

## **Research Space**

Conference or workshop item

**Uncanny intimacies**

**Riley, P.**

## UNCANNY INTIMACIES:

Writing *Seasalter*

Hi, I'm Peggy Riley – a playwright, novelist and Senior Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University. I recently completed my MFA at Birkbeck, and I would like to share the research and writing of my novel, *Seasalter*, completed for my dissertation.

**SLIDE 2:**

'What is it that you are communicating with, at this moment of extreme danger, when your mind is in a state unlike any you've ever known before?' (Ghosh 29). In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh outlines how climate crisis is changing the stories humans tell of the world and our place in it. How do we respond to what we witness, what we see? In what state will our minds comprehend our new reality? How will we communicate our fears and longings, and with whom - or what?

As climate change alters landscapes, shifting borders and boundaries, it also shrinks proximities between people, places and species, creating new 'uncanny intimacies' between the human and nonhuman (Ghosh 33).

**SLIDE 3:**

Uncanny intimacies hinge on 'moment(s) of mutual recognitions ... in that moment of contact (when) you realise that this presence possesses a similar awareness of you, even though it is not human'. It is a mute communication, says Ghosh, but it *is* communication, a connection with 'a presence that is not of this world' (Ghosh 29).

**SLIDE 4:**

In *Seasalter*, my protagonist, Jake River encounters the uncanny in the estuary. He finds a figure wrapped in plastic, caught in his father's oyster beds. He perceives the figure as a seal and then a girl, assuming her to be a migrant or refugee fleeing war or climate change. In fact, she is a sea monster, one of the many his father told him lived and hunted in their waters, but Jake is unable to perceive or recognise her for what – or who - she is. She is a

creature being forced into contact with the land and its humans due to climate change – the rising temperature of the water, the human-filled, waste-filled seas, and water’s own unstoppable rise.

The inability to perceive is overwhelming, the ‘great derangement’ of Ghosh’s title. Jake is overwhelmed at the novel’s opening, filled with grief at the loss of his father and the world he knew, mid-pandemic as we still are, as well as anxiety for what might come, a changing world that has become ‘seriously unthinkable’ (Haraway 30). Ghosh suggests the ‘unthinkable’ changes in our climate ‘are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognise something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors” (30). When once humans might have blamed gods for natural disasters or prayed to them for rescue or good harvests, now we might instinctively feel that our world is out to get us, to exact some karmic justice or revenge for the ‘Great Acceleration’ of our Anthropocentric ways (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill). If seasons are kind or even “normal”, we count ourselves as lucky. Humans might have a ‘more intimate connection’ with modern global warming events than with ‘climatic phenomena’ of the past, because of our contribution toward their making, our culpability and complicity. Our growing awareness that this is normal now.

#### **SLIDE 5: QUOTE**

‘It is surely no coincidence that the word uncanny has begun to be used, with every greater frequency, in relation to climate change. ... Weather conditions, and the high-carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty. No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us’ (Ghosh 30).

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#### **SLIDE 6: WAVES**

What we witness in climate change is ‘the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms’ (Ghosh 32). In my novel, the water is filled with shapes and forms, creatures and humans and monsters of all kinds. The weather and the water are both sentient. And why shouldn’t they be? Climate change is uncanny, though ‘the environmental uncanny is not the same as the uncanniness of the supernatural’ (32) found in

Freud's interpretation. 'It is different precisely because it pertains to nonhuman forces and beings' (32) with freakish weather, wildfires, and rising seas that seem intent on our destruction while we humans battle viruses made from human-nonhuman contact, viruses that spread through our population via various proximities and intimacies.

### **SLIDE 7: FLOODING**

Seasalter is set in the town just west of Whitstable, where I live, a working fishing town in East Kent, and a region hit hard by divisive politics, the tribalism of Brexit, and the rising seas brought by global warming. Here on the North Kent coast, it is the sea itself that is becoming unthinkable. Studies suggest that much of East Kent will be underwater by 2050: iconic locations like Dungeness, Romney Marsh, Folkestone, much of Dover and Deal, Ramsgate, Margate, Whitstable and Seasalter. 'Aging flood defences, rising sea levels and climate change mean that flood risk to people, properties and agricultural land will significantly increase in the coming years' (Castle), we are told. But it is already significantly increasing. This moment of "extreme danger" is not just coming – it is arriving. We can see that it is here.

### **SLIDE 8: GREAT FLOOD OF 53**

And it has been here before. In 1953, a storm surge swept up the east coast of the UK, flooding coastal towns and cities including Seasalter and drowning two-and-a-half thousand people (Yablonsky and Blair). As a result of this great flood, coastal communities increased their sea defences, but rising seas routinely breach them. In Seasalter, there are no sea defences. The coastline will not be protected or shored up against the rising seas, physically or financially. The Great Flood caused havoc and destruction that remains. My home was flooded before we lived here, which the house regularly reminds us of. Our foundations are wet, our walls are damp, and we live with the certain knowledge that water will get us eventually, either by the sea, the nearby Stream Walk, a buried river which always threatens to rise, or the pump system at Gorrell Tank that never copes with flooding as it's meant to. But should I be surprised when I learn my street was once known as Rope Marsh? Maybe no one and nothing can really hold back water from going where it wants to go – or where it used to go before humans and their doings got in its way.

Of course the history of the region is much older than its last flood. This is ancient land, where Romans farmed oysters and salt, where Jutes established a kingdom, and where earlier rising seas drowned a Saxon church. The "new" church that replaced it was built in

1160. This area is coastland beside marshland, where the Seasalter Levels have been drained to make grazing land and farmland, but they all will one day be underwater again, as are floodplains and coastal areas around so much of the world right now.

### **SLIDE 9: SEASALTER QUOTE**

In the Great Flood of '53 in my novel, Jake's father rows himself down the high street, as a boy, and finds a sea monster swimming up on land. In this moment of First Contact, they regard each other. Both are curious. The monster has teeth, but the boy has a weapon: a length of sea rope. Instead of uncanny intimacy, the boy catches the monster by the tail in Squeeze Gut Alley and won't let go until the rope severs it from the monster's body. This tail becomes a kind of talisman, an uncanny totem that the father hangs on the wall as proof that monsters exist. But the monster wants it back. Who is to say that the sea, like a sea monster, doesn't want revenge for all that we have taken, all that we have extracted, and the damage we leave behind?

### **SLIDE 10: OYSTERS**

The taking of the tail and the splitting of the monster is just one kind of extraction done here, a working harbour that extracts fish and shellfish, principally whelks and oysters, in greedy net-and-boatloads. Creatures of the estuary and sea must also deal with all that humans put into it – ships and fuel, cargo and supplies that topple overboard from shipping containers and pleasure crafts, as well as the rotting relics, ships and jetties, wrecks left behind, unexploded bombs, waste and sewage, routinely pumped in by Southern Water.

### **SLIDE 11: TURBINES**

The seabed has been cut open, and powerlines laid into trenches that attach the land to the offshore wind turbines, so I imagine the land and water hum and vibrate with that power, though no creature has yet to tell me so, directly.

But nonhuman beings are communicating in a variety of ways, most of them self-destructive. All around the world, the nonhuman speaks in beaching, bleaching, and mass die-outs from toxic waste or unsustainable temperatures (Bullock). In Whitstable and Seasalter, nonhumans and humans are routinely sick due to intentional sewage spills. How much more will the ocean take of what we dish out? In my novel, not much. My sea monster wants revenge and then war: for the sea to rise and bring another Great Flood that will wash all land and humans away.

**SLIDE 12: SUBRAMANIAN**

I write from the hot seat of my own climate anxiety where I walk along the shingle to see, not the sea glass and driftwood I have been hunting for years, but what is washing up now: plastic. This plastic-full sea forms the setting for *Seasalter*, whose estuary opens to the North Sea, one of the global waters dealing with an estimated eight million metric tons of waste dumped every year where only 1 percent of the plastic released into the marine environment is accounted for (Subramaniam). Instead of Anthropocene, journalist Meera Subramaniam suggests our era should be dubbed the Plasticene as our planet is so affected by these remnants in our land, water, and air as well as our human and nonhuman bodies. This ‘plastisphere’ finds synthetic polymers woven throughout all ecological and biological systems: ‘As plastics degrade, so do the barriers that once seemed so defined and distinct, between inert and organic, between outside a body and its interior, between science and art, between present and future’ (Subramaniam).

I’ll be running a writing workshop tomorrow afternoon about sea plastic and eco-grief.

**SLIDE 13:**

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway reaches beyond the limitations of human logic to find connections through tentacular thinking, a ‘life lived along lines ... not at points, not in spheres’, where humans connect in new ways through string figures and with arachnids, fungal tangles, roots and rhizomes (32). The sea creature’s thinking seems to be tentacular, connecting her with all fish-kin – all creatures who live at or on or below the water, but she is as limited in her thinking as any human is, thinking only her own “kind” is capable of sentience. When the nonhuman and the human meet, they are both in crisis. These crises force them both into an uncanny intimacy where each might choose to destroy or save the other.

‘One of the uncanniest effects of the Anthropocene (is the) renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself’ (Ghosh 63). As our proximity to the nonhuman increases, we notice the barriers between human and nonhuman are permeable: perhaps they are not fixed and never have been. As Jake’s proximity to the nonhuman increases, he thinks any such intimacy must speak of his own crisis, of mental illness. Even when the two find common

ground in music, in a shared song, Jake believes their only differences are ones of gender, race and circumstance, but not species. When he perceives the creature's tail, a tail that looks uncannily like the severed tail his father captured, his mind rejects it.

To survive our own crises, we may have to find ways to merge with what may seem to want to destroy us. The protagonist of Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation* (2014) merges with the 'fruiting bodies' in Area X; becoming a shared species with the spores enables her to find the means to survive the hostile environment and her own overwhelming grief. In vaccinations, we take in a weak version of the pathogen that wants to destroy us, merging with it to teach our bodies how to fight them and survive. Jake resists such merging and the pull of the creature on him. He cannot comprehend the creature's rage – or the sea's - until the sea finally rises against them: human and nonhuman. Each is the other's monster.

SLIDE 14:

And it is easy to believe in monsters here. They're in our folklore and festivals. They're on our streets.

SLIDE 15:

They're in our environment and our landscapes.

SLIDE 16:

They're hidden in the shapes of everything we see.

SLIDE 17:

They're even in the water – such as the mighty crab, Crabzilla, who also makes an appearance in my novel.

SLIDE 18:

At the end of *Seasalter*, both human and nonhuman protagonists find their ways toward a kind of peace. Jake learns to live with the uncertainty of what has happened and what might yet happen at the liminal line between land and the rising sea. He learns to stay in 'the trouble', as Donna Haraway would say, which 'requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful and Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as

mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (1). And the sea monster finds a way to reconcile with all that has been lost and will never be recovered.

SLIDE 19:

'Literature is bound up with what it's like to be us, to be human. Literature is how we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves' (Eaglestone 1), but we need to think bigger. In a changing landscape on a changing planet, our narratives can also change, to make room for the uncanny we experience in the world:

SLIDE 20:

'a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness' (Ghosh 31). Must all intelligence and agency belong to humans when our shared earth is in peril? In the Anthropocene, we acknowledge that there is no separation between people and nature, between civilisation and the environment, between 'humans as rational beings' and the 'biological robots' of nonhuman organisms (Schwaegerl). Perhaps if we can, our intimacies can adapt. We can remember – or rediscover – our sense of the miracle of the world, even as it changes beyond all our recognition.

SLIDE 21: THANKS.

Thank you.

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