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The gothic coast: boundaries, belonging, and coastal community in contemporary British fiction

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## Abstract

This essay argues that recent British gothic fiction is characterised by the detailed attention it pays to coastal landscapes, giving particular focus to Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney*, Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*, and Daisy Johnson's *Fen*. I read these novels as participants in a broader debate around the symbolic power of the British coastline, and situate them in relation to current work in the field of coastal studies, and in connection with contemporary political discourses that see the coast – the spaces that illuminates Britain's relation to the wider world – as a potent site to explore anxieties of belonging, nationhood, and national identity. This is a fiction responding directly to rising nationalism in the twenty-first century and to anxieties around the significance – and fragility – of borders.

**Keywords:** the gothic; coastal studies; nationhood and identity; ecotone; ecologies.

## Biography

Jimmy Packham is a lecturer in English at the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on gothic literature and maritime writings, as both distinct and overlapping areas of study.

## The gothic coast: boundaries, belonging, and coastal community in contemporary British fiction

The seashore is an edge, perhaps the only true edge in the world whose borders are otherwise mostly political fictions, and it defies the usual idea of borders by being unfixed, fluctuant, and infinitely permeable. The seashore is the place that is no place[.] (Solnit 92)

Gothic texts operate ambivalently: the dynamic inter-relation of limit and transgression, prohibition and desire suggests that norms, limits, boundaries and foundations are neither natural nor absolutely fixed or stable despite the fears they engender. Crossing a boundary, for all the tension released, shows that it is neither impermeable nor unchangeable. (Botting 9)

Fixed and unfixed, place and non-place, visible boundary and infinitely permeable border: the conception of the coast and the shoreline outlined above by Rebecca Solnit speaks to the enduring ambivalence such spaces hold in cultural imaginaries. This ambivalence characterises a number of recent works of gothic fiction by British writers, all of whom make significant use of littoral zones in their narratives. Wyl Menmuir's *The Many* (2016), for example, depicts a community whose precarious economic and ecological condition is reflected in the perceived threat posed by this unstable meeting point of land and sea. The tale is foremost about grief and the decline of a small Cornish fishing community, but the novel's dramatic climax occurs when the sea rises up across the land – transgressing its usual limits – permanently affecting the village's inhabitants' sense of their place in the world: "the sea had risen overnight and the beach had been entirely drowned, though there has been no storm and no warning of high tides" (113). Seemingly of its own volition, the sea has moved further inland, submerging the village and effecting something akin to a renewal of the local environment. "It is no longer the same beach," we are told in the aftermath of the symbolic deluge as one of the fisherman, Ethan, surveys the damage,

and the stones that make it up are no longer the same stones. It is as though while the space remains the same, it has been filled with items that are similar but not the same. He feels as though everything has been replaced by someone who knows this place well, but who has had to reconstruct it from memory. (117-118)

Perhaps most important in this observation is not how coastal impermanence destabilises space or place, but rather that such impermanence generates an epistemological uncertainty in those who live here. Knowing and processes of perception and memory become almost tidal in this world, unfixed or unmoored from certainty. Here, for instance, both Ethan and his imagined "someone" are subject to the imprecisions of memory. After the flood, the beach is both old and new, the same and a strange and unsettling simulacrum of the previous day's beach.

As Menmuir's novel makes clear, the coast is a space frequently defined for its 'inbetweenness,' an unstable amalgam of land and sea, whose tidal comings and goings have helped consolidate its reputation as a liminal space and limit, culturally and environmentally.

It is also through such terminology that the language of the coast is comparable with the language of the gothic, as Fred Botting's introduction to the genre helps bear out. Indeed, gothic fiction is very much at home in borderlands. While definitions of the genre are quick to point out the nebulousness of the gothic, a recurrent theme of this fiction is the occupying and transgressing of borders and boundaries – political, cultural, spatial, ontological, epistemological, and so on – in order, on the one hand, to spook readers with the threat of such transgressions, and, on the other, to highlight the constructed nature of those limits.

This essay interrogates the overlap between these two phenomena through an analysis of the role of the coast in three recent pieces of British gothic fiction: Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014), Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*, and Daisy Johnson's *Fen* (2016). My argument here is twofold. First, I argue that the representation of littoral spaces in these works speaks to contemporary preoccupations with the porousness and instability of supposedly fixed and firm borders and identities. I read these novels as participants in a broader debate around the symbolic power of the British coastline, and situate them in relation to current work in the field of coastal studies, and in connection with contemporary political discourses that see the coast – the spaces that illuminates Britain's relation to the wider world – as a potent site to explore a current crisis of national identity.<sup>1</sup> These fictions present an uncanny coast in order to interrogate the relationship between individuals, their local environment, and their homeland and its traditions. Each, in essence, is interested in the question of who does – and who does not – belong at the coast.

Second, I argue for the significance of the coast to a specifically gothic literary tradition. Identifying a 'coastal gothic,' this essay makes the claim that the coast has long stood as a key locale in gothic writing and by so doing recovers a neglected feature of the gothic tradition: to the labyrinthine castle, ruined abbey, and inhospitable mountain ranges of Europe, we might add the coast as a site of gothic experience *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup> In recent years especially, and for the reasons outlined above, the coast has become a hypervisible environment in a great deal of contemporary gothic writing in Britain. Drawing on the work of coastal studies to help illuminate the gothic valences of the coast, I deploy the concept of the ecotone, a term that denotes the overlapping of two distinct ecological zones, and of which the coast is perhaps the prime instance.

It is my contention that the ecotone may be understood as the symbolic driving force – the central metaphor – shaping the content and action of these gothic coastal texts. What we encounter in each novel is the overlapping of otherwise discrete phenomena: in *The Loney*, it is the past overlapping and encroaching on the present; in *The Many*, the economic and ecological, and local and global; and in *Fen*, the self and other, or human and nonhuman. The coast, as an ecotone everchanging and in constant flux, offers a language through which the central concerns of each novel can be articulated. Taken as a representative sample of a trend in contemporary British fiction, these novels highlight the major role the coast continues to play in the twenty-first century British imaginary, as a powerful site of identity and the space in which it is seemingly most threatened. By concluding with *Fen*, I suggest one way in which contemporary writing offers a resolution to the issues of alienation the coast is otherwise made to embody, as the collection urges us to turn our attention away from human communities and towards the ecological community of the coast.

Recent work within the fields of oceanic studies and sea narratives have evinced a distinct coastal turn. The purpose of much of this work is to inhabit the coasts and littoral spaces “mentally and imaginatively” (Gillis 3).<sup>3</sup> It is a means of seeking fresh critical perspectives on processes – both natural and artificial – that take place there, while also redressing an imbalance that has seen the coastal space itself slip out of view in cultural studies, “as if its peripheral relationship to the land has reinforced its peripheral treatment culturally” (Allen et al. 1). Consequently, there is a distinctly ecological dimension to much of this work, and in their introduction to *Coastal Works*, Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith adopt the biological term ‘ecotone’ to describe the shoreline. Their aim by so doing is to help move our understanding of the coast away from the popular conception that this space truly represents an edge or a limit; it is in fact more complex than this. If the coast is politically at least a notional edge or limit, then biologically and ecologically speaking it is nothing of the sort: an ecotone is a hybrid space “where two ecosystems meet and overlap” producing an abundance of life – and death – and thereby exhibiting an “intensification of activity over a border zone” (5-6). The coast, then, from this perspective, is akin to a centre, a hotbed of furious biological processes.

Scholarship of the coast is also invested in the shoreline as a means of investigating nation formation and the understanding of the nation state itself; it is an effort towards decentring cultural and critical thought, to inhabit the boundaries that make visible the limits of nation states and, more abstractly, national identity. The conception of the coastline as a national border is itself a relatively modern political fiction, the product of “an Enlightenment project driven by the territorial imperative of pinning down property lines and fixing the boundaries of the emerging interior nation-states” and “the political imperatives of nation-states busily consolidating themselves” (Gillis 106-107). Further, studies of the coastline demonstrate how British coasts have become hotbeds of nationalist thought and what Daniel Burdsey describes as “symbolic markers of contemporary nationhood and anxieties over [Britain’s] multicultural composition”: “The English seaside is an important site for analysing the shifting cultural and spatial politics of race and ethnicity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain” (Burdsey 542, 549).<sup>4</sup> It is such anxieties that the virulent and xenophobic language of Britain’s 2016 EU membership referendum controversially spoke to, when then-Prime Minister, David Cameron, and UKIP’s on-again-off-again leader and parliamentary candidate for the coastal ward of South Thanet, Nigel Farage, simultaneously emphasised the seeming fixity and the fragility of national borders. To ITV, Cameron spoke of “a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean” (BBC News), while in an effort to justify this language to Radio 4’s Today programme he stated “I want to make sure our borders are secure and you can’t break into Britain without permission” (Khomami) – a language that, in its direct evocation of human swarming and the transgressing of borders, is more fit for the heightened rhetoric of the gothic novel.<sup>5</sup> Britain is not alone in confronting a rise in nationalism in the twenty-first century: the rhetoric of Donald Trump’s US-Mexico border wall parallels the language of Brexit. It is, however, the specifically coastal quality of much of Britain’s border that contemporary gothic fiction has focused on as it responds to this discourse of fragile and imperilled boundaries. Indeed, it is by turning to the gothic that we find a sustained

engagement with the power of littoral spaces and those who venture into them; it is a genre whose evocative language and fixation on transgression has given repeated articulation to fears around the violation of national and personal borders.

Writing in his history of the seaside, *The Lure of the Sea*, Alain Corbin identifies the period between 1750 and 1840 as the era in which the coast entered the British cultural imagination in new and significant ways as the beach became a site of pleasure, rather than productivity. This was the period

when the coasts of the ocean began to appear as a recourse against the misdeeds of civilization, as the place where it was easiest to grasp the new sense of time proposed by scientists, and experience the dissociation of mankind's history from that of the earth. This was where the sublime beauty of the ocean and the pathos of its storms unfolded. (Corbin 53)

This is a period that incorporates the emergence and the heyday of the gothic – usually identified as occurring between 1764, with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and the 1820s. By invoking the sublime, Corbin aligns the experience of the coast for its earliest pleasure-seekers with the kind of experience that early gothic fiction sought to evoke in the imaginations of its readers, a feature of the genre most readily visible in the rugged and treacherous wildernesses found in the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, itself often coastal in setting. Moreover, the gothic itself emerges and takes hold in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain as a response to contemporary exigencies surrounding national identity and historical tradition. Meiko O'Halloran emphasises specifically why the gothic demonstrates such a vested interest in borderlands, arguing that “[b]y the Romantic period, the idea of an ‘imagined community’ or shared national identity for Britain had come under intense pressure due to an increasingly complex nexus of national relationships both at home and abroad.” O'Halloran cites the numerous Acts of Union (1536, 1707, and 1800-1801) as initiating a long process of political and cultural upheaval that saw the nations – England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland – seek ways “to preserve their distinctive national identities, vernaculars and homespun traditions even as they were united.” Consequently, the gothic “provided a multitude of ways for authors and their audiences to navigate a volatile domestic terrain, imaginatively crossing national borders, opening up liminal spaces, and exploring key moments of historical transition” (O'Halloran 207).

In *The Literature of Terror*, David Punter similarly identifies in the gothic an effort to grapple with a specifically English historical tradition and heritage. The gothic, via its thematic – and etymological – preoccupations with the old-fashioned, the barbaric, the archaic and pagan, and through its resistance to “civilised values and a well-regulated society,” provided, in the minds of its writers, a source of “grandeur which was sorely needed in English culture.” England's gothic writers argued “that there were whole areas of English cultural history which were being ignored, and that the way to breathe life into the culture was by re-establishing relations with this forgotten, ‘Gothic’ past” (Punter 5-6). The gothic was a mode harking back to a – fictionalised – past, aiming to celebrate and establish a uniquely Anglo-Saxon heritage, in contradistinction to prevailing classical, Augustan ideals of the earlier eighteenth century. This sense of the gothic has received renewed attention in the media recently, aligning both the gothic in Britain with a pagan past and this past itself

with contemporary anxieties around notions of belonging, within which, as I will argue below, the coastal gothic plays a prominent role. An article in the *Guardian* newspaper by Michael Newton, for example, is clickbaitingly headlined “Cults, human sacrifice and pagan sex: how folk horror is flowering again in Brexit Britain.” Newton suggests that folk horror – a term made popular by Mark Gatiss in 2010, and referring to a small clustering of British horror films from the 1970s, including *The Wicker Man*, *Blood on Satan’s Claw*, and *Witchfinder General* – “presents the dark dreams Britain has of itself.” He argues that a revival of it today – in the fiction of Andrew Michael Hurley and the films of Amy Jump and Ben Wheatley, for example – evokes a world of ‘rootedness in place’ that feels “uncanny [...] in the discontinuous world of modernity, where [...] such belonging feels strange and even sinister” (Newton). By turning our attention to the coast in particular, we see gothic fiction engaging with feelings of up- or un-rootedness, with a lost or neglected historical tradition, and with questions of belonging and borders.

It is not difficult to fathom why the treacherous terrain of a storm-tossed coast, lashed by waves and littered with the detritus of shipwreck, onto which there is always the risk of things washing up that are (to paraphrase Freud) preferable submerged and out of sight, should appeal to writers of the gothic.<sup>6</sup> The movement towards the coast in gothic fiction is not to remove its blighted protagonists from the gothic ‘centres’ of narratives and into liminal spaces beyond the reach of the overbearing forces of patriarchy, Catholicism, and such other gothic staples – that is, away from political and cultural loci of power. Instead, the experience of the coast serves to reinforce the experience of the gothic, embracing the instability and uncertainty imaginatively associated with the topographical and epistemological experience of littoral zones. The coast in gothic fiction tests the limits of the self, exposing it to the hostile, and potentially fatal, forces of a volatile environment and foreign or alien beings: monstrous creatures populate a shoreline that is symbolically and culturally the intersection of two worlds, one known and familiar, the other unknown and uninhabitable (or at least undesirable).

The gothic adopts this meeting-point between land and sea to explore the meeting-point between life and death. Figures in this landscape find themselves dislocated from life but not yet dead, like the “restless spectre” Victor Frankenstein stalking the Orkney shoreline (Shelley 164). The gothic, then, exploits the coast as ecotone to initiate a blurring of boundaries between self and other, self and place. In *Dracula* (1897), Mr Swales gives an account of the sailors lost at sea who remain commemorated by their empty coastal graves. On Judgement Day the sailors will return for these graves; they will come “‘trimmlin’ and ditherin,’ with their hands that dozzened an’ slippy from lyin’ in the sea that they can’t even keep their grup o’ them” (Stoker 74). Caught, like the coast, between more firmly distinct spaces, the bodies take on the properties of the topography they inhabit, furthering the dislocation between life and death, body and signifier; the “dozzened an’ slippy” hands cannot grasp the material objects that attest to their identities. Further, the permeable border of coast and harbour is a site of incursion, or what Joan Passey has evocatively called an “open wound in England, ripe for infection,” a means of articulating anxieties of empire and nationhood (24). “It is no coincidence,” Emily Alder argues, “that it is by ship that Dracula invades an Empire built on its maritime power,” an act that “undermines [Victorian British] assumptions about naval supremacy [and] domestic security” (18, 11). The shore is a

receptive point of contact – an imagined boundary – between Britain and the wider world while it yet retains an ambivalent nature, simultaneously “open wound” and clear and visible border. These features of the gothic coast – as an environment to explore crises of selfhood and nationhood – continue to resonate in the twenty-first century.

*The Loney: whispered shibboleths*

Andrew Michael Hurley’s *The Loney* follows a family who, at Easter each year, travel with friends and their Catholic priest from London to the northwest coast of England, to a place the locals call “the Loney” – “that strange nowhere between the Wyre and the Lune” (4). They undertake the annual pilgrimage hoping to find a cure for the narrator’s mute brother, Hanny; the cure is eventually found when a strange girl, with the power to restore the dead to life, gives birth to a creature with “blind grey eyes,” a “shrivelled yellow face,” “grotesque swellings on its neck,” and a “mangled claw of a hand” that seems to have absorbed, and thereby relieved others of, various wounds and disabilities (340). This girl lives in “Thessaly,” a house separated from the mainland by a tidal causeway, and a gothic device twice-over. First, the name evokes the Greek Thessaly, an island inhabited by witches or enchantresses; second, it recalls the haunting of Crythin Gifford, a town connected twice a day by a causeway to Eel Marsh House and its malevolent spirit in Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black* (1983). This distinctly gothicised take on the healing – and haunting – powers of the coast also characterises Jenn Ashworth’s recent *Fell* (2016), a coincidence that suggests the enduring appeal of the coast as restorative agent yet one from which we are eerily estranged or which is, more pointedly, polluted.

Alongside this narrative sits another in *The Loney*: the story of Father Wilfred, who used to travel with the family until one year he encountered the body of a previous iteration of the creature that heals Hanny washed up on the beach, and subsequently lost his faith. It is not any particular religious faith that imbues the coastal world in *The Loney* with its power, but such power is found embedded in and emanating from the ecotone itself. Above all, the novel is about the troubling persistence of tradition and belief, about intercommunal violence, and about immigration and the imagined degradation of community.

The narrative is told in a voice that continually circles back to the landscape of the Loney, foregrounding the significant role place has to play in this novel and its goings-on. First, *The Loney* self-consciously inserts itself into the historical realities of coastal dangers and the exploitation of migrant labour when it addresses the ever-present violence of the tides: “Opportunist cocklepickers, ignorant of what they were dealing with, drove their trucks onto the sands at low tide and washed up weeks later with green faces and skin like lint” (4). This passage most prominently evokes the drowning of 23 Chinese migrant workers, who were killed while cockle picking in the waters of the Lancashire and Cumbrian coast in 2004. Morecambe Bay – the real-life counterpart to the fictional Loney – is also the location of Sambo’s grave, commemorating an enslaved African boy brought to this area in the 1730s.

Second, *The Loney* evokes the ambivalence that is characteristic both of the gothic and of cultural representations of the coast. *The Loney*’s coast is a site of historical dislocation, as if this world sits somewhere beyond linear historical time, where time simply accumulates such that “the place was sick with it. Haunted by it. Time didn’t leak away as it



should” (41). As a result, the coast is presented as a space prompting the intermingling of contrary or opposite states of being: past intermingles with present, life with death, God with the devil, paganism and folk belief with Christianity. The overlapping of these phenomena at, and as symbolic manifestations of, the coastal ecotone is both restorative, ensuring the continuing survival of discordant ontological and epistemological conditions, and violent, as the one phenomenon exists in perpetual struggle with its opposite. The coastal landscape is one of competing traditions in which the palimpsestic layers of history remain visible, where a plurality of historical times and cultural practices exist in successive layers without ever quite overwriting one another.

The coast itself is depicted as a hypernatural space, where things lived “as they ought to live,” where “[t]he wind, the rain, the sea were all in their raw states, always freshly born and feral” (80). The ecosystem exists in a constant state of rebirth, and is therefore consistently wild and unclaimed. It is the uncanny animism of the coast that alienates the pilgrims from London. Father Wilfred is haunted by a “growing unease that the marshes were somehow aware of his presence,” that the Loney is “a dark and watchful place that seemed to have become adept at keeping grim secrets; secrets that were half heard in whispered shibboleths that passed from one bank of dry reeds to the other” (322). The Loney embodies a pseudo-panteism, and it is the “whispered shibboleths” that are particularly evocative here. Evoking customs, a belief system, or a speech pattern that is particular to a certain community, with the intent of preserving a tradition to which outsiders do not belong, the Loney’s own shibboleths speak both to a gothic animism and to the novel’s fundamental interest in using the qualities of the coast I have outlined here in the exploration of community and belonging. As the sea encroaches on the land, “churning its way over the sands” (186), as natural states are in continual turmoil, so does this quality of the landscape impress itself upon the figures and objects who inhabit it. The girl who cures Hanny, for instance, embodies a power that is already latent within the ecotone of the coast. The intermingling of past with present and of competing cultural ideologies is most evident, however, in the religious and folk practices that endure at the Loney.

The local church, for instance, the Church of the Sacred Heart, is “an ancient place – dark and square and glistening amphibiously in the rain”; “the stonework inside’s all Saxon” and it “managed to escape the Reformation” because it sits on the coast beyond the geographical reach of the Church – “I don’t think they could find it,” the narrator’s father surmises (133-134). It is not simply that the community has been forgotten or missed by the Reformation, hanging on to both a Catholic and Saxon past in a Protestant present, but that the church has slipped out of religion itself. When the narrator describes the church’s rood screen and Doom painting, it portrays a scene in which “the wicked were collected in enormous cauldrons to be cooked for Satan, who squatted like a sort of horned toad” (137). The language of the amphibian characterises both the church and its satanic antithesis, drawing them into peculiar sorority with one another. Moreover, the amphibian qualities of each links them with an ecotonal creature – half-land- and half-water-based – and suggests the influence the coastal world has had on this symbol of human community and spiritual preservation. The performance of the Pace Eggers on Easter Sunday, too, is indicative of the persistence of past practice in the present and, more importantly, of the narrative’s overarching concern with notions of belonging. The Pace Eggers are a performance troupe

made up of the locals who live at the Loney, and who perform for the urban pilgrim outsiders; they perform a mummers play involving St. George, a villainous Turkish Knight, and a quack doctor, Dog.<sup>7</sup> It is the eerie centrepiece of *The Loney*, playing out in microcosm concerns that resonate throughout the novel: the drama rehearses the victory of St. George over a foreigner, while itself playing to a group of incomers and immigrants. To the pilgrims they look “like things that had crawled out of a nightmare,” singing songs in “strange minor keys [...] that sounded like they might have once charmed the Devil to the surface of the world” (230). Once again the local is connected with the satanic, and the mumming itself establishes the significance of a folk practice that nonetheless rings strange and alien – or devilish and *unheimlich* – in the ears of the novel’s city-dwellers. Both the church and its rood screen and the Pace Egging, then, may be read as visions of the entire coastal community in miniature.

The past persists elsewhere, too, drawing attention to intercommunal hostility and violence that is particularly indicative of a British national(ist) violence. Hanny and his brother play in an old abandoned pillbox on the beach, decorated with a “botched swastika someone had painted [...] as a companion to the letters *NF*” (81). Here, the boys recreate famous battles of the Second World War – “Sword Beach, Iwo Jima, Arnhem, El Alamein” – transforming the pillbox into

a cell in a German prisoner of war camp, which we’d fight our way out of with our bare hands, thwacking *Achtung!*-ing Nazis in freeze frames. Or it was a jungle hideout from which we watched a line of buck-toothed Japs [...] then we’d unzipper them with a burst of machine-gun fire [...]. The Japs were cruel and devious [...] weaker than the Krauts and the Krauts were always more arrogant than the Brits, who naturally won every time. (83-84)

The boys act out nationalist ideologies of British military supremacy in a coastal fortification indicative of the threat of foreign invasion and marked out by its National Front graffiti as a site of nationalist attention. Furthermore, it remains a relic of a war-torn past whose narrative persists into the present in the physical form of the pillbox and in the imaginations of the boys themselves, reprising and reiterating a racist and xenophobic portrayal of a foreign other. Further, as the narrative itself betrays, sustaining a vision of British military (and, indeed, national and cultural) supremacy, in which the British forces win “every time,” involves the rewriting of the historical past such that, for example, the Allied forces were in fact victorious at the Battle of Arnhem. Finally, and tellingly, the narrator remarks that the “[t]he Loney was just a place the Luftwaffe passed on their way to the Clyde. And the Third Reich never did come marauding up the Irish Sea in the end” (82). War never touched the Loney – further isolating it from the world-at-large – except in the not-so-innocent wargames of the outsiders who stake a claim on the nostalgic visions of a powerful British past.

The vision of the pillbox, and the Loney more broadly, overlooking the Irish Sea further embeds this coastal space in a network of nationally-sanctioned violence against foreigners; it occupies a “region of exchange [...] where relationships and tensions between geography and culture are felt intensely and are played out dramatically” (Allen et al. 4-5). This highlights what might be termed *The Loney*’s ‘archipelagism,’ to adapt John Brannigan’s terminology: the novel’s geographic setting signifies the intersection of Irish, Scottish, and English history and violence. To begin to think archipelagically in this

geography is to work towards “a recalibration of relations between the regions and islands of the Irish and British archipelago, specifically of those social, political, and cultural relations which have been defined by Anglocentric identities” (4). For Brannigan, the archipelagic literature of modernism was an effort towards “deconstructing and exposing the crises and exhaustions” of old narratives to which England nonetheless appeared – and, one might add, continues to appear – “securely wedded,” such as its sense of its imperial identity (13, 9). We see above how the boys of Hurley’s novel enthusiastically insert themselves into the hangover of a specifically English wartime glory.

The point is reiterated from a slightly different perspective – that of the outsider to English culture – when the narrator reports the account given by Father Bernard, the family’s Scottish Catholic priest, of his birthplace, Rathlin Island.<sup>8</sup>

It was by all account a fairly miserable hovel on Rathlin Island, some barren speck of rock I’d never heard of [...]. The only thing of note about it was that it was where the spider supposedly egged on Robert the Bruce to clobber the English, and there that the English replied by massacring the McDonnells. Even the children. Apparently you could still find bloodstains on the rocks that the sea refused to wash away. (*Loney* 57)

This account – another vignette embodying of the novel’s overarching concerns – reports the violence enacted in this space, in the maintenance and further spread of English imperial power. The coastal location of the violence – characterised as it is in the novel as a site peculiarly receptive to bearing enduring witness to the past – “refuse[s] to wash away” the signs of the massacre. Indeed, that time performs strangely in coastal spaces is subtly indicating by the elision of two centuries, where Robert the Bruce’s actions in the fourteenth century are met with the massacre of the MacDonnells in the sixteenth. As we see throughout the novel, the coast preserves the relics of the past, while the natural world in this ecotone, imbued with sentience and agency, aligns itself with the marginalised figures who inhabit it: the bloodstains on the rocks commemorate the victims of English invaders whose acts remain enshrined here. The account speaks to a process of Scottish storytelling or myth-making that portrays the English as violators of the natural – they have permanently stained the coast with blood – and which thereby functions as another of *The Loney*’s “whispered shibboleths,” a narrative that speaks to a Scottish identity at the exclusion of the English, while further offering a suggestive “recalibration of relations.” That the audience to Father Bernard are excluded from this tale may be seen in the scepticism with which the narrative is received and in the intimation that their interest is foremost in the presence of the English on Rathlin Island. The island, dislocated from the mainland and so implicitly from centres of power and civilisation, is a “barren speck” adorned with “miserable hovel[s]”; “The only thing of note” about it is the English massacre, a qualification that registers, as the processes of othering in the wargames cited above also do, a perverse national pride in the occasion. And it is only “supposedly” where Robert the Bruce encountered the spider, and “apparently” that bloodstains still cover the rocks, words expressive of a mild disdain for the Scottish myth, working as they do to keep belief in the account at arms’ length.

Just, then, as *The Loney* is invested in exploring the tensions of urban outsiders among rural communities, and in the representation of a cohesive – if alien – rural or coastal identity that latches onto mythic pasts in order for it to remain viable, so too does the novel explore

the overlapping of communities at national levels, and the violence enacted at such meetings. The coast provides the language and symbolism through which Hurley is able to explore the turbulent and imperial past of Britain, and of Scottish-Irish-English relations. The 2014 novel cannot be read as a response to Brexit, but the anxieties with which it engages across networks of various communities nevertheless speaks to a rise in nationalist and populist politics, to contemporary concerns with Britain's imperial and mythic past, and to a pervasive sense of dislocation. The Catholic pilgrims establish the autonomous congregation of Saint Jude's in London due to the perceived threat of spiritual degradation that is in reality a form of hostility and intolerance of difference. To the pilgrims, London is an "Other world" populated by people who "walked in darkness" (326); and despite a belief that the Loney represents life as it ought to be, the pilgrims remain alienated from the Loney, too. Hurley registers the contradictions of a British identity that clings to outdated myths of national supremacy and its assumptions of authority, while continually faced with – and dismissive of – the evidence of its own historical divisions and internal violences.

### *The Many: ecology and economy*

Where *The Loney* positioned its protagonists on the coast to stage a gothic drama about national affiliation, *The Many* adopts a global perspective on the question of belonging in coastal communities. Wyl Menmuir's novel exhibits a broader scope than Hurley's in this respect, but nonetheless reiterates a conflict between the local and the wider networks in which the local is involved, and, further, does so via the competing interests between ecologies and economies. *The Many* may therefore be understood as structured around two interrelated symbolic ecotones: in the first instance, the intersection of ecological catastrophe and economic collapse, and, secondly, in the relationship between the local and the global. As such, it bears out some of the ideas recently formulated under the portmanteau term "globalgothic." According to Fred Botting and Justin D. Edwards, globalgothic is "a tangible reaction to the distress and anxiety of a globalised system that erupts within or from public cultures across the world." It involves "a decentred and deterritorialising apparatus of governance" in turn "generating a new sense of anxiety about borders, identities and futures" (12-13). As becomes evident in Menmuir's novel, such processes engender "a context of unbelonging through the rupture of communities" and "national, social and subjective dissolution" (Botting and Edwards 23). Indeed, the very structure of *The Many* charts the troubling relationship the national, the social, and the subjective have on one another, illuminating how one may be alienated in turn from national communities and economies and local social spaces, and finally dramatizing the fragmentation of the individual subject as a consequence of competing tensions between local and global.

At its heart, *The Many* tells two stories, alternating between them across chapters. The first, focused on Ethan, paints a portrait of a Cornish fishing village on the brink of economic ruin due to a dramatic fall in healthy fish stock and the eerie presence of a fleet of container ships – potent symbols of a global capitalist market – forming a barrier across the sea a mile or so from the coast, enclosing the community, denying it access to the fish beyond. The fishing community remains haunted also by the drowning of one of the children of the village, Perran, years earlier. The second concerns Timothy, newly arrived in this community

from the city, to renovate a house he has bought – Perran’s, unoccupied since he died. Timothy receives no warm welcome as his presence revives among the villagers memories of Perran, himself a symbol of the wider ruin of the community; he has come “to destroy Perran’s house, to erase his memory” (21). Timothy is finally driven out of the village after his house is ransacked, and only Ethan makes any effort to involve Timothy in the community’s activities, namely the unending and fruitless fishing within the waters circumscribed by the container ships – an activity that has become “ritual rather than function” (5).

Situating the narrative on the coast allows Menmuir to gesture visibly towards the global markets in which this community is bound up, and through which it suffers: anchored on the horizon, the ever-present container ships occupy the periphery of this community, allowing – as the narratives embedded in *The Loney* do – the drama between local and global to play out in microcosm. In this respect, the coast is both a literal and a symbolic point of departure for Britain’s involvement in global trade networks: literal in its ports and fishing communities, and symbolic in the enduring notion of the coast as an ‘edgeland’ where the local and the national bleed uneasily into the global and the world at large, where national and local economies meet a global market economy. The coast is a meeting-point between distinct – even antithetical or conflicting – value systems. Menmuir is also attentive to an instability that characterises coastal life. As quoted above, the sea that sweeps over the beach transforms the coastal landscape into something vaguely *unheimlich*, whose “stones are no longer the same stones,” as if the coast has been “reconstruct[ed] from memory.” With the beach in a state of continual erasure and renewal, it remains for Ethan the *heimlich* and familiar space of home, and, simultaneously, the *unheimlich* space, out of kilter with itself, from which he is gradually being alienated to the point that he sees “hairline fractures that run and spread throughout the fabric of the whole place” at the novel’s end (129) as his very world begins to disintegrate.

Topographically unstable, this instability is echoed, too, in the commercial labour that takes place on the coast. Anxiety about the influence of the sea on fishing ships inflect Ethan’s dreaming: he “dreams of a storm in which all the boats pulled high on the beach are dragged down the stones into a boiling sea [...] in which they break and dissolve” (9). The fishing industry itself in turn affects, and is inextricably tied to, the ecological instability of the coast. Ecological disaster is writ large throughout the narrative. The coast is “littered with plastic bags, polystyrene blocks, floating on the oil-slick water” (117), which makes the sea appear “*unnaturally calm*” (15). Lucy Wood’s gothic short story collection, *The Sing of the Shore* (2018), similarly articulates the horrors of a Cornish coastline uncannily mimicked by plastics that become symbolic of global trade. “Sometimes things looked like sand, but they weren’t sand,” writes Wood, of a beach covered in minute plastic particles that drive to distraction the woman who tries to keep the beach clean, finally defeated by the immovable presence of a washed-up shipping container (116). And where the fury of *The Loney*’s rural coast bespeaks its heightened naturalness, the industrialised coast of *The Many* has unnaturally influenced the environmental conditions of the ecotone, which in turn influences the industry in a process of damaging reciprocity. What few fish are found are horribly disfigured, looking

burned, as though with acid, their eye sockets elongated and deep, showing through to the bones at the edges and there are white lesions down the side of each body. Their rough black skin is dull and flaked away in patches, the fins thin and ragged where there should be muscle (26)

The sea, traditionally and mythically a source of life, is poisoned, populated only by ghostly, skeletal creatures and threatening the landed population, too. Swimming is forbidden, “if you don’t want to end up sick, or sterile” (23), while as child Ethan dreamt of “a bloody exodus of the sea” (3), anticipating the collapse of the ocean’s ecology.<sup>9</sup> On a local scale, then, the fishing community is poisoning itself, overfishing in its own small domain – a microcosm of wider issues, of course, but also a sign that the global problem has local roots.

Though seemingly abandoned, *The Many*’s vast container ships – “skeletal for their lack of cargo, idle sentries to an empty coast” (23) – remain indicative of an ever-watchful bureaucratic power beyond the Cornish village, metonyms of the global. Italicised flashbacks detail the arrival of the ships a decade previously, presaged by letters from the Department for Fisheries and Aquaculture “*in archaic and obscure language*” explaining how “*boundaries will be marked for the purpose of controlling fish stocks in restricted zones and for the containment and management of harmful waterborne agents*” (51-52):

*For some this news is more than they are prepared to take, with fish stocks falling fast and the prices so low.*

*Overnight the ships arrive and are anchored at regular intervals along the horizon. After a few days, Ethan wonders whether the ships might always have been there, unnoticed and waiting for their chance to edge closer towards the shore, into sight. (53)*

Though ostensibly figured as the novel’s villains – mysterious officials arrive occasionally to take delivery of entire catches from the village – the presence of the container ships and these officials is a sign of a government-directed effort towards ecological preservation and recovery. These container ships work to contain local ecological problems in the interests of a wider – if nonetheless shady – global economy, limiting the further spread of the polluted sea and gothic creatures swimming in the coastal waters, both in terms of the oceanic biome and a human produce market. Further, the disquiet articulated by the fishermen of this village at the imposition of such measures echoes contemporary rhetoric surrounding EU fishing quotas and the lack of autonomy it is felt the UK has over fishing rights in its coastal waters – another significant feature of anti-EU and pro-Brexit discourse in recent years. *The Many* sympathises with desires to take back control of ‘our fishing waters,’ while asking quite what horrors these waters might contain and highlighting the necessity of restrictive legislation.

In some ways, *The Many* gives the lie to the notion that local markets are somehow less abusive and more sustainable than, say, industrial fishing trawlers, the most common subject in conversations about the persistent depletion of natural resources. But the maritime and oceanic backdrop to this matter complicates the neatness of the division. On the one hand, the sea is an ideal medium through which to convey this message as the protagonists’ interest in looking at and through the sea’s surface suggests. As an adult, Ethan dreams of his fishing boat “refurbished and renewed” sailing across a sea “where he sees the flank of a great creature pass beneath the boat, muscular and immensely long” (30). Timothy dreams of swimming into the sea’s depths, “of the vents where life still clings on to the hydrothermal streams that escape the earth’s core, of the shrimps, the crabs, the biosludge that survived the

great oceanic apocalypse” (63). The dreams here are fundamentally dreams of oceanic abundance, voyages to sites and sources of life, reading the ocean and its primordial “biosludge” as life-giving and host to large, healthy – and presumably economically remunerative – creatures. But such abundance no longer exists. Yet the dreams, and indeed the persistence with which the fishermen daily go to sea to dredge up more of the “dull and lifeless” fish that are all the sea has left to give up (57), point towards a denial of this reality, a continuing belief in the sea’s surface as concealing and offering up infinite foodstuff and economic dividends – a falsehood that the difficulty of seeing through the sea’s opaque surface has helped perpetuate. On the other hand, the fish within the coastal waters are themselves – like the fishermen – involved in an oceanic system encompassing the globe, able to move beyond the container ships which present only a superficial, symbolic, and surface-level barrier. As the expedition beyond the container ships in chapter 7 reveals, the fish stocks in the open sea are just as mutated as those in the harbour: the container ships cannot in truth ‘contain’ anything.

Further, these ships enact a process of alienation within the fishing village and strip the community of any agency it might exert in pursuit of either its own interests or sustainable and healthy fish stocks. The ships literally enclose the community, and their dramatic and sudden appearance, intimating that “*the ships might always have been there [...] waiting for their chance to edge closer to the shore,*” gestures towards the prospect of being indissolubly bound up with an unseen network that one is always, if unwittingly or unwillingly, part of – Freud’s oceanic feeling for a globalised world. The sense of alienation is emphasised when Ethan and Timothy approach the container ships:

On the side of the ship, what is presumably its name is written in letters ten feet tall or taller, though it is written in a script Ethan does not understand. The letters look familiar, as though he should be able to read them, though each is transfigured and mutated, and though they pass close to the ship, the letters do not resolve themselves into anything that carries meaning he can decipher. Deeper into the boat’s shadow, he sees signs riveted onto the hull at intervals. They are warnings perhaps, or impart vital information, though they are all written in the same familiar, but unreadable, script. (53-54)

It is here that the terms of the globalgothic are most readily applicable to *The Many*, whose symbols of global and decentred networks have generated a “context of unbelonging” and “rupture of communities.” The ships belong to a world whose signs are unavailable to Ethan.

Like the “*archaic and obscure language*” of the letters from the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, this apparently monolithic governmental and industrial presence is present in such a way that invests it with a timelessness and uncanny otherness which in turn excludes the fishing village from complete and clear participation in a network they are always already part of. Unable to read the signs, one cannot comprehend what one is being advised or instructed to do, and cannot therefore act accordingly. In something of a reversal of the folk horror tradition in which isolated communities are eerily out of step with modern practices, it is the symbols of globalised modernity who emerge from a dim and shadowy past. Menmuir’s decision to name his governmental department after the Canadian system of governance (rather than the Britain’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) engenders a further sense of dislocation as the Cornish community finds itself answering to a governmental body most readily associable with the North American continent. Wood

gestures towards a similar process in *The Sing of the Shore*, in which a Cornish villager is tormented by his belief that he can hear the unintelligible buzzing of communication cables running beneath the Cornish beach, achieving a painfully heightened awareness of the shoreline's position as a point-of-contact with the global, and the alienation such an awareness has enacted on the local and personal level (169-175).

The final point of connection between the local and global in *The Many* involves Perran himself. We never meet Perran – he is dead before the narrative begins – but for the fishermen he remains a totemic symbol of a lost and irrecoverable past: continuing to grieve for Perran is symbolic of a wider grief, a recognition of a wider loss.<sup>10</sup> Timothy, too, though an outsider, becomes entranced by Perran's near-mythic status. In a dream, Timothy sees thousands of Perrans pouring from the sea and the land; "Perran upon Perran upon Perran. Timothy knows they are all Perran [...] though all the figures before him are faceless and featureless" (112). It is in his facelessness, his lack of identifying marks or legible signs, that Perran is connected to the governmental presence, via the container ships which are "tied to their positions by miles of red tape issued and reissued endlessly by a faceless, disembodied authority" (25). Perran holds this "faceless, disembodied authority" on a local rather than national or global level. The loss of agency these ships herald – as characters constantly find themselves fighting a powerful temptation to pass beyond them (9, 25) – is reiterated at community level by the figure of Perran, onto whom the community projects its sense of self, but who is irrecoverably lost to the past, a site of decentred, or perhaps unavailable, authority. When Ethan begins to see fissures in the very fabric of material reality, resembling "a tangle of incredibly fine gill nets," he hears a voice emanating from them, asking "Who was Perran?" (129, 131). It is a question Ethan cannot answer, and which highlights the alienation he must finally admit to feeling from Perran and what Perran represented and, as the presence of the cracks and disembodied voice demonstrate, which simultaneously heralds the symbolic dissolution of this world.

Indeed, even the boundaries between individual subjectivities begin to disintegrate. A subjective sense of perspective is both doubled and collapsed at the end of the novel. Timothy watches Ethan dive from his boat into the sea while simultaneously experiencing the dive himself:

seeing events not just through his own eyes but through Ethan's, too, and as he does, the fragile boundaries that held together for a short while begin to vibrate a blur [...] as though he is both within Ethan's body and watching him from without (140)

Ethan becomes Timothy's doppelganger just as Perran is ultimately revealed to be a double for Timothy's own dead infant son – remarkably also called Perran, and suggestively associating Timothy more firmly with Cornwall than the assumption of his outsider status permitted (126). At its end, then, *The Many* stages successive collapsings of individuality that are both a collapsing of difference and distance – Timothy's subjectivity merging with Ethan's – and a loss of self. Ethan's dive into the sea at this point echoes Timothy's earlier dive, which Ethan warned him against, not least because it replicates Perran's immersion and drowning in the unpredictable and violent waters of the coast. The coastal topography and the fisheries themselves are joint participants in these processes: the fissures look like the gillnetting of the fishermen and "they emerge from the sea" even as the sea itself is



“somehow immune to them” (129-130). The damaging reciprocity of coastal life reasserts itself: the pollution of the sea and the fishermen’s effective alienation from their site of labour finally reflects back onto a community falling apart and symbolically ensnared in its own netting.

In the final pages of the novel, Timothy’s ransacked house is mysteriously rebuilt, looking exactly as it did before he arrived, and the container ships are “broken free of the great weight that had held them where they were [...] now barely visible on the horizon and spread much farther than they had been” (139). The coastal village, “the site of a battle long fought between the sea and the land and the inhabitants” (136), undergoes a renewal or reversion to a past form. Finally, *The Many* offers no solution to the ecological or economic precarity that its coastal ecotone exemplifies. Neither global response nor local practice is adequate to prevent the fissuring of the community and the place, even as such an event betokens a renewing of the space; this renewing is tidal, as the sea will continue to contend with the land, and the container ships that move out of sight do so only to return to that invisible presence from which they originally emerged. Indeed, the vision of the container ships “barely visible on the horizon” is not a relinquishing of the process of containment they effected. It is an encompassing of a much wider geographic area, a further spreading of the conflict at the heart of the novel, suggestively evoking the “expanding frontiers” of a “global realm” (Botting and Edwards 13).

#### *Fen: rupture and articulations*

Articulating a way beyond the communal and ecological alienation that characterises Hurley’s and Melmuir’s coasts, are the gothic vignettes of Daisy Johnson’s short story collection, *Fen*. These tales are set on the coastal wetlands of East Anglia, and, if this appears to distance us somewhat from the coast in the strictest sense of the term, I argue that nonetheless the coast and the language of the ecotone continues to fundamentally shape Johnson’s narratives. While gesturing to the collection as a whole, I wish to focus foremost on those tales that are geographically proximate to coastal spaces – most prominently “The Lighthouse Keeper.” The gothic tales of *Fen* connect Johnson to a lineage that moves back through Sarah Penny’s neo-Victorian gothic in *The Essex Serpent* (2016), through M.R. James, to Charles Dickens and Pip’s encounter on the coastal fenlands with Magwitch, “soaked in water, and smothered in mud,” coated in the oozy loam of the swampland from which he seems to have emerged (Dickens 4). Magwitch is infected by this space, physically transformed by it. This speaks to the final symbolic ecotone I wish to address in this essay: the coming together of the self and other – or, more precisely, the human and nonhuman in littoral spaces. In Johnson’s fiction we see what might be termed an ontological ecotone where the human body becomes a site of the overlapping of various states of being, human and nonhuman, within and outside language. Through this, Johnson points a way beyond the ecological alienation articulated in *The Many*.

Johnson’s short stories exhibit many of the familiar trappings of gothic fiction: her narratives and her coast-dwellers are haunted by louche Parisian vampires (“Blood Rites”), a sentient and possessive house (“A Bruise the Shape and Size of a Door Handle”), a linguistically-troubled zombie (“Language”) and, throughout the tales, uncanny and articulate

animals – including an albatross, eels, and a rather friendly fish – and a slew of violent and overbearing male characters. The true site of horror, however, throughout *Fen* is not the marshes or coast on which her characters exist, but the language(s) in which they exist: it is a volatile and unstable kind of language that Johnson portrays in the fenlands of East Anglia. *Fen* repeatedly makes visible a network that incorporates violent manhood, men's corrupt and corrupting language, and – following their encounters with this language – the sicknesses and bodily transformations of women, either as a consequence of this language or as a means of escaping it.

“Blood Rites” tells the story of vampiric women emigrating from France to the British coast in order to feed on the seemingly mundane men of coastal eastern England. The women explain that “we learnt men the way other people learnt language or the violin. We did not care for their words [...]. We cared only for what they wanted so much it ruined them” (*Fen* 15). English is a preferable language to consume because of its crudeness, because “English was the language of breaking and bending and it would suit our mouths better. None of us would ever fall in love in English” (15). However, this language is also rather persistent – sticky or muddy, if you will – as the vampires find themselves speaking the words of the men they eat, gaining access to their victims' lewd knowledge; they discover that “fen men were not the same as the men we'd had before. They lingered in you the way a bad smell did; their language stayed with you” (25). Like the female creature drowned in coastal waters in *Frankenstein* (1818), *Fen* uses this landscape to give expression to the violences of a patriarchy that exerts physical and symbolic control over the female body.

The peculiar linguistic realm specific to the fens in Johnson's collection is one that partakes of the instabilities and amorphousness of the landscape in which it appears. As we see in “Blood Rites,” the fens are presented as a site of infection. As in *Dracula*, the vampires colonise a coastal zone; but, more importantly, the male victim of the female vampires is presented as the speaker of a violent language that transforms and reshapes the psyches of the women who have consumed him. Indeed, it is language that persists here, rather than the human form, a language that is continually remoulding and reasserting itself. There are echoes in this language of Julia Kristeva's semiotic *chora* – a signifying system which precedes the supposedly stable representational system propagated by a fixed (patriarchal) order – within which the individual subject is always “*en procès*,” as-yet undetermined. Kristeva posits the *chora* as “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases”; the *chora* is “rupture and articulations,” just as the unstable coastal fenlands themselves – and those who occupy them in Johnson's fiction – manifest an ongoing process of rupture and articulation, of continual and cyclical loss and reclamation, in which the coast is only ever a site of “ephemeral” stasis (Kristeva 25-26). Thinking of Johnson's world as one which embodies this sense of the *chora*, we can read the tales as narratives that simultaneously affirm the violences that occur as the human subject emerges from the pre-lingual *chora* into the fixed world of culture and established ontological boundaries while also bearing witness to a process that involves the exclusion of the female voice and the female body from this cultural and material space. Denied a place in this linguistic realm, the women of Johnson's fiction seek refuge in the nonhuman world, and it is in this movement – between the human and nonhuman – that the

ecotone is symbolically evoked in *Fen*, which presents the ecological as a site able to accommodate, by transforming, an imperilled humanity.

It is in collection's final tale, "The Lighthouse Keeper," that Johnson most thoroughly explores the relationship between human and nonhuman bodies and different kinds of knowledge, concluding *Fen* in a celebratory affirmation of the possibility of human immersion in nonhuman worlds on their own terms, that is, without subjecting them to a destructive transformation into familiar or reductive anthropocentric terms of reference. The tale, the most explicitly ecofeminist of her collection, concerns a female lighthouse keeper who finds herself entranced by a particular fish she sees swimming in the coastal waters near her home; she is mocked by the local community both for being a female lighthouse keeper and for befriending, rather than consuming, the fish, and she finally turns her back on this world, setting the lighthouse ablaze and diving into the waters for a total immersion in the world of the fish. The tale, and collection, ends with the narrator making connection with something that seems to be, but is not definitively, her fish: "She swam down, breath potent between her ribs. She lost light all the way down until it was dark enough only to feel the motion of something brushing at her leg" (*Fen* 192). It represents an effort to understand living organisms "in relation to their lived environment," to see, as Mary Mellor puts it, "the natural world, including humanity [...] as an interconnected and interdependent whole" (1).

Once again the tale's primary concerns are of the nature, limits, and limitations of the body and the prospect of communication. As lighthouse keeper and beachcomber, the narrator understands herself as constituted by the detritus, the flotsam and jetsam, of the sea; she stands in front of a mirror "look[ing] at the strangeness of herself. Made up from sea findings; the things left behind" (182). On her first encounter with the fish, she feels compelled to claim it from the sea like the rest of her belongings, initiating an Ahabian pursuit from the shore, hooking chicken gristle to a fishing line "to try the fish's tastes" and "dangl[ing] her extremities in [the water] to entice it – to make it think she had a message to give" (180). On failing to entice it, the narrator undergoes an upheaval in her understanding:

maybe everything she'd guessed about the fish was wrong; that it was, rather a sort of metamorphosis. She [...] yelled her knowledge of the creature out into the cold foam. The way it could have stung her and did not; the way it moved with an almost human intelligence. Not a food source or a pretty thing to watch but, maybe, a friend. (184)

This transformation in comprehension alienates her further from the human community. Against a backdrop of "oil-slicked fishing boats [...] pulling in great tides of dead" and the specific threat of this particular fish being ritually killed and communally eaten, she acknowledges that she is "celebrating a fish" (188, 191, 186).

The fish makes visible alternative conditions of being and knowledge. "The Lighthouse Keeper" draws together its feminist and its ecological interests in its presentation of the world and experiences shared by the protagonist and the fish. Following Mellor, it urges us to "see human envelopment in 'nature' as a material relation, an immanent materialism," and, moreover, to understand that "knowledge of the natural world is always beyond human grasp" and view ourselves as "actors in a necessarily uncertain process," embodying a "radical uncertainty" that most properly reflects the radically uncertain qualities

of the natural world (Mellor, 147-149). At the end of *Fen*, the ecotone of the coast makes possible a posthumanist movement towards bridging the human-nonhuman divide: the fish's indifference to the human world enacts not a process of irreconcilable otherness, but a curious pursuit of community that necessitates a rejection of the coast as a site of human industry and labour, and a diving into a realm populated by creatures with an "almost human" – but crucially *not* human – intelligence.

Just as the ecotone is not the dissolution of two ecologies in the production of a third, but an overlapping of ecological sites in the generation of a biological palimpsest, the world Johnson gesture towards at the conclusion of *Fen* is one that does not dissolve the difference or distinction between 'human' and 'fish,' but instead posits coexistence rooted in tactile and electric bodily proximity, exemplifying Mellor's notion of embodiment – of one's immanent, bodily materialism – as the fundamental principle of an ecologically-grounded consciousness. It is not a consuming of the animal, a voyeuristic watching of it, nor an effort to translate it or tell its story, or an assumption that it cares about any "message" she/we have to give. It is the recognition of a shared ontology, a recognition that "the fish was the same as her" (*Fen* 185), and a celebration of the selfhood of the other. The final sentence of the tale proclaims the unimportance of traditional forms of knowledge – the unimportance even of finding the specific fish – and bespeaks the embracing of uncertainty and tactility instead. "She lost light all the way down until it was dark enough only to feel the motion of something brushing at her leg." Across the sentence, mirroring the dive into the sea's dark depths, clarity and certainty diminish. The former lighthouse keeper swims until it is so dark that sight is impossible, until she can only feel motion and material being – a movement into a posthuman world of indeterminable flux and fluidity.

*Conclusion: who is this who is coming?*

In M.R. James' classic tale of gothic beachcombing, "Oh, Whistle and I'll to You, My Lad" (1904), it is by blowing on a whistle found buried near an old Templar preceptory in the coast's dunes that the bumbling Professor Parkins summons the ghostly figure he is to be haunted by, and it is the whistle's Latin inscription that warns him against such curiosity: "*quis est iste qui venit*" (82). Though translated by Parkins as "who is this who is coming?" this is not quite right. As Roger Clarke has recently pointed out, "iste" is a word with pejorative connotations, and he suggests an alternative translation more in keeping with this spirit: "what is this revolting thing coming towards me?" (124). James' tale speaks to the notion of the coast as a temporal palimpsest and site of spiritual warfare I have identified in *The Loney*. But it also figures the coast as a site of unwelcome intrusion. Such a question – "who is this (unwelcome thing) who is coming?" – furthermore unites the three gothic texts I've been dealing with throughout this essay. Hurley, Menmuir, and Johnson are each invested in placing outsiders at the coast to test the boundaries and the nature of the coast and its communities, both human and nonhuman, while bespeaking an anxiety that the coast remains at the margins of culture.

The texts ultimately reject those who come to the coast with antiquated, touristic notions of recreation and healing, assuming the possibility of benevolent participation in its communities. This is suggestive, in part, of a conservative isolationism in this locale,

returning us to Daniel Burdsey's work on the exclusionary processes enacted in English coastal towns. Menmuir most forcefully articulates this sense of an urbancentrism that is at best insensible to the lived experience of the coast, and at worst condescending and vaguely colonial. The fishermen presume Timothy has come

because that's what upcountry folk do, to replace the drudgery of the city with that of the coast. He has come to save them from themselves, or to hold up a mirror to them [...] in all their faults and backwardness (21)

This is a fiction that resonates with contemporary debates about British identity and the prospect of no longer belonging to a particular place, speaking to intranational divisions within British communities as much as the problems of belonging to an international community – visible not least in popular discourse that figures rural Britain as a world of 'backwardness' harbouring unpopular political views, and in the perceived failures of politicians to properly address longstanding anxieties about immigration that the Brexit vote rendered starkly visible (Ford and Goodwin). The texts demonstrate the power the British coast has as a catalyst and pivotal participant in these conversations, and the potency of the gothic to evoke the temporal and spatial transgressions and contestations underlying them. This consequently illuminates the enduring presence of the coast in gothic fiction: invested in this space as an intersection of two worlds, the gothic exploits the coast to give expression to the limits of self and nation. Such a feature of the gothic has become especially pertinent in recent years, as Britain looks nostalgically back to an old world while facing the prospect of reconstituting its place on the world stage, negotiating a past it can no longer embody and a (post-Brexit, post-EU) future with few, if any, current certainties. Under such conditions, coastal gothic shows little sign of abating.

The coast provides a space where uncertain selves may be 'shored up,' reconstituted by the detritus of castaway objects and an ever-present past, where myths of belonging may be perpetuated or reclaimed; in each of the texts I have discussed the coast is a site of ritualistic practices, aimed at sustaining communities and selves. Troubling this, however, is the recognition that the coast is where the illusory nature of supposedly fixed boundaries is rendered most starkly visible, illustrating the ongoing conflicts that shape coastal (co)existence and citizenship more broadly in twenty-first century Britain. Finally, this gothic fiction urges us to look to the coastal landscape itself, pointing a way beyond purely human concerns towards a conception of belonging that emphasises immersion within the environment itself, in which the coast's supposed instabilities are no longer problematic; here, one no longer belongs to a potentially hostile human community, one belongs to the coast.

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<sup>1</sup> For recent work in coastal studies, see Gillis, *The Human Shore*; Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*; Allen et al, *Coastal Works*. Foundational studies of the coast to which I and the above scholars are indebted include Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea* and Robinson, *The View from the Horizon*.

<sup>2</sup> The few studies of the gothic coastal and littoral spaces of Britain that exist have, to date, been single-author or single-text studies, focused foremost on the gothic writers of the latter half of the nineteenth century and the fin-de-siècle. See Trower, "On the Cliff Edge of England"; Passey, "Gothic Landscapes and Seascapes"; Alder, "Dracula's Gothic Ship". Christine Tondorf has also recently proposed the existence of an 'Australian Coastal Gothic.'

<sup>3</sup> Gillis borrows the phrase from Rachel Carson.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 212; Back, “Falling from the Sky”.

<sup>5</sup> Brannigan notes that this sort of language speaks to a “crisis of identity and belonging,” and that “[b]iological metaphors for human migration have long been identified by cultural geographers as an insidious means of policing perceived social, national, and racial boundaries” (230).

<sup>6</sup> The allusion here is to Sigmund Freud’s (in)famous account of the uncanny in his 1919 essay of the same name.

<sup>7</sup> For a history of pace egging in the British isles, see Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>8</sup> Further evidence in the novel of the violence that follows British colonial practice, and of Hurley’s interest in nationalism, is found in Father Bernard’s account of his time spent as a minister in Belfast and the Ardoyne (313-314).

<sup>9</sup> In place of fish are vast blooms of jellyfish; “no fish, no shrimp, nor shark, just jellies” (25). This, as Stacey Alaimo notes, is a feature of polluted waters worldwide. Alaimo, “Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics” 141.

<sup>10</sup> The name also recalls Saint Piran, patron saint of Cornwall, at which point the boy may be understood as representative of Cornish identity more broadly.

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