

Voices of the Deep Posthumanist Ethics and Multispecies Kinship in Laline Paull's *Pod*

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أصوات الأعماق: أخلاقيات ما بعد الإنسانية والقرباة متعددة الأنواع في رواية Pod للكاتبة لينا بول

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Abstract

This paper examines, through a close reading, a dialectical relationship between Laline Paull's (2023) sci-fi novel *Pod* and the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism and multispecies ethics. Played out wholly within the oceanic world of a pod of spinner dolphins, the novel subverts the human-centric markers of traditional literary engagement by ascribing full narrative agency to nonhuman beings and by placing human environmental violence, in its catastrophic dimension, at the ecological centre of cetaceans' experiences. Grounded in posthumanist scholarship of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe, as well as multispecies ethnography of Anna Tsing and ecocritical frameworks of Rob Nixon and Timothy Morton, it argues that *Pod* rounds out this binary dismantling that has characterised Western humanism and its extractive relationship to the so-called natural world. This posthumanist dialectic charts the novel's ontology of entanglement and nonhuman subjectivity (thesis), the anthropocentric violence posed against these sensibilities (antithesis), and ultimately finds that Paull's narrative moves toward, in Haraway's terms, "making kin" across species difference not through a negation of difference but grounded rather in an ethical recognition of shared vulnerability from within the Anthropocene (synthesis). They also argue that Paull's formalistic choices within the novel, most notably her inclusion of a cetacean first-person narrative viewpoint, how she develops a nonhuman voice, and how she purposefully avoids human narrative resolution, are all aspects of creating a literary praxis instrumental in enacting the posthumanist ethics purportedly endorsed by the novel itself. **Keywords:** posthumanism; multispecies kinship; ecocriticism; Anthropocene; cetacean studies; Laline Paull, nonhuman subjectivity; environmental humanities; making kin.

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقة الجدلية بين رواية الخيال العلمي لرواية *Pod* (2023) للكاتبة لينا بول والأطر النظرية لما بعد الإنسانية وأخلاقيات التعدد النوعي. تدور أحداث الرواية بالكامل داخل العالم المحيطي لجماعة من دلافين السبينر، حيث تعمل على تقويض المؤشرات الإنسانية المركزية التي تميز التفاعل الأدبي التقليدي، وذلك من خلال إسناد فاعلية سردية كاملة إلى الكائنات غير البشرية، ووضع العنف البيئي الذي يمارسه الإنسان، بأبعاده الكارثية، في المركز الإيكولوجي لتجارب الحيتانيات. وتستند الدراسة إلى تنظيرات ما بعد الإنسانية لدى دونا هارواي، و روزي برايدوتي، و كاري وولف، فضلاً عن الإثنوغرافيا متعددة الأنواع لدى آنا تسينغ، والأطر النقدية البيئية التي طورها روب نيكسون وتيموثي مورتون. وتجادل الدراسة بأن رواية *Pod* تسهم في استكمال عملية تفكيك الثنائيات التي ميزت النزعة الإنسانية الغربية وعلاقتها الاستخراجية

بالعالم المسمى الطبيعي. ويتتبع هذا الجدل ما بعد الإنساني أنطولوجيا الرواية القائمة على التشابك والذاتية غير البشرية (الأطروحة)، ثم يستعرض العنف المتمركز حول الإنسان الموجّه ضد هذه الحساسيات (نقيض الأطروحة)، ليخلص في النهاية إلى أن سرد بول يتجه نحو ما تصفه هارواي بـ«صنع القرابة عبر الاختلافات النوعية، ليس من خلال إلغاء الاختلاف، بل من خلال الاعتراف الأخلاقي بالهشاشة المشتركة في سياق عصر الأنثروبوسين (التركيب أو التوليف)». كما ترى الدراسة أن الخيارات الشكلية التي اعتمدتها بول في الرواية، ولا سيما توظيفها لوجهة نظر سردية بضمير المتكلم تنتمي إلى الحيتانيات، وطريققتها في بناء صوت غير بشري، وتجنبها المتعمد للحلول السردية الإنسانية التقليدية، تمثل جميعها عناصر في ممارسة أدبية تسهم في تجسيد أخلاقيات ما بعد الإنسانية التي تتبناها الرواية نفسها. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** ما بعد الإنسانية، القرابة متعددة الأنواع؛ النقد البيئي؛ الأنثروبوسين؛ دراسات الحيتانيات؛ لينا بول؛ الذاتية غير البشرية؛ الإنسانيات البيئية؛ صنع القرابة.

Introduction

For a long time, animals' literary representation have occupied an anxious margin in Western letters between the twin poles of anthropomorphic sentimentalism, wherein animals are rendered as surrogate human subjects whose interiority is legible only by way of people's projection onto them of human categories, and a naturalistic distancing which preserves the animal in suspended objecthood, spectacle, or symbol but forecloses any authentic ethical encounter with its alterity. The third novel of Laline Paull, *Pod* (2023), defies either option with a daringly formal and philosophical statement that places it alongside the most important contemporary environmental literature. *Pod*, which takes place entirely within the world of a pod of spinner dolphins navigating a human-polluted, military sonar-laden and industrial civilisation-permitted-fine-levels-of-generalised-violence Pacific Ocean, denies its cetacean characters narrative privilege and systematically withholds the anthropocentric reassurances traditional animal fiction offers. The novel comes at a time of heightened theoretical and political crisis. The Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which nature is articulated as a consequence of human action, has not only generated an unprecedented ecological crisis but also a representational one: the inherited structures of Western humanism, founded on the exceptional status of the subject situated within (and apart from) the worlds that are rendered available for exploitation, prove fundamentally inadequate to the conditions they help to bring about. While posthumanist theory, multispecies ethics and the environmental humanities have a wonderful ability to resource this crisis, literature, capable of producing unique kinds of affective knowledge, challenging the reader to take on new ontological roles (to inhabit new perspectives), enacting as well as articulating knowledge, has more than ever a vital role to play in this intellectual project. The current paper makes the case for an understanding of *Pod* as a dialectical literary text, one that not only represents but performs the posthumanist and multispecies ethics identified by its critical reception as its primary concerns, creating in the reader the disorienting, generative nonhuman perspective that posthumanist theory describes yet cannot deliver independently. As such, the dialectical structure of this analysis reflects that of Paull's argument: an initial thesis that sets forth the novel's posthumanist ontology, followed by an antithesis on the violence and incommensurability which complicate interspecies modes of kinship, and finally a synthesis pointing toward Paull's articulation of what Donna Haraway (2016) calls "making kin", a mode of solidarity not outside difference but in it. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Following a brief theoretical orientation that connects the scholarship relevant to this article, the first analytical section (thesis) takes up how the novel constructs cetacean subjectivity, uses nonhuman temporality and spatiality as primary modes of its representation, and philosophically dismantles the human/animal binary. The second part (antithesis) shifts to the novel's unvarnished depiction of anthropocentric violence, unpacking Paull's staging of interspecies understanding and irreducible asymmetry in human, cetacean relations under Anthropocene conditions. Rather, the third section (synthesis) contends that the novel offers a model of multispecies kin through its formal properties and narrative structure in which sameness or sentimental identification are always surpassed by shared vulnerability and ethical responsiveness. The conclusion considers what this analysis means for literary posthumanism as a mode of critique.

Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism, Multispecies Ethics and Environmental Humanities

Prior to engaging in the textual analysis proper, it is essential to lay out the theoretical coordinates around which the argument will navigate. The posthumanist tradition is heterogeneous: it aims multiple critiques at the humanist subject without reaching a consensus on any common conclusions. For this article, three branches of theory are especially relevant: the feminist posthumanism of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti; the deconstructive posthumanism typified by Cary Wolfe; and the multispecies ethnography associated with Anna Tsing and Deborah Bird Rose. Haraway's work is foundational. In *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003)

and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway elaborates an account of "sympoiesis," making-together as a model alternative to the autopoietic, self-contained, bounded subject on which liberal humanism is based. According to Haraway, subjectivities are always already produced through relations with others, both human and nonhuman; the individual entity is an abstraction from a reality of entanglement. For Haraway, this relational ontology becomes an ethical and political imperative, surrounded by the wreckage of Anthropocene; she argues that our response should not be a deeper digging-in of humanist exceptionalism but rather making kin across species difference. She writes: "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It makes a difference what knowledge knows. What relations relate relations matters. Worlds matter, where they go. Why is it important which stories tell stories (Haraway, 2016, p. 35)? Braidotti is more clearly a philosopher than Haraway, and more directly involved with the legacy of Spinoza and Deleuze. In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti advocates for soë-centred egalitarianism, an ethics based not on the specific knowledge/relational status of bios (the qualified life of the human political subject) but on zoe, bare, reproductive/nonhuman life as such. The posthuman, for Braidotti, is less a demise of the human than it is a creative re-parsing: "The posthuman predicament means that there are diverse possibilities, more critical reflections will be needed and explored" (Braidotti 2013, P.12). This dialectical framing of posthumanism as crisis and opportunity responds directly to how the structure of the present paper is arranged. Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites & What is Posthumanism?* (2003) analysis, *Day and Stokes* (2010) also introduce a necessary deconstructive dimension of Paull's novel. After Derek Attridge, and referring to Wolfe's commentary on Derrida late in the book on the animal, placing posthumanism as normative rather than a simple descriptive category within humanist ideology, which lays down what ethics can consider by using criteria which inevitably exclude nonhuman beings. So, the deconstruction of this binary is not only a theoretical operation, but a political act. The term "the discourse of species" in Wolfe summarises both the ideological role that the human/animal distinction performs and a standpoint from which to examine when literature acknowledges this function, by either perpetuating it or calling it into question (Wolfe, 2003, p. 6). The input from the 'multispecies turn' apparent in social sciences and humanities (e.g., Tsing, 2015; Bird & Ros, 2011; Kohn, 2013), whether through animal studies or posthumanism approaches, gives additional resources to the understanding process. Abstract and systemic by nature, philosophical posthumanism is a foil for multispecies ethnography, with the former being interested in the specific, embodied, and relational. Although not explicitly suggesting assemblages (which I think is a term more useful in the analysis of Paull's ocean world, which itself is an assemblage: a complex community of life constantly negotiating relations of mutual dependence, vulnerability extant among living things imperative to survival in a world under assault), Tsing makes it clear that "the absence of economic development and environmental preservation could pave the way for novel arrangements between cultures, communities and ecosystems" (63) where commodities are best seen as relationships representing connections between places, As Marilyn Strathern most famously notes: "all practice both creates and splices together interrelations" (Tsing, 2015, p. 70). Using Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", the "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" that comes with environmental degradation, a lens for understanding how the novel depicts humanity's effect on cetacean life (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Timothy Morton occupies an ecological niche in this regard, for his notion of "the mesh" as well as his idea of dark ecology gives us a rope to work with when it comes to what the novel negates about pastoral consolation and traditional nature writing. As Morton (2010) would argue, an ecological thought that is adequate to the Anthropocene cannot be comfortable or reassuring; it must dare to dwell in uncertainty, darkness and Angst (as an uncanny fear/fascination with a nature no longer understood as stable ground but rather as dynamically changing, vulnerable, deeply entangled sets of processes).

Cetacean Subjectivity and the Posthumanist Ontology of Entanglement: Constructing Nonhuman Interiority

The most overtly formal aspect of *Pod* that attracts attention is its cetacean point of view. In an aesthetically rigorous nonhuman but ultimately readable voice, the novel is narrated by Ea, a young female spinner dolphin. This balance is a tremendous literary achievement with immediate philosophical consequences. The posthumanist project of imagining thought beyond the human subject can and should be accomplished without discarding narrative interiority, but rather its radical reconstitution in nonhuman terms. Ea is oriented through modalities that are autochthonously cetacean: her sensing world consists of echolocation, sonar songs, a constellation around which social bonds and navigation become manifest, through a temporal dimension not governed by the linear, clock-measured time of human modernity but instead shaped around migrations,

feeding, and reproduction. Paull is careful to keep the integrity of this view: she does not grant Ea access to forms of knowledge or modes of reflection that would be impossible for a dolphin, and she resists the urge to make Ea's interiority a mirror image of human consciousness. This imposition of formal limitation reflects an important philosophical position. For many of the theoretical threads that count as posthumanist, the description of nonhuman life by means of the categories of human thought is a kind of epistemic colonialism: It makes the animal readable, but it does so at the cost of effacing its authentic otherness. As Wolfe (2010) indicates, and invoking the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, different forms of life function within distinct 'observational systems', distinct modes of enacting boundaries and acting in time, and the ethical recognition of nonhuman others demands not that we project our own observational system upon them but rather that we pay attention to these differences. This ethical sensibility informs Paull's method of narrating: she develops a narrative perspective that is truly other, so that the reader can experience an awareness that is not simply human consciousness in cetacean garb but a separate mode of existence. It is especially true of the novel's treatment of communication among cetaceans. From the perspective of the article, while dolphins' songs, clicks and whistles do not represent a primitive or rudimentary form of human language but a nuanced, sophisticated, and even superior mode, the ability to express more than propositional content, like emotional states as well as memory and relative position, with an accuracy beyond that possible by human literary means. When she describes her social bonds in words of sound, of being "in resonance" with her pod, or of that resonance shattering under the violence of others' sonar, Paull is invoking real science about cetacean communication that has shown dolphins have characteristic whistles, learn complex vocalisations and convey information about self, emotional state and environment acoustically (Tyack, 2000; Reiss, 2011). This communicative world, which is at once scientific and, through the act of narrative practice, a philosophical intervention in that failure to listen, insists via narrative practice that the nonhuman is not a mute actor stagehand for human beings but a cast of voices, a world full of meaning subjects.

Entanglement and Relational Ontology

In Paull's novel, the pod emerges not simply as a social and ecological unit subject to posthumanist ontology of entanglement, that is, the claim that subjects are constituted through their relations rather than preceding them, but as an actant in a continuously iterating demarcating encyclopedia. Those members of the Pod are not individuated subjects who just happen to assort themselves into groups; they are constituted as such by their membership, that is, by the network of sonic, emotional and behavioural relationships that sustains podness. She is indistinguishable from her mother, those who share their pod with her brother-sisters and beloved Ku, and the rest of the marine community at large that has bonded with, indeed, been a part of. That this relational ontology resonates quite deeply with Haraway's account of sympoiesis, the biological term for the co-dependence of different organisms to survive, symbiosis, is, for Haraway, a model of something larger: an ontological claim about life as such being made through interstices of mutual making. "Nothing produces itself; nothing really autopoietic or self-organising," Haraway writes. It is always important to talk about with whom we are making and kin-making practices (Haraway, 2016, p. 58). That insight is played out at every level of the story: Paull's Dolphins' ecology, their sociality and even their individual psychologies are situated within relationships of mutual dependence and entanglement extending well beyond the pod as a discrete unit to the ocean ecosystem as a whole. And, indeed, the relational ontology is reinforced by the way that the ocean itself is treated in this novel as an active, agentic environment. The Pacific Ocean in *Pod* does not serve as a passive setting but rather as an active agent within the story: currents, temperatures, acoustic characteristics, and biological cycles all influence and limit the dolphins' lives at every level. Drawing on the burgeoning scientific and philosophical literature on oceanic agency, Paull figures the sea as what Jane Bennett (2010) would call a "vibrant matter," an agglomeration of forces, processes and matters that defy any easy division between life and non-life, agency and inertia. The ocean is also vividly realised, briefly aspiring to the life of a human character: as so much lively material, it acts in posthumanist fashion, expanding animus beyond sentient existence into the energetic and ecological grounds of which all lives are made.

Dismantling the Human/Animal Binary

Among the most philosophically incisive of elements incorporated into Paull's posthumanist project is her systematic destruction of the human/animal binary. This dismantling occurs along several structural axes: first, the very construction of cetacean subjectivity (which shows that language, sociality, emotionality, self-awareness, properties traditionally defined as "human" characteristics, are not properties exclusive to humans); second, the ironic portrayal of human characters in the narrative (who come across as increasingly opaque and

threatening and, in some respects at least, less morally comprehensible than the dolphins are); a third structural move is the outright refusal by this novel to contain within it a human perspective capable of domesticating or explaining the world of cetaceans. Human characters, as seen through Ea's eyes, grow into nebulous, unfathomable figures echoing the gnash of a city in noise and pollution, then lose their interiors and motivations altogether. They are forces, they are impacts, they are causes of damaging effects, never subjects which could orient the reader's sympathies or give moral intelligibility to an imagined vantage point. This refusal to let in the human is an overt performance of posthumanist critique; it makes the reader dwell in a world where man isn't the measure of all things, where humanity's acts are not what we would call rational agency but rather ungraspable destructive force. Its narratological strategy, though not its ultimate effect, has precedents in the long tradition of what some critics have labelled "zoocentric fiction" (McHugh, 2011), ubiquitous literature that uses nonhuman perspectives to estrange the human, but Paull's iteration is far more radical than this. Where classics of the genre like Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty* (1877) or Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) reestablish human as the horizon of meaning, this is simply an animal story in service to human moral education; *Pod* refuses this reinstatement. Not with a recovery of human perspective nor a restoring of interspecies understanding does the novel conclude, but instead with an exacerbation of cetacean autonomy and a solidifying line between the world of 'the human' and that of 'the pod'. The formal choice here is itself an ethical one, asserting the impossibility of reducing cetacean life to human categories and arguing for the ethical necessity of those cognitive needs being registered as such.

ANTITHESIS: Human-Centred Violence and the Inability To Fully Understand Other Species: The Slow Violence and the Ocean That Has Become Damaged

The paper's dialectical movement necessitates the forcing of the thesis of posthumanist entanglement and cetacean subjectivity against what resists it: the violence, asymmetry, and incommensurability that permeate actual relations between human civilisation and marine life in the Anthropocene. The critical reception of Paull's novel has often stressed the utopian aspects over the explicitly antithetical elements at work, and a reading that focuses solely on the positive potencies of cetacean subjectivity and multispecies affiliation would risk fashioning a politically eluding sentimental posthumanism in lieu of earnest critique. The human representation of cetacean nature in the novel lends itself to analysis through Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, making this theoretical framework particularly useful for understanding its critique. Nixon (2011) characterises slow violence as "a violence that is neither sudden nor spectacular but instead incremental and accretive, its calamitous effects regularly directed from far away to reach their intended target" (p. The environmental destruction that contours the world of the novel is exactly this kind of violence: plastic pollution, warming and acidification of ocean waters, depletion of fish stocks, contamination through toxins in the food chain, all slow violence that does not manifest as events but as conditions, not acts doing harm but where ambient harms create background for everyday life. Paull writes about this slow violence with an astonishing specificity. The ocean where Ea and her pod migrate, washed by the accumulating debris of humanity: the plastic filaments that choke the feeding grounds; the chemical runoff that poisons the water column; the thermal disruptions that shift prey distributions. Not treated as dramatic events but the day-to-day texture of life for the dolphins, conditions in which, nonetheless, they must perform all the everyday business of eating and finding mates and navigating behaviour, all within those limits. This same autolitical method of representation is itself a slow violence on the politics of representational practice: it serves to highlight how the damage humans cause in the oceans must be taken up through incremental violence, through its effects on cetacean lives rather than from the human agent's perspective by which this damage occurs and is maintained when displayed within Time Context 3, as Paull puts it, heavied upon each person who experiences and ultimately embodies these cumulative losses over generations. In this context, the novel's treatment of military sonar is especially poignant. While the sonar technologies utilised by naval vessels in the world of the novel only serve as a nuisance for us, they're torture devices for the dolphins. These are their capacity to understand, with a visceral intensity that compels the reader to grasp it for what it is: the weapon of acoustic violence embodied in high-intensity sonar, which kills by rending asunder the sensory capacities through which dolphins constitute their world (D'Amico et al., 2009; Filadelfo et al., 2009). Much of the most formally experimental passages in the novel are those which consist solely of sonar sequences as Paull works to write what it would be like for its brutally dominated protagonist, a being whose meaningful relationship to the world is one that is primarily acoustic, experiencing utter acoustic violence.

The Asymmetry of Interspecies Encounter

A central tension in posthumanist theory is between the promising politics of multispecies kinship and growth, versus an empirical reality of asymmetry (one grounded in probability rather than teleology) and power differential built into human-animal relationships. Haraway's tale of "companion species" has been challenged, for example, by Wolfe (2010) and also by the philosopher Vinciane Despret (2004), who argue that it underestimates how much the associations between humans and animal others are determined by power relations that no mere benevolence can dissolve nor even a care-filled attentiveness cultivate. The dolphin (this is easiest to see in contrast with the dog, which is perhaps Haraway's paradigm companion species)—the dolphin has not engaged in a co-evolutionary relationship with the human; it is not sustained and at least partly defined by its entanglement with human society in the way that domesticated animals are. Humans are not as much mutually shaped by cetaceans as cetaceans are longitudinally affected lives of humans epoch and in short anthropogenic history, and thus upon human lives themselves, which on account of radially based cetological influence is a due effect now have for millennia. This asymmetry is serious stuff, which is what you get in Paull's novel. *Pod* doesn't mean that the human world is only ignoring the dolphins when it comes to their well-being; how we in fact organise our world is actually made with systems which help each other up and form structures that lead to killing off whole populations of cetaceans. The economic systems that generate the pollution, the military imperatives that deploy the sonar, the consumer cultures that propel the overfishing need not be failures of individual moral attention but systemic features of human civilisation amenable to not simply shifts in disposition but changes in social organisation. That the novel presents no human character to model the proper ethical response to this predicament, who sees the harm being done and takes steps to remedy it, is a formal way of affirming this systemic reality. If structural human violence cannot be responded to by individual human virtue, An illustrative presence in that regard is the figure of the researcher who enters the novel for a moment. From Ea's perspective, this is just another incompetent human (benign compared to the military vessels and pollution, but still oblivious) in cetacean "research" for the deep, authentic reasons of her heart. The researcher's expertise on dolphins is scientific, methodical and impressive in its own right, but remains irreducibly outside the cetacean world it analyses. Such an encounter exemplifies what Despret (2004) identifies as the core epistemological issue at the heart of human-animal studies, namely, that observer knowledge is always already constrained by scientific categories and assumptions whose structuring principles may be ontologically incapable of capturing what matters most about nonhuman life. There are ethics of epistemological asymmetry involved. If humans cannot fully grasp cetacean experience (if the divide between human and cetacean consciousness is, in fact, truly incommensurable), then the ground for human ethical obligation toward those individuals cannot be empathy or understanding, at least not of a familiar variety. It has to be rooted in something better, in the idea that we are unsettlingly similar (most likely!), or in the acknowledgement of a kind of ethical duty existing prior to and going beyond all affirmative familiarity with the innerness of the other. This is the territory that the synthesis of the novel will need to navigate.

Nonhuman Narrative Is Nonhuman Narrative

The antithetical side of the analysis has to contend, too, with a formal tension that is intrinsic to its own particular project. By its very nature, the nonhuman point of view that Paull enacts is a human construction: composed in English, following narrative conventions native to novelistic form, directed toward a human audience. No matter how strictly Paull preserves the cetacean point of view, the story remains a human creation born in human language and human literary tradition. This is not a simple indictment of what the novel accomplishes; all literature functions in such conditions, but one that an honest consideration must admit. The philosopher Thomas Nagel's classic essay (1974), titled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat? It is a document that raises the relevant epistemological question with characteristic rigorous economy. Nagel claims that the subjective quality of experience, what is known as qualia in philosophy, could never be entirely and accurately expressed through an objective third-person description; it cannot ever be possible to depict how one so-called bat perceives its world from outside of being any one bat, due to the difference between qualitative perception arising naturally within a forming shape as opposed to describing that such perceptions exist along with their essence from beyond. Even if we knew all the neurological and behavioural correlates of bat echolocation, such knowledge would not tell us what it is like, from the inside out, to perceive the world sonically. Indeed, a similar restriction applies with even greater force to representational claims about cetacean consciousness in fiction: however imaginative Paull's recreation of Ea's current experience of being a spinner may be, she cannot meaningfully speak for what it is actually like to be a spinner dolphin. This limitation is not only a contingent failure at the level of literary technique but also a structurally determining feature of the posthumanist literary project. Indeed, as Wolfe

(2010) has recently urged, the allure of hoping that posthumanism allows us to think beyond the human subject meets the double-barreled irreducibly human conditions of all thought: we can never escape thinking it from the human perspective, only interrogate and undermine it and turn it over to its necessary others. Posthumanist writing can at best be said to work not toward making nonhuman experience transparently present, but instead to perform a productive disturbance of the anthropocentric presumptions which structure human experience: a disturbance that opens up space in the reader for the ethical entreaties of nonhumans themselves without claiming to render that world fully transparent. This limit is, for the most part, admirably flagged in Paull's novel. The occasions where Ea's perspective appears to creep up into an implausibly human-like reflectiveness, where she seems, ultimately, to perform a kind of philosophical self-questioning that stretches the limits of plausible cetacean cognition, are few and far between, it should be noted, in her tale; they read less as failures of the nonhuman mimesis than signpost of the novel's own cognizance of its formal contradiction. It is a text, which realises it is human in its construction (the hands that pushed the keys) and enacted within a human system simulation and thus a nonhuman perspective is re-enacted and that all of this may also be acknowledged as a status of simulation. This lack of awareness, but also this hyperawareness, is its own form of a sort of posthumanist honesty.

Synthesis: Kin-Making Across Difference, Multispecies Solidarity as a Model of Paull: Shared Vulnerability as Ethical Ground

This means that the dialectical movement of the paper now requires not a thesis-antithesis synthesis but rather one that preserves the tensions existing in both its elements, in alert yet reactive terms, while opening toward an alternate configuration. The synthesis offered in this essay is based on a notion of shared vulnerability, meaning an understanding that life (human and cetacean) is under siege but this siege affects different species through various forms of exposure (and degrees of exposure) to the harmful forces released by the Anthropocene; and it is this common exposure, not any form of shared subjectivity or communicative capability, that constitutes ethical grounds for multispecies solidarity. This logic is influenced by Judith Butler, whose account of "precariousness" and the intrinsically non-acknowledgement of certain lives or bodies through the concepts of irretrievability and "grievability" in *Frames of War* (2009) offers an ethical framework for addressing obligation within unbalanced conditions. For Butler, recognising the vulnerability of the other, of being open to violence, of being capable of suffering, and the reliance on conditions which one cannot fully control, is what underwrites ethical response. Importantly, this recognition does not depend on any previous finding of the other's personhood, sentience, or moral standing; i.e., it rests upon bare bodily vulnerability to harm. As Butler argues, "Vulnerability precedes the subject" (Butler, 2009, p.33), it is a feature of being alive that we share across species and diverse living forms. Paull's novel performs this Butlerian insight through its depiction of whale suffering. Ea's fellow pod members die, of sonar damage, of plastic-blocked stomachs, of starvation from empty fish stocks, in a specific and tender way that insists on their moral import without anyone ever claiming dolphin and human grief as equal. It does not argue that dolphin suffering is the equivalent of human suffering or that dolphins deserve anything on the basis of them being "like us" in morally relevant ways. It argues something simpler and far more elemental: that the suffering is important, that it exists, that the causes are human and their effects irreparable, and that a civilisation which inflicts this suffering without recognition is failing as an ethical obligation detached from the legal or philosophical status of those who suffer. This argument appeals to Derrida's initial intervention in animal ethics. Derrida is quite clear that, in terms of thinking about our ethical obligations to animals, the issue at hand is not if they can reason: *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) (the question of Kant, "can they talk?"²⁹ (the Cartesian question) but rather: "Can they feel pain?" (the Benthamite question, endorsed and radicalised by Derrida). The ability to suffer, that is, the capacity to experience harm, pain and loss, is a common moral boundary; one that cetaceans clearly cross. Paull executes this argument narratively, compelling the reader to vicariously experience through fiction the radical suffering cited by Derrida as the basis for ethical obligation.

Making Kin: Solidarity Without Identity

The synthesis of this novel suggests is not just a simple empathy-based response to cetacean suffering. More ambitious and more philosophically sophisticated than this. By the path of Ea's story and the narrative outlines to which this story conforms, Paull provides a model of multispecies kinship that Haraway's 'making kin' concept most fully illuminates. Making kin, for Haraway, is not uncovering preformed affinities but creating relations of care and responsibility at a distance. In her formulation, it demands "to stay with the trouble" (p. 2), to live into the discomfort and messiness of entanglement instead of searching for the illusory comfort of some

solution-aligned vision for multispecies coexistence within an apparently uncomplicated and inoffensive imagined future. "Make kin, not babies!" is a provocative slogan of Donna Haraway, and its contemporary relevance to *Pod* is informative (Haraway, 2016, p. 102). The plot of the novel, among many other things, is thus about reproduction, the production of new cetacean life under circumstances that render such reproduction more and more difficult. But also, a story about the other kinds of kinship: the ties that are made between Ea and those who surround her, bonds that defy species but also life and death, human and animal, self and collective. These bonds are neither biological nor identity-based (of any type); they are bonded through a shared experience of exposure to harm, and through the conscious decision that, despite being exposed, we must respond with care instead of indifference. A complementary lens for engaging with multispecies solidarity in the novel is Anna Tsing's concept of "assemblages." Tsing identifies life in the Anthropocene not with stable ecosystems or harmonious natural orders but, instead, with contingent (messy) multispecies assemblages that she dubs "open-ended gatherings" of organisms and the materials and processes they use in order to keep living together in degraded ecologies by improvisation and mutual adjustment (2015). Tsing's Pacific matsutake forests, with their intricate interdependencies of fungi, trees, humans, and more-than-human materials; they offer a structural counterpart to Paull's oceanic world: both are assemblages in which survival is contingent on the cultivation of relations across radical difference and where the question of who counts as kin can never be determined beforehand. Paull's novel is so conducive to an ethnographic account that it allows one difference with Tsing: assemblage-membership matters, but uselessly if not affectively and ethically. The ties that hold the pod together cannot ever be understood as simply functional interdependencies; they are caring bonds, grieving bonds, recognising bonds that transcend any ecological or utilitarian parsing. When Ea mourns her dead; when she forges connections with other cetacean species along the way; when she responds to the sufferings of beings beyond her pod, these are not flagged as aberrations, nor as sentimental projections, but rather they are manifestations of relational ontology by means of which cetacean life sustains itself. In Paull's world, the ethical isn't layered on top of the ecological; it's constitutive of it. Seated in a nonhuman narrative perspective, the argument here grows from the foundational idea (elaborated in the opposing section) that a human conception must underlie; therefore, this formal paradox is not only a failure but a potential resource. This self-conscious inhabitation of its own impossibility—the constructing of a cetacean perspective out of the very conditions human language creates, will serve as its own version of what Haraway terms "Staying with the Trouble." The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001) has argued, following a tradition extending from Aristotle through Henry James, that literature can do this because it uniquely trains the moral imagination: training readers to enter into the viewpoint of others so as to feel the reality of lives different from their own and responding to the life-and-death nuance beauty of vague moral situations with an attentiveness great abstraction cannot muster. Critics writing from a posthumanist vantage point have charged Nussbaum with residual humanism by suggesting that the relevant perspectives to be cultivated are human ones, but her central insight has bite beyond the boundaries of species: If literature can cultivate the moral imagination vis-à-vis other humans, it can, in principle, exercise an ethical responsiveness toward nonhuman others as well. Paull's novel makes this expansion with remarkable dexterity. The reader who has walked through a few hundred pages in Ea's world, seeing the ocean as (not yet finished) cetacean, feeling the social bonds of fascist cetacean structures, grieving cetacean losses, is not the same reader who opened this novel. What is acquired in the reading is not knowledge of what it would be like to be a dolphin—which cannot even exist—but a kind of ethical attunement to the truth of cetacean life, its heft and value and precariousness, which cannot be paraphrased. This rehearsed resonance has been termed "species affect" in posthumanist literary criticism (Chen, 2012), a kind of interspecies emotive feedback, differentiated from empathy but still an ecological outgrowth thereof. The novel in the ongoing precarity that ends it rather than in restored order is perhaps its final and most important formal ethical gesture. The classic novel structure, stability through disruption to resolution, interpolates what Morton (2007) calls the "pastoral ideology", in which nature is thought of as stable and harmonious, deviation from which is seen as abnormal. *Pod* rejects this ideology at every layer. By contrast, the novel's oceanic world does not exist as a fallen paradise in need of restoration but rather as a fractured landscape that life ekes out through improvisation, adaptation and cultivation of new modes of solidarity. The novel does not end with an answer but with a possibility: a plea to the reader to be present, without delusion or wishful thinking, in the form of what becomes a world in which human and nonhuman life must learn how to exist together under conditions of mutual destruction that can no longer be undone.

Conclusions

Through dialectical engagement structured by the movements of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, this paper has argued that *Pod* is a seriously engaging and philosophically informed work of posthumanist literary ethics. This thesis demonstrated that the novel's configuration of cetacean subjectivity was an enactment of a posthumanist ontology of entanglement at the literary level, illustrating how Paull's formal choices, the nonhuman point-of-view narration, the construction of cetacean idiom, and relationality as the constructivism for identity, performed at the narrative practice level, theoretical arguments made by Haraway, Braidotti and Wolfe. The antithesis applied this benevolent reading to the thermal stress test of the book's brutal depiction of anthropocentric violence and systemic inequity and the structural impossibility of interspecies sympathy. And the synthesis proved that these tensions are not resolved, but rather productively inhabited in the novel; a model of multispecies solidarity appropriate to the conditions of the Anthropocene emerges from Paul's proposal through shared vulnerability and making kin across difference. In other words, this analysis goes beyond interpreting a single piece of literature. Much of the interest in *Pod* arises not only because it is a remarkable literary work, albeit one with significant formal achievements, but as part of an ongoing cultural conversation about where, ethically speaking, life exists on the maps drawn by contemporary global capitalism and ecological disaster. As the ecological crisis deepens and as anthropocentric humanism reveals its limits, so too does the urgent need for cultural forms capable of creating new ways of being ethically responsive to the nonhuman world. This project relies upon literature for its ability to generate affective knowledge and make an abstract idea concrete, as well as enact the ethics it espouses rather than merely describe them. What Paul has achieved with her novel is to create a text that fills this need, dealing with both philosophically and literarily. Having created a narrative world in which cetacean life is granted full ethical weight and human civilisation is visible only as a destructive force, glimpsed largely by its victims, and where the comforts of pastoral resolution are insistently refused to her characters, she has produced not just a novel that embodies but also one that enacts posthumanist ethics, indeed in this deepest sense a posthumanist literary practice. There are productive paths for future scholarship to extend this analysis in several different directions, by sustained engagement with the marine biology and cetacean cognitive science that Paull draws upon; the comparative analysis of the novel alongside other recent works of nonhuman fiction like Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) or Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020); or an application of indigenous ecological epistemologies which offer ways of grappling with multispecies relations that Western posthumanism is just beginning to take seriously. What this paper has attempted to demonstrate is the theoretical basis and needed vocabulary within which these later investigations can be successfully made.

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