



Ecocritical Perspectives in Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*

Peter Melville

Abstract: Eco-fantasy critics often celebrate what Gry Ulstein calls fantasy's "intrinsic exploratory potential for ecocritical ideas." It is, however, equally important to acknowledge the possibility of failure that a rhetoric of potentiality necessarily implies. As Ulstein admits, fantasy can reinscribe anthropocentric messaging just as easily as it presents ecological perspectives. Naomi Novik's environmental fantasy novel *Uprooted* (2015) offers an example of a text that incorporates elements from both ends of fantasy's spectrum of ecocritical potential. Specifically, it dramatizes a shift in perspective from an initially negative, human-centered depiction of nonhuman environments toward a vision in which humanity appears considerably less central or important. Capitalizing on fantasy's capacity to focalize nonhuman points of view, *Uprooted* evokes philosopher Timothy Morton's ecological concept of coexistentialism, a key principle of which maintains that within the course of negotiating relations between human and nonhuman beings, sometimes "the only thing to do is to treat beings as people, even if they turn out not to be." Anthropomorphic gestures of this kind critically challenge assumptions of human exceptionalism and elevate the value of nonhuman life-forms, which in Novik's novel includes the "heart trees" and magical creatures of the ever-expanding dark forest, whose reverse reclamation of human territories provides the principal antagonistic force of the narrative.

Keywords: fantasy, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, Naomi Novik

1. Introduction

Fantasy critics have long stressed the importance of ecocritical perspectives within the genre. Among the first to do so was Don D. Elgin, whose 1985 book-length study on the topic argues that the fantasy novel “offers humanity a way to reintegrate itself into the natural world” (269). Brian Attebery would go so far as to quip that by the end of the twentieth century, one could easily imagine a recipe for formulaic fantasy whose main ingredients included “a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it” (10). In the early 2000s, Ursula Le Guin notably shifted the focus of eco-fantasy criticism from themes of reintegration and ecological restoration toward fantastic representations of the nonhuman. What sets the genre apart from realist fiction, she claims, is its tendency to be drawn “away from” rather than towards anthropocentrism: it “verges on and partakes of actual realms in which humanity is not lord and master, is not central, is not even important” (87). Enthusiasm for fantasy’s exceptionality in this regard has not waned in recent years. Chris Brawley, for instance, confidently wagers that by “making trees walk and animals talk, mythopoeic fantasy is perhaps the most subversive art there is” (23); Gry Ulstein similarly concludes that “fantasy fiction, more than other literary genres, has an intrinsic exploratory potential for ecocritical ideas” (7). This essay aims to extend this line of ecocritical thought through an earth-centered reading of Naomi Novik’s 2015 fairytale-inspired fantasy novel *Uprooted*. The climax and conclusion of this overtly environmental novel, I argue, effectively demonstrate the promise, but also some of the limitations, of fantasy’s propensity to anthropomorphize non-anthropocentric viewpoints as a central aspect of the genre’s ability to promote ecocritical ideas.

Ulstein’s assessment of the fantasy genre is especially useful in this regard not only because it captures the enthusiasm other eco-fantasy critics have for fantasy fiction, but also because her shrewd framing of the genre’s ecocritical potential acknowledges rather than avoids the possibility of failure that a rhetoric of potentiality necessarily implies. Anthropocentrism, she admits, “is just as easily found in [fantasy] as ecocentrism” (15). For this reason, it is important not to ignore fantasy’s ecocritical failures but to consider those failures alongside more successful examples of ecocritical fantasy. The genre’s expressions of anthropocentrism may disappoint, but they also have the potential to draw attention to unexplored ways of thinking about worlds inside and outside fantasy texts, or about the representation of nonhuman beings who are villainized or sacrificed to maintain a text’s human-centered focus.

Take for example the monster Grendel from the Old English poem *Beowulf*, perhaps the first fantastic figure within the English literary tradition. As a bona fide swamp monster of the “desolate fens” (*Beowulf* 106), Grendel represents dangers both real and imagined that lurk beyond the borders of human settlement. This demonization of nonhuman nature does more than conjure a sense of human community through a shared set of anxieties about the unknown. It also portrays life and lands beyond the built environment as justifiable targets for human domination. As environmental critic Rod Giblett contends, the *Beowulf* poem perpetuates a “pejorative Christian view” of marshlands that has been “largely responsible for the destruction of wetlands in the west for the past millennium” (132). *Beowulf*’s violent encounters with Grendel betray to the modern reader an early cultural template for representing

forms of nature in English fantasy as adversarial, a template that Giblett insists is given renewed emphasis in J.R.R. Tolkien's ominous depiction of the Dead Marshes in *The Lord of the Rings* (132). This fantastic legacy of adversarial nature continues (quite obviously at times) in contemporary popular fantasy texts, including Peter V. Brett's *Demon Cycle* (2008–2017), where swamp demons and other monstrous creatures associated with hostile environments seek to consume human civilization.¹

Figures of demonized nature offer glimpses into fantasy's troubled history of failing to achieve its ecocritical potential, but successful examples that write against this legacy also abound. One subgenre of fantasy that is surprisingly productive in this regard is paranormal urban fantasy, where magical figures typically associated with rural settings (such as fairies, witches, and animal shapeshifters) lurk in the hidden pathways of city life. Representing a blending of human and nonhuman sensibilities, the paranormal creatures of urban fantasy evoke ideas of interrelation rather than strict hierarchical separation between beings. Uneasy but fruitful engagements with animal shapeshifters depicted in urban fantasy texts such as Patricia Briggs's *Mercy Thompson* novels (2006–) or Anne Bishop's *The Courtyard of the Others* series (2013–2017) offer insights into forging less anthropocentric coexistence with nonhuman beings.² These are but two examples within its various subgenres where fantasy delivers on its promise for ecocritical ideas. Robust histories of ecocriticism already exist in Tolkien studies and scholarship on epic fantasy in general, but recent work in eco-fantasy criticism has moved in the direction of other promising subgenres as well, including YA fantasy and weird fiction.³

Having already attracted positive and negative ecological commentary, Novik's *Uprooted* offers an example of fairytale fantasy that purposefully incorporates elements from both ends of fantasy's spectrum of ecocritical potential. Specifically, it dramatizes a shift in perspective from an initially negative, human-centered depiction of nonhuman environments toward a more productive vision in which the human (to paraphrase Le Guin) is neither central nor even that important. Capitalizing on fantasy's capacity to focalize nonhuman points of view, *Uprooted* effectively promotes philosopher Timothy Morton's ecological concept of coexistentialism, a key principle of which maintains that within the course of negotiating relations between human and nonhuman beings, sometimes "the only thing to do is to treat beings as people, even if they turn out not to be" (74). Anthropomorphic gestures of this kind critically challenge assumptions of human exceptionalism and increase the perceived value of nonhuman life-forms, which in Novik's novel includes the "heart trees" and magical creatures of the plainly named "Wood," an ever-expanding dark forest whose reverse reclamation of human territories provides the principal antagonistic force of the narrative.

In the spirit of critical realism, however, it is important to note that while Novik redeems a Wood-centered view of the world at the close of her novel, her narrative restricts its ecocritical potential to a vision of coexistentialism that is

¹ For more on Brett's *Demon Cycle*, see Melville, "Demonizing Nature."

² I explore this topic further in Melville, "Urban Fantasy."

³ Notable examples of such criticism include Alice Curry's "Traitorousness, Invisibility and Animism," Carrie Spencer's "Young Adult Fantasy to Save the World," and Andrew Strombeck's "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy."

ultimately negotiated in human terms. The nonhuman is acknowledged and even appeased to some degree but remains subject to human control. Even though the novel's protagonist Agnieszka becomes an ecologically enlightened custodian of the Wood, her environmentalism is appreciably undercut by metaphors of human mastery and cultivation as she works to subdue the Wood's more threatening and undesirable elements. This includes the intolerable presence and spread of rot, which the novel encodes as a sign of magical or moral (rather than purely organic) corruption within the nonhuman. In other words, even as it dramatizes a shift in ecological perspective, *Uprooted* likewise exemplifies the stubborn persistence of an anthropocentric discourse within fantasy that works against the novel's otherwise progressive environmentalist message.

2. Ecocritical Responses

While the novel's concluding transition from an anthropocentric viewpoint to an earth-centered perspective remains the primary focus of this essay, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the novel's storyline as well as an account of existing ecocritical responses to its environmentalist vision. Inspired by Polish folklore Novik remembers from childhood, the plot of *Uprooted* involves a good deal of palace intrigue and competing interests among the kingdom of Polnya's ruling classes, while also following the fairytale antics of the kingdom's superstitious country folk, particularly in Agnieszka's home village of Dvernik. Agnieszka is chosen at a young age to train under a powerful wizard named the Dragon who lives in a tower overlooking the lands adjacent to a dark forest known as the Wood. Though there is much tension between them, Agnieszka joins the Dragon in his mission to protect surrounding villages from the Wood's "incursion" and corrupting influence (131). When Agnieszka cures her friend Kasia of Wood-sickness (an illness that effectively turns people into Wood-controlled zombies), Kasia's recovery inspires Polnya's Prince Marek to enter the Wood to rescue his mother the Queen who has been trapped in the Wood for twenty years. The Queen's return to the Polnyan court leads to political unrest that culminates in a military assault on the Dragon's tower. Combining their magic to fend off the attack, Agnieszka and the Dragon decide to enter the Wood and confront the so-called "Wood-queen," who has been controlling Wood-corrupted citizens (including the rescued Queen) to do the Wood's bidding across the kingdom. During their altercation, the Wood-queen overpowers the Dragon and traps Agnieszka in the trunk of a "heart-tree" where she has a vision of a distant past when the Wood-queen experienced a great betrayal.

The details of Agnieszka's vision (to which I will later return) are less important than the effect the vision has on her, as it enables her to witness the history of the land from a Wood-centered or nonhuman perspective. Upon awakening, Agnieszka escapes the heart-tree and greets the Wood-queen with compassion rather than further conflict. She convinces the Wood-queen to abandon her pursuit of vengeance and morph herself into a slumbering heart-tree that can remember "how to grow" instead of "how to kill and how to hate" (419). Having calmed the Wood-queen's misanthropic rage, Agnieszka vows to

spend the rest of her days as a sylvan custodian, rooting out corruption and encouraging healthy growth throughout the forest.

Given this concluding pivot toward conservationism, it is not surprising that scholarship of *Uprooted* has been drawn to the novel's ecocritical import, though not always in a favorable manner. In an essay on "Deep Dark Forests and Literary Horror," Elizabeth Parker includes the novel in her list of "arboreal horror texts" that portray woodlands as "the dangerous antithesis and potential destroyer of civilization" ("Who's Afraid" 278). In her follow-up book-length study on the same topic, Parker admits that the malevolent Wood's origin story featuring the Wood-queen as a "she-devil in the wilderness" contains a promising "tale of ecofeminist revenge" (*The Forest* 124, 125). She nevertheless insists that the Wood-queen's fate of morphing into a heart-tree presents readers with a "thoroughly impressive example of the monstrously animate forest" reduced to "*inanimate* Nature," a move that Parker aligns with "old reductive identifications of women with *passive* nature" (126, original emphasis). The novel thus concludes not with eco-enlightenment so much as patriarchal containment of feminist defiance.

Eilis Lee elaborates on the novel's potential as ecofeminist revenge fantasy by suggesting that "the Wood's dark ecology becomes a supremely effective cypher with which to express the power of female rage" (28). Lee's take on the novel is more optimistic than Parker's and goes so far as to suggest that *Uprooted* "ends on a near-utopian vision" (29). Lee places emphasis on the character of Baba Jaga, a mythical witch based on the figure of the same name from Polish folklore, with whom Agnieszka identifies and whose intuition-based methods for wielding magic Agnieszka aims to revive. With the example of Jaga before her, Agnieszka is not just another wizard performing magic within the confines of an established patriarchal status quo. She is instead a figure of magical alterity who convinces the Dragon of the value of suppressed feminized forms of magic. Characters like Agnieszka, Jaga, and the Wood-queen embody what Lee sees as the novel's underlying progressive message: "Through vigilante feminism and inhuman strength *Uprooted's* women can destabilize archetypal patterns and modes that encode women as objects to be stolen and consumed" (29).⁴ Like Parker, Lee expresses concern over the novel's success as ecofeminist revenge fantasy and points to "ideological confusions" that limit its "feminist intervention into troubling folkloric narratives" (29). Such intervention, she insists, "only stretches so far" (29). In the final analysis, "the Wood is intrinsically connected to female immorality and remains the punishment-site for female desire" (29).

My reading of the novel is sympathetic to Parker and Lee's critical assessments, especially in terms of the novel's conflicted feminist messages, but I would propose that Novik's environmental vision stretches further than either critic allows. The contrast Novik draws between the toxic anthropocentric viewpoint that runs throughout most of the novel and its final widening into a Wood-centered perspective makes a spectacle of human arrogance and cruelty toward nonhuman life. This gesture reverses the process by which nature is typically demonized and promotes instead an image of the nonhuman as an object of empathy and care. The Wood-queen is not punished so much as she is

⁴ Although I engage Lee on these points, Mónica Rusvai makes similar observations about the gendered differences between the Dragon and Agnieszka's uses of magic ("Vegetal Magic").

relieved of an age-old injustice when Agnieszka abandons long-established patterns of human domination in favor of an environmental ethos rooted in compassion for inanimate and animate forms of nature.

3. Anthropocentric Viewpoints

As Parker suggests, the Wood is initially characterized as irredeemably negative: a place no human may venture into and come back unchanged. Those lured into the Wood are often “corrupted” in some manner, visibly changed so as to be no longer recognizably human. Agnieszka’s friend Kasia is a prime example. Though Agnieszka and the Dragon cleanse her of the Wood’s controlling influence, Kasia’s external form (her trunk-like legs and limbs) remains unnatural to human eyes. Some critics of the novel view Kasia as a productive blending of human and nonhuman attributes (Rusvai 93, Lee 25), but her fate does not have a lasting impact on the kingdom’s dominant anthropocentric attitude. The people of Polnya persist in imposing strict delineations between the Wood and human life, and Kasia represents more than anything a violation of such divisions. To be sure, Agnieszka and the Dragon’s acceptance of Kasia’s transfiguration is interpreted by others as proof that they have veered from their mission to safeguard the kingdom, and may even be corrupt themselves.

Antagonism between the people and the Wood runs so deep that the Wood is regarded as a cunning inhuman sentience whose sole objective is the destruction of humankind. “The power in the Wood isn’t some blind hating beast,” we are told; “it can think and plan, and work towards its own ends. It can see into the hearts of men, all the better to poison them” (295). Despite suspicions to the contrary, the Dragon devotes his whole existence to battling the Wood’s encroachment and protecting the kingdom from what Agnieszka calls “the full force of its malice” (181). His highest purpose as the most powerful wizard in the land is to ensure that the Wood and its human-focused rage remain at a distance, securely contained within a set of human-imposed borders. Novik rehearses the imposition of such distinctions between human and nonhuman environments only to dismantle their artificial separation by the end of her tale. The history and present disposition of the nonhuman are more entangled with the human than readers are first led to believe. Novik reveals this entanglement, as I have suggested, through a brief but illuminating change in narrative focalization from the novel’s protagonist Agnieszka to its presumed antagonist the Wood-queen.

Even though critics celebrate Agnieszka for practicing a form of magic that is “deeply rooted in nature” (Rusvai 92), she holds noticeably anthropocentric viewpoints prior to her encounter with the Wood-queen. It is her idea, for instance, to confront the Wood-queen and put an end to her malice. Recognizing that the Dragon’s attempts to “hold the Wood back” have failed, she implores him to join her in seeking a more permanent solution: “We have to stop it for good. We have to stop *her*,” she urges him, even if it means “burn[ing] the Wood [down]” (394, 402, original emphasis). Her point of view is limited for the most part to a human perspective that prioritizes the needs of the kingdom over and against a persistent nonhuman reclamation of human-settled territory. She may be a lover of nature with a fondness for “climbing

trees and tearing through brambles” (18), but her appreciation of nature falters when the nonhuman presents itself as an obstacle to the project of human civilization.

It is not until the Wood-queen captures her within the trunk of a heart-tree that Agnieszka’s anthropocentric focalization recedes to allow a nonhuman narrative perspective to emerge. Lulled by the heart-tree’s anesthetizing influence, Agnieszka has a vision in which she observes events of a distant past from the vantage point of the Wood-queen’s sister, who watches a group of Polnyans’s ancestors escort the Wood-queen to their tower to marry their king. The marriage is intended to bring peaceful coexistence between the tower-people, who are newcomers to the land, and the Wood-queen’s own “wood-people” who have a “look of tree to them” and whose voices sound like “drumming on a hollow log” (410). When the vision accelerates to indicate the passage of time, Agnieszka finds herself “full of tears” as she witnesses the wood-people seeking refuge from the tower-people’s treachery (412). She learns that an ambitious young man has usurped the tower-king and imprisoned the Wood-queen, and intends to uproot the wood-people and claim their lands. The wood-people transform themselves into heart-trees to evade capture, but the vision accelerates once again to show the Wood-queen returning to the newly formed heart-tree grove, where she finds two men cutting down one of the trees. Desperate to save her half-felled compatriot, the Wood-queen kills one of the men and presses the other into the dying heart-tree so his body can be grafted onto the trunk to provide sustenance for the tree to heal. Rather than leading to healthy growth, this vengeful act of botanical preservation marks the origin of the Wood’s corruption: the Wood-queen’s anguish over her people’s mistreatment seeps into the soil, polluting the forest with an enduring hatred for humankind.

Apart from allegorizing the devastation humanity wreaks on nonhuman environments, Agnieszka’s vision exemplifies the effectiveness of anthropomorphic storytelling. Momentarily suspending its human focalization to tell the story of the wood-people’s ill-fated encounters with humankind, the novel widens its perspective to accommodate a point of view in which Agnieszka’s nemesis the Wood-queen becomes the protagonist of her own tragic tale. Acting as a kind of nonhuman narrative proxy, the Wood-queen’s sister turns to Agnieszka and invites her to witness the wood-people’s history through her own arboreal-focused set of eyes (410). In this respect, *Uprooted* recognizes and exploits the ecocritical potential of what narrative theorist Gérard Genette calls “variable internal focalization,” which occurs when the “restricted field” of a primary focal character’s viewpoint is offset by that of another character before returning to the primary perspective once again (191, 189). While this technique effectively highlights subjective differences between and across disparate human points of view in more realistic fiction, fantasy has the imaginative capacity to extend the range of that variability to include nonhuman perspectives that pointedly offset and expose anthropocentrism itself as a “restricted field” of view. Interrupting the focalized perspective of one human character with an anthropomorphized nonhuman viewpoint, in other words, not only expands the novel’s narrative field of perception; it also prompts humanity to confront its own structured view of reality.

Novik’s novel does not merely shift into anthropomorphism in providing access to the Wood-queen’s sister’s point of view but purposefully dramatizes

the transition as an event that impacts Agnieszka and the reader at the same time. The invitation to witness that transition summons both to open their imaginations to a Le Guinian realm in which humanity is neither central nor important outside its role as antagonist to the survival of nonhuman beings with prior claims on the land. Exposure to this realm shaped by painful memories of arboreal trauma engenders empathy for previously unsympathetic figures of nonhuman otherness. Agnieszka and the reader are shown the Wood-queen in a distinctly compassionate light that reveals motivations rooted not in malice so much as grief over loved ones lost. No longer a stereotype of insensible fairytale malevolence, the Wood-queen is revealed to be a devoted sovereign devastated by her inability to save her people from existential harm.

The Wood-queen's fate moves Agnieszka to "pity and sorrow and regret" (419), even as she is horrified by the Wood-queen's acts of murderous retribution against the tower-lord and his soldiers. As someone who was herself uprooted from family and friends at a young age, she begins to appreciate how the Wood's corruption stems not from a source of intrinsic wickedness but was cultivated in the "roots" of the Wood-queen's misery and has "fed that misery onward" to the present (419). She believes the heart-tree in which she was trapped "found these [lost] memories" in an appeal to help mend the relationship between the Polnyan people and the Wood (414). Recalling the Wood-queen's aspirations for peaceful coexistence with humankind, Agnieszka wonders: "I might have been the daughter she'd hoped for, the child halfway between the tower-people and her own" (420). Empathy for the Wood-queen's point of view promotes feelings of proximity rather than distance as Agnieszka recognizes kinship in the shared dream of cooperative future sustainability.

If Kasia represents the blending of human and nonhuman characteristics in one body, then Agnieszka represents a blending of the same in a single mind suddenly capable of apprehending what Morton (4) calls the "ecological thought," a mode of thinking that prompts human consciousness to imagine "interconnectedness in the fullest and deepest sense." Emphasizing relationality over separation, the ecological thought unsettles coherent binaries that distinguish human environments from a concept of nonhuman "Nature" that resides elsewhere "over yonder" (3). As Agnieszka learns, environments both human and otherwise are immanently entangled. The tower-people's past betrayal of the wood-people affects the Wood's spiteful aggressions toward the people of Polnya in the present, just as Agnieszka's growing awareness of the former alters her perception of the latter. For Novik, everything – including the Wood, humanity, the past, and the present – is intimately and reciprocally interconnected. Denying this relationality only leads to further animosity and suffering.

4. Treating Beings as People

Regrettably, the people of Polnya fail to recognize their entanglement with the nonhuman – the fact that they are implicated in the harm they inflict on the environment as well as the harm it inflicts on them. Unable to think beyond their own anthropocentric narcissism, they view the Wood as an impediment to their desire to settle lands and expand their kingdom. Agnieszka's visionary experience within the heart-tree exemplifies the potential of anthropomorphic

discourse to challenge the limits of such anthropocentrism. The pathos the vision cultivates for the Wood-people's nonhuman point of view recalls Tolkien's much-discussed characterization of the Ents, the anthropomorphized tree folk from *The Lord of the Rings*.⁵ Portraying arborescent lifeforms with varying degrees of human characteristics literalizes Morton's call to "treat beings as people, even if they turn out not to be" (74). Coexistentialism may well depend on such gestures with the capability to raise the value of nonhuman lifeforms from a human perspective. Though it misrecognizes the nonhuman on its own terms, anthropomorphism can draw the nonhuman within the reach of human compassion and promote feelings of interconnectedness over preconceived notions of human exceptionalism. A tree with legs or a face may no longer be a tree as such, but its anthropomorphized features have the capacity to call humanity to accept responsibility for its crimes committed against otherwise faceless forms of nature.

Agnieszka models a positive response to such a call. In the distraught face of the Wood-queen, she apprehends her own responsibility for past actions against the Wood and pledges her life to nurturing growth within the forest. Her first act of care is to help the Wood-queen transform into a heart-tree that entwines itself around her sister's heart-tree, which was wounded in the violence preceding Agnieszka's vision. She feeds the Wood-queen a mixture of heart-tree fruit and spring water while uttering a transformation spell, and watches as "the new heart-tree tangled with the old one, bracing it up, sealing over the jagged scar" (421). This touching scene of cooperative healing and entanglement signals a path toward coexistentialism. The two heart-trees reflect an interconnectedness comprised not only of a shared system of roots and peridermal tissue, but also Agnieszka's compassionate embrace of the Wood's right to life.

The final chapter of *Uprooted* captures Agnieszka's commitment to this newfound ethic of cooperation and care. While the Dragon returns to the Polnyan court "to clear out the corruption from the capital" (422), Agnieszka takes up residence in the Wood and gains the trust of the Wood's giant stick-bug "walkers" who urge her to teach them how to care for sickened heart-trees (424). Together, Agnieszka and the walkers work toward cleansing the Wood of corruption left over from the Wood-queen's anguish. This work is gradual but steady and is complemented by visits Agnieszka makes to surrounding villages to change people's perceptions of the Wood and the creatures that dwell within its borders. To recall Lee's words, the novel's conclusion gestures toward a "near-utopian vision" as hostilities between the people and the Wood give way to more promising signs of sustainable coexistence.

5. The Persistence of Anthropocentrism

According to Rusvai, Agnieszka's efforts to affect "slow change" in the people's attitudes is "geographically limited" to villages surrounding the Wood. She laments that the novel "refrains from offering a solution extended to the entire society" (96). Even Agnieszka's mentor the Dragon holds doubts about the

⁵ For compelling ecocritical readings of the Ents in Tolkien, see Ulstein ("Hobbits, Ents, and Dæmons") but also Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans' *Ents, Elves, And Eriador*.

Wood's prospective recovery from malice. As Agnieszka quips, he flees to the Polnyan capital to "find himself some new stone walls to hide behind" (423). Those who live closest to the Wood similarly struggle to overcome old prejudices: "Not many people were ready to eat a heart-tree's fruit yet" (432). Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic, even in fantasy, to expect rapid widescale changes to a people's long-held system of beliefs. It takes time for new ideas to take root. Some Polnyans continue to feel uneasy about the Wood, but Agnieszka commits herself to sowing the seeds of change in the hope that her actions will bear fruit for future generations to enjoy.

Patient readers of *Uprooted* would do well to worry less over the speed at which Novik's "near utopian vision" takes shape than about metaphors of human mastery that trouble the novel's ecocritical conclusion. In her attempt to assuage people's lingering fears of the Wood, Agnieszka assures them that "the Wood had been defeated, defeated for good" (431). Though she implicitly refers here to the agency behind the Wood's malice rather than the whole forest as a complex ecosystem, Agnieszka's militaristic choice of words betrays an underlying anthropocentrism that imagines a resolution to environmental crisis in which humanity stands victorious while nature is subject to domination. This is, I argue, no mere slip of the tongue. Agnieszka's efforts to restore the Wood to an imagined state of health prior to the Wood-queen's corrupting influence effectively amount to suppressing aspects of the Wood that are undesirable from a human point of view. Despite her own assurances over its defeat, Agnieszka still views the Wood as a place "full of monstrosities and corruption" (423). These monstrosities do more than remind her of humanity's past engagements with the nonhuman; they also test the limits of her tolerance of nonhuman elements that have no place in her vision of cooperative coexistence with the Wood.

In many ways, Agnieszka's stewardship of the Wood consists of weeding out unwelcome forms of corruption. Her efforts range from nursing sickened wildlife back to health to battling giant mantises still deranged by the Wood-queen's "driving rage" (424). These actions seem helpful enough in the context of the Wood's return to vitality, but there is a lack of precision in the novel's emphasis on "corruption" as a thing from which the forest must be freed. Novik's narrative often conflates the idea of corruption as an infectious pathological drive to carry out the Wood-queen's wrath with a broader biological understanding of corruption as a process of organic decomposition, more commonly known as rot. There are several instances when rot doubles as a metaphor for corruption: Agnieszka considers using a "rot-finding spell" (originally crafted to identify spoiled foodstuffs) on Kasia to "find where corruption ... had taken root in her" (120); a Wood-corrupted book that spawns a monster is said to have been lurking in the King's library for years "like a rotting apple" (308); and the corrupted Queen of Polnya is shown to be "rotted out from the inside" (382). This last example is particularly troubling because the Queen's spoiled interior is revealed through a truth-summoning spell that Agnieszka and the Dragon cast on people suspected of corruption, as though decomposition was somehow synonymous with falsehood or deception. While the sight or smell of organic rot is repellent to human sensibility, particularly as it indicates the presence of something potentially harmful to human subsistence, decomposition is an essential process within forest ecosystems. Conflating this process with an absence of truth is symptomatic of a human-

centered perspective. It blurs the lines between nurturing healthy growth and purging elements of nonhuman nature that are inimical, or just plain offensive, to human existence.

6. Conclusion

Skewing its “near-utopian” environmentalism in favor of humankind, *Uprooted* calls attention to the persistence of anthropocentric discourse even within fantasy that promotes environmentalist perspectives. This fact alone makes it a representative, or *realistic*, instance of ecocritical fantasy. After all, when Ulstein privileges fantasy for its environmentalism, she does not mean to suggest that the genre promises an end to anthropocentrism once and for all. Rather, she merely celebrates the genre’s “exploratory potential” for presenting ecocritical ideas (7). One idea that *Uprooted* presents quite convincingly is the usefulness of anthropomorphic storytelling to imagine nonhuman points of view. Anthropomorphism (itself a product of anthropocentrism) does not eliminate human-centered viewpoints so much as it offers imaginary counter-perspectives in which nonhuman nature appears empathetic and deserving of respect. As is the case with *Uprooted*, anthropomorphism has the potential to highlight the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings who share a past that shapes the way they interact in the present. Shifting the narrative perspective from human to nonhuman viewpoints enables a better appreciation of this interconnectedness. It exemplifies fantasy’s Le Guinian capacity to imagine realms in which humanity’s prominence over nature is not as justifiable as it first appears.

Few fantasy novels have attracted as much ecocritical attention as quickly as *Uprooted* has since its publication in 2015. While critics disagree over the extent to which *Uprooted* offers productive environmentalist messaging, it is worth recalling Morton’s point that thinking about interconnectedness “isn’t snug and cozy,” nor is it full of “predictable, warm fuzziness” (31). Representing nonhuman points of view is messy business. *Uprooted*’s greatest ecocritical asset might be its ability to elicit varied responses to its environmentalist vision. If entanglement is the object and purpose of thinking ecologically, as Morton suggests, then a novel whose environmentalism is ensnared by its own anthropocentric shortcomings captures, perhaps better than most, the promise but also the realism of fantasy’s ecocritical potential.

Biography: Peter Melville is Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg where he specializes in fantasy fiction, poetry, and Romanticism. He has published recent work on the fantasy genre in edited collections and academic journals including *Extrapolation*, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Fafnir*, *Studies in the Fantastic*, and *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*.

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