

The title of my PhD research is “In-between Nature and Culture: A Material Ecocritical Perspective on Contemporary British and Estonian Literature”. In this work therefore I take as my subject contemporary British-Caribbean and Estonian literature, more specifically the female author Monique Roffey in comparison to Andrus Kivirähk, viewing them in a fresh material ecocritical perspective and drawing thus together environmental literary criticism and the currently proliferating new materialism. Ecocritical framework and especially the new materialist focus serve in illuminating the writers’ innovative approach to nature and culture and thereby issues to do with agency, body and voice.

The writers come together, representing literatures that on the world scale are rather peripheral. This ground of comparison provides an ecocritical look into minor literatures, rather than the more common mainstream British or American literature, as has been the traditional ecocritical focus. Characterised by its origin in the US and a strong Anglo-American focus, there is a growing recognition in ecocriticism to study peripheral literatures.

Ecocriticism itself has an interesting interdisciplinary position in the humanities, situated closely to the science of ecology. It adds an ecological perspective to the humanities, having “one foot in literature and the other on land”, as the leading ecocritic and the author of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty, has put it (xix). Although expanding rapidly and having several branches in the UK, US, Europe and Asia, ecocriticism is still a rather new research direction in Estonia, not to talk of material ecocriticism, which is still currently defining its position. My new materialist focus places this research into the third wave of ecocriticism, to use the wave model. That is, while the first wave ecocritics were largely engaged with British and American literature, nonfiction nature writing, the experience of wilderness and ecofeminism, then the second wave in the 90s already focussed on other literatures, multiple genres and also urban environments. However, the latest direction emphasises in particular such an international, comparative framework and engages already with new materialism, queer theory, bioregionalism and eco-cosmopolitanism, to name a few perspectives.

The material ecocritical perspective provides a fresh, intriguing look on the respective national literatures and assists in opening currently unexplored strands there. More specifically, the writers I am studying engage compellingly with issues relevant in the new materialist perspective, questioning the nature-culture divide and fleshing out intriguing interactions of the human and the nonhuman.

But to first introduce briefly the studied writers, Andrus Kivirähk (b. 1970) is one of the most prominent and innovative contemporary Estonian writers, whose works are known

for their humour, satire and subversion of fossilised attitudes. Monique Roffey (b. 1965) on the other hand is a new voice in West-Indian literature, whose home, the Caribbean region, is vibrantly present in many of her novels. In my research, I am focussing on two of Roffey's novels, *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* and *Sun Dog*, which are distinct for their strong sense of place and a constant interplay and interaction of nature and culture. By way of comparison, I am analysing Kivirähk's highly popular novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, which has become a canonical book in Estonia, having led to labelling the year 2007 when it was issued as "the year of snake words". Set in medieval Estonia and recounting the changing nature-culture relations, the book has come to represent the danger of Estonian language and nation to become extinct. In that vein, the novel has been predominantly read in terms of this extinction; however, it has been also significantly termed "the first Estonian eco-novel" (Hasselblatt 1262). That is, although the green perspective has not been central as to Estonian literature and there tends to be instead focus on evergreen topics, a powerful green movement is said to have arisen with this book in Estonia.

I am following this vibrant green layer and nature-culture dynamics, illustrating some of the current debates in material ecocriticism, such as the agency and capacity of articulation of nature. Both writers represent magical realism and challenge the nature-culture dichotomy, shifting importantly human-centred perspective toward a posthuman one. Rooted in these concerns, I am looking at how the writers approach, challenge or subvert the nature-culture binary. Or, to be more precise, grounding this work in material ecocriticism, I am interested in how do the agency of nature and naturalcultural intra-activism manifest themselves in contemporary literature and what are the implications of such manifestations. Also, as Kivirähk is a male author, I am further engaging with the question whether the female perspective is more anti-dichotomised, suggesting probably more alternatives.

In line with the new materialist perspective, the writers foreground the fluid border of nature and culture, which comes to challenge normative understandings of humanity and suggests the importance of the reciprocal becoming of humans and nonhumans. As my interest lies in shifting the human-centred perspective and seeing differently, I take material ecocriticism as my central theoretical premise, also central to the writers' works. My methodology for exploring these issues follows from the ecocritical framework, its inherent eclecticism, hybridity and interdisciplinarity. Ecocriticism, namely, takes a rhizomatic approach to the study of literature and follows from common concerns and challenged issues, rather than a definite method. Specifically, I would term my approach generally as reading

against the grain – against the dominant anthropocentrism, considering instead nature’s agency, voice, and alternatives to anthro-centred humanism.

This posthuman materialist ethic is central as to what is nature and what is culture from a material ecocritical angle and finds ample illustration in the literary works: from voiced and bodily nature to trans-corporeal entanglements of the human and the nonhuman. Roffey’s one of the latest novels *Archipelago* also calls for the new materialist reading of the issue of climate change as a vivid illustration of nature’s agentic capacity and naturalcultural intra-activism.

In order to get closer to the fictional illustrations of new materialist concerns, I will briefly introduce material ecocriticism and then exemplify the naturalcultural dynamic at work in Roffey’s and Kivirähk’s novels. Material ecocriticism is the latest direction within the broad field of environmental literary criticism, situated in the new materialist paradigm. The latter theorists and their thought on matter, agency, embodiment and other concerns have had a transformative effect on ecocriticism, bringing forth material ecocriticism.

Centrally important is the idea that matter possesses agency, being thereby transformative not only for the concept of nature but also for that of culture. This material view destabilises the nature-culture dichotomy, approaching nature as an agent and indicating importantly posthuman ethics. It follows from the understanding of the co-constitution of the material and the discursive, highlighting a practice where they emerge through one another, through their “intra-actions” (see Barad 2007). Such a materialist view allows for a more expansive view of agency, extending the horizon of possible actors. Material ecocritics thus take as their premise, on the one hand, the connection of matter and agency, and on the other, the natural-cultural intra-actions, where the two get formed and shaped.

The broader framework of inspiration for material ecocriticism includes among others new materialism, green cultural studies and environmental philosophy. The term “material ecocriticism” as such has been proposed and formulated by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, the foremost representatives of this ecocritical direction in Europe. While the material turn has assumed many names, like new materialism, material feminism, vibrant materialism, and others, Iovino, for example, has characterised such a material ecocritical mode as “non-anthropocentric humanism”, while Oppermann as “feminist ecocriticism with posthuman alliances” (“Feminist Ecocriticism” 28). Such a perspective recognises that humans are defined in relation to nonhumans, and their agency depends on and is also interlaced with nonhuman agency. This view entails hence reconsideration of the human self, which is a “crossroads of agencies” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Theorizing” 457).

The privileged subject in material ecocriticism is corporeal matter, the terrain of the body, following from notions of “bodily nature” and “trans-corporeality”. In general, however, there are two approaches to matter in material ecocriticism that both relate to textuality. First, focus on the representation of matter’s agentic capacities in narrative texts, and, secondly, matter’s narrative power in creating meaning, which highlights matter as a text, a site of narrativity. Oppermann, namely, has termed this narrative agency, or matter’s expressive quality, storied matter, which is thus thick with meaning and not passive or inert (see Oppermann 2013).

I will not repeat here the general new materialist concerns, theorised by Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Susan Hekman and many others, but will conclude with the significance of the material ecocritical perspective. Its reconsideration of both nature and the anthropocentric concept of agency entails “a truly non-anthropocentric vision”, as Oppermann has noted as well (“Material Ecocriticism” 56), expanding our view as to other actors on the planet, multiplicity of corporeal beings, meanings and stories. The reconsideration undoes such binaries as culture/nature or object/subject and denies the sovereign position of humans – they are always already part of the material world. Such a perspective, then, is transformative also for humans, who in this view are seen as increasingly posthuman, subject to unexpected forces beyond their own control.

Also, material ecocriticism exhibits a significant ethical stance, which Serenella Iovino as a professor of ethics summarises as “ecological horizontalism” and “an extended moral imagination” (“Material Ecocriticism” 52). This horizontal and extended view brings well together the ideas central to material ecocriticism: the extension of anthropocentric concepts of agency, body and stories, suggesting thereby an entangled rather than neatly divided world. In so doing, material ecocriticism has the potential of impacting “environmental literary studies in an unprecedented way,” as Iovino believes (ib. 56). According to the other prominent material ecocritic, Serpil Oppermann, this entanglement of subjects and horizons liberates the human vision from its otherness to that of “differential co-emergence”, suggesting again the naturalcultural intra-actions (“Material” 67). As Scott Slovic, the editor of the major ecocritical journal *ISLE*, has observed, this perspective initiates “an entire new direction in contemporary ecocriticism”, providing tools for rethinking anthropocentrism and fossilised understandings of nature’s passivity (443).

But introducing now the literary works themselves, it can be said that both Kivirähk and Roffey with their novels go beyond anthropocentrism, extending the otherwise anthropocentric concept of agency but also voice onto the supposedly passive nature. Namely,

agency firstly manifests itself through the portrayal of nonhumans as voiced. *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, for example, focuses on the protagonist Leemet, the last man to speak snakish, who lives in the forest. The majority of forest dwellers become villagers, discarding their former life as animalistic and pagan. These events on the human level are conveyed with parallels from the nonhuman. However, nature and culture do not remain juxtaposed as such, but are manifested in various forms of blurring, dissolving the rigid binary. This hybridity becomes strongly manifest in the character of snakes and humans, and, particularly, the blurring of their voices. Kivirähk subverts the evil Biblical snake, making snakes the brothers of humans; they have shared ancestry and speak a common language, snakish. That is, snakes emerge as voiced subjects, speaking with the last few forest dwellers, some of whom in turn speak snakish. The hybridisation originates from snakes, because they who have taught the language to humans. However, with the appearance of the tempting village life, snakish is spoken by increasingly fewer people and used for other purposes.

Thus, on the one hand, snakes are articulate, but on the other, it is even more significant that the last few forest dwellers speak the language of nature. The very manifestation of this is the protagonist of the title. Leemet is taught the language by his uncle Vootele, while the majority alienate from the language, considering this process too difficult. The forest dwellers who still understand the language can only differentiate between the most common hisses. The most powerful words, however, which would awake the huge snake Northern Frog, who has defeated all the enemies in the ancient times, require that snakish be spoken by ten thousand people.

In fact, Vootele promises to teach Leemet so well that he no longer understands whether he is a human or a snake. In addition to the command of snakish, Leemet does, indeed, become a manifestation of such a blurring of nature and culture, crawling on the grass or wanting to dig under the earth like a mole in order to hide. He is even said to resemble a snake in terms of his appearance: while Leemet's best friend grows tall, Leemet "resembles a snake with joints, being lanky and thin" (Kivirähk 109). Kivirähk stretches the binary even further, so that Leemet develops life-long friendship with one of the snakes. Saving the snake's life from a hedgehog Leemet is invited to the snake cave where no other human being has ever been. Being invited to hibernate at the cave, Leemet feels himself more as a snake than a human. Thus, this close relationship illustrates a less binary view of nature and culture, a hybrid co-existence in the new materialist vein.

However, when Leemet congratulates Ints on her new-born offspring, mistaking Ints for a male animal, an inevitable difference between nature and culture is observable as well.

Snakes are proud animals and consider other beings who cannot speak snakish inferior. There is thus further polyphony of voices, as snake language functions as a basis for hierarchy inside nature. Insects, for example, are at the bottom of the hierarchy of speaking. That is, mosquitoes, bees, and horseflies cannot speak snakish, for their brain is as little as a speck of dust. Grasshoppers, spiders, and ladybirds are even termed “born idiots” (58). A particularly interesting remark is made on bears, who are considered the wisest of animals, apart from snakes, of course, the brothers of humans, as Kivirähk puts it (16). Although snakes are considered to be the wisest of animals because of speaking, they are still portrayed in conjunction to humans – the supposedly wisest of all creatures.

In such a rich portrayal of nature and culture, Kivirähk therefore enmeshes snake language within the matrix of a polyphony of voices. Although humans and snakes have shared ancestry, humans no longer value the ancient language, being thus seen by snakes as mere insects. Yet, the protagonist becomes the very manifestation of a hybrid of nature and culture, speaking snakish so well that he could be mistaken for a snake. In the light of the blurred voices, Leemet could be characterised as “natured culture”, while the snakes in turn as “cultured nature”, to use the terms of the ecofeminist thinker Patrick Murphy (89).

Contrary to Kivirähk’s work, where humans speak a nonhuman language, in Roffey’s *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* nature speaks in human language. Namely, Trinidadian hills are attributed with a direct speaking ability so that nature enters into conversation with the human protagonists Sabine and George, the new migrants from England to Trinidad. The hills are not only attributed with a voice, but are portrayed as a woman with body, hips, belly, and curves, highlighting the corporeality of the nonhuman. Doing so, Roffey’s portrayal radically challenges the nature-culture division, suggesting a view of nature as both bodily, speaking and acting.

Namely, the latter agentic capacity of nature becomes manifest in opening the chain of events and causing the disintegration of the protagonists’ marriage. Roffey uses nature as a narrative device to bring to the fore a love triangle. Namely, George’s allegiance shifts from Sabine to the green woman, and although George could be argued to represent culture, he is closer to nature than he is to his wife. This closeness enhances the feminine dimension of nature. Nature’s presence is highlighted throughout the novel through her mightiness and the quality of encircling the humans. Nature is imposing — even the sky is said to be staring and hurling rays, so that the protagonist wants to get out of the way. Herein, the nonhuman setting appears as a looming presence that is superior to humans, bombing them for example with aggressive rain and fruits (e.g. Roffey 430). Acting out, the image of nature is far from meek

and static; on the contrary, the vibrancy of the nonhuman is well captured into Sabine's observation that "the mountain woman looked placid, but in fact the opposite was true. The mountain woman teemed with life" (Roffey 331).

And interestingly, Roffey furthermore complicates nature as a character in that this nonhuman power is underpinned by ambivalence. Just as there are also clashing voices in Kivirähk's novel, Roffey indicates an internal conflict within nature, making birds for example also afraid of the roaring rain of the mountain woman. Nature attacks also her fellow nonhumans, suggesting partial hostility toward those elements of nature that have accepted human dominance. Further ambivalence can be seen in that nature seems to be unable to control her own strength and violent outbursts (Roffey 223). Generally, however, this nuanced power conveys the depth and agency that Roffey attributes to the nonhuman.

Both the hills and snakes emerge therefore as agentic subjects, speaking and acting. The giant snake Northern Frog, for example, entails enormous power that has, indeed, acted out but that is left to sleep, for the snake language is discarded. Particularly, in the world where everyone else has forgotten the language Leemet understands their specific power – already one correctly pronounced snake word can help kill another being or save a life. Above all, the nonhuman agency challenges such binaries as nature/culture, passive/active, nonlanguage/language. In particular, the voicing of the nonhuman suggests the creative and expressive quality of nature, which is central to material ecocriticism and its understanding of the liveliness of matter.

Attributing nature with voice and agency, Roffey and Kivirähk diverge from the norm of anthropocentrism but they go beyond that, challenging and blurring current distinctions as to nature and culture even more. Namely, nature and culture become finally literally merged in the novels, suggesting the composite reality in the new materialist vein and thus a truly non-anthropocentric vision. In *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, the most spectacular instance of this is the human character Meeme, one of the last forest dwellers, who has no house but is always seen close to the ground, like a blade of a tree. With his moss-covered clothes and beard, holding insects and plants, he resembles strikingly human turf, as Kivirähk words it (153). Such a portrayal of the human as intermeshed with the nonhuman turf, moss, and creatures is truly indicative of the co-existence of the material and the discursive, or, the natural and the cultural. They emerge, indeed, intra-actively through one another—Meeme becomes the naturalcultural being in his contact with the soil and the moss in turn finds a body on which it spreads. He is no longer a clearly demarcated human but not fully natural either, representing a fluid "natureculture", to use the term of Donna Haraway (2004).

Nature and culture truly collapse into each other. For example, Meeme notes that he does not resemble a decomposed matter of leaves, but he has become this— “Yes, I decay,” he remarks (194). In fact, he wants to rotten in the same place where he dies, to become one with his native forest soil. And, indeed, Meeme does finally dissolve into the earth, so that there is not the slightest division of human body and nature. They merge, highlighting a trans-corporeal space – a space where human corporeality and nonhuman nature “meet and mingle” and are substantially interconnected, as Alaimo puts it (238). These material interconnections are evident in the final scene where Meeme is in the process of becoming the earth.

There was Meeme, but it was certainly an exaggeration to consider him a human. He had lost even his last boundary markers and when I [Leemet] stepped closer to him, I couldn't tell precisely where his body ended and the moss began. The forest was dark, too, but Meeme looked, indeed, like somehow dissolved in nature. He was like a melted heap of snow that had spread itself. The same moss which grew below and beside him also grew on top of him. Furthermore, it seemed that he had not moved for a long time, because he was covered with a thick layer of autumnal leaves. His face was dark like soil and his eyes gleamed from this layer like dew drops. (374)

This border-defying naturalcultural being has, indeed, mingled his flesh substantially with the earth—moss and soil. Furthermore, this earth is agentic in taking control of him, spreading, and finally dissolving the creature in itself. The vaguely discernible human has become ultimately intermeshed with the nonhuman, melting the two. The inseparability of Meeme's body from nature fleshes out a situation where nature “is always as close as one's own skin”, to use Alaimo's formulation (238), covering him on all sides. Meeme remarks to Leemet that he already senses how plants start growing through him; in spring, they will grow through him as if through turf, eaten by goats (375). And, indeed, when Leemet finally passes the place, Meeme has become a puddle among the turf.

Meeme, therefore, is the ultimate illustration of the trans-corporeal space, where his body is inseparable from nature and its agentic forces. He experiences the process of gradually becoming the earth—from a leaf-like being on the ground to the very ground itself, suggesting the intra-active becoming of nature and culture, where they emerge through one another, as Karen Barad would put it.

Such a co-becoming, rather than preceding, is similarly laid out in Roffey's first novel *Sun Dog*, where the nature-culture binary is also undone. Set in modern-day London, the

novel recounts the identity quest of the protagonist August as he searches to find his real father. The plot is vividly accompanied by seasonal changes that cycle from winter to autumn. Typically classified as magic realism, the novel portrays magical transformations that evolve cyclically on August's body and the text is set importantly against the backdrop of the atmospheric phenomenon of sun dogs, a luminous halo on both side of the sun, coming to represent the false fathers. This environmental phenomenon, however, provides not so much this parallel but draws environmental subjectivity onto August as his body starts to transform environmentally.

August is sensitive toward weather and experiences environmental changes on his very body. In winter, he is covered with a frost that at first resembles a rash until icicles also form on his body, dangling from his armpits and ears and tinkling a little when he moves. Strikingly, when spring arrives on August's body, he literally blossoms — buds emerge “silently, without pain, in ones and twos, overnight, or sometimes during the day” in all possible bends and folds of his body, behind his ears, and between his toes and fingers (Roffey, “Sun” 103). “I grew leaves too,” August observes (254). Mimicking the act of rain, water seeps from his body like rain from the sky. In summer, August's skin cracks and lilies bloom on his body. And finally in autumn, in the same way that nature casts off its leafy coat, August's hair, eyelashes and fingernails also fall off.

These changes are indicative of a blend where nature and culture form a circulating material-discursive system and where the human is transformed beyond recognition. This extraordinary position on the edge of both nature and culture is significant, as August does not know his real father but finds a new father figure in nature. As the human is radically transformed by nature and made his own father, I approach the situation, among others, through the concept of “transposition”, as discussed by Rosi Braidotti (2006); that is, an in-between space where nature and culture circulate in their fluid becoming. With his naturalcultural hybridity August, indeed, comes to represent the nomadic subject in transit. He is in the process of changing, being embedded and entangled with the material world around and on his very body. The relationship in this novel also provides an alternative male gendering of nature, usually understood as the feminine womb of creation. Nature is August's father just as he is a father to all humans. With his precarious position on the edge of both nature and culture, August's body transcends the nature-culture divide, and this posthuman creature could be characterised as a dynamic, rhizomatic subject in the process of becoming, to follow Rosi Braidotti.

As a hybrid character, August therefore illustrates a porous natural-cultural body, in which he feels himself good. For example, he regards the buds on his body with love, kinship and alliance. Changing with the seasons, August starts growing nature on his body, so that the environment makes him uniquely his own father. Growing buds, flowers and other lively things, he senses a splitting inside his body, cells moving apart, thus once again highlighting the co-emergence of the human and the nonhuman.

Another aspect important in the novel are the trees, with which August feels affinity, as his becoming a tree himself, growing leaves and casting the green coat off in line with the seasons. As August is becoming an organic part of nature and vice versa, this porous body strongly highlights the trans-corporeal space of material interconnections, as was the case with Meeme in Kivirähk's novel. With August, nature is indeed as close as one's own skin, in Stacy Alaimo's vein. This is brilliantly manifested through the blossoms on his body. He explains the situation as flowers on flesh, pink on pink, a blessing according to him (184). Significantly, the nonhuman and the human flesh come together, melting into each other with their pink hue. This rhizomatic mesh is present through all the material changes occurring on his body and confirming that bodies are indeed material-discursive phenomena, not fixed entities, as Barad also puts it.

This memorable blend, as portrayed through August, therefore draws together ideas of trans-corporeality, transposition, and the intra-active becoming of nature and culture. They co-emerge on and through August's body, while matter is an active participant in this becoming. Namely, to draw finally the circle of changes together, August realises that the changes on his body had started when his father died – thus, nature is indeed an active participant in August's becoming. Nature makes him his own father, until he finds his true father. All in all, Roffey radically revises the nature-culture binary, melting them together – human becomes an organic part of nature and the material world a part of him, suggesting their circular co-emergence. This vibrant view denies the sovereign position of humans, suggesting that they are always already part of their surrounding material world.

To conclude this overview of my research, both Kivirähk and Roffey radically challenge the rigid nature/culture division and thus the view of them as passive/active, voiceless/voiced, and so forth. The otherwise anthropocentric concepts of voice and agency are extended onto the material world, so that nature emerges as “a self-articulating subject”, to use the term provided by Serpil Oppermann (“Ecocriticism” 4). Taking the novels together, human and nonhuman languages are blurred, so that humans appear to be natural creatures (speaking snakish) and nature itself a voiced cultural creature, as the hills which engage in

conversations with humans. Nature's agency, however, manifests itself already in the aspect of voice and the portrayal of nature as an active empowered subject, which results in re-visioning the power positions of humans and nonhumans. Interestingly, nature is granted further depth, because nature is not always secure with its own power position, as Roffey indicates. Generally, such a portrayal of nature as voiced, agentic and furthermore bodily conveys the expressiveness, creativity and vibrancy that the surrounding nonhuman world exhibits.

Qualities such as agency, voice and body are then obviously not singularly human, but span the material world around us. Moreover, the novels call for the final dissolution of anthropocentrism and the traditional binary logic in merging nature and culture in the literal sense of meaning. Such a composite co-becoming becomes strikingly manifest in the trans-corporeal entanglement of human corporeality with the nonhuman material world. In *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, Meeme not just grows turf on his body but becomes the turf, dissolving in the earth and suggesting the intra-active becoming of nature and culture. The human becomes similarly posthuman in *Sun Dog*, where August's seasonally transforming body forms a circulating material-discursive system, or an interconnected space of becoming. Instead of nature/culture, we are faced with their trans-corporeal entanglement – and inextricably so.

All in all, as both novels are extremely rich in engaging vibrantly and intriguingly with the nature-culture binary, it cannot be said that Roffey's portrayal with its feminine view offers more alternatives or dismantles the binary somehow more. However, it does become evident that Roffey engages more with the body. She does not only convey the trans-corporeal meeting zone of human body and nature, but (1) portrays the hills as a green bodily woman, and (2) provides an alternative male gendering for nature in *Sun Dog*. The bodily view of nature even transpires from Roffey's one of the latest novels *Archipelago*, where the seascape is again portrayed with emphasis on corporeality. Also, Roffey appears to privilege womanhood, attributing the aspect of voice and power to the feminine, the green woman. For example, the nature-culture conversation in *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* occurs exclusively between women.

In general, both writers nevertheless indicate a radical move beyond the nature/culture binary -- they shift the normative anthropocentric perspective and challenge thereby the understanding of culture as more than nature or separate from it. Revisioning primarily such concepts as agency, voice and body, the writers narrate into being a dynamic world, where one could say that nature and culture both co-emerge and merge.

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