Imagining the Anthropocene with the Wadden Sea

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Abstract

This contribution explores the potential of the Wadden Sea for the imagination of the Anthropocene. The concept of the Anthropocene represents a challenge to the cultural imagination, as it draws together deep, geological time, recent and current events, and long futures; the geographical and generational implications of justice; and the profound entanglement of human progress with ecological decline. We argue that the cultural landscape of the Wadden Sea is a space in which these paradoxes and connections are made visible and material. Literary and artistic works engaged with the Wadden Sea display a critical awareness of Anthropocene entanglements: in our analysis, we explore visual and textual representations of the Wadden Sea and show how it serves as a site for the imagination of the past and future of our planet.

... now he strode across the soft mudflats, across the land that belonged to the sea; strode alongside a motionless channel, a black vein of water, that lay there as if to remind the tide to come back for it after six hours and draw it into the rising currents (...) Eventually he was just a moving dot in the dark expanse of the mudflats, under the wide and grey sky up here: he had time until the tide turned... (Lenz, 2010, 8; original translation)¹

The plot of Siegfried Lenz's short story set on the Wadden Sea coast turns on an understanding of the landscape as a place that is as much about time as it is about a physical space. The wide, open expanse of the mudflats at low tide allows the two lovers to observe the figure of the cuckolded husband as he makes his way towards the *hallig* and to realise when he is behind schedule that he is about to be cut off by the incoming tide. It is a spatial visualisation of a temporal event and shows the figurative potential of the unstable landscape. While her lover sees the tide sweeping in through his binoculars, the walker's wife admits that his watch is running slow; the reader

must assume he has been misled about the time in setting out so late for his daily walk, and as a result, he will not make it back to the safety of the dike before the tide comes in.

This conflation of the landscape with a timescape—the way that place can become time and time become place—is a particular feature of the Wadden Sea coast. In our current moment of environmental concern and growing appreciation of the interrelation of different timescales, from geological time, human historical time, and urgency of future time conveyed by rising sea levels, interest in the Wadden Sea as an arena for the Anthropocene imagination is high. A number of recent fictional works attest to this.² In this article, we explore the presentation of the Wadden Sea in four literary texts, looking in particular at ways that the complex tensions, timescales, and paradoxes of the Anthropocene can be envisioned and imagined in works of literary fiction. We focus on questions of modernity and geographical and temporal scales that appear in Wadden Sea novels to show how they reflect, and help us consider, the magnitude and complexity of climate change and environmental crises.

In this article, we refer to the Wadden Sea as one geographical region, even though it is spread across three different

¹ ...jetzt schritt er über den weichen Wattboden, über das Land, das dem Meer gehörte; schritt an einem unbewegten Priel entlang, einem schwarzen Wasserarm, der wie zur Erinnerung für die Flut dalag, nach sechs Stunden wieder zurückzukehren und ihn aufzunehmen mit steigender Strömung (...) Zuletzt war er noch nur ein wandermder Punkt in der dunklen Ebene des Watts, unter dem großen und grauen Himmel hier oben: er hatte Zeit bis zur Flut...

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² Jan Christophersen, *Schneetage* (2009); Kjersti Vik, *Mandø* (2009); Uwe Timm, *Vogelweide* (2013); Christiane Neudecker, *Sommernovelle* (2015); Toine Heijmans, *Op Zee* (2011); Vonne van der Meer, *Eilandgasten, De avondboot, and Laatste seizoen* (1999, 2001, 2002); and Jannie Regnerus, *Nachtschrijver* (2017). There are also a number of crime novels set on the Wadden Sea by authors such as Kari Köster-Lösche and Claus-Dieter Wolf in German, Tine Enge in Danish, and Els Kerkhoven and Mariëtte Ciggaar in Dutch.

nations (the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark) and several different language areas. This is both a reflection of a common history in the North Sea lowlands generally and along the Wadden Sea coast in particular (Bankoff, 2013; Schroor, 2018) and an attempt to avoid the “fallacies of methodological nationalism” (Walsh, 2018). The imagination of the Wadden Sea coasts is refracted through different literary cultures, but its ecological distinctiveness and shared cultural history allow for its foregrounding as a topographical rather than national region. Moreover, as we shall see, the significance of the Wadden Sea as a site for the imagination of the Anthropocene extends far beyond these three national territories.

The literary texts selected, besides engaging with the Wadden Sea, meet fully or in part Lawrence Buell’s “rough checklist” for what constitutes an environmental text, in that the physical setting is intrinsic to the story they tell; human interests are not the only legitimate ones; there is a sense of human accountability to the environment; and they convey a sense of processuality, of the history and future of the non-human environment (Buell, 1995, 7). Environmental literature such as the texts explored here can both indicate and effect greater awareness of the troubled human relationship with our environment, at least on an individual level. As scientific research into climate change across the globe has presented ever more pessimistic scenarios, the international community, national governments, and individuals alike have failed consistently to take decisive action to address these issues. Environmental literature is influenced by and responds to the cultures and societies that have effected these failed responses but can also encourage thinking beyond the limits that societal discourse entails. Therefore literature is an important source in understanding humans’ place in the Anthropocene.

The naming of the new geological epoch as the Anthropocene whilst it is, in geological terms, only just underway indicates that it is above all a label inviting us to reflect on ourselves, not a clearly measurable epoch with a start and end date but a discursive term that allows us to envisage a break with the Holocene. Adam Trexler sees the novel as “a privileged form to explore what it means to live in the Anthropocene” (Trexler, 2015, 27). However, writer and scholar Amitav Ghosh suggests a more tentative understanding of the literary novel in modern society, arguing that the genre was part of the machinery of the Western Enlightenment that embraced colonialism and conquest and worked to shore up human progress and rationality over non-human spaces and agencies in modernity and is thus complicit in the crises that have resulted in the Anthropocene. He argues that literary novels are therefore not equipped to incorporate the magnitude and complexity of climate change. In this sense, the novel is bound up in some of the same challenges to the cultural imagination posed by the concept of the Anthropocene that historian Dipesh Chakrabarty outlines in his influential article “The Climate of History: Four Theses”. Two of these

challenges concern our ability to reconcile our understanding of human progress and emancipation since the Enlightenment with the extractivism that has been its motor (Chakrabarty, 2009, 207–12.) and the possibility of bringing different scales—deep time and human history, individual humans and the species humanity—into conversation (212–20).

With regard to literary fiction, Ghosh argues that there is a fundamental misalignment between the conventions and expectations of literary fiction on the one hand and the scales and agencies of planetary existence on the other. Ghosh describes the “modes of concealment” (15) that push the unpredictable and inexplicable agencies of the non-human world—floods, cyclones, tiger attacks—into the background of modern realist literary novels, with texts focusing on the order and regularity of the everyday and timescales that cover at most one or two human generations. Ghosh ascribes novels a significant role in the cultural assimilation of a modernity that sees humans as both separate from nature and nature as fundamentally inanimate and within human control. The conquests of northern European wetlands, explored in particular by historians Simon Schama and David Blackbourn (Schama, 1995; Blackbourn, 2007), are a part of this same modernity that subdues the natural world, colonizing and extracting people and resources in pursuit of progress. The stories we tell ourselves reinforce and co-create the world around us, and, Ghosh suggests, the genre of the novel that emerged as the leading literary form of modernity is designed to mislead us about the extent of our dependence on the natural world.

Nevertheless, Ghosh recognises in the geography, ecology, and aesthetics of the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal a place for the imagination of climate change and the Anthropocene. In his scholarly work, he has written of the particular storytelling tradition and landscape of Bengal, and his fiction shows how these wetlands can be productive for the challenge to humanity of recognising the causes, scales, and reach of climate change (Ghosh, 2016). In his novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, the Sundarbans serve as a site where the agencies of an inanimate nature have never quite disappeared from view, and thus a possible space for the unravelling and reweaving of the novel form to incorporate the realities and complexities of the Anthropocene. Kluwick refers to these novels as “Anthropocene water fictions” and argues that they “challenge some of the limitations of the realist novel that Ghosh identifies” (Kluwick, 2020, 64–65). The Sundarbans—equatorial and forested with mangroves, inhabited by tigers—are ecologically and aesthetically different to the Wadden Sea area, and the imaginative and literary representations draw on different traditions. But nonetheless the wetlands have some elements in common. They constitute the sinking land at the edges of nations that allow different realities to collide. Low-lying and flood-prone, the culture of the Sundarbans, like the Wadden Sea, is imbued with the memory of both sudden and dramatic floods and slower processes of siltation and movement. In this

article, we argue that the Wadden Sea, like the Sundarbans Ghosh explores, is a globally important wetland site that is historically entangled with the legacies of Enlightenment, empire, and extractivism that characterise the Anthropocene and, moreover, one that has global significance as a site for the imagination of the future of our blue planet. Like the Sundarbans, the Wadden Sea constitutes an imaginatively and physically porous edge where modernity and scale can be reimagined and reinterpreted.

Coastal, island, and marine spaces have recently received much attention from scholars in the humanities through fields including coastal and island studies and blue humanities. These strongly interrelated fields have appreciated them as sites of particular importance with regard to modernity's shaping influence (DeLoughrey 2017; Gillis 2014, 156; Pugh 2018, 93; Mentz 2015, xxviii–xxix; Rozwadowski 2018, 11–12; Gange 2019, 343–344). As economic centres of gravity shifted from coastal to more inland places with mechanisation and industrialisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the cultural imagination framed these communities and places as ones that modernity had not affected, and that remained outside of its influence (Gillis 2012; Rozwadowski 2018, 130; 152). Contemporary scholarship, however, has appreciated that these places were all fundamentally and radically changed through the unfolding of modernity. The Wadden Sea, with its coasts, islands, and waters stretching across three nations, is a unique place to explore how the imagination of coasts and waters is developed and how its critical engagement with modernity is relevant to the issues we face in the Anthropocene.

Rewriting and rereading the human history of the Enlightenment

Two texts written in German will show how the Wadden Sea can serve to reimagine our relationship with the Enlightenment “conquest of nature”.³ Theodor Storm's, 1888 historical novella *Der Schimmelreiter* (published in English variously as *The Rider on the White Horse* and *The Dykemaster*) connects the Wadden Sea coast to the Enlightenment, providing a critical reflection on the project of modernity and its conquest of nature. This canonical exemplar of German naturalism has a long history of being read and instrumentalised to different ends, including by the National Socialist regime, who saw land reclamation as a further aspect of the project of *Lebensraum* for the German people. However, more recent interpretations have found new ambiguities in the Enlightenment vision of engineering progress,

reclaimed land (embodied by the novella's protagonist Hauke Haien), and the superstitions of the recalcitrant local population. The tensions between the worldviews of proto-engineer Hauke Haien and those who oppose his plans have been read by ecocritical scholars as engagement with one of the core paradoxes of the Anthropocene (Sullivan, 2012; Rigby, 2015, 84–111; Ritson, 2017), namely, the desire for scientific progress and emancipation that we can now see has the potential to annihilate human culture completely. The Wadden Sea served Storm as the site of Anthropocene tension in the nineteenth century, just as it serves others today.

In the novella, eighteenth-century dikemaster Hauke Haien's haunting starts when he kills a cat in a jealous rage as a young man. The cat's owner, Trin' Jans, curses him for it. Hauke Haien marries the dikemaster's daughter and subsequently becomes dikemaster himself, but despite his serious nature and evident abilities, he is unpopular and unable to persuade his fellows to invest their energies in his proposed new dike. Even his wife Elke is wary: “Ever since childhood I've been told that the watercourse out there couldn't be tampered with” (Storm, 1964, 232)⁴ she says, and she continues,

When I was little, I heard the hired men talking about it. They said there was only one way to build a dam out there: to bury something alive in it while it was being built. They said that, about a hundred years ago when the dike was being built on the other side, the people bought a gypsy child from its mother at a high price and buried the child alive in the dam. But today there isn't any woman hereabout who would sell her child. (232)⁵

Hauke Haien will not countenance this superstitious attitude and resolves to build the dike anyway. But he continues to feature in the superstitious stories of the local population. He purchases a horse from a mysterious and unpleasant vagabond; meanwhile, the skeleton of a horse that has long been visible on an uninhabited sandbank out at sea is suddenly seen to have disappeared. The rumours that Hauke Haien has entered a pact with the devil, or is riding the devil's horse, are quickly spread. Hauke Haien builds his new dike and reclaims new land. But in doing so, he neglects to pay attention to the old dike, and in the severe storm with which the novella ends, the old dike breaks, drowning his wife and child and leading Hauke Haien to ride his horse into the raging sea and to his death. Hauke Haien has ultimately paid for the new dike with

³ *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* is the title of David Blackbourn's account of the draining of marshes in the Prussian Kingdom. Its arguments can be extended in large parts to the German Wadden Sea region.

⁴ von Kindesbeinen an habe ich gehört, der Priel sei nicht zu stopfen, und darum dürfe nicht daran gerührt werden“ (Storm, 1888, 108)

⁵ Als ich Kind war... hörte ich einmal die Knechte darüber reden; sie meinten, wenn ein Damm dort halten solle, müsse was Lebigs da hineingeworfen und mit verdämmt werden; bei einem Deichbau auf der anderen Seite, vor wohl hundert Jahren, sei ein Zigeunerkind verdämmt worden, das sie um schweres Geld der Mutter abgehandelt hätten; jetzt aber würde wohl keine ihr Kind verkaufen! (108)

blood after all, his family's blood, and the narrator informs us at the very end that it is still standing 100 years after the events described in the novel.

Hauke Haien is driven by his single-minded pursuit of new dike infrastructure that will reclaim new land and protect it better from storm surges due to an improved shape. He is an empiricist and Enlightenment figure, turning away from religious fatalism and drawing on mathematics and modelling to present his plan for the dike. His fellows however remain drawn to a variety of religious beliefs, ranging from conformist protestant to non-conformist to pagan superstition. It is possible to interpret the novel both as a tragic failure to shake off hidebound myth and embrace progress, or as the story of a curse placed on the protagonist as a punishment for his egotism and arrogance.

Re-reading this novel as an exploration of the dilemma of the Anthropocene presents us with a new interpretation. Storm's ambiguous interlacing of uncanny and supernatural elements into the life of his rational dikemaster gives us a Wadden Sea coast that is an animate landscape with a long history. The uncanny apparitions in *Der Schimmelreiter*—the mysterious figure who sells Hauke Haien the horse, the disappearance of the skeleton on the sandbank, the rumours of a curse on Hauke Haien for refusing to countenance the superstition that new dykes require a blood sacrifice—are manifestations of cultural ties to the Wadden Sea landscape that Western “progress” was busy overwriting. Reading this novel in the Anthropocene allows us to see these uncanny apparitions in a new light and understand them as representations of a more-than-human Wadden Sea way of life rather than figments of a backward culture. Recognising the continued existence of these agencies is not just enacted by the writing of new novels, such as Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, but also by the re-reading of old ones with new eyes. The modes of concealment that Ghosh posits as intrinsic to the realist novel are just as much the product of a realist mode of reading, as Ursula Kluwick has argued. In her analysis of Ghosh's Anthropocene water fictions, Kluwick suggests that Ghosh is too hasty in dismissing the potential of the realist novel, arguing that “what is at stake here is not the ability of the realist novel to represent the nonhuman, *but a tradition of reading that disregards nonhuman agency*”. (67, our italics)

Uwe Timm's *Vogelweide*, published in 2013, similarly provides a commentary on modernist visions of the conquest of nature that give the Wadden Sea its particular flavour in Anthropocene fiction. *Vogelweide* is recounted from the perspective of a German man, Eschenbach, who has taken a job monitoring the bird population from the island of Scharhör. Scharhör, along with neighbouring Nighör, is considered uninhabited; only those engaged in conservation work are permitted to visit. On Scharhör, Eschenbach thinks back over the years that led to his self-imposed exile there, his relationship with Selma, his affair with Anna, and his bankruptcy due to a

treacherous employee, and the structure of the novel takes the form of his flashbacks interlaced with his introspective reality on the island. Timm's novel is rich in intertextual allusion; the title *Vogelweide* (which translates as “bird pasture”) was the name of a medieval German poet, Walther von der Vogelweide, while the protagonist Eschenbach has a similar name to the protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

In the plot structure and its exploration of the liaisons of two couples, *Vogelweide* echoes the novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*, 1809) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe, a major force in German culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, posits in this work the attractions between two couples as chemical reactions: the action takes place on a country estate with a large formal garden. Goethe's novel opens with Eduard fresh from an afternoon staking out young trees in his nursery, and this managed landscape gives us a quintessential figure of Western Enlightenment. The novel reflects ideas about progress, the improvement of nature through human ingenuity and work, and the advancement of a scientific worldview in its application of chemical processes on human relations.

Timm's novel *Vogelweide*, by contrast, opens with the following passage:

The island is slowly moving east. Three or four metres a year, depending on the ferocity of the winter storms and the storm floods. Here, where he was standing now, was just water forty years ago, and mudflat. (5, original translation)⁶

The well-managed garden that sets the scene for Goethe's *Elective Affinities* is replaced by Timm with an island nature reserve off the shifting Wadden Sea coast, a place that is inherently unstable and not under human control; it is moving eastwards, away from the West and the traditions of the Enlightenment on which the novel plays. Like *Elective Affinities*, *Vogelweide* also has a plot line concerned with the mapping or quantifying of human desire, but it is the project of a single obsessive researcher and remains unresolved. Timm's opening lines suggest a decentering of the human in his novel, and the outlying islands of the German Wadden Sea are the place representative of this move from Enlightenment humanity to a world in which the ultimate agencies are non-human, and humans are small figures on the margins.

While much of the content of the novel are memories not connected to the coast, the island of Scharhör and its inaccessibility and lack of those things—art, architecture, human relationships, money—that were so important to Eschenbach in his past life are a recurring theme. When his former lover

⁶ Die Insel verlagert sich langsam nach Osten. Drei bis vier Meter im Jahr, je nach Stärke der Winterstürme und Sturmfluten. Hier, wo er jetzt stand, war vor vierzig Jahren Wasser nur und Watt.

Anna receives permission from the conservation authority to visit him and stay a single night, she asks “why this escape from the world, why does it have to be such a tiny island?”⁷ and Eschenbach answers, “don’t go hoping for glorious bays, steep cliffs, nothing like that, [just] a small, flat sandy island in the Wadden Sea” (15).⁸ The Wadden Sea coast is presented as a site of an “elsewhere” far from the everyday.

Timm’s choice of the Wadden Sea has significant implications. While the Wadden Sea provides a counterpoint to the fixed and managed space of a garden, the instrumentalisation of the island perpetuates the problematic fiction of island spaces as bounded and other (McMahon and André, 2018, 299). It also suggests that the Wadden Sea is not part of the machinery of late capitalist exploitation, whereas with the practices of drilling for natural gas, fishing, and research projects into climate change mitigation, to name but a few, the Wadden Sea is rather at the centre of extractivist modernity and the Anthropocene.⁹ Indeed, the imagination of the Wadden Sea, and coasts and islands globally, is one that is fundamentally linked to, and a product of, modernity. Modern industrialisation saw centres of productivity move away from coastal regions, and this shift is what allows for and has led to an imagination of them as untouched by modern progress (Egberts and Hundstad 1075–1076). Nonetheless, the instrumentalisation of the Wadden Sea as a site outside of modernity is an important feature of its imagination; the real Wadden Sea is always in interaction (and sometimes in tension) with its fictional alter egos.

Eschenbach is on an island where his contact with human culture, besides Anna’s visit and the infrequent conversations with Bauer Jessen when he brings supplies and the occasional visitor from the mainland at low tide, is reduced to the removal of “the detritus of prosperity” (Timm 334)¹⁰ from the tideline. Eschenbach is depicted as occupying the outermost margin of human culture, in a space where he can reflect on Western Anthropocene modernity—made subtly manifest in his rewriting of Goethe’s Enlightenment novel *Elective Affinities*—from the outside.

The political equivalent of fictionalisation of the Wadden Sea as a remote space cut off from modernity is its status as a conservation site, which contributes to the island’s inaccessibility. Inaccessibility due to nature protection on the Wadden Sea has been explored by historian Anna Wöbse, who charts the way that conservationists who led the way in preserving the delicate tidal ecosystems on Knechtsand subsequently had the painful experience of becoming “interlopers and undesirables” who were prevented from setting foot in newly

protected areas (Wöbse, 2013, 172). The Wadden Sea is an area where nonhuman agencies dominate, not just in terms of the power of the tides and the storms to reshape the coasts, but also the power afforded to birds and other wildlife to live with minimal human interference.¹¹ As Bernhard Malkmus has argued, we need these conservation sites as sites of learning: “National parks are not a luxury, nor primarily leisure destinations, but places of learning where we can experience the systemic limits to our irrational belief in endless growth and total industrialization” (Malkmus 2020). These sites of learning exist not just physically, but in fiction too.

These two texts by Theodor Storm and Uwe Timm both employ the Wadden Sea coast as a site to explore the problematic entanglements of the Anthropocene. Timm engages with the literary legacy of the Enlightenment by rewriting one of its key texts from the standpoint of a Wadden Sea island that is inherently unfixed and will be washed away. Storm’s narrative explores the conflict between a rationalist view of nature and an older sense of a landscape that is animate and vengeful; it is re-reading it today, with our understanding of climate change and the limits to exploitation, that allow us to see it as an Anthropocene novel *avant la lettre*. Both show the potential of the unstable landscape on the edge of the Wadden Sea to envisage the origins of the climate crisis that, as Ghosh asserts, “is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9).

The Wadden Sea as elsewhere: dismantling ideas of separation

The notion of elsewhere as a site apart, somewhere marginal, empty of people is predominant in many Wadden Sea texts, literary, and otherwise.¹² This imagination is complicated in Toine Heijmans’, 2011 novel *Op zee*. While the other novels discussed in this article have land-based narratives focussing on either the mainland coast or the Wadden islands, most of the action of *Op zee* takes place, as the novel’s title indicates, at sea. In recent years, scholars have pointed to an echo of the nature/culture dichotomy in thinking about the Wadden Sea, in which

⁷ Warum diese Weltflucht, warum gerade so ein Inselchen?

⁸ Mache dir keine Hoffnung auf traumhafte Buchten, Steilküsten, nichts, eine kleine, flache, im Wattenmeer gelegene Sandinsel.

⁹ Cf. Baer and Nehls, 2017; Tulp et al., 2017; and the list of doctoral theses on climate and the Wadden Sea listed on the website of the Waddenacademie.

¹⁰ der übliche Wohlstandsmüll

¹¹ This view of conservation practice as delineating between human and non-human interests is not universally accepted. A report from the conference “Communicating World Heritage—a task of the World Heritage Convention” points out the difficulty of maintaining habitats for in situ conservation of biodiversity in an area “shared by three of Europe’s most densely populated and economically vibrant countries” that is “far from remote, let alone secluded” (Strempe, 2018, 110). As Cormac Walsh points out, the way in which the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve privileges non-human ecologies over the cultural heritage and way of life of the human inhabitants of the Wadden Sea coast is one of the reasons why it has not been popular in the region (Walsh, 2018, 179). Cf. also Hasse, 2011.

¹² The tourist website for Borkum states “Situated at about 30 kilometres from the German coast, Borkum is ... a good distance away from everyday life” (Nordseeheilbad Borkum) and the anthem of Schiermonnikoog begins “Far, very far away from busy life / Connected to the wide sea / Is a place so dear to us / That is the ground where we were born” (“Het eilander volkslied” 1–4)

the land is aligned with culture and sea with nature showing that the sea is just as entangled in culture in history of the Wadden Sea as the land is (33; 58). Other scholars in the blue humanities have exposed the cultural historicity of the global sea (Rozwadowski 2018, 11–12). *Op zee* picks up on this; while its protagonist sees the sea primarily as a historical void, a rich network of personal and cultural connections spans the waves.

Like *Vogelweide*, *Op zee* showcases a complex intertextuality and is preoccupied with a critique of a positivist, empirical worldview. In doing so, it also questions the idea of the Wadden Sea as “elsewhere” through an exploration of perspective. It emphasises the many ways in which the novel’s protagonist and environment are connected to the wider world, despite their surface presentation as isolated. *Op zee* is centred on Donald, who narrates all but the last four of the novel’s 27 chapters. The novel chronicles the final days of a 3-month sailing voyage, which see him travel from Thyborøn, Denmark, across the North Sea to Harlingen, the Netherlands. While he initially comes off as a slightly quixotic in his pursuit to show himself as an ideal father sailing the North Sea with an ideal daughter, he reveals himself to be increasingly detached from reality and unreliable as both a narrator and a father. After he loses his daughter Maria overboard in a storm, he embarks on a mad pursuit of the girl, until in the final chapters it is revealed that his daughter was in fact never with him on the ship to begin with but instead with her mother on shore. Furthermore, he is not at all the accomplished sailor he has made himself out to be but arrives home with both himself and his ship on the verge of ruin.

Like *Vogelweide*, *Op zee* is modelled on a classic nineteenth-century text, in this case Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and takes this as a counterpoint for its commentary on the Anthropocene. Like *Moby-Dick*’s protagonist Ahab, Donald takes up his insane and dangerous quest after seeing a mirage: instead of pursuing a whale imagined as the embodiment of evil, Donald chases a buoy that he believes to be Maria, who has fallen overboard. *Op zee* questions the scientific worldview and the notion that the world is orderly and humans have control over the environment. This critique functions firstly on a textual level, as Donald makes a number of observations regarding the natural world that he is later forced to reconsider as the circumstances become more and more dangerous and his convictions increasingly untenable. As Donald sets out from the port of Thyborøn in his boat, he describes the sea as “a Petri dish” (Heijmans, 2011 89–90, original translation),¹³ referring to the glass plate in which organic matter is studied in a controlled, small-scale environment. Later, he says: “Nature is so predictable, I thought, that you could summarise all of it in an almanac” (116–117).¹⁴

¹³ een petrischaal

¹⁴ De natuur was zo voorspelbaar, dacht ik, dat je het allemaal kon samenvatten in een almanak.

The textual complication of Donald’s optimist-positivist outlook comes in the form of a storm that he encounters at the end of his journey, just before he tries to enter Stortemelk, the passage between the islands of Vlieland and Terschelling that opens onto the Wadden Sea. It is here, as he waits for the storm to pass, that he finds Maria is missing from her bed. After his attempt to rescue her, he barely makes it back to the boat. Here, geographic terms lose their meaning and function: “The meridians in my head have come undone and become entwined, become a tangle” (160).¹⁵ Donald realises he has been mistaken in his understanding of the sea:

Water has no feeling and no history. It doesn’t do anything, it’s just there. If it kills you, if it drowns you, there’s nothing behind it except your own stupidity. The sea is not a friend and not an enemy either. ... Humans’ problem is that they anthropomorphise everything. Humans think water has a plan. Humans want to be stronger than the water, while it is only just water: water without thoughts, without intentions. (154)¹⁶

Here, post-modern Donald shows himself to be different to nineteenth-century Ahab, who never comes to this realisation with regard to the whale he chases. Donald acknowledges that the sea is not easily logically studied and understood, let alone conquered, and that humans are not the only or even most significant agency at play there.

Secondly, the novel also complicates Donald’s scientific worldview on a subtextual level. In the final chapters of the novel, the reader understands that the story they have read so far, of Donald’s sailing trip with Maria, her attempted rescue, and his finding her back on board, has been a fiction not just between the covers of the book, but in Donald’s mind as well. His initial fantasies of a glorious homecoming, attempted when he enters the harbour and “straighten[s his] back, the back of a victor” (171)¹⁷, are wryly negated when a third person narrator, who assumes Hagar’s point of view, presents this picture instead as the boat enters the harbour:

The boat looks different than when it left. Not much remains of the proud, red hull. The paint is faded and a tear runs through it, as if someone has treated the boat with a chainsaw. ... It is a wounded boat that enters the Harlingen harbour. It’s a miracle the boat still floats. ... The man at the helm has a scrappy face. It is a face

¹⁵ De meridianen in mijn hoofd zijn losgeraakt en in elkaar gedraaid, een warboel is het.

¹⁶ Water heeft geen gevoel en geen geschiedenis. Het doet niks, het is er gewoon. Als het je vermoordt, als het je verdrinkt, dan zit daar niets achter behalve je eigen stomiteit. De zee is geen vriend en ook geen vijand. ... Het probleem van de mens is dat hij alles vermenschlijkt. De mens denkt dat het water een plan heeft. De mens wil sterker zijn dan het water, terwijl het alleen maar water is: water zonder gedachten, zonder bijbedoelingen.

¹⁷ Ik recht mijn rug, de rug van een overwinnaar.

Hagar doesn't know. Emaciated. As if he hasn't eaten for days. (154)¹⁸

This reversal makes the reader question their own earlier judgement; after having been possibly sceptical, but generally empathising with Donald, now the entire story is cast in a new light. Whereas in *Moby Dick*, with its encyclopaedic detailing of whales and the whaling industry, the judgement of the single narrator is never called into question (Moretti, 1996, 62); Donald's unmasking in *Op zee* as an entirely unreliable narrator urges the reader to be sceptical of the kind of narrative Donald has presented: of one man, alone at sea (with or without his daughter), facing the elements successfully. In the context of the other texts discussed in this article, it is significant that the place of this questioning, even mockery of man's mastery of the watery element, is the Wadden Sea, a porous site where boundaries of all kinds are murky and obscure and conditions change from one moment to the next.

Op zee furthermore engages with the Wadden Sea as an "elsewhere" and shows how this is always a fiction: elsewhere is in fact always "somewhere". Many texts about the Wadden Sea, especially the island novels *Vogelweide* and *Mandø*, present the area as a place of escape, an elsewhere disconnected from the world of home. Local inhabitants are largely or entirely absent in the uninhabited island setting of *Vogelweide*, for example, and in Jannie Regnerus' *Nachtschrijver* (in which the Wadden island setting is in fact inhabited). Local inhabitants who appear in Vonne van der Meer's Wadden island novels are generally ignored by the visitors who take centre stage in her texts. However, throughout the novel, Donald is shown to be not at all disconnected from his environment but fundamentally in touch with the local community in the Wadden Sea area. While he draws on this tradition of representation in imagining himself alone with nature in the Wadden Sea, local inhabitants are always present on the margins of the text, reminding the reader, if not Donald, of the complexity of human life that exists alongside the many visitors, like Donald, who present the Wadden Sea to the wider world.

When the storm approaches Donald, an operator from the maritime traffic control Brandaris on Terschelling contacts him to check on him, discusses his plans with him, and keeps an eye out for him through the storm. When Maria disappears, the only reason help does not arrive is because Donald refrains from calling for it. Still, he practises a mayday call and imagines the many people, on the islands and the mainland, who would come to his aid when called: "Den Helder Rescue ...

The lighthouse keeper in the lighthouse of Terschelling ... A helicopter will come from Vlieland ... Big men. Seamen" (126–127)¹⁹. After his ordeal, he is again in touch with the operator at Brandaris, while Hagar calls another operator at the same centre, who provides his own, sceptical, view on Donald's situation that detracts from Donald's self-mythologising (186). In these brief conversations, *Op zee* shows an awareness of one important feature of any place that is imagined as elsewhere that Adam Zachary Newton identifies: an elsewhere "is ... never a blank slate ... It is pre-occupied" (17) and the interests and sensibilities of these pre-occupants can be ignored, but never denied. This echoes Cormac Walsh's observation that Wadden Sea landscapes are only fully appreciated when they are understood as sites with not only natural but also cultural importance: this understanding is crucially dependent upon sites' presentations as "homescapes" or places where people live (182).

Another forceful commentary on Donald's fundamental connection with his Wadden Sea environment comes from Jenna Arts' illustrations for *Op zee*. One illustration (17) shows a row of lighthouses, which can be identified, from left to right, as the lighthouses of the Dutch Wadden Islands of Schiermonnikoog, Ameland, Terschelling, Vlieland, and Texel, towering over Donald's small boat, depicted amongst outsized waves. The lighthouses tower imperiously and combine their bundles of light into one beam: it is clear this is their territory, and the boat is an outsider. Yet, the boat is caught in the middle of the lighthouse beams: they make him a focal point within the landscape. If elsewhere is the erasure of the local, as well as the home, then this connection to others negates the elsewhere: "For is it not others who unseat us from what we thought was home, sending us elsewhere, and who also, we hope, redeem us from our homelessness, securing our only true and genuine place?" (Newton xii). The illustration on the title page has a similar function: it shows the back of Maria's head, with two braids streaming down her shoulders and connecting below her to form a sea that holds a small boat. This image is echoed in the initial of each chapter, which similarly seems to represent hair, streaming water or algae. In this, it unites the divided scales that enabled Donald to pursue his fictional escape from home and arrive elsewhere: the very small scale of algae are connected to the larger scale of Maria and the much larger still scale of the waves that carry Donald's boat. Everything is entangled.

In its position at the edge of the nation-states that still form the centre of much of our academic and cultural understanding of the world, and as a site that is geographically and ecologically unique, the Wadden Sea invites narratives of the region that see it as disconnected from the world at large. These are

¹⁸ De boot ziet er anders uit dan toen hij vertrok. Van de trotse, rode romp is niet veel over. De verf is vaal en er loopt een scheur doorheen, alsof iemand de boot met een kettingzaag heeft bewerkt. ... Het is een gewonde boot die de haven van Harlingen binnenvaart. Het is een wonder dat die boot nog drijft. ... De man aan het roer heeft een mager gezicht. Het is een gezicht dat Hagar niet kent. Uitgebeend. Alsof hij dagen niet heeft gegeten.

¹⁹ Den Helder Rescue. ... De vuurtorenwachter op de vuurtoren van Terschelling ... Van Vlieland zal een helikopter komen. ... Grote mannen. Zeemannen"

presented in a large number of fictional texts set in the region. However, these same environmental factors in the Wadden Sea embed it in a network of connection, porosity, and complex interdependencies. Through time and tide, migration, and infrastructure, the Wadden Sea is fundamentally tied to other places near and far. Through its engagement with these characteristics, *Op zee* echoes the contemporary academic understanding of coastal and island places as ones that are marked primarily by their historic and very rich connections with other places, not only ecologically but also culturally (Gillis 2014, 155–156). The notion of insularity as relationality that the novel engages which makes islands particularly significant places to study in the context of the Anthropocene, which similarly depends upon an understanding of relationalities that have long been ignored (Pugh 2018, 95–96), including, but not limited to, the ones discussed in this article, of scale and history. These themes can also be linked to the conception of the sea as a historical space with a distinctly patterned past of different uses, knowledge formations, and relationalities that blue humanities scholars have explored. This text picks up on these themes and thereby shows that the sea, just as much as the land, deserves a firm standing in the cultural imagination of the Wadden area. By showing how littoral and marine relationalities are negotiated in the cultural imagination of the Wadden Sea in terms of culture, society, and ecology, *Op zee* and the other novels explored in this text are highly relevant texts in the study of the cultural imagination in the Anthropocene that show how pervasive myths of singularity and separation are illusory.

Global tides: the Wadden Sea and the Sundarbans

In terms of the dialectics of the Anthropocene, it is not only negotiations between geographical scales that are relevant in the Wadden Sea but those between temporal scales as well. In his “Four Theses”, Chakrabarty mentions in particular “the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty, 2009, 201) as relevant challenges in the Anthropocene. He sees the problem in our failure to recognise the potential of the natural world to transform from a “slow and apparently timeless backdrop” (205) into something with energies and movements that is entangled with our own. Amitav Ghosh sees this failure as co-constituted by modern novels in their “concealment of these exceptional moments” (22) in which the agencies of the non-human world become apparent. The Wadden Sea coasts present us with a landscape in which the natural history and non-human forces are easily visible and visualised. Fictional representations of the Wadden Sea provide a space where human history and natural history encounter one another.

The text cited at the very beginning of this article, by Siegfried Lenz, shows one such encounter between timescales on the Wadden Sea, when human timekeeping and the cyclical time of the tides interact with one another. In this section, we will explore the 2009 novel *Mandø* by the Norwegian writer Kjersti Vik: in her imagining, the eponymous Danish Wadden Sea island serves as nexus for the human imagination of planetary time. The storm floods that threatened Mandø in the past are recalled by characters cognisant of the rapidly accelerating sea level rise and the short future of human habitation on the island. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes: “sea level rise is perhaps the most powerful sign of planetary change, connecting the activity of the earth’s poles with the rest of the terrestrial world and producing a new sense of planetary scale and interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean” (DeLoughrey, 2017, 33). In *Mandø*, the sea level rise that threaten the small island are recognised by the characters as part of the climate crisis that is causing sea level rise across the planet; the island, with its flood memory and relatable characters, is both a unique place and linked to global stories of climate crisis.

The novel is narrated from multiple perspectives that alternate between a group of six tourists who come to the island for a holiday, foremost of which is Maja, and a young local islander, Claus, who the tourists initially befriend. Maja knows nothing about the landscape of the Wadden Sea before she arrives on the coast. When she sees the causeway that they have to drive across to reach the island, she is horrified by the vista of the mudflats: “It’s the most horrible sea any of us have ever seen. It’s not even sea, it’s just mile after mile of shitty gross seabed. It looks like mud and slime” (Vik 2009, 14, original translation).²⁰

The causeway to Mandø makes the island hard to access for the youthful visitors, and thus, the mudflats are not just perceived as hideous but are also a tangible barrier to reaching and conquering the island. The causeway can only be crossed at low tide, meaning that the young friends are often trapped either on the island or on the mainland, unable to get back. As with Scharhörn in Uwe Timm’s novel, the inaccessibility of Mandø gives the island a special heterotopic status from which to reflect on the mainland and on normal life, making it a quintessential elsewhere.

The tensions that arise from the island’s geography are reflected in the novel in the dialogue between the characters Claus and Maja. Unlike Maja, who is repelled by the island, islander Claus has a deep respect for the natural history of the island and the mudflats. Claus is a keen birdwatcher, and his tracking of the movements of the migratory birds that come annually to the island is one of the

²⁰ Det er det vemmeligste havet vi noensinne hat sett. Det er ikke et hav en gang, det er bare mil på mil med dritekyll havbunn. Det ser ut som mudder og slim.

ways in which he shows his understanding of his local environment as part of a global system:

The stream of birds from the north continues. The Wadden Sea is their most important stop on their migration. More than ten million water birds fly past each year ... Arctic terns fly almost from pole to pole, each year, there and back. How many kilometres do they cover in the course of their lives? 200,000 kilometres? 250,000? The birds saw the world long before we did (27).²¹

Claus sees the birds as privileged in their access to the island; his empathy with the bird's point of view in contrast to the difficulties Maja and her friends have in crossing to and from the mainland. In his imagination of the passage of the birds and their role in the planetary system, moreover, Claus embeds the tiny island of Mandø in its global context. This ability to move between local and global views of the island is important in an Anthropocene novel that sees the inextricable links between the two.

Claus not only sees Mandø as a tiny part of a global ecological system, but also brings awareness of a vast timescale that extends far beyond the local storm flood memories that Maja reads about (Vik, 2009, 13). Claus tells Maja about his understanding of history, describing a planet of roiling waters and reminding us of the iconic image of the blue planet as seen from space:

I tell her about the moon's gravitational pull on the water. I tell her too that the moon moves a little bit further away from the Earth every year that passes. When our planet was still young, the moon was much closer ... I tell her that the difference between high and low tide out on the open sea is now 36 centimetres, which is nothing when you think how big the planet is, but four billion years ago there were tidal waves that were 400 metres high! ... I can see the young earth, fluid and full of movement, beyond anything we can imagine today. (121–22)²²

The dialogues between Claus and Maja bring the different scales into conversation with each other, addressing one of the great challenges of the Anthropocene. Key to the novel's ability to contextualise the setting—a very small tidal island—within

global space and deep time is the landscape of the Wadden Sea and its shifting and cyclical space-time relations and the thus reflects the “multiple, unfolding temporalities and the richness of relationality in the Anthropocene,” that Jonathan Pugh identifies as characterising the Anthropocene island (Pugh 2018, 99).

This dialogic relation takes on an interesting dimension when compared with the binary in Theodor Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter* discussed above. In Storm's novella, Hauke Haien represents Enlightenment rationality and is in contrast with the characters who cling to pre-modern animism and religious fear. In Kjersti Vik's *Mandø*, Claus is deeply religious, and Maja sees herself as representing modernity and reason; but Maja's rationality is limiting and prevents her from being able to see the bigger picture, whereas it is Claus' deep and spiritual affection for his home that is ultimately enlightened of both the history and the future of the island and the planet. As he tells her:

If the sea level rises, it'll look bad for us out here on Mandø. ... The sea doesn't have to get much closer before it becomes uninhabitable here. ... We have upset the Earth's balance, even the balance of life itself (115)²³

Maja remains convinced that Claus is simply backward in his thinking, a product of his island isolation. A brief sexual encounter between the two results in Claus falling in love with Maja, while Maja almost immediately seeks to distance herself from him. In the end, the young visitors goad Claus out onto the mudflats in thick fog by pretending that Maja has gone out alone, so that Claus feels compelled to go and rescue her. He survives his ordeal and makes it back to the island, by which time Maja has left for good. As in Storm's *Schimmelreiter*, the tension between the rationalist, utilitarian worldview, and the spiritual one that can make peace with the shifting and vulnerable landscape of the coast is not resolved. However, whereas Hauke Haien represents the new order and his superstitious community the old, in *Mandø* these positions are reversed. Here it is Maja who represents the outgoing and shortsighted mode of thought, whereas Claus' spirituality and love for his vulnerable home suggest an imaginative reconciliation with an older system of human dependence on and respect for the non-human environment.

Conclusion

The texts discussed here show how the islands, coasts, and waters of the Wadden Sea serve as a potent site for the imagination of the Anthropocene. Ambivalence about the engineering of the Wadden Sea landscape that accelerated during

²¹ Fortsatt strømmer det på med fugler fra nord. Vadehavet er deres viktigste rasteplass under trekket. Over ti millioner vannfugler flyr forbi hvert år ... Rødnebbterne flyr nesten fra pol til pol, hvert år, frem og tilbake. Hvor mange kilometer tilbakelegger de i løpet av et liv? 200 000 kilometer? 250 000? Fuglene så verden lenge før oss.

²² Jeg forteller henne om månens massetiltrekning på vannet. Jeg forteller henne også at månen flytter seg litt lenger vekk fra jorden for hvert år som går. Da kloden vår fremdeles var ung, lå månen svært nær... Jeg forteller henne at tidevannsforskjellen ute på det åpne havet nå er 36 centimeter, hvilket er ingenting når man tenker på hvor stor jordkloden er, men for 4 milliarder år siden, da var tidevannsbølgen omtrent 400 meter høy!...Jeg ser for meg den unge jordkloden, flytende og full av bevegelse, hinsides all bevegelse vi kan forestille oss i dag.

²³ Hvis havet stiger, er vi ille ute her på Mandø... Havet skal ikke komme mye nærmere før det bli ubeboelig her...Vi her forrykket jordens balanse, selve livets balanse.

the Enlightenment has been written into Theodor Storm's Wadden Sea classic *Der Schimmelreiter*, allowing for new readings in the light of the climate crisis. Contemporary novels such as Uwe Timm's *Vogelweide*, Toine Heijmans' *Op zee*, and Kjersti Vik's *Mandø* use the Wadden Sea and its islands to draw attention the paradoxes inherent to the historical narratives of progress and conquest, and the interactions of temporal and spatial scales.

Wöbse and Ziemek see in the rise of ecological awareness a globalisation of the Wadden Sea, a "conversion from a peripheral into a global sphere" (Wöbse and Ziemek, 2018, 254). Their history of the region charts the developments in nature conservation and international cooperation that culminate in the Wadden Sea's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009. We argue here that the dynamic and vulnerable wetlands on the North Sea are not just of global *ecological* significance, but also of significance for the global *imagination* of the past and the future.

The novels discussed in this article all engage with views of science, progress, nature, and humanity that have become complicated by increasing awareness of the implications of life in the Anthropocene in communities around the world. *Der Schimmelreiter* presents a modernist tale of conquest of nature, which is frustrated by local citizens and natural events that result in the main character's death. Reading this story in the Anthropocene attunes us to aspects of the novel that were previously underplayed or overlooked. *Vogelweide* shows a landscape that itself deconstructs modernist myths of control and progress through the Wadden Sea waves that deconstruct the island of Scharhörn. In *Op zee*, the sea sustains a fiction of one man bracing the Wadden Sea waves alone, but other aspects of the region's geography and community show that the perspective of a single person is untenable, and other scales and points of view are indispensable to understanding the world, a message that is central to understanding the conditions of the Anthropocene. Finally, *Mandø* relates the eponymous island to the vast geographical and timescales that the Anthropocene has made newly relevant for humans. Embedding these ideas in fictional Wadden Sea worlds, all four novels show how our thinking has and still is developing and responding to the current climate crisis and how we understand our place in it. Taking this multilingual collection of novels as a group, we can see the emergence of the Wadden Sea as a key site for the imagination and reappraisal of complex interdependencies of place and time.

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