

Article

The View from the Sea: The Power of a Blue Comparative Literature

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Abstract: This paper advocates for a blue comparative literature that uses the view from the sea to provide new axes for comparison. Roy Jacobsen's *De usynlige* (*The Unseen*, 2013) and Sarah Moss's *Night Waking* (2011) explore subsistence lives on small islands in the northern Atlantic at different moments in the past, when inhabitants were dependent on the sea for food and transport. By looking at them together, as texts linked by their engagement with the physical world of the northern Atlantic, the two novels show how marginal populations on small islands can represent a space for the imagination of the human past and future in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: blue humanities; comparative literature; Roy Jacobsen; Sarah Moss; scandinavian literature; anthropocene; island studies

1. Introduction

The first view of the island of Barrøy, the fictional setting of Roy Jacobsen's novel *De usynlige* (*The Unseen*, 2013) is from the sea. The terrified priest from the main island has allowed himself to be rowed for two hours across the water in summer to make his first visit to this far-flung corner of his parish. Looking back, he sees his own parish with new eyes.

But when he scrambles out of the *faering* and teeters a few steps along the mole he catches sight of something he has never seen before, his home on the main island the way it looks from Barrøy, along with the Trading Post and the buildings, the farmsteads, the strips of woodland and the fleet of small boats. "My word, hvor bitty it is. A can scarce see th' houses." (Jacobsen 2017a, pp. 5–6)¹

The passage across the water, a trip that has been long feared and avoided by the priest, affords him a new perspective on his place in the world. He is lost in wonder: he simply cannot get over it, to the extent that for a few moments he doubts his earthly mission.

Crossing the ocean, being on or in the water, can be transformative: it can afford new perspectives, particularly as a response to contemporary societies in which maritime culture and island communities are diminished and overlooked (Mentz 2009, p. 997; Gange 2019). In this paper I will advocate for a blue comparative practice, one that pushes us to use the vantage point of the water to look at the land and how humans live on it. I will draw on a comparison of two contemporary novels in my argument: Norwegian writer Roy Jacobsen's *The Unseen* and British author Sarah Moss's 2011 novel *Night Waking*.

¹ "Men da han kommer seg ut av færingen og vakler noen skritt opp på moloen, får han øye på noe han aldri har sett før, slik den ser ut her fra Barrøy, Bruket og buene, gårdene, skogteigene og flåten.—Kain du sei me, kor lite det e, main kain knapt sjå husan" (Jacobsen 2013, pp. 5–6).

The discipline of comparative literature depends precisely on the ability to move between different viewpoints, to read both with close attention to the cultural context of the text and to compare from a position outside of it, by bringing it into dialogue with other (con)texts. The discipline has however been something of a stick-in-the-mud when it comes to both the spatial and the material turns. Its modern genesis in Europe as a field of enquiry that would uphold the ideals of European humanism, particularly amidst the rise of fascism (Spivak 2003, pp. 1–22; Lubrich 2006, pp. 47–67; Leernout 2006, pp. 37–46; Ritson 2019, pp. 15–16), also provided it with its particular interest in abstraction from physical place. The pull away from physical place was never so clear in the philological disciplines with their roots in nineteenth-century nationalisms (German studies, Scandinavian studies, etc.), which are built around the unit of the nation state and can thus absorb a return towards the category of physical place rather easily—indeed, ideals of nationhood are often closely entwined with ideas of landscape. Comparative literature, by contrast, is explicitly deterritorialising, looking for cultural and political similarities across texts produced in different physical and linguistic contexts. It thus provided particularly fertile ground for movements such as structuralism and poststructuralism that distanced literary texts not just from the physical context in which they were produced, but even the physical bodies of the authors themselves (Barthes 1977, pp. 142–48). Nonetheless, in view of the demands placed on human thought by the reassertion of non-human agencies in the Anthropocene, comparative literature has to re-engage with the physical world.

The value of comparative literary practice in being able to examine texts both within and without their cultural contexts is of particular relevance in confronting an ecological crisis that is both global in nature and splinters into myriad local impacts. In this paper, I will argue that the reframing work done by the adjective “blue” can be a helpful tool in the simultaneous de-nationalisation and ecologization of the study of European literature, and in particular comparative literature. Rachel Price identifies the importance of the ocean in its provision of “capacious frames for analysis beyond the nation-state”, and also the potential for the ocean to enable both an understanding of territorial and aquatic spaces as fundamentally cultural *and* as ecological and non-human systems (Price 2017, p. 45). Taking the water—the material space in between land masses—as a starting point opens up new axes for literary comparison and foregrounds different commonalities across different literary cultures, generating an archipelagic critical perspective that is grounded in the interconnected physical world, and is attentive to, but not fixed to, the boundaries and assumptions of the nation state.

The two novels written by Roy Jacobsen and Sarah Moss, while being contemporary with each other, are, in literary and cultural terms, quite different works². They are to differing extents historical, and they each focus on a distinct historical period, Jacobsen on the 1930s, and Moss oscillating between the present day and the late 1870s. They are written in two different languages—the very global English, and the very local language Norwegian, which is made even more local by its use of idiosyncratic regional dialect. The two novels also draw on different stylistic devices, Jacobsen invoking an archaic timelessness (and the legacy of Knut Hamsun)³ with his use of short sentences in the present tense, and Moss employing a cynical, scholarly narrator, whose long sentences reflect on and mediate the story she is recounting. Comparing the novels along genre or narrative lines is not especially productive. Jacobsen’s extradiegetic narrator has a focal range from the gull’s eye (“The houses on Barrøy . . . From above they look like four dice someone has thrown at random.” (p. 36)) to the intimate details of family life. Moss’s intradiegetic narrator is part of the unfolding story; the only parts of the text not narrated by her are letters written by a nineteenth-century nurse, the finding of which by the narrator is anticipated by the reader by the interlacing of various letters with a contemporary storyline.

The basis for my comparison, then, is not one of form, style, or genre; it lies in the relationship between text and the topography and human history of the northern Atlantic. The rocky islands on

² Moss’ novel has been mainly analysed in the context of its treatment of motherhood, e.g., by Emily Jeremiah (2018).

³ The style of the novel strongly evokes Knut Hamsun’s 1917 Nobel Prize-winning novel *Markens grøde* (Hamsun 1917, published in English as *The Growth of the Soil*).

which both novels are set are linked by the rough seas and harsh climate of the North. The “blue” of the Atlantic (mostly a storm-lashed grey) provides a material and conceptual link between these two novels and opens up axes for comparison across literary space that allows ecological and planetary anxieties to become more easily visible.

The sea does not just connect the two locations physically, but also serves as a link between local and planetary scales in our moment of climate change. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes, “sea level rise is perhaps the most powerful sign of planetary change, connecting the activity of the earth’s poles with the rest of the terrestrial world and producing a new sense of planetary scale and interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean” (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 33). Water is the visually dominant element that gives its name to the “blue planet”, imagery that has been a catalyst for the environmental movement since the NASA photographs were made public in 1972, but it is not only in the somewhat criticized “disembodied gaze from outer space” and the explicit context of modern environmentalism that the ocean functions to remind readers of the ecologies that connect across the globe (Lekan 2014, p. 176). Flooding and storm tides stand synecdochally for climate crisis (Bracke and Ritson, p. 1), and imbue coasts and islands with a particular ecological fragility, encouraging their literary use as spaces to explore the imagination of human vulnerability and resilience.

Sarah Moss and Roy Jacobsen have both created fictional islands for their novels. Their fictional islands draw heavily on real places, embodying McMahon and André’s claim that it is the simultaneous reality and fictionality of the literary island in modern literature that make it so potent as a site of imagination (McMahon and André 2018, p. 299). This kind of literarisation of islands can be problematic, as the authors of this article go on to point out, as it not only draws on but also feeds the imagination of island spaces as bounded and other, and thus has underpinned and continues to underpin colonial projects and modes of thought. These two novels, in their different ways, reflect on their own fictionality and on the colonial gaze, and thus engage discursively with the history of the literary island.

Moss’s Colsay seems to be a loose fictionalization of St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides (Moss 2011, p. 376). Here, her protagonist Anna, a history postdoc with two young children, has moved to the island along with her scientist husband who is engaged in monitoring the declining puffin population. They are the only inhabitants, and in fact the island belongs to her husband, part of his Anglo-Scottish colonial heritage; most of the island’s former inhabitants, subsistence peasants, left during the Highland Clearances at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ This colonial history is acknowledged with guilt by Anna, and the constantly interrupted work on her monograph (on the history of childhood) and the demands of her own children draw her into an obsession with these past inhabitants of the island. Her interest in its history is intensified when she finds, firstly, the bones of a baby buried in the garden of their house, and secondly, a cache of unposted letters written by a nineteenth-century nurse who had been sent to the island to try and reverse the (even in nineteenth-century terms) extraordinarily high infant mortality rate.

The Unseen is the first of a trilogy set on the fictional island of Barrøy, on the North Norwegian coast; unlike Moss’s portrayal of Colsay, Jacobsen accesses the island’s history directly, with the novel set in the 1920s and 1930s, rather than embedded within a contemporary narrative. The central novel in the trilogy (Jacobsen 2015) concerns the island and its inhabitants during the German occupation of Norway in World War II, with the final book (Jacobsen 2017b) taking up the story in the immediate postwar period. Although the island past depicted on Barrøy is some eighty years later than the island past that obsesses Anna on Colsay, both novels are concerned with a particular kind of island dwelling, one that is contrasted strongly with a progressive narrative of a mainstream Global North that is

⁴ The Highland Clearances refers to the gradual depopulation of northern Scotland and the Scottish islands from the middle of the eighteenth century into the second half of the nineteenth century by a mixture of forcible eviction and the turnover of subsistence land into grazing land for sheep or cattle and associated out-migration. Controversies over the reasons for the Clearances continue today (cf. Richards 2013, Preface).

increasingly prosperous, urban, comfortable, and connected. The inhabitants of Barrøy in the 1930s and Colsay in the 1860s are poor subsistence communities whose existence appears in all senses marginal.

2. On the Edge of Survival

The two novels have in common their portrayal of island mariculture, or *sjöbruk* (Westerdahl 1992, p. 5), and the relative poverty of the remote island populations. The few inhabitants of Barrøy (totalling five at the beginning of the novel) and the uncounted poor inhabitants of Colsay live on the very edge of the land, dependent on the sea for sustenance. On Colsay, we learn most about the historic poverty of the Colsay islanders from the letters written by the nurse May to her sister in Manchester. May describes to her sister the labour involved in procuring fowl for food: “at certain seasons the men pass their time hanging off the cliffs at the north end of the island on ropes, catching such creatures in nets that they manufacture for that purpose.” (Moss 2011, p. 55). Elsewhere, she notes

The people are living not so much as they did in the last century but as they must have done eight or even ten centuries ago, barring only the partial introduction of tea and shoe leather, although the older men and women yet sport footwear made of birds with the feathers still on them. The men gather birds and fish (or die in the attempt, which I am assured is all too frequent) and the women, twice a day in all weathers, walk near three miles across the hill to milk the cows and then back, bearing the milk in wooden pails on great yokes . . . the result, here, is a people endemically hungry, endemically dirty, endemically sick, in which no one has reason or opportunity to improve. Such change is necessary to raise them even to the standards of all but the poorest slum dwellers in Manchester . . . (p. 70)

May’s comments reflect on the hopelessness she sees, her sense that the parishioners of Colsay have no ambitions beyond, at the most, naked survival. Poverty is shown in the text to be a relative condition, and also one that is identified and named by those outside it. Moss’s framing agents, Anna and May, provide a constant, reflective commentary on their role as outsiders on the island; May cannot talk directly with the Colsay islanders because they speak Gaelic rather than English, and Anna perceives their lived experience indirectly through text, as a historian. In Anna’s case, the explanations to her son Raph relativize their position in the world vis-à-vis the island’s previous inhabitants, both temporally and in terms of wealth. She explains to him, “You know how long ago, the people who lived here couldn’t always find healthy food? And they didn’t always have clean water?” (p. 78).

On Barrøy, with no intradiegetic narrators or correspondents to present this poverty to us, we are dependent on other signs to interpret the precariousness of island life. Ingrid Barrøy, whose story becomes the narrative focus of the trilogy as a whole, is a small child at the outset of *The Unseen* and knows no other life than the one she leads on the island whose name she bears, on which she, her mother, father, grandfather, and mentally impaired aunt Barbro are the only other human inhabitants. The local parish priest, whose rare visit to the island of Barrøy provides the novel’s opening, gives us the first sense of the island’s remoteness as seen from the mainland and also of the way the islanders are seen as poor, when he inspects Ingrid’s fingernails and eyes and is surprised to find no trace of the vacuity that he is used to amongst his poorest parishioners.

He begins to discuss the forthcoming christening with them, that of three-year-old Ingrid with the long, tarry-brown hair and bright eyes, and feet that probably won’t see a pair of shoes before October; where did she get those eyes, so devoid of that lethargic stupidity engendered by poverty? (Jacobsen 2017a, p. 9)⁵

⁵ “Han går i gang med å diskutere den forestående dåpen med dem, av den tre år gamle Ingrid med det lange, tjære-brune håret og de blanke øyene og føttene som vel ikke kommer ned i et par sko før uti oktober; hvor har hun de øynene fra, så blottet for fattigdommens sløve dumhet?” (Jacobsen 2013, p. 8).

Ingrid, in meeting the priest's gaze directly, presents him with a challenge to the mainland/colonial view of the island population. Unlike the Colsay islanders, who are mediated textually (May's letters and Anna's narration, which is interspersed with her academic writing and thus feels written, rather than spoken), the fictional island dwellers of Barrøy are presented to the reader visually, by being seen; and almost immediately, the outsider's gaze is returned and the islanders' view is taken up in the novel by the all-seeing narrator.

The subsistence communities are both entirely dependent on their ability to live from their small island resource base. In both texts, the difficulty of growing food on land, and the resulting dependence on the sea for food, is shown. "Everything of value on an island comes from outside", the narrator of *The Unseen* tells us, "except for the earth, but the islanders are not here because of the earth, of that they are painfully aware" (p. 11).⁶ On Barrøy, we learn, there are only twelve trees of any size, and all twelve "lean in the direction that nature has bent them" (p. 27).⁷ On Colsay, it is Anna's ill-fated and ill-tempered attempt to plant fruit trees in the cold and windswept garden that brings to light the skeleton of an infant.

The men of Colsay, who climb on the sheer cliffs to trap puffins for food, are quite literally operating on the edge between life and death. From the "unseen" Norwegian islands, including Barrøy, the menfolk go North to the Lofoten in winter to work on fishing boats: "Lofoten is a place you don't necessarily return from unscathed, you are dicing with death, where more than two hundred men⁸ lose their lives every winter" (p. 70). This life-and-death precarity is shown to be relative to better situations elsewhere. While on Barrøy the islanders take a certain pride in their hardiness and self-sufficiency, on Colsay the nurse May is frustrated by the islanders' lack of interest in improving their lot, and suggests emigration "to a place of sunshine and wheat-fields" as a solution to poverty and high mortality (Moss 2011, p. 219). We identify with the nineteenth-century colonial view of Colsay through May's letters, while Anna's well-meaning attempts to understand island life in the past present a more nuanced, if very partial, view of Colsay. More chillingly, in May's letters, there is a suggestion that the infant mortality rate on the island is the result of some superstitious practice by the "Knee-Woman" who assists at the rare births, something not resisted and thus tantamount to infanticide. Moss's characters wonder about who would not want their own child to live ("even animals don't kill their own young . . ." (p. 256)), while at the same time examining closely the miseries of life ("the women who spend their days . . . trudging like beasts of burden through the rain" (p. 219)) that might render such a position comprehensible.

3. Seeing the Unseen: Linking Past and Future Anxieties

The novels' exploration of poverty, scarcity, and marginality in the northern Atlantic resonate with contemporary discourses of climate crisis and the spectre of ecological collapse. Neither of the two novels has hitherto been considered as climate-change fiction, or examined in the light of its underlying ecologies.⁹ But the common themes emerging from the comparison of these fictional works imply

⁶ Alt av verdi på en øy kommer utenfra, bortsett fra jorda, men det er ikke på grunn av den de er her, det er øyboerne pinlig klar over." (Jacobsen 2013, p. 11).

⁷ "... heller i den retningen naturen har bøyd dem." (Jacobsen 2013, p. 25).

⁸ There seems to be a mistake in the translation, as the original says forty men rather than two hundred: "Lofoten er I tillegg et sted man ikke nødvendigvis vender helskinnet hjem fra, det er et lotteri med døden, der over førti mann går ned hver vinter." (Jacobsen 2013, pp. 65–66).

⁹ While Sarah Moss's previous novel *Cold Earth* was listed as an example of Anthropocene fiction by Adam Trexler, *Night Waking* has to my knowledge only received academic attention for its discussion of motherhood. See (Trexler 2015, *Anthropocene Fiction: The Novel in a Time of Climate Crisis*, p. 82); Cf. footnote 1 above. Despite critical acclaim in the public sphere, where he is known as a novelist concerned with working-class Norway, Jacobsen's Barrøy trilogy has yet to receive scholarly attention. Recent ecocritical studies concerned with Norwegian and Scandinavian literature make no mention of Jacobsen's *De usynlige*, nor any other work by him. Cf. (Krøger 2013, «De usynlige» er rett og slett en helt fantastisk roman); (Hjeltnes 2013, Bokanmeldelse: Roy Jacobsen: «De usynlige»); (Hennig et al. 2018, *Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment*); (Hennig 2014, *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur aus Island und Norwegen: Ein interdisziplinärer Beitrag zu den environmental humanities*).

shared anxieties about the present and future of human life on the northern archipelagoes, and by extension on the planet as a whole.

Whilst climate change is not a central theme in the novel, it is built into Anna's anxieties surrounding parenthood. Unable to concentrate due to sleep deprivation, Anna worries neurotically about her abilities as a mother, about the dangers of modernity, childhood accidents, poor nutrition, neglect, and the state of the planet, all of which anxieties are at least in part fired by the book she is trying to write (on the construction of childhood in the eighteenth century). In the opening of the novel, she wonders to herself, "what would I pawn for sleep? . . . Clean water for the children of Africa or a week off motherhood? The advent of carbon-neutral industrial processes or a month's unbroken nights?" (Moss 2011, p. 27). She thus frames her own anxieties within larger, "global scale" (p. 27) anxieties about the state of the world, whilst acknowledging her guilt about her relative privilege and complicity in a society that perpetuates inequalities.

More explicitly still, Zoe, the teenage visitor to the island who becomes attached to Anna and her children, displays an environmental consciousness that borders on despair:

There's almost no virgin forest left. . . . They've just totally obliterated it. All those centuries of slow growth. . . . And the blue inlets that I liked are full of fish farms, which fill the water with antibiotics and pesticides and poison everything else and the fish farmers kill all the seals and bears they can get their hands on to stop them eating the farmed fish. (p. 266)

Zoe goes on to link her environmentalist angst directly with Anna's anxieties about choosing to have children:

My parents' generation have totally screwed the entire planet beyond any possibility of redemption and [. . .] they're going to leave the rest of us to kill each other for water and oil. I mean, Jesus, Anna, how could you have kids when there's nothing left for them . . . ? (p. 267)

Anna's and Zoe's concerns set the portrayal of historic subsistence poverty clearly within the framework of modern day anxieties related to the climate crisis and the collapse of planetary ecosystems; they draw the reader into this line of thinking, positioning them with Anna and Zoe in the modern world, and regarding Colsay from a vantage point that is distanced, but which pivots between the Colsay of the past and an imagination of the future that is imbued with anxiety about ecological decline and human suffering. Colsay represents not just the past, but also a possible cruel and hardscrabble future, and envisioned is not just the difficulty of life "on the edge" but also the challenge of upholding humanist values both in the midst of poverty and from positions of wealth and opportunity. In this context, in such a place, the spectre of infanticide (in the gothic imagination of the narrators) is linked to contemporary decision-making about whether or not to bring children into the world.¹⁰

Jacobsen's novel depends more than Moss's does on the frame of reference the reader has in presenting Barrøy as a place of marginality and subsistence. Ingrid herself is rarely portrayed as being hungry or cold, and Hans her father rarely as overworked, but descriptions of meals and the incessant labour are telling and stand in stark contrast to the world Norwegians know today. There is other evidence too of the precarity of their existence. The ruin of Karvika, a previous dwelling on the island, is referred to in the text as a place which commands respect; the fate of its inhabitants is not known, but it is understood by all as a sign of their vulnerability on the island: "There are now only two foundation walls left and the remains of a landing place for boats, which are buried beneath seaweed

¹⁰ This is made more explicit in the novel when Anna reveals that she was pregnant a third time, and she chose to have an abortion without telling her husband Giles.

and sand. . . . The explanation is doubtless tragic, perhaps horrifying” (Jacobsen 2017a, p. 37)¹¹ Later, in a heatwave, when Barrøy runs out of drinking water, Ingrid’s father Hans begins to worry,

A kind of desperation has entered his life, worry is written into the whites of his eyes, this is dangerous, a danger so unnatural that it has not been possible to predict, when was there last such a summer as this? Was it this that wiped out the civilisation in Karvika? (p. 163)¹²

Surrounded by water, the vulnerability of the islanders and their dependence not just on the sea for food but on rainwater for drinking is made apparent. The islanders’ reading of the ruins of Karvika raise the spectre of a changing climate and human ability to adapt. While there is no explicit reference to past or present climate crisis in *The Unseen*, I contend that we can consider the Norwegian reader in the year 2013 fully cognizant of both the science and the popular rhetoric of environmental discourse. The portrayal of precarity, the descriptions of the weather and the intimate relationship between the Barrøy islanders and their local environment, their understanding of the conditions and possibilities of the island; these things resonate because of the tension between the historical setting and the “now” of the reader. In particular, the islanders’ affection for Barrøy and their knowledge of its nature align with the “deep ecology” of Norway’s widely read environmental philosopher, Arne Næss. In Næss’s *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, published in 1989, Næss writes that, “Progress has in all seriousness been measured by the rate of energy consumption and the acquisition and consumption of material objects” (Næss 1989, p. 24). Jacobsen’s novel responds to Næss with a look back at a society that has historically been considered stagnant rather than progressive, and presents us thus with a reckoning with the value of this “progress”.

In particular, the Næss reference to energy consumption is met by Jacobsen by his unsentimental view of Norwegian life in the era before oil was discovered in the North Sea in 1969 and catapulted Norway to its place amongst the most prosperous nations in the world. As Kari Norgaard notes, “Norway is one of the nations of the world that has benefitted most from oil production. It is important to understand not only that Norway is one of the world’s richest countries, but that oil and gas have played a significant role in generating that wealth” (Norgaard 2011, pp. 9–10). The awareness of oil permeates contemporary Norwegian society, and the absence of fossil fuels in the economy of Barrøy is made manifest in the repetitious focus on the forms of human energy in use to procure food and other basic necessities (wood for a new snath, drinking water during the drought, sugar and coffee) and to provide and improve shelter on the island.

. . . they walked down to the boat shed, launched the faering, took the larger rowing boat in tow and rowed to the Trading Post. There they loaded the boat with all the materials they could get, bought twelve kilos of nails, a tin of coffee and twenty kilos of flour, rowed back and that same afternoon set about cladding the south-west-facing wall. They finished just after midnight. (Jacobsen 2017a, p. 108)¹³

This passage is part of a much longer one that details the subsequent days, during which the men, Hans and Martin, work day and night to finish a quay house. The emphasis on the physical labour and the time taken to complete the building work, and the descriptions of simple food (fish, potatoes, flatbreads, all of which themselves are labour-intensive to procure) draw attention to the enormous amount of human energy that is necessary for survival. Oil is conspicuous by its absence,

¹¹ “Det er nå bare to grunnmurer igjen, og rester av en båtstø som er begravd av tang og sand. . . . Forklaringen er ganske sikkert tragisk, kanskje fryktelig” (Jacobsen 2013, p. 35).

¹² “Det er kommet noe forvilet inn i tilværelsen, alvorret står skrevet i hvitøyet hans, dette er farlig, en fare så naturstridig at den har vært umulig å forutse, når var det sist en sånn sommer? Var det dette som utryddet sivilisasjonen i Karvika?” (Jacobsen 2013, p. 151).

¹³ “. . . gikk ned i naustet, satte færingen på havet, tok den største prammen på slep og rodde inn til Bruket. Der lastet de det de kunne få av materialer på prammen, kjøpte tolv kilo spiker, en boks kaffe og tjue kilo mel, rodde ut igjen og gikk samme ettermiddag i gang med å bordkle sørvestveggen. Den var ferdig litt over midnatt.” (Jacobsen 2013, pp. 101–2).

and the narrator even draws attention to the absence, albeit obliquely, for example in musing on the “bright idea” of reforesting the islands to provide timber and shelter arable land from the stiff Atlantic winds; the narrator maintains that islanders would never want to destroy the view—their horizon on the world—by planting trees, concluding that, “No, nobody would even consider doing this until the country attains such wealth that it is in the process of going to rack and ruin” (p. 29).¹⁴ The Barrøy islanders, besides resisting the colonial gaze that sees them as poor, have a gaze of their own. Their view—from the island, out on the world—is important.

The novels display the potential of literary islands to provide a “privileged vantage point to challenge and deconstruct old (colonial) hegemonies” (McMahon and André 2018, p. 307). Colsay’s maricultural inhabitants are portrayed at several removes, remembered through the remains of their village and the references to the Clearances during which their way of life disappeared from modern view. Their lives and agencies are obscured, overwritten by the (post)colonial concerns of the narrators. Similarly, the “unseen” of Jacobsen’s title refers to the (intentional or not) overlooking of the marginal maricultural population of the North Atlantic in the history of Norway and modernity, but here island dwellers exhibit their ability to see their world. Looking at these two texts together, from the vantage point of the sea that blue comparative praxis provides us, allows us to bring these different island imaginaries into our purview.

4. “Ingen kan forlate en øy:”¹⁵ The Anthropocene Archipelago

Read against contemporary climate crisis—mentioned in *Night Waking*, implied in *The Unseen*—these quite different historical novels expose anxieties about the hardships of pre-modern lives and the implications for the future of humanity. In this final part of my paper, I will show how Colsay and Barrøy are Anthropocene islands—allegories of the Anthropocene, in Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s words (DeLoughrey 2019a, esp. pp. 165–70),—drawing attention both to their porosity and interconnectedness as physical sites within archipelagic and oceanic (“blue”) systems, and simultaneously figuring as spaces for the imagination of a finite planet.

As Jonathan Pugh elaborates in his article on relationality and island studies in the Anthropocene, contemporary island studies focus on islands as part of larger archipelagic and oceanic systems (Pugh 2018). In *Night Waking*, the isolation of Colsay that keeps the islanders from leaving is shown to be just as relative as their poverty. The Colsay population is entangled in a network of colonial exploitation that extends across both space and time. Their lack of agency as poor subjects is commented on both by May Moberley, who prevails upon the owner of Colsay—the ancestor of Anna’s husband Giles—to consider resettling them in America, and by Anna, who implicates Giles in abuses of the landowning class. Musing on Giles’s family and the “blood on the family tree”, Anna links Colsay to global events and places:

A few hungry winters on Colsay, a few mistakes in the Great War which had significant consequences for other ranks, some cousins who seemed perfectly happy in South Africa throughout the apartheid years and in fact rather less so thereafter. (Moss 2011, p. 188)

But while Colsay is connected to the wider world, its rocky isolation also serves the imagination of finite resources, and it is against this that the story of the dead infant plays out. While the evidence ultimately suggests that the baby’s death was not deliberate—a result perhaps of a tetanus infection caused inadvertently by the untrained “Knee-Woman”—Anna is haunted by the idea of a mother choosing to kill her newborn, as she is by other examples, real and imagined, of human cruelty and neglect on Colsay. The implications of this are that the extreme and inescapable poverty as colonial subjects on Colsay render humanist values impossible to uphold—and the possibility that this scenario

¹⁴ “Det vil heller ingen finne på å gjøre før landet blir så rikt at den var i ferd med å forsvinne” (Jacobsen 2013, p. 27).

¹⁵ (Jacobsen 2013, p. 21). “Nobody can leave an island.” (Jacobsen 2017a, p. 22).

represents not just the past, but also, through Anna's guilt, the colonialist present, and also the future, if Zoe's words are true and we have been left a damaged planet on which we are "to kill each other for water and oil" (p. 267).

The Malthusian imagination of an island resource base that is simply too small to support population growth is both upheld *and* diffused by its position within a global network of ecological and colonial exploitation, and darkly refutes the narrative of the nineteenth century as the era of progress and the spread of liberal human values that is represented by altruistic May Moberley. Colsay thus reflects the "multiple, unfolding temporalities and the richness of relationality in the Anthropocene," that Jonathan Pugh identifies as characterising the Anthropocene island (Pugh 2018, p. 99).

We learn that the indigenous Colsay population started to leave the island from the late nineteenth century onwards, their abandoned village ("barely a hamlet really; the remains of twelve stone cottages" (Moss 2011, p. 17)) left behind on the island as a reminder of their presence. On Barrøy, the threat of migration and the abandonment of the island is felt keenly. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, Norwegians emigrated to the United States in huge numbers due to the hardships of rural life.¹⁶ Hans Barrøy shows his anxiety about the abandonment of Barrøy island through his worry about his only daughter Ingrid; at the beginning of the novel, he is worriedly looking for signs that she is not carrying the same mental disability as his sister Barbro, and will be able to manage the island and produce the next generation, since she has no siblings.

The threat of out-migration and the abandonment of land and livelihood—implied rather than named—connects the isolated world of Barrøy, two hours' rowing from the nearest settlement, to the wider world. There are other ways in which the island is shown to be connected. "Whatever is washed ashore on an island," we learn, "belongs to the finder, and the islanders find a lot." (Jacobsen 2017a, p. 17)¹⁷ Parts of wrecked boats, flottage, dead animals and birds, bottles; on one occasion, the islanders find a whole tree, a Russian larch that has been torn from land and washed up far from its home. The bird's-eyed narrator recounts the tree's journey from "the banks of the Yenisei in the wilds south of Krasnoyarsk," via the river to the Kara Sea and thence "west past Novaya Zemlya and Spitsbergen, all the way up to the coasts of Greenland and Iceland . . . in a mighty arc halfway around the earth" (pp. 19–20).¹⁸ The islanders are captivated by the enormous tree, so much so that they find themselves unable to cut it up for firewood, and they roll it up off the beach and fix it in place on the ground, assuming that one day they will find a use for it or be able to sell it as valuable wood. But the tree then remains there, and is still in place one hundred years later.

Barrøy enacts a dual function, both connected to the rest of the globe and yet impervious to the market forces that drove global change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The islanders do not know how to engage with the market; the isolation of Barrøy allows them to go on living in their own way, even as global events intersect with island life.¹⁹ Barrøy provides us with an alternative model to the linear story of capitalist and industrial "progress", and as with Colsay, this model can serve for a productive imagination of the future as well as complicating our picture of the Anthropocene past. While Colsay presents us with our darkest fears about humanity and survival, Barrøy provides a less traumatic reorientation, in which physical labour and sufficiency play a central role and the values of the capitalist market are relegated—in a gaze *from* the island, rather than upon it—to some far-off, other place.

¹⁶ More than 44,000 people are believed to have emigrated from the thinly populated North Norway alone between 1866 and 1920. N. Fulsås cited in Bærenholdt (2007, p. 71).

¹⁷ "Det some driver i land på en øy tilhører dem som finner det, og øyboerne finner mye" (Jacobsen 2013, p. 16).

¹⁸ "... ved Jenisejs bredd i ødemarka sør for Krasnojarsk . . . vestover langs Novaja Semlja og Spitsbergen og helt inn under Grønlands og Islands kyster . . . i en mektig, halvjordisk sirkel" (Jacobsen 2013, p. 18).

¹⁹ In the second and third volumes of the trilogy, global events intervene more forcefully when German forces occupy Norway and a Russian prisoner of war is washed up alive on the island.

However, the narrator of *Barrøy* is aware of the island's allegorical power as a site for the extrapolating imagination, and any hermeneutic ambitions on the part of the critical reader are pre-emptively shot down by the narrator. "Nobody can leave an island. An island is a cosmos in a nutshell, where the stars slumber in the grass beneath the snow" (p. 21)²⁰, we are told somewhat laconically: *Barrøy* is not just a microcosm of this planet, but stands in for an entire universe. We are reminded by this self-aware narrator that *Barrøy* is a fictional island, even as we acknowledge the power of the story it tells.

5. The Sea around Us: Blue Comparisons

Colsay and *Barrøy* are fictional spaces that afford rich perspectives on the temporal and spatial dimensions of the northern Atlantic Anthropocene. The novels each contribute to national-cultural discourses on the climate crisis, but this contribution has not been widely recognized or discussed, since within their respective context, the themes of ambivalent motherhood (in Sarah Moss) and the labouring class and Norway during World War II (in Roy Jacobsen) have been more prominent. Taken together, however, from the vantage point of the sea that links them, they show how literary portrayals of northern Atlantic islands serve to refract a specific kind of climate anxiety that is linked to the power of the ocean, the isolation of small islands, and the difficulty of farming or producing food on land and the corresponding dependence on fish and seabirds. The portrayal of northern Atlantic subsistence cultures is an imagination of a different kind of past, one that existed simultaneously with but outside the mainstream narrative of capitalist progress and industrialisation; it creates an open-ended space where the imagination of possible futures can be explored.

The fictional islands of *Colsay* and *Barrøy* are shown to be connected across time and space. Besides the thematic connections that arise through the work of comparison, the fictional spaces also intersect with a wider physical and historical world. The ocean is the spatial and figurative link between the islands and the currents of global history; *Colsay* draws on discourses of colonialism, extractivism, and human cruelty to link the most downtrodden subsistence communities to the political trajectories that made up the nineteenth-century world. *Barrøy* is linked materially via the ocean to the world at large, via things that wash ashore and the movements of boats and people, whilst holding global capitalism at bay; the spectre of the Second World War and the discovery of Norwegian offshore oil, two developments of which any contemporary reader is fully aware, afford *Barrøy* its temporal context and its links between past and future iterations of island life.

The ways in which the Anthropocene archipelagoes of the northern Atlantic can be identified and read through two quite different novels show the importance of a "blue" mode of thinking in comparative literature, one that looks for the physical world that is represented and created in the literary imagination. It meets DeLoughrey's charge for a critical ocean studies that can "bring together the geopolitical and the literary and narrate them in ways that mutually inflect and inform each other" (DeLoughrey 2019b, p. 31). Besides taking steps to ground Comparative Literature in material ecocritical concerns, this comparative analysis also serves to alert literary scholars working in English Literature and Nordic Literature to ways in which literary texts generate productive new readings when viewed from outside the "islands" of their cultural contexts. Using the northern Atlantic topography to identify texts for comparison reveals new archipelagic frames of analysis, and allows new commonalities and differences to become visible.

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²⁰ "Ingen kan forlate en øy, en øy er et kosmos i et nøtteskall, der stjernene sover i graset under snøen" (Jacobsen 2013, p. 22).

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