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Metamorphosing with Selkies: Shape-Shifting Instabilities in the Self-Conscious Anthropocene

Métamorphose avec les Selkies : instabilités changeantes dans l'Anthropocène conscient de lui-même

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Article abstract

This article deploys the inspirational figure of the selkie toward emphasizing non-hierarchical and sustainable co-existences between various species, ecosystems, and human beings, a necessary perspective in light of climate change, biodiversity loss, and species extinctions. The selkie wife story exposes the consequences of exceptionalist hierarchies, including those that structure nature as subordinate, animals as subordinate, and women as subordinate. Challenging this discriminatory thinking, the seal folk model accomplishes at least four things that are vital to its function as a traditional Irish folktale and to the ethical considerations it produces in the self-conscious Anthropocene. At its foundation lies a flexible worldview that accepts species ambiguity, contrasting with representations of biological others that fix their bodies as landscapes of control and abuse; the story itself is a warning against arrogance and domination, and is a rebuke of imperialism; and finally, it develops a clear lesson about how to be a proper person.

Here I radically renegotiate human exceptionalism and the ontologies that illusion supports by turning to selkie myths and other stories of shapeshifting women to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living in the self-conscious Anthropocene in productive and collaborative ways.

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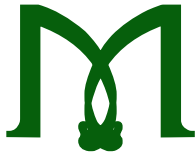
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Metamorphosing with Selkies: Shape-Shifting Instabilities in the Self-Conscious Anthropocene

SARAH E. MCFARLAND

Abstract

This article redeploys Irish seal folk stories, a tradition of social and ecological knowledge germane to the era of climate change, as potent cultural messages that challenge contemporary ideologies about ecosystems and human beings. The selkie wife story exposes the consequences of exceptionalist hierarchies, including those that structure nature as subordinate, animals as subordinate, and women as subordinate, confirming what Val Plumwood has argued about such constructions: “Racism, colonialism, and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial, and ethnic difference as closer to the animal.”¹ Challenging this discriminatory thinking, the seal folk model accomplishes at least four things that are vital to its function as a traditional Irish folktale and to the ethical considerations it produces in the self-conscious Anthropocene. At its foundation lies a flexible worldview that accepts species ambiguity, contrasting with representations of biological others that fix their bodies as landscapes of control and abuse; the story itself is a warning against arrogance and domination, and is a rebuke of imperialism; and finally, it develops a clear lesson about how to be a proper person.

¹ Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993: 4.



Here I radically renegotiate human exceptionalism and the ontologies that illusion supports by turning to selkie myths and other stories of shapeshifting women to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living in the self-conscious Anthropocene² in productive and collaborative ways.

Keywords: selkies, Irish folklore, human exceptionalism, matriculture

Résumé

Cet article redéploie les histoires folkloriques irlandaises sur les phoques, une tradition de connaissances sociales et écologiques pertinentes à l'ère du changement climatique, en tant que messages culturels puissants qui remettent en question les idéologies contemporaines sur les écosystèmes et les êtres humains. L'histoire de la femme Selkie expose les conséquences des hiérarchies exceptionnalistes, y compris celles qui structurent la nature comme subordonnée, les animaux comme subordonnés et les femmes comme subordonnées, confirmant ce que Val Plumwood a soutenu à propos de telles constructions : « Le racisme, le colonialisme, et le sexisme ont retiré leur force conceptuelle du fait de présenter les différences sexuelles, raciales et ethniques comme [une situation] plus proche de l'animal. »³ Remettant en question cette pensée discriminatoire, le modèle des gens du phoque (selkies) accomplit au moins quatre choses qui sont essentielles à sa fonction de conte populaire irlandais traditionnel et aux considérations éthiques qu'il produit dans un Anthropocène conscient de lui-même. À la base du récit se trouve une vision du monde flexible qui accepte une certaine ambiguïté des espèces, contrastant avec les représentations des « autres » biologiques qui figent leurs corps comme des paysages de contrôle et d'abus ; le conte lui-même est un avertissement contre l'arrogance et la domination, et une réprimande contre l'impérialisme ; et enfin, il développe une leçon claire sur la façon d'être une bonne personne.

Ici, je renégocie radicalement l'exceptionnalisme humain et les ontologies que soutient l'illusion en me tournant vers les mythes selkie et d'autres histoires de femmes métamorphes pour imaginer des façons alternatives de penser et de

² I use this term following Lynn Keller in *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*.

³ Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993: 4.

vivre dans l'Anthropocène conscient de soi,⁴ de manière productive et collaborative.

Mots-clés : selkies, folklore irlandais, exceptionnalisme humain, matriculture

I think the world is dying because we were
dead to its astonishments pretty much. It'll be
around but it will become less and less until
it's finally compatible with our feelings for it.
--- Joy Williams, *Harrow*⁵

In this article, I redeploy the inspirational figure of the selkie toward emphasizing non-hierarchical and sustainable co-existences between various species, ecosystems, and human beings. Its title alludes to lines from the Irish poet Eavan Boland's poem "The Woman," which evokes "The hour of change, of metamorphosis, / of shape-shifting instabilities. / My time of sixth sense and second sight."⁶ I thereby substantiate ways that selkies can encourage similar experiences of wonder and transformation. Seal-human shapeshifters, selkies are non-dualistic and challenge Western binary oppositions in their very beingness, which is difference and continuity, animal and human, natural and cultural all at once. Despite the common misunderstanding that selkies are humans in seal form, they are actually another species altogether. They personify the paradox of species difference by existing in a liminal space between, a 'both/and' figure. I argue for a radical diminishment of human exceptionalism in this turn toward selkies and other watery, shapeshifting women as inspirations toward imagining alternative practices of thinking and living in productive, collaborative ways. This perspective is vitally necessary in light of the destabilizing effects of global climate change, biodiversity loss, and mass extinction in the twenty-first century. Because of their fluid species ambiguity, selkies are uniquely positioned to subvert the assumptions of human exceptionalism that drive exploitations of ecosystems and human and nonhuman others in our current geologic era. They can thus help us reconsider our species' role in the world, when the lives of many humans and our aquatic and terrestrial nonhuman kin are rendered especially precarious.

⁴ J'utilise ce terme à la suite de Lynn Keller dans *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*.

⁵ Joy Williams, *Harrow: A Novel* (Knopf Doubleday, 2022), ix.

⁶ Eavan Boland, *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (W. W. Norton, 1990), 84.

As many scholars have noted, even labeling this geological period the Anthropocene is provocative for centering the human as a universalizing species concept, ignoring wider implications, disparate accountabilities, and divergent experiences of environmental changes. In 'The Anthropocene: Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea,' Rob Nixon illustrates the dangers of species narcissism, observing that "it's one thing to recognize that *Homo sapiens* has accrued massive bio- and geomorphic powers. But it's another thing altogether to fixate on human agency to a degree that downplays the imperfectly understood, infinitely elaborate webs of nonhuman agency."⁷ As Susan M. Rustick argues in 'Held Hostage by the Anthropocene,' the designation makes it difficult "to generate an appropriate ethical response grounded in compassion and a recognition of our mutual interdependence with all of life."⁸

As an alternative, Lynn Keller's phrase 'the self-conscious Anthropocene' foregrounds the extensive awareness and recognition of "a powerful cultural phenomenon tied to reflexive, critical, and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects on the planet."⁹ Keller's analyses of experimental poetics shows how it "encourages readers to think in terms of a vast net of interconnection in which [...] other wild creatures cannot be associated with escape from human strife or human limitation, for those now shape all planetary experience in the Anthropocene."¹⁰ Such interconnectivity aligns with Bruno Latour's suggestion that we should deploy moments of "risky diplomacy"¹¹ to recognize the interpenetrating and co-constitutive interweaving of organisms and environments, rejecting the modern contract that leads to the reification of partitions between absolute nature and an autonomous human culture, between the 'other' and the 'self.' Selkies model a fluid and interchangeable relationship between human and nonhuman boundaries and themselves exist within that interweaving.

Selkies refute the distinctions between humans and other animals, cultures and natures, and human agents encountering nonhuman objects. For example, in one version of the selkie wife story, the tale begins with a lonely young human fisherman who comes across women dancing and laughing on the coastline. The women are mesmerizingly beautiful, and the young man sneaks closer and closer to watch them dance and play. As he gets

⁷ Rob Nixon, 'The Anthropocene: Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea,' *Edge Effects* (6 November 2014, updated 12 October 2019): unpaginated.

⁸ Susan M. Rustick, 'Held Hostage by the Anthropocene,' in *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene*, eds. Morten Tønnessen, Kristin Armstrong Oma, and Silver Rattasepp (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 4.

⁹ Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (U Virginia P, 2017), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity, 2017), 151.

near, he sees their pile of fur cloaks and identifies them as selkies. The young man sneaks close enough to the collection of skins that when the selkies notice him, it is too late: he grabs one of the cloaks, leaving one dancer without her fur after the other selkies scramble for their own and dive into the sea, transformed into seals. The man returns to his village and the seal-woman follows, pleading for the return of her skin. Having thus trapped the selkie in her human form, the man claims her as his spouse, and she is a devoted partner: a loving mother, a good cook and homemaker, and a successful fisher, too. Nonetheless, at every opportunity she searches for her cloak until one day, she discovers it hidden in the gable of their cottage (although in some versions, her daughter innocently discloses its location to her, thus making the child complicit in her mother's abandonment). Once she finds her fur, the selkie immediately leaves her children and husband to return to the sea, once again free to choose her own form.

In one version, her confused children follow her into the ocean and drown.¹² In another version, the seal wife's son is called to the coastline by "a huge shaggy silver seal" to discover his mother's hidden sealskin, returning it to her; she inevitably leaves, even though "you could tell she wanted to stay with her child, she *wanted* to, but something called her, something older than she, older than he, older than time."¹³ In most versions, the selkie ensures her former husband provides well for their children by guaranteeing his fishing success. Despite the way she was treated by her human captor, the selkie demonstrates compassion and ensures the family lives well. As David Thompson relays the story, the husband 'was never as he had been, in his mind' once the selkie returns to the ocean, but

He had more luck fishing than ever before, and when he was out fishing there was often a seal swimming round his boat and there were tears in the eyes of this seal. When the children walked along the shore a seal swam along by them in the sea and cast up to them many-colored fish and beautiful shells.¹⁴

The selkie's suffering is thus not ignored or repressed in the telling: rather, it forms the crux of the story's ethical message. By imprisoning the selkie within her human form so he

¹² As Clair Le Couteur observes, "The Seal Wife's children are never fully hybrid; their place is on land, they cannot shapeshift, and their humanity is not in question" (75). See their article, "Slipping off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales" for a fascinating interrogation of the mythic and material sealskin (published as Peter Le Couteur). Peter Le Couteur, "Slipping Off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales," *The Gender Forum*, 55 (2015): 55–82.

¹³ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (Balentine, 1992), 260, 261.

¹⁴ David Thomson, *The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend* (Counterpoint, 2000), 162.

can possess her, the fisherman/husband restricts her agency, subjectivity, self-expression, and autonomy. The moment she can, she abandons her human children and husband to return to her independent, wild and free, fully subjective self. Yet even so she demonstrates compassion and concern for her human family, ensuring her children are well-fed and cared for. Her desire for agency is at the forefront, yet even when she can return to the sea, her weeping and gifts are depicted in attentive detail. She can thus be imagined as no mere metaphor or myth but as an actual being deserving of respect and autonomy, a mysterious creature who links sea and coastline, animal and human, and the entanglement of material oppressions and individual subjectivity: selkies enact becomingness in the transformative spaces between such limiting categorizations.

To demonstrate this transformative liminality further, I turn to two poems written by Irish women for reasons of equal importance: as examples of the warning and inspiration selkies provide, and because both poems speak *from* and *within* the selkie perspective. Both these reasons demonstrate how selkies can unsettle binaries and stimulate innovative ways of thinking in the self-conscious Anthropocene. The first case is the warning, arising from the inspiration of selkies dancing freely. Specifically, even though the seal woman is an ideal wife and mother, her domesticity comes only with severe restrictions on her agency: the stealing and hiding of what enables her true self to *be*. Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill suggests these restraints in her poem “Taimid Damanta, A Dheirfearacha” (translated by Michael Harnett as “We are Damned, my Sisters”). In English:

We preferred to be shoeless by the tide
dancing singly on the wet sand
the piper’s tune coming to us
on the kid spring wind, than to be
indoors making strong tea for the men—
and so we’re damned, my sisters!¹⁵

A paucity of available options toward flourishing exists once someone is seized, captured, subjugated, and coerced into forced labor (or restricted by patriarchal gender norms further inculcated by religious structures, as is implied by being ‘damned’). Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem alludes to the consequences to the selkie’s agency once her cloak is stolen, contrasting forced domesticity with the freedom of dancing on the seashore to the wind’s music. But underpinning that allusion is another: that when she can, she will abandon her family to retake her true form.

The experience of retaking that true form is exemplified in the writings of Eavan Boland, who utilizes shapeshifting female creatures to expand and transform the selkie myth.

¹⁵ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Rhoga Dánta*, trans. Michael Harnett (New Island Publishers, 1993), 15.

Boland evokes the selkie in her own voice, which is uncommon in the traditional stories.¹⁶ The female figure in Boland's poem "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish" is, as the title states, an active participant in her own transformation and therefore brings embodiment into the foreground of critical inquiry. The short, irregular lines of the poem mirror the embodied conversion step-by-step and piece-by-piece, helping us to imagine the perspective of a selkie herself even though the speaker is not a selkie. Boland is often associated with the creation of an Irish poetry that reframes the roles of women and nationhood within the historical traditions of Ireland, of which selkie tales are a part. As Richard Rankin Russell puts it, she imbues "her own poetry increasingly with a lament for Gaelic Ireland, along with the recuperation of the role of women in Irish history and in Irish poetry."¹⁷ In this poem specifically, readers experience the repossession of agency via Boland's female speaker, who empowers her own transformation. The short, irregular lines mirror the building of a new body, envisioning from *within* the experience in alignment with what it might be like to shift between human and seal forms.

"The Woman Turns Herself Into a Fish" begins with instructions, the first five stanzas composed of imperatives:

Unpod
the bag,
the seed.

Slap
the flanks back.
Flatten

paps.
Make finny,
scaled

¹⁶ I have never heard nor come across a selkie wife story told from the selkie's first-person perspective, although there is valuable work being done in that space of silence. For instance, one anonymous reviewer of this essay pointed me toward Gary Markle's *Selkie Skin* art project, which invites people to wear a 'selkie skin' made of scavenged and reclaimed plastic waste while they float in the ocean. Markle indicates that the "project transforms the wearer into an aquatic creature through a performative garment. This shift in consciousness, even for a brief period, is an attempt to create empathy with the increasingly plastic-filled waters of the world. Even when invisible, oceanic plastic waste at both macro and micro levels are now ubiquitous." (306-8) For more about Markle's project, see Andy Best, "Imagining Godzilla: An Art Research Network Platform," in *Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts*, eds. C.P. Krieg and R. Toivanen (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 293-330; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-14-20>.

¹⁷ Richard Rankin Russell, "W.B. Yeats and Eavan Boland: Postcolonial Poets?" in *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*, ed. Deborah Fleming (Locust Hill Press, 2001), 120.

and chill
the slack
and dimple

of the rump.
Pout
the mouth,

brow the eyes.¹⁸

The first instruction, to unpod, is ingenious for the complexity of its meaning: a pod is a group of mammals. Usually, the word is used to describe marine animals but the speaker is in fact leaving a group of terrestrial mammals—human beings—and becoming a marine animal. Additionally, in a crude sense the selkie wife becomes a uterine bag for seminal seed when she is forced into a maternal role while in her human form. Here, the speaker is transforming away from human sexual reproductivity altogether. The short lines strain against themselves as they simultaneously command change and describe the process of transformation, emulating the very act of alteration they describe, plodding toward unpodding.

The first section of the poem ends with the seed unpodded, the repetition gasping for a new breath as a new being:

and now
and now

eclipse
in these hips,
these loins,

the moon,
the blood
flux.¹⁹

This section contains two of the four lines that might be said to have a rhyme: 'eclipse' and 'these hips' underscore the importance of menstrual phases to the speaker's human self and emphasize that they are, in essence, her connection to the lives of all

¹⁸ Eavan Boland, "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish," in *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (W.W. Norton, 1990), 131.

¹⁹ Ibid.

menstruating mammals in all times. Furthermore, the shift from 'the' to 'these' personalizes the speaker's physical changes at exactly the moment the last remnants of human biology fall away: the end of menstruation as lunar eclipse.

The middle stanzas of the poem shift the focus from *becoming* to *being*. The process of transformation is complete and now the *I* of the poem *is*, the product of her own formation, physical, emotional, and creative still:

It's done.
I turn.
I flab upward.

blub-lipped,
hipless,
and I am

sexless,
shed
of ecstasy,

a pale
swimmer
sequin-skinned,

pearling eggs
screamlessly
in seaweed.²⁰

Menstruation, gestation, and birth are exchanged for the hipless and painless releasing of eggs into the seawater (an extension of the release of an egg from the human ovary to be captured by the fallopian tube). 'I am' she exclaims, godlike and beautifully sequined. Here is the beginning of another transformation that extends through the end of the poem, this time of words typically used as nouns becoming verbs: things into action, literally and grammatically.

The third section expresses prior desire and some regret, suggesting that the humanness of the speaker's subjectivity is still present within the marine creature (and vice versa):

It's what

²⁰ Ibid., 132.

I set my heart on.
Yet,

ruddering
and muscling
in the sunless tons

of new freedoms,
still
I feel

a chill pull,
a brightening,
a light, a light:

and how
in my loomy cold,
my greens

still
she moons
in me.²¹

The other—the human other now—still exists in the wateriness of the woman transformed. She is free, the homonym ‘sun/son’ marking her independence from both a human body and her human maternal responsibilities, ‘tons’ of pressure suddenly lifted to become light as the photons of ‘light.’ ‘Sunless tons’ and ‘new freedoms’ also form a near rhyme, only the second in the whole poem and thus further emphasizing those lines. The speaker belongs in a changing and shifting natural world in which she actively participates, still a part of the fish, who, like the selkie, is both human and other yet neither, forever enacting becoming-ness, existing precisely in that in-between place of activity in flux.

For other imaginings of the selkie figure, there are several outstanding Irish films about seal folk that demonstrate the selkies’ embedded entanglement with place and lore in the Atlantic archipelago region. For example, the animated film *Song of the Sea* (2014) is about a young selkie called Saoirse and her human brother Ben. Full of haunting imagery, lush visual and aural beauty, and powerful folkloric messages, the film centers questions related to loss, modernity, and freedom in Ireland. Similarly, its title a reference to the undine, a legendary water creature in European folklore, *Ondine* (2009) likewise explores contemporary Irish relationships and incorporates several traditional shapeshifting figures,

²¹ Ibid., 132-3.

including selkies, mermaids, and other watery beings. The titular character might be a selkie, although the ambiguity of her species makes for part of the film's magic.²² More explicitly selkie-centered is *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), a film set in County Donegal that tells of an ancient family ancestor who married a seal woman, leading to the disappearance of a child, Jamie, who has selkie heritage. Although also about loss, modernity, and freedom, the film's plot is structured around his sister Fiona's efforts to convince the selkies to return him to his human family. Each of these films employ selkies to reveal a less simplistic, more pantheistic way of interacting with the complexities of human animals within the more-than-human world.

As these examples illustrate, selkies demonstrate that the 'human' as a concept is in a constant state of differential becoming, transformative instead of stable. For this human, the Anthropocene marks "a finite space in which 'we' are now all joined in a tragedy of the commons," as Claire Colebrook demonstrates.²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty appropriately problematizes the concept of a stabilizing, overarching human species, arguing that "We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. [...] One never experiences being a concept."²⁴ In contrast to a vague concept of humanness, by enacting becoming-ness, selkies make explicit what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call 'becoming-animal,' a disruption of concretized identity and an undermining of the central premise of animal ontology (which is that animals have substantial essences or structures that are identifiable and stable). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest instead that there are historically contingent and variable processes of 'becoming animal' that are constituted as activity-in-flux. As James Urpeth succinctly states of becoming-animals, "Flux, change, and relation are, for them, more real than permanence, stability, and identity."²⁵ Such organisms are not coherent systems with constancy; instead, becoming-animals are indeterminate entities, never finished fluxing between various impermanent conditions. They are always entangled so the "boundaries of identity are lost in the representation of species' irreducible interdependence and mutual implications in each other's lives and deaths" as Kari Weil puts it.²⁶ Selkies make explicit this seeming

²² Kirsten Møllegaard astutely and insightfully demonstrates how *Ondine* problematizes generic conventions and engages postmodern intertextuality in relation to contemporary issues of migration and settlement in her chapter, "Global Flows in Coastal Contact Zones: Selkie Lore in Neil Jordan's *Ondine* and Solveig Eggerz's *Seal Woman*," in *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag*, eds. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye (Denver: Utah State University Press, 2014), 93-111.

²³ Claire Colebrook, *The Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Volume One* (Open Humanities Press, 2014), 10.

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, 2 (Winter 2009): 220.

²⁵ James Urpeth, "Animal Becomings," in *Animal Philosophy* ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (Continuum, 2004), 102.

²⁶ Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (Columbia UP, 2012), xxii.

paradox: neither exclusively human nor animal by being both simultaneously, they foreground the inextricable—but often elided—linkages and fluidity between human beings and the rest of the living world.

Yet, as Melanie Challenger points out in *How to Be Animal: A New History of What It Means to be Human*, many humans struggle to identify commonalities between their own lived experience of the world and the fact that each nonhuman life also has its own lived experience of the world. Those experiences also matter deeply. She argues, “We are surrounded by evidence that intelligence and awareness are a normal part of life. Instinct or otherwise, everything around us expresses an unquantifiable degree of complexity and skill. What prevents us from valuing it all more highly?”²⁷ She answers: “Our intuition tells us that we are not really the creature of muscle and bone that stares out from the mirror. We are the conscious thing in our heads. In this way, we don’t have to believe in dualism to be under the illusion of it. We are trapped in a sensation of personal experience.”²⁸ Yet that illusion can be interrogated, as it is in Boland’s poem, where the speaker only voices her ‘I’ once transformed: “It’s done. / I turn,” even as the human self persists: “still / She moons / in me.”²⁹ Nonetheless, even after Charles Darwin’s expansive evolutionary theory recognized human-species relationships with other animals (and as descended specifically from ocean-dwellers³⁰), the greater Western tradition has largely preserved human uniqueness as separate from the more-than-human world, reifying the human species as an exception to the rest of animal nature. As I have illustrated elsewhere, this is human exceptionalism, “imbricated in the discourse of progressivism, a symptom of how Darwin’s evolutionary concept is enlisted in support of a view of progress with humans at the apex of evolutionary innovation.”³¹ Within the discourses of advancement and liberal humanism, the concept of human exceptionalism is an unavoidable outcome of the enlistment of Darwin’s evolutionary theory in support of a progressive teleology.

In contrast, Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism offers a crucial lens through which to reconsider practices of human exceptionalism and the alternative structures of the sort inspired by the figure of the selkie. Barad urges an accounting “of the entangled materializations of which we are a part.”³² Her work focuses attention on the embeddedness of human bodies in the larger environment, the vast web of changing

²⁷ Melanie Challenger, *How to Be Animal: A New History of What It Means to be Human* (Penguin, 2021), 111.

²⁸ Challenger, 120.

²⁹ Boland, 132, 133.

³⁰ In a letter to Charles Lyell, Darwin describes human ancestry as interwoven specifically with the ocean, writing “Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull, and undoubtedly was a hermaphrodite!” ‘Letter 2647 – Darwin, C. R. to Lyell, Charles, 10 Jan (1860),’ *Darwin Correspondence Project*; URL: <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-2647.xml>, accessed 20 February 2025.

³¹ Sarah E. McFarland, *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 3.

intra-actions that compose reality and “entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering”³³ and puts humans back into “the world-body space in its dynamic structuration.”³⁴ Selkies can be a valuable part of that dynamic ethical transformation: their morphology is itself, literally, an operating principle, whereby flux and transformation is their materiality.

By centering entanglement with the rest of the living world, selkies can arouse different ethical responses, many of which arise in the variety of legends about the selkie folk. There are tales about male selkies seducing lonely women, stories about human women finding baby seals on the shore and nurturing them to maturity to be later rewarded, and tales of drowning fishers saved by seals.³⁵ The selkie wife tales, in contrast, reveal the consequences of violating another’s bodily integrity and dignity by denying the agency and subjecthood of another being and reducing her to the status of manipulatable object. Maria Tatar observes that “Tales about swan maidens, selkies, seals, and mermaids may once have been far more widespread than they are today. One critic has argued that the tales can be found ‘in virtually every corner of the world,’ because in most cultures ‘woman was a symbolic outsider, was the other, and marriage demanded an intimate involvement in a world never quite her own.’”³⁶ These stories’ ethical points—deploring the callous treatment of human and nonhuman others—challenge the institutionally-sanctioned objectification of nonhuman animals and the dehumanization of women and colonial subjects by emphasizing the ambiguous and liberating aspects of selkies. They encourage “thinking from within the space of indistinction,”³⁷ to use the words of Matthew Calarco in another context: “Thought and practice that originates from within a space of indistinction aims to reorient us along lines that enable alternative modes of living, relating, and being with others of all sorts (human and nonhuman).”³⁸ Selkies make the imbrication of the human *as an animal* abundantly clear, negating notions of progressive advancement. Whether from ‘natural’ to ‘cultural,’ ‘wild’ to ‘domesticated,’ or ‘savage’ to ‘civilized,’ such classifications become irrelevant.

³² Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke UP, 2007), 384.

³³ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁵ See, for example, the stories collected in Duncan Williamson’s *Tales of the Seal People* (Interlink, 2005).

³⁶ Maria Tatar, “Introduction: The Odd Couple in Tales as Old as Time,” in *Beauty and the Beast: Classic Tales about Animal Brides and Grooms from Around the World*, ed. Maria Tatar (Penguin, 2017), xviii.

³⁷ Matthew Calarco, “Identity, Difference, Indistinction,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11, 2 (Fall 2011): 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

Such alternative modes of being construct experience within lateral, not hierarchical, expressions of mutual interaction. Selkies make explicit the ways that human and nonhuman are mutually vulnerable in a shared landscape of bodily experience, which is deeply relevant to the self-conscious Anthropocene and the increasingly catastrophic climate change that marks it. Selkie stories demonstrate a worldview in which the boundary between humans and other living beings is flexible and where species categories, as well as other constructions, are fluid instead of stable. Beings in human form might be a mingling of both human and animal; animal shapes might be human beings. In other words, selkies reveal that life exists along a continuum linking humans with other animals. Accordingly, they raise important questions about the relationships between humans and other animals, between humans and each other, and between the political, cultural, and economic structures that inculcate discriminatory, oppressive, and exploitative practices. Perhaps most importantly, selkies embody lessons about living appropriately in the community of beings with whom we share the world. From the perspective reflected by selkies, there is no stability in relations of humans with their environments, because each is simultaneously both. The final warning in the selkie figure, then, is a reminder that recognizing and revering the materiality and agency of the natural world is ethical human behavior, a particularly relevant moral code in the self-conscious Anthropocene.

Selkies are important reminders about the subjectivity of others within our shared ecological worlds. They help us remember that not all things are as they seem, that first appearances might not tell the whole truth, and that it is always better to respect another's perspective than to ignore or silence it. In the words of Barad, their 'always entangled' natures queer the perception of duality. Seal folk are "iteratively reconfigured though each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future,"³⁹ or human and animal in a meaningful or applicable way. These are important ethical messages. A perspective that centers the inseparability of human and nonhuman worlds like selkies invalidates species and individual exceptionalisms and is a valuable example of what Donna Haraway calls 'entanglement.' Invoking Haraway, Alexis Shotwell observes that entanglement is "inescapable, even when we cannot track or directly perceive this entanglement. It is hard for us to examine our connection with *unbearable pasts* with which we might reckon better, our implication in *impossibly complex presents* through which we might craft different modes of response, and our aspirations for *different futures* toward which we might shape different worlds-yet-to-come."⁴⁰ Selkies represent valuable ways of thinking about the challenges facing us all in the twenty-first century. They offer an opportunity to see forward into new ways of being toward each other, toward other life forms, and

³⁹ Barad, iv.

⁴⁰ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (U Minnesota P, 2016), 8.

toward inevitable ecological presents and even more catastrophic near futures. The self-conscious Anthropocene is an epoch marked by denial, procrastination, failure, and an inability to effectively reduce precarity and harm, so re-envisioning the potent lessons taught by the selkie figure is particularly relevant. The specificity of struggle, dignity, resilience, and victory mapped by the seal wife aligns with potential responses to the root causes of the climate crisis: racism, sexism, capitalistic exploitation, and other forms of oppression that dehumanize and other in strategic and tactical ways, alongside explicit warnings of the dire consequences of such behaviors. They model and complicate Haraway's concept of 'response-ability,' which acknowledges the integrated network of human and nonhuman actors within which humans have responsibility to respond.⁴¹ They are ethical, environmentally-beneficial enactments of what she calls "significant otherness-in-connection."⁴² Allusions to the seal wife demand us to scrutinize and transform our relationships with the ecosystems and nonhuman others with whom we share the earth, toward recognizing affinities and toward celebrating otherness-in-connection. Film and literary allusions to seal folk further attend to the cultural fabric of histories, colonialization, genocide, and migration, foreshadowing today's diverse complexity of experiences amidst global climate change.

What happens, then, when thinking with selkies and from a seal wife point of view, we are response-able and intentionally, purposefully weave our unique individual selves back into the living world? In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer observes that "people of the modern world suffer a great sadness, a 'species loneliness'—estrangement from the rest of Creation. We have built this isolation with our fear, with our arrogance, and with our homes brightly lit against the night."⁴³ The selkie who ensures her human family never goes hungry illustrates ways to engage by building compassionate multi-species community centered around shared responsibility, and furthermore encourages us to bear witness to our changing worlds as self-conscious members of the Anthropocene. What I am proposing is a determined, purposeful shifting in the way we participate in worlding, toward attending to all sensory experience, upheld by curiosity as a disposition and wonder as an inclination, open and welcoming of opportunities for astonishment. The persistent illusion of human subjectivity—the world of normal experience—is that I am separate from, rather than entangled, immersed, inextricably interconnected with the various material agencies that are categorized as the environment. As Rustick observes, "When the mind awakens to non-dual oneness, fixed designations and appropriations fall away. [...] We are then capable of living as wise, compassionate individuals keenly aware

⁴¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke UP, 2016), 105-15.

⁴² Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 51.

⁴³ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed, 2013), 358.

of our interbeingness with all and making ethical choices accordingly.”⁴⁴ In the midst of the self-conscious Anthropocene, resilience and empowerment exist in openness to the experience of wonder at entanglement with the wider world and curiosity about the various participatory and agential unfoldings that comprise the more-than-human biosphere. Jenny Odell makes a similar point, explaining that “I’ve also learned that patterns of attention—what we choose to notice and what we do not—are how we render reality for ourselves, and thus have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time. These aspects, taken together, suggest to me the revolutionary potential of taking back our attention.”⁴⁵ Inhabiting embodied perspectives toward astonishment encourages an intensified capacity for ecological consciousness, re-enchantment with the rich saturation of sensory experience, an appreciation of our material entanglement, and a recognition that all of us—all beings living on this planet—are in this, together.

About the Author

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⁴⁴ Rustick, 4.

⁴⁵ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, 2019), xxiii.

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