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## Ways of Looking: the Composite Novel and Posthuman Community in Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13*

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Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017) is set in an unnamed village in the UK's Peak District and, in thirteen chapters that each cover a year, depicts the everyday lives of the humans, plants, and animals in that area. The novel is notable for giving equal emotional significance to human and non-human life, and for being composed of vignettes focused on characters or groups that are arranged chronologically without deference to a dramatic arc. These characteristics ally *Reservoir 13* with the contemporary novels being categorised as narratives of community or composite novels, which often use locations to bring together disparate characters. Within this context, *Reservoir 13*'s unusual focus on non-human life raises questions about how the place of the non-human in literary communities is framed by composite or fragmented narrative structures. This paper concludes that *Reservoir 13* can be seen as an example of a posthuman literary community: through its fragmented structure, externally focalised narration, and inclusion of disparate forms of human and non-human life, McGregor crafts a community not as it might be experienced by one human – the bird's eye view of the third-person narrator covers too much ground for this – but as a theoretical perspective. In the nascent field of posthuman narratology, *Reservoir 13* is an apt case study for showing how twenty-first-century writing might construct a posthuman community with the conundrum of the anthropocentrism and humanism of the novel form lurking in the background.

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‘The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying’: this is the epigraph that welcomes readers into Jon McGregor’s 2017 novel, *Reservoir 13* (2017a, vii). It is the twelfth section of Wallace Stevens’s poem ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ (1954), and the implicit key signature of ‘ways of looking’ in *Reservoir 13* is what I investigate in this essay. In the poem, an outside observer coordinates the seemingly unrelated actions of the river moving and the blackbird flying into a causality that is based on human eyes and human judgment. Similarly, I argue that it is the formal structure into which McGregor places his fourth novel’s rural community that defines their relationships, that frames the parameters of community for the reader’s eyes.

The significance of community in *Reservoir 13*, and its unusual features within the novel, have been amply rehearsed by reviewers. The account goes something like this: the setting is a small village in the UK’s Peak District, where everyone knows and gossips about everyone else. The tale begins with the trappings of a thriller – a young girl named Becky Shaw has gone missing – but this quickly proves to be a red herring. Over thirteen years recounted with a high degree of temporal verisimilitude, we see that Becky’s case remains unsolved and becomes a recurring thread in the rich tapestry of everyday life which, as Neal Alexander shows, has been a staple of McGregor’s novels since *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, published in 2002 (Alexander 2013). One of the most notable features of the novel is the ‘god’s-eye view’ (Saunders 2017) or ‘bird’s eye view’ (Foster-Skaraas 2017) of the narrative voice, as reviewers have termed it. The narrative moves from one character or scene to the next in non sequiturs that proceed in chronological order but otherwise bear little resemblance to a dramatic arc. In McGregor’s own words, he wanted to express ‘the idea that you have lots of people and they’re individuals but they overlap’ (Jordan 2017). Beyond the implied humans of ‘lots of people’, another key feature that reviewers such as Justine Jordan and Tessa Hadley have noted is McGregor’s emphasis on the non-human life in and around the village, with Jordan writing that McGregor gives equal ‘emotional weight’ to the badgers, reservoirs, and blackberries as he does to the human characters (Jordan 2017; Hadley 2017). In the same interview with Jordan, McGregor says that he wanted to include ‘all the birth and life and death stuff of various different birds, animals, trees [...] I thought, that’s as much part of the story as the human life’ (Jordan 2017). Indeed, these non-human figures are included without further distinction in the non sequiturs of *Reservoir 13*, troubling the traditional hierarchies between human and non-human.

On the back of these distinctive formal choices, I argue that in *Reservoir 13*, the story is the community; human and non-human are woven together by a central way of looking that frames them together regardless of any experiences they might be imagined to share or not share. After situating McGregor’s form on the spectrum of

the short story cycle and composite novel, I show how the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred, crossed, and problematised by this form. I propose that these crossings within the literary construction of a community make *Reservoir 13* a representation of a posthuman community. As such, this essay attempts to bridge recent scholarly interest in literary representations of community,<sup>1</sup> especially with relation to the short story cycle spectrum,<sup>2</sup> and the growing body of scholarship on posthumanism and narratology.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Reservoir 13* and the Short Story Cycle Spectrum**

The idea that in *Reservoir 13* McGregor blurs distinctions between human and non-human is not a new one. Ben de Bruyn has described the novel's 'flat ontology' (2022, 262), and Jean-Michel Ganteau suggests that *Reservoir 13*'s landscape, and its overall project, are 'relational':

The poetic and structural choice that privileges the juxtaposition of vignettes featuring objects of varying ontological status gives the impression that the human emanates from the natural, in the same way as the natural elements of the landscape are tightly intertwined with the human. Such a juxtaposition looks like a relational device, so much so that, in the kaleidoscopic universe of McGregor's novel, it seems as if things and beings were separated the better to connect, or at least to multiply attempts at connection. (Ganteau 2018, para. 16)

Beyond the relationality built into the text, Ganteau concludes that McGregor's experiment with vignettes that simultaneously move towards each other and remain distinct is an exercise for the reader's attention. The 'humble and invisible' – insects, birds, lakes, stones – are given equal precedence to human dramas, and even among

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Lee 2009, in which community is considered on a spectrum from fragmentation to coherence in several 21st-century novels, and Miller 2015, which constructs a history of literary community from the Victorian period to the present day. Both books share a preoccupation with narratologies of community.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview on the short story cycle spectrum and recent engagements with it, see D'hoker 2013. A number of books and articles over the last decade have revitalised the question of the short story cycle spectrum and the 'narrative of community', including Jennifer Smith's book on the American short story cycle, and Patrick Gill and Florian Klaeger's edited volume on 'constructing coherence' that often thematise community (Smith 2017; Gill and Klaeger 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Several articles in the past decade point towards a growing interest in the narratological characteristics of texts read as posthuman (Flanagan 2014; Lovell 2018; Tomasula 2014); in particular, Sue Lovell considers self-conscious paratexts such as footnoting, as well as autofictional elements and non-realist temporalities as portals into the reader's awareness of being "already posthuman" in order to inaugurate a field of posthuman narratology (Lovell 2018). Also significant are the 2021 collection *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative* (Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascual 2021) and *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, in which the second section focuses on "posthuman literary modes" (Clarke and Rossini 2016).

those dramas, the ordinary ones are just as prominent as the grand: Ganteau argues that this retrains readers' ethical and perceptual capabilities towards less often narrativised parts and forms of life (Ganteau 2018, para. 20). Building on his conclusions about the perceptual impulses of *Reservoir 13* and the idea of relationality, I propose that *Reservoir 13* should be seen within the history of narratives of community, and that a reading that is attentive to this form can point to the posthuman angle that *Reservoir 13* represents within twenty-first-century narratives of community.

The short story cycle, first identified by that name by Forrest Ingram in 1976, is central to discussions of narratives of community in the past century or so. Like McGregor's landscape, it too might bear the name relational for the way it holds in balance 'wholeness' and 'fragmentedness' between the collection of related short stories and the relative independence of the short stories themselves. Over the past five decades, the short story cycle has been further articulated as one point on a spectrum between 'openness' and 'closedness' as narrative structures – a more formalist position – or as a form in which completion or fragmentation is in the eye of the beholder (e.g. Lundén 2014 vs. Luscher 1989). Regardless of critics' positions within this debate, however, there seems to be a consensus that the short story cycle finds itself on a sliding scale between the short story collection and the monolith of the traditional novel. Because of its structural juxtaposition of the one and the many, the short story cycle has long been associated with the representation of community, with Sandra Zagarell going so far as to use 'narrative of community' as a generic marker that substantially overlaps with the short story cycle designation (1988). Significantly for the relationality that Ganteau identifies in *Reservoir 13*, Zagarell argues that this genre avoids the individualism that characterises the novel. In archetypal novels such as those of Walter Scott, Zagarell states that 'a Romantic emphasis on the individual consciousness or [...] on individualized, often heroic characters, overshadows the portrayal of community life' (1988, 501). The short story cycle spectrum offers a turn away from such individualism.

As much as short story cycles continue to evoke community – or its impossibility – in twenty-first-century fiction, the little-discussed area on the literary spectrum between cycle and novel increasingly seems utilised to depict new forms of community (D'hoker 2018, 17). Elke D'hoker identifies those contemporary texts that are composed of fragments too interconnected to stand on their own, but that nevertheless defy the conventions of the novel, as 'composite novels'. D'hoker highlights the way that these novels tend to stand apart from conventions of novelistic community portrayal as follows:

In their juxtaposition of different characters, voices, and lives, these books depart from the single-protagonist-driven plot of the traditional novel, especially as

the characters do not share the usual novelistic ties of family, love, or friendship. Instead, they are connected through a common setting or shared history or are brought together through an accident or coincidence. (D’hoker 2018, 17)

In this article, D’hoker focuses on human interconnections in her description of the composite novel, identifying especially interactions that illustrate ‘the limitations of high individualism’ (2018, 17). *Reservoir 13* fits this bill perfectly. Over the course of thirteen years within the novel, we are introduced to a village’s worth of characters: newcomers such as Susanna and her children, who we eventually learn are fleeing domestic abuse; residents for time-out-of-mind such as the Jackson family; characters who left the village and return to visit, like high-powered executive Richard; and members of the community who don’t fit into a Peak District village’s stereotypical ethnic picture, such as Su Cooper and Deepak. However, following Ganteau’s reading of the ‘relational’ way that human and non-human are brought together by McGregor’s formal choices, I argue that McGregor takes the critique of individualism further. In the following section, I show how McGregor’s formal choices cause *Reservoir 13* to challenge both the idea of a (human) protagonist and the centring of the human species as the only participants in a literary structure of community.

### **Spaces and Bridges between Species**

The resistance that the short story cycle as a form poses to the novel’s individualism relies generally, on the reader’s focus being spread evenly between heterogeneous characters. These characters might very well be highly individualised within their focalised stories, but the centripetal force of the story cycle prevents the formation of a strong hero’s journey or special emotional allegiance from reader to character. To borrow Zagarell’s turn of phrase, the short story cycle might be thought of as portraying multiple ‘individual consciousnesses’ (501). A major difference from this understanding of the short story cycle in McGregor’s usage of interconnected fragments is the absence of any sustained or very internal focalisation that focuses on any one individual within the community. *Reservoir 13* avoids overt insights into individual psychologies, instead allowing humans and non-humans to mingle through the depiction primarily of actions, rather than giving overmuch time to focalisations that set human and non-human apart within McGregor’s realism. The main vehicle by which this intermingling takes place is the non-sequitur structure of the novel.

The repetitive way that *Reservoir 13* is written means that any examples of non-sequiturs across species lines are somewhat arbitrary; they occur again and again across the thirteen chapters. For the sake of a more focused point, I have selected examples that

demonstrate how emotion is diffused, transferred, or echoed from human characters to animal ones or vice versa. I take my cue from Justine Jordan's review of the novel: writing in the *Guardian*, she observes that McGregor gives even 'emotional weight' to human and non-human events (2017). Here, in the second chapter, the cycle of birth and death across species lines is highlighted by the following juxtaposition:

Jackson had a stroke and was taken to hospital and for weeks it was assumed he wouldn't be coming home.

In the beech wood the foxes gave birth, earthed down in the dark and wet with pain, the blind cubs pressing against their mothers for warmth. (McGregor 2017a, 35)<sup>4</sup>

This transition between the Jackson family and the fox family is abrupt, especially as each fragment is only a sentence long, but they are bridged by common experiences of pain. Further, the pain and uncertainty experienced by Jackson's family is overshadowed by that of the mother foxes in labour. Their birthing pains are explicit in McGregor's word choice ('dark', 'wet', 'blind', 'pressing') whereas the Jacksons' fear is concealed in the passive voice ('it was assumed he wouldn't be coming home'). Where readers might tend to give greater emotional importance to a man having a stroke than to a fox giving birth, McGregor's inversion of experiential language balances out this tendency. The similarity between animal experiences and human ones is brought to the fore, and the human gaze re-directed away from the places to which it is used to paying attention.

McGregor's non sequiturs do the same job in the opposite direction as well when they draw a reader's attention from an emotionally weighted human drama to an everyday event in the non-human world. In the first example, I showed how experiences are echoed and spread evenly between textual fragments and species. In the following one, it becomes clear how the non sequiturs can also diffuse emotion by framing it within the everyday cyclicity of life. One of the villagers, Irene, has a neurodivergent son, Andrew, who experiences great anxiety whenever the siren goes off in the nearby quarry to signal an upcoming blast:

[...] she wanted to hold him but he wouldn't be held. She could only stand nearby. He'd been strong enough to throw her off for years. Some days the siren sounded five or six times. From the eaves of the church the first bats were seen leaving at dusk, hungry from a long winter's sleep and listening for food. (McGregor 2017a, 112)

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<sup>4</sup> For more examples of fragments that introduce non-human characters and a discussion of these fragments in terms of ecological modelling, see De Bruyn 2022, especially pp. 271-2; 286-7; 289 (diagram); and 293-4.

The scale of the pain and anxiety experienced by Irene and Andrew is evoked implicitly, like the Jackson family's above. The reference to the repeatedly sounding siren does not elaborate on Andrew's difficulties. Instead, readers' attention is drawn to the regularity and repetition of this experience ('some days'). From here, the narrative segues into the similarly ordinary and cyclical event of the bats waking from hibernation and 'listening for food'. Placed next to the action-based focus on Irene ('he couldn't be held', 'she could only stand nearby'), the description of the bats' daily and annual actions places Irene's anguish among all the recurring events of the years and days. The similar level of focalisation offered to the bats, who are 'hungry' and 'listening', compounds the sense that McGregor gives even amounts of attention and value to human and non-human figures. Whether *Reservoir 13*'s 'composite-ness' amplifies or diffuses the emotional charges of events, then, it gives plenty of room to the external narrative voice that in turn gives villagers, foxes, and bats a sort of equity within the story world. McGregor's fictional village in the Peak District is thereby filled with interconnections across species lines. The cyclicity that McGregor hints at in the fragment with Irene, Andrew and the bats is not unique to this example. Parallels between human and non-human cycles and traditions bridge the novel's year-chapters. As on the level of the fragments discussed above, across chapters, McGregor's attention to cyclicity continues to sweep away the hierarchy between human and non-human.

Tradition lurks in the background of most recent discussions of literary representations of community (see e.g. Lee 2009; Miller 2015). It remains a staple in defining what approach to community an author takes: Sue-Im Lee, for example, arranges the contemporary novels she discusses along the axis from idealising community to seeing community as an oppressive and homogenising force. The latter in particular speaks to the afterlife of sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's concept of *Gemeinschaft*, the idea of a pre-modern village community that one is 'born into' (Delanty 2010, 30). It also corresponds to stereotypes about villages as opposed to cities: they are hidebound, close-knit, *traditional*. At first, McGregor plays into these stereotypes in *Reservoir 13*: we find ourselves in a village in a remote part of England – the paradigmatic *Gemeinschaft* – where customs such as the annual pantomime, the cricket match with the neighbouring village, and picking blackberries in August structure communal life. But, as the following example of 'well dressing' illustrates, not all is as it seems. McGregor offers no explanation for the term, which enhances the sense that this is a practice so ancient and ordinary that no description is needed.<sup>5</sup> This impression is followed up by the indirectly reported conversation among the

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion specifically of well dressing in *Reservoir 13* and the effect of its inclusion on setting, cyclicity, character development, and community formation see Parkes-Nield 2021.

well dressing committee about whether or not to hold the event after Rebecca Shaw's disappearance:

The well dressing committee had a difference of opinion about whether to dress the boards at all this year. [...] There'd never been a year without a well dressing that anyone could remember. [...] In the end it was agreed to make the dressing but to keep the event low-key. (McGregor 2017a, 14)

In one of the only academic studies of well dressing, Elizabeth Bird argues that the practice can be seen as a function of 'social integration, either as a celebration of a felt unity and continuity, or as a conscious attempt to create a sense of community' much like other repeated communal activities (1983, 71). However, both Bird's study and a more recent study by Rosemary Shirley emphasise the shift of well dressing in many parts of the Peak District from a primarily community-oriented practice to one performed to attract tourists (Bird 1983, 71; Shirley 2017, 652). In *Reservoir 13* this shift is highlighted, especially in later chapters: 'The well dressing boards stood for just short of a week, with the crowds up on previous years and Jim Stephenson's brass band from the high school playing over the weekend' (McGregor 2017a, 271). In addition to these more recent changes, Shirley notes that in many cases, the emphasis on the ancient origins of well dressing by nation-building twentieth-century folklorists may be exaggerated; though the village of Tissington claims possible origins for the practice in either the fourteenth or the seventeenth centuries, the first records of a well-dressing there date to 1818 (Shirley 2017, 652–53). What McGregor's characters treat as ancient tradition in *Reservoir 13* is in fact a practice that is *becoming*, to use posthumanist parlance, as much as the community itself. Moreover, the identity-in-process that the well dressing suggests is echoed in the small annual changes and habits across *Reservoir 13*'s non-human fragments. To see that neither human nor non-human cycles are primeval, we need look no further than the novel's title: in *Reservoir 13*'s companion text, *The Reservoir Tapes*, a character says that amid the thirteen reservoirs, 'there's plenty of nature here, but there's nothing natural about the landscape' (McGregor 2017b, 40).

The novel's emphasis on annual structure as well as lunar cycles highlights habit alongside gradual change among the non-human cases. Animal-focused fragments, such as the ones we have already seen above, appear once per year for most animal groups and move forward by a little less than a month in each chapter. In the first chapter, for instance, we meet the local badger sett during September:



The badgers in the beech wood fed quickly, laying down fat for the winter ahead. They moved through the leaf litter in a snuffling, bumping pack, turning up earth-worms and fallen berries. (McGregor 2017a, 23)

The final chapter finds us with the badgers in the ‘year’s’ August section:

The badgers spent more of the night outside, and ranged closer to the edges of their territory. There was scent-marking, and in the morning small piles of soft scat could be found. (McGregor 2017a, 317)

With the exception of a few allusions to human actions, such as the chance that humans or other animals ‘could’ find scat in the morning, these fragments focus their attention closely on the badgers. However, the fact that the badgers, humans and other creatures share a space is made explicit when McGregor refers to the beech wood. Along with other landmarks, this spot is first introduced in the view of the village from the top of the moor at the very beginning of *Reservoir 13* (McGregor 2017a, 2). Though humans and non-human animals are not shown as interacting very frequently or deliberately, McGregor makes it quite clear that the species represented share both a space and a temporality in which habits vary and change, but not too much. To return to a phrase I used earlier, they are ‘becoming’ alongside one another.

In addition to the features I have discussed so far that level the narrative and emotional playing field between species, there is a figure in *Reservoir 13* who provides a space between human and non-human – a narrative bridge of sorts: Rebecca Shaw, the missing girl. Rebecca does not appear in the novel – when we enter the story, she has just gone missing – but the mystery that ensues gives room to speculation about her possible fates that seem to embody aspects of a posthuman condition. The hypothesis fragments follow their own cyclical pattern and show up as sections in most chapters that are not focalised through any particular character, but seem instead to embody a kind of collective (human) unconscious of the village. Though the perspective is entirely human, an issue with the writing of a ‘posthuman’ community that I address below, Rebecca Shaw no longer is:

She could have walked high over the moor and stumbled into a flooded clough and sunk cold and deep in the wet peat before the dogs and thermal cameras came anywhere near, her skin tanned leather-brown and soft and her hair coiled neatly around her. (McGregor 2017a, 183)

She would be seventeen by now, and the police published a computer-generated image of how she might look. There was something about this approximate-Becky that seemed too smooth. As though the Becky in the picture had been kept in a sterile room and was only now coming out. (McGregor 2017a, 106)

In the first example, Becky inhabits the distinctly non-human sphere of the peat bog, and McGregor's description blends the human corpse ('her hair coiled neatly around her') with the fate of many animal carcasses ('tanned leather-brown'). Further, Becky is suspended between life and death ('stumbled' and 'sunk', rather than 'drowned'); she is becoming something, but what is not made explicit. The second passage achieves the same effect in the cyber-sphere: the phrase 'she *would be* seventeen now' suspends Becky in a space in which she both ages and doesn't, changes and doesn't change, much like the other cycles her passages echo in *Reservoir 13*. In both passages, Becky has entered a space that is on the border between human and non-human (the ground; the virtual) to become a sort of hybrid. The figure of the missing girl implies a continuity between human beings and the non-human spaces of landscape and technology and lends space in the narrative to a hypothetical 'social mind' apparently shared by all the human inhabitants of the village.

### Posthuman Community

Having discussed the many structural and thematic features of *Reservoir 13* that point towards the fruitfulness of a posthumanist reading, I can now turn to the idea of a posthuman community as such. First, though, the present definition of 'posthuman' requires clarification. The posthuman enjoys a variety of meanings on the new materialist side to which I refer, alongside the more literally 'post-human' usage, as for instance by Francis Fukuyama in his 1997 book, *Our Posthuman Future*. Here, I approach the issue of posthuman community through Rosi Braidotti's work, as her feminist posthumanism unites many of the central concerns of the posthuman turn by critiquing White, male 'Vitruvian' humanism (Braidotti 2013, 13–14) simultaneously with anthropocentrism, engaging critically with technologies of all kinds (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018, 4). Her definition of the turn sees humans as only one piece – albeit a privileged one – of a much larger landscape of non-human entities, but crucially also acknowledges humanity as complex and full of internal differences. Often, Braidotti argues, attempting non-anthropocentrism can, advertently or not, overlook the fact that "Anthropos" is made up of multiple gendered and racialized categories with hierarchies in some cases as stratified as those between human and non-human. This observation is crucial where the novelistic depiction of a multi-species community is concerned.

In her 2019 *Posthuman Knowledge*, Braidotti grapples with the idea of a posthuman 'we'. This is a slippery pronoun here, precisely because many of the members of the 'we' may not be able to express or experience the 'we' in those terms (Braidotti 2019, 52). Braidotti's concern with this 'we' is practical and political: she asks what the body politic becomes when it no longer revolves around a 'Vitruvian' human against which all others are measured as lesser. In order to escape the homogenising force of the first-person plural as a single, stable group, Braidotti crafts the phrase 'we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same' (2019, 52). Crucially, she argues that this conception of the 'we' is not synonymous with 'we, the people' as 'a unitary category' (2019, 52). Rather, she highlights that 'a people' (her emphasis) is always 'missing and virtual, in that it needs to be actualized and assembled [as] the result of a praxis [...] to produce different assemblages' (Braidotti 2019, 52). Similarly, in *Reservoir 13*, the many inhabitants in and around the village are not the same, but are undeniably coexisting within the same time and space and are all equally important for the narrative. Moreover, the structure of the novel and its focus on the workings of community produces such different assemblages: consider the well dressing committee as opposed to the family unit of Andrew and Irene, the unit of the village, or the collective presentation of all life in the valley.

However, the village in *Reservoir 13* at no point declares itself as a 'we', which is a basic – if problematic – component of community in most philosophical discussions, from Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of 'being singular plural', to the idea of a nation, to Braidotti's posthuman assemblages (see Nancy 2000, chap. 1). The village's lack of a name emphasises this absence of overt cohesion: for instance, the annual cricket match against nearby Cardwell is generally reported in the passive tone – 'at the cricket ground the annual game against Cardwell was lost' (McGregor 2017a, 19) – which, while delineating the opponent, leaves the coherence of the village as a "side" nebulous. The same effect is achieved in later iterations of the cricket match when it is 'the cricket team' playing, rather than the village being unified as a 'we' by its name as Cardwell arguably is (McGregor 2017a, 49). Instead, *Reservoir 13* takes 'they' as its central pronoun. The entire community and its component assemblages, linked by shared space and time, are narrated using an external third-person plural or singular; the passages speculating about the missing girl evoke an imagined third-person plural consciousness. Perhaps most significantly for the novel's 'way of looking', an extended they-narration occupies its first two and a half pages, as the village is introduced during the search for Rebecca Shaw:

They gathered at the car park in the hour before dawn and waited to be told what to do. It was cold and there was little conversation. There were questions that weren't being asked. [...] They were given instructions and then they moved off, their boots

crunching on the stiffened ground and their tracks fading behind them as the heather sprang back into shape. [...] They kept their eyes down and they didn't speak and they wondered what they might find. (McGregor 2017a, 1)

Unconventional 'they' narratives like this one are generally found, Brian Richardson observes, when 'authors feel a need to present collective experience in an unusual or innovative form' (B. Richardson 2015, 200). Such narratives and their depiction of 'social minds' have a long literary history,<sup>6</sup> and have garnered significant critical attention in recent years.<sup>7</sup> Several key takeaways from this conversation are relevant for reading *Reservoir 13*'s use of both the implied 'they' of its externally narrated composite novel structure and the literal, narrative 'they' that appears intermittently. In contrast to the first-person plural, Monika Fludernik finds that 'they'-references to collectives tend to foreground the numerical size of the group but may equally be employed to hint at an incipient splitting up of the unit; it highlights the group's internal rifts and hence lack of force' (2017, 155). Further, the 'they', unlike the 'we', resists 'positive solidarity' (Fludernik 2017, 155). Perhaps because of this ambivalent relationship to the depiction of community, or the tendency to seem 'odd' when sustained (B. Richardson 2015, 200), they-narrations are rare compared to we-narrations. Expanding on the 'oddness' of a narrative structured around a 'they', Richardson suggests further that 'the presentation of social minds in "we" and "they" forms tends to lead to unnatural narration', that is, 'impossible representations of social minds' (2015, 209–10). Like Braidotti's 'we', then, a 'they' is flexible enough to encompass different groupings at different times, and its potential for 'internal rifts' and lack of implied positive solidarity avoids ascribing the same experience to every part of the 'they'. In this regard, it echoes the 'we-are-not-one-and-the-same' of the posthuman condition. The novel's structural 'they' implies a multi-species grouping; the overt 'they' that

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Richardson's 2015 article on the representation of social minds through 'we' and 'they' narratives highlights a number of significant experiments in the 'they' mode from the past hundred years of Anglophone literary history: sections of Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897) feature they narratives, as do parts of D.H. Lawrence's *Things* (1928) and Maxine Swann's *Flower Children* (2007). Among less overtly experimental texts, Monika Fludernik identifies passages of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851), Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Joan Chase's *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* (1983) and Mary Gordon's *The Company of Women* (1981) as partial 'we' narratives (Fludernik 2017, 146). At this point, the literature of the short story cycle/narrative of community and the study of collective narrative converge: *Cranford* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are staples in the discussion of the short story cycle as depiction of community (see Zagarell 1988). As Fludernik also acknowledges (2017, 146), Susan Lanser has conflated the 'communal I' of such fictions with both their structure – as I claim is the case with McGregor's 'they' – and the 'we' narratives proper (see especially Lanser 2018, chaps 13 and 14).

<sup>7</sup> See especially Palmer 2010; a special issue of *Narrative* introduced by Alders 2015 that includes Richardson 2015; and Fludernik 2017 for a more general discussion of this ongoing conversation in narratology. See also Gibbons and Macrae 2018.

opens the novel seems to be entirely *homo sapiens*; and other groups, human and non-human, are described in the third person in between. Even as it sidesteps the totalising connotations of the third-person plural, though, that have associated it with the narration of riots or mobs (Fludernik 2017, 154–55), McGregor’s unusual emphasis on this pronoun raises questions about the ‘impossible’ nature, to use Richardson’s adjective, of the ‘social minds’ represented. The first question concerns the nature of a community yoked by literary form that is not shown to *experience* the multi-species interconnection that is implied in the novel’s structure. The second has to do with the possibility of representing what I am calling a posthuman community at all: Jan Alber notes that the use of the ‘they’ creates distance between the narrative voice and the narrated (2018, 134). This narrative choice emphasises the presence of an implied narrator in *Reservoir 13* who assembles the collective called ‘they’, and implies that this narrative voice is not a ‘god’s-eye’ or ‘bird’s-eye’ view as reviewers have dubbed it, but something human (Alber 2018, 135). Here we find the crux of the issue: namely whether a literary community represented from beyond its boundaries by a human consciousness can be conceived of as posthuman. At the same time as the ‘they’ of the novel in its fragmented and non-focalised form enables its posthuman characteristics, the implied humanity behind these narrative choices troubles the notion of a realist posthuman literary community.

Rather than depicting a ‘real’ community of any kind, McGregor’s ‘they’ instead offers up community, posthuman or otherwise, as something virtual and conceptual rather than something experienced by its component parts. The third-person approach seems to draw on the tradition of depicting unnatural or impossible social minds outlined by Richardson and might be considered a solution to the posthuman turn’s challenge to the arts in general, and literature in particular. This is the challenge of representing non-anthropocentrism in an artistic work crafted by a human being that simultaneously resists representing human nature as monolithic. One practical response to this challenge found in the *Posthuman Glossary* suggests that artists responding to the posthuman must ‘imagine and theorize an art (theoretical) practice that is critically aware of its own humanist bias’ (Holert 2018, 62). Tom Holert draws this response from Rosalind Kraus’s 1972 argument that artists should state their ages, genders, and other features of their perspective in order to contextualise and thereby make it obvious that their perspectives are particular (2018, 62). With the impersonal and fragmented – yet implicitly human – narrative voice, McGregor makes it unnecessary to frame the non-human from the particular perspectives of the human characters or create anthropomorphic voices for the non-human figures. At the same time, the greater individuation between human characters (unlike the foxes, they have

names and individual characteristics) accounts for the novel's inevitable human bias and knowledge. This feature also allows McGregor to avoid representing human nature as monolithic. In addition to addressing issues of class and economics in this small region and paying attention to the multiple species that inhabit it, McGregor depicts characters on the autism spectrum, characters experiencing gendered violence, such as Susanna (who has fled to the village from her abusive husband) and characters who experience racism in a mostly White village setting. Within the individuation of human characters, *Reservoir 13* maintains a critical distance from a White, male, or neurotypical humanism.

The question of a non-anthropocentrism is more difficult. On the one hand, the novel is undoubtedly anthropocentric in that more attention is afforded to human beings and the actions taken by humans are more complex and diverse. The 'global instability' that kicks off the novel is the disappearance of a human girl (Phelan 2007, 18). On the other hand, *Reservoir 13* is a work of human art that is, in some ways, by definition unable to escape a certain anthropocentric bias beyond demonstrating a self-conscious anthropocentrism, as Holert's discussion indicates. In responding to this challenge, the represented community in *Reservoir 13* flattens the traditional landscape-painting structure of human in the foreground and non-human in the background, instead showing the two in relation at every turn. *Reservoir 13*'s community is not posthuman in any complete sense, then – and completion is not the point of the concept. To return to the key signature of 'ways of looking', the community in *Reservoir 13*, framed as a literary construct by this epigraph as it is, can be read not as a real community but as a perspective taken. The cyclical, 'in-this-together-but-not-one-and-the-same' communal life is not shown to be experienced by any one member of the community, but by the implied (human) reader beyond its borders as an exercise in gently exploding the boundaries of humanist community. McGregor's narrative patterning of the everyday and ordinary shows how, by using many ways of looking, we might perceive ourselves as already becoming within a posthuman community.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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