

# UNDERSTANDING THE FABRIC OF THE NATURAL WORLD: THE ROLE OF THE COLLECTIVE PROTAGONIST IN ANNIE PROULX'S *BARKSKINS*

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary Anthropocene narratives often choose to engage with large scales of space and time. As a consequence, according to Ursula K. Heise, “the single protagonist may decrease in importance, since epic-style narratives over the last century have tended to shift the major narrative actants from individual human characters to collective and sometimes nonhuman actors.” Annie Proulx’s latest novel, *Barkskins* (2016), is a fitting example of this tendency. Despite its commitment to several human characters, *Barkskins* never forgets about the story of the forest, which in Proulx’s words is “*the* character, the underpinning of life.” In this essay, I will explore the role this multifaceted collective protagonist plays in *Barkskins*’ narrative. First, thanks to the many human characters at the center of the plot, the narrative can geographically and historically map people’s past and present movements across America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania, taking the timber business as an example of the technological and cultural development of capitalism in different parts of the world and its long-term effects. Second, the making of the forest and several indigenous people into central characters enriches and diversifies Proulx’s discussion of the human impact on the natural world. Finally, its twofold perspective on the actions of single human beings as well as the impact of humanity as a whole bring *Barkskins* to raise the question of individual/collective agency vis-à-vis the present environmental crisis.

**Keywords:** Annie Proulx; Anthropocene; Collective Protagonist; Ecocriticism.

What is so new about the New World? When the two characters that open Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*, René Sel and Charles Duquet, leave France in 1693 to reach the coast of Canada, they are confronted with the unimaginable extent of its forests. Nothing they saw in the old continent is comparable, because in the new world “grew hugeous trees of a size not seen in the old country for hundreds of years, evergreens taller than cathedrals, cloud-piercing spruce and hemlock” (Proulx 2016, 4). Questioned about the actual size of this natural wonder, René’s and Charles’s *seigneur*, their new employer, answers: “It is the forest of the world. It is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning” (5). A Frenchman himself, Monsieur Trépagny compares the forest to a mythical creature, showing the newcomers’ inability to rationally understand what they have in front of them. It is something they have never experienced before—it is so vast it escapes their understanding and

imagination. For them, it is first and foremost a problem of temporal and geographical scale.

Annie Proulx has experienced a similar problem of scale while writing *Barkskins*, for her initial subject, climate change, was in her words “too large and too difficult . . . to serve as the foundation for a novel” (Clay 2017). Even if limited to one aspect of climate change, “deforestation caused by human timber cutting for profit” (ibid.), the scope of this text, its attempt to encompass almost three centuries of planetary history, remains ambitious and places *Barkskins* in a developing series of contemporary narratives committed to representing the anthropocene, the well-known geological epoch first theorized by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000). In the field of American literatures, Anthropocene narratives are part of a rich and prosperous tradition that has explored for a long time the relationship between human beings and the environment, with numerous and diverse contributions. Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (2018), winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize, is only one of the most recent examples of the relevance and success of U.S. environmental fiction. It is important to underline that the Anthropocene presents new and specific challenges to writers and critics, and its influence on literary and cultural studies is now widely recognized. According to Jennifer Wenzel (2020), the Anthropocene forces us to rethink literary and cultural interpretive schemes because it “involves multiple, human-induced changes to the Earth system resulting from rearrangements of molecules and life forms across the planet, associated with the burning of wood and fossil fuels, industrial chemistry, planned and accidental discharges of nuclear material, and global trade and migration” (4). Therefore, it certainly “shifts the emphasis from individual thoughts, beliefs, and choices to a human process that has occurred across distinct social groups, countries, economies, and generations” (Trexler 2015, 4). At the same time, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has clearly put it in his four influential theses on the climate of history, the anthropocene poses a challenge to the concept of anthropocentrism, since it can make

sense only if “we think of humans as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet” (2009, 213).<sup>1</sup>

The narratological needs of this new geological age influence the contemporary production of and the critical discussion around literature in general, and the novel in particular. Some voices, like Amitav Ghosh in his always-quoted *The Great Derangement*, have argued that “the *longue durée* is not the territory of the novel” (2016). According to Ghosh, the modern realist novel has mostly excluded collective and global issues from its interests, because of its focus on human protagonists and their inner life. As a result, “at exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike.” Other scholars, like Ursula K. Heise, have underlined the successful role of genres such as science fiction, which often allows to overcome “constraints of probability, individualism, and scale that shape the mainstream novel” (2018). The term “cli-fi,” or climate fiction, is used precisely to describe a growing “body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, . . . combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future and reflection on the human-nature relationship” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2018, 2).<sup>2</sup>

Proulx’s attempt to deal with the Anthropocene is of a more conventional kind, which is probably the reason for the book’s limited critical attention. Rather than speculating on the future, she is concerned with a realistic reconstruction of the past (Owens 2016), of those centuries in which the transformation of human beings into a geological force is particularly evident. The result is a quite traditional historical novel, fairly different, at least from a formal point of view, from the formulations that critics

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the idea of anthropocentrism in American literature, see Bryan L. Moore, *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century* (2008) and *Ecological Literature and the Critique of Anthropocentrism* (2017).

<sup>2</sup> For a glimpse at the diversity and richness of contemporary discussions around the role of science fiction in representing the climate crisis and the anthropocene, see for instance the special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* (vol. 45, no. 3, November 2018), entitled “Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis,” edited by Brent Ryan Bellamy, and Shelley Streeby’s latest monograph *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), which highlights the connection between climate change, science fiction, indigenous studies, and activism.

such as Frederic Jameson or Ian Baucom have recently proposed for the contemporary outcomes of this genre.<sup>3</sup> Proulx's idea of historical novel seems to rely on a definition coined by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, which highlights its "positively weighted modernizing, an erasing of temporal boundaries, the recognition of an eternal present in the past" (1981, 365-366). So it is for Proulx: despite a chronologically linear narrative spanning from 1693 to 2013 that could emphasize the temporal distance between past and present, her human characters make in the past the same mistakes that we impute to the present; they show the readers how wrong they did and how wrong we still do. At the same time, they underline that certain human actions—like deforestation—have long-lasting repercussions, clearly complicating the relationship between different temporalities, especially when considered from the perspective of the anthropocene.

Despite its more traditional structure, *Barkskins* shares with other Anthropocene narratives the choice to substitute the single protagonist for a more collective one. As Heise explains when describing the possible outcomes of contemporary sci-fi stories, "the larger-than-life hero or single protagonist may decrease in importance since epic-style narratives over the last century have tended to shift the major narrative actants from individual human characters to collective and sometimes non-human actors" (2019, 301). *Barkskins*'s narrative reaches both goals at the same time. On the one hand, the story revolves around a cluster of human protagonists that relentlessly replace one another over more than three centuries. On the other, the forest works as an actual character from the start. "For me," Proulx explains, "the chief character in the long story was the forest, the great now-lost forest(s) of the world" (Leyshon 2016). Together, these human and non-human actors create a collective protagonist that allows Proulx to enhance her representation of the Anthropocene, as I will try to demonstrate in this article. First, thanks to the many human characters at the center of the plot, the narrative can geographically and historically map people's past and present movements

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<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson in his *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) and Ian Baucom in "Moving Centers: Climate Change, Critical Method, and the Historical Novel" (2015) present David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) as a prominent example of the contemporary historical novel.

across America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania, taking the timber business as an example of the technological and cultural development of capitalism in different parts of the world and its long-term effects. Second, the transformation of the forest and several indigenous people into central characters enriches and diversifies Proulx's depiction of the human impact on the natural world. Third, its twofold interest in the actions of single human beings as well as the impact of humanity as a whole bring *Barkskins* to raise the question of individual/collective agency vis-à-vis the present environmental crisis. In other words, this multifaceted collective protagonist allows Proulx to fulfill what is perhaps her highest ambition: to reconnect, if only in the pages of a novel, the broken threads of a long and truly global story.

#### THE NEWCOMERS: THE VIOLENT STORIES OF CAPITALISM

As I mentioned before, *Barkskins*'s narrative spans from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. However, its main focus is the period between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where Proulx seems to place the germination of certain technological and cultural seeds that will fully develop in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The novel, in fact, relies on the first component of its collective protagonist to track the development of capitalism as an economic model, through various European and American characters that work to shape the American continent as well as the rest of the world. The establishment of the colonies, the construction of increasingly larger cities, the constant improvements of roads and trade routes are just some of the examples Proulx makes to map out this expansion, which is of course physical and cultural.

At the very beginning, the first two protagonists are the already-mentioned René Sel and Charles Duquet, two Frenchmen in search of redemption and success, whose story bears a strong resemblance to that of Proulx's own ancestors (Burnett 2016). The sense of displacement felt towards the so-called New World and its endless forests is soon forgotten. Through their words and actions, René and Charles become the symbols of a certain way of thinking, and in particular of a relationship with the natural world they keep applying to the new context. This is an old interest of American literature, addressed by classics like John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782),

James F. Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823), or Henry D. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), but also an old interest of Proulx's. Referring to the writer's entire literary production, Alex Hunt notes that "while geography determines culture in Proulx's work, geography itself is a category shaped by culture" (2009, 2). This is particularly evident in *Barkskins's* first pages, since René and Charles know from the start that they will work as woodcutters for three years in what is now Canada, in order to own a piece of land and finally start a new life. The newcomers see the land as private property, the forest as an incredible chance to make a profit and pass it on to their descendants. Proulx sees Christianity as the culture reference for this way of thinking (Freeman 2016). One of the two epigraphs to the novel is a quote from "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," a famous article published by historian Lynn White. "By destroying pagan animism," White argues, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (1967, 1205). In Proulx's account, the claimed and controversial contribution of Christianity to the relationship between human beings and the natural world matches another cornerstone of modern Western culture: capitalism. Charles Duquet, who will realize his dreams of success through a profitable business based on American timber, describes the forest early in the book with the keyword of capitalist thought. "There was one everlasting *commodity* that Europe lacked: the forest . . . The forest was unimaginably vast, and it replaced itself. It could supply timber and wood for ships, houses, warmth. The profits could come forever" (Proulx 2016, 69; emphasis added).

Charles Duquet's deforestation project originates precisely from the false belief that forests are infinite and always able to regenerate themselves. In his mind, the logical consequence is that an infinite resource can lead to infinite profits, if only an appropriate market is found. The North American business scene soon becomes too limited for him, so Charles embarks on a long journey to Europe and China. This is the way in which Proulx tests her character's beliefs, by confronting him with different contexts and points of view. During the numerous discussions with a Chinese merchant interested in his timber, Charles learns that the locals have used the forest in various ways in their thousand-year history, feeding the needs of war, agriculture, or paper

production. They used it to the point that wood is now scarce, which explains the demand for foreign merchants and supplies. However, “Duquet thought it likely that the forests of China and France and Italy had been puny in the beginning; he believed that the uniquely deep forests of the New World would endure. That was why men came to the unspoiled continent—for the mind-numbing abundance of virgin resources” (98). Blinded by his hunger for profit, Charles really becomes Proulx’s champion of Western thought and the founder of a real “forest empire” (121).

The design and development of the timber business in North America and other countries occupies a privileged position within the novel because it allows Proulx to explore the persistence and evolution of these cultural patterns in space and time. Thanks to *Barkskins*’s collective protagonist, readers can follow the representative development of Duquet’s company, its geographical and technological expansion. At the same time, thanks to the individual protagonists presented one after the other, they can connect these general tendencies to specific situations, understanding how personal choices are involved in historical change. Particularly interesting is the moment when, about two hundred years after its foundation, Duquet’s company, now called Duke and Sons, falls into the hands of Lavinia, who will fully realize the multinational aspiration of her ancestor. While visiting the family sawmills and lands for the first time, she starts to feel “a powerful sense of ownership; they were her trees, she could cause these giants to fall and be devoured by the saws. She regarded their monolithic forms with scorn” (502-503). The disorientation her ancestor felt in the face of the woods, his fear vis-à-vis the otherness of the forest, is now completely overcome by the now innate ideas of capital and private property, which cannot be limited to the trees. “And the birds that rested on them, her birds, her squirrels and porcupines; all of it” (ibid.). Proulx’s description of Lavinia’s insatiable longing for possession reminds me of a very powerful scene in William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* (1942), another American novel that, as Lawrence Buell has written, “elegiacally bears witness to the disappearance of the virgin forest” (2001, 176). At the end of the famous chapter/story entitled “The Bear,” one of the characters, Boon, kills the animal of the title, the most desired prey of all. Many hunters have tried before him, some of them without really wanting to, because the bear

was more of a symbol in their eyes, a sort of personification of the forest and the wilderness itself. The death of the animal, Faulkner makes it particularly clear, brings Boon no contentment or reward. On the contrary, the satisfaction of his desire for possession leads him to madness: sitting against a tree full of squirrels, he can only shout at everyone approaching “Don’t touch them! Don’t touch a one of them! They’re mine!” (Faulkner 1994, 315). Unlike Boon, whose sudden insanity reveals a profound personal relationship with the natural world, Lavinia’s longing for possession is fueled by capitalist and entrepreneurial thinking, and translates into more careful and extensive planning, into the search for new forests to buy and exploit. “What fabulous kinds of wood may not grow in distant places?” (Proulx 2016, 529), she asks herself, before leaving for New Zealand to explore the natural resources and commercial possibilities of such a distant country. In one of the rare moments when the narrative abandons its purely realistic tone, Proulx adds: “far to the east, deep under leaf mold and black forest soil, the bones of Charles Duquet relaxed” (ibid.), establishing a direct connection between centuries and geographies, transforming Lavinia’s behavior into the fulfillment of actions started decades before. This is one of the ways the narrative finds to show that the destruction of the forest was no accident, but the result of a meticulously built plan, of individual and collective choices that various characters keep taking and confirming over the years. Following multinational agendas, the Duke and Sons will thus continue its expansion, reaching many parts of the world after New Zealand, like South America, where “in league with banks, other timber outfits, the mining industry, coffee, cocoa, banana, and mango importers, became part of the new colonialism” (659). Once again, Proulx continues, “when the great onslaught on tropical forests began, they were in the van, taking all they could” (ibid.).

Despite its focus on the Dukes, *Barkskins*’s narrative never forgets to give a sense of the scale and spread of the historical phenomena it represents. For instance, it constantly keeps track of the various waves of migration that bring an increasing number of people to the United States and contribute to the timber business in different ways. “The world had heard of the rich continent with its inexhaustible coverlet of forests,” Proulx writes. “Everything was there for the taking—it was the chance of a



lifetime and it would never come again” (531-532). While some immigrants are involved in the actual cutting of the forest, others simply need timber to build their houses and start their new life. As Marco Armiero explains, it is not really appropriate to speak of “how immigrants shaped or adapted to the ‘natural’ environment” (2017, 55), since they behaved according to preconceived systems of values and views of the natural world. These “were collective rather than individual enterprises” (54), Armiero continues, and *Barkskins’s* narrative conveys precisely this idea of collectivity. The European ways of life, which settlers and migrants replicate in the new world, is often supplied by timber, affecting the American landscape more and more. New sawmills, roads, railways, factories and cities come to replace the once “infinite” woodlands. Most newcomers, although in different ways, follow the motto Monsieur Trépagny established at the beginning of the novel: “To be a man is to clear the forest” (Proulx 2016, 17).

#### THE NATIVES AND THE FOREST: THE INTERTWINED STORIES OF EXPLOITATION

The other two main components of *Barkskins’s* collective protagonist complicate the novel’s discussion of this controversial relationship between human beings and the natural world, focusing the attention on indigenous peoples and the forest itself. From the beginning, the narrative broadly embraces the stories of Native Americans, echoing again a long and fertile tradition in American literature, recently revived by works like William T. Vollmann’s “Seven Dreams” series (1990-2015). *Barkskins’s* second main storyline develops around René Sel, who soon marries a Mi’kmaq woman, Mari. Together they will give birth to a multiracial lineage, i.e. to a number of protagonists that will provide a highly critical point of view on the newcomers’ mainstream narrative.

René and Mari themselves, the narrator underlines, “stood opposed on the nature of the forest” (50). While René, who still thinks like a Frenchman, works all his life as a lumberjack to subjugate the alleged exuberance of the woods, Mari sees the forest as “a living entity, as vital as the waterways, filled with the gifts of medicine, food, shelter” (51). The opposition is clear: for René the forest becomes a resource only when destroyed, since the profits come from external sources and systems, while for Mari the

forest is a resource in itself, and must be preserved in order to continue to benefit from it. This culture clash will continue with later generations and will be reasserted, for example, by Kuntaw Sel and Beatrix Duquet, the first couple to bring the two families together. Kuntaw is one of René's grandchildren, while Beatrix is the daughter of one of Duquet's descendants and a Passamaquoddy woman. Although at this point their heritages are much more mixed, Beatrix wants her partner to learn how to read books and approach western knowledge, while Kuntaw wants her to "read" the forest, that is to "understand and decipher the tracks of animals, the seasonal signs of plants and trees, the odors of bears and coming rain, of frost-leathered leaves, the changing surface of water" (278). More importantly, he wants her to understand that "the forest and the ocean shore are tied together with countless strings as fine as spiderweb silks" (ibid.).

In this respect, as Ben De Bruyn has rightly noted, "Proulx's work evokes the cultural stereotype of the 'ecological Indian'" (2016, 80), the well-known tendency to idealize indigenous culture and history. But Proulx seems to be aware of the risk. In one of the many interviews given at the book's release, she critiques those who believe in the existence of a primeval forest prior to the arrival of the Europeans. "Native Americans," she explains, "had plenty to do with the shaping of the forest, including setting fires every few years and sometimes big fires every fifteen years to keep open parklike places where deer would come for the grass and meadow fare" (Freeman 2016). In other words, Greg Garrard confirms, "invariably Indians had previously dwelt in the habitats under threat, transforming and managing them in their own ways" (2004, 123). With this awareness, Proulx seems more interested in the complex and multiform representation of the natives' present, of the new challenges to their individual and collective experience.

In particular, *Barkskins's* collective protagonist becomes an effective way to discuss the violence imposed on Native Americans as an example of slow violence, creating an even deeper connection with the history of deforestation. "Slow violence," Rob Nixon has influentially written, is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2011, 2). After the first bloody encounters with the newcomers, the history of the natives is

characterized by another kind of violence that continues in new forms until today, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (ibid.). The three centuries covered by Proulx’s story are enough to highlight changes over a long period of time, to follow the many forms this violence takes. In addition to the obvious practical aspects, such as the dispossession of the land, from a cultural point of view many of the indigenous protagonists are faced with the loss of traditional practices and knowledge. Even when they try to preserve them, they have to tragically recognize their futility in a world that is so rapidly changing. As the narrator comments early in the novel, the Mi’kmaq language has been influenced by European languages for a long time, it “was awash in French words with remnants of Portuguese and Basque from the days of those earlier European fishermen on the shore” (Proulx 2016, 182). But now that Native Americans are decimated and unable to carry on their traditional activities, the old language is useless, because it lacks the words to describe the new social system and way of life. “If we want to secure any of our old land, we have to do it the whiteman way with papers,” one of the indigenous characters say towards the end of the book. “To learn those English laws we have to know how to read. Write. In English” (612). The ineffectiveness of the old culture and the brutality of the new one bring with them also a sense of profound individual disorientation. Achille Sel, René’s and Mari’s son, embodies the personal and psychological side of this form of violence from a very early stage. If his mother was still able to provide food and medicine to her family thanks to ancient knowledge and techniques, to feel a strong connection with the forest and her people, Achille quickly realizes he doesn’t belong anywhere. During a fishing trip with other Mi’kmaqs, his canoe is rammed by a giant black and white fish, an orca that seems to come from one of the natives’ myths. In another of the few non-realistic moments of the narrative, the animal looks Achille in the eyes and confirms: “You are not” (185). As generations go by, the situation continues to deteriorate. Achille’s grandson, Tonny, voices this malaise in an even more definitive way, transforming it into a desire to leave, or rather, to die. “I am apart from every person,” he says, talking to his father. “English, Mi’kmaq, French, American. I have no place . . .

I have no one. I not belong. No place good for me. I go away. Maybe somebody kill me soon. Then I be done” (276).

While some native characters respond to the new condition with despair and inaction, others begin to take part in the activities initiated by the newcomers and work for the white people and their companies. *Barkskins* points out several times that the natives end up contributing to the timber business. Some work as informers, teaching the white entrepreneurs where the richest and greatest forests are located and how to reach them through the ancient Indian paths. Others participate directly as woodcutters, often in the most dangerous jobs, such as moving tons of logs down the rivers. In any case, Proulx’s choice to put many different indigenous protagonists at the center of the narrative confirms once again her attempt to portray the complexity of their experience, beyond stereotypes. Jinot Sel, one of Tonny’s sons, is an important example in this respect. After allowing readers to explore various aspects of the North American timber business from the point of view of the workers, he has the opportunity to leave the American continent and get to New Zealand, where he will continue to cut trees. It is true, as De Bruyn writes, that in the end his story “suggests that class and race boundaries are insurmountable” (2016, 79), because he will pay for a murder he did not commit. But his first encounter with the New Zealand forest enacts a significant reversal of the Pioneer myth that opened the book. Like René and Charles in Canada, so Jinot enters a forest “so unlike the pine forests of Maine, New Brunswick and Ontario, or any other he had ever seen, he never could have imagined it” (Proulx 2016, 426). As for his European ancestor, his fascination for the new world is momentary: the New Zealand forest soon “repulsed him with its violent tangle of vegetable exuberance, its unfamiliarity and ancient aloofness” (430). The myth of the ecological Indian does not belong to his story.

As Jinot’s case highlights once again, the forest is really the place in *Barkskins* where the opposing histories of the newcomers and the indigenous people are confronted, the element around which individual and collective destinies revolve. Even more than that, the forest often becomes an actual character, the last component of the novel’s collective protagonist. From a narratological point of view, this is achieved in

two main ways. First, there are many instances in which the forest is the subject of the action, on a par with the human protagonists. At the beginning of the book, for example, when René Sel is engaged with other men in their work of deforestation, Proulx writes: “In its own way *the forest was swallowing René Sel, its destroyer. The forest was always in front of him.* He was powerless to stop chipping at it, but the vigor of multiple sprouts from stumps and still-living roots grew in his face, the rise and fall of his ax almost a continuous circular motion. There seemed always more and more trees on the horizon” (57; emphasis added). It is important to notice how Proulx avoids a complete personification of the forest. Making it the subject of the sentence, the writer highlights the performative power of this non-human actor but does not equate it with a purely human logic.

Moreover, the forest becomes a real character because it is shown in its geographical singularities and in its development and transformation through time, like its human counterparts. From spruces and white pines in North America to the majestic kauri of New Zealand and the many fruit trees (mangoes, guava, passionfruit, starfruit, coconuts, bananas) of South America—the narrative never forgets to mention the different species of plants that constitute each forest, another example of the meticulous research conducted by the author in the preparation of the book. The tragic destiny of the forests is of course described through the practice of deforestation and the technological advancements that foster the timber business. In addition, Proulx’s narrative acknowledges the role of fires that in several waves have destroyed the North American woodlands, both in the form of more general fires the settlers start in order to clear the land for fields and pastures, and of specific epochal fires, such as the ones that in 1910 burnt over three million acres in three days in Montana, Idaho, and Washington. Together with the saw and the ax, as Proulx would say, fires contribute to leaving indelible “scars” on the earth (38).

The combined action of time and human beings also modifies the very essence of the forest. As the Mi’kmaq characters quickly notice, once-common varieties of plants are more and more difficult to find. “But of uncommon weeds there was no lack—mallows, dock, stinging nettles, sow thistle, knotgrass, and adder’s-tongue, aggressive

clovers” (180-181). Europeans bring with them to the new world a number of new species, thus altering pre-existing balances—this is part of the process that Alfred Crosby has famously named “ecological imperialism” (1986). Towards the end of the novel, one of the last descendants of the Sels, Sapatisia, who has devoted her entire life to the study of plants and ecosystems, is questioned by two very young members of her family on a related issue. They want to know why people can no longer rely on the medicinal plants once used by Native Americans. “Since the conquest the air has been filled with pesticides and chemical fertilizers, with exhaust particles and smoke. We have acid rain,” Sapatisia explains. “The deep forests are gone and now the climate shifts. Can you figure out for yourselves that the old medicine plants grew in a different world?” (696). This is perhaps the most ambitious goal achieved by the forest as a protagonist: the ability to highlight that its change is strictly related to the change of wider environmental factors, to a larger story of countless interconnections.

#### THE COLLECTIVE PROTAGONIST: A STORY OF INTERCONNECTIONS

Sapatisia Sel is obviously right: the world described at the end of *Barkskins* is different from the one discovered in its first pages. Three hundred years of human activity have affected it in macro- and microscopic ways, producing above all a break in the relationships between human beings and the other living species. In Proulx’s words, as soon as René Sel and many more people started their work on the forest, “the wildness of the world receded, the vast invisible web of filaments that connected human life to animals, trees to flesh and bones to grass shivered as each tree fell and one by one the web strands snapped” (12). *Barkskins* focuses precisely on this story of destruction, on its causes and its consequences, as told from an individual and collective point of view. Two such different perspectives are held together by the narrative’s collective protagonist, which proves to be one of the author’s most effective narrative techniques to keep such a complex story together. Thanks to her collective protagonist, Proulx “reveals that a broader perspective on the human does not necessarily imply a neglect of individual identities or socio-political issues” (De Bruyn 2016, 80). The attention paid from time to time to so many European, American, and indigenous characters certainly

becomes an exercise in realism, a successful way to account for the role of individual stories and to evoke the complexity of the evolving socio-historical context. At the same time, Proulx challenges the reader not to consider the history of the world from the limited perspective of its human component. The constant presence of the forest next to the other human protagonists reveals that humans are only one of the living species, although certainly very influential. The most convincing example is provided by the dynamics of the collective protagonist itself, which highlights the transience of the human characters, whose life, as well as that of the many trees in the forest, is continually subjected to the risk of an imminent and more or less accidental ending. Above all, Proulx's narrative succeeds in highlighting how the destinies of humans and the other living species are closely interconnected, leading to a final remark on the possibility of individual and collective agency in the face of the past and present environmental crisis. This seems to link *Barkskins*' to "the overarching concern of Proulx's fiction," which, according to Karen L. Rood, "is the way in which ordinary people conduct their lives in the face of social, economic, and ecological change" (2001, 10). If much of the novel is in fact focused on the destructive individual and collective human actions of the past, *Barkskins*'s last chapter is set in the present and looks to the future. At this point, the narrative is led by a group of international researchers and environmentalists, guided by Sapatisia Sel and funded by a sort of environmental protection fund that is the last reincarnation of part of the Duke empire. The group's main focus is forest replanting, an activity that the limited perspective of a single human being cannot embrace. "It will take thousands of years for great ancient forests to return," Sapatisia explains to her colleagues. "None of us here will see the mature results of our work, but we must try, even if it is only one or two people with buckets of seedlings working to put forest pieces back together" (Proulx 2016, 706). Her point of view is not as naïve as it may seem. She knows very well that it is too late to go back to the world of the past—she has witnessed herself the melting of polar ice caps. She knows that strong powers are against their work, since one of her co-workers was killed in the field. At the same time, she believes that certain human actions can have a positive effect on the earth and the ecological crisis, if only an alternative point of view is found

and shared. “It is terribly important to all of us humans . . . to help the earth regain its vital diversity of tree cover. And the forests will help us. They are old hands at restoring themselves” (ibid.). Through Sapatisia’s words, as well as through the novel’s collective protagonist, Proulx seems to suggest that this individual and collective, human and non-human perspective is the only way to finally reweave the numerous threads that compose “the fabric of the natural world” (698).

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