal demands. With regards to her writing of place, Jamie conflates the natural and national, and like Morton calls for us to do with the concepts of 'Ecology' and 'Nature', ceases to see them as distinct. Over the course of her career, Jamie's work seeks to examine what exactly it is that we have, and how best to deal with it and our relation to it.

### **Journeys Within and Without: Jamie's Personal Autonomy**

In an interview with *Books from Scotland*, Jamie anticipates her stance as outlined above in its maturity, and describes the theme of her essay collection *Findings* as 'about being human, conscious, implicated [. . .] The book took around three years to write, but mixed into it are things I'd been thinking about or noticing for maybe twenty years.' (n.p.) The importance of maintaining a sense of personal awareness, responsibility and objectivity is something she herself says has followed in her writing and observation for the last generation. This is key to how she positions the issue of personal autonomy in her work; for

Jamie, it is necessary to be aware of oneself, human and unique in one's relation to the world, and to be able to experience that realisation as fully as possible in order to give voice to it and to take the kind of action that offers one the best chance of finding meaning within it.<sup>138</sup>

Her 1993 collection introduces poems that 'celebrate the journey-makers, the seekers and disseminators of wisdom, those who would declare themselves an "autonomous region"' (Jamie AR 6). This drive to discover and to push beyond constraints geographical, cultural, or otherwise in order to find 'wisdom' is transmuted into the secular-religiosity of her later poems.<sup>139</sup> Of the thematic shift in her writing, Jamie addresses the need to move beyond prescriptive identities, saying 'it takes [. . .] much more courage than it takes to talk about being a woman poet or a Scottish poet to say, I'd like to work my way back into some idea of what is true and sanctified, or sanctifiable' (*Scottish Studies Review* 2.1 20). This idea of truth is based on the connectivity and implicatory conceptions of place and personhood that Jamie has centred so frequently in her work. For her, the sanctified is that which exists in the world beyond our noticing. It must be looked for and engaged with in order to offer up meaning. She has said,

I might suggest that prayer-in-the-world isn't supplication, but the quality of attention we can bring to a task, the intensity of listening, through the instruments we have designed for the purpose. It might be [. . .] the words on a page, or a smear of blood on a slide. (*London Review of Books* 24.11 39)

Journeying is possible not just across the global geographical landscapes of her travelogues, but within the ecologies of the body, the page, the internal world of our understanding. The body and gender become a way for Jamie to investigate the 'sanctifiable', often in defiance of a Romantic idea of 'healthy' or 'natural' womanhood or bodily potential (for example her confrontation of illness in *Frissure*, or her examination of fetishisation and violence in *The*

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<sup>138</sup> Burnside also frequently uses awareness or hyperawareness to interrogate the difficulties of human consciousness faced with an increasingly damaged world.

<sup>139</sup> This Orientalist assumption is something that Jamie also becomes more adept at analysing and identifying in her approach, tempering her desire to see beyond the European worldview with the awareness that post-imperial eurocentrism affects much of her experience as her work progresses.

*Queen of Sheba*).<sup>140</sup> In doing so, Jamie's work sees sanctity not as inviolate purity but as engaged authenticity of being. The body-as-ecology offers up a landscape, and acts as a touchstone to ground Jamie in the world, to amplify the importance of considering the self as implicated within the wider processes of life, to demand response and thereby responsibility. In order to maintain sight of 'what is true', Jamie has consistently advocated an aesthetic and a philosophy that takes facets of identity as waypoints on a journey of discovery, rather than fundamental destinations or dwelling places. Autonomy is essential to identities singular and shared in her work and it is something she develops across the span of her career.

Autonomy is also tied to responsibility. For Jamie, it is important not to see oneself as exempt from the world or its systems, be they political, social or environmental. She points out, 'everything is natural, from the cotton summer / dress to the horizon; a natural illusion.' (*The Way we Live* 12) Our conceptions of the natural are informed by the Romantic ideal of nature as ambient, inviolate and separate from our human experience, which renders it apolitical and nostalgic; it becomes a cipher that we must decode to prove our own essential difference from it.<sup>141</sup> Jamie denies this. Understanding this interconnection leads her to unpack the sociopolitical links between nation and citizenry, and state and world, via an ecological framework that acknowledges human impact on the world one

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<sup>140</sup> 'the gendered tropes of the sublime [. . .] circumscribe the aesthetic possibilities of female authorship [and arguably representation] in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries' (Pipkin 597). Not only is the language of the natural world feminised and frequency fetishised, but Pipkin explains, the idea that women could conceive of, process and transcend the implicit power of Nature was deemed impossible, and so the male poet was the only worthy or capable vessel through which Nature's sublime could be conveyed (Pipkin 598). This places women in a double bind; their bodies become linked with the land as it is to be used and appreciated by the male gaze, and they must receive this interpretation and explanation from men exclusively, since they cannot themselves conceive of the ways in which they are linked, body and mind, to the natural world. The masculine sublime can be read therefore as a desire to control and tame the natural world, whereas a feminine sublime might seek to proffer a more 'ecological' approach; it would see the natural world intrinsically linked to the female body and experience and therefore something more equitable (Pipkin 599-600). While this brings up its own problems of health, idealism and what effectively constitutes a female body, it offers a relational groundwork for much of Jamie's nature poetry and travel writing, as she seeks to integrate her bodily experience in the world around her, natural and manmade.

<sup>141</sup> Morton *Ecology without Nature* 19; 77; 122

inhabits. Like Robertson, Jamie's human bodies are vulnerable and fragile; sickness and injury mark them and affect their perspective. Like Burnside, the environments of her poems enrich or debilitate the beings that inhabit them. These spaces act as reflections of psychic landscapes and display the real and material effects of systemic decisions and factors. Our existence and actions require us to participate in and act on the world around us, and our sense of separation from those systems natural and otherwise is merely 'an illusion', so that the only good way to live becomes one that engages with this knowledge. Autonomy is not isolationism. Rather, it is assuming responsibility, for one's place in the wider ecologies of the world, for the individual way one sees and interacts with that world outside of assumed and normative socialised patterns of behaviour and self (such as patriarchal structures or capitalist systems e.g.)

Autonomy, then, becomes the ability to regulate oneself— politically, socially and in ecological terms— fully and responsibly. In her debut collection, Jamie muses on her need for autonomy and the potential subversive power that she wields as a result, learning that 'Apparently/ I think too much, and will make journeys.' (*Black Spiders* 12) Journeying becomes a way for Jamie to think on a larger scale, 'too much' translating into just enough to form and continue to advocate an autonomy of self that works outside of the oppressive constraints of established socio-political boundaries. As her work progresses, Jamie increasingly writes an ecocritical (and therefore politically relevant) poetry of place and self that requires the reader to position themselves as responsible, autonomous, engaged and prepared to interact with this new poetics and the world it wishes to create.

### **Gendered Autonomy**

The title poem from her 1994 collection *The Queen of Sheba* (hereafter QS) transplants the ancient Arabian queen to nineties small-town Scotland. In doing so Jamie returns power to the symbol of the eroticised and fetishised woman-as-other (woman of colour doubly so). In this poem, Sheba's arrival and her exoticism act as an energising and empowering moment for the young women of the nondescript Scottish town in which she has only ever previously been mentioned as a symbol of uncouth female pride. The 'Scotland, [that has] invoked her name/Once too often' now sees her, 'more voluptuous even/ Than Vi-next-door' (11). This description helps to subvert and mitigate the fetishisation of women of colour in this poem

by presenting a figure of eroticisation that is literally situated close to home, making her rather a domestic and familiar titillation. She wishes 'to strip the willow [. . .] desires the keys/ to the national library' (11) and inspires the girls of the poem to 'draw our hot breath/ and shout:// *THE QUEEN OF SHEBA!*' (ibid.)

Jamie's examination of this figure and the reaction she provokes subverts familiar tropes; the national library of Scotland and ceilidh dances here become symbols of knowledge and physicality with a wry and distinctly 'Scottish' twist. The impropriety that exposure to too many books and the sexual temptation of dancing might provoke, for instance, is once again brought back to bear on a specific and limited small-town Scottish field of reference. The young women of the poem are granted the presence of this mythic figure within the aesthetic packaging of their own lived experiences, their own cultural vernacular. Jamie is able to subtly undermine reductive readings of both femininity and nationality, and in so doing the girls of the poem are able to invoke the queen's name as a shout; she becomes, via this series of cultural and semiotic transformations, a defiant answer to the age-old question and attempt to stifle female ambition (often with an undertone of chastising perceived sexual impropriety or non-gender-conforming behaviour).

Throughout her work, Jamie makes use of tension; she relies on the fluidity of meaning inherent in the experiences she writes about, and the words used to write about them. 'The Queen of Sheba' for example, uses a figure innately coded with a certain 'type' of meaning and presents tropes of femininity and of Scottishness, and explores the ways in which they can and (for the sake of autonomy) must be subverted and re-examined. Jamie remains aware of, and capable of subverting, stereotypes that persist around depictions of women and the nation in *Sheba*. Body and place are intertwined for women, whose bodies and selves have often been a prize of or stand-in for the nation, tied to patriarchal, imperial and capitalistic concepts of ownership and idealised femininity. Jamie is often concerned with providing a new humanity or a closer examination of these tropes; as above, she uses the Queen of Sheba as an empowering, if problematically 'exotic' figure, championing the connection of women with women, and relaying the fraught relationship between women and their deployment as symbols of nation, empire or transgression. Sheba represents community, solidarity and possibility for the young women of the poem, not merely an

other of intrigue and difference.

This sense of connectedness leads Jamie to attempt a reappropriation or recognition of the fluidity of symbol and myth in her poetry. Her 1993 poetry collection *The Autonomous Region* is inspired by her travels through Tibet and combines Jamie's writing with photographs by Sean Mayne Smith.<sup>142</sup> In it, Jamie conflates the travels she herself undertook through the region in 1989 (which coincided with the Tiananmen Square massacre) with the fictionalised travels of two (non-fictional) historic figures; Wencheng, a seventh-century Tang princess and later queen of Tibet who is said to have brought Buddhism to the region, and Fa-Hsien (Faxian), a fourth-century Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled from China to India on foot. She explains

Legend has it that the sun-moon mountain near Quinhai [sic] Lake is so called because there the princess [Wencheng] broke her 'sun-moon' mirror. The sun-moon is a symbol of the harmony of opposing forces, like yin-yang, and to break such an item, to my mind, puts Wenchen [sic] on a par with Eve, or Pandora. She took with her to Tibet certain other things unknown in that place: literacy, beer, glass and silk. (*Gairfish* 1992, 69)<sup>143</sup>

Jamie conflates Chinese-Tibetan myth and symbolism with that of Hellenic and Judaeo-Christian traditions to locate Wencheng within a paradigm of 'fallen women' so often re-examined and revisited by female writers of the twentieth century. She empowers her as a pioneer; a breaker of ancient mythos, who must then live in a world off-kilter. She also illustrates the symbolic weight placed on the idea of natural 'balance' throughout cultures, a charge consistently laid at the feet of women in semiotic and literary terms and ignored in economic terms. Moral and 'natural' balance is presented as something that female transgression denies, and which therefore invites consequences. Contemporary capitalism by a similar token, is a constructed system which is by its essence untenable, but that is presented as eternal and 'natural', and which works alongside wider social structures to

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<sup>142</sup> Jamie's uses of photography and art to accompany her poetic recreations of memory, here and in *Frissure* for example, is echoed by Robertson's similar fascination with photography as material evidence of otherwise irrecoverable places and memories; see Robertson '1964' (*Hill of Doors* 5-7).

<sup>143</sup> The Scottish Literary magazine *Gairfish*, edited by fellow poets W.N Herbert and Richard Price, printed extracts from the book before its 1993 publication.

frequently disenfranchise women.<sup>144</sup> The proliferation of capitalism (perhaps hinted at by the ‘beer, glass and silk’ that accompany Wencheng) is the more representative parallel for how ‘unbalanced’ economic and social norms are in relation to women. Wencheng is not only posited as the figure that changes the religious-cultural makeup of a society (to one which, crucially, dispenses with godhead and stresses the interconnectedness of man and nature), but also as a bringer of education and commerce. Even as we must accept the tensions inherent to the relationship of capital and environment, these traits allow for Jamie to explore an aspect of feminine ‘autonomy’, and support a revisionist, feminist retelling of the Wencheng myth:

Meanwhile, in another place,  
the princess (travelling, travelling)  
breaks the Sun-Moon Mirror and weeps.  
A strong-willed woman and resolute,  
she knows when to weep. (AR 25)

Jamie allows the poem’s symbols to slip through several readings. The idea of balance as inherently impossible within the female form is challenged by the presence of the sun-moon as its symbol. Nature is typically cast in trope as female, and certainly the moon is gendered as such (though sun-moon could be read as a male-female balance, broken by female irrationality). ‘The princess travelling, travelling’ suggests a teleological quest mythos, and shrewdly subverts the usual role of princess as a prize to be travelled to on another (male) hero’s quest. Wencheng’s subversive/catastrophic act of breaking the sun-moon mirror leaves her autonomous, albeit in a world newly hurled out of symbolic balance. The breaking of the mirror displays the ecological concern with the ‘rift between appearance and essence [wherein] “between” is not a measurable dimension’ (Morton *WLML* n.p.). Femininity and grief are also no longer ‘measurable dimensions’ within Jamie’s work. Wencheng’s emotional-response-as-symbol is subverted; weeping is not portrayed as the typical and spontaneous female reaction, but rather a learned action, one which the ‘resolute’ princess ‘knows when’ to perform.

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<sup>144</sup> See Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1957]. Trans. Annette Lavers. Print.

The typical ambivalence with which Jamie presents her symbols supports a reading that highlights the intersecting facets of gender, place and identity and is underlined by the fact that, in the stanza which follows this, Wencheng's maid

sees the mirror smashed at the princess' tiny feet

and on her lips

the beginning

of a terrible

and mischievous

smile. (*AR* 27)

Here the 'break' in the previous verse becomes ambiguous. We are left to question exactly what level of agency Wencheng is imbued with in the mirror's destruction. The lines ending on 'terrible' and then 'mischievous', force the reader's eye to linger on the act's antithetical potential consequences. They also highlight the new age that Wencheng heralds in Tibet; the phrase 'the beginning' stands alone and is placed solely 'at the princess' tiny feet'. Jamie complicates the traditional mythos of woman as cause of a moral and spiritual fall, instead noting that although change and imbalance have led to grief, there is within this rereading a new beginning to be had, which allows this poetic scene to close on the image of a female 'smile'. Natural cycles are related with those initiated by human intervention and the feminine becomes autonomous and 'unnatural' in her actions; this confers on Wencheng a power usually reserved for 'male' sociopolitical spaces. As Winning states, for Jamie, the making and remaking of myth highlight the fact that, like the smiling princess behind the broken mirror (itself heavily symbolic of female identity and its systematic disempowerment), 'Femininity exists sleekitly beneath the master narratives of identity.' (*CWP* 229)

The 'master narrative' of Scottish literature in the twentieth century is certainly one that Jamie seeks to work sleekitly beneath. It has often been argued that Scottish poetry in the twentieth century, as conceived and curated by writers like Hugh MacDiarmid, has led

to a 'masculinist bias in Scottish culture and nationalism'<sup>145</sup> [which] may be read through larger questions of nationalism and the exclusion of women' (Winning *CWP* 227). Margery Palmer McCulloch identifies the tendency within Scottish women poets' work to eschew the intellectualised national focus of some of their male contemporaries, and instead embrace more fully a state of flux, since identity is contingent on several variables (especially for women writers, and doubly so for women writers of colour).<sup>146</sup> To this end, Jamie's Scots language poetry can be seen as offering the best potential of the vernacular, which at its strongest

undercuts the fetishism of roots and difference, [and is] not simply a pliable medium with which the self-choosing individual fashions identity, but a crowded terrain of competing claims to belonging and unbelonging; where 'identity' is an ideological inscription with concrete repercussions. (Hames *Studies in Scottish Literature* 39.1 219)

Jamie locates the vernacular as a way of privileging the subaltern within her work, and in doing so reaches across international and temporary borders to find commonality with the creation myths of other nations and the metanarratives of wider world histories. She works at exposing the ways in which certain identities are sublimated in myths of History and Nation to the detriment of actual and progressive representation. History for her in these instances is female, and it can and does sound like her; she rewrites the stories frequently elided in historical accounts and in so doing reminds us of the subjectivity inherent in all mythmaking, and the ways in which we might hope to adapt and subvert this.

If not overly concerned with explicitly or combatively analysing the masculinism often associated with Scots language writing, Jamie is certainly not sympathetic to it. Her poem 'Jocky in the Wilderness' casts out the stereotypical Scottish urban-working-class-everyman (perhaps best exemplified in MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man looks at the Thistle*),

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<sup>145</sup> See Colin Nicholson Ed. *Poem, Purpose and Place: Shaping Identity in Contemporary Scottish Verse*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992. Print. (Specifically: Liz Lochhead interview p 204.)

<sup>146</sup> See McCulloch. 'Scottish Women's Poetry 1972-1999: Transforming Traditions'. *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*. Eds. Eileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000: 11-26.

telling him 'they're closing down the factory'.<sup>147</sup> This marks Jocky out as a manufactured identity, but also one that is cognisant of the limited opportunities that late capitalism in Scotland has offered to its men. She rejects a fatalistic reading of this phenomenon though, instructing him to 'come hame' again only 'when ye've learned/ to unclench yer fists and hert' (QS 42). Jamie's rejection of this symbolic Scot suggests both her movement towards the revisionist, historically-aware approach that will see her examine our relationships to our own pasts again and again in her work, but also away from the continuing debate about 'Scottishness' and what it is, at least in the (potentially reductive) terms that exist within the established tropes of the Scottish literary canon. It also raises questions about how class is appropriated and presented within Jamie's work, and what place she realistically 'offers' for Jocky; she risks offering a reductive rendering of the working-class in an attempt to explore certain tropes of masculinity within canon. Jocky appears as a previous template for a national icon, though crucially not the nation, which is female; it is passive and accommodating to the will and character of the men of that place. Jamie also chimes with Burnside's views on the political value judgements that certain environments create; Jocky's 'factory' works (as with much of Jamie's identity-imagery) as a dual semiotic; the factory (of canon, of history, of stereotype) that made him the trope, the image, the 'man', and the factory that is the location of that identity in real terms. That workplace stands as the defining environment, the allotted space within society for a certain type of man within contemporary Scotland and an identity rooted in those geographic and social spaces.

### **Autonomous Regions? Place and Identity in 'Real Terms'**

Jamie posits autonomy in her work as a full and reciprocal relationship with the spaces we inhabit. This can only be achieved, she suggests, if the access we have to those spaces — anatomical, metaphysical, social— is fair and open. Jamie is alert to the way in which space is utilised and allotted to various people in her poetry. In 'Pearls', she catalogues an environment of poverty and isolation, using recognisable imagery: 'A weekly/ wheely-bin of shame, Pot-Noodles,/ Wotsits, poverty stuffs' (*New Scottish Writing* 196). Markers of her status and deprivation populate the space that this poem's speaker inhabits; food and household ephemera become marks of social stigma and the house a bleak approximation

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<sup>147</sup> MacDiarmid, Hugh. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Ed. Kenneth Buthlay. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987.

of a home, a consolation only in that 'my walls/ the labouring stairs, at least/ would hug me.' (197) Autonomy is not possible in this environment because the inhabitant's relationship with their space is dictated by the outside factors of poverty, privation, and social stigma. As with 'Jocky', Jamie's writing confronts and to an extent sensationalises that poverty. Jamie's focus on enervating or unhealthy spaces is on the domestic, the urban, recalling the terraced houses of Dunn's *Terry Street*, Burnside's factory towns, Robertson's rural isolation. Within these walls, Jamie's speaker 'could slice me/ with a bread-knife, free/ and cradle my struggling heart...' (198) In both 'Jocky in the Wilderness' and 'Pearls', the surrounding environment creates an identity that is lacking in fundamental areas and that has as a result created violence. Toxic masculinity is a violence inflicted by and on Jocky within the confines of this constructed space of identity and environment. In 'Pearls', poverty and isolation lead to a perverted domestic tableau where the virtuous trappings of housewifery become consolations even as they become threats, means to inflict self-harm. This violence and the spaces that engender it is a subject that Burnside deals with more directly in his own writing. The issues of class and gender in Scotland intersect for Jamie, creating another liminal space within narratives of nation or self, and carving out another 'sleekit' narrative beneath the surface of the canon.

Jamie's approach to female identity within this national setting is therefore frequently incisive. In the same collection that features 'Jocky in the Wilderness', Jamie ruminates on a possible female suicide, having discovered 'a huge/platform sole' (QS 13) by the shores of the Forth. This puts her in mind of her school days of 'wee sisters and pals tugging our hair' (ibid.). The bank of the Forth becomes instantly connected with the bedrooms and backyards of her youth; both spaces become self-contained locations wherein female friendship, experience and communication exist to forge support and understanding within the wider spaces of society at large. Ironically, the maybe-crime-scene almost becomes a safe space, a place of contemplation and communion, another arena in which we can learn how best to be a woman within a world that is expressly not created for us. Jamie wonders if 'she just/ stepped off the Forth Bridge/ head over heels' (QS 13), initially conflating the frequently troped dual image of the love-drive/death drive whilst returning synecdochally to the image of the opening lines. Jamie is able to redeem the woman's autonomy by acknowledging her vulnerability; in a similar way, Robertson utilises

the entropic within his work to recognise that he is simultaneously fragile and culpable. Both realisations lead the poets to a more engaged 'being-in-the-world'. As with the poems above, the violence inherent to the systems and spaces of late capitalism present the speaker with a scene of suicidal potential; self-inflicted violence within such an environment as not only inevitable but perhaps desirable. Within these poems Jamie sees the built environments of contemporary life as threats to life (human and nonhuman). However, instead of allowing this image to stand as a definitive symbol of female marginalisation within urbanised Scotland, she asks:

Or did she walk in, saying yes

I recognise this

as the water yanked heavy

on thighs belly breasts? (QS 13)

The previously rather quick-moving rhythm in the poem slows to allow for this tableau; the woman is almost objectified by the successive listing of her body parts as she falls below the surface of the water, but simultaneously made human; the body is broken down into its subsequent parts, but in listing this taxonomy, Jamie evokes the body as ecology, and this progression as a discovery of that ecological system. The woman is not merely disembodied and sexually-signified parts; instead she is a collection of systems at work within the whole that she herself can 'recognise' and redeem. She reclaims her agency via speech, as she experiences her own body's progress into the river. The line 'I recognise this' could almost be placed within parenthesis and read as a chorus response to the speaker, an affirmation of shared identity. The unidentified woman could however have been a 'school pal', a sister; this connects her to more general issues of female existence within a modern urban environment. The poem ends ambivalently, on a note of sadness and solidarity, which conflates theological and vernacular readings and celebrates female community even in the face of this problematic reading of its reality:

God girls, we'd laugh:

It's all right once you're in.

It's all right

once you're out the other side. (QS 13)

The water becomes a spatial stand-in for femininity; it is not a symbolic physical rendering of a quintessentially feminine element, but instead an environment in which women are forced to exist. That it is one that makes up the largest and least explored swathes of our own planet, is anathema to human life, and is a polluted and neglected environment by dint of being an afterthought due to human perception and existence being focused on dry land, is provoking. The ecological approach to signifiers of gender allow us to read environmental crises alongside social ones. The poem suggests that the spaces women exist within are polluted and uncharted; the narratives women create to adapt within such spaces become a marker of agency and pride in adversity.<sup>148</sup> Jamie also interrogates the symbol of water as it pertains to femininity; the idea that drowning is a recognisably literary 'female death' and a punishment for transgression is tied into the frustrations of female existence and sexuality (something that the poem's title could read for; the shoe as fetish object is an enduring trope of female sexuality and its potential exploitation).<sup>149</sup> This tiny, imagined glimpse of the life and possible death of one woman in Scotland in the 1990s stacks possible allusions and is posited as one of the narratives that exist beneath that of nation, one that is elided to uphold the metanarrative of the national that Jamie seeks to rework.

Jamie does not reductively interrogate gender even on the subject of motherhood. The idea of female life-giving is tied again to ideas of mortality, often as a nod to the cost of female lives in nation building. In 'Ultrasound' she declares of the image of her son in utero that 'this new heart must outlive my own' (*Jizzen* hereafter *J* 18). More biting, in 'Pioneers' the image of woman-as-child bearer is invoked to confront the historically damaging realities of their role; 'the wife by the cabin door/ dead, and another sent for' (*J* 34). Within the master narratives of nation, history and nature, Jamie unpacks identities that are sustained and challenged whilst existing underneath the overarching 'story'. Her response to all master narratives in her work is a nuanced and inquiring one. Gender is not reductively troped, nor is the question of national or cultural identity allowed to occupy fully the 'colonising tendency [. . .] at work within certain nationalist interpretations of the literary

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<sup>148</sup> See also Burnside, 'My Grandmother, Elizabeth Burnside, December 1962' (*AOB* 43-44)

<sup>149</sup> e.g. Ophelia, the Lady of Shalott.

text' (McGuire 143). By utilising the myths, symbols and artefacts of disparate cultural traditions, Jamie is more often than not able to avoid a reductive approach and instead open up her work to the discourse surrounding the question of how we as humans recover our identities from a world which is increasingly discoverable but equally unknowable.

### **Artefacts and Remembrances: Nation and Representation**

The Neolithic often provides Jamie with an apt metaphor for the buried pasts of presently inhabited places, and a symbol of our modern disconnection from those symbols. In 'The Brooch', the titular object is all that remains 'of the woman who pinned it [. . .] her gift, my heirloom, stones' (*The Tree House* 46), an organic inheritance of the earth itself, a connection via the material fact of sharing the same land. In this instance, the time between the object's use and the speaker's receiving it are unclear; perhaps it is inherited from a mother or relative, perhaps it is an artefact like the arrow heads in the National Museum and is thousands of years old.<sup>150</sup> The material presence of the artefact is all that is left to anchor the imaginative chain that the poet must now make to establish the changing meaning of the object and her changing relationship to its owner.

Jamie is constantly aware of history and its echoes. In 'Forget it', from her 1999 collection *Jizzen*,<sup>151</sup> the speaker's mother, when confronted with the child's declaration that 'We done the slums today!' (5) responds 'What for? Bangs the oven shut,/ Some history's better forgot.' (5) This exchange highlights to Jamie that

this is a past  
not yet done, else how come  
our parents slam shut, deny  
like criminals: *I can't remember, cannae*  
*mind*, then turn at bay: *Why?*

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<sup>150</sup> See Winning *CWP* 229.

<sup>151</sup> The Scots word for the bed used for childbirth. This underpins Jamie's use of the body as a site of power and potential disruption, as well as serving to reinsert the role of women into the historical conception of nation-building.

*Who wants to know? (J 6)*

'Forget It' displays the ways in which personal recollection and lived experience often sits outside of 'official' or sanitised reconstructions and narrativisations of those events; a time is not 'History' after all when one is living through it: that happens after. A personal history can only ever be recalled subjectively; this subjectivity, ironically, is what makes such events 'true' (or at least significant), but cannot make them applicable to wider (official) narratives of place, or nation, or nature. The distortion between what was experienced and how that experience is recounted post hoc leaves spaces of potential and recovery that Jamie mines in order to discover the ways in which such memories and events are both part of us, and used to construct a self that fits within overarching narratives of power and control (e.g. nation, politics). Again, personal identity and memory feed the construction of nation as they offer up a mythos of self and belonging to an overarching structure (in this case 'Scotland'). The gaps in understanding between what is revealed and what is experienced are the spaces in which Jamie situates her poetry; the way in which things are (mis)remembered and who is allowed (or even wants) to voice their remembrance informs a history of nation that in actuality erases sections of its society from spaces of discourse. This creates spaces that may be unrecognisable even as we are nominally a part of them, supporting identities only so long as certain experiences are denied or hidden, and so leading to a disruption between place and self.

By focusing on this irony, Jamie nudges us towards a consideration of the ways in which histories are made; the proofs of our existence as measurable things, not provable unless experience or remembrance, is made object. Even as the child treats the subject with the same distance and archaeological interest as the Neolithic artefacts Jamie describes in *Findings*, to her mother it cannot be treated as mere 'material culture'. The intergenerational tension present between a mother who has lived history and a child who merely 'learns' it, and therefore potentially *mislearns* it, drives the exchange. This conversation takes place between two female speakers, which emphasises again the lack of agency women have traditionally had in writing histories of nation and identity. This poem deftly posits and unpacks the distance between the creation of 'histories' (in the purest sense, as stories or narratives here) and 'artefacts' as means by which to recover these stories, and the realities of the changing use and experience of our shared landscapes.

Jamie's Scotland is therefore many Scotlands; artefacts, remembrances, and narratives which run below the surface all impact on modern life in the nation. In her most recent collection Jamie's poem '23/9/14'<sup>152</sup> offers a view of nation that sees the maturation of Jamie's thirty years of writing in and from Scotland. It finds the speaker resolutely present in the country and aligned with the mood of many who had hoped for a 'Yes' vote on Scottish independence:

So here we are,  
  
dingit doon and weary,  
  
happed in tattered hopes  
  
(an honest poverty)  
  
wir flags are wede awa,  
  
the withered leaves of shilpit trees  
  
blaw across deserted squares,  
  
and the wind  
  
— harbinger of winter —  
  
Quests round the granite statues  
  
— and so on and etcetera.  
  
We ken a' that. It's Tuesday. On wir feet.  
  
Today we begin again.<sup>153</sup> (BC 41)

Jamie pulls together vernacular Scots, the rhythms of the natural world, the metanarratives of nation, progress and history, and the mundanity of daily routine in contemporary

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<sup>152</sup> The referendum on Scottish independence was held on the 18th of September 2014, and returned a 'No' vote by a narrow margin (55% to 45%).

<sup>153</sup> dingit- defeated, struck; happed- covered; wede (pp. wed)- to clear or remove; shilpit- sickly, emaciated, small, cheerless.

Scotland to illustrate a response to thwarted political representation that takes in and examines each of the factors at work within that aim, as well as the empathetic and sincere disappointment of a hope deferred (again). Nation is posited as a project of substantial (political) representation, a goal that requires on-going commitment and work. Though ‘digit doon and weary’, Jamie affirms the necessity to ‘begin again.’ She deftly uses the Scots-articulated lines to highlight disappointment, chiming with narratives of strong and unique cultural identity as a balm for marginalised political-national identity. However, Jamie subverts this easy appropriation of political autonomy into essentially unproblematic cultural representation; by the end of the poem she utilises the same language to chide that ‘We ken a’ that. It’s Tuesday. On wir feet’. It isn’t enough to wax poetic in vernacular tongue, to reify and eulogise a lost political battle; that same language must be turned towards the quotidian and on-going process of struggle for legitimate change and political transformation. Collectivity is key, as Jamie calls us to ‘wir feet’, but whilst ‘wir flags are wede awa’, the us versus them narrative does not coalesce. Instead, Jamie uses this poem to subvert that trope, along with the trope of an oncoming winter of discontent; the ‘shilpit trees’ and ‘deserted squares’ are rejected outright by the narrator as old news. We already know ‘a’ that’; the reiteration of clichéd images and conceptions of Scottish identity and the national struggle for independence do not in fact lead us forward. This narrative becomes as cyclical as the season cycle Jamie invokes to illustrate it. Instead, we must impose our own cycles of progress and get to work on substantial political engagement and change.

Here, Jamie is able to display the ‘semiotic otherness of vernacular writing’ (Hames *Studies in Scottish Literature* 39.1 219) to articulate the importance of the realisation she has come to within her work. Namely, that it is not enough merely to use demotic language while ‘leaving the structures [. . .] unchallenged and unchanged’ (ibid. 220). For Jamie, national identity and engagement is worthwhile only alongside the aspiration for change in national action; a political and social shift she aligns with ecological conceptions of responsibility, sustainability, intersectionality and empathy, in opposition to the voracity of the contemporary neoliberal enactment of nation as practised by the UK state apparatus. By 2014, Jamie has traced a journey of self, nation and nature that leaves her with a clear-eyed understanding of all three, especially as they pertain to Scotland and its status as a (potentially independent) country in contemporary Europe and beyond. For Jamie, the

ethnographic idea of a land is anathema to the reality of an engaged citizenry; in her poem 'Here lies our land',<sup>154</sup> inscribed on the Bannockburn battle moment, Jamie plays on that possible pronoun to spin a semiotic of nationhood that values the material environments of a small country populated by 'small folk' (n.p.), and that sees nationality as involvement and investment in the 'swift clouds, glad glints of sun' (n.p) of the nation 'belonging to none but itself' (n.p). Nation remains a construct, but the land is tangible, changeable and Scotland personified speaks at the poem's close, welcoming 'all ye', who have '[played their] part' (n.p.), and revealing 'You win me, who take me most to heart.'(n.p) The nation is a dialogic creation; borders political and geographic bear less relevance to 'our land' than our interaction and embodiment of it. We who 'take to heart' the land around us, who revel in being 'small' and eschewing the (British) metanarrative of nation that Jamie has derided, are rewarded with the knowledge of what nation could be under these ecological poetics.

### **In Our own Words? International Vernacular as Subaltern**

In *The Autonomous Region*, the invented history works to illustrate Jamie's ambivalence toward a fixed idea of meaning and identity, and the use of vernacular reinforces her globalised outlook; her poetic, cultural and personal autonomy and subjectivity is insistently connected to the experiences of others. There exists within Jamie's travel writing a sense of the constant duality of her position; interloper-guest, coloniser-tourist, part of an imperial power that initiates the events that have led to the current political situation in the Northern Areas, and the inhabitant of a country who has seen similar (though not comparable) actions imposed on its political institutions. Jamie's Scots poetry outside of Scottish locales becomes representative of both the subaltern within her own tradition and a way of aligning that tradition with the mythos of others, as well as an act of ventriloquism, of appropriation that literally makes the stories and people of another country Scots.

Jamie allows her narrative descriptions the monk Fa-Hsien to place him within the safely quotidian, lending an almost suburban cuddliness to his attitude. His journey is begun by 'just one tiny act; he'd dropped the keys back/ thro' the letter-box' (AR 22). Her Fa-Hsien is presented as somewhat of an innocent abroad, and certainly not a veteran traveller, someone who 'loved/ to feel his head spin, loved/ to cough the dust and consider himself/ a

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<sup>154</sup> Reproduced online at the Scottish Poetry Library [www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk).

journeyman, a-journeying.’ (Ibid.) The lure of experiencing difference does not necessarily guarantee gaining experience or connection. Having created the image of a new traveller, an almost counterpart to Jamie herself, it is into his mouth that *The Autonomous Region’s* Scots lines are placed. He observes ‘a lassie in a red scarf,/ wi her heid in her hauns’ (33), rests by ‘a loch called Qinghai’ (49) and expresses, towards the poem’s close, ‘a hanker for his ain folk’ (51). The specificities of the demotic display their paradoxical power; to universalise the experience of those whose language or cultural inheritance sits outside of the mainstream political -cultural dominion. Having dedicated the volume to those who consider themselves ‘autonomous regions’ (AR 6), Jamie uses the pull of the specificity inherent in vernacular speech to draw parallels between the experiences of all travellers who search for new cultural experiences and understanding. She draws the parallel between the self within lived space and the self as lived space, politicising and reaffirming her bodily autonomy. As Boden paraphrases, for Jamie it seems that ‘if autonomy is always under threat, it can, paradoxically, always be reinforced by a sense of connectedness with other cultures’ (39). National autonomy is frequently tied to personal autonomy; in gendered terms, by transcending of cultural expectations or limitations, and in political terms via the rejection of a state hegemony via solidarity with global communities.

### **Scotland as Point of Comparison: Jamie’s Internationalisms**

The rhetoric of discovery, knowledge and identity is central to her prose travelogue *The Golden Peak* (1992, republished with a foreword and new chapter in 2002 as *Among Muslims*, hereafter *GP*).<sup>155</sup> Jamie focuses on her progress through the Northern Areas to illustrate the factors at work in creating new identities, political and national, and on the immediate effects of experiencing this difference in meaning. It also serves as a starting point for her (increasingly sophisticated) understanding of how such identity is shaped and co-opted and of the distinction between cultural and political forms of representation and their potency. The problematic conflation of Scottish and postcolonial experience also finds

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<sup>155</sup> It is pertinent to note this change in title for the 2002 reissue. It highlights to us the ways spaces are racialised and reproduced for consumption by white audiences. Jamie’s presence in the spaces of the book shifts, when politically and financially expedient, from being among the physical geography (the ‘peak’) of a country, to her experiencing the country via a specific human geography that is racialised for the reader and occupies a socio-political space that carries connotations of difference and exoticism for contemporary European audiences.

expression within the book; Jamie sees frequent parallels between her own stateless nation and the situation of the Northern Territory of Pakistan, but has a tendency to remain distant from those people she describes, perpetuating the danger of othering those who both serve to illustrate her own concerns and provide light relief whilst expressing theirs. For example, the following passage of transcribed speech at once serves to give insight into, and distance us from the rather theatrical person delivering it, as well as delineating between government or commercial ideas of place and the inherent or personal conception of home:

SO WHAT FOR THIS ROAD, MR IQBAL! Now, Miss, you have seen this road, this Friendship Highway, what is this? It is a means by which the Pakistan and Chinese governments can shake hands in case of emergency! Was it built for my betterment? No. [. . .] The West is not giving to us, it is holding us, just here exactly here. We will not starve, but we will not rise. Your aid promotes a state of Arrested Development. It is a state of Dependence. Enough, little, little, is given, so these simple peoples think you care. (*GP* 28-29)

Jamie is sympathetic, concerned with the involvement and misappropriation of Pakistani interests by western powers, and the Colonel's speech above is provided to illustrate that concern 'in his own words'. However the degree of classism and colonialism that pervades this discourse is also left as a tension by Jamie in her reporting of it. The underlying suggestion that the way in which space is curated and delineated in the Northern Areas is based on continuing geopolitical and economic interests, makes it clear that Jamie is aware that ideas of nation and place are not inherent or objective in the contemporary world. The creation of new countries, and of their administration is not 'for [our] betterment' but so that global 'governments can shake hands' (*GP* 28-9). For the speaker above, nation is an imperialist construct defining markers of power and access, infrastructure and aid. These create meta-spaces within the physical geography that has been recently and expediently redeployed and redrawn.

The ways in which Jamie and those she engages with encounter and relate to nations and to the environments around them are already dictated by wider socio-political concerns that seek to co-opt and curate the spaces that 'belong' to each country. Whilst the abiding effects of colonialism and the ways it dictates attitudes and policies of nation and space

even now clearly affect the situation she encounters in Pakistan (and certainly the way it is repackaged in the 2002 edition), Jamie consistently draws parallels between Scotland's situation and the political struggles her travel writing explores. She also astutely identifies 'A fierce pride in Pakistan – or rather, a universal loathing of India—fills the people' (*GP* 47), something that has oft been claimed of the Scots in relation to England. For Jamie, 'It is refreshing to be in a country which believes the future will be better than the past' (*ibid.*). This ideal has been repeatedly invoked in debates about Scottish devolution and independence. That Jamie draws these parallels is symptomatic of her consistent interest in place, in community, in the relation between the natural and the socio-political worlds, but it does also play into problematic critical archetypes which might conflate Scotland's experience as an imperial ally (if frequent political enemy or subordinate) of England and that of oppressed and colonised communities overseas.

There is the sense that, in being somehow 'closer' to the natural world, to a past and to a kind of living that, because it is not solidly dictated by the structures of late capitalism, seems 'primitive' in a way that Romantic conceptions of the countryside or the working-class seem primitive— non-complex, and inherently 'authentic'. So, the people she meets whilst traveling have access to a way of living that is recuperative for Jamie and those like her. This is initially mired in unavoidably neocolonial language and conceptions:

What is worth keeping? Can't we keep our relationships and our willow baskets and our songs and looms, yet say goodbye to deficiencies and blight? There are charities working here, NGOs a-plenty. There are [. . .] schools and mobile clinics, annual 'medicine camps'. What happens, though, if all the clever ones leave? (*GP* 246)

The paternalistic NGOs who are working to ameliorate the problems caused by the same kind of imperial interventionism that they offer now as a solution are seen as a way to elevate and therefore bring the communities Jamie encounters towards a hegemonic neoliberal ideal of a thriving community— one that has access to and investment in the global market. The 'willow baskets, songs and looms' relegate the economies Jamie engages with here to the past, a simpler time of local crafts and oral histories, that exist alongside 'blight'. This is a deeply problematic viewpoint; it relies on colonial and Eurocentric visions of the global south that perpetrate a sense of primitivism and inferiority, and that privilege

(albeit unconsciously) neoliberal models of society, nation and nature— as markets, brands and resource respectively. Initially, when the model for nation is Scotland, Jamie struggles to find a nuanced point of connection; European models are seen as ameliorative, when in actuality they perpetuate such issues. Perhaps this realisation is why autonomy — the ability to engage with and intercede in systemic construction of space and place— gains such prominence as her work progresses. Within this realisation is the kernel of ecological thought that can work to see this relationship as not primitive or simplistic but in fact responsible, empathetic and necessary. This is unsurprising given what she comes to critique in Scotland and the UK as a nation.

Whilst it is imperative not to elide the realities of racism, colonialism and classism in the construction of human environments, it is possible to view the struggle against capitalist models of nation, nature and self as rooted in a necessary ecological and environmental fightback. As the *New York Times* noted in November 2017, ‘the very way in which we globally produce, which is for profit rather than for sustainability [ensures] the crisis will continue and, given its progressive nature, worsen’ (n.p.). The crisis that Jamie sees here as one of identity and lived environment keeps her at a remove from the ‘looms and songs’ that represent a more holistic connection with the world that produces such material artefacts of a life, and are seen as insufficient by the contemporary mores of the global north. Crucially, it is also the crisis that is working to ensure that such removal from the reality of our consumption that allows for free reign over market production to the extent that there will be no world left to attempt reconnection with, if left unchecked. In ecological terms, the interrelationship of people to their environments, and the reification of certain societal and environmental spaces, works to undermine the supremacy of a neoliberal and neocolonial view of nation, nature and self. It offers a view of societies as interdependent upon the spaces we inhabit and the ways in which we are given access to administer them. Jamie’s work seeks to allow spaces for the voices of those within marginal spaces to speak; even as this is a somewhat fraught position to write from, Jamie frequently achieves a degree of subtlety and dialogism in her attempts to do so.

The desire for a Scottishness which is outward-looking and international is certainly visible in her earlier volumes, particularly in ‘Republic of Fife’ which rejects those same nationalist-kitsch identities that Jamie returns to in her 2014 article. The speaker of this

poem is 'no feart, not of anyone/ with a tartan nameplate screwed to his door' (50) and seeks instead to inspire Scots to

dare let go, lift our hands

and wave to the waving citizens

of all those other countries. (QS 51)

However, whilst Scotland and whatever semiotics constitute its makeup is something that Jamie deals with, her use of place and her concern with the legacies of cultural landscapes and material cultures within the place she calls home go beyond the aspect of critically privileging the national. In her appropriation and interrogation of the nation, she is aware of the various strata which exist *within* a given place. She constantly looks not only to her own country but also outward to all those other citizens, in order to transform the question of 'Scotland', what it is and can be, poetically.

She knowingly challenges both the role of a poet within 'the nation' and interrogates the tools at her disposal as a poet. 'The Latter-day Noah' summarises the literary and philosophical tools that also inform *The Golden Peak*, *The Autonomous Region* and *The Queen of Sheba's* approach:

Tell me, what is our cargo?

He nodded out of the window. 'Archetypes.'

And where do we take them? He went on staring.

'Just sail. And keep sailing. Sail over the

edge if you must. (*The Way we Live Now* 49)

Archetypes are a cargo upon a ship with no clear destination; they are merely to be carried, to travel with into the unknown, to be kept moving and taken to their logical (or extreme) conclusion. They provide on their own little animation for the speaker or his taciturn captain, who merely stares. He presents a figure seemingly resigned to his fate, or alternatively a steward determined that the cargo will reach its proper destination

regardless of whether it takes the ship's crew with it in the process. These 'archetypes' act as symbolic artefacts through which the poet can recover multiple meanings via the introduction of an established mythos; the flood of Noah that will leave the world ready to start anew; the flat world which will reveal mysteries beyond its edge, perhaps either of the Underworld, or of the realisation of a horizon; the ferryman whose job it is to carry away the souls of the dead. In this short poem, the layering of semiotics allows us to read in five lines a sort of manifesto (or at least a hypothesis) for a poetics that seeks to utilise and re-evaluate the symbols working in Scottish poetry at the end of the twentieth century, and the values and ideas that they represent.

Nation, Jamie is aware, can be nothing more than a collated set of archetypes, artefacts given to narratives and narratives rewritten at each expedient moment. By 2014, Jamie is more circumspect in her deployment of nation. She remains hopeful but is less entrenched in the sort of viewpoint that causes her to use Scotland as a point of comparison when confronted with 'poverty and blight' in Pakistan, for example. The 'web of [her] noticing' (Jamie *London Review of Books* 24.11 39) has expanded to critique the constructions of that state too as inherently fragile and flawed, and to look for other levels of environmental engagement alongside the national. The nation in this sense becomes a simulation; a constantly recreated image of itself, a purely utopian concept and a set of metanarratives in perpetual tension. Written in the year directly following on from Scotland's independence referendum, Jamie's 'Scotland's Splendour', recounts the eponymous 'book I last recall / crammed into my bedside cabinet' (BC 49), now rediscovered in 'the back of our local charity shop' (ibid.). Inside, it displays

In 'full natural colour'  
  
page after page of mountains  
  
mirrored in placid lochs,  
  
cattle ambling by reedy lochs,  
  
stags on heather-moor  
  
and one modern silver cataract:

the spillway of a new-built hydro dam.

All this, I'd been given to understand,

was 'Scotland' (BC 49).

The nation is simulacra; its spaces recreated in 'natural' colour, its environments captured in a series of discrete landscapes. Both Scotland and its constituent parts are made unreal in their communication; in attempting to 'represent' the nation, the mix of natural and manmade elements, the separation inherent in conceiving of Scotland as economy, and Scotland as landscape becomes clearer. The land is a narrative that spans 'page after page' for centuries, whose legitimacy is immutable and immeasurable, untouched until the material proofs of modern civilisation intrude, and the hydro dam becomes 'a cataract': an obscuration, a film on clear vision, to be excised to return the 'full natural colour' of the authentic Scotland of 'reedy lochs' and 'heather moor'. Jamie recognises that as with her ship's cargo, this kind of landscape writing and nation-building is a weighty archetype. It allows Scotland to become 'that hardback nation' (49), a state that exists as a series of vignettes. The natural world is the Romantic out-there, and the manmade a series of proofs of economic and therefore national commentary and success. In rediscovering these images within the book, Jamie is forced to consider again the way in which nation is conceived of and appropriated within political and social discourse, and the best way for a writer to approach it meaningfully, so that Scotland can be multifarious, complex, and tangible, not merely 'a dream-tinged land we pick up/ then shelve again.' (49)

There is dead weight, but there is potential. There is recognition, but there is the fear of stagnation, of symbols and ideas becoming mere 'archetypes', being reduced to their common denominator. In 'Archetypes', the layering of possible meaning and the unknowable destination 'over the edge' hint at the possibility for a poetry of interrogation and openness which marks Jamie's later work. Her constructions and interrogations of nation are attuned to the spaces we connect to in order to forge identity, and the way in which those connections are utilised and narrativised to lend significance to the spaces and experiences of certain people, events and ideologies over others.

**‘Had you never considered how the world sustains?’<sup>156</sup> The Human and Natural World**

By seeing ourselves are part of specific established and constructed systems, while removing ourselves from others (such as the process of the natural world), we are diminished. Jamie’s poetry increasingly posits the need to move outside of a national paradigm and explore our relationship with the natural world and examine the effects of our presence within it; this forms the basis for her own political and poetic formations of nation, nature and self, which seek to combine those narratives to create and celebrate a new Scotland. Ascherson chimes with Jamie’s thoughts and explorations of identity as tied to history, artefact and settlement, and how connection between people and their landscape changes and persists. These are topics Jamie visits often in her essays and later poetry volumes, *The Tree House* (hereafter *TH*) and *The Overhaul* (hereafter *O*):

[Only recently in] the study of material culture [. . .] are archaeologists forcing themselves to look beyond the ‘processes of creation’ to the long life of successive meanings which followed creation [. . .] And nations? They are artefacts too, but they have two sorts of biography.<sup>157</sup> One is the narrative ‘story’ of the territorial community which, in this case, goes under the title of Scotland: the battles and families and kings and coal mines. But the other biography is that of an abstraction, of a supposedly changeless artefact named Scotland, and that biography in turn becomes a rumination about origins and processes of creation. (Ascherson 9-10)

Jamie is attuned to the importance of human imagination in transforming and sourcing meaning from the natural and the archaeological, and the subtle and inextricable ways this information shapes concepts of self, nation and environment. She writes that ‘Because of the earthfast notion that time is deep, that memories are buried, the Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts occupy the windowless basement level of the National Museum [of Scotland, in Edinburgh]’ (*Sightlines* 43). Jamie’s interest in human civilisation’s reliance on the natural world for so long before insulating ourselves entirely against it persists in ‘Excavation and Recovery’ (*O* 8) and another of *The Overhaul*’s poems, ‘The Beach’. As with the former,

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<sup>156</sup> Jamie *The Overhaul* 20.

<sup>157</sup> Acknowledging the materialism inherent within such narratives is a starting point for the ecological, rejecting the abstraction of ‘a something [. . .] “over yonder,” called Nature [since] Ecology is profoundly about coexistence’ (Morton *TET* 4-7).

Jamie looks at the change of perspective that time brings to human interaction with natural formations of inhabited space. In the aftermath of a storm, the poem's speaker muses that 'A few brave souls/ will be there already,/ eyeing the driftwood,// the heaps of frayed/ blue polyprop rope,/ cut loose, thrown back at us —' (O 3) The pull that the natural world exerts on its human inhabitants strikes a similar chord as her thought on the significance of the river to the prehistoric dwellers of Tayside in 'Excavation and Recovery'. She marvels, 'What a species— still working the same curved bay, all of us// hoping for the marvellous,/ all hankering for a changed life.' (O 3) Jamie is aware of the continuity suggested by the presence of enduring communities in certain places; as a species, 'all of us' have found and laid claim to spaces we inhabit, and find ourselves at local and global levels charting and responding to the changes in our environments, hoping to find something 'marvellous', to effect change and renewal, watching the evidence of our own human existence 'thrown back at us' by the tide.

The ambiguous couplet that ends the sonnet suggests the innate power of the natural world to offer us the potential for renewal and change, the 'changed life' for which the human condition sets us yearning. It also suggests that, having seen the material results of our interference and impact on the spaces around us — the pollution (or at least human impact) suggested by the strikingly manmade 'blue polyprop rope' cast on the beach— we must hope for something 'marvellous' to break the cycle of our own destructive presence within the communities and environments we have inhabited for generations. Jamie suggests that the pull of such specific places and our connection to them is maintained by a series of repairs and rearrangements, and that ironically this routine is what might pave the way for 'change' again, in our reconnecting with less invasive relationships to the land we inhabit. The difficult task of connecting the signifiers of a modern 'civilised' life with the spiritual, social and practical importance of such landscapes is something that she tries to explore in these works; by forcing the images of the natural and built environments to coalesce she makes clear the disconnection between space and inhabitant, and at the same time shows an innate desire to close that gap. Jamie is wary of the destructive inheritance of the nation and our complicity in its systems and practises; an ecological nation would, she suggests, find a way to offer recovery from these inheritances.

Our attempts to cultivate and mould our environments to our liking are visible in the

charting of a river, the building of a dam, or the museum exhibit; we are the things we leave behind and we are the constant attempts to reconcile ourselves with and prevail upon, our surroundings. The past is accessible for Jamie either through the artefacts that it leaves in its wake, or through observing of the patterns and effects of past actions and environments; the relics, and the riverbanks. 'Reliquary' (*TH* 37) combines these concerns and sees the past overlaid onto the present landscape. She sees 'The land we inhabit opens to reveal/the stain of ancient settlements,/ plague-pits where we'd lay/ our fibre optic cables;// but witness these brittle August/ bluebells casting seeds,/ like tiny hearts in caskets/ tossed onto battle ground.' Unlike Burnside, Jamie's sense of the past is strong and measurable; she feels a kinship to Neolithic settlers and to twentieth-century housewives, and she charts and accesses these dialogs via a series of poetic recreations in her work.<sup>158</sup> The past becomes for her a space that opens up the possibility of connection via hints of continuity; a communal awareness of the competing timelines we are faced with, be they personal, historic or even geologic in scale.

In *The Bonniest Companie*, Jamie attunes her own human timescale to the wider time scales of the natural world. The collection sees her write a poem for each week of the year; the book becomes an ecology that itself follows and transcribes the patterns of the year as Jamie traces natural cycles and seasonal changes alongside personal and socio-political events and observances. The experiences of 2014/15 see themselves rendered into a textual ecology; Jamie transcribes new shapes onto the past and creates new spaces within her own lived history. She is aware that these experiences are inseparable from each other, and that it is in the mesophysical, one's embodiment of and within the world, that one can best understand one's relation to the world at large.

The disproportionate impact that human actions have on these processes is also something Jamie addresses. 'Wings over Scotland' utilises a similar approach to Burnside's 'Lazarus Taxa', comprised of a list of bird of prey deaths in Scotland. Jamie records

Glenogil Estate: poisoned buzzard (Carbofuran).

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<sup>158</sup> 'Growing up, I was always anxious about memory, at some undercurrent level: it wasn't, for me, a philosophical question, when I asked myself what a memory was, and why my own memories were usually so vague [. . .] I remembered—I still remember—so little. I have a very weak notion of time' (Burnside *A Lie About my Father* 36-7).

**No Prosecution.**

Millden Estate: Poisoned buzzard (Alphachloralose).

**No Prosecution.**

Millden Estate: Poisoned golden eagle 'Alma' (Carbofuran).

**No Prosecution. (BC 51)**

Jamie continues, the list expanding to include not only poisonings but a 'golden eagle,/ caught in spring trap', (51) and the 'Disappearance of a red-tailed kite.' (Ibid.). The year in this poem is measured in deaths meted out; the cycles of migration and return that Jamie has used to calibrate her sense of self and place within poems such as 'Eyrie I' and 'Migratory' I, II and III are violently aborted here.<sup>159</sup> The documentary/found form that this poem takes is rare for Jamie, as is her recounting of merely the violence and disconnection much of the human world inflicts on to the natural. This poem stands as an evidentiary call to recognise and assume responsibility; for Jamie, the timelines and processes of the human world cannot offer up the hopeful and enriching effects that she has traced in much of her nature writing. As in all environmental areas, our impact here feels disproportionate, relentless and immensely damaging, removing creatures from the world which in cultural and literary consciousness hold powerful symbolic weight.

This poem stands as a companion piece to the earlier 'Wings over New York' (BC 21), which is more typical in its focus. Jamie presents a mid-city vignette, where

One of the Central Park

red-tailed hawks is

hunched in a leafless maple

pecking at a polythene bag.

When it flies its talons

entangle in the plastic

so it plunges head down

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<sup>159</sup> *The Bonniest Companie*: 10, 39, 45, 46.

— dreadful winged pendulum—

and everyone gasps,

but with three strong wingbeats,

it frees itself and soars (21)

The impact of our commodification of the resources and spaces of the world around us are also placed front and centre here, but in this case the hawk (and so the reader) is granted a reprieve. The collective will for the bird to break free and ‘soar’ is enmeshed with the realisation of collective responsibility and dismay for its plight; the audience recognise their complicity in the ‘polythene bag’, which seeks to ‘entangle’ the hawk, left aghast as the potential violence of this interaction plays out for them above Central Park. The bag is an object that causes both diegetic and extradiegetic audience to respond; we understand the need to remove and dispose of this object, and see at first the potential and then the actual damage inherent in its being left ‘in the wild’ to interact with nonhuman animals.<sup>160</sup> In this case, our responsibility is excused by the hawk’s escape. By recalling us to this poem with ‘Wings over Scotland’ later in the collection, Jamie creates an intertextual link of responsibility and awareness that demands we remember that this is not always the case. It is also striking that many of the deaths recounted in ‘Wings over Scotland’ take place within the demesnes of Scottish Estates whereas the backdrop to ‘Wings over New York’ is the city’s most famous public park. Jamie suggests that the return of land to collective, public ownership (that she has advocated previously), allows us to access the responsible and empathetic approaches to that land and its inhabitants human and nonhuman.

The times at which her personal, human experience draws up against the changes and systems of the natural world are the most powerful for Jamie. In ‘Corporation Road I’ (BC 12), she writes of the sublime quality inherent in such moments where the mundane is elevated by the shifting perspective an encounter with the natural world engenders. The suburban-industrial setting suggested by the poem’s title acts as a backdrop to a transformative moment, when the speaker recalls ‘in my father’s arms/ I was carried from

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<sup>160</sup> The plastic bag acts for Jamie much as the cigarette butt does for Morton; it is a tangible representation of immediate, localised danger that equally stands as an example of catastrophes on a more incomprehensible scale (plastic pollution vs. forest fires). See Morton *WLML*.

our brick-built semi,/ shown the stars above the steelworks' glare.' (BC 12) The hyperobject of the galaxy bumps up against the objective presences of the 'brick-built semi' and the 'steelworks', tangibly unnatural in construction, as well as the suggested (invisible) hyperobjects of the factory emissions, the altered atmosphere separating one layer of sky from another. This poem recalls Burnside's writing in *Living Nowhere*, and several of his poems, which also seek to present these moments of quiet epiphany, where the quotidian (and implicitly debilitating) environment of life in an industrial town is visited by natural phenomena and processes; a snowfall, a starry night.<sup>161</sup> In these moments, the space that we live in is altered; a relational dynamic is established, and we are able to place ourselves in a world where both the factory and the Milky Way are as tangible and comprehensible as each other; in doing so we reorient ourselves towards a more engaged philosophy of space and self.

### **Her own Space: Gendered Ecologies, Femininity and Illness**

In *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, Louisa Gairn claims that

It has been suggested that Kathleen Jamie could be viewed as 'a nature poet who has been sidetracked by "issues"' – meaning issues of gender, culture and national identity which have, to date, been the main contexts in which her poetry has been viewed.<sup>162</sup> This comment, however, implicitly suggests that to write about the natural world is to avoid an engagement with the political. (156)

It is certainly true that to see writing that focuses on the natural world as somehow removed from political concerns is limited and limiting. Many of the most pressing political questions of our time are explicitly ecological; the Paris Climate Accords, for example, are a global political and diplomatic commitment to recognising and curbing emissions. In domestic politics, issues of energy supply and safety, debate over land usage for fracking, for example, are a partisan and ecological concern. And, bluntly put, politics can only be addressed within a world alive to address it. Furthermore, 'the natural world' and its political issues are not limited to loss of habitat, deforestation or oil drilling in the abstract;

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<sup>161</sup> See Burnside 'Night Shift at the Plug Mill' (*The Hunt in the Forest* 13)

<sup>162</sup> Jules Smith, 'Critical Perspective on Kathleen Jamie'.

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/kathleen-jamie>

the things that decimate the 'natural world' have direct human impact. The questions of ecology are not removed from the human, nor do they provide a separate set of issues from recognised social justice and reformational political movements. Those people who suffer as a result of policies which cause environmental harm are also those people who have been designated as less worthy of a privileged lifestyle in all other aspects of life. The allocation and consumption of natural resources is, like the allocation and distribution of global wealth, concentrated overwhelmingly in the global north which has via historical colonial and on-going globalised industrial projects looked to the global south to provide resources and labour and to profit.

Structures of gender, class and race converge on questions of nature and ecology as well as on political representation. People of colour are more directly and severely affected by climate change; women suffer disproportionately; minority communities lose land and resources to capital projects on sacred indigenous land.<sup>163</sup> The issues of the natural world and the human one are not separate; as this thesis has consistently argued, the only way to proceed with a radical politics and a responsible undertaking of self in the world is to realise this and act accordingly. Jamie remains attuned to these concerns. She is alert to the ways in which we privilege space, and the ways in which the conceptions of place, nation and their narratives shape the way that government and private institutions allow for and curate access to spaces and resources. As Ascherson points out regarding the conservation of Argyll's standing stones, '[Kintraw] is a resource; it has Outstanding Natural Beauty; it is Heritage, which requires heritage management. So this stone, unlike the others, was put back.'<sup>164</sup> (4) Throughout her work Jamie looks at the landscapes that are altered in service to the narrative we privilege, and the way that value is constructed within spaces of 'natural beauty' as seen through the eyes of contemporary neoliberal institutions. In her writing on such events she is frequently in agreement with Burnside, who also mistrusts the uses to which capital puts the natural world; both he and Jamie are wary of a value attributed to space as a potentially profitable 'resource' rather than as a public environment and shared

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<sup>163</sup> See for example recent protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access oil pipeline that had previously had its course diverted from a wealthy and predominantly white neighbourhood due to residents' concerns to run instead across sacred Sioux land. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/free-speech/rights-protectors/stand-standing-rock>.

<sup>164</sup> See Burnside 'Where the Wild Things aren't'. (*New Statesman* 140 57).

historical-social space.

As a woman writing about the natural world, Jamie is also careful to avoid essentialist tropes, or to become apolitical in her intent, even as (as Gairn has noted) there is a desire by some critics to see the writing of nature and nation as irrevocably separate, environmental writing as hermetic. Laura Severin has argued that 'Jamie's initial nature writing, in volumes such as *Jizzen* (1999) and *The Tree House* (2004), is often disappointing in its abstraction of nature and its use of poetic structures that objectify nature for human needs and purposes' (99). This is a reading that relies on a feminist interpretation of nature writing as a trope fixed on to female writing, complete with 'implications of essentialism in regard to association with Mother Nature; concerned too about the idea of Nature as Earth Goddess, the object of the male poet's worship' (McCulloch 18). However, Severin acknowledges that even in Jamie's earlier nature poetry there is a move towards 'more interactive understanding of the human-natural connection' (99), which I would argue characterises much of her latest volume, and is certainly present in the fragment poems of *Frissure*, which chart the realisation of humanity's innate connection to the wild, and which acknowledges, as Severin points out, 'the perishable aspect of nature, its link to mortality, rather than to nature's beauty and spiritual sustenance. Human-natural interaction [. . .] is complex and not always reassuring [for Jamie]' (103).

Jamie asks exactly the questions which Morton claims ecological writing can, does and should pose. Her collection *Frissure* in particular displays that the characteristic of the dark ecological that he outlines. Dark ecology certainly permeates Jamie's exploration of gendered environment(s). Her poetry explores both spaces that exist within the world set aside for women (the *purdah* she encounters in Pakistan, the childbed, the dressing room before a night out), and what it is to walk through the world as a woman, one's own body and self examined for the space it takes up.<sup>165</sup> Jamie's collaborative work *Frissure*, published in 2012, utilises the imaginative process of creating that Burnside sees in the natural world as a way of illuminating her own relation to it, and of rediscovering her identity after a cataclysmic event (in this case her cancer).<sup>166</sup> A book of 'poem fragments' accompanied by

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<sup>165</sup> See *Among Muslims: Meetings at the Frontiers of Pakistan*. London: Sort of Books, 2002. Print. [First published as *The Golden Peak*, Virago 1992]; *Jizzen*. London: Picador, 1999. Print.

<sup>166</sup> See Burnside *Strong Words* 259.

mixed-media illustrations by artist Brigid Collins, it charts Jamie's convalescence after a mastectomy, and deals intimately with the issues of the seen, the imagined, the symbolic, and how these intersections shape identity (often tied intimately to Jamie's experience of gender). It is also an opportunity for Jamie to return to ecological readings of the natural world, and of the body as ecology that she begins in 2005's *Findings*, when she muses on specimen jars in the Surgeon's Hall Museum and is compelled to confront the ways in which we 'consider the natural world as "out there", an "environment", but [that] these objects in their jars show us [is actually part of us,] the intimate unknown' (141).

The proofs of these bodily ecologies provide Jamie with a powerful impression of our interconnectedness with the natural world and its processes; the objects and artefacts of our existences. The central image in *Frissure* is the mastectomy scar Jamie sustained during her breast cancer treatment. This scar becomes a landmark, Jamie's body a landscape; in doing so Jamie is able to see herself as more than her body, even as she situates herself relentlessly within it. At the same time she gains a new and tentative love and familiarity for the site of herself that is so fundamentally different. Of this process, she states,

I saw [my mastectomy scar] as a site of change, of injury. But [as] I turned this way and that, I thought it looked like the low shores of an island [or a] bird's eye view of a river. Or a map. Then, I fancied it looked like the stem of a rose. With that, a line of Burns arrived in my head. 'You seize the flo'er, the bloom is shed.' (vi)

By introducing mutability to this 'site of change', Jamie is able to move past the scar as a representation of that change so that it becomes a space of liminality, potential and, interestingly, geography. The scar is a river, a map, a rose's stem. Jamie is able, upon her own skin, to slide the scale of this space up: from a portion of one flower of one plant, to potentially a whole new continent seen from the air. Her body becomes in itself a new landscape to be mapped and charted, even appreciated for all the possibilities for seeing that it opens up. By accepting a dark ecological approach, Jamie is able to reposition herself within relation to the world around her (injured, sick, recovered) and in relation to her own body as a landscape. A space becomes known by being made unfamiliar; we realise we have changed because the way we exist within ourselves and the wider world has been irrevocably shifted. In seeing this change, the space for an imaginative transformation of

that space becomes possible. It is for example, in the moment of transformation, from a map to 'the stem of a rose', in the shift from one thing to another, that 'a line of Burns' occurs to Jamie. In becoming able to see her own scar, and by extension her body, as a liminal space, a site of constant (and recently catastrophic) change and (potential) renewal, Jamie is given back access to the language of the poetic, which seeks to chart and explore this change. It is this mutability and liminality that lead to healing, and which render the scar no longer just a marker of injury but of potential. The recurring dichotomies of nature/humanity, mortality/transcendence and connection/isolation are all present, and the vulnerability which Jamie allows by displaying the image of her scar so prominently and as a basis for creative play marks a striking turn in her focus. No longer is the symbolic used as an imaginative escape into the poetics of nation or place or identity in generalised terms, but is presented as a fundamental and problematic fissure in the understanding of self; the recalled image that Jamie has of her body is irrevocably, violently altered.

By 'seeing' anew, she must reconcile her reality via the same poetic means that have hitherto provided her with the opportunity to assert that

I don't recognise the idea of 'the outdoors', or of 'nature'. We are 'nature', in our anatomy and mortality. Regarding nature as other, different, an 'outdoors' an 'environment' speaks volumes about our alienation from ourselves  
(*BooksfromScotland* n.p.).

Paradoxically, in this alienation from the carefully carried, lifelong reality of her self-image, Jamie is able to succinctly illustrate the imaginative powers that have been central to her poetics for the last thirty years. The disruption of one's physical health shows one's involvement in the animal processes of life on Earth; the human becomes part of 'natural process', rather than a creator or controller of the same. *Frissure* was conceived around the idea that Jamie would sit for Collins, in order to experience an artistic view of her new scar, and that she would contribute the 'fragments' she had written during her recovery to chart her developing relationship to her body, under Collins' gaze and her own. Her body becomes its own rigorously examined ecosystem; travelled as Nepal, Pakistan, Tibet were travelled in her earlier work, examined as a landscape and *oikos*. In her introduction to the book, Jamie explains:

Throughout, I tried to keep looking [. . .] The radiologist and pathologist looked with their eyes, the surgeon with his fingertips [. . .] I'd been subject to a lot of medical gaze, and was curious about an artist's. An artist's would be different (v-vii).

This is something that Jamie has often done with her poetry before now, when she turns her sight inward. She has repeatedly used sites of 'violation' or disruption, of tension and apprehension, to create a beautiful moment, to act as a springboard for poetic rumination, as for example with Wencheng's breaking the mirror, or the image of a woman's shoe as wreckage. Jamie's description of 'nacreous blacks, the poisoned-river trceries and slow detonations,/ the creeping lichens, as if the skin were a living tombstone' (*Frissure* 21) is reminiscent of *Tree House's* 'Hoard' which wonders of a man discovered at a Neolithic burial: 'What kind of figure did he cut/ huddled in the dusk, gut wound/ packed with sphagnum' (36). In both cases the act of observation serves as the catalyst for realisation; it is the act of transcribing the realisation that leads to a potential understanding. In 'Gift 2', the realisation of her body's corruptibility leads Jamie to assert a sense of her humanness, hard-earned, and the innate connectedness that it engenders: 'We can gaze at these,/ then walk out into the day again, changed, saved, haunted a while' (*Frissure* 21).

The importance of the shared experience is reasserted throughout *Frissure*. Jamie acknowledges that 'having an artist work with "my scar" or "my body" meant I had to relinquish myself just as surely as I had during my medical treatment' (xi). Initially, this too is presented as a potential violation; a tension between autonomy and capitulation. However, this site of tension is again renegotiated, and in 'Healings 1' Jamie is able to call the 'sound of a handing over, the best surrender. The sound of knots untying themselves' (4). Mortality, or at least our awareness of it, as an exclusively *human* feature paradoxically draws Jamie back to her assertion that 'we are nature' in this collection.<sup>167</sup> 'Healings 2' affirms that '[to] be healed is not to be saved from mortality, but rather, released back into it:/ we are returned to the wild' (7), conflating the peculiar human trait of self-aware mortality with the idea of the natural order. To live, fully aware of our finite nature, is to be able to connect with our environment on an animal level, and it is that which makes us most human. There is also the suggestion that the uncertainty of this re-introduction, this

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<sup>167</sup> See Robertson's similar revelation in 'Cat, Failing' (*The Wrecking Light* 18).

precarious and 'wild' existence is perhaps akin to our feelings as urbanised people when confronting or encountering the natural order, or 'the wild' in our everyday lives, the absurdity of which Jamie has previously voiced.<sup>168</sup> This fragility, newly awakened, reaffirms to Jamie that she is nature, and that by extension nature exists in a balance that is precarious, that hyperobjects such as carcinogens, heavy metals, air pollutants, materially affect her and the world, and that there is no separation that can be effectively maintained merely by *knowing* this. Jamie's body becomes a series of systems affected by outside forces but defined and maintained by her own responses to and effect on those forces in turn.

The maturation of her ecological poetry therefore sees her view its function as one that demands recognition of this fragility; Jamie reworks anthropocentric views of environment and being-in-the world that operate under established capitalist models. Another aspect of *Frissure* is the solidarity and communion that her journey through recovery offers her not only for the natural world, for her sense of herself as animal, mortal, alive and connected to wider ecologies, but also for other women. In becoming so aware of her own bodily space, and the way that space is altered so that societal markers of womanhood are changed and removed, she examines the relationship of the body to ideas of womanhood. Jamie does not fall into essentialism; a body altered is still a woman's body; a breast-less body is still a woman's body; a desexualised body is still a woman's body. The possibilities for the bodies women might inhabit and claim autonomy of are not prescriptive. This ecological approach allows for a greater pluralism of female experience and existence, and subverts essentialised or dehumanising tropes of femininity and gender, allowing for a politics of womanhood that is inclusive and rehabilitative, not divisive or oppressive. Instead, she sees her body and its trauma as a way to reconnect to other women in her life; Jamie's fascination with the minutiae of the systems and parts of the body, as she has detailed previously in her essay collections, informs her examination of her relationship to herself and her body anew, as a site of potential hereditary illness.<sup>169</sup> The discovery of the BRCA1 gene, for example, responsible for a majority of hereditary breast (and ovarian) cancer makes us aware of a heredity of trauma that is carried within the

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<sup>168</sup> See Burnside 'Sky Burial' (*All One Breath* 54-56).

<sup>169</sup> See for example, 'Surgeon's Hall' *Findings*. London: Sort of Books, 2005: 129-145.

bodies of women themselves, an internal violence that could be performed on that body, as opposed to the external violence that one is at risk of walking through the world as a woman. Jamie offers a sort of equal and opposite exploration to Burnside and Robertson's refutation of reductive formations of masculinity and aligns with the latter's own experiences of sickness and physical injury.

By examining the poetics of heredity in writing her experience in *Frissure*, Jamie sees her body anew as a closed system, an environment over which her illness has shown her she is not the only governing force. Further to this however, she is able to locate herself and her body as the result of a lineage of women, of their bodies; she looks to the women in her family history and the ways in which they too have negotiated and translated their sense of self and their own relationship to their bodies, to the world. In 'Heredity 2' (*Frissure* 25-29) she recounts that 'My grandmother called her breast her "breist", her bosom her "kist" ./ "Come for a wee nurse aff yer Nana", she'd say. "Courie in, hen"' (26). Here, Jamie recalls the language her grandmother had for her own body; she lists generalised terms followed by the specific Scots and idiosyncratic names her grandmother gave those body parts. The poem suggests that finding a language that is personal, that is poetic and evocative, and that in this instance specifically derives from a female familial vocabulary, is a healing act. The issue of heredity, here a factor for the loss of the breast to cancer, is like the surgical scar transformed into a space where her sense of self as a woman, and the comfort of female family, support and physicality, offers a reclamation of bodily autonomy, and can be passed down through those same microscopic and genetic channels as the predisposition to the trauma that has led Jamie to this point of reminiscence. Seeing and writing her own body as ecology with such scrutiny, Jamie subverts and challenges essentialist assumptions of both womanhood and the feminizing of nature, refusing the objectification and narrative of natural space as a 'body to conquer'. Instead she sees it as an intimate landscape, its own 'autonomous region', and a part of a wider net of life forces and interactions.

## **Conclusion**

Jamie constructs a poetics that is embedded in the 'real world' we must inhabit. Her writing explores political and social influences on our environments, as well as the spiritual and philosophical pull of the natural world. It is also aware of how we construct and identify those distinctions; Jamie does not trust that because a place is not obviously urban that it is

not subject to human intervention or administration, and is consistently concerned with advocating more equitable and empathetic relationships to the land around us. She is aware of the structures which make up the spaces we inhabit daily, and writes a poetry that exposes and interrogates these structures while offering a sense of deconstructed and dialogic space.

The nation forms the basis of those spaces; she sees Scotland first as a home to travel out from and reach back to, then as a series of landscapes constructed and maintained by systems of representation, access and language the Jamie seeks to break down and understand. Jamie is concerned with nature as a factor of her reconsidering of national space. She seeks to disavow the ways in which contemporary systems of living, and of figuring space (urban, natural and national) have led to a lack of connection to her environment. She seeks to overcome our own worse nature and return to a point of equilibrium that is concerned with accepting the material conditions of one's environment and attempting a balanced relationship with them. In her case also, this equilibrium is something that can and must be addressed by engaging with the systems of governance at work in the spaces we inhabit. More so than Burnside or Robertson, Jamie sees an explicit link between current socio-political systems and the ways in which nation and nature open up to us and are sustained. Involvement in the systems that alter our environment— ecological, social and political — forms the basis of her poetic philosophy. Nature is the web of environmental and creative factors that life in contemporary Scotland often obscures via neoliberal mechanisms of work and industry and that Jamie's poetry attempts to recreate textually via an ecological lyric.

Her poetry slips through politicised and explicitly Scottish perspectives and subject matter, to transplant these concerns (initially shakily) onto the national landscapes of the countries she visits, before coalescing to a nuanced awareness of how space is politicised, controlled and degraded across familiar and unfamiliar places. Jamie traverses borders geographic and metaphysical in coming to this realisation; she learns via travel to see connection with the inhabitants of other places, and to see the further reaching effects of processes such as climate and capital that initially seem invisible. This leads her to conflate the spaces of the environmental with the political increasingly in her later work; she sees that local actions have global effects, and she is able to find commonality by accepting the

individual experiences and responsibilities we have for our interactions with the wider world. This applies to her poetry of self as well; she considers questions of gender from social and political standpoints in her earlier poetry, in order to examine the spaces offered to women in the contemporary nation. She goes on to examine the ways her own physicality is a part of systems of ecology at work beyond her noticing, even as they are affected by those same political and social concerns (for example access to healthcare, or protection from violence).

Jamie hopes to create 'autonomous regions' within her poetry; she wishes to find herself ungoverned by repressive ideas and harmful apparatus. Instead, she hopes to find herself situated in a world to which she is beholden on honest and self-aware terms. For Jamie, nationalism must be turned to internationalism, sickness to recovery, and borders to waypoints. She seeks to write spaces wherein we are able to fully realise and reflect on the ways in which the systems of our identity operate. She claims that only by engaging with the world as it is, and working within the realities of the spaces we inhabit, can we hope to reach a state of independence from those systems which degrade us and the wider world, and start to move forward with hope and purpose. She examines, reconsiders and redeploys identities and interpretations created *a priori*. Instead, she looks to find meaningful and pertinent readings of these tropes and characteristics to rework nature, nation and self in her work. For Jamie

the 'touchstone' and the stereotype can usefully be considered as 'distinctive marks', which, because they do not refer to an absolute signified, remain open for reappropriation [. . .] if autonomy is always under threat, it can, paradoxically, always be reinforced by a sense of connectedness with other cultures. (Boden 39)

Jamie writes a Scotland and a poetics that is unerringly part of the world, looking for connection and embracing the responsibility for one's fellows that accompanies this. She offers a body of work that suggests such spaces of autonomy and reciprocity are possible and that the tools of their creation are at hand.

## Conclusions: The Space for the Ecological Lyric

Louisa Gairn has noted that ‘successive generations of Scottish writers have both reflected and contributed to the development of international ecological theory and philosophy.’ (1) There is a thread of concern for the natural world, for the environments we create and access, and for the ways in which the spaces we live in are altered by forces within and without, that she traces from the nineteenth century. Certainly, this thesis argues that there is a marked concern with issues of space and dwelling in the poetry and writing of the later twentieth century, and that it is necessary to include this component in questions of national writing alongside nature writing. The ecological provides an approach that opens up an interdisciplinary and intuitive criticism, that allows for clear nuance and (perhaps most encouragingly) subversive potential when examining the type of issues that Scottish writers are concerned with, as a part of, and beyond, issues of national canon.

The work done by mid twentieth-century Scottish poets such as Morgan and Dunn saw a critical response that centred the nation in such a way as to render the spheres of urban and pastoral Scotland two unrelated environments. The natural world offers the spaces that allow for a consideration of one’s identity out among the land. It becomes representative of the ‘real Scotland’ that might link one organically to metanarratives of history and nation and so help find Scottishness as a tangible location; perhaps the banks of the right river, or the view from a certain hill at sunset will knock that bit of information loose, and suddenly Scot and land can be reconciled. Nature exists as a space outside of the poet in this critical paradigm, offering an ‘authentic’ backdrop to questions of identity. Urban environments, it follows, contain all the messy human interaction of modernity, and act as a backdrop to the introversion and hopelessness of the atomised modernist individual. Neither identity or reading allow for a holistic interrogation of the material conditions or environments of Scotland in the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century. This becomes unhelpful, reactionary even, within current conditions. However, as this thesis has shown, within the work of Dunn and Morgan are the proto-ecological constructions of nature, nation and self that Burnside, Jamie and Robertson tackle in their work. Dunn returns to writing after nearly two decades with his 2017 collection *The Noise of a Fly*, to place himself in the same arena of ecological lyric as Burnside, Robertson and Jamie. He finds himself concerned not with his place in the UK as a Scot, nor within Scotland as a poet, but instead as a citizen and a writer inextricably connected to and concerned with the

world, and ‘the cost/ Of what I’ve done, or did not.’ (55) It feels like a fitting collection to come from a voice that has frequently written to or been aware of the concerns of the ecological, and of such concerns’ material realities — the tension between what he has ‘with tongue in cheek, identified as [. . .] “Romantic Sleep” versus “Social Responsibility”’ (Gairn 3).

Gairn observes that poets such as Jamie and Burnside see poetry, and ecological writing, as a ‘line of defence’ (156) against the issues of contemporary life. In addition to this, the work of writers such as Burnside, Robertson and Jamie not only offers a ‘defence’ for the natural world, for the wild spaces or the sacred places, but goes on to offer the ecological as a space in which these things tangibly impact the reader, the poem and the wider world of that poem’s creation. They write an ecological poetry that moves beyond the ameliorative paradigm of Bate wherein ‘nature writing [functions] as a “recreational space in which we can walk and breathe and play” (64)’ (Huggan 154), and that reaches further than a line of defence. In tackling issues of nationhood, nature, and self, Burnside, Robertson and Jamie offer integrated, pragmatic, and exact conceptions of our place within the spaces we allow ourselves and the place given to us by contemporary socio-political situations. In reading the work of the poets via an ecocritical framework, it is possible to combine the critical focus of nature writing, of national writing and of the place for poetry within canon and society more broadly, and to find interesting, insightful and hopeful readings of the poetry of place in contemporary Scotland, and its place within critical and literary spaces of resistance. Between recognising the ways in which this integrated reading of Scottish poetry has tended to be deferred for examinations of what identity, or what Scotland looks like in the contemporary canon, and showing the potential application of that reading to current poetic and political spaces in Scotland, this thesis offers an interdisciplinary approach. The full and transformative power of the poetry of the last thirty years, exemplified by Burnside, Jamie and Robertson, is only realised when it is relentlessly and incisively tied to the real-world conditions of its production.

The ecological allows a framework that engages with the stylistic and philosophical aspects of the work of Burnside, Robertson and Jamie. It offers a holistic approach to concerns of space and place, and one that sees these concerns within the context of their environments. It offers an alternative to neoliberal hegemonies of nature, nation and self, by offering up spaces in which alternate and fictional selves are celebrated, situated and

challenged. Morton's philosophy aligns with the literary criticism of writers such as Gardiner and Hames, who see the ways in which such spaces are often co-opted or elided by mainstream discourse and praxis. What I term ecological poetry in this thesis is that which recognises the following: that something fundamental to the psyche is lacking without integration of the 'natural'; that entropy is a governing physical and philosophical force in one's interaction with the natural; that by transgressing borders, one is made vulnerable and implicated in ways that are potentially empowering and politically actionable; that the lyric works as a poetic space that is always potential, utopian, and therefore safe for such realisations to be made and processed. These factors coalesce to form a poetics that is acutely engaged with the world as it exists, and which creates space of and for a world that might be.

### **Utopian Thinking: Ecological Lyric as Potential and Political**

Poetry of place in Scotland has provided a space for questions of identity, nation and environment to play out in generic terms that allow for multivalence, heterogeneity and nuance. The lyric, in the work of Burnside, Robertson and Jamie, provides the liminal as not only a thematic proving ground for such idea, but as philosophy-in-practice. The space of poetry is one that requires an in-between-ness; it depends on the swithering, the changeable and the mutable. While not a formal innovation, their lyric offers a generic space that demands reader and poet situate themselves within and apart from the text, and therefore leave themselves vulnerable to the questions that text raises. The philosophical-poetic space of the ecological lyric that Burnside, Jamie and Robertson operate within offers a poetics of empathy, responsibility and interaction. It sees the environment and political concerns of contemporary life as inextricable, and sees nature, nation and self as facets of a prismatic whole wherein poesis and ecology work in synchrony towards creating potentially radical socio-political spaces within otherwise traditional formal and stylistic poetic boundaries.

Burnside especially shows himself driven by the possibility for integration; his poetry locates the sacred in the inextricable nature of the human and nonhuman worlds. His philosophy sees an indisputable lack in the humanity offered us by contemporary societal mores and practices; for him, the space we inhabit is always insufficient, and only by locating the root of this insufficiency in the stunted relationship we allow ourselves with the natural world, can we hope to find a changed possibility and perspective. Nature for

Burnside is integral; it is the spiritual dimension that life under contemporary capital ignores and derides. Nature is the organising principal around which he builds his approach to poesis and its reception; he seeks to offer a worldview that acknowledges poetry-making and world-making as 'continuous' (CK n.p) and that offers the land, mimetic and diegetic, as regions inhabited and cherished by those who share it. This approach differs from the 'consolatory' (Huggan 154) role that Bate assigns nature writing, even as Burnside chases something recuperative in his relationship with and writing of the natural. Ameliorative spaces are not just 'natural', and nature (and nature writing) instead acts as a catalyst to adjust the way we approach the relationships we have to our environments natural and otherwise, seeing neither as beyond or apart.

This viewpoint leads Burnside to mistrust the institutions of that contemporary governance and lead him to a view of nation and self that is at once removed from many established human structures, and deeply communal and reciprocal. Burnside's pursuit of a renewed philosophy of dwelling, and the inability of modern life to affect the human spirit has been well-documented, but there requires an analysis of how his concerns materially affect either the type of poetry being written, or the potential critical reception and impact of that poetry, within the contemporary canon.<sup>170</sup> Stylistically, Burnside's approach alters little in terms of the deployment of form. The lyric, refined and redeployed, works to craft his vision of balance and communion via its innate musicality, its dialogic tendency, its familiarity and its multivalency. The speaker of the lyric is at once invoking deeply personal moment, a private dialog, and universal address. Within the intent for this form then, combining it with such subject matter offers up poetic spaces meant not just to, as Burnside has said, locate moments in time and space, nor offer up intent and possibility as concurrent, but ones that are intrinsically mutable and communal; the poetry of the ecological lyric invites inhabitants.<sup>171</sup> They exist in perpetuity as potential spaces, their liminal geographies at once representative and interpretive, but demand not merely interlocution but interaction of a specific and material intent. Ecological lyric requires not only that one see the space of the poem as changed by one's interaction with it, but that

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<sup>170</sup> See for example Iain Galbraith in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* p.565.

<sup>171</sup> See Burnside 'Poetry and a Sense of Place'. Proceedings of the Writing a Sense of Place Symposium, Tromsø 15-18 August 1996: 201-222. via septentiro.uit.no

the material world that contains it be altered upon having viewed it. Such poetry does not seek mimesis in order to change the way we see the space represented. Instead, it offers itself up as a space made possible by the world already accessible to the reader; its intent is not the ecomimesis that Morton distrusts, but instead active and on-going poiesis. It conceives poetic space, the (acknowledged as such) representative space of the poem's subject matter, and the space in which the reader receives the poem, as all acting upon the other. Jamie too sees the lyric as a way of writing the spaces that both disconcert and degrade her, or offer her hope for renewal, within the current systems she inhabits, though she hopes that political engagement can achieve change under those current systems. Robertson writes a lyric that paints densely meaningful psychological landscapes alongside current geographies, and finds he is always observing himself in his interactions with those spaces around him. All three poets seek earnestly to write and locate poetry that alters a worldview; Burnside believes that poiesis, fundamentally, offers microcosmic shifts in perspective which offer a chance to shift the psychological (and perhaps material) spaces occupied in the 'real world' depicted, suggested or approximated within the textual-philosophical space of the poem on the page. The knowledge of the possibilities inherent within the lyric offers up an ontological awareness that invites, if not hopeful, then informed, engaged, and alternative responses to the contemporary frameworks of modern living.

### **The Space that is Changed: Scotland's Contemporary Sense of Self**

Politically, this type of reading sees its antithesis; Scotland, the recent 2018 Hansard Society audit has found, now comprises a populace that is increasingly disengaged with the apparatus of state administration, such as elections and referendums, even as its citizenry are more informed than ever about it.<sup>172</sup> Public awareness of the possibility to engage with and alter the spaces one inhabits leads, in the wake of frequent votes and campaigns, to a sense of disconnection from the apparatus responsible for administering those spaces.

The audit's executive summary states:

In Scotland, political engagement is mostly higher compared to 2004, but the post-independence-referendum upsurge has not been sustained, and political

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<sup>172</sup> See 'Audit of UK Political Engagement 15' (2018)  
<http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/audit-of-political-engagement-15-2018>

dissatisfaction is high. [. . .] Only 14% of Scots say they are satisfied with the system of governing Britain, a decline of three points in a year and 22 points since the first Audit in 2004. [. . .] Compared to last year, interest in and self-assessed knowledge of politics are both up four points, to 62% and 56% respectively. But certainty to vote dropped 10 points, to 59%, below the Britain-wide average. [. . .] Compared to Audit 1 in 2004, certainty to vote is up five points, political interest 16 points and knowledge 25 points. But people's sense of political efficacy is down nine points at 36%.

The potential configuration of nation offered by state political bodies is, ironically, at odds with the community experience of that space as they inhabit it. The space of the nation as it is experienced is at odds with the utopian Scotland offered by engagement with current political systems; this distrust in the processes of democracy within the nation state means that, in real terms, the creation of alternate spaces feels not revelatory, but impossible. The lyric works within the revelatory spaces that could and should be opened up by such political engagements, to offer the 'nourishment' (CK n.p) that Burnside sees as essential to continued hope that the world can be made anew. The nation that Burnside wants to see comprises 'terrains in Scotland [. . .] managed by people living there and by people who have genuine interest in their landscape [. . .] no countries but regions, and people who form allegiances together for certain purposes' (Burnside qtd. Galbraith 565). Once again, the cultural offers what the political cannot, but in this case, it is not merely an alternative method by which to express and therefore sublimate political and social disaffection, but a genre that offers an epistemological tool to articulate and envisage alternatives to hegemony that do, when they become the direct focus of the poet, articulate specific goals and socio-political alternatives to the status quo. The continued anarchic conception of Burnside is not enough for the poetic spaces curated and examined by Jamie though, who explicitly links the utopian spaces of the lyric with that of the renewed Scotland.

### **Integration: The Natural Reconsidered**

The integration of natural and poetic spaces in each of the poets' work is not reductive, nor is it conservative. Integration in this sense means that they are concerned with bringing the way we view the nonhuman inline with our conceptions of the world as affective and

changeable, acting on and us and shaped due to our actions within it. Each finds philosophical parallels in Morton's work, though it is Burnside who is perhaps most concerned with teasing out the distinction between integrated natural spaces and concepts in his work. For him, the natural and the poetics space offer a nourishment that cannot be accessed elsewhere, and without which he does not deem it possible to sustain oneself to the work of world-building and (more importantly) world altering. His privileging of the lyric, as has been discussed, chimes with his desire to seek spaces at which we find connection as potential within the natural word.

Nature offers an animistic potential to find and imbue meaning in the space one inhabits, as well as a recognition that such meanings are constructed within our own 'natural' selves. This is powerful as it centres concern and communion as the foundational qualities of the identity that ecological poetry seeks to write. The ecological lyric operates by restoring value to Alice Notley's observation that 'self means 'I' and also means "poverty", it's what one strips down to, who you are when you've stripped down.' (n.p.) All three poets strip down to the parts of self that are fundamental; Burnside's spirit, Robertson's entropy, Jamie's autonomy, all recognise the aspects of the self that are tied to that self's integration and interaction with the wider world. This allows them to mitigate the poverty of the self that is left when governed by the environments and demands of late capital, or by ideologies that consistently elide the natural world in their considerations of being, or by being unable to locate themselves within the spaces that surround them. In terms of creating new spaces within Scottish poetry, this approach links to the enduring fascination with poetic self as a knowingly constructed and opportunist alter ego as for Macpherson's 'Ossian', all the way through to the lyric 'I' as an emergent part of ecological consciousness. By seeing the self as something which must be stripped down in order to rediscover its relationship with the scale around it, the 'I' functions in the spaces where "identity" is an ideological inscription with concrete repercussion' (Hames *Studies in Scottish Literature* 39.1 219), and seeks to manage what those repercussions might be.

This relationship that Burnside seeks can be seen as a mostly successful synthesis of the epistemological and poetic functions of dividuality. As Bird-Davis notes, 'relational epistemologies function in diverse contexts where other epistemologies enjoy authority, including western contexts [. . .] when [. . .] we animate the computers we use [. . .] and the cars we drive, we relationally frame them. We learn what they do in relation to what we do'

(78) This is relevant to Burnside's definition of the lyric, wherein 'each thing defines each other thing but, the locus of change, or of the definition, cannot be determined' ('Poetry and a Sense of Place' 230) (n.p). We see this also in Robertson's conception of the function of poetry, to Jamie's 'talking to' as the role of the poet, and to Morton's definition of the ecological, wherein 'a thing detects another thing' (*WLML* n.p) in philosophical-critical terms. Given that rigour and intentional analysis are necessary to define and understand animisms, there is a risk in using an approximation of it, of merely recreating appropriative modes of viewing non-western ideology, ironically mirroring human/nonhuman debate. However, all three poets are concerned with unpacking the

violence [that] arises from the tendency to objectify others— humans, animals, terrain and so on [. . .] spiritual enlightenment begins, I feel, in a first recognition that there are no objects in the world, that there is no possibility of being meaningfully 'objective'. Thus violence is the symptom of a spiritual failure, a failure to recognise the fundamental imperative to respect and honour 'the other' (Burnside qtd. *Dósa Scottish Studies Review* 4.1 19).

Burnside, Robertson and Jamie seek an understanding of nature, nation and self that allows for intersectional analyses of the violence done to the world and its inhabitants. The given world for Burnside is, along with its poetic reconstructions, not assured: 'no matter how faithfully we believed in a given world, the world we inhabited was determined by the way we described it.' (*Poetry and a Sense of Place*' 208) This is a feeling shared by Robertson, who operates between publishing centres and geographical margins, and Jamie, who sees description and representation increasingly connected.

The argument for the socio-political relevance of the ecological lyric is not merely earnest posturing. As meteorologist Eric Holthaus points out, 'the Earth itself, in 2018, with climate change barreling right on ahead and the vast majority of people on the planet unaware of exactly how existentially transformative that is — is a liminal space.' (Twitter 4 Feb 2018) A poetics that centres our relationship to the nonhuman has contemporary relevance to Scotland as it governs its spaces and population. As Scandrett observes, while 'environmental justice as policy will always tend toward dilution, [. . .] environmental justice as a social movement maintains an instability in the direction of more radical transformation.' (201) Ecological lyric exists within that same tradition, but offers spaces in

which that dilution might be examined and reinterpreted, without the explicit intention for 'radical transformation' inherent to environmental justice as a social movement. Poetry is instead a creative movement first and foremost, and alongside this, the reflection of a lived reality, and a way of giving creative space to an otherwise ineffable set of events and actions that nonetheless have concrete repercussions. The textual object of the poem opens up the necessary critical-imaginative space to consider the hyperobjects of climate change, of global pollution, of millennia-old ice caps, and make each interaction in each possible encounter with those things another opportunity to turn the dial slightly more into focus, so that we might be made aware of the transformative nature not just of a the poem, but of the age in which we live.

### **Entropy as Empathy: Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Change**

The issue of vulnerability is made pertinent in each of the poets' work, but especially Robertson's, since instead of merely removing the human as the central figure in his worldview, he utilises issues of degradation, fragility and harm to render the human another species to be protected in the wider ecosystem. The unique awareness of humanity does not offer invulnerability; instead, it offers us a specific and paradigm-shifting ability to see that we are in fact just like everything else. From this, Robertson writes an empathetic poetry that is incisively and consistently aware of the 'instability of the flesh' (*Open Letters* n.p.) and the entropic nature of the systems and lifeforms around us— a sort of *memento mori* that forces us to privilege life and possibility in all forms, not just the human.

In each of their conceptions of self, the poets collapse distinctions between the human and the nonhuman. At its basic level, this elision happens because of the continued focus on the ways in which human beings are as much altered and affected by their environments (political, national, natural and psychological) as they affect them in turn. This realisation demands that, while we might not have to 'let nature in', we must see that we are already 'out there' with it. This in turn is what makes such poetic depictions of self powerful and transformative in their work. It offers a self that is contingent to Morton's idea of ecology without nature; a self without self-importance. The poets write a humanity that does not privilege human experience and consciousness but nevertheless is wholly compassionate and rigorous in its exploration of it. The fact that we are deeply fragile and yet act out disproportionate violence is dealt with by all three writers: Burnside refutes dualism for integration and advocates that our relational model for the nonhuman shifts accordingly;

Robertson offers a wry commiseration with the vulnerable nonhuman, even as he sees in it ways to elevate and unfetter humane aspects of the human psyche, and Jamie brings her gaze to bear on the ways in which we are tied to our landscapes in ways that necessitate responsibility and care, finding the direct outlet of that care in acts of poetic creation and political engagement.

This aligns with many of the political-national narratives that surround Scotland in contemporary discourse; that it is the outward-looking, egalitarian ‘small country’, that its cultural identity bears out its political ambitions. This thesis has shown the ways in which this narrative struggles to approach the reality of delivering environmental justice, and the ways in which the poets’ exploration of who suffers and how in the spaces of modern society offers a more radical exploration of those myths perpetuated in the name of nation. They also increasingly find that the nation as it is offered and constructed in political and critical terms, is not enough. The spaces curated by national borders, and enforced or overlooked arbitrarily for issues of capital but not for migration say, expose the imbalance at the core of such narratives. The ecological lyric of Jamie, Burnside and Robertson aligns itself with a poetics and a politics that is more radical than any offered under current national ideas of Scotland as it stands. They are committed to centring compassion in their subject matter, and using this to examine and critique issues of space and place in contemporary life. It is important to do this because we suffer. It is important to do this because that suffering is in part of our own making, and radiates out to cause suffering beyond us. It is important because it allows us spaces that force us to reconsider who and what we give our empathy to, and how the spaces that we inhabit and encounter in ‘real life’ police or direct that empathy. All three poets write an empathic and self-aware eco-poetics that finds us valuable because we are animal, fallible and finite, and that encourages us to see value in the nonhuman because we are humane, aware and unprecedented.

### **Borderline: Refiguring Place and Nation**

By realising that we are part of local and global ecologies in tandem to local and global economies, Jamie, Burnside and Robertson offer us a view of the nation that advocates for localisation over globalisation, seeing the ways in which nation is constructed in narrative and critical terms. An increased awareness of and responsibility for the land we inhabit, the power of international connections between citizens and writers, and the interrelation of

self and space across mythos and borders, is privileged over globalised 'relationships' with other nebulously defined national or neoliberal governments, and corporate interests. There is in all three poets' work, a sense that the relationship individuals and communities have with their lived space is paramount, and that much of the mechanisms of modern government and capital work to exclude people from that involvement. Burnside has offered, in illustrating his views on nation, the following story:

In Norway the [indigenous people] Sami have their own parliament now [. . .] But what happens is that the Norwegians build a dam on the River Alta, a hugely important river for the Sami people and their local environment. The Sami fought it really hard of course. After that they gave the Sami a parliament which is culturally and to some extent economically effective, but [. . .] the Sami still have no rights over the land itself. (Burnside qtd. Dósa 15)

Jamie has noted something comparable of her feelings regarding the use of land in Scotland, and Robertson has written obliquely of similar issues in his poetry of place and possession in the Highlands of Scotland. Again, the politics of neoliberal nationhood is ill-suited to enact any policies that invoke any kind of meaningful environmental justice, displaying their hypocrisy by performing institutional shuffling of the pieces whilst actual issues of sustainability and justice are not addressed, for indigenous peoples in this case, or more broadly for the people who inhabit the land that is being debated and deployed for various political and economic uses.

Mistrust of established systems of power is not a new reading of the literature of small countries. However, what is potentially important is that, in writing the kind of poetry they do about nature, about land and travel and environment, and about more broadly Scotland and the idea of the national, these poets offer tangible, engaged and political readings (writings) of those issues. The work of all three is concerned with the relational systems we set up to deal with the environments we inhabit. It is concerned with examining the narratives that allow for such monolithic structures to emerge and sustain, and how we as individual citizens might connect to more meaningful and less violent conceptions of citizenry. The Scotlands of Jamie, Burnside and Robertson's poetry are not made up of anything more or less than the lived and living pieces of their landscapes. Their negotiation of borders is poetically powerful; they see these spaces as interstitial in the

psychogeographies of place and nation that they evoke, and they expose the irony of neoliberal nationhood championing 'borderless' globalisation alongside the (often violently) enforced political and classist borders that make up contemporary nations. Those who can and cannot transgress such borders are delineated according to values of capital and power that have little to do with the land or the people travelling on it, and much to do with the reinforcing of monolithic power structures that deny humanity, refuse nuance, and enforce status quo.

Burnside, Robertson and Jamie write a poetry of place that is at once rooted in the contemporary nation whilst at the same time unconcerned with how that nation is defined in terms of its unique 'identity' or 'voice'. They see such rumination as intrinsically conservative, privileging a safely 'representative' literature at the expense of a poetry that engages with the world anew and with earnest investment. The poets offer a radical ecological lyric that not only sits in opposition to an insufficient political status quo, but offers an opportunity for interdisciplinary and intertextual readings that, while they might not 'stop an chainsaw' (CK n.p), certainly open reader's eyes to the plight of the forest. Their poetic spaces are dynamic and transformative. As Morton notes:

Contra Heidegger, the earth does not stand still in lyric. It does not reveal a world or a destiny. If it opens, it opens too much, swallowing us up. [. . .] Embodied in the sonic and graphic materiality of the text, the earth quakes, setting up a subject quake, a tremor of the 'I'. What remains after our long delve into the fake otherness of ecomimesis is the fragility of an 'I' that we can't quite get rid of (*Ecocriticism* 255-6).

Burnside, Robertson and Jamie write poetry that lets us sit with that fragility; their poetry offers more than an ecomimetic rendering of the natural world, or an introspection that forestalls transformative action. Instead, they write psychological and lyrical spaces of potential and resistance that let us feel the tremor run through us. Their work does not reveal but opens up; instead of finding ourselves swallowed, we find ourselves involved. That same 'tremor of the "I"' runs through the world of the poem and the world of its representation. It offers up the possibility that, after the quake subsides, we will find ourselves similarly shaken, and so the positions of things will be altered.

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## Appendix 1, Fig. A:

*Table 2: Results of Survey of Scottish Voters on Which Description best Describes their Nationality, %:*

<b>Year</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>1992 (Scottish Election Survey)</b>	<b>1997 (Scottish Election Survey)</b>	<b>1997(Scottish Referendum Survey)</b>
<b>Scottish not British</b>	39	19	23	32
<b>More Scottish than British</b>	30	40	38	32
<b>Equally Scottish and British</b>	19	33	27	28
<b>More British than Scottish</b>	4	3	4	3
<b>British not Scottish</b>	6	3	4	3
<b>None of These</b>	2	1	4	2

(Sources: System Three Scotland, Glasgow Herald, 1986; Scottish Election Survey, 1992; Scottish Election Survey, 1997; Scottish Referendum Survey, 1997. George McKenchie 55, table 1)

**Appendix 1, Fig. B:**

*Table 3: Survey of Scottish Voters 1979-1997 as to who they identify with most strongly, %*

	Middle Class	Working Class	No Class
1979			
Same Class English	35	43	25
Different Class Scottish	34	22	30
No Preference	28	24	24
1997			
Same Class English	30	29	20
Different Class Scottish	53	47	51
No Preference	8	12	17
<i>Don't knows and no answered responses excluded</i>			

(Source: Survey of Electors, 1997. McKenchie 56, table 2)