

Eqqumiitsuliorneq: **Haptic Reading, Climate Representation and the Book-Objects of Nancy Campbell**

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Abstract

This paper marks the first substantial critical engagement with Scottish poet and artist Nancy Campbell, and centres upon two of her works: *How to say 'I love you' in Greenlandic* (2011), and *The Night Hunter* (2011). Both works mediate their reflections on the precarity of Greenland's environment and language in the face of climate

change through the generation of a haptic mode of reading. This paper reads the unique materiality of Campbell's climate representation in conjunction with Timothy Morton's theorisation of climate change as hyperobject. If the hyperobject of climate change risks stifling action for a liveable future through its

paralysing vastness, Campbell's work moves towards a solution by bringing the unimaginable losses of the climate crisis to a graspable scale.

The first section reads the sequenced loose pages of *How to say 'I love you' in Greenlandic* as a device that encodes the interlinked losses of Greenlandic language and land. Simultaneously, it argues that Campbell offers resistance to these losses by encouraging the reader to rearrange these pages, thus breaking through cycles of inaction. The second

section further delineates the haptic mode of reading demanded by Campbell's book-objects, with a focus on *The Night Hunter's* material elements. These scavenged items materialise the catastrophic violence of climate change as hyperobject, and generate a radical intimacy with nonhumans in the face of this crisis. Overall, the paper argues that the haptic engagement that Campbell fosters offers a way to remain actively engaged in the wake of the climate crisis.

For Scottish poet and artist Nancy Campbell, language is a material, haptic thing. Much of Campbell's work questions the form expected to be taken by a book: for example, pages are unbound and soapstone is placed beside words. These choices work to heighten the reader's awareness of the book-object's physicality and draw attention to its various surfaces (such as that of the pages, the cover, and the more surprising natural elements it contains). This paper argues that Campbell imbues the surfaces of her work with meaning and, through touch, brings the unimaginable losses of the climate crisis to a graspable scale.

Furthermore, this marks the first substantial critical engagement with Campbell's work and positions the heightened materiality of her climate representation alongside Timothy Morton's theorisation of climate change as hyperobject. The haptic mode of reading encouraged by Campbell's book-objects generates an affective response that resists passivity and compromises the position of intellectual distance the reader may seek to inhabit. Morton claims that an over-reliance on reasoning in the face of climate catastrophe is a symptom of people's resistance to "an affective experience that would existentially and politically bind them to hyperobjects, to care for them" (184). The haptic mode Campbell generates works to do precisely this: to 'bind' the reader to the catastrophic hyperobjects through unexpected, tactile interactions whilst simultaneously rendering them relatable through a miniaturised scale. Thus, by positioning Morton alongside Campbell, this paper explores how care for hyperobjects can be created through a haptic experience of literature.

Much of Campbell's work draws on her experience of the precarity of Greenland's environment and language following her 2010 residency at the Upernavik Museum. The United Nations classed the predominant Greenlandic dialect, West Greenlandic/Kalaallisut, as "vulnerable" in 2009, with other dialects at risk of disappearing entirely within a century (*Atlas of World's Languages* 165). Simultaneously, Greenland has shown some of the most pronounced effects of climate change compared to anywhere in the Arctic; a 2024 study, for example, found that there has been a loss of snow and ice from the ice sheet margin, glaciers, and ice caps covering an area of approximately 28,707km² (Grimes). As

Campbell seeks to raise awareness about the threat of language endangerment facing Greenlandic dialects through her work, she places this endangerment alongside the crises faced by the environment, treating the loss of indigenous land and language as intertwined phenomena.

Campbell's treatment is supported by the theoretical understanding of language endangerment in the wake of environmental destruction. Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, for example, explicitly connect the loss of indigenous land to the "dying out" of indigenous languages, claiming that the endangerment is directly due to "their habitats [...] being destroyed" (48). Okanagan scholar Jeannette Armstrong further emphasises the intimate relationship between indigenous languages and land with her concept "land speaking," arguing that "all indigenous peoples' languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it" (148). The very nature of indigeneity ties a group of people to a specific geography and environment; it therefore follows that the language, the lifeblood of culture, is bound more closely to this geography. This entanglement between language and environment is key to understanding Campbell's work, and the haptic mode of reading she encourages, to generate an affective response to these twin crises facing Greenland and the world at large.

This paper focuses on two key projects. Firstly, Campbell's *How to say 'I love you' in Greenlandic* (2011), which ties together environmental concerns about the melting Arctic ice-scape with twelve Greenlandic words and their translations. Secondly, *The Night Hunter* (2011), an art-book created with Roni Gross that uses objects (such as horse bone and driftwood) to materially express Campbell's poem of the same name, later published in her collection, *Disko Bay* (2015). If hyperobjects have, through their enormity, generated an age of "hypocrisy, weakness, and lameness" (Morton 24), Campbell's and Gross's objects gesture towards this age whilst, in their smallness, aiming to push against this passivity. The reader is placed in a position of tangible influence upon the objects; rearrangement becomes a playful, hopeful way to engage with otherwise petrifying questions of loss.

The first section, centred on *How to say 'I love you,'* considers how the reader's performance of control, generated by the ability to rearrange

the book's loose pages, can work to break through cycles of inaction in the face of climate and cultural crises. Focusing on *The Night Hunter*, the second section further delineates the haptic mode of reading demanded by Campbell's book-objects, and argues that the affective responses produced by the book's material elements work to foster a radical intimacy with non-humans, challenging an anthropocentric world-view. Overall, this paper will assess how these book-objects offer new ways to remain actively engaged through a uniquely tactile re-imagining of literature.

Performing Control: *How to say 'I love you' in Greenlandic*

“Can the environment survive without the language? Can the language survive without the environment?”: Campbell poses these questions in the preface to *How to say 'I love you' in Greenlandic*. The preservation of indigenous language goes hand-in-hand with the preservation of indigenous culture; throughout *How to say 'I love you'* and in the readerly engagement it encourages, Campbell suggests that these words and the ways of being they encapsulate work to preserve the Greenlandic environment by envisioning non-destructive ways of living together with the land.

The twelve Kalaallisut words selected by Campbell often point towards a unique way of being within the environment, seen in the equivalences drawn between human actions and the movements of water and ice. For example, *imivog*, “he calls out for joy; or, water is drawn from the shore by the ebb of the sea,” and *puttaarpog*, “he leaps from one ice floe to another; or, he dances,” imply an intertwined existence between human emotion and environment (Campbell, *How to say*). When the words do not explicitly point towards this relationship in their definition, the visuals they are paired with—Campbell's own prints depicting a skyline determined by the shape of ever-mutable ice—suggest an implicit connection. The continually changing shape of the ice mimics the fluctuating meanings within a single word.

Kept in a box, the pages of Campbell's *How to say 'I love you'* are not bound to one another or the cover. Likened by Campbell to cards in a pack in the preface, the reader is free to physically rearrange the

pages to generate new sequences. The preface concludes by stating that “a few cards can create a winning hand for those with the courage to play them,” granting the reader permission to “play” with, reposition, touch, and use the words by going beyond the bounds prescribed by the traditional book form (Campbell, *How to say*). This playfulness forms part of Campbell’s creative project that aims to generate hope that pushes back against fear: if reading is a game, the possibility of winning, alongside losing, is created.

In the work’s original sequencing, the first word is *akunnagaa*: “it is too late to begin” (Campbell, *How to say*). The accompanying print shows a foreboding dark blue covering up a lighter shade in rapid, broad strokes. A small iceberg carves out a shape in the horizon below the darkening sky. In evoking the melting of the ice-caps caused by irreversible climate change, this word and print embody Morton’s claim that “[t]he end of the world has already occurred” and that it is hyper-objects, both literally and through our awareness of them, that have brought this condition about (7). Following the prescribed sequence, the reader arrives finally at *unnuaarpoq*: “there is no night any longer” (Campbell, *How to say*). The hopeful associations of a new dawn encoded in this word are troubled by the accompanying image, depicting a block of light-blue with the skyline reduced to a level line. This recalls the phenomenon of the midnight sun, in which the polar sun does not set for days or months due to the Earth’s axial tilt. The image suggests absence through its flatness; the literal lightness of the natural phenomenon is expressed in terms of loss rather than gain and Campbell furthers this loss by mapping it onto the environment. The image foretells a melted world that has lost the fluctuating skylines produced by moving ice. This doubleness characterises Campbell’s work as a whole, where the playful mode of engagement she encourages is troubled by the climate- and language-anxiety that encodes it.

The existential threat that climate change poses confronts human beings with a paralysing lack of control—the scale of the issues can result in a feeling of powerlessness that stifles response. However, neither Morton nor Campbell claim this condition should lead to inaction; Morton understands that “action on the Earth [...] depends

on” moving away from the idea that the world is about to end and towards the concept that it has already ended (7). Similarly, although the hopeful style of engagement that Campbell encourages is troubled by climate—and language—anxiety, it also troubles this anxiety back. The unbounded pages of *How to say ‘I love you’* leave open the possibility to move a word, place it in another context, change its meaning, or remove it from the sequencing. The hope of *How to say ‘I love you’* is that the performance of control and play on this smaller scale can lead to action beyond the bounds of the book. Campbell’s project not only allows the reader to be an active participant in re-telling the book’s story, but also to see creative action as a necessary form of resistance in the face of the end of the world.

Performing Intimacy: *The Night Hunter*

The possibility to engage with and rearrange elements of the book is key to both *How to say ‘I love you’* and Campbell’s art-book created with New York-based artist Roni Gross, *The Night Hunter*. Campbell’s poem “Nakuarsuuvoq / The night hunter,” featured in her collection *Disko Bay*, is the literary core of *The Night Hunter* as a book-object. In this poem, Campbell describes the poet’s reliance on the elusive figure of the hunter:

I am a poet. I am writing about Aua, the night hunter
and how his feet compact the snow and leave deep traces
as he passes my door destined for the harbour
where his boat is moored. I never see him. He might be a ghost

but that his feet compact the snow and leave deep traces.
[...]. (Campbell, *Disko Bay* 22)

The night hunter’s existence is confirmed only in the traces he leaves behind in his environment: the snow, ice shelf, and shore bear witness to his marks. Significantly, these traces are vulnerable to heat: when the snow and ice melts, the footprints and tracks will be lost. *The Night Hunter*, as an art-book, translates the trace elements of the poem that are under threat of disappearance into material elements held in the

reader's hands. The book's objects echo the traces the hunter leaves: the iron knife, for example, could be the tool the "ice shelf bears the marks of" (Campbell, *Disko Bay* 22). *The Night Hunter* draws on the tension between the transience of the hunter's marks described by the poem and the material permanence of the objects in the art-book.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus lay out six ways of reading surfaces which push against the critical mode of interpretation that seeks to unearth the text's hidden meaning, deep beneath its surface. Two such modes of reading a surface involve paying critical attention to the literal surfaces of the book and accepting texts rather than attempting to master them as objects (Best and Marcus 10). This kind of attention to surfaces is applicable to and complicated by the art-book version of *The Night Hunter*, in which the boundaries between words and objects are blurred. Contained, once again, in a box, the poem is printed in a driftwood-covered book and paired with various sculptural and natural objects to be touched alongside the poem's words. The material context within which the poem is placed transforms the reading experience and creates an environment where words are at a level with stone, wood, metal, hide, and bone. The unexpected material confrontation with the natural world that *The Night Hunter* generates demands that the reader engage with the environment and climate beyond the book.

A type of reading centred around a haptic experience is proposed by the art-book's materiality; the reading of surface is suggested as a way of understanding the poetic content, prioritising the sensory experience of touch over more traditional modes of poetic interpretation. Gross claims that the books produced under her imprint Z'roah, including *The Night Hunter*, "utilize materials as equal partners to the text" (Roni Gross). Through this partnership, the experience of reading is altered and the materiality of the poem's language is heightened. Indeed, in the description of *The Night Hunter* in Gross's portfolio, the participatory element generated by the objects is described, claiming that, "[b]y holding these pieces and placing [them] in the depressions on the board, the reader can participate in the telling of the story" ("The Night Hunter"). By suggesting the placement of these objects as a participatory form of

telling the poem's story, *The Night Hunter* works to equate reading and engagement with the environment. The reader's position in relation to the text and their environment is thus renegotiated: engagement with *The Night Hunter*'s haptic experience necessitates abandoning the detached position of the critic, instead asking the reader, book, and environment to enter into a reciprocal and intertwined relationship.

On opening the box, a strangely natural, material world is revealed. Beneath the lid, the observer finds two types of wood and a rawhide pouch; the pouch contains two soapstone sculptural objects, a blunt iron knife, and a piece of horse bone. The wooden board has six oval indentations in which the various objects can be placed and arranged (see fig. 1). No instructions are provided on how to properly engage with the objects and board, leaving the reader with only two options: non-engagement or play. Playing involves arranging the objects in different orders, at different angles, and occupying different dents.

The art-book continually breaks the rules it is met with: Gross utilises unexpected materials, forms, and textures to question what a book is and how it should function. Playing with the book's various elements positions the reader as an active, creative force rather than a passive consumer (of material, of information, and of stories). Morton argues for the value in thinking about "hyperobjects as transdimensional real things" as "[g]lobal warming is not simply a mathematical abstraction [...]. [Hyperobjects] are real objects that affect other objects" (73). The soapstone, bone, and driftwood of *The Night Hunter* demand a similar mode of thinking; through engagement with these objects, the poem can no longer be read as an abstracted representation of the natural world. Instead, the book becomes a miniaturised theatre in which real objects affect one another and relate to the hyperobjects beyond the bounds of its box. The play and engagement generated through *The Night Hunter*'s materiality works to resist the potential passivity of the reader, thus forcing them to corporeally confront the environment the book invokes.



Fig. 1. Roni Gross and Nancy Campbell, *The Night Hunter* (2011). Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Rec. g.42. Wooden game board, driftwood-covered book and rawhide pouch containing sculptural objects. Photograph mine.

The heightened engagement with the world beyond the bounds of the book that these objects generate is complicated by the geographical origins of the materials utilised by Gross. None of the materials included as part of the art-book are from Greenland: the sculptural objects are made from Canadian soapstone; the iron and horse bone are from Dead Horse Bay in Brooklyn (Gross and Campbell). Rather than claiming to bring Greenland to the reader through transporting its physical traces, the links between the Arctic and the art-book are more abstract. The “sculptural vocabulary” of this work was chosen from primarily found material, with Gross tying this choice directly to the value historically placed on found materials in Greenland because of the lack of “ordinary materials” such as wood, metal, and fibre inland (qtd. in Campbell, “A New Publication”).

Gross's materially generalising move is particularly potent in the case of the horse bone. Dead Horse Bay is known as one of the dirtiest beaches in New York City, "synonymous with refuse, offal, and unpleasantness," with the city shipping its garbage there since the mid-nineteenth century (Urbanus 58). The proliferation of waste found on its shores is irrefutably tied to its industrial past; its vast numbers of bones can be traced to the horse rendering plants historically located there, which processed horse carcasses into fertilizer, glue, soap, nitroglycerin, and more (Urbanus 58-9). The bone's history presents a stark image of animal life instrumentalised as profitable product. In the scavenging and elevation of these bones, Gross conversely calls on Jane Bennett's theory of "thing-power," the ability of inanimate objects to actively produce affect, and the power of waste to transform from "dead stuff" to "live presence" (5). The boundaries between object and subject, inanimate and animate, are questioned. Simultaneously, the inclusion of this waste-product expands the reach of *The Night Hunter*, pointing towards Greenland's position within the interlinked hyperobjects of industrialisation, capitalism, and climate change.

Confrontation with hyperobjects collapses the conception of the world that places humans at its centre; it signifies the "end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone" (Morton 108). The visibility of hyperobjects forces us to acknowledge our own death and transience in contrast with their magnitude. Humans are forced into intimacy with nonhumans as hyperobjects do not discriminate in their sphere of influence; they compromise the boundaries humans have constructed to separate us from all that is other. The "intimacy" Morton describes is not easy: it generates a discomfiting sense of other lifeforms being too close, "of having them under one's skin" (139). Although this intimacy can be uncomfortable, attuning to this closeness with nonhumans is necessary for rejecting an anthropocentric world-view and breaking out of the cycle of inaction.

The Night Hunter performs this disquieting—but necessary—attunement to intimacy that hyperobjects demand through the inclusion of its unexpected objects, particularly the horse bone. The opportunity for an intimate, tactile experience of an object that was once part of a living

creature is created through the bone. By introducing this object into the book's space, Gross and Campbell physically confront the reader with the closeness of death and the function of nonhuman life in the industrial machine. Holding, touching, and playing with the bone allows for an intimacy with the nonhuman, breaking the spell of abstraction that prevents humans from questioning the value denied to other forms of life. The affective response generated by this haptic experience of literature is key to facilitating the intimacy with nonhumans and objects Morton understands as necessary for effective climate action. The history held in the horse bone signifies the interconnectedness between Western industrial development and the loss of indigenous culture, language, and land; the ability for the tactile experience of an object to indicate global connection speaks to the radical intimacy needed to re-imagine our position on Earth.

Conclusion

Both Campbell's own projects and her collaboration with Gross utilise a uniquely haptic experience of the book to mediate the vast gap in scale between the reader as individual and the climate crisis as hyperobject. In doing so, these works not only highlight the interconnectedness of climate change and threats to indigenous cultures, they also advocate for hopeful engagement and action to resist these forces. *How to say 'I love you' in Greenlandic* and *The Night Hunter* demand active engagement from the reader—whether through unbound pages that invite rearrangement or the unexpected inclusion of small objects to be placed on a game-board—and thus collapse the detached, critical passivity wherein the reader may seek shelter. The readings this paper performs in conjunction with Morton's theorisation of hyperobjects show how Campbell's haptic mode of reading seeks to balance the petrifying loss indicated by hyperobjects with direct action on a miniaturised scale.

As the haptic experience of these book-objects is key to their ability to perform a radical re-imagination of textual engagement, they can only be genuinely effective if encountered physically. Beyond the scope of this paper, the necessity of this physical experience opens up the need for questions about the accessibility of these works. Regarding *The Night Hunter*, only eight copies of the art-book (complete with sculptural elements and

game board) were made, and were marketed as “deluxe” copies (Gross and Campbell). Furthermore, priced at \$2500, *The Night Hunter* is reserved for the private collections of the wealthy or the special collections of elite institutions. Also a limited-edition art-book, *How to say ‘I love you’* suffers from similar access-related issues as it is predominantly held in special collections (such as those of the V&A National Art Library and Yale Centre for British Art). In limiting the audience that can experience these works through their materiality, the book-objects become alienated from their own function. Considerations of the ways in which Campbell’s work could be effectively democratised without losing its essential materiality remain a productive and necessary avenue for further study.

How useful are these book-objects as political tools if they are kept in elite institutions, reserved for only those granted access? It is essential that this work, both in terms of climate and language endangerment, can have a productive effect on a wide range of people in order to make a genuine difference to the lives of those it discusses. Campbell writes:

[...] The children do not know the words

yet old men drink in darkness instead of singing.
I am exhausted by the ascent. We begin squabbling, since
the song is tuneless, the children do not know the words.
Our feet sink in the snow; the sun will melt our tracks.
(*Disko Bay* 31)

Once again, the traces of indigenous livelihoods risk melting away like the environment where they originate. Campbell calls on her readers to form relationships with these traces through the haptic experience of her work, and thus actively work to fight their disappearance.

The word that prefaces this paper’s title, *eqqumiitsuliorneq*, is Greenlandic for art and translates literally to ‘the making of strange things.’ It is strangeness, the confrontation with the other or the unexpected, that drives these works. Tactile engagements with strangeness can generate the radical intimacy that Morton describes: it can offer an alternative way of thinking at the end of the world.

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Biography

Hendrikje Dorussen is a graduate researcher whose academic interests include translation theory, 20th and 21st century poetics, eco-criticism, and materiality. She received an MPhil in English Studies from the University of Cambridge in July 2024, with her thesis positing a comparison between Anne Carson and Nancy Campbell, relating their transgressive translational practices to their innovative approaches to the book-form. Due to begin a DPhil in English at Oxford University in October 2025, her doctoral research will continue to investigate formally-innovative literary and artistic responses to language endangerment.