

## Navigating the Restless “boundaries of migration”: Ruth Padel’s *The Mara Crossing* as a “matter-realist” Exploration of the Border between the Human and the Nonhuman

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### Abstract

My inquiry into borders as a critical figure or zone for exploring the relation between the human and the nonhuman will focus on Ruth Padel’s *The Mara Crossing* (2012), a mixed genre work of alternating prose and lyric poem sequences on the theme of animal, vegetal, mineral, and human migration that itself moves fluidly across the frontiers between poetry and prose, human and animal journeys, present and past, art and history. Following on from Susan Stanford Friedman’s 1998 feminist examination, in her book *Mappings*, of the border as a problematic, permeable, liminal space of in-betweenness, which confounds the dualisms that define sexual and ethnic identities even as it enables them, the essay will draw on more recent new materialist theories such as Rosi Braidotti’s philosophy of nomadic “becoming”. Focus will be on the multiple border crossings performed by the human and nonhuman constituencies on the move in Padel’s composite work.

### Keywords

Anthropocene – becoming-with – bio-egalitarianism – intra-action – migration – non-human – new materialism – poetics

Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge.

DONNA HARAWAY<sup>1</sup>

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1 Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”, *Environmental Humanities* 6-1, Jan. 2015, 160.

As Susan Stanford Friedman observed in 1998, “Border talk is everywhere – literal and figural, material and symbolic” (Friedman 3). Borders, she argues, are inseparable from our ideas about who we are, and “[i]dentity is in fact unthinkable without some sort of imagined or literal boundary” (*ibid.*). As a concept, the border is intrinsic to our ideas about identity and difference, superiority and inferiority; it figures the separation or, in Karen Barad’s words, “the Cartesian cut between subject and object” (Barad 2012, 77) which informs the duality inherent in human consciousness and leads to the parsing of the world into the mostly binary categories of self/other, male/female, culture/nature, inside/outside, subject/object, human/nonhuman. Yet even as they divide and separate, erecting categorical and material walls between individuals, groups, and nations, borders insist on connection, writes Friedman. Permeable and problematic, borders are valued as ambivalent, liminal zones of in-betweenness, “interstitial site[s] of interaction, interconnection, and exchange” which offer “new ways of thinking that negotiate beyond the conventional boundaries of us and them, white and other, First World and Third World, men and women, oppressor and oppressed, fixity and fluidity”. It is in these “symbiotic, syncretist, interactive formations in the borderlands in between difference” that Friedman made her bid to “reinvent a singular feminism ... that assumes difference without reifying or fetishizing it” (Friedman 3–4).

Nearly two decades later, in what Rosi Braidotti has dubbed “the schizoid economy of our times” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 247) characterized by rapid globalisation on the one hand and the resurgence of hypernationalisms on the other (Braidotti in Buchanan and Parr 2006), the ambivalence of the border as a figure with which to rethink relations of difference and divide whilst challenging reifying and binarist ways of thinking has lost none of its relevance. While technoscientific innovations and the transnational movement of capital, goods, and information flow seamlessly across national barriers, walls are thrown up within and around “Fortress Europe” and along the Mexico/US border in a bid to stem the flow of irregular migrants that has intensified in the wake of rising inequalities between “the West and the Rest” and the displacement of peoples due to war and economic immiseration. Meanwhile, newly disorienting pressures brought about by anthropogenic climate change – collapsing ecosystems, oceanic pollution, and the accelerating extinction of species – transcend national borders and bring into sharper focus the relation of interdependence and inter- or intra-action<sup>2</sup> between humans and the natural environment.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Karen Barad (2007 and 2012). Barad explains her neologism as “*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*.” That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction”, which assumes that there

The fluidity of the divide between nature and culture, humans and their nonhuman or “earth” others, has been wrested from the critical shadows by recent work in ecocriticism,<sup>3</sup> animal studies,<sup>4</sup> and posthumanism, as well as the recently proclaimed “nonhuman turn,”<sup>5</sup> all fields premised on the intertwinement and codependence of human and nonhuman actors, as Rita Felski has shown (Felsi 2015, 737–742). Enshrined in Donna Haraway’s well-known “natureculture” coinage (Haraway 2003), the fragile and porous boundary between the human and the nonhuman is also the focus of contemporary neo-materialist approaches as exemplified by Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, who, in extending the poststructuralist dismantling of dualisms to the human/nonhuman divide, decentre the human and unsettle anthropocentric mind-sets. In the words of Donna Haraway, “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism [have] become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social... Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with” (Haraway 2016, 30). Instead, a new idea of “the human” emerges as an endangered species alongside other nonhuman categories, relocated in a rhizomic continuum with non-anthropomorphic or earth “others” in recognition of what Braidotti calls a “deep bio-egalitarianism” (*Nomadic Theory*, 134 and 222). This ontological “flattening” recomposes the human and the nonhuman around a “commonly shared bond of vulnerability” (Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 111) in face of the destructive consequences of human actions upon the environment in the age of the Anthropocene. “Both the scale and the consequences of climate change are so momentous as to defy representation”, writes Braidotti, but she believes that the humanities and cultural research can “fill in this deficit of the social imaginary and help us think the unthinkable” (*ibid.*, 160). And “think we must!” charges Haraway (reprising Virginia Woolf’s famous line in *Three Guineas*) in her latest book which

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are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad 2007, 33 emphasis added). The notion has implications for anthropocentric exceptionalism insofar as, by unsettling (or “queering”, to use Barad’s term), “the familiar sense of causality where one or more causal agents precede or produce an effect”, it also “unsettles the metaphysics of individualism (the belief that there are individually constituted agents or entities, as well as times and places)” (Barad 2012, 77).

- 3 Cf. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1997); Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011).
- 4 Cf. David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (2011); Cary Wolfe, ed. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (2003); Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies – The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (2008).
- 5 See Richard Grusin, ed. *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015).

urges us to “stay with the trouble” by finding new “geostories” with which to tell our “times of multispecies, including human, urgency” (Haraway 130 and 40 and 35).

How one contemporary British poet, the classics scholar, activist, conservationist, and great-great-grand-daughter of Charles Darwin, Ruth Padel, goes about “thinking” our posthuman relations to the material world we share with multispecies “critters”<sup>6</sup> that are on the move around the globe is the focus of this essay. In *The Mara Crossing*, a 2012 collection of alternating lyric poems and prose interludes on the theme of migration, Ruth Padel “stays with the trouble” of today’s migratory flows of people and animals by seeking out figurations for the shared vulnerability and material entanglement of Earth’s nomadic subjects, be they human or animal, mineral or vegetal, fungal or viral. Re-contextualising the problematic of migration in its historical and biological perspectives, the essays and poems enact a new imaginary of our shifting, unstable global conditions and impress upon the reader the extent to which, as Rosi Braidotti puts it, “we’ are in *this* together” (*Nomadic Theory* 222). The eponymous border-crossing that gives its name to the collection is the Mara River in the Masai region of Kenya, locus of one of the largest animal migrations in the world where thousands of gazelles, zebra, and wildebeest hurl themselves into the crocodile-infested river at the end of their arduous trek from the arid Serengeti in a bid to reach the phosphorus-rich grazing lands that lie beyond. The crossing is a site of slaughter as well as the promise of new life, and the phonetic accident of the river’s name, “Mara”, which, Padel tells us, resembles the Latin word for “bitter”, allows it to stand in the book as a dual emblem of “struggle, barriers and obstacles, but also the triumph of survival”.<sup>7</sup> These are the mainstays of all migration stories, from that of the primeval “First Cell” (10) migrating and multiplying to generate new life on earth (the subject of one of the early poems), to the extinction of entire species that have reached “The End of the Line” (188), and even to the “transmigration of the soul” after death (238). “The cell and the soul”, writes Padel. “Those are the boundaries of migration” (9).

Within these boundaries of birth and death, the poems are arranged following an ostensibly teleological order, starting with cellular migrations at the microbiological level, moving onto bird and animal migration, the historical

6 Haraway’s term for all life forms. “All critters share a common ‘flesh’, laterally, semiotically, and genealogically.” Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene”, *op. cit.*, 162.

7 Ruth Padel, *The Mara Crossing*, First Edition, Chatto and Windus, 2012, 217. Subsequent quotations from *The Mara Crossing* will be given parenthetically.

displacement of people and peoples through exile or colonisation, emigration or immigration, and closing with a series of poems inspired by the diasporic experiences of today's refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrant workers. As David Farrier has pointed out, such an "ascending" organisation "problematically puts non-human migrations in the service of enlightening understanding of human migrations" (Farrier 2016, 49–50) and indeed, Padel is quite explicit about the political ambition of her book to elicit sympathy and tolerance for today's displaced peoples. She wrote in *The Guardian*, "The poems about today's mass migrations and national responses to them – security guards, deportations, fishing smacks filled with dying refugees limping in among tourists to the Canary Islands – were the political point of the book".<sup>8</sup> However, if one aim of the collection is to foster empathy and understanding for today's human migrants through an appreciation of the fact that "we're all / from somewhere else" (*The Mara Crossing*, "First Cell" 10), a broader achievement is to urge on our attention new definitions of territory and of belonging to a shared but damaged world. We could call this, with Braidotti, a "matter-realist" poetics (*Nomadic Theory* 127–149) of becoming, becoming-with (Haraway 12) or becoming-world(ly), something Haraway defines as becoming "more alert to the demands of significant otherness at all the scales that making more livable worlds demands" (Haraway and Wolfe 2016, 152) and Braidotti as a process that involves "redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space. It expresses multiple ecologies of belonging" (*Nomadic Theory* 94). Any apparent anthropocentrism in the collection's organisation is offset, I suggest, by the delineation within its pages of an alternative, restless cartography of intersecting ontologies whose overlapping contours and boundaries insist on the multispecies commonality of migration. They offer a sense of the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman – not in any romantic or organicist sense of a supposed unity of mind and nature, of microcosm and macrocosm which would restore humankind's alienated self-consciousness to some kind of psychic wholeness, but more as what political ecologist Jane Bennett calls the "messy" "entanglements between human and nonhuman materialities" that confound the comfortable categories we use to make sense of our place in the world, an awareness of which might help us to "promote greener forms of human culture" (Bennett 2010, 115 and x) and find more sustainable or "ongoing" ways of living on our damaged planet (Haraway 132).<sup>9</sup>

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/21/ruth-padel-migration-open-weekend>. Accessed 10 September 2016.

9 Haraway's inquiry in *Staying with the Trouble* is into artistic practices that are "on the side of... 'ongoingness': that is, nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together

The awareness that “[w]e were all wanderers once” (1) presides over the poetic universe Padel explores, one animated by multiple agencies, human and nonhuman, and criss-crossed by the deterritorialising lines of flight of spores and seeds, cells and sea creatures, birds and mammals, as well as humans. “Migration moves you into a disoriented world which doesn’t add up in the way you are used to. You have to start putting things together in a new way”, she writes (152) in what could be a statement of the poet’s artistic agenda. Through striking juxtapositions and processes of defamiliarisation, in registers which straddle the conventional disciplinary and generic boundaries between science and art, history and biology, prose and poetry, Padel’s “matter-realist” poems and essays creatively instantiate these new ways of “putting things together” that forge links between ontologies, entities and beings not previously seen to be connected.

## 1 Lines of Flight Across a Restless Cartography

*The Mara Crossing* tells the story of migration as a process of creative tension between fixity and movement, with the need to put down *roots* vying with the compulsion to set off down uncharted *routes* leading to “new life”:

Trees and plants are rooted, but their migration created the forests: their very existence is the result of movement. Cells migrate in the body but stay safely (otherwise we’d all be in trouble) inside it. Migration is part of the restless, constantly self-renewing nature of all life, in creative tension between the fixed and the wandering. (17)

The migrant subjects of the collection include prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells splitting apart in a process of creative destruction, “breaking bonds and creating new ones with a swift, enormous violence” (9), confounding inside and outside, “genetic code exposed / on the outside of their home” (“Dance of the Prokaryotes” 11). Elsewhere, the story of the humble apple is one of transcorporeal (Alaimo 2010) ingestion and expulsion across bodily and earthly boundaries, “interaction between plants, animals and people whose horses trod pips into the soil of forests and plains” (19). In “Flight of the Apple”, the emphasis is on the constitutive and transformative intra-action of human and nonhuman life across vast swathes of space and time as the apple seed is

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ways for living and dying well with each other in the tissues of an earth whose very habitability is threatened”.

transported from its origins in “heaven’s mountain Tien Shan, / heaving itself into the air above the snowline” to “an underworld of caves” in floods and in the guts of bears “whose lazy sorcery / turns hawthorn bullets into quince / and apple. Because everyone, given time, / changes everyone else”. The “invisible orchards” contained in the apple pip carried in the dung of “the wild red / long-maned horse of the Lascaux Cave // whose teeth and gut help this pip / on its adventure”, seed the founding cultural narratives of Western humanist civilisation, and lead

...to William Tell  
 protesting an unjust edict,  
 Newton dozing in a Cambridge garden,  
 to Eden, to Eve. So apples sprang  
 wherever we tamed the horse. (27)

Vegetable, animal and human life, the material and the discursive, mingle and mutually shape one another across bodily and territorial boundaries that are thick but permeable. This is a world of restless matter on the move where all the actors are following different road maps. At times the maps overlap as all seek the shortest route: “If you superimposed human and avian journeys on a world map, many lines would become one. Over the Strait of Gibraltar, over the Bosphorus or coming up from South America to North, human migrants face the same hostile planet as birds” (209). But the natural barriers and geomagnetic lines along which nonhuman migrants steer their course rarely coincide with man-made road maps or geopolitical frontiers. In “Road Closed to Save Mating Toads”, the toads’ disregard for slip roads and electricity lines as they crawl unstoppably to their mating ground is rendered formally in run-on lines that enact a prosodic severing of “power / lines” while the inexorable syntax straddles the artificial division of the poem into two nine-line stanzas:

...When they reach the water they begin to sing  
 and to this male-voice chorus, trilling away  
 like nobody’s business, come the amber-eyed females  
 drawn from the silent woods by a fusion  
 of phonotaxis, trigonometry and hormones.  
 It’s a life and death affair, this half-mile crawl  
 in straight lines, toes spread for good contact  
 with earth, struggling through rough grass, power  
 lines, slip roads and a motorway... (94).



These nonhuman migrants inscribe the world in ways that are very different from humans’ inscription of the globe. Millions of migrating birds following “ancient routes, nothing to do with human frontiers” (31) “weave worlds together” (201) whereas man-made borders and other technoscientific implantations score and scar the face of the Earth, dividing and sundering like from like, be it the UK Border control desk in “Immigration Counter and the Gates of Ivory” (226) where an elderly Nigerian passenger is refused entry and, like “a gentian blossom / is forcibly removed”, or the deadly blades of wind turbines in “Farming the Wind” which exact a devastating toll on migrating birds unable to read the human “wind atlas / we consult as we position our turbine”:

White cutlass on a space march to nowhere.  
Knives hidden in cloud – slicing thorax,  
breast muscle, wings and liver  
of osprey, plover, peregrine –  
creating this spectral litter  
of dead and dying biological masterpieces. (201)

In a further illustration that “we live today in the midst of a great dying” (181) which is largely anthropogenic, we are invited to ponder the lethal entanglement of human and nonhuman life in the critical eco-tones where “Indian elephants are hit by trains running across their migration corridors” (182) or where the border fence running between the US and Mexico “destroys animal habitats and stops animals migrating or reaching water” (206). Such scenes stage the violent encounter of what Rosi Braidotti calls *bios* – life as a specifically human capacity to construct a discursive, social nexus, as instantiated perhaps by the “wind atlas” that allows us to “farm the wind” – with nonhuman *technos* (the slicing turbines and railways) and *zoe*, the “mindless vitality of life carrying on independently, regardless of rational control” (*Nomadic Theory* 99). *Zoe* as a nonhuman force of generative vitality “that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated domains” (92) is instantiated in *The Mara Crossing* in the lines of flight of migrating species that criss-cross the globe in a “complex global knitting-pattern of flyways” (38) that overlays and intersects the fixity of man-made borders with an alternative network of mobile and provisional loops. Such a network of unsuspected connections is disclosed in the poem entitled “The Watcher” in which the poet-as-scientist-cum-bird-watcher is able, thanks to a “radio transmitter / fitted in east Germany”, to trace on a computer screen the flight of a white stork from Europe to Africa, revealing a “pixellated map” that cuts across and overwrites the cartography of sovereign



states and human conflicts in favour of an alternative map defined by the geomagnetic coordinates of the earth's rotation:

One mouse click and a red vine grows  
 over eastern Europe, Eilat and Sudan to Chad  
 tracing the flight of magnetite, lodged between white stork skull and  
 white stork brain,  
 held to Earth's magnetic field over mountains, sea,  
 fumes from the cities, frontier guns,  
 a thousand no-man's-lands, a thousand wars. (49)

The sense of affinity between poet and bird, enabled by the prosthetically-enhanced satellite vision that allows the modern-day Audubon to “retrace that juvenile's first journey”, is heightened by the beating of the human Watcher's heart in time with the pulsating tracking device that itself replicates the bird's vitality: “The pulsar, monitored by satellite, / flashes at the frequency of my heart”. Human heart and stork skull, satellite and magnetite: the human and the animal, the machinic and the mineral work together here in a cyborgian “assemblage” (cf. Bennett *op. cit.*; Latour 2010) of *technos*, *bios*, and *zoe* to offer us not so much a “view from above” as a situated “view from a body” (Haraway 1988, 589). Or rather, from a Latourian assemblage of bodies, organic and inorganic, that remaps the globe in terms no longer defined by sovereign states framed by sharp borders (Latour 2016, 320), but by that which, crossing all borders, weaves a meshwork of “intertwined cosmos-networks” that extend beyond artificially insulating geopolitical boundaries much as do the causes and effects of climate change – CO<sub>2</sub>, air pollution, and refugees – that demand to be attended to.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 From Sharp Borders to a Foliated Frontier

In this geomagnetic remapping of the globe, Padel foregrounds the mineral magnetite as a major actor not only shaking up our anthropocentric view of the geopolitical borders and boundaries that shape our world, but also deterritorializing – Braidotti might say “nomadizing” (*Nomadic Theory* 223) – our

<sup>10</sup> My reading of the redefinition of territories is inspired by talks given by Bruno Latour at Duke University in 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJZFJwIFsp4>) and at the COP21 conference *Comment penser l'anthropocène?* entitled “The notion of ‘Critical Zones’ and the Redefinition of Territories”, 5–6 November 2016 <http://www.fondationcolo.org/l-anthropocene/video>.

understanding of our attachments to and orientations within territorial space. Elsewhere in the collection, magnetite is instrumental in unsettling the ontological boundaries between organic and inorganic entities, and between the material and the semiotic. Padel traces the history of magnetite from its mythical discovery in Magnesia in Asia Minor, supposedly by a shepherd named Magnes, via the story of the emigrant scientist Heinz Lowenstam who in 1961 discovered the mineral lodged in the brains and bodies of certain animals where it was found to play an important role in the migrating behaviour of a whole range of life-forms “from birds to bees, crocodiles, tuna, fungi, sea turtles, fruit flies, sharks and lobsters” (55). The significance of the discovery lies in the blow dealt to the imagined boundary between the organic and the inorganic, the sentient and the non-sentient: “Until 1961 magnetic rock was a static, inorganic thing which paradoxically caused other inorganic things to move ... but in 1975 magnetite was discovered in another life form, magnetotactic bacteria, which swung into line along earth’s magnetic field. Biomineralism was accepted as a new fact of life” (54–55). This “new fact of life” is taken up in poetic vein in the poem “Lodestone”, the old English word for magnetic rock, in which the speaker is “the ‘leading’ stone” itself, the prime mover and shape-shifter that traverses the ontological divides that separate the mythical from the historical, the human from the animal, the organic from the inorganic:

#### LODESTONE

**I am** Magnes the shepherd who found a pebble  
 stuck to a nail in his boot and discovered the mineral  
*Attract*. **I am** Heinz Lowenstam, geologist from Silesia  
 who identified magnetite in tooth caps  
 of a homing mollusc. **I am** magnetotactic bacteria  
 knitted with crystals which orient to earth’s  
 magnetic field. **I am** also your garden robin  
 who reads geomagnetic lines the way you scan  
 a newspaper, navigating folded thunderclouds at night  
 by neural pathways of Cluster N wired to my left eye  
 from light-processing regions of the brain.  
**I am** the photoreceptor protein which draws young  
 monarch butterflies hatched on a month-long  
 journey to the same old Mexican forest their ancestors knew.  
**I am** salamander, spiny lobster, bee, crocodile and whale  
 and also that flock of cranes passing silently over the moon.  
**I am** fish, mammal, fungi, and bird. **I am** two billion years

of life-forms steering by the minerals of which I am made  
and molecular feel for the pull of the earth.

*What about us, poor wanderers with no inner compass?*

You inscribe the globe. You map, you have words,  
you foresee your death. Isn't that enough?

(186, emphasis added)

This poem insists on the material-semiotic nature of our being in the world. Navigation by sensitivity to the earth's magnetic field is figured as an alternative mode of inscribing and reading the world that is radically "other" to the representational mode of human semiosis and cartography. As Felski writes, citing Latour, hermeneutics is not a privilege of humans but, so to speak, a property of the world itself (Felski 740). Conversely, the "words" humans have instead of magnetite exert no less of a material "pull" than that "of the earth", having a strong orienting function analogous to magnetite, which Padel acknowledges in the prose run-up to the poem:

We are like but also unlike the nature which surrounds us. Animals use magnetite to respond to earth's magnetic field; we don't. Scientists recently found magnetite in human brain tissue, but don't know what it's doing there. It may be doing nothing and is merely a by-product of the way our tissues handle molecules of iron.

*But we have words instead. We give 'directions'; we tell each other where to go.* (182, emphasis added).

As Timothy Clark has observed, more than a mere tool, language is better seen as a material environment that we humans "cannot choose to step out of... and somehow orient ourselves in the world without it... Language is rather a kind of decisive environment out of which we define ourselves" (Clark 2011, 54). Clark makes the point that our linguistic environment expresses the weight of centuries of oppressively anthropocentric modes of thought and perception, human exceptionalism having traditionally been erected on the site of language. Man is the *zōon logon echon*, the animal having discourse, who "inscribe[s] the globe", who "map[s]" and "ha[s] words" ("Lodestone"). Lacking in language, animals in Western thought have traditionally been the boundary markers of the metaphysical uniqueness of the human subject, the gatekeepers that police the liminal zone between the human and its nonhuman others. But the antepenultimate italicized line of the poem – "*What about us, poor wanderers with no inner compass?*" – spoken in the plaintive voice of the magnetite-bereft human, articulates a different kind of lack that strikes a

chastening blow at fantasies of human mastery through language. If indeed, as Derrida puts it, language marks "the limit between Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A" (Derrida and Wills, 2002 398), it is a limit, he adds, "about which we have had a stomachful", that woefully fails to account for the heterogeneous multiplicity of the forms and relations that pertain among and within, as well as between, the animal and human life ranged on either side of the divide. For Derrida, this privative definition of difference solely in terms of what nonhuman animals "lack" is "not simply a sin against rigorous thinking" but also "a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals" that effectively entrenches dogmatic anthropocentrism (416). He proposes instead that we attend to the "limitrophe" nature of the human-animal border not as "a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line" conveying "the number, form, sense, or structure, the foliated consistency of this abyssal limit, these edges, this plural and repeatedly folded frontier" (399).<sup>11</sup>

The "geostory" told in "Lodestone", with its alternative semiosis proper to the manifold nonhuman subjects that "read geomagnetic lines the way you scan / a newspaper, navigating folded thunderclouds at night", speaks to this Derridean imagery of the internally divided line and the foliated frontier in which human discourse would be just one of multiple "folds" of being. A sense of the enfolding of *bios* and *zoe* is conveyed throughout the poem in the interleaving of the magnetic "I am" among multiple subject-positions across the human-nonhuman divide in a manner that places the human in a diffusive "natureculture continuum" (*The Posthuman* 65) with the mineral, fungal, bacterial, animal, and insect ontologies of lobster, bee, crocodile, whale etc. This "matter-realist" poetics registers the liveliness and distributed agency of the nonhuman in a manner that is consonant with New Materialist conceptualisations of materiality and corporeality as defined by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost for whom "all bodies, including those of animals (and perhaps certain machines, too), evince certain capacities for agency. ... [H]uman intelligence emerges within a spectrum of vital materializations... From this perspective, the difference between humans and animals, or even between sentient and nonsentient matter, is a question of degree more than of kind" (Coole and Frost 2010, 20–21). In this way the New Materialist, or "matter-realist", turn emphasises the extent to which all bodies are "kin" in the sense of being

11 Using a similar nonlinear spatial image of the field, Cary Wolfe invites us to see the "lack" of human language among nonhuman animals less as a privation than as "a difference in *degree* on a continuum of signifying processes disseminated in a field of materiality, technicality and contingency, of which 'human' language is a specific (albeit highly refined) instance" (Wolfe, *Zoontologies*, *op. cit.*, 35).

inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations or “multiple ecologies of belonging” (Bennett 2010, 13; Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 193).<sup>12</sup>

### 3 The Other Within

*The Mara Crossing* is among other things an invitation to us to embrace our multispecies kinship with naturalized “other” constituencies, including disparaged or under-acknowledged “kin” like malaria-causing plasmodium, syphilis or cyanobacteria. Padel therefore adopts “a parasite’s point of view” (20) to tell the provocative geostory of symbiogenesis or becoming-with (Haraway 2016), in which human evolution is not only inseparable from, but shaped by and dependent upon parasites, bacteria and viruses, the body’s harmful others, outsiders, and intruders, which migrated alongside (and inside) humans and “drove evolution” (19) by forcing their hosts to adapt to survive. That “[w]e all descend from primeval slime” (7) is one of the book’s axiomatic premises that urges upon us a sense of the “common materiality of all that is” (Bennett 2010, 122): “The parasites which survived were those that spread into more and better places to live. ... We, mosquitoes and *Plasmodium* evolved and spread together”, Padel reminds us (21). This naturalcultural story about the symbiotic “intimacy of strangers”<sup>13</sup> tells of the alien residence taken up in our bodies by the “other within”. The colonies of bacteria that inhabit and make up the human microbiome while having nothing in their genetic code that could be called “human”, express the “‘alien’ quality of our own flesh [that is] populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners” (Bennett 112). Padel points out how our common metaphors stigmatize a disease like syphilis as “the unwelcome immigrant, coming from somebody and somewhere else” (20). Yet the variety of xenophobic monikers that name the disease points to the impossibility of isolating otherness or parsing out-side and in-side along a stable border, which is constantly displaced from one constituency to another: “France

12 I am aware that reading Padel alongside current New Materialist thinkers runs the risk of making the poet appear to be merely exemplifying current critical theory. While there is no evidence that Padel is familiar with New Materialism (although her wide-ranging intellect and scientific eclecticism mean this is not impossible), the points of intersection in the matters of concern of both poet and theorists are nevertheless indicative of the *zeitgeist* of our Anthropocenic moment.

13 Biologist Lynne Margulis’s expression for symbiogenesis, quoted in Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, *op. cit.*, 60.

called it the Italian disease, the Dutch the Spanish disease, Russians called it the Polish disease, Turks the Christian or Frank disease, Tahiti the British disease. ... Before 1530 the Italians, Poles and Germans were already calling it the French disease". (20) The border between self and other is endlessly displaced, even internalised.

The poem "Revelation" insists that it is from the very start that "Otherwise is built in" (12), at the level of the DNA molecule, snapped apart into two "caterpillar-like halves" whose "flailing legs" (8) resemble the "twinned snakes" of the chemist's sign (12) growing in opposite directions: "Behold your molecule of heredity/Two cosmic serpents, yes; but tail to head" ("Revelation" 13). The figure of the serpent registers a "contrariness" (8) that is scripted into both the cultural narrative of myth and the material genetic code of DNA as the idea that "We're conflict from the start" (12). The two "cosmic serpents" of the sundered double helix point to the past as well as the future, being at once a "molecule of heredity" (13) – one that "connects us intergenerationally to the prehuman and prepersonal layers of our existence", as Braidotti might put it (*Nomadic Theory* 222) – and at the same time a vital force of ongoingness, variation and futurity, the Allele or variant gene, "The Other, who reveals where you'll go / next" ("Allele" 23). In the Judeo-Christian myth of the fall, meanwhile, the same figure of the serpent evinces "how something harmful got into the system from the start. One name for Satan is *alienus*, the stranger, the outsider" (21). Notwithstanding, "The stranger should be welcome / in your home, for *stranger* may also be *god*", writes Padel in "Allele" (23). The Greek *xenos*, we learn, "meant not only 'stranger' but 'guest-friend'" (153), an ambivalence which persists in the porous etymological border that separates today's "host" from "guest" (both from Latin *hostis*, enemy).

Being alert to the "other" within, entering on lines of flight that lead away from human perspectives in favour of imagining ways of being differently attached to the world, be it as stork, toad, mineral, seed, virus, or microbe, are all part of the "becoming-with" of Padel's matter-realist poetics. As well as recognising our common materiality, this poetics involves acknowledging the space we share with other-human and nonhuman beings that intersect and pass through it. In "Sharing Space", human and nonhuman ecologies are tied together in the reframing of a recent momentous human event, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, as just one point on the millennial pathway of migrating birds: "The night before 9/11 // a million Swainson's thrushes / must have flown / over the towers" ("Sharing Space" 200). We are required to see our relation to space – including that space we like to call "home" – as contingent and shifting, not static and exclusive.

#### 4 “earth in active relation to the human” (126–7): Connecting the Disconnected

In this nomadic, as opposed to sedentary, relation to space (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 471–481), the idea of “home” is unsettled, provisional and endlessly deferred (*Nomadic Theory* 260). *The Mara Crossing* explores home as less a place than an ongoing process, which Padel illustrates with her two “blueprint[s] for migration”, birds and the Jewish diaspora (154). Describing Bruegel’s painting “Landscape with Flight into Egypt” as “a small theatre of displacement” (126), Padel conjoins the fate of the holy family fleeing massacre with that of the “white bird” in the painting that “flies // across this chasm we have to go down into” and she asserts that “Home is the journey” (145). In relation to birds, “[the] word ‘home’ raises a whole spray of questions. What is home, for a bird? ... a nest is not a bird’s home. ... a nest is only temporary. ... Does a bird even have a home? ... Migration means spending your life not only in two different places but also en route” (64). Her belief that “maybe where you ‘come from’ is not as important as who you are at any one moment” (66) is in keeping with Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic philosophy which holds that home “is not necessarily a place of ‘origin’ but can also mean belonging in multiple locations” (*ibid.*).

The ironies and overlaps of such multiple belongings and restless displacements are not lost on Padel who uses the backdrop of the holy land and its successive waves of exile and diaspora to ponder Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti’s assertion about the inevitably shared nature of home: “every home you have is the home of others too” (159). She is aided by the ambivalent figure of the Colossus, which initially personifies a nonhuman, or more properly *in*-human, force embodying war, persecution and destruction, sending “hurtling refugees” (144) onto the roads in search of asylum, before coming to lodge at the heart of the human itself. Goya’s painting *The Colossus* and Padel’s poem of the same name personify as a “naked giant, fist raised, eyes closed, / ... strid[ing] / across the land, buttocks swaddled / in black smoke” (144) that which Bruegel’s “holy asylum-seekers” are fleeing in their “archetypal escape from a Colossus” (126). Yet the Colossus is not the prerogative of a single constituency: it can happen that, in crossing borders, those who have been forcibly displaced by the Colossus of oppression come in turn to embody and enact it. Centuries after the early Jewish diaspora, Padel reminds us, the returning Jewish refugees became a “new Colossus” (156) for the Palestinian inhabitants who had remained in the so-called “land without a people for a people without a land” (156). Far from the benign and welcoming New Colossus celebrated in Emma Lazarus’s sonnet, this new incarnation laboured under “a mistaken Zionist belief that the land was empty of inhabitants before the settlers got there. And so,



eventually, reversing one exile created another. The refugees became the new Colossus” (156). In establishing their new home, they forgot that “every home you have is the home of others too” (159).

The poem ends by wondering “How did it [the Colossus] stomp so easily into our home?” (144) – a home that is not only a contested and hotly fought over spot on a map, but extends to embrace the ecosphere as a whole, violated by the destructive agency of the human Colossus unleashed by the Anthropocene against the nonhuman world. Reflecting upon the fate of the ancient Mesopotamian marshes, “the ancient stopover / for sacred ibis, marbled teal” (203) and reputedly the original site of the Garden of Eden, which have dried up through human activity and pollution, Padel can affirm that “in the midst of [the] great dying” (181) that is the mark of the Anthropocene, “We are the Colossus now” (181). The *inhuman* comes to lodge at the heart of the human that is responsible – however unintentionally – for the “great dying” of species whose extinction is catalogued in an “underworld library of death”, a Natural History Museum archive at the “end of the District Line” in the poem “End of the Line” (188).

The question of assigning responsibility for the environmental and humanitarian emergencies she documents is not Padel’s focus in the collection, however. She is not playing the blame game.<sup>14</sup> As Barad puts it in discussing her theory of “agential realism”, responsibility is not only about “right response, but rather a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the response of the Other” (Barad *op. cit.*, 81). What Padel’s writing seeks to cultivate in the reader is perhaps more precisely a sense of *response-ability* (a term favoured by new and vital materialist thinkers), that is, an ability to respond, an enabling of responsiveness to matters of concern, which involves being attentive to the interactions between the human and the nonhuman. In its foregrounding of the nonhuman “landscape” over the human drama of “flight” being enacted against it, Padel’s *ekphrasis* of Bruegel’s painting teaches us a lesson about the entangled relationality of the human and the nonhuman. The natural world is not

14 See Bennett for a discussion of the difficulty of ascribing political responsibility for environmental catastrophes, which she considers to be more properly located in human-nonhuman assemblages. Bennett detaches the idea of responsibility from morality in order to underline the issue of adequate *response*: “Perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one’s response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating: Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends towards the enactment of nobler ends? Agency is, I believe, distributed across a mosaic, but it is also possible to say something about the kind of striving that may be exercised by a human within an assemblage” (Bennett, 36–38).

merely an inert backdrop to a more vital human agency: “Landscape ... is not only the context of our lives, the place where we enact life-changing moments, but also earth in active relation to the human” (126–7). Composing this “active relation” between the human and its “earth” others in a sustainable and “matter-realist” fashion implies recognising that the Colossus is not only outside but also within. It is, in Braidotti’s words, “an itinerary that consists in erasing and recomposing the former boundaries between self and others” (*Nomadic Theory* 35). It involves learning to detach oneself from the world in order to attach oneself to it differently or elsewhere, something the migrant or displaced subject is especially attuned to. Migration, Padel writes, “moves you into a disoriented world which doesn’t add up in the way you are used to. You have to start putting things together in a new way” (152). The poet can help us apprehend these new attachments, these new ways of regarding our place in the world. Like Orpheus, whose songs “drew together rocks, trees, animals and people” (*ibid.*), Padel’s at times prosaic poems and poetic prose seek to “connect the disconnected” (152) by offering us encounters with nonhuman and other-human perspectives that may perhaps, in the words of Jane Bennett, “chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests” (Bennett 122).

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