article

uncanny waters

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abstract

In this article, I argue for the notion of what I term 'uncanny water' as a conceptual tool for reading contemporary oceanic fictions. The uncanny's affective capacity to destabilise epistemological and ontological certainties makes it a particularly potent literary tool for challenging the nature/culture binary. I argue that fictions which actively defamiliarise the ocean can be used to redress the anthropocentric privilege found in hitherto narratives of the oceanic that were predicated upon mastery and control, and that uncanny moments of displacement and uncertainty can illuminate human/oceanic interconnections and foster a sense of responsibility and compassion towards the oceans. I identify resonances between the uncanny's continuing referentiality and the notion that feminist transcorporeality interrelates the subject into networks of materiality which extend across time and space in unknowable ways. Both transcorporeality and the uncanny work against the conceit of the individual through the dissolution of boundaries, and, crucially, both require a suspension of assumptions of the self as whole, discrete and impermeable. To demonstrate this, I read the uncanny waters of contemporary fictions from the Northern Atlantic Littoral (Atlantic Canada and the westernmost parts of the UK). The littoral position of these spaces makes them ideally placed to negotiate the borders between habitable and unhabitable spaces, and the limitations of knowledge that run alongside this. I assert that iterations of uncanny water offer a transoceanic dialogue which shifts constructions of subjectivity away from national and terrestrial boundaries to one more akin to the fluid and relational dialectics of transcorporeality.

keywords

The Atlantic Ocean is geographically, historically and materially bound to the project of modernity; as the ocean was traversed to facilitate colonialism and the slave trade, it became indelibly connected to the capitalist world system. As a consequence of travelling the ocean to furnish the interests of empire and capital, socio-political and cultural discourses surrounding the Atlantic have regularly constructed it in relation to the nation state and surrounded it with a rhetoric of territorialisation and exploitation. This is witnessed in the dominance that Western nations have held over the Atlantic, using this space in a paradoxical way that, even while it was cast as 'extra-national' space, saw richer nations control many of the trade routes and coastal access, allowing them to transport goods, people and information between countries and expand their wealth (Cohen, 2010, p. 657). Control of the Atlantic is still very much held by wealthier nations that have capitalised on their proximity and power over the Atlantic to expand their territories out to sea and claim ownership of the subsea bed.[1] In the twenty-first century, the Atlantic Ocean's role in the history of modernity means it has been continually placed in relation to national and anthropocentric interests.

The dominance over the Atlantic held by Western nations was perpetuated in literature that emerged and grew with maritime expansion. Margaret Cohen (2010, p. 657) notes that between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries a surge of novels were published in Britain and North America that took transatlantic seafaring as their subject matter and subsequently created a raft of 'armchair sailors' who 'combed sea voyage literature, factual and fictional, for strange, surprising adventures as well as for information about world-altering developments and events'. Sea voyage and nautical fictions produced during this era encapsulated a spirit of enterprise that was set against the harsh and merciless environment of the Atlantic Ocean. The 'risk-taking spirit' espoused in nautical fiction meant that, as a genre, it was 'about enterprise, about seeing an opportunity and seizing it' (Peck, 2001, p. 5). Fictional depictions of the Atlantic Ocean published across these centuries aided in embedding it within the rhetoric of capitalism and its accompanying individualistic ideologies. However, in the twenty-first century, the climate emergency is shoring up the instability of assumptions of human/ocean separability, and so fictional depictions of the Atlantic Ocean that surrounded it with a rhetoric of control and exploitation no longer offer viable representations of ocean/human interactions and demonstrate a need for stories and narratives that augment and highlight the material interdependencies that run to and through the ocean. Accompanying the rise in fictions that seek to redress ocean/human interactions is an 'oceanic turn in literary studies' (Yaeger, 2010, p. 524) that seeks to offer appropriate methodologies and frameworks for reading across oceanic literatures in the climate emergency.

I offer the concept of 'uncanny water' as one such environmentally and ethically conscious framework for approaching fictional depictions of the Atlantic Ocean during the climate emergency. This proposition argues for the affective capacity of the uncanny to destabilise epistemological and ontological certainties, and therefore undermine any notion of anthropocentric mastery implicit in narratives of

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[1] Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, pp. 31–33) gives an overview of the increasing territorialisation of the Atlantic in the twentieth century following the war, when advanced maritime oceanographic technologies allowed for advancements in extraction and militarisation. When Truman annexed Micronesia and tripled the territory of the United States, it led to an international scramble to territorialise the oceans, which led to the establishment of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the establishment of the Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ), allowing all coastal sovereign states to extend their territories by the same 200 nautical miles as the US and to draw upon the resources that lie within this space.

human/ocean interactions. At its core, 'uncanny water' is concerned with the potential of uncertainty and the inability of humans to fully know or comprehend the ocean. In this article, I outline the methodology that underpins 'uncanny water'; as a concept it is informed by literary and psychoanalytical definitions of the uncanny as a relational signifier, whereby attempts to pinpoint its origin regularly result in a process of continual substitution that displaces one meaning for another. I map this continued referentiality onto feminist posthuman methodologies of transcorporeality that show how the transferral of matter and agency through bodies 'reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures' (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2) and opens up a space in which the inextricable relationship between humans and the environment can be negotiated. In particular, I focus on transcorporeal transits of water as outlined by Astrida Neimanis (2017) in her figuration 'bodies of water'. Neimanis argues for an embodied hydrological cycle that imbues all bodies of water into a 'more-than-human hydrocommons'— an intricate system of intake, expulsion, relinquishing and imbibing. As water is taken up and dispelled across bodies, it becomes involved in processes of repetition and cyclicality that make tracing its origins and disseminations impossible. I argue that the relational capacity of the uncanny offers a means through which the unknowability of water is represented in oceanic fictions.

In drawing specifically upon the work of Neimanis (2013, 2017) and Stacy Alaimo (2010, 2012), I position my concept of uncanny water within the field of *feminist* blue humanities. Figuring bodies as coterminous with one another in an aqueous milieu troubles much of the hitherto dominant understandings of both embodiment and our oceans by presenting a 'challenge to three related humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism' (Neimanis, 2017, p. 3). As embodiment is extended through water and the oceans, it illuminates the injustices that these concepts of corporeality have facilitated and affords the possibility for more interconnected and relational models to emerge. To emphasise this, I apply uncanny water to fictions set in and around the coastal spaces of the Northern Atlantic Ocean. As a space loaded with a history of violence, control and exploitation, I offer uncanny water as a means through which to read the currents of water that circulate across and through the Northern Atlantic but without simply replicating the discourse of mastery and control that is sedimented in both its cultural constructions and materiality. Any critical orientation towards the reading of fictions featuring the Atlantic Ocean must be conscious of its role within modernity's history, while remaining attentive to how the political and historical markers of modernity are embedded within the ocean's very materiality and reproduced in unknowable ways through bodies of water. The concept of uncanny water, I argue, goes some way to attending to how the flows of power and meaning might be reproduced in contemporary fictions of the Northern Atlantic. It does this by being attentive to an 'aqueous politics of location' (Neimanis, 2013, p. 37)—that is, an awareness of both how subjectivity is defined in relation to an embodied and contingent position *and* how the redirection of water beyond this position is ultimately unknowable. An aqueous politics of location therefore asserts that '"where we are" as materially water is necessarily diffuse' and 'accounting for an aqueous politics of location is always a process with an uncertain end, rather than a finished project' (*ibid.*). As water is disseminated across bodies, it carries with it traces of where it has been and continues to disperse without fixed or specific end.

This aqueous politics of location means that reading uncanny water in the Northern Atlantic involves attending to how subjectivities are produced through the epistemologies and ontologies that circulate around this body of water but also how they might then be reproduced to offer more relational models.

The concept of uncanny water reads the emergence of the uncanny in oceanic fictions as a means of amplifying material interconnectedness through water.[2] I distinguish three interrelated iterations of 'uncanny water': the use of uncanny tropes of ghosts and doubles; the use of intertextuality through subversion of preceding narratives of the Atlantic Ocean; and processes of deterritorialisation that involve a renegotiation of territorialised understandings of the ocean and how bodies are oriented towards water and the ocean. Each of these interrelated iterations, in varying but tangential ways, invokes the uncanny to make strange understandings of human/ocean separability before showing how these might be reconfigured to emphasise the uncertain and interconnected pathways of water. In this article, I focus primarily on how these iterations emerge in fictions set around the Northern Atlantic Littoral—that is, from rural, coastal spaces geographically located at the threshold between land and the Atlantic Ocean, including the Maritime Provinces of Canada and the westerly coasts of the UK. Littoral fictions articulate a peculiar tension that exists between land-based and water-based understandings of place and so offer a particularly poignant understanding of how bodies can be oriented towards the ocean.[3]

I assert that iterations of uncanny water compound in fictions set in and around the Northern Atlantic Littoral to offer a transoceanic dialogue that shifts constructions of subjectivity away from national and terrestrial boundaries to one more akin to the fluid and relational dialectics of transcorporeality. Texts from these spaces show a preoccupation and orientation towards the ocean that arises from longstanding historical and material connections to coastal life. They depict a distinctive orientation towards the Northern Atlantic Ocean, demonstrated in characters living by, and engaging with, the ocean in a regular and sustained way so that the events of the texts are centred around its movements, tides and creatures. The sea becomes the focal point from which all the other events of the novel are derived, and it is in this way that the texts place the ocean at the forefront of all ocean/human interactions. Moreover, by focusing on the ocean's pathways and currents, these fictions construct the ocean as a space of connectivity that implicates them into a relationship both with the ocean itself and within a transoceanic dialogue with other 'shore folk'. However, the proximity of these coastal spaces to the Northern Atlantic and their own histories of migration mean they are implicated in longer histories of capitalism and colonialism and how these are manifest and reproduced across bodies of water. Therefore, even while fictions from the Northern Atlantic Littoral attempt to offer transatlantic narratives of interconnection and responsiveness, they must do so within a framework that acknowledges their role in darker histories in the marginalisation and exploitation of others.

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[2] Here, I borrow the term 'amplify' from Neimanis (2017, p. 55), who advocates for stories and art that grant 'access to an embodied experience of our wateriness' that lies beyond easy comprehension. Drawing on these stories demonstrates that they are 'pulled from a material world' but 'given back to us so we can more readily access and *amplify* them, anew' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

[3] My thinking here is informed by Michael N. Pearson's (2006, pp. 354, 356) concept of the 'littoral society', where he claims that 'shore folk have more in common with other shore folk thousands of kilometers away on some other shore of the ocean than they do with those in their immediate hinterland' and that this is to do with a greater preoccupation towards the water that sur-rounds their home and upon which their livelihood often depends; indeed, more often than not, as Pearson contends, shore folk 'live on the shore but work on the sea; they are very precisely littoral' and it is this tendency towards the ocean that connects shore folk across seas and oceans. I read this within the fictions of the Northern Atlantic Littoral where there is a preoccupation with living and working by and around the movements of the Atlantic Ocean.

In what follows, I delineate the theoretical framework that informs my concept of uncanny water and explain how it is manifest in each of the interrelated iterations I identify. I give brief examples of how these are depicted in a selection of fictions from the Northern Atlantic Littoral. The examples I give are from novels including Michael Crummey's *Sweetland* (2015), which follows one man's attempt to remain alone on his eponymous island in response to a Newfoundland resettlement scheme that attempts to move rural Newfoundlanders to more industrial viable 'centres' in the years following the collapse of the fisheries. The novel follows him attempting to fish and fend for himself while enduring the elements of the Newfoundland coast. I also consider Lucy Wood's short story 'Flotsam, Jetsam, Lagan, Derelict' (2018), which describes how a retired couple living on the Devonshire coast centre their days around cleaning the beach of plastic and waste that is brought in by the tides. In addition, I look to Kirsty Logan's *The Gloaming* (2018), which tells of a young woman, Mara, living on a remote Scottish island who falls in love with Pearl, a travelling and performing 'mermaid' who Mara believes is the embodiment of a selkie from Scottish folklore. Lastly, the young marine biologist of Melissa Barbeau's novel *The Luminous Sea* (2018) is starting her career studying marine life in the coastal waters of Newfoundland but becomes enthralled with a mysterious 'creature' discovered in the surrounding waters. The concept of uncanny water is not limited to these examples, but I use these here to demonstrate how the iterations of uncanny water are expressed across the Northern Atlantic in these littoral locations.[4]

theorising uncanny water

Central to the concept of uncanny water is its emphasis on the unknowability of water and how this holds a radical potential to destabilise the nature/culture binary that has been reinforced by historical, cultural and political representations of the Northern Atlantic Ocean. This unknowability is highlighted in fictional depictions of human/oceanic relationships that incite the uncanny to destabilise epistemologies and ontologies that privilege the human. This is achieved, in part, through the uncanny's ability to defer meaning so that certainty and closure are denied. This relational capacity is established by Sigmund Freud (2003 [1919], p. 124) when he asserts that the uncanny is the anxiety created through the coexistence of the unfamiliar within the familiar; he describes it as the 'species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'. For the uncanny to arise, in Freud's terms, it relies on the subject to establish a familiarity with something, only for that to be subverted. Hélène Cixous (1976) developed this relationality implicit in Freud's definitions of the uncanny by emphasising its continued self-referentiality. Cixous (*ibid.*, p. 536) argues that Freud's attempts to pinpoint the uncanny in his essay result in a process of continual substitution whereby he constantly displaces the uncanny's meaning so that he never truly arrives at a satisfactory definition but only serves to leave 'one nonproof for another'. This leads her to posit that 'the effect of uncanniness reverberates (rather than emerges), for the word is a relational signifier' (*ibid.*), and to stress that the uncanny will always refer to something else, exceeding what it is and seeping into something else. The uncanny appears in these moments of its excess and slippage; she argues that '[i]t is in fact a composite that infiltrates the interstices of the narrative and points to gaps we need to explain' (*ibid.*).

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[4] I want to stress that the concept of uncanny water is not limited to the fictions I mention here, but for reasons of brevity and space I have included examples that provide the clearest conceptions of how each of these iterations are imagined.

Consequently, Cixous demonstrates that the uncanny lies in nonrepresentation—that which is absent paradoxically signals its presence.

The uncanny's function as a relational signifier means that attempts to pinpoint and define its locus are futile since it perpetually refers to something beyond itself. Water operates in a similar way across bodies, forever seeping beyond the self and into the body of another, making its origins diffuse, multiple and evasive. Being as a body of water depends upon the interchange and diffusion of water across the hydrocommons. Through the continual displacement of water across bodies, we are affirmed both in our aqueous commonality with others and in our unassimilable differences. It is water's capacity to always repeat differently across bodies that sustains its unknowability and demarcates the limitations of embodiment.[5] This is particularly prevalent when considering the ocean as a body of water—a space that participates in the exchange of water across the hydrocommons while also remaining beyond what humans can understand. Neimanis (2017, p. 42, emphasis in original) stipulates that 'any body's orientation to water as material substance, and as geographical location, serves as a *limit* that determines which milieus are habitable, withstand-able, and thus knowable. Water remains one step ahead of, and beyond, the limits of any body'. Water exceeds the body—both in relation to ontological being and epistemological understanding. Both Alaimo and Neimanis articulate the limitations of embodied knowledge as a kind of 'suspension' (Alaimo, 2012, p. 487) that holds humans in a moment of near-stasis by refuting the terrestrial and bounded nature of the discrete human individual. Through this affective and in-between state, the watery interconnections between humans and nonhumans are revealed, since in this moment 'material agencies and ontologies of intra-action and perpetual becoming deny us the security of knowing what will happen next' (*ibid.*, p. 488).

As a concept, uncanny water compounds water's unknowable relationality with the uncanny's transgressive potential. In fictions of the Northern Atlantic Littoral, the uncanny arises in particular encounters with aqueous others (usually in the form of ghosts/doubles) who emerge on the shoreline to cast doubt on epistemologies and ontologies that frame the Northern Atlantic as a knowable and comprehensible space. As these figures emerge, they also carry with them vestiges of power and meaning that show how these have been sedimented in the ocean's very materiality. These figures consequently function as reminders of the material interconnection between humans and the ocean while simultaneously highlighting the legacy of colonialism and capitalism. Whether characterised as spectral figures or nonhuman doubles, the figures of uncanny water illuminate how the pathways of water *might* extend across bodies, but ultimately, *as uncanny figures*, they show that attempts to follow these pathways with any certainty are futile. Not only do the figures of ghosts and doubles offer the opportunity through which water's unknowability is made visible, but these are produced in a framework that acknowledges its indebtedness to material semiotic understandings of the Northern Atlantic that have their foundation in modernity's beginnings and its accompanying capitalist and colonialist trajectories. These fictions often offer an explicit or implicit intertextuality to demonstrate how narratives that perpetuated a control and mastery of the Atlantic Ocean have been assimilated. These texts often either implicitly reference familiar narratives of oceanic conquest and expansion—a 'Robinsonade' or adventure type story—or draw upon tales that perpetuate the image of a 'wild, lawless, eternal, and quasi-infinite'

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[5] Water's finite nature on the planet emphasises this—it can only ever be taken up and repeated differently across other bodies (Neimanis, 2017, p. 3).

ocean through vast and sublime imagery (Yaeger, 2010, p. 540): for example, where 'doubles' of characters are framed through the material semiotic associations of sirens, selkies and mermaids whose mythical and folkloric appearances have closely associated these figures with the danger and allure of the ocean. But crucially, these contemporary fictions of the Northern Atlantic demonstrate that these narratives are no longer viable and show how these can be reconfigured to stress this; Robinsonade characters who attempt to perpetuate 'economic individualism', by pitting themselves against the harsh elements of the Northern Atlantic, instead find themselves succumbing to these elements and even dying and becoming ghosts themselves.[6] Likewise, figures of mermaids dive into the abyss with their accompanying doubles but, rather than death by drowning, reveal the permeable boundaries of bodies to be an affirmative opportunity for interconnection and entanglement.[7]

Often, however, the endings of these fictions neither affirm nor deny whether or not these figures are in fact the uncanny figures of mermaids/ghosts/other. This uncertainty denies closure, thus holding the reader in a state of suspension and uncertainty. It is this moment of uncertain suspension that compounds all of uncanny water's prerogatives: by denying any sense of mastery or control over the text's effects, the reader is held in a state of ready responsiveness that shows how embracing unknowability might offer new possibilities for being and becoming as a body of water. I argue that this sense of suspension is a deterritorialising—de-*terra*-torialising—impulse that reorients bodies towards water and deprivileges the human as the primary site of embodiment. The following sections keep this sensation in mind—thinking about how the various iterations of uncanny water I identify facilitate feeling 'out of place' and deterratorialised in relation to the waters of the Northern Atlantic Ocean. As Cecilia Chen (2013, p. 290) notes, 'moments of feeling out-of-place are important to renewing our sense of orientation and to discovering other ways to relate to place that escape habitual assumptions'. Feeling 'out of place' affords the opportunity to reorient subjectivity towards being and becoming with water and, in the instances of uncanny water I discuss below, it reorients this towards the Northern Atlantic and disallows habitual assumptions about this body of water.

haunted bodies of water

In fictions set in and around the shores of the North Atlantic, ghosts of uncanny water surface at the coastline to gesture towards the losses to more-than-human assemblages that have been, and continue to be, triggered by capitalist and colonialist violence. The ghost is a particularly poignant figure through which to imagine how this violence might extend across bodies of water, as it confounds assumptions of temporality and ontology and thus exemplifies water's own anachronistic extensions across time and space. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (1999, p. 11) observe that '[t]he temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, as at once they "return" and make their apparitional debut'. The ghost 'debuts' in the present, appearing there for the first time, while simultaneously carrying vestiges of the past with it in its return. This allows the ghost to be a suitable figure for

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[6] My example here comes from Michael Crummey's *Sweetland* (2015) but evidence of figures attempting to endure the elements and becoming ghostly themselves are also found in Kenneth J. Harvey's *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* (2005), Kirsty Logan's *The Gloaming* (2018) and Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2018).

[7] See, for example, Kirsty Logan's *The Gloaming* (2018), Melissa Barbeau's *The Luminous Sea* (2018) and John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* (2011), all of which include figures of selkies/sirens/mermaid-like creatures who function as doubles of characters.

conceptualising the uncanny transcorporeal potential of bodies of water, since water endlessly repeats across bodies but always into something different and specific. This is part of a body's virtual potential—the way in which '[a]ll of the potential expressions of a body are latent in one of its actualizations' (Neimanis, 2017, p. 53). This suggests that a body's potentialities are those that it was that still exist in the present, those it never became, but might have, and those it could still become in the future, and all of these are manifest in a body's present actualisation. With water, these potentialities are never fully known, because of water's capacity to recur and always become different—perpetually drawing on this latent virtual potential to exceed itself and become other (*ibid.*, p. 89). This means that bodies are haunted by the lingering (yet undefinable) presence of water's past expressions and simultaneously hold the potential to extend forward and haunt others in unknowable futures. The watery extension of oneself into the future acknowledges that one's bodily matter is implicated in the conditioning of the life of another and thus instigates an ethical imperative to radically reorient oneself towards the 'other'. With uncanny water, the reappearance of ghosts from the past often triggers this ethical awareness. The anachronism of ghosts means that they 'do not just represent reminders of the past—in their fictional representation they very often demand something of the future' (Buse and Stott, 1999, p. 14). In signifying the return of material violence, the ghosts of uncanny water simultaneously offer anticipatory gestures towards a bleak and uncertain future for the planet's oceans and consequently 'demand' a more relational ethics that considers bodies of water as coterminous with one another.

I consider this relationality as part of water's 'hauntology'. Jacques Derrida's (1994) neologism of haunting and ontology conditions existence through the figure of the ghost, suggesting that being is facilitated through those who are absent and there is an ethical imperative to be attentive to them. He emphasises this at the beginning of *Specters of Marx* when he claims, '[i]f I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of justice' (*ibid.*, p. xviii, emphasis in original). The ghost therefore stands in for those not currently present, but without whom existence would not be possible. Derrida uses the figure of the ghost to argue for the importance of these absent others to existence and asserts that it is essential that ethics take account of them. I argue that the ghosts of uncanny water exemplify a hauntology that mirrors water's own *haunt*ology. Water's repetitions demonstrate a spectral quality of being neither present nor absent at any one time, since just as water arrives from the past it is simultaneously manifesting in the present in highly specific and unique ways. As humans, we cannot definitively follow water's traces from the past and into the future—they are at once too nebulous, too extensive and too tentative—but water's finitude means that our being is conditioned by those who came before us and we will condition the lives of others. These absent 'others' are other humans and other nonhumans to whom our existence is indebted.

Nowhere are these transits more legible than in the Northern Atlantic Ocean, which has relied upon the figures of absent others through which to perpetuate the project of modernity. As a body of water in its own right, the Atlantic Ocean partakes in the processes of watery exchange with other bodies of water and carries with this the complex dynamics of power and capital that are sedimented in its very materiality. Thus, any relational framework that aims to place the Atlantic Ocean at the forefront of ocean/human interactions has to consider how water's hauntology is embedded within the very material and historical fabric of the ocean itself. Fictions set in and around the Northern Atlantic Littoral attend to this by regularly presenting bodies suffering under the burden of late capitalism's anthropocentric

thrust—a burden that is inescapably material. Whether through examples such as plastic waste, overfishing, digital technology or the very narratives of progress themselves, they show the lived, material effects of late capitalism's systems and processes. These texts illuminate how this material violence can extend and detrimentally impact those it comes into contact with. By drawing upon the uncanny figure of the ghost, they make apparent the ways in which anthropogenic effects and harm to the oceans offer a radical disjunction to linear expectations of temporality, and show how the unresolved material violence of the past returns in the present in ways that are unsettling, demonstrating how the 'material violence of the past emerges, reincarnate, re-fleshed, in our future' (Mansfield, 2008, para. 14). The return of the material violence of the past is a kind of haunting—a recurrence of the past in the present in unpredictable and unforeseeable ways. Uncanny water articulates a sense of haunting that illuminates the extensive ways in which violence against the bodies of water can re-emerge.

One example of this can be found in Lucy Wood's short story 'Flotsam, Jetsam, Lagan, Derelict' (2018), in which a retired couple are haunted by the ubiquity of plastic waste on a Devonshire beach. With every daily beach clean, more and more plastic surfaces at the shoreline until it seems to become the natural landscape, so seaweed becomes replaced with 'heaps of twisted nylon rope' and 'blue and white shells' are tiny fragments of plastic (*ibid.*, p. 113). Removed from its former anthropogenic function, the plastic persists and recurs anew in the present. I argue it is this anachronism that allows it to function as a ghost and to haunt Mary and Vincent as they are confronted with the plastic's return from the past. As such, it echoes Alaimo's (2012, p. 487) assertion that '[e]veryday ostensibly benign stuff' can become 'nightmarish' as it 'floats forever in the sea'. The promise of the plastic's endurance means it will persist forever, disseminating across bodies in time and space. The plastic's ever presence, and the absence of the natural environment, mirrors the ways in which ocean plastic is extending through the hydrocommons transcorporeally, transforming the environment and bodies in often unpredictable ways. Plastic 'haunts' within the story because it functions as a warning of how it can extend through bodies of water. It functions as a signifier for the anthropocentric hubris of late capitalist consumer culture and how the consequences of this are wreaking untold damage upon bodies. The plastic of Wood's short stories in many ways functions as a kind of 'ghost' who exemplifies matter's recurrence through aqueous transits. It haunts the protagonist because of its anachronistic return across the waters of the Northern Atlantic and demonstrates one of the ways in which bodies can be 'haunted' by water's continued return from an unknown past and into the present.

Rather than showing waste and pollution as it circulates around the waters of the Northern Atlantic, Michael Crummey's novel *Sweetland* is an example of a Northern Atlantic Littoral fiction using ghosts to emphasise how late capitalism is displacing human bodies across and through the Atlantic. His island setting of 'Sweetland' off the coast of Newfoundland is suffering in the socioeconomic aftermath of the cod moratorium and subsequent closure of the fisheries. The novel centres around Moses Sweetland, whose ancestors founded the eponymous island, as he initially attempts to fight (and then lose) a government resettlement scheme that aims to move islanders to industrious and economically viable inland towns and cities. Through deploying tropes of ghosts and haunting, *Sweetland* explores how the dissipation of these communities results in a pervading sense of displacement and anxiety. The novel sets up this comparison through using the space of the shore as a site where these ghosts emerge and force a confrontation with the material violence of capitalism. The novel opens with a scene in which Moses rescues a boat full of Sri Lankan refugees who have been drifting on the water off the coast of the

island of Sweetland. In the scene, the Sri Lankans are depicted as ghostly; Moses hears disembodied '[v]oices' across the fog (Crummey, 2015, p. 3). One voice shouts out from '[m]iles out on the water [...] seeming to rise from the ocean itself' (*ibid.*). The experience 'spooked' Moses who 'had to work up the nerve to respond' (*ibid.*). Moses then tows the refugees to shore where they are aided by Sweetland's residents. These descriptions characterise them as a kind of absent presence that unnerves Moses. This description of the refugees positions them as spectral and displaced figures—liminal and in-between. In her analysis of the various forms of haunting that permeate the novel, Vanja Polić (2018, p. 80) argues that the refugees adrift in the North Atlantic mirror the transient, extra-national nature of capital and globalisation and that the refugees will eventually symbolise the displaced islanders of Sweetland who will 'become internal exiles adrift in the spaces of Canada, all of them living ghosts'. Polić's analysis compares the experience of the refugees with the islanders of Sweetland. Polić acknowledges the ex-centricity of the Newfoundlanders, and the spatial overtones of her comparison stress that the movement inward *away* from the coast is a moment that will alter the subjectivity of the Sweetland islanders. They will become displaced figures who never fully assimilate into the more urban centres.

What is shown, by way of these brief examples, is how the concept of uncanny water produces ghosts to gesture towards the losses incurred through the systems and processes of late capitalism. They show how, through environmental destruction, economics, production and consumption, vital entanglements between humans and nonhumans are being pushed further into jeopardy. As these figures arise on the shore, they show how currents of power and meaning circulate across and through the Northern Atlantic, creating losses in their wake that are signalled through both 'waste in terms of pollution and the wasted lives of slaves and refugees' (Yaeger, 2010, p. 708). It is this too often invisible 'hauntology' of water that these ghosts allude to but also show as having material repercussions that extend in myriad ways across other bodies—whether that is through transcorporeal transferral of waste or through the displacement of people. In this way, the ghosts of uncanny water signal that the depths of the Northern Atlantic are not unknown and abyssal, and what is fed into the hydrocommons via this body of water can re-emerge elsewhere. In the following section, I think about whether or not the conception of the ocean as abyssal and unknown might actually have productive potential and deploy the figure of the double to do so.

sea monsters, selkies and mermaids: the 'double' in uncanny water

Like ghosts, doubles of the Northern Atlantic Littoral offer an imagined possibility of how the legacy of capitalism and colonialism positioned the ocean as supplicant to the white masculine coloniser. 'Doubles' of characters are figured as mermaids, selkies and sirens who function as reminders of patriarchal influence that 'othered' the ocean through feminised characterisations that alluded to its unknowable and abyssal nature. Mermaids, selkies and sirens were creatures who were renowned for luring men to death in the watery depths of the ocean, and their fluidity represented an unassimilable difference that threatened to destroy the masculine subject. Instead of figuring these creatures as a dangerous threat, I suggest that uncanny water is used to draw upon the radical potential of this 'unknowability' and abyssal nature of the fluid feminine to reimagine subjectivity as connected to and through the materiality of water. Instead of luring men to their deaths in the Northern Atlantic Ocean, what might giving oneself over to a watery unknown mean? I suggest that the 'doubles' of uncanny

water, like their ghostly counterparts, offer an imagined possibility for how this might offer a positive model for interconnection and entanglement with the nonhuman that triggers an awareness of one's own aqueous potential.

Two examples of novels from the Northern Atlantic Littoral that utilise mermaid and selkie doubles to undermine the discrete individualism and phallocentrism that feminised the ocean are Kirsty Logan's *The Gloaming* (2018) and Melissa Barbeau's *The Luminous Sea* (2018). These fictions recast sea 'monsters' of mermaids and selkies as doubles of the novels' characters. In Barbeau's novel, a mysterious fish-like creature is captured by a young female scientist, Vivienne, working off the coast of Newfoundland. Vivienne feels a strange affinity for the creature and describes the creature using the pronouns she/her. Yet the physical descriptions of the creature suggest a hybridity between fish and woman. She has 'muscular shoulders' that 'taper to long fronds' and '[b]uried within sleeves of silken kelp are bony flippers. Or hands' (Barbeau, 2018, p. 28). The creature is kept in captivity by Vivienne and a team of more senior scientists. Over the course of the novel, Vivienne finds herself excluded from accessing her. As the senior team members become more aggressive in testing and analysing the creature, Vivienne's own body begins to suffer, suggesting a synergy between the two 'women'. Similar synergies occur in *The Gloaming* when a young woman, Mara, finds herself attracted to Pearl. Pearl works as a travelling 'mermaid', performing in shows around the world, and Pearl's affinity with the ocean leads Mara to believe that she is a shape-shifting selkie. Both novels emphasise how dominant patriarchal narratives feminised the ocean in order to exploit it and the nonhuman bodies that depended upon it. In *The Luminous Sea*, the increasingly aggressive testing is led by a male scientist who is keen to improve his reputation through exploiting the 'discovery' of the unusual fish creature. He warns against Vivienne's 'anthropomorphizing' of the creature, preferring she refer to her as 'it' or 'the sample' (Barbeau, 2018, p. 77). Furthermore, his ambition leads him to dismiss his female team members, as he wants to be the sole author on the paper because it looks better for the 'optics' (*ibid.*, p. 104). This dismissal of his colleagues demonstrates how his sheer ambition leads him to exploit both women and the nonhuman. In *The Gloaming*, Pearl asserts to Mara that the selkie story is ultimately 'about women as other'—about '[m]en's fear of giving away power' (Logan, 2018, p. 240). These novels therefore correlate the exploitation of the sea with its feminisation, through the construction of narratives that implicitly demarcate the ocean and women as a site of otherness.

Mermaids provide imaginative figurations of an otherness that threatens the masculine because of their associations with the feminised ocean and female sexuality as fluid, uncontainable and abyssal. With their bottom halves submerged in water, mermaids represent an unknown and unseen threat and to follow the mermaid into the water would mean the dissolution of the masculine subject as he plunges into the feminised 'other' of the ocean. Mermaids and their fellow sea-creature sisters, including sirens and selkies, therefore represent 'the horror of the abyss attributed to woman. Loss of identity: death' (Irigaray, 1991, p. 91). Luce Irigaray contends that the masculine's fear of the female stems from a fear of her fluidity as that from which he originated, consequently it is '[t]he danger of immersion in primary matter that endlessly feeds your anguish, your forgetfulness, and your death' (*ibid.*, p. 66). Plunging into this 'primary matter' of the 'abyss' therefore reads as a return to the womb and categorises the ocean as archaic mother—that is, the 'parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end' (Creed, 2012 [1993], p. 17). To read the ocean as archaic mother is to acknowledge it as that which is the origin of life on earth, separate from insemination by the masculine,

and that which is responsible for the earth's continued survival. Barbara Creed (*ibid.*, p. 28), in her theorisation of the 'monstrous feminine', proposes that the archaic mother is horrifying because she is 'a force that threatens to reincorporate what it once gave birth to' and that '[t]he desire to return to the original oneness of things, to return to the mother/womb, is primarily a desire for non-differentiation'. I connect the masculine fear of the archaic mother to the fear of the ocean and a fear to return to 'primary matter' that would eliminate the masculine and his discrete individualism. The ocean's characterisation as female body, epitomised in the mermaid and her monstrous sisters, is therefore underpinned by a phallocentric fear of subsumption, of a destruction of his self-containment and engulfment by the 'other'.

Uncanny water draws upon the connotations of fear and anxiety of female sexuality within siren and mermaid narratives and subverts these. 'Immersion' in and with an aqueous other still reads as a site of uncertainty and hesitancy, as doubles instil a sense of the uncanny in their human counterparts. Yet, uncanny water posits that 'immersion' in and with an aqueous other can offer unknown potential that is generative and affirmative. This 'immersion' is consequently seen as a material moment of interconnection that involves entanglement with the 'other'. Fictions of the Northern Atlantic Littoral consequently offer moments of touch and tactility, with the 'doubles', initially sites of fear, transforming into sites of possibility and potential. They do this through displacing the masculine figure at the heart of earlier narratives of the oceanic imaginary, replacing this with a female figure who encounters a monstrous double.

When the women of these novels therefore encounter this double, their own uncontainable nature and fluidity are revealed, as characters 'touch' and entangle themselves with this figure. In Barbeau's novel, this is exemplified when Vivienne is sexually assaulted by one of her colleagues. In the aftermath, she goes home to take a bath and, undressing, notes the damage to her skin. Her back is 'scraped raw' and the blood dries, making her shirt stick to her flesh, so that the fabric consequently 'pulls at her torn skin' (Barbeau, 2018, p. 116). She submerges herself into the water and finds herself thinking of the creature in the lab. When she visits the creature the next day, she is shocked to notice the creature in a similar state, covered in wounds and scratches from her treatment at the hands of the scientist. They become united in their bodily pain as their wounds ooze and seep. Later, a moment of touch between the two cements their affinity (*ibid.*, p. 172). A similar moment of touch is demonstrated in *The Gloaming*, in which immersion and touching the monstrous subject become a process through which both subjects are affirmed in their own uncontainable nature. When Mara is masturbating in the bath, she fantasises about Pearl:

> She slid her hands between her legs. She felt Pearl lay her down at the edge of the sea, snowflaking kisses down her neck. She put her hands alongside Pearl's, touching where she touched [...] Pearl was touching her, loving her, owning her. Their bodies merged, became one. Mara was Pearl was Mara and they were both—they were both. (Logan, 2018, p. 97)

Facilitated by the fluid and undefinable nature of the female body, the bodies of both women merge. Subject and object, self and other, are broken down but in a way that affirms the presence of 'both'; the boundaries between them are thus not collapsed in a moment that results in the dissolution of the subject, but both become subjects in their own right, and are confirmed through their own uncontainable

nature. Touching collapses the boundaries between self and other, but instead of this being a threatening destruction of self-containment, it affirms the fluidity and porosity of the body. Through this, the female protagonists recognise their own unfolding potential and materiality. Instead of leading to the death and dissolution of the subject, the fluid feminine is thereby repositioned in the novels as affirmative, as characters do not dissolve the boundaries of their own bodies but are instead reconfigured as interconnected to other bodies and the environment around them.

Like the ghosts of the preceding section, immersion with these aqueous others can grant access to the possibilities of being and becoming that acknowledging oneself as a body of water might afford, demonstrating how bodies might meet and converge in the more-than-human hydrocommons. While Logan's novel shows how this can be a positive and affirmative act, Barbeau's demonstrates how following the currents of water in the hydrocommons is not necessarily neutral. The exploitation of both Vivienne and the creature once again demonstrates how fictions that amplify water's hauntology can illuminate moments of both interconnection *and* injustice. This highlights how conceptions of bodies of water as subject to mastery and control are still pervasive and damaging, but in drawing attention to these moments we might foster different and more relational understandings of bodies as deeply implicated in one another's materiality.

reconfiguring the oceanic imaginary: intertextuality and uncanny water

In drawing upon earlier tales of mermaids and sirens, the contemporary fictions of the Northern Atlantic Littoral demonstrate another of uncanny water's prerogatives: intertextuality. The doubles who mirror tropes of mermaids and selkies demonstrate the ways in which the texts themselves are *haunted* by narratives of oceanic mastery, control and exploitation. These fictions utilise intertextuality to acknowledge how conceptions of the Northern Atlantic have been constructed through late capitalist and colonialist ideologies and their accompanying discourses of mastery and control. In engaging explicitly and implicitly with nautical fictions that perpetuated these ideologies—such as *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 1994 [1719])—the fictions of the Northern Atlantic Littoral enact their own aqueous politics of location whereby they acknowledge how these fictions contribute to the enduring legacy of mastery and control that surrounds the Northern Atlantic. As these narratives are reproduced with an emphasis on the uncanny (as incited in their use of ghosts and doubles), they stress unknowability and therefore refute the possibility of this mastery and control being repeated. The scope of this is dependent upon how long a text maintains a suspension of disbelief and whether or not a resolution to its supernatural elements is offered. In 'uncanny water', a continuous referentiality denies closure for the text's uncanny effects: uncanny water prolongs and precludes narrative certainty. The resultant effect is one that mirrors the ontological suspension articulated by Neimanis and Alaimo. As we are denied closure to the text's uncanny effects, so too are we held in a state of suspension that denies any sense of certainty or control over the narrative.

The subversion of particular narratives that perpetuated a discourse of mastery and control in relation to the ocean is witnessed particularly in *Sweetland*—a novel that pits its protagonist Moses against the elements, as he is left alone on the island following a government resettlement scheme. Moses' attempts

to survive alone on the remote Newfoundland island have led Caitlin Charman (2020, p. 42) to claim that *Sweetland* should be read as an 'anti-Robinsonade'. The end of *Sweetland* sees Moses perish as a result of starvation and illness. This offers a stark contrast to *Robinson Crusoe*, where Crusoe is able to bend the landscape of the island to his will before returning home to expand his own wealth (Defoe, 1994 [1719]). While Crusoe's efforts are often heralded as a consequence of his 'economic individualism', *Sweetland* demonstrates that solitary efforts to manage the land are 'inadequate for survival and prosperity' (Charman, 2020, p. 55). Not only are they 'inadequate' but they are proven deeply futile. Moses' death is the culmination of his inability to properly manage the land on his own. Yet, in comparison to Crusoe, Moses' death actually demonstrates that collective networks of care are a more sustainable and responsive example of building human/oceanic relationships and that these offer a disruption to capitalist narratives of economic individualism. Moses' death is a result of an absence of the community of people who support and work sustainably and responsibly with the ocean. All these people have been cast aside by capitalism, and in death he joins them and stares out across the ocean. In death, Moses is no longer 'man' against 'nature' but he re-joins his community of absent others whose bodies and lives sustained the more-than-human community of Sweetland. The final scene of all these spectral, dislocated and liminal figures uniting together provides a glaring contrast to Crusoe's individualistic pursuit of wealth and is the image that readers are left with. This moment solidifies the novel as a counterpoint to the damaging narrative of 'man' against 'nature', as it leaves readers with an image of a whole community that has been spectralised by the homogenising force of capitalism. While the scene ends on an optimistic sense of joy as Moses 'all of a sudden felt like singing' (Crummey, 2015, p. 318), this still communicates an overarching message that becoming part of a wider assemblage that involves human and the nonhuman can foster a more compassionate relationship with the ocean and its accompanying communities.

In *Sweetland*, the ghostly figures of the final scene amplify the unknown potential of water's pathways and show the detrimental impact of repeating narratives of mastery and control. Logan's novel *The Gloaming* offers a similar subversion, drawing upon a Celtic folktale of a selkie through the novel and reconfiguring this through the text's uncanny effects. The tale describes a fisherman who catches a group of young women dancing and laughing on the sand one evening. He feels 'quite bewitched' (Logan, 2018, p. 28) by one particular woman but as he watches, he sees them slide greyish skins over their bodies and disappear into the water as seals. The next night he returns and takes one of the skins and hides it. One of the selkies is left wandering the shore and the fisherman convinces her to marry him, which they do, and they have several children, but the selkie still longs for the sea, and one day her youngest son finds her skin and returns it to her. In the novel, two characters tell the tale with two different endings: one in which the selkie returns to the sea forever, and another in which the selkie stays with the family on land. The novel replicates the tale within its frameworks—hinting at the possibility of Pearl being a selkie or a mermaid. Irrespective of the ending, implicit within the tale is a sense of mastery and control—that the selkie *could and should* be captured and contained by man in the first place. However, the novel denies a sense of closure, as the narrator offers both multiple endings and no endings, while refusing to confirm whether Pearl is a selkie or not. At the end of *The Gloaming*, the narrator directly addresses the uncertainty presented thus far in the novel. In answer to a rhetorical question about the outcome of the novel's characters, the narrator simply states, 'I'm sorry to tell you that I don't know' (Logan, 2018, p. 302). What follows are then several different possible endings—some happy, some less so—before the narrator says, '[t]hey didn't live happily ever after, like a couple in a story. But they were

happy for a while, and perhaps that's all we can ask' (*ibid.*, p. 303). Instead of offering 'only one possible ending' (*ibid.*, p. 302), the novel asserts a freedom in embracing the many myriad variations that the story could continue to become. In this way, the novel suggests that desiring something to be fixed and known imposes a limit, but embracing this limit allows for myriad other unknown potentials.

Uncanny water refutes certainty about water, and the ocean. It brings familiar tales of mastery and control and subverts them, so that they become uncertain and ungraspable. In the moments where meaning is deferred and an ending or closure is denied, the reader is held in a state of suspension and uncertainty. This is where surrendering to the unknowability can cultivate a better sense of relationality and responsiveness to the other. Instead of trying to overcome the gaps in the narrative, suspension holds the reader in a state of ready responsiveness: a 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016). It shows how embracing this unknowability can create new possibilities for being and becoming with the other. Rather than offering a fixed ending that perpetuates a sense of mastery and control, these texts often offer myriad possibilities, alternatives and multiple endings that show the virtual potential inherent in a body of water. To speak for the ocean is impossible, but what is offered instead is an understanding of how the ocean is relationally implicated in the hydrocommons and how narratives that are attentive to this responsiveness and relationality can demonstrate this.

conclusion: watery bodies, watery selves

Humans cannot fully know water. The relationship humans have with water is about limits—the limit of what is survivable and habitable (Neimanis, 2017). As a species, humans conceive of water as places thought of in relation to land as the primary spaces we live upon and inhabit. This is exemplified in understandings of the Northern Atlantic that see it as a *surface* to be traversed and upon which colonial and capitalist ambitions and aims can be overlaid. Considering this space as a body of water and all bodies as deeply implicated within the hydrocommons means acknowledging that the depths and currents that run through and across it slip beyond human comprehension. It is about reorienting human ontology towards water, deterritorialising oneself from land—de-*terra*-torialising—and submerging oneself into unknown watery depths. This will undoubtedly make any terrestrial species feel 'out of place', but there is a transformative power inherent in this sensation. As Cecilia Chen (2013, p. 290) notes, 'moments of feeling out-of-place are important to renewing our sense of orientation and to discovering other ways to relate to place that escape habitual assumptions'. This means attending to these moments of feeling out of place as possibilities for reorienting moments of being and becoming with water. Chen elaborates that if humans can embrace this sense of being out of place, then it can cultivate awareness of how habitual assumptions and land-based understandings of water can 'limit the ways in which we listen to (and think about or with) water' and 'could aid in opening up critical human discourses toward larger environmental concerns' (*ibid.*, p. 277). Land-based assumptions of being-in-the-world ordered the world into that which was knowable and visible and excluded that which was not. Deterritorialising ontologies offers insight into what was marginalised and excluded through these modes of habitation and living.

The uncertainty implicit in feeling out of place runs through all the iterations of uncanny water. Uncanny water involves encounters and immersions with aqueous others—be that a place or a being—and through these meetings facilitates new possibilities for being and becoming. These moments are critical as they

afford the assimilation and understanding of the ways in which water is dispersed between bodies and allow for an ethical consideration of how this might be reproduced but in unknowable ways. As such, uncanny water participates in the growing scholarship of the feminist blue humanities in its consideration of this ethical potential of extending embodiment to and through the ocean, and how this might disrupt more dominant understandings of corporeality. I have demonstrated here how fictions of the Northern Atlantic Littoral emphasise a material interconnection through bodies of water. By drawing upon the uncanny, they illuminate water's uncertain pathways through bodies, but the uncanny's inherent relationality means they remain attentive to all of the currents of meaning that accompany its transits. In the pivotal moments where characters encounter an aqueous other, they become implicated in these complex interconnected material histories that weave to and through this body of water. As bodies in these texts orient themselves towards the ocean, they simultaneously acknowledge its material histories and resonances. Moreover, moments of immersion create uncanny effects as characters—and the reader—feel out of place with an aqueous other and this can have a generative effect. Considering the uncanniness of these moments grants an opportunity to think about what is articulated in the in-between and how bodies are constantly displacing their own aqueous materiality unto others in uncertain ways. This is an affective and relational process that illuminates water's hauntological properties; lingering in these moments can incur a transformative moment of realisation that shows the generative potential of recognising bodies' mutual materiality and how we can all more ethically orient ourselves towards both its uncertain displacement elsewhere and those absent others across the hydrocommons.

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Caroline Emily Rae is in the final stages of her PhD at Newcastle University. Her research is engaged with how contemporary fictions articulate the materiality of bodies of water at a time of climate crisis. She has published in *Studies in Canadian Literature* and presented at a number of international conferences. Alongside her research, Caroline is the editorial assistant at the journal *Feminist Theory*.

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