

New British Nature Writing, or an Emergent Hope

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ABSTRACT

Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, Britain has witnessed the emergence of a new literary movement called “new nature writing.” This paper aims to call attention to new British nature writing as an emergent genre marked by its practitioners’ will to replace anthropocentrism with ecocentrism, present an all-embracing understanding of nature, and interweave the personal with the ecocritical. To this end, it offers insights into selected memoirs of contemporary British writers, including Kathleen Jamie’s essay trilogy *Findings*, *Sightlines*, and *Surfacing*; Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun*; and Carol Donaldson’s *On the Marshes: A Journey into England’s Waterlands*. Such non-fiction first person narratives, labeled as eco-memoirs, may provide an eco-centered approach to the natural world in the Anthropocene, and thus cherish hopes for a livable future for our planet. (HBM)

KEYWORDS: new nature writing, eco-memoir, British nature writing, nature, hope



The global community is currently facing a profound ecological crisis, accentuated by the successive publication of scientific reports validating this critical situation. One of the most recent reports in the field, *The Global Climate 2011–2020: A Decade of Accelerating Climate Change*, issued by the World Meteorological Organization in 2023, stresses that rising temperatures have led to the prevalence of food insecurity, contributing to mass migration and impairing health at a cost of billions of dollars in loss and damage (50). In light of such facts, a livable future sounds but a matter of hope. It is, indeed, quite hard to be hopeful about the future of our planet when we consider even a fraction of the anthropogenic disasters we are currently witnessing, such as deforestations in the Amazon rainforests, Greenland’s ice melting unprecedentedly fast, the sixth mass extinction accelerating, and an increasing number of deaths linked to air pollution in coal-powered countries. However, Maria Ojala, who has investigated the correlation between hope and pro-environmental behavior among a group of young adults in Sweden, suggests that if people trust their own and others’ ability to influence environmental

problems positively, they are more inclined towards environmental engagement, but if they are unrealistically optimistic and ignore the threat caused by current environmental problems, they are less likely to take responsibility (636). Although Ojala's findings cover a limited number of young adults in Sweden, her research is significant in terms of highlighting the importance of the quest for hope in the context of current environmental problems: hope is required to act for the planet. Thus, hope emerges as an urgent need in facing the ecological crisis unless it involves the latter's denial. At this point, literature, specifically first-person narratives that voice ecological concerns may hold out some hope.

In fact, ecocritics have been trying to show that literature and the humanities can and should assume responsibility and take action for the physical world since the early 1990s, when "ecocriticism emerged as a recognizable critical school" (Glotfelty xviii). Cheryll Glotfelty made one of the earliest academic moves to bring literature and the physical world closer with her frequently cited remark in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996): "Literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter and ideas interact" (xix). Like Glotfelty, many ecocritics have drawn attention to the role literature and arts can play in the ongoing ecological crisis. For example, in his *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), the American critic Lawrence Buell argued that literature can help us develop eco-centric values and reorient "human attention and values to a stronger ethic of care for the nonhuman environment" (*Writing* 6). Timothy Morton, a British ecocritic, believes in the role of the arts in expanding the limits of our perception when it comes to beings other than us: "Poetry won't save the planet. Sound science and progressive social policies will do that. But art can allow us to glimpse beings that exist beyond or between our normal categories" (60). Echoing such sentiments, Richard Kerridge, a leading nature writer and ecocritic, also states that "[e]cocritics hope to influence readers and writers so that works concerned with environmental values will become more popular, and new works will emerge to inspire change" (361).

Apparently, the possibility that literary professionals can contribute to the saving of the world from a man-made crisis has been acknowledged, and in this context one promising inference is that although poets or writers have not necessarily been trained to decrease pollution, stop climate change, or increase biodiversity, they can help revisit humanity's deeply rooted anthropocentric attitude to the world. In this regard, the recent movement in Britain called "new nature writing" merits special attention. British nature

writing helps to challenge anthropocentrism and thus emerges as a hopeful movement due to contemporary writers' efforts to replace anthropocentrism with an eco-centric viewpoint, offering an all-embracing understanding of nature, and interweaving the personal with the ecocritical by rejecting the culture/nature and human/animal dichotomies.

This study offers insights into selected contemporary British writers' memoirs: Kathleen Jamie's essay trilogy *Findings* (2005), *Sightlines* (2012), and *Surfacing* (2019); Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016); and Carol Donaldson's *On the Marshes: A Journey into England's Waterlands* (2017), with the intention of introducing the different tenets of new British nature writing.

Jamie's essay trilogy has been included because of its comprehensive nature that lets the writer treat diverse topics such as climate change, extinct species, and loss of habitats showing that this new genre supports a broad definition of nature. Liptrot's memoir demonstrates that nature writing welcomes self-centered, therapeutic writings that expand into ecological narratives by presenting the author's attempts at connecting to the natural world in her hometown in Orkney, Scotland,¹ while struggling to get over alcoholism. Donaldson's book focusing on England's wetlands and the people living there illustrates that new nature writing regards humans as a species sharing an ecosystem with non-humans, and thus it promotes environmental justice discussions.

New nature writing in Britain

"New nature writing" was first used as a term by Jason Cowley in the 2008 special edition, "The New Nature Writing," of the British literary magazine *Granta* to refer to a recent movement in Britain (qtd. in Smith, "An Archipelagic" 3). This issue marks the beginning of the movement that has grown exponentially since then (Hampton 455). What Cowley means by "new nature writing" is clarified in his editorial note:

When we began to commission articles for this issue we were interested less in what might be called old nature writing—by which I mean the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer—than in writers who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways. We also wanted the contributions to be voice-driven, narratives told in the first person, for the writer to be present in the story, if sometimes only bashfully. The best new nature writing is also an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue. (10)

Jos Smith, who published one of the earliest book-length studies, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (2014), indicates that about ten years earlier than Cowley, Richard Kerridge had underlined the need for a new way of writing about nature by employing the same term (“The New” 270). Specifically, Kerridge states that “[e]nvironmentalism calls for a new nature writing, clearly differentiated from the conservative tradition and aware of its appeal and dangers” (qtd. in Smith, “The New” 270).

From both Cowley’s and Kerridge’s viewpoints, it is apparent that nature writing, which has largely been shaped by Romanticism, needs a distinct approach in the current millennium. The quest for novelty might result from the fact that some remarkable books such as Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* (1977) and J. A. Baker’s *The Peregrine* (1967) notwithstanding, British nature writing went through a period of stagnation in the twentieth century for diverse reasons. In fact, it was mostly trivialized, and the respect afforded to the genre in Romantic and Victorian literature was hard to find (Hampton 1). According to Robert Macfarlane, “[f]or much of the twentieth century in the UK, writing about wildlife or the countryside was regarded with suspicion tending to contempt” (“New Words” 166). In the first place, nature writers of the twentieth century were dismissed for being nostalgic for a Britain that never existed (Hampton 455). In his influential book *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams offers a Marxist reading of English literature and criticizes pastoral writing for idealizing rural life, which was, according to Williams, marked by feudal oppression rather than an assumed organic unity between people and the countryside.

In addition, Anna Stenning and Terry Gifford refer to the lack of philosophical sophistication in explaining the dismissal of nature writing in the twentieth century: “writing about the British countryside and rural life dwindled in the mid-to-late twentieth century, perhaps due in part to critical association with sentimentalism, or a lack of philosophical sophistication, while the international and urban travel narrative produced bumper crops” (1). Stenning and Gifford point out a technical problem intrinsic to the genre as well: “[F]inding a structure for a series of narratives about the external environment is problematic. It runs the risk of sounding, to the skeptical British ear, inauthentic and staid on the one hand, or indulgently personal and egocentric on the other” (1). Also, Smith asserts that there has been a tension between the writers who believe an aesthetic look at nature distorts facts and those who oppose the endorsement of nature as an object as if it were something that we could know the true character of through science (“An Archipelagic” 114–15). Alexander J. B. Hampton argues that amidst this

discussion, the public voice of the individual who attempts to interact with nature has been gradually replaced by the objective voice of the expert, which left nature writing to scientists (455). In other words, twentieth-century British nature writing was shaped more by naturalists, geologists, and biologists than by writers (455). Thus, at the outset, it faced significant challenges, but it has managed to survive probably because of the well-established tradition it stood on, and because the writers of the twenty-first century have not been discouraged from writing about nature. Also, the urgent need to develop eco-centric ways of thinking to prevent the current ecological crisis from getting worse might have urged contemporary authors to write from a less anthropocentric perspective without muting themselves. Indeed, Hampton states that at the turn of the twenty-first century, a group of writers began to challenge the view that nature writing should be strictly neutral and scientific, and they have been trying to rehabilitate British nature writing and the voice of the individual that interacts with nature (455).

The resurgence of British nature literature is remarkable: Macfarlane highlights two factors to explain the rise of its popularity in recent years. One is the disembodiment people increasingly feel as they spend more and more time in “atmosphere-controlled environments,” and the other is the global ecological crisis we are currently facing (“New Words” 167). From the standpoint of the reader, the estrangement from the natural world, stemming from the confines of their indoor-centric lifestyles, provides a rationale for turning to nature writing for solace amidst an ongoing ecological crisis.

Nevertheless, in the middle of this literary revival, some practitioners of the movement have opposed the use of the term “new nature writing” for defining the British literary scene. Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane, and Kathleen Jamie are equally worried that this label might lead some to assume that writing about the natural world is distinct from writing about culture (Smith, “The New” 267). According to Joe Moran, too, the term is problematic because recent nature writings are “thematically wide-ranging and stylistically digressive, combining personal reflection with natural history, psychogeography, travel and topographical writing, folklore and prose poetry, which makes them difficult to categorize” (49). In fact, umbrella terms such as “new nature writing” would sound deficient in any case because each and every single work of literature is worth separate attention, and books may not easily be compressed into a single category. However, given the recent upsurge in Britain, it is important and necessary to try to frame and thus recognize recent nature writing as an emergent movement even if it is done at the expense of using a term which fails to satisfy all the contemporary

representatives of nature writing. After all, as Macfarlane says, “[n]ature writing is an unsatisfactory term for this diverse, passionate, pluriform, essential, reviving tradition—but it is the best there is, and it serves as a banner to march beneath” (“Call”).

Despite the lack of consensus on the use of the term to define the recent revival in British nature writing, I have chosen to employ it in this study, for it is the most commonly used one, and also because of the ecological crisis we are in. In fact, the writing emerging in response to this unparalleled crisis would necessitate the employment of a label that underscores the idea that its practitioners are in search of a new way of responding to the crisis. Deborah Lilley also suggests that the unmatched scale of environmental harm has caused British authors to respond with a new terminology and new possibilities by blending elements of autobiography, travelogue, natural history, and popular science to explore and critique the interweaving of human-natural forces (3). Indeed, the current age of the Anthropocene is traced back to the industrial and even agricultural revolution, thus, it is not new. However, the way writers and critics respond to it, their sense of anxiety is relatively new. This collective sense of anxiety is the reason why contemporary nature writers can be brought under a shared term; these writers are trying to raise their voices in their own individual ways, which could differentiate them from the nature writers of the previous centuries.

Yet it should be acknowledged that this sense of anxiety does not contain helplessness or despair. On the contrary, there is a will to cause an effect. As Cowley puts it: “They [the new generation of British nature writers] share a sense that we are devouring our world, that there is simply no longer any natural landscape or ecosystem that is unchanged by humans. But they don’t simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodize and commune: they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect” (9). Obviously, contemporary nature writers would like to trigger a change in our way of thinking about the natural world from both a scientific and literary perspective, which could hopefully result in a change in our actions. Jamie’s essay trilogy comprising *Findings* (2005), *Sightlines* (2012), and *Surfacing* (2019), Liptrot’s *The Outrun* (2016), and Donaldson’s *On the Marshes: A Journey into England’s Waterlands* (2017) serve to demonstrate that new nature writing embraces a broad interpretation of nature, evoking, simultaneously, the hope that the prevailing anthropocentric perspective can be replaced by a more eco-centric worldview, ultimately fostering more ecologically responsible actions by humanity.

Kathleen Jamie's essay trilogy: An eclectic look at nature

On first considerations Kathleen Jamie's essay trilogy consisting of thirty-seven essays on diverse topics such as climate change, whale hunting, and cancerous bacteria is a memoir that covers the last fourteen years in the writer's life with flashbacks to her youth. Jamie's writing presents her evolution from a young woman with caregiving responsibilities towards her children and elderly parents to a more carefree and independent middle-aged woman. Nonetheless, the essay collection embraces much more than Jamie's inward journey because of its relational aspect which has an ecological dimension. Relationality is a term commonly applied to autobiographical writing where, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, it means that "one's story is bound up with that of another" (*Reading* 64). Mark Allister argues that it is possible to find life writing examples in which the relationality aspect includes the writer's connection to the natural world (3). In this kind of relational autobiography "ecology intertwines with culture, the author's life is metaphorically written on the land together with its inhabitants, human or non-human, and these writers create a new and important kind of life-writing by turning terrain into text, geography into consciousness" (3). Jamie's essays qualify as relational autobiographical texts, that is, eco-memoirs.

As an eco-memoir, the trilogy explores several human-induced ecological problems such as pollution, loss of biodiversity, climate change, raising the reader's awareness of the Anthropocene from diverse aspects. For instance, her essay "Findings" calls attention to the plastic pollution on Ceann Iar, an island to the northwest of Scotland. Ceann Iar, once a human settlement but currently a home to seals and birds, cannot escape the remains of a plane crash or loads of plastic waste driven by the winds and waves (*Findings* 53–59). Similarly, her essay "The Hvalsalen" in *Sightlines*, which reveals her experiences as a visitor and a voluntary worker in the whale museum in Bergen, Norway, focuses on the cetaceans, which had been there long before humans appeared, as a vulnerable species endangered by humans, who now desperately try to conserve their bones in museums. In her work she conclusively points at the absurdity of the situation, voicing her frustration and sense of shame no matter how much effort is taken now to protect them. While working on the whale bones, she notes, "I turned the rib in my hands, stroked it with the sponge. Shame and shame" (*Sightlines* 119).

"In Quinhagak," the longest essay in *Surfacing*, Jamie describes her work in the field as she assists a team of archaeologists trying to save the remains of the Yup'ik people in Quinhagak, an Alaskan village, a settlement

in danger of being flooded by rising sea levels. Ironically, the artefacts made by the ancestors of this indigenous community can be unraveled because the earth thaws early due to the rise in temperatures, and diggings get easier. When the hydrological, chemical, and biological balance of the soil that helps to preserve archeological remnants is disturbed, pieces of cultural heritage may be unearthed (Garcia 105). The Yup'ik people are encountering precisely this situation. The essay demonstrates the paradox that in consequence of global warming the artifacts buried in the frozen Alaskan land come to surface, enabling the indigenous people to reclaim their past; however, this process will ultimately leave them landless. Thus, Jamie points out the effect of global warming on cultural heritage and shows that nature and culture are inextricably intertwined. As a matter of fact, the impact of climate change on cultural assets has already been recognized by the international community. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) certified in its 2014 Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) that climate change will affect culturally valued buildings through extreme events and chronic damage to materials (IPCC). Far earlier than this, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stressed the need to protect cultural and natural heritage together through the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, for they both face increasing threats of destruction not only by traditional causes of decay, but also by evolving social and economic conditions. Jamie's essay on Quinhagak serves as a convincing, local example of this global problem, urging the reader to recognize its emergency.

During her trips in Scotland, Norway, and Alaska, Jamie pays heed to non-human nature and highlights the wrongdoings and injustices that humans inflict upon their fellow creatures. However, the essay trilogy is not a requiem for a world that has been lost. Nor is it a curse on humanity. From *Findings* to *Surfacing*, Jamie tries to maintain her contact with the natural world by going on short and long expeditions in the middle of her caregiving responsibilities. She joins a team of scientists to track birds on a remote Scottish island, participates in archeological expeditions that global warming or erosion have made urgent, and observes dead body parts in anatomy and natural history museums. Through all these experiences, Jamie offers an ecocentric approach to understanding human beings as part of the broader ecosystem and chooses not to focus on them as central characters but refers to them just as one of the species in contradiction to the prevailing anthropocentric worldview.

In her essays, Jamie visits a great variety of places, such as her backyard, a pathology lab, an anatomy museum, an abandoned Scottish island, a newly discovered Neolithic settlement, and an Alaskan village, while she ponders what exactly is nature. From her first essay to the last, Jamie portrays nature from many different aspects including, but not limited to, island birds, whale bones, cancerous human cells, windswept islands, and rising sea levels. The diversity of the themes Jamie covers as well as the lack of a central theme overlap with the heterogeneity in nature. The classical ecological perspective contrasts heterogeneity with homogeneity, which means “the absence of variation,” and defines heterogeneity as the “composition of parts of different kinds” (Kolasa and Rollo 2). In fact, ecological heterogeneity appears to be fundamental to the resilience of ecosystems, for it has been proven that the loss of ecological heterogeneity threatens biodiversity and prevents the proper functioning of ecosystems (Dzubakova, et al. 1). Given the essential role of heterogeneity in nature, Jamie’s tendency to include a variety of species in her essays without prioritizing any single one merits recognition as an endeavor to mirror nature’s complexity in writing, and fosters readers’ appreciation for the diversity in natural systems, which does not privilege humans as a species.

Underlying this heterogeneous perspective, Jamie’s concerns about the natural world and the anthropogenic harm done to the planet are salient. Of her own writing, she states: “You take notes almost like a naturalist who observes something, whether it is a flower or a street scene. It is not out of curiosity, but you almost respect what you are observing. You want to have what you observe accurately in its beauty and detail, and so it is almost like a mark of respect for it” (qtd. in Mackay 86). Jamie’s caring respect and attentiveness to nature act as the connective force of her eclectic trilogy.

Jamie’s rejection of binary oppositions, especially those of culture/nature and human/non-human, lies at the heart of most of her contemplations. Her discomfort with any exclusionary definition of nature is apparent. For instance, her essay “Pathologies” containing her observations in a pathology lab reveals that her mother is about to die and she has to let “nature to take its course” (*Sightlines* 21). By visiting the pathology lab, Jamie tries to open herself to all aspects of nature including pathology, cancer, and death, but she cannot bring herself to take her mother’s death as a natural phenomenon no matter how expected it was. After the funeral, Jamie goes for a walk on the hills behind her town and comments: “The sky and the river were beautiful and glassy . . . Nature was back in her accustomed place: outdoors, in the trees’ colors, in the tidal flux of the river; in the fieldfares

arriving to the fields” (22), suggesting that when nature is in question, what comes to mind first is not death but trees, rivers, and fields. Despite her endeavors to embrace all facets of nature, including decay and death, she has a hard time positing death, particularly her mother’s death, as a natural fact. At this point, she asks herself: “What was it [nature] exactly, and where did it reside?” (23). Jamie provides no clear answer to this question in any of the essays, but she makes an effort to look at the natural world as a whole without separating death from it.

Jamie’s essays include events and situations she experiences in nature rather than theoretical discussions about it. To be more specific, her trips to places such as anatomy museums and pathology labs and her active participation in archaeological projects help to question dichotomies such as human/non-human, culture/nature, and present/past through tangible examples. Jamie’s attempts to deconstruct dichotomies bring to mind Donna Haraway’s criticism of dualism:

[C]ertain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man. (59)

The essays in the trilogy aim to dismantle most of these dichotomies. For example, in “Pathologies,” she looks at a cancerous colon through a microscope, and she writes, “[i]t was a natural artefact alright, but far from elegant, and if I hadn’t been told I couldn’t have said whether it belonged to an aquarium, a puppet theatre or a bicycle repair shop” (*Sightlines* 26). This example shows that for Jamie nature is not an aesthetic object for the human gaze, neither is it outside the human realm, hence questioning the human–nature dichotomy. In fact, her motivation underlying this visit to the lab is to look inward physically, to see nature because she understands “it’s not all primroses and others. There’s our own intimate, inner natural world, the body’s weird shapes and forms, and sometimes they go awry. There are other species, not dolphins arching clear from the water, but the bacteria that can pull the rug from under us” (24). Likewise, in “Surgeons’ Hall” in *Findings*, she examines dead human body parts, which she regards as intrinsic to nature.

As it can be seen in her frequently cited paragraph, Jamie intends to look for nature inside us, not necessarily outside:

We consider the natural world as “out there,” an “environment,” but these objects in their jars show us the forms concealed inside, the intimate unknown, and perhaps that is their new function. Part art gallery, part church of secular contemplatives. “In the midst of this city, you think you are removed from nature,” they say—“but look within.” (*Findings* 141)

In a similar vein, “Three Ways of Looking at St Kilda” in *Sightlines* offers a thought-provoking perspective to question the culture/nature divide. St. Kilda, a Scottish island home to nearly one million seabirds, including the UK’s largest colony of Atlantic puffins, used to host people until the 1930s, when islanders voted to leave the island (132). Jamie visits the island with a group of archaeologists to help them with their work. While on the island, she is particularly fascinated by cleits. A cleit is “a stone storage hut or bothy, uniquely found on the isles and stacs of St Kilda,” which was used to store a wide array of products, including cured fish, eggs, hay, manure, and grains (“Cleit”). Cleits served as stores for the islanders to keep their resources (*Sightlines* 150). The archaeology team Jamie joined was trying to locate them accurately, using satellite technology because cleits cannot be positioned easily. They have been abandoned for about ninety years and have become embedded in the landscape, making it difficult to discern them. Also, as they are made of stone and turf, which are both natural materials, they look like part of the landscape rather than a building erected. Jamie’s reaction to understanding the cleits is emotive, unlike that of the archaeology team that surveys them from a scientific point of view. Though she does not denounce the importance of measurements done by the archaeologists and appreciates their work, she complains about too much accuracy. She prefers to consider cleits as the remnants of a recent past rather than human-made structures to be scrutinized with tools and devices. She says, “I thought the cleits curious, half nature and half culture, with their stone walls and turf roofs shivered in the breeze. We could measure them all we liked, but they were still mysterious” (155). From the author’s standpoint, a cleit embodies the intermingling of culture and nature.

Jamie’s widely ranging themes defend an understanding of nature where dichotomies fail. Chitra Ramaswamy maintains that “[n]ature, for Jamie, is a broad church, welcoming in moths drowning in lochans, cancerous cells under microscopes, whale bones washed up on the beach, and the

people who clean them in dusty museums. She has no interest in romanticizing nature, or seeking out wild, untouched places” (“Interview”). Through such diverse views and landscapes, Jamie presents alternative perspectives from which to look at the natural world. While offering a heterogeneous account of the natural world, Jamie does not silence herself as a daughter, mother, wife, or independent woman, which makes her writing relational and familiar. As Eleanor Bell claims, “Jamie writes from a personal space which sees the value of recording the everyday within a grander order. It is perhaps these very human qualities of her essays on travel and nature, though—seeing the domestic within the wild, and vice versa—which are central to their appeal” (129). This is where hope lies since Jamie can appeal to her readers through her first-person narrative. Her direct experiences in nature, her participation in voluntary projects, and her non-authoritarian style in her questionings make the author easy to relate to. Seeing how Jamie does her share in shattering anthropocentrism, the reader is given hope that a less anthropocentric world is possible.

Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun*: From the edge of alcoholism to the edge of an island

In Amy Liptrot’s memoir, *The Outrun*, which was awarded the 2016 Wainwright Prize and was shortlisted for the 2016 Wellcome Prize (Cain), a familiar landscape serves as a cure for Liptrot’s alcoholism and a context where she gains a new perspective. The memoir begins with Liptrot’s arrival in the Outrun, her family’s farm in Orkney, a Scottish island years after leaving it for London. The author starts her narrative from the moment she has already reached sobriety following her troubled years in the metropolis, and she focuses more on her time on the island than her alcoholism, which makes *The Outrun* an island memoir.

As in many other examples of new British nature writing, including Katherine Norbury’s *The Fish Ladder* (2015), Olivia Laing’s *To the River: A Journey Beneath the Surface* (2011), the author of *The Outrun*, too, has recourse to the natural world as part of her healing process. Such works within new nature writing can be categorized under the strand of “close natural history observation as psychotherapy and psychodrama,” wherein authors take refuge in the natural world as a remedy (Oakley et al. 6). In these books the natural environment appears as a resource for human consumption “in danger of being unwittingly instrumentalized” (12). Some writers are concerned that nature could be objectified in such healing narratives. A nature writer, Mark Cocker expresses his concern over this tendency of self-

centered narratives, stating that “[t]he real danger is that nature writing becomes a literature of consolation that distracts us from the truth of our fallen countryside, or—just as bad—that it becomes a space for us to talk to ourselves about ourselves, with nature relegated to the background as an attractive green wash” (“Death”). However, Liptrot’s *The Outrun* is a life narrative that transcends its author’s personal life and expands to nature.

Without reducing the landscape to a setting for her life story, Liptrot reveals how she has recovered from alcoholism and reconciled with herself as she returns to the Outrun. Having spent her childhood and adolescence in close contact with the natural world on Orkney, she moved to London, where she expected not to be limited by geography and a small community: “I grew up in the sky, with an immense of space, yet limited by the confines of the island and the farm,” she writes (19). Nevertheless, London overwhelmed her with its turmoil and chaos, and she ends up an alcoholic. Her addiction caused her boyfriend to break up with her and, over time, she is dragged into loneliness and despair: “Unsettled in London, I felt as if I was dangerously suspended high above crashing waves” (50). She spends dreary and purposeless days, during which she feels as if she was “just passing time, not living” (51). In those hard times, she relies on alcohol and cigarettes as an immediate solution, and she can neither continue her daily routine at work nor socialize with her friends who slowly withdraw from her due to her frequent sobbing fits and never-ending depressive mood.

Aware of what her addiction has cost her, Liptrot decides to recover and receives treatment in a rehabilitation center. Knowing that “coming out of rehab was not the end of the story but the beginning,” she seeks a way to help her remain sober (80). She agrees to go back to Orkney upon her mother’s encouragement, who suggests she could help her father on the farm. When she arrives on the island, she feels somewhat insecure: “I’ve washed up on this island again, nine months sober, worn down and scrubbed clean, like a pebble. I’m back home, at the end of a rough year, in the winds that shaped me and where the sea salt left me raw. I’ve got a fresh start but I’m not sure what to use it for” (88). Then she starts to help her father on the farm by carrying out physically taxing activities, such as building or repairing drystone dykes, taking care of the lambs, feeding the poultry, and cutting down uncontrollable thistles (116). Of her first months on the island, she notes, “I’m back under these decaying clouds and deep skies, living among the elements that made me. I want to see if these forces will weigh me down, like coping stones, and stop the jolting” (93). Though she is initially uncertain about what to do with herself on this island, which she derogatorily used to

call “The Rock” in her adolescence, the island teaches her new skills. She has a different kind of bodily experience there and she learns to use and take care of her body to be able to fulfill the tasks on the farm: “At the end of the day I attend to my body, thinking of how it will function rather than how it looks: getting rid of my hangnails that could get caught, letting the hot shower massage my muscles” (116).

Her bodily experiences on the island are not limited to exhausting farm work, however. Like her contemporaries Olivia Laing and Carol Donaldson, Liptrot also finds her way of healing through walking, and she notes, “AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] recommends meditation, which I find hard Instead I practice my own form of walking on the hill and absorbing my surroundings. When I walk, I am soothed by being in motion. My body is occupied and my mind free” (174). In fact, the therapeutic effect of walking has long been recognized, since at least the first recorded use of the Roman expression *solvitur ambulando*. This Latin phrase, usually attributed to Saint Augustine, means that problems are solved by walking (Pidgeon). For Liptrot walking is also a healing physical activity. When walking across the island, she touches her surroundings and gets to know the island more closely. She often holds, in her bare hands, whatever is left from the tide or a storm, such as a star fish dropped by a bird or a replica of Westray Wife, an archeological object peculiar to the island. She gleefully remarks: “I am free to collect any from below the tide line. After a westerly gale, I walk home with arms full” (175).

The bodily experience of walking gives Liptrot the opportunity to physically connect to the island, which she has long ignored, since her drinking years. Growing aware of her body along with its limits and capabilities, she gets immersed in the island physically. Thus, young Amy, first alienated from the island thinking that it was restrictive, gradually becomes a part of it. Her connection to her own body and the island is a step towards the sense of unity she felt was missing in London. Remembering her life in that city, Liptrot admits, “I am scattered and never at home” (93). Orkney, however, teaches her to be integrated with her bodily existence on the one hand, and with the surrounding landscape on the other.

Liptrot proves to be an eager and quick learner on the island. She joins the swimming group Orkney Polar Bears and enjoys this activity as “a way to experience the changing seasons and different parts of Orkney” (194). They swim in all seasons and in all kinds of weather conditions, by following the tide and wind directions. Their endeavor to adjust to the natural world foregrounds that humans are natural beings who need to and can learn to live

in tune with the natural world without causing harm to it; just like the curious seals that accompany Liptrot and her group during their swims. Liptrot's direct and continuous contact with the sea in all its states has a healing effect on her. She feels she belongs in the sea. In other words, she feels safe there: "By swimming in the sea I cross the normal boundaries. I'm no longer on land but part of the body of water making up all oceans of the world, which moves, ebbing and flowing under and around me" (199). She feels connected not just to the waters surrounding Orkney but to all the oceans in the world. The island, which she once thought confined her, now connects her to the world.

Liptrot's days on the farm are so busy that although she craves a drink from time to time, she can find a reason to turn her attention to the outer world and engage herself in some activity. One day as she is building a dike, she thinks she has to work with the stones available to her and cannot spend much time worrying if she is making the perfect wall (91). To her, living on the island is like building up dikes; she has to content herself with what she has. Therefore, she tries to leave her own vulnerabilities behind and shows interest in her surroundings to tell the story of the island with all its strong winds, bare soil, sheep, seals, birds, crashing waves, powerful tides, and dangerous cliffs as well as its human inhabitants, their myths, and sagas.

Her efforts to describe the island with all its elements serve as her tribute to the island, which apparently accelerated her healing. However, her interest in Orkney is more than personal. Current ecological issues like the energy production difficulty do not escape her notice, and she gives detailed information about recent investments in utilizing tidal and wave energy on the island. Admittedly, she supports renewable energy, yet she would not want to see the island turn into an industrial zone (275). Thus, her self-absorbed inward look gradually transforms into an eco-centered outward look. Her concerns about herself are increasingly replaced by her concerns about the natural world on the island. In other words, she intermingles her own account with the story of her birthplace where she grew up. Liptrot's ability to interweave both narratives have made *The Outrun* a fine piece of eco-memoir. As Will Self puts it, "[i]t's this aptitude Liptrot has for marrying her inner-space with wild outer-spaces that makes her such a compelling writer—and one to watch" ("The Outrun"). In this respect, Liptrot can be positioned alongside new British nature writers who have resolved the subjective-objective eye tension that marked the nature writing of the previous century, for she expands her narrative from her own life to non-human lives in Orkney. Liptrot metamorphosizes from a confused and disoriented young

woman to a responsible islander who can relate herself to the outer world to the extent that she takes responsibilities to protect her homeland, Orkney with all the lives it hosts.

What makes *The Outrun* a fitting example of new British nature writing is that in this autobiographical account, Liptrot gets out of her own experience of alcoholism, questions her past attitude to the island, and learns to see herself as part of a challenging ecosystem who should do her share to keep it alive. Long walks and cold swims heal her, and through all the bodily and material experiences she has within Orkney's harsh and beautiful nature, Liptrot achieves "the freedom of sobriety" and even takes up a one-year job for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) on the Corncrake Initiative, a conservation project (Liptrot 123). She reaches transcendence in her own way through physical contact with the land and the ocean, and she is committed to a cause other than herself. From this perspective, *The Outrun* is a good and hopeful example of one's engagement with nature without instrumentalizing it.

Carol Donaldson's *On the Marshes*: Justice for the marshes

Another nature-based healing story comes from Carol Donaldson with her literary debut, *On the Marshes*, which describes Donaldson's one-year journey from Gravesham to Whitsable in the wetlands along the River Thames and the River Medway in the south-east of England. An Essex-born writer, Donaldson spends six years on the North Kent Marshes, where she lives and works as a warden for the RSPB. During this period, she not only shows a professional interest in the marshland's ecosystem, but also develops a strong sense of attachment to the place. While on the marshes, Donaldson learns to be self-reliant and to live as part of nature. Her love of the marshes encompasses birds, seals, birds, plants, and human dwellers, that is, all the human and non-human elements that constitute the marshland ecosystem.

However, Donaldson's self-sufficient and happy life on the marshes comes to an end after a forced eviction. Knowing that the marshes are under the threat of a project that aims to construct residences and an airport in the area, Donaldson decides to walk the marshes before they are lost to urbanization. On the surface, walking these waterlands is a way for Donaldson to pay tribute to the marshes, for the marshes have taught her how to live self-sufficiently as a human being in the modern capitalist world without forgetting that she shares an ecosystem with other life forms. Her walk is also a journey of self-confrontation as she reconsiders her choices in life after a series of losses: she loses her caravan, where she has been very

happy and proud to live, upon a legal constraint. She breaks up with her boyfriend with whom she has been together for a long time, and she leaves her job at the RSBP, which she loved. As she walks across the marshland and remembers her trekking and camping memories with her boyfriend on the very same marshes, she brings herself to accept the fact that they were never the ideal couple she had imagined them to be. She also considers her strong attachment to the caravan and accustoms herself to the fact that she would not be able to live in her caravan forever even if that legal order had not been issued. Walking the marshes helps her get over these losses more quickly, thus her journey gains a therapeutic dimension. As this healing journey unfolds, Donaldson's personal concerns are progressively interwoven with her worries about the marshes and the diverse lives they host, which adds a critical perspective to her memoir.

In her book, the non-human is outshined by human representation in spite of Donaldson's frequent and detailed references to bird species, insects, seals, and hares, which altogether contribute to the biodiversity on the marshes. Donaldson's specific emphasis on the human dwellers of the marshes might help posit her memoir within the realm of environmental justice, which has not been widely treated in new British nature writing so far. Rob White explains that "[e]nvironmental justice refers to the distribution of environments among peoples in terms of access to and use of specific natural resources in defined geographical areas, and the impacts of particular social practices and environmental hazards on specific human populations" (43). According to White, these specific human populations, mostly defined on the basis of class, occupation, gender, age, and ethnicity, are more affected by environmental ills than other people (43). It appears that within environmental justice discussions, human health and well-being come to the forefront, while non-human nature is situated as a resource at the former's disposal. In the United States, for instance, the environmental justice movement has been criticized by some mainstream environmentalists who argue that the movement can hardly be called environmental because of its focus on human justice and well-being rather than nature (Bakari 2). Nevertheless, the problems raised by environmental justice activists need tackling. Instead of insisting on purely ecocentric or purely anthropocentric concerns, a more flexible and holistic approach that can change from case to case and from region to region could be applied, and local factors could be allowed to determine the course of such a reconciliatory approach (Bakari 36). Moreover, considering the ecological principle that everything is interconnected, separating human well-being from the well-being of the non-

human and that of the planet and giving absolute priority to either of them would be unwise. Besides, ecocriticism in the twenty-first century is turning our attention to humankind's responsibility, calling on everyone to act upon environmental injustices (Buell, *The Future* 133). Hence, Donaldson's interest in the human condition on the marshes is as timely as it is necessary.

As a class-conscious writer, Donaldson observes that the socio-economic status of people currently residing in wetlands sharply contrasts with that of those living in residences overlooking the waters. There is a tangible tension between the two: "The hard-drinking boat owners were lowering the tone in the local pub People who lived in waterfront apartments inhabited a planet different from people who lived in a container, and the two didn't rub shoulders easily in the local boozier" (Donaldson 210). Donaldson feels sorry for the people living on the marshes because they might be evacuated one day just as she was. In fact, she has been informed that people in the new developments already have complaints about the residents of the boatyards (210). While certain people can easily claim the right to enjoy the beauty of wetlands from afar, those who live there and have developed attachment to the marshes may any time be forced out. Donaldson is pointing at a problem of environmental justice and rightfully raises the following questions: If somebody is going to decide about a landscape, who should that be? The ones living there, the ones watching it, or the ones making money over it? What about the muted non-human?

Donaldson is particularly worried about the decision-making processes concerning the north Kent marshes. The very reason for her intention to walk the estuary was that she wished to experience the land before it was too late; the area was under threat from the then London mayor Boris Johnson's desire to build an airport and from the government's plan to build roads and housing (Donaldson 16). Donaldson was sad that the area was the target of politicians and builders who did not care about the wildlife there (42). Her critique of the authorities in the airport and housing project is aimed at the idea of progress at the expense of human and non-human lives: "The government wanted this land paved with progress in a bid to make it profitable and sanitized and serve the needs of London. It seemed to think of progress in terms of money, with little thought for the quiet pleasures that enrich life, such as villages where sparrows can dust-bathe" (42–43). Donaldson prefers the north Kent marshes "as a place of sanctuary for the wildlife but also for people to come and experience the peace . . . to forget for a moment their urban cares and twenty-first century stress and remember that life wasn't always like this and didn't have to be" (87). She duly asks:

“Who’s to say that people didn’t ‘need’ that far more than they ‘needed’ another airport or ‘Thames Crossing?’” (87). Thus, Donaldson calls for a reconsideration of humans’ relationship with the non-human world.

Similarly to Jamie’s trilogy and Liptrot’s memoir, Donaldson’s narrative also contains autobiographical elements, especially when she revisits her relationship with her boyfriend and seeks closure, and her own story also fades into the background as she conceives the past and current dwellers of the marshes as members of the marshland ecosystem that needs conservation. Donaldson’s elaboration on the fragile situation of the marshland people, her attention to the class conflicts around the marshes, her reaction to the government’s and the developers’ plans at the cost of the non-human and human lives provide her memoir with an environmental justice perspective that embraces both the human and non-human dwellers of the North Kent Marshes. As Ben Eagle observes, Donaldson is calling for England’s preservation of its waterlands, which should be appreciated. “There is a fundamental need to protect these fluid, liminal English edgelands and avoid the dominant agenda of development at all costs. Carol Donaldson should be applauded for standing up for wildness on the edge of the metropolis,” writes Eagle (46). *On the Marshes* harbors hope not just because it focuses on a conventionally downgraded landscape that has now become a target of economic and industrial interests and risks being lost to urbanization, but also because it shows that a personal journey can evolve into the criticism of current economic and political systems.

Conclusion

The memoirs by Jamie, Liptrot, and Donaldson examine different facets of the British landscape and offer different ecological insights. Although they write from disparate geographies and focus on distinct ecological problems, they share a passionate voice to describe and present disturbing phenomena in the natural world surrounding them, and they tend to combine their personal narrative with the story of the landscape. With their stories expanding from the personal to the ecological, they manage to draw attention to diverse ecological problems that impact humans and non-humans alike.

Highlighting ecological problems may not suffice in the Anthropocene, for they require a critical eye and immediate action. In such an emergency, first-person non-fiction narratives, which currently seem to mark new nature writing in Britain, may be more motivating and hopeful than fictional narratives, especially those of science-fiction. Timothy Clark warns

that “[i]mages of flooding, social collapse, drought, water wars and so on are clearly the expression of an acknowledged, and growing, social anxiety, and yet also and contradictorily, of its denial through its transformation into forms of spectacle and thriller” (“The Challenge” 98). The eco-memoirs examined in this study keep away from this paradox and pull readers in the writers’ landscapes by encouraging them to do something just as the writers have done: Jamie and Liptrot participate in conservation efforts, while Donaldson has a professional interest in the marshes. They all write paying tribute to the land and the life forms it hosts in order to provide various lenses through which to look at nature. This is exactly the reason why new nature writing in Britain might instill hope. After all, life stories evolving from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism may convincingly show that it is still possible to take action for our planet and leave next generations a livable world.

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Note

¹ I use the expression “the natural world” to refer to the environment as a complex of all the physical and chemical factors such as climate or soil as well as living entities. I avoid the term “environment” because of the idea of human-centeredness it evokes. Similarly, I embrace a comprehensive definition of nature which does not exclude humans as a species or human impact on it.

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