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Learning to Be a Species in the Anthropocene: On Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how contemporary literary fiction responds to the climate crisis and the attendant call for a seemingly universalist "species view" of human beings. What does it mean to think of the human as a species, how can we find traces of species being in literature, and how do they interact with other dimensions of human lives? To address these questions, the paper confronts recent accounts of historical context, animal characters, and capitalist time with Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016). As this confrontation shows, Proulx's novel teaches its readers to be a species—without ignoring differences of race, class, and gender.

Although thinkers continue to worry over the homogenising implications of appeals to "the human," and with good reason, several commentators have argued that we need such a broad category if we are to address the destructive impact of our species on the planet and its other inhabitants. If we take the long view, processes like deforestation, global warming, and species extinction are caused by all of us and impact all of us, however unequally distributed the guilt and subsequent suffering, and one of the questions we have to address is therefore simple, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued: "[w]ho is the we?" ("Climate of History" 220). One strategy to tackle that question, he adds in an influential essay that I will return to, is to learn to think of ourselves as a species, a collective being with a geological force. This is a productive move, for literary studies too, as Kate Marshall and Jesse Oak Taylor have shown. But it is not uncontroversial, Chakrabarty concedes, and not just because "the biological-sounding talk of species" brings to mind "dangerous historical examples" ("Climate and Capital" 214). Ato Quayson has asserted, for example, that this broad conception of the human ignores "the complicating minutiae of lived experience" (367). You only have to juxtapose the effects of climate change in southern Sudan with those in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, he notes, to see that "[m]an-as-geophysical force … is the product of specific political, social, cultural, and economic realities [that can be] so different as to defeat the purpose of seeing them as similar" (369). Even or especially in the face of climate change, we should not forget that humanity is not one. Yet the "charge of depoliticization" in Bruce Robbins's phrase (8), does not make climate change go away. Nor should we forget that the "slow violence" of its effects poses urgent threats to "poor communities" especially, as Rob Nixon has demonstrated (16).

Both the universalising gesture and its socio-political critique have important precursors. In Mark Greif's account, intellectuals and writers from the 1930s until the 1970s experienced a sequence of global threats that included totalitarianism and capitalist conformism, and they addressed these challenges to the rights of man by advocating a new "humanism" or "[r]e-enlightenment" and inventing a new rationale for human protection (23), believing that "[m]an must carry his warrant within himself, like his heart or lungs" (12). Their efforts led to the

emergence of "crisis of man discourse," a particular form of discourse in which the direction of history, the impact of technology, the role of classic literature, and the nature of "man" were tirelessly discussed. In the realm of literature, this led to the "nove[l] of man" (122), a particular type of work that often featured the word "man" in the title, as in *The Old Man and the Sea* or *Invisible Man* (or, more relevant here, *Man in the Holocene*). In such works, writers like Ernest Hemingway and Ralph Ellison pitted these abstract questions about the human condition against lived reality and thereby anticipated subsequent critiques of this unmarked, universalising category, which passed over race, class, and gender in trying to build a common cause. There are strong continuities between "crisis of man" thinking and climate change discourse, Greif's conclusion notes, referring to Chakrabarty's recent invocations of the human. These continuities are particularly clear in Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015). In his short book on the new global crisis, Scranton explicitly asks "what does it mean to be human?" (20) and professes his faith in "a human community existing beyond any parochial identity, local time, or single place" (24). He argues for "a new Enlightenment" (89) in which the classics of cultural "memory" (95) figure prominently, and feels that climate change forces us to embrace the stoic lesson that we have "to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization" (21). Because "[t]he problem," he notes, returning to the first person plural, "is that the problem is us" (68). Bearing in mind Greif's analysis, one might also establish a lineage between earlier "novels of man" and a book like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006): just consider the fact that the protagonist responds to the question "are you a doctor?" with "I'm not anything" (55), and tells his son that they are the "good guys" because they "carry the fire," yet another elusive foundation for human protection, "inside" themselves (234). These continuities do not mean that the components of "crisis of man" discourse have remained unchanged: as Greif observes, the old problem of man has mutated into debates on posthumanism, for instance (326). So one question for literary critics now, seeing that earlier novels helped to rethink the previous discourse of man, is how contemporary fiction addresses the new global crisis and the new universalist conception of man as a species.

This paper tackles that problem in two ways. On a theoretical level, I return to Chakrabarty's writings on climate change as well as to recent publications on the historical novel, animal metaphors, and capitalist time to arrive at a better understanding of human species being in early twenty-first-century fiction. What does it mean to think of the human as a species, how can we find traces of species being in literary works, and how do they interact with other dimensions of human lives and communities? Making things more concrete, my answers draw on Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016), a recent novel about the "taking down of the world's forests," as the cover puts it. Spanning more than three hundred years and seven hundred pages, there are three layers to this epic story. First, Proulx's novel follows a large cast of characters drawn from two families, the rich Dukes and the poor Sels, who play various roles in the timber industry, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along what is now the border between US and Canada—a regional focus which implies that *Barkskins* fits into Proulx's larger project of what Alex Hunt calls "critical regionalism" (2). Second, by charting the rise and fall of the Duke timber empire, *Barkskins* illustrates the fact that globalisation is not only "that in which expansion contracts and contraction enriches, it is also that in which enrichment haunts" ("Globalit" 162), as Ian Baucom observes, for the activities of the Duke company expand horizons (towards China, Brazil, New Zealand) while concentrating wealth in certain zones (Amsterdam, Boston, Chicago) and prompting haunting returns of cultural difference (via the Mi'kmaw heritage of the Sel family especially). Proulx's novel not only highlights characters and capital, but also climate—as a dog named after Hans Carl von Carlowitz already suggests (459). From the start, when René Sel helps to cut the forests of New France, the novel underscores the destructive impact of human logging: "[a]s he cut, … the vast invisible web of filaments that connected human life to animals [and] trees to flesh … shivered as each tree fell and one by one the web strands snapped" (12). And the knowledge that everyone tampers with this web, even native people who are forced to work in the lumber camps, leads another character to see humans in a different light: "I believe that humankind is evolving into a terrible new species and I am sorry that I am one of them" (658). Environmental destruction is a

sign of power, but also of finitude: in the book's penultimate page, the sight of melting glaciers offers a glimpse of "human extinction" (712). Addressing this crisis is "terribly important to all of us humans" (706), another character concludes, again adopting the broad view alluded to by Chakrabarty. Although it is not a typical cli-fi novel along the lines studied by Adam Trexler, *Barkskins* is hence a good starting point if we want to examine the conjoined histories of capital and climate and the figure of the human as a species. Moving from eighteenth-century literature and the start of the Anthropocene to twenty-first-century fiction in the age of Amazon, my analysis of Proulx's species thinking does not focus on elegy and extinction, like Taylor's and Marshall's, but on context, character, and time. These three elements of *Barkskins* enable us to recalibrate our view of the novel and the human, and teach us, not just to die as a civilisation, but to be a species.

Humans in an Extrahistorical Context

To understand human species being and its literary manifestations, we first need to return to Chakrabarty's influential series of papers on climate change discourse and to consider Ian Baucom's response in a consecutive string of papers that adapts these insights for literary studies. The first set of papers, especially "The Climate of History," is well-known, but it is worth revisiting the composite argument of these publications before turning to Baucom. For all of these ideas shed light on Proulx's *Barkskins*, and its portrayal of the human in the Anthropocene.

Chakrabarty's argument consists of four elements. The starting point is that man-made climate change poses significant epistemological challenges, by collapsing the distinction between slow natural history (the purview of the hard sciences) and fast human history (the domain of the humanities and the social sciences), and by revealing the difference between manageable risks (as understood by policy thinkers) and unpredictable uncertainties (as highlighted by climate scientists). An interdisciplinary response to these issues, however successful, will not escape additional moral questions, second, for climate change confronts us with the uncomfortable truth that the freedoms of modernity, formerly considered to be undisputed goods, were purchased at the price of

turning to destructive fossil fuels. This also means that, turning to the present, the global poor's legitimate calls for improved living standards may yield the undesirable result of a larger carbon footprint and a higher average global temperature. A classic double bind, social justice comes at a considerable environmental price. Third, climate change calls for ontological revision. For our shared predicament as inhabitants of the planet shows, according to Chakrabarty, that a postcolonial analysis of capitalism and its Western roots should be complemented by a form of "[s]pecies thinking" that unites human beings, "a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe" ("Climate of History" 213, 222). Without invalidating earlier approaches, we now need to consider "three images of the human":

> The universalist-Enlightenment view of the human as potentially the same everywhere, the subject with capacity to bear and exercise rights; the postcolonial-postmodern view of the human as … endowed everywhere with … differences of class, sexuality, gender, history, and so on … And [finally] the figure of the human … as a geological force on the planet, … a species, a collectivity whose commitment to fossil-fuel based … civilization is now a threat to that civilization itself. ("Postcolonial" 1-2)

In making sense of our present condition, we should consider human beings as citizens bearing shared rights, as subjects characterised by individual differences but also as one planet-wide force of natural destruction. Learning to see ourselves in the latter light may help to rethink our destructive ways, by invalidating pernicious forms of anthropocentrism and by reconnecting us to the other animals trying to make ever-smaller homes on our increasingly humanised planet. But Chakrabarty concludes on a pessimistic note by returning to the initial epistemological challenge, and underlining that the combined activity of the human species and the resulting mixtures of human and natural history can be explained, perhaps, but not understood on an individual human level. In his view, "[t]here c[an] be no phenomenology of us as a species" ("Climate of History" 220), and even the existence of "art and fiction" does not change

the fact that "we cannot ever experience ourselves as a geophysical force" ("Postcolonial" 12). In the end, our conceptual tools are inadequate to the task of addressing these epistemological, moral, and ontological challenges.

Sharing Chakrabarty's postcolonial background, Ian Baucom has adapted these insights for literary studies, and his adaptation can be summarised by returning to the different parts of the argument. On an epistemological level, Baucom reiterates the observations that human and natural history can no longer be disentangled, and that humanities scholars should therefore rethink their methods in an interdisciplinary fashion. Shifting the focus slightly on the moral and ontological levels, he subsequently turns to the problem of individual freedom (rather than global justice) and to the scene of a person thrown into a particular historical situation (instead of the weather-changing spread of a blundering species). This adaptation of Chakrabarty, Baucom clarifies, is really "an expanded variation of the question of freedom that Sartre inherits from Marx, the question of how we might … make something of what our mixed, multiscaled situation is making of us," the difference with Sartre being that Baucom does not restrict that situation to the single scale of human history but expands it to include conditions from "the infra- and suprahistorical domains" ("Moving" 152): "[i]t is only by accounting, simultaneously, … for the relation between … 'historical' time, and the infra- and suprahistorical domains of psychology, physiology, biology, geology … that one can truly provide an adequate account of the human dialectic of freedom and necessity, … of that full range of 'properties' from which the human situation is composed" ("History 4°" 130). To understand the situation of a particular human actor, its biographical and historical dimensions need to be linked to its "nonhuman" or "extrahistorical" components, zooming in on small neuronal processes and zooming out to encompass large evolutionary and geological constraints that are now directly intertwined with individual human activities. Rephrasing this in Chakrabarty's terms, the description of our situation in the Anthropocene should include the three figures of the human mentioned earlier and perform the associated modes of historical and extrahistorical analysis (in terms of citizen rights, subaltern identities, and climate-changing species).

This argument seems compatible with Chakrabarty's. But Baucom's conclusion is notably more optimistic. Thinking closely about our mixed situation enables us to see, according to Baucom, that change remains possible even though the planet seems to be altered beyond repair already. At least in part, this optimism stems from Baucom's belief, contra Chakrabarty, that we can "[e]xperienc[e] our compound ways of being human" by reading multiscaled works of fiction like Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* ("Moving" 156). For in these novels, Baucom shows, anthropocentric concepts of time, nature, and the human are redefined by exposing human objects and bodies to "species time" ("Human" 19) and by radically expanding the makeup of fictional characters and their context to approximate the multiscaled situation of the Anthropocene. The proper response to present challenges is modelled, in short, in a new type of fictional character as well as in "a new form of the historical novel" that Baucom calls the "extrahistorical novel" ("Moving" 154). The newly complex situation of "the human" is exemplified by the life of Sonmi-451, for instance, a character from *Cloud Atlas*. As a clone, she is zoologically linked to other Sonmis, but she also sees "petro-clouds" that confirm the catastrophic geological blending of humans and weather (146), and inherits, fuelled by "an intensive program of humanistic reading" (147), the Enlightenment dream of freedom and personhood. In the Anthropocene, in sum, the human inhabits a multiscaled situation that connects biographical time to the extrahistorical timeframe of the species. This composite view takes shared rights and different identities into account, and hence alleviates fears over reductively universal views of "the" human.

A first take on literary species thinking, Baucom's argument reveals how a novel like *Barkskins* opens up restricted understandings of context and character. Consider one of its more prominent characters, Jinot Sel, a mid-nineteenth-century descendant of René Sel and his Mi'kmaw wife Mari. Jinot's identity and situation are complex, to put it mildly, so it is no surprise that this mixed-race character feels alienated from himself at one point, as if he is "a hybrid creature" (400). Expert at cutting trees, navigating timber-filled rivers, and recognising high-quality axes, Jinot's activities provide readers with a glimpse of different parts of the

timber industry. At the same time, he can read and write, knows the classical figure of Hephaestus, and seems destined to transgress class and race barriers by taking over an axe-making company (398). Yet Jinot's story ultimately fails to fit the template of the *Bildungsroman*, in which a disenfranchised character gradually acquires more rights and insight, and rather suggests that class and race boundaries are insurmountable. When his employer dies during a joint journey to New Zealand, local authorities mistakenly accuse Jinot of murder and force him to return to the lumber camps, cutting short his climb on the social ladder and even ending his life, as an untreated infection leads to his premature death. Becoming a citizen with full rights (Chakrabarty's first figure of the human) proves difficult because of differences in class and race (the second figure), not to mention gender (Jinot's sexual identity is complex too). And the novel frequently stresses the structural injustice faced by Indian and mixed-race characters, not least in the juxtaposition of its two families, only one of which grows rich off the land. That humans are also active on a geological plane (Chakrabarty's third figure) is revealed in the ending of Jinot's story, for his buried body is subject to the devastating forces of "soil erosion" (480), in a scene that links his individual narrative to a large, anonymous process: "[t]he mountain streams, joined by other runaway water, raced flashing down the hills carrying rocks, ricker slash, logs, gravel, soil, the old cookhouse, and, disinterring Jinot Sel, swept his carcass out into the Pacific" (441). Compounding the tragedy, not everyone is aware of this destructive consequence of logging. As a head of the Duke company is forced to ask: "what *does* happen to a hill with the trees removed?" (552). And the fact that this entrepreneur is a woman ably struggling against gender prejudices, making the reader root for her, only underlines the complex moral situation of the Anthropocene, in which human rights conflict with nonhuman environments.

Nor is the end the only moment in Jinot's story when the impact of humans on the landscape is revealed. Consider the apocalyptic Miramichi fire, a real historical event that was caused by human negligence and remains one of the largest recorded forest fires on the North-American continent. Burning much of New Brunswick and sweeping down on the lumber camp where Jinot is working in 1825, it

forces humans and animals alike into the water: "[t]he teamster was in the pool with his oxen, sharing it with several deer, a wildcat and a black bear cub" (386). And if this forced alliance of humans and nonhumans seems idyllic, consider the fate of the cub and its injured mother: "[s]he died right there and the cub just kept on tryin[g] to suck" (391). Nor is this fire a one-off event. In fact, the novel explicitly ties the natural disaster to the larger capitalist system these characters find themselves in. When Jinot first witnesses the production of axes, he notes that "it was the Miramichi fire compressed into a bed of coals, the hurricane wind blowing only at the command of the bellows" (399). Trapped by larger forces, the novel's characters are indeed like passive "lea[ves]" floating on the wind (50, 203). So much for Enlightenment freedom. And bearing in mind Baucom's argument, the fact that Jinot dies because of illness, like so many characters, especially native people confronted with imported diseases, underlines the importance of small- as well as large-scale factors in his historical "situation." In Proulx's novel, that situation hence includes "extrahistorical" factors that appear to belong to natural history, like erosion and smallpox. Zooming out, it could in fact be argued that the many smaller stories comprising *Barkskins*'s mosaic fit into three narrative templates that correspond with Chakrabarty's three figures of the human: a story of education in which characters acquire rights, status, and knowledge, a story of identity in which characters struggle with injustices related to class, race, and gender, and a story of unfolding destruction in which forests disappear, animal species go extinct, and precious soil erodes. A crucial thread connecting these interlinked stories is the fact that native characters are treated unjustly, presciently aware of ecological interconnection yet forced to participate in environmental despoliation. If this suggests that Proulx's work evokes the cultural stereotype of the "ecological Indian"—a figure that, despite modern critiques, plays a central role in native self-definition past and present, as Joni Adamson and Annette Kolodny have argued—it also reveals that a broad perspective on the human does not necessarily imply a neglect of individual identities or socio-political issues. In this novel, the story of climate change and the story of the poor are one and the same. Placing people in an extrahistorical context reveals social as well as environmental injustice.

Waves, Animals, and Other Humans

Although Baucom's modification of Chakrabarty enables us to perceive the multiscaled situation of fictional characters in the Anthropocene, it could be argued that its composite picture of the human remains too invested in the notion of individual characters to develop a truly posthuman form of species thinking. Adding infra- and suprahistorical constraints to a character's historical situation enriches our picture of the historical novel, to be sure, but there is no strong reason to single out one dimension of this situation and call that a species perspective. What is more, Chakrabarty himself already feels conflicted about the term: he asserts that the word "species" is but "a placeholder" ("Climate of History" 221), and invites us to call this mode of human existence "a 'species' *or something else*" ("Postcolonial" 14, emphasis added). These qualifications make sense, for it could be argued that a definition in terms of species being is hard to reconcile with an emphasis on geological force. That is why I will now examine and flesh out this biological perspective on the human, bearing in mind Chakrabarty's observations that species are never fixed and that "personhood is … no less of a reduction of [the] whole human being" than the term "species" ("Climate of History" 215). Assigning animal characteristics to other humans has been a dangerous rhetorical move, as Cary Wolfe and others have shown, but their inspiring work in animal studies proves that a species perspective may play a progressive role too, by questioning boundaries between and among humans and nonhumans. Such an approach provides an additional way of thinking about human life in the Anthropocene. If we want to rethink our mode of existence along species lines, how do literature's animal images help us to adopt this modified perspective?

Before we can locate this form of species thinking in Proulx's novel, we need to familiarise ourselves with two recent accounts of "character" and "personhood" in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. Certain differences notwithstanding, these analyses converge in that they identify two competing conceptions of human life in the prose of George Eliot and Laurence Sterne. First, Pearl Brilmyer has argued that we should differentiate between two conceptions of fictional characters. Critics have traditionally privileged the modern, humanistic notion of

character typical of psychological novels, she claims, with an emphasis on depth, individual interiority, and the narrative development of the "round" character. Yet Eliot's late turn to "the typological tradition of the character sketch" complicates this story (Brilmyer 36), and hints at the alternative, nonhuman view characteristic of natural history writing, with its focus on carefully observed description and an externalised view of "flat" characters and their "typical" behaviour:

> Eliot's naturalistic investment in describing people in terms of the characterological traits they share with nonhuman animals calls into question the human exceptionalism of novelistic modes of characterization. Rather than craft characters as uniquely psychological beings, her sketches put them on the same plane as other creatures; like fish, sea lions, or even microscopic vorticellae, human beings are conditioned by bodily frameworks and habitual responses… (36)

Treating "the problem of embodiment as a (species-specific) universal" (38), Eliot's late work hence "situat[es] the human as an object of natural-historical inquiry [and thereby] decenters and dehierarchises the human within the *scala natura[e]*" (45). Rather than narrate the interior development of a unique human individual, her writing catalogues the behaviours typical of varied forms of life, human as well as nonhuman. This type of literature therefore offers a "natural history of human life" (42).

Heather Keenleyside similarly distinguishes two conceptions of human life. In Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the fictional merchant Walter Shandy upholds the view ascribed to John Locke, a "property model of personhood" ("First-Person" 118) in which minds and bodies are imagined to consist of building blocks that can be assembled and taken apart at will, "effectively transform[ing] the person from a living creature into a collection of goods" (120). By contrast, Walter's son Tristram and Sterne himself develop an alternative strain in Locke's work, Keenleyside argues, which does not model the person on a thing but on "the living animal" (139), the fact that we share traits and sentiments with family members and other members of the human species, not to

mention with other vulnerable creatures, who are often maltreated by proponents of the property model of personhood. Against the idea that we can separate biological and biographical life, Sterne reveals that even the first-person form of life-writing has a generic, species dimension, which can be captured by natural-historical description, "a form familiar from nature television or field guides about, say, 'the bobcat'" (133). Keenleyside finds a similar logic at work in James Thomson's *The Seasons,* an influential eighteenth-century poem that muddies the modern distinction between individual humans and generic nonhumans via techniques of personification that promiscuously link trees, animals, and humans, by mentioning unassigned "body parts that could belong to any creature" (eyes, ears, hearts, and so on) ("Personification" 455), and by "chang[ing] all kinds of beings into people (or, in Thomson's various terms, into "tribes, nations … or kinds") rather than into persons as individuals" (453). Like Sterne's novel, Thomson's poem raises important questions: "If personifications change things to persons, then what is a person? How does it differ from a 'sensible being' or from 'animal life'? Are persons always humans, and are humans always persons?" (450). The net result is "an ontology that insists that one's identity essentially depends on the whole of which one is a part" (459), a view akin to "the network of relations" (44) Brilmyer finds in Eliot. These arguments imply that throughout literary history, writers have counteracted anthropocentric understandings of character and personhood by adopting an external, natural-historical view on the human animal.

Another way of approaching our species being is therefore to consider dimensions of human existence we share with other creatures, ranging from the threat of extinction I mentioned earlier to everyday forms of bodily vulnerability, shared family traits, peculiar behavioural quirks, and a bird's-eye view of large human populations. When a reader encounters such passages in literature, she is again encouraged to abandon human privilege, to take up a distanced perspective on our activities, and to learn to be a species. And this happens throughout *Barkskins*, as the following series of descriptions shows (I provide several samples, as their cumulative effect is important for my argument): "[s]o many fish the river seemed made of hard muscle" (7); "[he] pranced around like a rooster [and like] a rooster, his wet eye

fell on the only hens in sight" (30); "[the] mouth [of Mari's son], like Mari's, curled at the corners, and all who noticed this curving smile thought of her" (161); "[a]s quick as an eel grasping its prey Captain Strik himself ran onto the deck" (238); "the lady crows watch[ed] [the males and their feathers] coolly, … measuring the presentation of every point with critical eyes" (412); "like a salmon he longed to go back to [the Atlantic]" (421); "she has the eyesight of that little bird that finds invisible insects" (447); "the rich man's daughter [has] come to see the workin[g] stiffs like a zoo" (506); "a victim of dropsy that made her legs swell to the size, shape and color of Boston harbor seals" (526); "[h]is nose was a pulp and the swollen blackened features resembled a boiled hog face" (565); "recovered from the Spanish flu that had killed Chicagoans like chickens" (658); "she clung to his leg like a barnacle" (681); "[r]ivers of birds on their great autumnal journeys—Hudsonian godwits, whole nations of hawks, countless black warblers …—looking like tiny men with their black berets" (22). As this catalogue of descriptions indicates, *Barkskins* does not only feature characters like Outger, Charley, and Sapatisia who are interested in natural history and the traits of specific kinds of plants and animals, but also turns the tables on its human characters, systematically inviting readers to adopt a similarly external perspective on the Dukes, the Sels, and the other creatures participating in its fictional world. Bodies are fragile, mortal, and open to their environments, family members recycle features and behaviours, humans as well as animals behave in characteristic ways, and the perspective of the individual creature is often discarded for a panoramic view of larger populations, "nations of hawks," and Chicagoans dead like flocks of "chickens."

In fact, the novel frequently highlights human populations to describe the fast and lethal spread of European settlers and their flora and fauna across the North-American continent. These settlers are described in the quasi-naturalistic terms of a flood—"as a great wave sweeping over [native tribes]" (181); "billows of overseas white people arriving in countless ships" (177); "[a] tide of agricultural-minded immigrants" (538); an "overwhelming tide of men with axes" (645)—and in related animal terms—"breed[ing] like mice" (213), they are "human locusts" (363); "human birds of prey" (455); "like spring

geese heading north" (469); migrating "in numbers like … passenger pigeons" (323), the latter being, not coincidentally, an extinct species. Similar descriptions of humans have functioned in dehumanising ways in the past, but here they level rather than erect hierarchies, in posthumanist fashion, and are applied to the powerful rather than the powerless, to migrants migrating from rather than to Europe. Again, this literary technique defamiliarises our perspective on the human. It might even explain why several reviewers of the novel have complained about *Barkskins*'s characters, who are not brought to life from the inside but described from the outside, and in numbers too large to process for the individual human reader. According to one critic, reading the novel is a bit "like strolling around the world's largest ant farm" (Garner n.p.). And that, I am suggesting, may be the point. Proulx is not the only contemporary writer to use such strategies, moreover. You just need to return to Scranton's nonfiction book to find similar images of the human species, these "clever, adaptable animals" (38) that can be seen as "creatures of light" (115) but also as a "swarm" of honeybees (55) or even as "a growth of carbon scum on a spinning rock in the backwater of an unremarkable galaxy" (116). Developing the legacy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing, these naturalist descriptions of human animals are hence a second way in which contemporary writing is teaching us to be a species.

Real Time, Quality Time, Species Time

Recent accounts of the extrahistorical novel and creaturely life enable us to identify two ways in which *Barkskins* hints at the species thinking called for by Chakrabarty, namely by expanding the context impinging on fictional characters and by expanding our conception of personhood beyond the human. To conclude I will briefly consider Proulx's novel in terms of its reading experience rather than its plot or descriptions, and that enables us to situate the work, however schematically, in its contemporary socio-economic context. What does it mean that *Barkskins* appears now rather than in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, in an age characterised by the conditions of the Anthropocene but also by the power of the online bookstore Amazon? Situating the

novel in the contemporary literary field may seem a detour but it will return us to climate and capitalism, and reveals one final way in which *Barkskins* encourages its readers to adopt a species view.

In a characteristically insightful intervention, Mark McGurl has recently proposed that Jeff Bezos's "everything store" Amazon can now be considered the primary condition of literary history, culminating in a situation where "the entrepreneurial … ethos [and] temporality of 'customer service' might be taken as the dominant logic of contemporary fiction" (447). After explaining the company's philosophy and operations, Kindle Direct Publishing especially, McGurl traces the ties between three features of the Amazon mindset and the early twenty-first-century literature it sells so successfully. First, the company's obsessive investment in "customer service" (453), an aggressive submission to customer-kings, finds a striking parallel in the genre of the billionaire romance made famous by E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Second, Bezos's participation in projects like the Clock of the Long Now reveals an interest in deep time that is less about a genuine interest in the future of the "species" (468) than about a dream of "corporate immortality" (468) on the part of a company that thrives on epic feats of logistics and technocratic optimism, staple features of that genre which specialises in future thinking, post-apocalyptic stories like Hugh Howey's *Wool*. Upon closer scrutiny, these two edgy genres are hence "the organic expression of Bezosian billionaire consciousness" (462). Third, whereas the new post-industrial economy exemplified by Amazon inaugurates the "general condition of *hurry*" (462, original emphasis) required by good customer service, this rapid "real time" regime triggers a compensatory shift towards a slower "quality time," as experienced, notably, in the act of reading literary fiction, a genre which does not aim for suspense but "finds its thematic substance in the narrative dilation of human intimacy" (465). But this release valve, McGurl argues, is "more compensatory than revolutionary," as quality time's efficient pleasure maximisation is but the flipside of real time's customer-oriented hurry (466). Here too, "reader enjoyment" is the "ultimate end" (456). Left, right, and centre, then, the literary field is being recreated in the image of Amazon and the post-industrial economy it represents.

Bearing these ideas in mind, Proulx's novel seems easy to describe. A long novel low on direct suspense, *Barkskins* is the type of work that requires readers to slow down, take their time, and reflect on issues that transcend the rat race (pun intended) of everyday life. There are interesting complications, however. McGurl's ideas encourage us to notice, for instance, that this literary novel includes episodes akin to the two forms of genre fiction typical of the age of Amazon. The BDSM romance makes an appearance in the story of Posey, a "flying tigress" (370) who bites and scratches her surprised husband (and not only him), and traces of post-apocalyptic fiction can be detected at the end, with talk of "dark diversity" (709) and "electromagnetic space storms" (712). Most of the erotic and scientific action takes place off-stage (the novel refuses to take us to the future, as if to underline its rejection of techno-fixes), so these generic expectations are frustrated too. But the novel nevertheless registers the author's awareness of contemporary tastes. More importantly, the reviews I mentioned earlier suggest that this slow work of literary fiction actually proceeds too fast to dilate human intimacy and deliver on its promise of a non-hurried form of quality time. *Barkskins* acquaints us with various vivid lives but its three-hundred-year sweep also brushes aside individual characters, causing the book to hurry up as well as slow down. It might appear as though the novel's temporal regime is not real-time hurry or quality-time dilation but rather the larger-than-human lifespan of the transnational company. For despite its environmental message, CEO consciousness is not absent from the novel, given its genealogy of the Duke empire, its detailed evocations of board meetings and epic feats of logistics. Yet the novel begins before the company exists and it continues after it is sold off, disappearing as abruptly as the minor characters living in its orbit. For all its fascination with boardroom politics, there is no dream of corporate immortality here. When a company representative writes a short history of the company, moreover, these "sixteen pages of company fantasy bound in leather" (673) clearly fail to live up to Proulx's seven hundred pages of company reality. So the conclusion seems to be, bearing in mind my argument about the novel's expanded context and animal people, that the novel's temporal regime is species time rather than company time. And the point is not that the book occasionally

refers to the long timeframes of evolution and geology (though it does that too) but that it tries to make its readers experience these long durations in the reading process, through its high turnover of literary characters especially.

The claim that this feature can be linked to species thinking is reinforced by an important observation about animal characters. Animals, as Ivan Kreilkamp has observed, are always at the risk of being put to death, and their appearance in fiction is therefore typically fleeting, short-lived, and unremembered, belonging more properly to short sketches than to extended novels: "[a]n animal character is … an incomplete or fragile character, one whose continuity over a long span of time or pages cannot be guaranteed or anticipated, and one whose presence in a long novel may implicitly challenge that very form's presumption that individual identity can be maintained over a long duration" (84). As the latter part of this claim indicates, a similar fate may befall human characters, with animal metaphors hinting at the fact that they too will be quickly forgotten and their "individual identity, personality and memory" might likewise be erased (85). In being easily forgotten, these humans are like animals. And that is precisely what happens to several minor characters in *Barkskins*, who are sometimes introduced and killed off in the same sentence: "[A]t Odanak, Theotiste had married and fathered a son, who died of measles in his third year, two days after the mother succumbed to the same burning illness" (159). More importantly, it could be argued that this is what happens to *all the other characters too*, as they similarly struggle to be remembered by the reader in the novel's speeded-up succession of births and deaths. This peculiar temporal regime is another way in which the novel hints at species thinking. It could be argued that this more-than-human pace constitutes a critical intervention, but it can be interpreted as a compensatory mechanism too, species time helping to reconcile us to company time much in the way that quality-time dilations help us to accept real-time hurry. Nevertheless, Proulx's work attempts to make readers experience what it is like to be an unremembered animal, to be a historical actor amid the competing claims of justice, identity, and erosion, to be part of a group of animals moving among other vulnerable creatures who are persons too. It teaches us to be a species without

ignoring race, class, and gender, and enriches our conception of climate fiction, and of the planetary problems that are a human crisis too.

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