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ENGAGING STORY OR VALUABLE MESSAGE? THE ANTHROPOCENE IN ANNE BISHOP'S *OTHERS* BOOK SERIES

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Ecocriticism is a very popular current in literary criticism nowadays. It brings together literature and environmental studies into one interdisciplinary area of inquiry, which usually focuses on how literary works portray nature, ecology, as well as environmental and climate issues. One of the events that highly impacted its analyses is the introduction of the term Anthropocene into the discourse of literary studies. The aim of this article is to discuss ideas related to the Anthropocene as shown in the fantasy book series *Others* by Anne Bishop. This article presents the goals and mission of ecocritical texts and sets out to situate Bishop's novels in their context.

As a geological concept, the Anthropocene emerged in the 1960s, indicating an epoch dating back to the first time humans began to exert a significant impact on the Earth's geology, ecosystems, and even climate ("Anthropocene," *Merriam-Webster*). However, it was widely popularized as recently as in the year 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and limnologist Eugene F. Stoermer, who proposed using the term for the current geological epoch in order to emphasize the central role of mankind in the planet's geology and ecology (Rafferty). The concept quickly gained popularity in the ecological discourse, and with time, it also entered other areas of science, and eventually, the humanities. Due to these developments, different areas of human culture became objects of analyses using the lens of the Anthropocene and focusing on

the impact humans have on natural environments (Chua & Fair). One of such areas was literary narratives centred around or touching on the topic of nature in the world adapted to human needs.

As Hubert Zapf puts it, “literature and culture have always been responding to the state of crisis” (2). The Anthropocene discourse is indeed all about crisis, or rather many crises, of human perception and vision of the world. These cracks in our apprehension of reality may encompass phenomena such as the division between human culture and nature, the power relation between humans and other animate and inanimate elements of the world, the opposition between “us”—the humanity—and “it”—the natural world, and the role and mission of humankind. Despite the emphasis put on the intersection between the two worlds (human and natural), Gabriele Dürbeck points out that the role of the Anthropocene narratives is really to “question established human *self*-understandings,” as it is the key to understanding our dynamics with the rest of the world (28). This shows how the relation between the humankind and nature is a very unbalanced one, and how the dialogue between the two is often seen as more of a monologue. The reason for this might be the prevalence of the conviction that, as humans, we are entitled to being in charge and deciding about the future. Such a sentiment is shared across many cultures and religions. Morten Tønnessen and Kristin Armstrong Oma write in their Introduction to *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene*: “Once upon a time, in the Anthropocene (...) we were human, we were powerful, and we were the talk of town amidst the chitter and chatter of the global animal community, from beast to bone” (vii). This position of power and authority visible in many narratives is the precise issue that the Anthropocene-led criticism scrutinizes and challenges.

However, it should be mentioned that different kinds of literary fiction depict the Anthropocene and deal with its premises in different ways. Some narratives merely point out the problem of human arrogance and lack of broader perspective onto the dynamics between mankind and nature; they

could be called diagnosis fiction. Other texts prophesy the disastrous consequences of human actions and portray those as the end of the world as we know it or human extinction; these have the characteristics of cautionary tales. Yet others give hope and propose solutions to the (im)balance of power that has existed for centuries; one might call them instructive or solution-seeking stories. Although most theoretical approaches advocate for a place for each of those versions, it might be disputable whether the Anthropocene literature should primarily represent any one of them.

Gabriele Dürbeck distinguishes five types of the Anthropocene-focused narratives: the disaster or apocalypse narrative (corresponding to the cautionary tale); the court narrative (similar to the first, but focused on the issue of blame, liability, and bringing the culprits to justice); the “great transformation” (in which the negative effects can still be reversed if swift action takes place); the (bio-)technological (a more radical version of the “great transformation”, where large-scale interventions into the Earth systems are proposed); and the narrative of an interdependent nature-culture (which strives to rethink the notion of “mankind” from a posthumanist perspective, and challenges the philosophical dichotomy between humans and the environment, culture and nature) (28). These can be put onto more than one spectrum: the difference is not only in the content of the narrative, but also in the mission of its author, their tone, and the level of optimism in their approach.

It is important to notice that most of the Anthropocene-focused narratives inherently seek to show the present human approach to the state of our planet in a negative light, as one that brings more damage to the natural environment than benefits to the humanity in the long perspective. Dürbeck herself says that the Anthropocene stories “share the idea of humankind as the villain but provide utterly different morals” (26). Ursula Heise sees them as a chance for rethinking the role of the mankind and the rest of the world (which might be seen as corresponding to Dürbeck’s narrative of an interdependent nature-culture) (40). Donna Haraway states that “no species, not even our own

arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called Western modern scripts, acts alone" (159), and Tønnessen and Armstrong Oma define the next phase of history, dictated by the Anthropocene narratives, as one characterised by "vastly improved technology and environmental management, wise use of Earth's remaining resources, control of human and of domestic animal population, and overall careful treatment and restoration of the environment—in short, responsible stewardship of the Earth System" (xviii). This shows that although not all stories within this narrative framework propose the same courses of action and solutions, they all agree in their assessment of the situation, of its moral status, possible catastrophic consequences, and the need to resolve it before it is too late.¹

The way that ecocriticism approaches different stories about nature and its role in the world influences the way those stories are later presented in the mainstream discourse. It also shapes the overall discussion about the climate change and other ecological crises that become more and more important nowadays. Furthermore, the very minute details of such stories influence, often on a subconscious level, our vision of the relation between humans and the environment, and which of its elements we accentuate or dismiss. That is why, in this article, I will try to prove that one of the ways of changing the ecological debate for the better is striving to rethink and retell the story of humans and their place in this world through literary fiction. To support this statement, I shall discuss a fantasy series that tackles the issues of the environment in a world very similar to the real one.²

Anne Bishop's book series *Others* tells the story of a small community set in the fictional world of Namid. The depicted world to a great extent resembles ours in terms of its geography and history, but one significant difference is that nature has its sentient representatives here. Those can take a variety of forms, from shape-changers to vampires and other kinds of monsters, all of whom are called "Others." They are described as very dangerous, mistrustful of humans and keeping to themselves. The coexistence of humans and Others is described

as fragile and easily thrown out of balance, and the Others (and, more generally, nature) are—in contrast to the real world—at an advantage due to their strength, efficiency and ruthlessness. The plot takes place on a continent resembling North America, and space is clearly divided between humans, who live in towns and cities, and Others, who inhabit the wilderness. Territories belonging to humans are supervised by representatives of Others, who set up small, enclosed settlements called “Courtyards” on the verges of towns, where they carefully observe their domain.

The action of Bishop’s books takes place mainly in one such Courtyard, in the town of Lakeside, whose residents are one day visited by a young human woman, Meg. It soon turns out that she is on the run, having just escaped a closed facility for *cassandra sangue* (girls who can prophesy about the future after cutting their skin) where her abilities were abused and capitalised. Meg turns to Others for protection, applying for the post of a Human Liaison, a job that entails running the local delivery office, and settling in the Courtyard, where human laws and rules are not in force. The series pictures Meg and a handful of other human characters slowly gaining trust, and even friendship of the Others. Meanwhile, the antagonists, all human, try to harm the Lakeside community of the Others and the human protagonists associated with them, but time and time again they are outmanoeuvred, and often brutally neutralised. The majority of the human characters are depicted as middling and easily swayed towards discriminatory and hateful behaviours. The plot of the series includes the emergence of an anti-Others movement called “Humans First and Last,” causing the scheming against the protagonists to become more coordinated and interlinked. The events in other parts of the world are mentioned sporadically, but at one point they become an important element, as the actions of humans in the equivalent of Europe eventually force nature and the extremely powerful Others called Elders (the elements or the ocean) to take action—they cause mass natural cataclysms, which wipe the majority of the human population off the face of Namid.

This series features many ecological and Anthropocene-related elements and themes. However, some of the ways in which they are realised might prove problematic in the context of today's Anthropocene discourse. The first problem is the manner in which nature is endowed with agency. Personification of nature is a common practice among authors of fantasy or science-fiction works that aspire to provide ecological commentary, and through that help the reader to identify with nature and advocate for its rights. A frequent way of achieving such personification is introducing supernatural creatures who are strongly connected to the natural environment. An example of this could be Charles de Lint's novel, *Widdershins* (2006), in which Native spirits and European fairies represent different ecosystems coming into contact with one another (Łaszkiwicz 161-162). However, as some scholars point out, personification is a tool that imposes a human system of reference onto the story, which can be limiting, as it does not allow for imagining alternative kinds of agency. This anthropocentric empowerment also tends to distribute the responsibility for the course of history more evenly, as the supernatural beings are treated as co-responsible for it. Such is the case in Bishop's *Others*, where, from the anthropocentric perspective, a part of the blame for the conflict between humans and nature falls onto the supernatural creatures, too. Since they are intelligent, and have behaved hostilely towards humans, seeing them as inferior, one cannot avoid the thought that maybe they could have done better as well. The difference between our world and the fictitious world of Namid is that the existence of *Others* and their actions and reactions to human activities make it easy for the series' antagonists to dissolve the responsibility for the developments and natural disasters that humans caused. In reality a similar process is visible in trying to dissolve responsibility for climate crisis, by attributing some of the changes to natural processes, such as volcanic activity. Such an approach clearly goes against the common feature of most Anthropocene narratives as outlined by Dürbeck, Heise and Haraway, that is the undeniable fault of humanity's arrogance and excessive power.

Bishop's books build strongly upon the division between different groups of characters. Among people, there are the good ones, who try to compromise and negotiate with the Others, and the bad ones, who do not understand the distribution of forces, and do everything in their power to antagonise the Others and the human citizens of Lakeside. Others, too, are divided into the ones who make the effort to communicate with their human associates, and those who advocate for displays of power and limiting the contact to the absolute minimum. And finally, even the positive human characters split into those who live *with* the Others, and those who live *next to* them. Those who are admitted into the inner circle of the Courtyard are almost exclusively people with supernatural abilities. Some of them are *cassandra sangue*, like Meg. Some, mentioned throughout the books, are Intuits—local communities of people endowed with exceptional intuition, who in their description resemble the Indigenous peoples of the Americas:

Finally, Henry said, "There is no police force on Great Island. Not like there is in Lakeside. The Intuits who live in Ferryman's Landing aren't the same kind of humans as the Simple Life folk. Or you." (Bishop 102)

The Intuits might be human, but their instincts were, in some ways, closer to those of the *terra indigene*. And their ability to sense things before something happened? How did that compare with Meg's ability to speak prophecy? (Bishop 106)

It is clear that the Intuits are considered different from "normal" humans and in some ways similar to the series' protagonist. It also seems that the only way to get truly accepted by the Others (here referred to as *terra indigene*) is to possess unique magical powers. It is not to say that the Others try to exploit these characters and their talents but rather, their strong bond with nature and natural forces is highlighted. However, it is worth pondering this situation in terms of fairness and agency. It is not enough to try your best, be friendly, polite, and fight against the discriminatory human adversaries—one needs to have a special trait, too, one that they have no power or choice over, to gain Others' protection and sympathy. Naturally, this problem constitutes an

extension of the one discussed before—giving nature anthropomorphic agency, and thus, liability—as it further dissolves the responsibility for natural history. Moreover, such deep emphasis on the role of divisions strongly contrasts with the idea in the Anthropocene discourse that humans and the natural environment belong together and that we should try to bridge the gulf torn between them by our actions and our narratives. Bishop's story does not inspire to renounce the traditional nature-humans division but rather seems to accentuate and create new partitions.

From the linguistic point of view, the very word "Others" is also loaded with meaning. The use of the word "other" in naming a major group of characters immediately evokes philosophical connotations. According to Edmund Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology, the notion of the "Other" is a conceptualisation of a being that is separate from the "Self," and is often ascribed negative characteristics and unwanted traits ("Edmund Husserl"). The perception and understanding of the Others in Bishop's novels have the same qualities. Humans feel that the supernatural dangerous creatures are different from themselves, so they name them "Others," which in turn makes them feel even more separate and dissimilar. In fact, both groups see each other as dangerous, unpredictable, savage, and cruel. The word "Others" has the power of fuelling the conflict between them. It also serves as an excellent excuse for caring only for one's own interests, self-idealisation and lack of self-insight, escalating fear, marginalisation, and violence towards the "common enemy."

The problematic issues of divisions governing the plotline of the series and of personification entail another one—that of the reader's identification with the characters. If most human characters behave in a discriminatory way, it is only natural that the readers do not want to see themselves as this majority. They identify with Meg, or other protagonists in this story, and want to believe that they would do the right thing if such a conflict with nature took place. After all, in the world of *Others*, people are shown as irrational, angry, greedy, hateful, and just evil, while also eventually playing the part of the victims of Elders'

well-deserved wrath and punishment. Instead of depicting nature as it exists in reality, and encouraging the reader to sympathise with it, Bishop writes the story from the anthropocentric perspective, at the same time personifying nature and vilifying humankind. Combined with the completely reversed balance of power between humans and nature in her series, it is very difficult to learn any lesson and change any course of action after reading the novels, because readers see themselves as someone on the nature's side, not as part of the "bad humans." The clash of humanity and nature is a completely different kind of conflict in those two worlds—fictional and real.

Within literature engaging with the Anthropocene a large trend devoted to the issues of colonialism and postcolonialism can be distinguished. It discusses the allocation of responsibility for the planet's current state among different ethnic and racial groups. According to Davis and Todd, in America, the mainstream discourse around the climate change and ecological crisis often overlooks how the deterioration of land, water and air was mainly the result of three big phenomena gaining momentum: colonialism, industrialism, and capitalism (771). All of those were brought to America by white people, but their consequences are suffered equally by all inhabitants, also those from Black and Native American communities.³ The problem of Indigenous people's blame or lack of it in the course of destroying the natural environment is a widely discussed one. In *Others* the presence of the aforementioned Intuits in the narrative arc sheds light on this issue. Their role in contacts with Others is a positive one, but the problem of their supernatural powers arises once again. Their noble character, innocence, and candour seem to stem just as much from their magical connection to nature as from their conscious decisions and lifestyle choices. Their similarity to the real Indigenous peoples contributes also to the already widespread mythicisation of the latter in popular culture. The series depicts them as withdrawn from the rest of society and somewhat mysterious. It does not help in dismantling and disarming the colonial point of view, in which Native Americans were often portrayed as uncivilised and

savage, or later fiction's idealisation of them as highly ethical and moral peoples, and their culture as mystical and spiritualistic. The ability to rise above human cognition due to their belief system made it all too easy to admire them on a superficial level, while at the same time denying them human dignity and treating as second-class community. This characterisation appears already in the first conversation about the Intuits in the books:

“They are the humans who have a sense of the world the rest of you lack, an ability to feel what is around them and recognize danger or opportunity before it is obvious. They were often killed because other humans believed such an ability must be evil. Even now, they keep to themselves and feel safer living in a human settlement controlled by the *terra indigene* than they do living in a city controlled by your kind.”
(Bishop 102)

The separateness of Intuits from the rest of humans is also explicitly articulated:

Now he studied Henry. “Why did you tell the police about the Intuits? They hide among the *terra indigene* to escape from the humans who hate them.”

Henry nodded. “Long ago, they were hated for their abilities. It would be good to know if they still are.” (Bishop 106)

Clearly, Intuits share a great amount of misunderstanding, exoticisation, rejection and trauma with the existing Indigenous peoples and minority groups. What highlights this presentation even more is the author's narrative choice to describe them through the words of the Lakeside Others. It provides an outside perspective on the motivations of the oppressors—one of non-human sentient beings. Thus, the issues of agency and identification resurface again —the prejudice against the Intuit community is shown as something irrational and typical of humans. Such an outlook strengthens the readers' identification with the non-human characters even more, which may divert their attention from the fact that, again, the readers are in reality more likely to make the same mistakes and be prone to the same fallacies as the antagonists of the series.

Taking into account all those problematic issues that the series presents, one cannot help but ask about the purpose of such approach and what it is that the author gains by sacrificing, misrepresenting and oversimplifying so many issues, and problematic ones at that. The answer seems to be: for the sake of the story. The primary purpose of Bishop's novels is to be interesting and for the plot to be immersive. This is much easier achieved by creating a story of scheming, of blame and punishment, and of villains being finally brought to justice, than by striving to redefine deeply rooted conceptual divisions and present a nuanced picture. As the very idea of a story is based on conflict in the Western culture, reading about it is much more entertaining and satisfying than an attempt at amending the wrongs and reconciling the conflicted parties. However, it is a concession that the author is making. And although the story is not harmful, and even points to ecological problems, its reading of the Anthropocene reveals a lot of problems in the presentation of the issues discussed here. Even though the personification of nature's agents and the coexistence of Others and humans could seemingly place the novels in Dürbeck's fifth category of stories (the narrative of an interdependent nature-culture), it is in fact an example of the apocalyptic narrative, where nature's agency and intelligence understood in anthropomorphic terms does not help in solving the conflict, but seems to exacerbate the problem even more, so that the plot line is exciting enough for the demanding reader.

To conclude, in her series *Others*, Anne Bishop creates a world whose problems are at the same time very similar and very far away from ours. Transferring the methods of solving those problems, and the attitude towards them, into our thinking about ecology can prove to be a misguided idea, as it provides more difficulties than solutions to the already existing problems. Despite my criticism of the books, Bishop's portrayal of ecological concerns, although not unproblematic, is still a valid effort to spotlight the role of nature and our environment in our lives and history. It also shows how the concept of

the Anthropocene can be employed to analyse the widest range of topics and narratives.

Endnotes

1. It should be noted that this perspective concerns chiefly the mainstream Western writing.
2. The reason I have chosen the fantasy genre is that because of its unrealistic convention, many problems connected with nature, and thus world-building, are exaggerated or more striking. This makes the readers pay closer attention to the ecological side of the story and facilitates a clear ecocritical argumentation line.
3. Frequently, to an even greater extent by the Indigenous groups.

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Abstract

Anne Bishop's *Others* is a fantasy book series following the peripeteias of a small American-like community. The series is set in a fictional world, whose biggest difference from ours could be defined as "nature being given fangs," as the non-human characters, i.e., the titular Others, protect their natural habitat against human influence and damage. They are supervised by ancient Elders and aided by human characters with supernatural abilities.

This article approaches the book series from the ecological perspective, trying to establish how its elements correspond with the premises of the Anthropocene. The main tenet of *Others*—the evened-out struggle between nature and (most of) humankind—may at first glance make it appear easily interpretable with regard to the Anthropocene concept. Yet, further exploration of particular themes and developments renders the series' central message more ambiguous in the light of the Anthropocene studies.

The article presents different types of narratives in terms of their interpretation of the Anthropocene, their common features, and the message they strive to deliver. Then, it examines the relation between the natural environment and humanity as proposed by Anne Bishop, including the inner divisions on both sides, the presence of Indigenous people's equivalent, and the introduction of the philosophical category of the Other in the characters' perception of one another. The end goal of this literary analysis is to juxtapose the story's immersion and its reader's satisfaction against the environmental values and lessons included in it.