

URBAN LANDSCAPES OF LOSS AND MOURNING:
A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY NATURE AESTHETICS

[SLIDE 1] "the point of much wilderness writing, it seems, is to celebrate a yearning not just for wild places, but for wild places without any people in them. ... We would like to start a counter-movement. Rather than escaping to the forests of the Highlands, park your car at Matalan [British retailer] and have a walk around the edgelands woods. This has the added advantage that you won't die of exposure if you take a wrong turn." (166)

This is the rallying cry at the heart of *Edgelands*, written by the poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts. In their book they celebrate what they – following the geographer Marion Shoard – call "edgelands": spaces at the fringes of towns that are neither quite urban nor quite rural. These are wastelands, derelict mines, landfills, streams, canals and other spaces at the edges of towns. Edgelands are similarly at the edge of what we think of as nature.

[SLIDE 2A] Although praised by many, *Edgelands* seems to have fallen to the side of what is now called new British nature writing: a genre which centres on the work of Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Tim Dee and a few other British authors. Although new British nature writing is supposedly characterized by a re-enchantment with the local (Mellors 116), much of it is concerned with distinctly non-urbanized and humanized landscapes. For instance, even though Macfarlane ends his exploration of British wilderness in *The Wild Places* with the realization that he can also find the wild near his own home in Cambridge, a wilderness ethic that relies on remoteness and non-urban environments informs his work and that of other new nature writers. *Edgelands*, then, remains relatively rare among contemporary nature writing in its exploration of landscapes that are explicitly humanized, and thereby seemingly incompatible with the wild as we traditionally understand it.

[SLIDE 2B] A similar exploration of the wild in a suburban setting can be found in Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, published last year. It draws on memoir and nature writing while describing Macdonald's relationship with a goshawk named Mabel, in a suburban setting. In doing so, *H is for Hawk* achieves

a similar kind of renegotiation of the (sub)urban and the wild that *Edgelands* attempts and which is, I argue, at the heart of a contemporary nature aesthetics.

Today, I'll discuss how this reconfiguration of the wild and the (sub)urban shapes contemporary imaginations of nature. By focusing on *Edgelands* and *H is for Hawk*, I'll be exploring this nature aesthetics especially through the lens of memory and loss. Precisely by drawing on the past and attempting to imagine a future do these two works reconceive the meaning of nature and wilderness in the present.

[SLIDE 3] *Edgelands*, as I mentioned earlier, explores what the authors call "England's true wilderness". Farley and Symmons Roberts grew up on the edges of industrial cities – Liverpool and Manchester – and remember the landscapes they played in as a kind of Arcadia: "The Lancashire edgelands we explored and played in as children were formed in some of the wider spaces of dereliction and waste left behind in the aftermath of industrialisation... it was a new landscape that made no sense, one with no obvious artistic or literary analogue, no rhyme or reason" (8). Memory also resurfaces in *H is for Hawk* – memories of, for instance Macdonald's father as she tries to cope with his sudden death in 2007. However, the landscapes in *Edgelands* and *H is for Hawk* aren't ordinary memory landscapes. Edgelands, indeed, are defined by the very fact that memory largely fails to attach to them: they are always on the move (7), "a no-man's land ... on the constantly shifting border" between rural and urban (168-9). Indeed, edgelands as Farley and Symmons Roberts define them are inherently fluid. Likewise, in *H is for Hawk*, it is not a memory landscape in the more traditional sense – for instance one which her father used to visit – that carries most emotional significance for Macdonald, but the landscapes she inscribes with the loss of her father. In both *Edgelands* and *H is for Hawk*, then, *emotion* and *experience* rather than the *memories* tied to a space become markers for importance.

[SLIDE 4] In *H is for Hawk*, Macdonald describes how after her father's death, she decides to train a young goshawk, Mabel. What I find particularly fascinating about the book is that *H is for Hawk* records not so much – or not only – a precarious taming of a wild animal, but also the wilding of the human training the hawk. For Macdonald, disappearing into her bird's wildness becomes a way

of coping with the loss of her father, of escaping from it, and trying to survive and imagine a future after his death. Consequently, the landscapes that she trains Mabel in – the countryside outside of Cambridge – become landscapes of loss even though they have not much to do with either Macdonald's father or the relationship she had with him.

Significantly, in keeping the goshawk, Macdonald negotiates the central knot with which I am concerned: a duality that is no longer a duality, namely the reconfiguration of the wild and the urban, an urban that is wild, and a wild that can be urbanized or humanized. In both *Edgelands* and *H is for Hawk* these spaces, or concepts, are intermeshed, rather than separated. Indeed, both texts show that the urban and the wild are not opposites, and they do so by explicitly positioning the wild in relation to the human, or the human as part of the wild.

Early in her book, Macdonald provides a history of human-goshawk relations. Spotting a goshawk, she writes, is not easy, but if you do see one, even just outside your home, "it looks like the hugest, most impressive piece of wildness you've ever seen, like someone's tipped a snow leopard into your kitchen and you find it eating the cat" (4). But this wildness is deeply tied in with the human: indeed, the goshawk's history is a human history, and the birds' existence "gives the lie to the thought that the wild is always something untouched by human hearts and hands. The wild can be human work" (8).

The deliberate intermeshing of the urban and the wild, and the erasing of this duality, also happens in *Edgelands*, most explicitly when Farley and Symmons Roberts suggest that the edgelands – not the Lake District, or rolling hills – are England's true wilderness. Their plea for edgelands is consequently also a rewriting of the English myth of the countryside, which they replace by an edgeland story grounded "[s]omewhere in the hollows and spaces between our carefully managed wilderness areas and the creeping, flattening effects of global capitalism, [where] there are still places where an overlooked England truly exists" (10). Indeed, echoing Leo Marx' definition of the pastoral as a middle landscape between the urban and the traditional wild, Farley and Symmons Roberts argue that the edgelands are where true pastoral is to be found, in the "zone of inattention" just outside of our human reach or interest (103).

[SLIDE 5] Ecocriticism has been impatient of urban environments, and is only recently really coming to terms with enmeshment, interdependency and intra-action. Indeed, for much of its first two decades, ecocriticism has been primarily, almost accidentally, concerned with dualistic thought, with "the relationship between literature and the physical world", as Glotfelty suggested in 1996. The kind of nature aesthetics that Farley, Symmons Roberts and Macdonald propose in their works would fit in perfectly with the new materialism that ecocritics have embraced over the past couple of years. However, new materialism has, perhaps surprisingly, not immediately led to more ecocritical attention to urbanized landscapes – although scholars have given insightful readings of garbage (Bragard) and dirt (Phillips; Sullivan). The reading I provide of *Edgeland*s and *H is for Hawk* is one way in which ecocriticism can be extended to more fully encompass non-traditional and humanized landscapes.

Another approach, which I don't have the time right now to explore further, is to expand ecocriticism in an interdisciplinary direction rarely discussed, namely through urban studies. Cities, the urban scholar Anne Spirn suggests, do not obliterate nature but "transform it, producing a characteristically urban natural environment" (42). In an early study on urban green spaces, Jacquelin Burgess and her colleagues noted the importance of these areas to city dwellers and shows that urban nature is valuable as *urban* nature, not as an echo, or remnant, of traditional or unspoiled nature. They discovered that so-called "unofficial green areas" – such as the greenery separating sidewalks from roads – are more valued than "official green areas," such as parks and gardens (460).

The theoretical – and sociological – reconfiguration of humanized nature that urban studies scholars propose, is undertaken on the literary level by Farley, Symmons Roberts and Macdonald, whose work expands the concept of wilderness. Contemporary natures are informed by the same connotations held by more traditional wildernesses: a distinct otherness, a dimension that is both completely un-human, yet which we often believe to be part of us somewhere as well. This impulse of otherness and the familiar similarly lies at the heart of

Edgelands and *H is for Hawk*, and of the reconception of the wild that they illustrate.

Farley and Symmons Roberts propose to use the term "feral" to describe the edgelands and as such move away from the connotations held by "wilderness": [SLIDE]

Feral is the new wild. After all, what's so good about wild animals, wild flowers? All they do is what their instincts tell them, what their genes taught them. Feral means you have a history, a proper backstory. And the edgelands are the domain of the feral. Here, finding shelter in the old ruins and food in the overgrown wasteland outside, cats forget their pet names, swap the lap and the sofa for the pile of discarded overall, or the car seat with its sporty trim. (158)

Being feral, in the case of *Edgelands*, is traditional wilderness with a human touch, it is a reverting back to something earlier, something ancient and preceding civilization. It is something both human and natural: the word "feral" itself can be applied to both humans and nonhumans without carrying quite as many negative connotations as "wild". In *H is for Hawk*, Macdonald similarly negotiates the space of the radically Other-yet-familiar by consistently using the word "wildness" rather than "wilderness". She describes the Brecklands, an area north-east of Cambridge, as follows, making a clear distinction between wilderness and wildness: [SLIDE]

I love it because of all the places I know in England, it feels to me the wildest. It's not an untouched wilderness like a mountaintop, but a ramshackle wildness in which people and the land have conspired to strangeness. It's rich with the sense of an alternative countryside history; not just the grand, leisured dreams of landed estates, but a history of industry, forestry, disaster, commerce and work. (7)

Wilderness, Macdonald seems to suggest, is the traditional secluded place of untouched nature, whereas *wildness* is a place in which, as she puts it, "people and land have conspired to strangeness" – a place both familiar, shaped by humans, yet radically Other. Interestingly, something of this distinction is implicated in the meanings of the words themselves. Whereas wilderness is used

primarily used in respect to land, wildness is a *quality* that is primarily attributed to land, animals and humans. Indeed, in Middle English, wildness could also be used to denote social and civil unrest, suggesting a more human dimension to this concept than to wilderness.

Throughout *H is for Hawk*, Macdonald is mainly concerned with wildness – with the human dimension of the rearing of hawks, for instance, and their very human history. Indeed, she extends this influence of the human to the wild in general when she notes "Wild things are made from human histories" (200). In describing her relationship with the goshawk, then, Macdonald also tries to bridge the gap between two parts of a duality, between wilderness and civilization, and by extension, between human and animal. Yet this process does not lead to the kind of communion with nature that certain environmental groups may advocate, or even the kinds of trans-corporeality that Alaimo and other scholars influenced by new materialism suggest. It is an alluring blurring of boundaries, a drug-like surrender, a dangerous giving up of the human, as Macdonald discovers.

Like T.E. White, whose book on training a goshawk she reads, Macdonald too wants to cut loose from the world, and escape to the wild after the loss of her father. What follows is partly a necessary effect of training a goshawk – as she writes, "one of the things you must learn is to become invisible" (67) – but ends up being destructive to everything that makes her human. As she writes, "Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human. Then it took me past that place to somewhere I wasn't human at all" (195). Not until she reads a story about a north Siberian tribe – which believes that turning into an animal can threaten the human soul – does she realize that this is what has happened to her: [SLIDE]

I'd turned myself into a hawk ... I was nervous, highly strung, paranoid, prone to fits of terror and rage; I ate greedily or didn't eat at all; I fled from society, hid from everything; found myself drifting into strange states where I wasn't certain who or what I was. ... It had brought something akin to madness, and I did not understand what I had done.
(212)

When she realizes that wildness has become all she has – and that it is killing her, as she writes – she almost immediately realizes that she no longer needs just wildness anymore. Simultaneously, the depression that she had fallen into after her father's death eases. The distance between her and the bird increases again, and although Macdonald makes it very clear that this is necessary, she also appreciates having lost her humanity: "I've learned how you feel more human once you have known, even in your imagination, what it is like to be not" (275).

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Edgelands and *H is for Hawk* go almost literally in opposite directions in their explorations of wilderness: *Edgelands* draws on childhood memories, while in *H is for Hawk* Macdonald tries to find a way to move forward into the future. Farley and Symmons Roberts go outside, travel around northern England, while Macdonald, at least for a time, literally takes the wild into her own home, and even internalizes it. At the same time, though, both books intersect in the ways in which they conceive of contemporary nature. Both of them challenge contemporary ways of imagining nature – and both present a direct challenge to new British nature writing which, as Macdonald has suggested, entrenches "a sense that the correct relation to the landscape is through walking and distanced looking". Instead, as she writes in the same piece, "[n]ature is not a singular thing; nor are we and nor are the practices that take us there". In recognizing this, and proposing alternatives to dominant ideas of wilderness, *Edgelands* and *H is for Hawk* demonstrate a twenty-first-century nature aesthetics that radically makes room for urbanized, humanized and non-traditional natural landscapes, and as such may help our theoretical perspectives on nature do the same.