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Engaging the imagination: ‘new nature writing’, collective politics and the environmental crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper⁴ explores the potential of ‘new nature writing’ – a literary genre currently popular in the UK – as a kind of arts activism, in particular, how it might engage with the environmental crisis and lead to a kind of collective politics. We note the limitations of the genre, notably the reproduction of class, gender and ethnic hierarchies, the emphasis on nostalgia and loss, and the stress on individual responses rather than collective politics. But we also take seriously the claims of art to enable us to imagine other futures, suggesting that new nature writing has the potential to play a role in collective forms of environmental justice and capabilities.

Keywords: politics; the arts; capabilities; justice

1. INTRODUCTION

Visit a bookshop, even in the most urban of locations, and there will be a table groaning with books about the countryside. Moving to the countryside, moving *back* to the countryside, the loss of countryside and the rewilding of the countryside, farming, falconry, dry stone walling and above all, walking. Often this literature is bundled together under the heading of ‘new nature writing’, a term

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⁴ An earlier version of this paper contained errors which have subsequently been removed

that many, including the writers contained within it, find unsatisfactory (not least because of the condescension to which nature writing has sometimes been subject), but which nevertheless serves as a useful shorthand for a range of literature which speaks to ‘anxieties about human disconnection from natural processes’ (Moran, 2014: 50), anxieties which have grown as the global environmental crisis has deepened.

In this paper we try to understand new nature writing as a literary form of environmental activism. This is not to say that new nature writers consistently see themselves as activists: some do and some do not, and indeed the political role that nature-writing should play is a subject of debate among new nature writers (Cocker, 2015; Macfarlane, 2015b). But the consistent theme of these writers – anxiety and grief about what is being lost (Bate, 2000; Cowen, 2015; Macfarlane, 2015a), even when it is being celebrated (Mabey, 2006; McCarthy, 2015) – is at the core of environmental politics, and highlights the question of how to mobilise a collective political response in the face of overwhelming bewilderment and denial. As Shaw and Bonnett argue (2016: 566), ‘the idea of a disjuncture between individualising psycho-social mechanisms and global environmental challenges’ is now well-established: we are aware of what is happening but we cannot or will not do anything about it. In this situation, the role of the arts is often seen as creative re-imagining, enabling us to fully comprehend the scale of potential loss but, as important, giving us back a sense of the future, an ability to imagine another, less destructive way of being (Levitas, 2013).

The idea of ‘arts activism’, or indeed of the arts having a political role, is an ancient one. Though the term is generally used nowadays either to talk about the blend of artistic and social activism – artists working with others around a particular cause – it may also be inherent in the artwork itself.

Examples of the latter might include Jeremy Deller’s work: the Battle of Orgreave was a re-enactment of the confrontation between miners and the police in the UK during the 1984 miners’ strike, and in ‘*We are Here*’ actors dressed as First World War soldiers appeared in a variety of location across the UK to mark the first day of the Battle of the Somme. In these cases the political

context is indistinguishable from the artwork, not least because in both cases the ‘artwork’ was temporary – existing mostly in video and photos taken by the public on their phones. Within the broad range of socially or politically conscious art, ‘environmental arts’ usually refers either to art which draws on the human relationship to the natural world (such the land art of Andy Goldsworthy), or to art which more explicitly concerns itself with particular environmental concerns, such as marine pollution, soil erosion or extinctions. In this latter case we might point to Eve Mosher’s work, in particular *HighWaterLine*, which marks the parts of cities projected to be submerged due to climate change. It is within this spectrum that we are placing new nature writing. Though largely a non-fiction genre, it prominently displays aesthetic or artistic motivations. Indeed, it is a high quality and literary form of writing that is often celebrated in such works.

How then does new nature writing speak to broad environmental concerns? What are its limitations and exclusions, and how do they reflect those of the arts in general in an increasingly unequal society? And how can something so often focussed on individual responses be mobilised in collective politics?

2. A SHORT HISTORY OF NEW NATURE WRITING

Macfarlane (2003: n.p.) suggests that from the 1930s onwards the UK saw a dearth of nature writing. He lays part of the blame for this at the door of the novelist Stella Gibbons, whose *Cold Comfort Farm* skewered a particular Romantic rural writing tradition so successfully that ‘it has been increasingly hard to write about “nature” with a straight face, and to expect a serious reception in Britain’. He also points to changes in the way people live and argues that increased mobility – more people commuting longer distances and more frequently relocating – has shorn the link between people and the place they inhabit, weakening their affinity to anything outside their ‘immediate, and often temporary domestic sphere’.

However, this overlooks the way in which nature writing has been a perennial feature of literature and polemic in Britain and beyond over the past 250 years of advancing industrialism and commodification and enclosure of farmed countryside and wilderness. In Britain, the antecedents of our present new wave of nature writing include the Romantics of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century; the rural poet John Clare and the lament over enclosures (Bresnihan, 2013); the defence of 'heritage' embodied in the establishment of the National Trust ; the surge of polemical writing in the 1920s and 1930s against suburbanisation and ribbon development (Williams-Ellis, 1937) ; and the work of natural history and topographical writers such as HJ Massingham in celebrating (though often in mournful and nostalgic tones) old English landscapes before and during World War Two (Matless, 1998).

A similar pattern of regular waves of celebration mixed with lament and defensive mobilisation for conservation can be seen in the USA during the 19th and 20th centuries, prefiguring the contemporary resurgence in nature writing and ecological anxieties. There are continuities of mourning, celebration, assertion of an aesthetics and ethics of land and the wild, coupled with advocacy of conservation, as in the UK, in the work of nineteenth century writers and activists such as Thoreau and John Muir, and in the leading US 'nature writers' of the mid- and late-twentieth century, such as Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder and Barry Lopez.

The politics of ecological defence and lament over the impacts of industrial society and economies on the land in these diverse bodies of work over the past two centuries do not translate unambiguously into a distinct ideology, aesthetics, ethics or pattern of mobilisation, as discussed further below in relation to the latest British wave of nature writing. Progressive and conservative values, if not reactionary ones, co-exist and co-evolve in the writings and politics of the celebrants and mourners of 'nature'.

From the early 2000s, in parallel with rising concern over global environmental risks such as climate disruption and over local loss of and threats to habitats and creatures, there has been major

resurgence of interest in British nature-writing and a wellspring of new non-fiction. Moran (2014: 49) notes some key practitioners of what, by the late 2000s, had come to be known as ‘new nature writing’: these include Mark Cocker, Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie and Robert Macfarlane. For Moran, what connects these authors is a desire to explore the natural world through everyday connections with it, that is, to draw attention to the natural world around us, not only to the ‘rare or exotic’ (2014: 50). This tradition has its origins in the transformation of urban landscapes following the Second World War and the work of Kenneth Allsop, who wrote of the thriving wildlife in the bombed-out scrubland of central London. The theme of ‘the human-made landscape as a makeshift natural habitat’ (Moran, 2014: 51) was continued by Richard Mabey, whose books *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973) and *The Roadside Wildlife Book* (1978) detailed the flora and fauna of deindustrialised spaces and roadside verges, a point taken up and amplified by Farley and Symmons Roberts in their book *Edgelands* (2012). Macfarlane (2003) highlights the word-of-mouth success of Roger Deakin’s *Waterlog* (2000), an account of Deakin’s journey around Britain swimming in rivers, streams, lochs and other ‘wild’ places, as a key moment in the current renaissance of nature-writing. However, it is Macfarlane himself who is the most prominent of the new nature writers; his books *The Wild Places* (2008b), *The Old Ways* (2012) and *Landmarks* (2015a) in particular reaching a (relatively) mass audience and working to popularise the genre. Though his writing contains exceptions to the everyday landscapes that Moran argues are the core subject matter for new nature writers – he has written about mountaineering (2008a), and locations from the Cairngorms to Palestine and Tibet – we find that even in these cases the vernacular and everyday landscape asserts its rights to be taken seriously. *The Wild Places* (2008b), for example, ends with a recognition of the wilderness available around his Cambridgeshire home.

Under the banner of new nature writing, and while mindful that there is a lot of overlap between and divergence within these categories, we might highlight five strands:

- ecologically motivated dissent, the most obviously politicised form of nature-writing from a variety of ‘green’ political perspectives (e.g. Kingsnorth, 2014; Monbiot, 2014);
- ecologically informed aestheticised observation – epiphany, mourning and celebration of nature at risk (e.g. Macfarlane, 2015a; Jamie, 2005 and a host of others);
- downsizing/de-urbanising labour on the land – urban intellectuals discovering their place on the land (e.g. Bunting 2010; Walthew, 2007);
- poetic natural history writers – twenty-first century variations on the old pattern of ‘gentleman observers’ (e.g. Cocker, 2007; McCarthy, 2015; Deakin, 2000);
- close natural history observation as psychotherapy and psychodrama (Mabey, 2005; Macdonald, 2015; Norbury, 2015).

Associated with these are a proliferation of magazines (e.g. *Archipelago*, *Elsewhere*), reissued natural history classics (eg. Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* (Shepherd, 1977, 2011), and JA Baker’s *The Peregrine* (Baker, 1967, 2005), both of which Macfarlane championed), websites (e.g. *Caught by the River*) and guidebooks about rustic crafts, bird-watching, cloud-spotting, navigating across country and so on. Most of these cater to niche audiences, but for the genre’s star performers there can be significant sales and much broader exposure. At the peak is Macfarlane, his books *Mountains of the Mind* and *The Wild Places* (first published in 2003 and 2007 respectively) selling around fifty or sixty thousand copies, with continuing annual sales of up to 10,000. Further, *The Wild Places* was serialised on BBC Radio 4’s Book of the Week, and was later the subject of a BBC Radio documentary, before being adapted into an hour-long film for BBC 2 television in 2010. Printing viewers’ enthusiastic letters afterwards, the Radio Times captioned Macfarlane’s photograph ‘The next David Attenborough?’.⁵

⁵ See <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20case%20study%20compilation.pdf>

Less well-known, and emerging in the UK over the past 10-20 years in parallel with the more popular strands of new nature writing, is a current of radical poetry-writing and related criticism on landscape and environmental perception (see for example Tarlo, 2011; Tarlo, 2013; Tarlo, 2016). This ‘radical landscape poetry’ is self-consciously more politically engaged and explicit about the connection to be made between poetic perception and eco-politics than is the case with the more mainstream works with which we are concerned here. The emergence of this body of work highlights the problematic relationship of mainstream new nature writing with the politics of nature and ‘the environment’. In the next section we take up the question of the politics – and lack of politics – in new nature writing.

3. A CONTESTED TERRAIN: THE PURPOSES AND POLITICS OF NEW NATURE WRITING

A pair of articles in the *New Statesman* serves to highlight the contested terrain of new nature writing, in particular the relation between the human and non-human, and the extent and role of new nature writing (and writers) as agents in environmental activism.

In the first, Mark Cocker (2015: n.p.) maintains that while the work of, for example, Richard Mabey explored the axis between nature and culture, many contemporary new nature writers explore the terrain between landscape and literature. Thus, he offers a rebuke to what to what he sees as an emphasis on ‘fine writing’ to the detriment of any engagement with the mounting threats to, and destruction of, nature, particularly noting the negative effects of contemporary farming techniques and agribusinesses that are profoundly affecting natural diversity. Cocker’s fear is that new nature writing will become ‘a literature of consolation that distracts us from the truth of our fallen countryside, or – just as bad – that it becomes a space for us to talk to ourselves about ourselves, with nature relegated to the background as an attractive green wash.’ This comes to the fore in his analysis of William Atkins’ *The Moor* (2014) which he criticises for its inattention to the politics and exploitation of Britain’s moorlands as they service wealthy grouse hunters, while noting that there

are ‘far more titles in the bibliography concerning the sexual politics of [Ted] Hughes and [Sylvia] Plath than there are about the environmental politics of red grouse and hen harriers’.

Three months later the *New Statesman* published a reply by Macfarlane (2015b: n.p.) in which he argues that nature writers do not need to be overtly political to have an effect. He highlights the power of literature to inspire belief and engage the imagination, arguing that to criticise new nature writing for a lack of activism is to miss the ways in which literature ‘works not in straight lines but in cat’s cradles of cause and effect’ and that its effects in encouraging activism may become apparent only in retrospect ‘or even remain unseen’. Here Macfarlane is restating his earlier position that if the natural world is not ‘imaginatively known’ it is ‘far more easily disposable’ (2003: n.p.). He avers that if his writing, and that of other new nature writers, evinces nostalgia for (relatively) unexploited natural landscapes this does not equal conservatism, but rather prompts action by bringing to the fore what has been lost and ‘what will come unless certain reparations are made in the balance of our relationship with the natural world’. Here, then, the sense of loss elicited by nature writers is a cultural resource that can be exploited to shape our future relationship to the material natural world (Ryle, 2002: 22).

We will return to Macfarlane’s argument below, but here we want to consider criticism of new nature writing and the limitations on it as a form of political engagement. Critiques take various forms: some are concerned with the writers themselves: the overwhelmingly male nature of the grouping is an obvious place to start. Others relate to what is taken to be the celebration of particular sorts of landscapes and the denigration of others, what Miéville (2015) calls ‘urbophobic utopianism’; there are also concerns that new nature writing commodifies or instrumentalises the natural environment – particularly as a balm to troubled psyches, as in Mabey’s *Nature Cure* (2005), Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2015), or Norbury’s *The Fish Ladder* (2015).

Perhaps the best-known critique of new nature writing comes from the nature writer Kathleen Jamie, whose wittily wounding words are no less effective for being, as she admits, somewhat ‘unfair.’ In her review of Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* in the London Review of Books she cries:

... when a bright, healthy and highly educated young man jumps on the sleeper train and heads this way, with the declared intention of seeking ‘wild places’, my first reaction is to groan. It brings out in me a horrible mix of class, gender and ethnic tension. What’s that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go, ‘discovering’, then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words. (Jamie, 2008: 25-6)

Many readers will recognise elements of this, even if they are fans of the writing in question, as we are. The way that family, work and other daily obligations seem to melt away when the wilderness calls. The tendency to bump into or stay with a rather rarefied form of fellow explorer – in Macfarlane’s case often writers or other artists – which calls to mind gentlemen explorers such as Robert Byron or Patrick Leigh Fermor, their passage through harsh landscapes often eased by a short stay with a Grand Vizier or the British Consul in Kabul. As Jamie notes, this seems to be a landscape in which most people, particularly working-class people, have been removed. Indeed, what is being celebrated in *The Wild Places*, amongst others, is the ‘emptiness’ of the land, though one need not know much about the history of the Scottish Highlands, for example, to understand the real causes and costs of that emptiness.

What we find troubling about the environmental politics of new nature writing can on occasion be extended environmental politics in general. The exquisite sensitivity of the writer, their desire for solitude in which to commune with their chosen landscape, even the arcane use of language can provide pleasure for the readers; but the desire to set this against the urban, against the everyday, and too often against their fellow citizens, is troubling. As Miéville (2015) writes, ‘start with heuristics like rural versus urban, nature versus the social, and in the face of oppressive power you easily

become complicit, or worse, in environmental injustice, in racism. Such simplistic urbophobic utopianism can unite the most nostalgic conservative, seeking solace in a national park, with the most extropian post-hippy touting an eco-start-up’.

The association of nature-writing with rurality – indeed, a particular type of rurality – is where concerns about class, gender and ethnic biases start to bite. Particularly in the UK, our natural and ‘wild’ places are the product of centuries of displacement, enclosure and farming, even while they appear untouched (Benson, 2008). Ryle (2002) points to the ways in which ‘nature’ is discursively formed: ‘nature’ has a material basis, but also relies on sets of cultural discourses and social relations. Landscapes have assumed the status of being natural through spatial practices and policy, and art and literature (p.12), so that it should be understood as a historical product of human material destruction and cultural intervention (p.22). To describe a landscape as natural, then, cannot be a neutral act, but mobilises sets of orientations and regimes of value. Of course this can be critical and subversive, but landscape and nature are often invoked in reactionary and repressive nationalisms, and obscure, or make ‘natural’, exploitation and social inequality. Given this, and as new nature writing operates in the highly unequal world of cultural production (Oakley and O’Brien, 2016), to point to who is doing the writing, is a point doubly worth making. In the work of new nature writers the careful observation of nature is valorised: *close attention*, conveyed by ‘fine writing’, is both a marker of personal sensitivity and attunement, and also a means to ecological consciousness-raising. However, such an ethical-aesthetic stance risks appearing to be a kind of engagement restricted to a class versed in arcana about the natural world; to emulate this practice requires immersion and concomitant investment of considerable time and money. In contrast, Jamie (The Guardian, 30 April, 2016) praises Annie Dillard’s collection of shorter writings *The Abundance* (Dillard, 2016) as being most like ‘how “nature” is encountered’ by the majority of people who ‘can’t spend a year crawling in bushes, who have to get home of a night to make the kids’ fish fingers’.

In the context of ecological activism, the focus of much new nature writing on nature, understood as wild, remote, forests or moors, omits the (sub-)urban environments in which most people live, and the polluted places most affected by human activity. As Buell (2005) argues, there is a need to engage with the pressing concerns of ‘the impoverished and socially marginalised: to landscapes of urbanization, racism, poverty, and toxification’ (p.113), a focus on which might draw greater attention to the links between environmental disadvantage, race and class. Works such as *Edgelands* (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2015), or Cowen’s *Common Ground* (2015), do deal with just these kinds of marginal landscapes, but in seeking to assert that such landscapes are worthy of our attention, as indeed they are, they often fall into an ironic, albeit celebratory, tone. Out of town shopping centres are ‘beguiling in their honesty’ (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2015: 217); motorway bridges are mysterious; landfill sites are havens for herring gulls. All true, no doubt, but this kind of attentiveness can lead to a downplaying of environmental harms and an unfiltered, approving tone which, if used about the Scottish Highlands, would attract the charge of idealising. Finally, we consider another powerful critique of new nature writing – the focus on the individual rather than the social (Scott et al, 2016). The notion that new nature writing is capable of re-engaging individuals with nature and, therefore, revitalising a vital ecological, moral and political milieu is a comforting one. Yet Buell (1995: 4) notes that:

... artistic representations of the natural environment have served as agent
both of provocation and of compartmentalization calling us to think
ecocentrically but often conspiring with the readerly temptation to cordon off
scenery into pretty ghettos.

Thus we can see how new nature writing, while having radical potential, can also *deflect* ecological action. In new nature writing, nature’s socio-cultural and political ecology often takes second place to individual projects of self-actualisation and epiphany, experienced primarily as a project of individual enlightenment, or personal consolation, not collective mobilisation. Here the natural

environment is as a resource for human consumption: in new sets of cultural commodities for the individualised, positional consumer, and thus implicated in the circuits of late capitalism which have done, and are doing, so much to bring about ecological crisis (Parr, 2014); or in danger of being unwittingly instrumentalised, as in books like *Nature Cure* (Mabey, 2005) or *His for Hawk* (MacDonald, 2015), where immersion in natural processes proves the remedy for depression or for bereavement.

4. BRINGING THE SOCIAL BACK IN

There are of course accounts that move us beyond the solitary. Budden (2016: n.p.) notes that being in ‘woods and marshes and fields’ for him is not to recall Jamie’s ‘Lone Enraptured Male’, but to think of ‘raves, of folk songs, of punk gigs, of dodgy drinking, edgy sex and a dancer’s dilated pupils as the sun comes up.’ This is a version of rurality more reminiscent of the anarchic corner of the English countryside in Jez Butterworth’s 2009 play *Jerusalem* than Nan Shephard’s Cairngorms. McCarthy (2015) too, in his hymn to the relationship between nature and joy, while drawing on the solitary teenage experience of cycling around the Wirral, speaks of the potential of this joy to reconcile humans with their animal nature in the natural world. ‘We may have left the natural world, but the natural world has not left us’ he argues in an attempt to awaken a sense of collective belonging in nature, not just individual engagement (2015: 61).

Macfarlane, in his defence of the role and politics of nature writing (2015b: n.p) describes this reconnection with the natural world in Gregory Bateson’s terms as an ‘ecology of mind’ (Bateson, 1972, 1999), and finds the manifestation of this ecology in everything from transition towns and allotments to the full range of the arts. He defends what he calls the ‘best’ of new nature writing from the idea that it glosses over ‘dark histories of landscapes’. While its politics can be difficult to understand in conventional terms, he argues that a ‘culture of nature’ has a distinctive intensity, that it pays attention to the ‘structures of ownership and capital’ that determine our relationship to the natural world. Indeed, it is often in linking past and present experiences of destruction, loss or

inequity that new nature writing comes into its own. Jamie (2005) in her account of visiting Maes Howe in Orkney for the winter solstice wonders what future generations will inherit from us: ‘they could scarce avoid all our plastic and junk, but what would they want?’ Having failed to catch the beam of sunlight that, clouds permitting, touches the Neolithic tombs on the solstice, she reflects on the marvel of heat and light that characterises modernity. But rather than simply reminding us that this marvel may end up destroying us, she writes:

... by the light that we have made we can see that there are, metaphorically speaking, cracks... The surveyors poring over the tombs are working in an anxious age. We look around the world by the light we have made and realise it’s all vulnerable, and all worth saving and no-one can do it but us. (Jamie, 2005: 24)

In a piece for the Guardian on ‘*The eeriness of the English countryside*,’ (2015c: n.p.), Macfarlane considers how this kind of sensibility works too in a variety of cultural expressions, from P.J. Harvey’s album *Let England Shake* (2011) to Paul Kingsnorth’s novel *The Wake* (2014) and Patrick Keiller’s *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), plus many more. This sort of art, he argues, disturbs ideals of place that are built on continuity or belonging and ‘locates itself within a spectral rather than a sceptered isle’. In this he sets himself against writers such as Scruton (2012), for whom sense of place is closely allied to attachment to home and nation, forming a bulwark against disorder. For Macfarlane, however, and many of those he celebrates, anxiety and disorder are the nature of living under late capitalism, and landscape is not somewhere to escape from that, but somewhere to recognise it:

In much of this work, suppressed forces pulse and flicker beneath the ground and within the air (capital, oil, energy, violence, state power, surveillance), waiting to erupt or to condense. (2015c: n.p.)

In this he echoes the arguments of scholars such as Tim Edensor (2005) or the late Svetlana Boym (2001) on ruins and ruination, where accounts of ruined buildings are used to unearth hidden histories in ways that cut against the cultivated nostalgia of the heritage industry. As Edensor argues the twentieth century has produced more ruined buildings than ever before – the effects of restless ‘market forces’ as much as war. But unlike ‘heritage’ buildings, where, as Beck and Cornford (2012: 65) put it, ‘the hard edges of history have been softened by time’, contemporary ruins are a sign of ‘power’s movement across the terrain’. Such spaces – the Edgelands of Farley and Symmons Roberts (2012) – the disused railway tracks and mines, the cooling towers, the landfill sites and logistics sheds that are also part of the natural environment, provide not just elegiac contemplation, but recognition that such processes are still going on, they force us to see the imprint of power and of capitalism, an imprint in ‘natural’ surroundings that is sometimes obscured.

Recognising the *scale* of loss brought about by anthropogenic climate change, not just in the natural world – but socially, culturally and politically – brings challenges of its own. As Bradley notes (2017: n.p.), the ‘inhuman scale’ of the challenge requires ‘new imaginative and lexical vocabularies capable of naming and describing concepts and experiences that exceed the human’. This is part of what Macfarlane describes as ‘eeriness’, which could render it the domain of science fiction and horror-writers alone. But the process of that damage is not a sudden catastrophe, but rather, ‘a slow grinding away of species and of subtlety’ to which nature writing, with its attention to the specific and its long time horizon, is well suited. Contrary to Cocker’s claim about the apolitical character of new nature writing, he clearly links environmental damage to contemporary political culture – from the military and surveillance infrastructure of Salisbury Plain, to the extraction of resources by means of violence and enslavement and the repackaging of the pastoral as a comforting Tory fable under David Cameron’s failed Big Society initiative. Here, fine writing is clearly bent to a political purpose. As clear, the artistic nature of these expression is inextricably linked to the politics itself. He is, in a sense, claiming that art can do something that other forms of communication cannot. In

the following section, then, we will consider this claim and the ways in which, new nature writing can function as an aesthetic form of environmental activism and provide for a collective politics.

5. NEW NATURE WRITING AS ARTS ACTIVISM

Unsurprisingly perhaps, for those who are interested in new nature *writing*, it is language itself that holds out the promise of changed consciousness. Jonathan Bate (2000), in one of the most well-known works of ecocriticism⁶, draws on Heidegger's claim that if technology in particular had alienated us from the world, then language – and especially poetry – can bring us back to it. Here, the simple act of reading poetry can help us 'start to imagine what it might be like to live differently upon the earth' (Bate, 2000: 250). Bate argues that certain forms of language are needed to convey certain forms of experience. He quotes Michel Serres' argument that the social sciences can help us to understand a notion such as power but are less effective at helping us to understand a notion such as fragility. Bate's response to this seems rather pat, suggesting that to understand fragility we should read Romantic poems such as *Frost at Midnight* or *To Autumn*, and it runs the risk of sounding rather like recommending literature on prescription; but the wider point makes intuitive sense, that is, even stalwart social scientists may agree that they have been better at conveying some human experiences than others.

For a nature-writer like Macfarlane, language has become something of a pre-occupation. His recent book *Landmarks* (2015a) argues that the loss of common nature words from everyday (British) English speech (and the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*) – ranging from conker and catkin to weasel and willow – further alienate us from the natural world and help ensure we pay less attention to it.

Because we lack the language to name and describe the natural world around us it is as though we cannot see it or, if we do see it, we come to name it in another way and thus misunderstand it, such

⁶ Ecocriticism is the interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. A central concern of ecocriticism has been to address the perceived absence of nature in literary criticism, and particularly focuses on authors such as Wordsworth and Thoreau, who are seen as embodying 'better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it' (Buell, 1995: 2). More recently, ecocriticism has broadened to develop its social and political dimensions (see Parham, 2008: 25).

as when we see moorland (or desert for that matter) and describe it as empty. It is not just the loss of regional variation that he mourns (though it is pleasing to learn that the West Country dialect term for a kestrel is ‘wind-fucker’) but also the terms for specific phenomena from hare-dung (*crottle*) to the radiance of winter stars (*Blinter*). Macfarlane references the botanist Oliver Rackham's description of the four ways in which landscape is lost – through loss of *beauty*, loss of *freedom*, loss of *wildlife and vegetation*, and loss of *meaning* – and admires the emphasis this gives to aesthetic experience. However, that these aesthetic experiences can be defended in part through a restored vocabulary of nature is not, as he says, to suggest that language is always innocent: ‘forest’ for example, refers to a piece of land set aside for deer hunting, the process of enclosure and impoverishment built into the fabric of one of our commonest nature terms.

Moran (2014), in a largely sympathetic account of the history of new nature writing, suggests that the genre is particularly alert to the complexity of our contemporary environmental problems and that it is the first-hand and ‘untidy experience’ of such prose that helps to bridge the gap to scientific understanding. By this he means that this sort of writing – first-hand, literary accounts – concerns itself with the specific and the concrete as a way to illuminate the general and the theoretical, a link as he sees it to the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and hence to the idea that the personal is the political. Moran’s point is that very few of us can understand environmental threats in the abstract: climate change, species loss or pollution are planetary threats, but flooding, the disappearance of sparrows from our cities, or the rise in asthma cases are how these bear down on us. Similarly, as Wendell Berry puts it (quoted in MacFarlane, 2015a: 10), talking about what we love is for the most part *specific*, and so we need specific words with which to do it.

The question, not just for nature-writing but for environmental politics in general, is whether greater awareness of the specific and the concrete does in fact link to wider political awareness, and there remain key questions as to whether the aestheticized and deeply individual moments of epiphany have any connection to a socially and politically negotiated shift to a culture of sustainable

prosperity. One way to do this of course is to take questions of language beyond fine writing and into rhetoric and what we might call political communication. Buell (1995) for example, argues that an indigenous community's metaphor of water as 'lifeblood' should be recognised as more valid than the corporate notion of it as a 'commodity'. The debate about how to move beyond the personal has been a long-running one in ecocriticism (Ryle, 2002; Parham, 2008; Gifford, 2008). Gifford, drawing on Buell, notes the tendency of British ecocriticism (following Raymond Williams, and as opposed to much American writing on the topic) to frame nature in terms of ownership, class and community rather than in notions of 'spirit of place', the overt political framing of the former more closely, and critically, aligned with campaigns for environmental justice.

Buell (1995) sees two ways forward for ecocriticism, which could equally be applied to the production of new nature writing. One is for it to engage more explicitly with what he calls environmental illness, ranging from asthma to depression. This produces an interesting spin on the notion of the nature 'cure' – as nature itself is sick – but also opens the door for an extension of the so-called misery memoir ('how nature led to my suffering'), which is perhaps not to be uncritically welcomed.

The second way forward is what he calls the literature of refugees or displacement, an issue that will continue to dominate our times as the climate crisis intensifies. Reading nature writing in this is not to limit ourselves to addressing absences; rather, Buell (1995) argues, it offers the opportunity of 'seeing them in new ways' (p.122) – allowing us to discern their 'mental limits' but also, in the best examples at least, how they might enter into dialogue with contemporary political concerns. Buell highlights this with reference to eighteenth century Irish poet Oliver Goldsmith, suggesting a re-reading of *The Deserted Village* ('But times are altered / Trade's unfeeling train / Usurp the land and dispossess the swain') in the context of the Three Gorges Dam and the displacement of ecological refugees (p.121).

A more fruitful way ahead could involve engagement of ecocriticism and new nature writing with emerging richer conceptions of mourning and grief in relation to the at-risk natural world (Cunsolo and Landman, 2017) – such as the concept of *solastalgia* explored by the philosopher and anthropologist Glenn Albrecht, an idea that aims to highlight individual and collective grief for what is being lost or threatened in familiar and loved landscapes with the onset of the 'Anthropocene' (Albrecht, 2005). We might also point to work by Shaw and Bonnett (2016), who defend individual grief and loss, and the complex politics of such responses, from the charge that they are merely narcissistic. Taking aim at academics who criticise the 'consumerist' behaviour of others, while 'airmile for airmile' indulging in far more environmentally reckless activities, they suggest that the perceived tendency of the population to turn away from environmental concerns (as evidenced by opinion polling that suggests its salience as an issue is declining) is not because they think it does not matter, but because it is daunting and overwhelming. Similarly contradictory impulses lie behind much 'ethical' consumption and indeed behind the commodified idea of 'well-being' which quell, through fail to adequately address, present problems (Davies, 2015). For Shaw and Bonnett, what is needed is a recognition that 'grief work' is a collective undertaking of sorts, or at least can be made to be so. Their example is George Monbiot's rewilding book *Feral* (2013): though his tendency to frame rewilding as a way forward that is not suitable for the 'timid' (who, he seems to think, inhabit the suburbs) somewhat limits its effectiveness as politics, they propose it as an example of the way personal emotion – in his case boredom – can lead to political mobilisation and collective ways forward.

6. JUSTICE AND CAPABILITIES

To conclude this paper, we want to think briefly about three other ideas – justice, capabilities and collective well-being – that can either enhance the potential of new nature writing as a form of environmental activism or can help us to understand the ways in which this potential is already

realised. In other words, we want to understand more fully the way that the ‘cat’s cradle’ of writing – and indeed the practice of other art forms – may lead to a collective politics.

The first thing to say is that we are interested in new nature writing as an aesthetic form, not simply as a means of education about the natural world and the threats to it, but as a cultural object in itself. In this way we subscribe to the idea of ‘creative justice’ forwarded in a recent book by Banks (2017) which argues that, for culture to do any critical work at all, we need to pay attention to culture as itself. This is not to suggest, as more naïve claims for the arts sometimes do, that arts or artists have some magical properties that can be applied to any social situation to produce beneficial outcomes. But denying the need for recognition of the cultural form itself, focussing purely on the collective activity that might produce an art work for example, is to immediately raise the question of why art, why not some other collective activity? It also means that we remain trapped within instrumentality, unable to value things – nature, art, the very essence of what it is to be human – in terms other than the instrumental. What we propose is that engagement with new nature writing can produce meaningful effects that ‘in part arise through specific in situ encounters with the properties of the works themselves’ (Banks, 2017: 21) and that these effects are emergent or indeterminate, and thus have their own power and potential which cannot be reduced to, for example, its social or economic contexts. Further, that these effects are able to speak to:

... *objective* needs that are common to all human subjects – such as the need for care, our social dependencies, and the necessity of addressing the various kinds of lack, want and desire associated with our capacities as humans to flourish or suffer. (p.21)

So culture, *as culture*, matters; but having recognised that, how do we move from that recognition to the idea of what culture *does*? How does it promote some form of activism? One of the strongest arguments on this in recent years has come from philosopher Martha Nussbaum as part of her work on the ‘capabilities’ approach to ethics and human development, developed with Amartya Sen (Sen

and Nussbaum, 1993; Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 2009). This concept argues that justice is not just about fairness but is about ensuring the ability of people to live lives that they consider worthwhile. By so doing it extends the idea of justice beyond simply an idea of righting wrongs and into the idea of human ‘flourishing’ and of well-being. Flourishing in this sense is to be distinguished from happiness, or even wellbeing, as it connotes activity (‘to flourish’) rather than simply a state of mind (Sayer, 2011). For Nussbaum this includes taking our emotional lives seriously and hence our emotional responses to things – landscape or writing about landscape for example – as having ethical potential, not as a poor substitute for reason. Nussbaum, unlike Sen, has been more prescriptive about the sort of capabilities required to ensure human flourishing and she stresses freedom to use imagination and engagement with the arts as key ‘capabilities’ linked to our ability to flourish, in part because of the ‘narrative history’ of our emotions (2001). These narrative histories, it seems to us, are often what engage new nature writers, concerned as they are with understanding their own emotional response to nature and suggest a line of objection to Cocker’s fear of nature as ‘an attractive green wash’ in these writings. Only in part by understanding why we feel as we do about the natural landscape and its loss can we fully engage with struggles to defend it (see also Firth, 2008).

As such, we view the idea of capabilities and of flourishing as a richer and less tainted notion of well-being than that which often prevails in policy discussions of ‘wellbeing’, (see Davies, 2015 for a critique), and as providing a way forward both for environmental activists and for those seeking to understand the role of culture within that activism. Deneulin and MacGregor (2010) argue that the capabilities approach helps afford greater agency for communities rather than seeing them as the ‘object of policy’, a point echoed by Edwards et al. (2016) in a paper which draws attention to the rise of the idea of capabilities within the environmental justice movement. They argue that a capabilities approach, with the important proviso that it can include collective or community functioning as well as individual, is particularly relevant to environmental concerns as it can

incorporate diverse concepts of justice premised on what communities actually value. This is important as it can capture the value not only of the ‘natural’ landscapes – forests, moors, mountains – but also the more quotidian landscape – edgelands, public parks, urban walkways – that may constitute our everyday encounters with the natural world. This can encourage an attachment to place, situating us within particular spaces and communities that assume significance and through which we are able to make sense of the world and provide feelings of stability, familiarity and security (Cleary et al., 2017: 122). A capabilities framework adds to this by emphasising social solidarities (Nussbaum, 2007) – it extends individual responses into questions about collective flourishing. Counter to the rise of a reactionary sense of place in the form of the extreme nationalisms that currently threatens us, new nature writing may strengthen feelings of place attachment that may work to recover what Doreen Massey calls a ‘progressive sense of place’ (Massey, 1994). The complex and untidy cat’s cradle of new nature writing opens a plurality of readings and meaningful engagements which, understood through a capabilities approach, does not reduce place to something static and defensive.

To conclude, then, it is important to note that we are not suggesting that all new nature writing already does this – far from it. But what we hope to have sketched out here is how individual engagement with cultural objects can make them capable of articulating the meanings and values ascribed to nature and the environment, and how this work might add to collective understandings and a collective politics of environmental justice. We have argued that new nature writing, by drawing attention to both beauty and potential loss, by placing humans back within the natural world, and by giving us tools with which to express and understand that connection can aid these processes.

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