“The Future of the Planet” – Scottish Cosmopolitanism/ CosmoFeminism and Environmentalism in Theresa Breslin’s Saskia’s Journey

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“THE FUTURE OF THE PLANET”: SCOTTISH COSMOPOLITANISM/COSMOFEMINISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THERESA BRESLIN’S SASKIA’S JOURNEY

Fiona McCulloch

The Scottish Parliament’s research paper *Sea Fishing* (2001) notes that “world-wide catches of fish have quadrupled in the last half century, and over half of all fish stocks are at or beyond maximum sustainable levels of exploitation.”¹ This cataclysmic situation signals that “there is a growing recognition of the need to consider the impacts of fishing on marine ecosystems as a whole.”² The Scottish Government is concerned with the socioeconomic consequences of this nationally, but it is, as the paper acknowledges, an issue spreading beyond Scottish shores. It is insufficient therefore to consider Scottish fishing in isolation; rather a global crisis demands transnational communication in order to solve a glocal problem. Thus, the report engages with the Reykjavik Declaration, an EU directive which seeks to replace the self-serving interests of nationhood with a transnationally responsible eco-ethic, as it is “our determination to strengthen international cooperation.”³ Yet, there is notable “exclusion of Scottish ministers from critical roles in EU negotiations, even in areas such as fisheries, where Scotland has 70 per cent of UK activity.”⁴

As though responding to this ecological concern, as well as the need for Scotland’s voice to be represented politically, Theresa Breslin’s young-adult (YA) novel *Saskia’s Journey* (2004) weaves the personal

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² Ibid.
story of its eighteen year old heroine, Saskia Granton, with the wider history of the fishing community of Buchan Ness and its integral place within global politics. She visits her great-aunt’s home on the Aberdeenshire coast and discovers a sense of belonging to the landscape and its people. Adopting an ecoconsciousness, Saskia recognises that human intervention for commercial profit and consumption is putting at risk “the future of the planet”\(^5\) and that, as a citizen of an increasingly globalised world, she must develop a cosmopolitan ethics of responsibility to redress the environmental imbalance. *Saskia’s Journey* in an immediate sense charts its young heroine’s trajectory but, more widely, interlinks this narrative with the maritime coastline whose ebb and flow affects the rhythm of human, environmental and political concerns. As her relationship with the sea develops, so too does her understanding of human interdependence upon it in terms of the immediate fishing industry but, more philosophically, the ecological impact globally. Fish also function symbolically throughout the text, as I discuss, linking Saskia to Pagan female empowerment and creativity.

Historically, children’s literature has forged a link between child and environment, following Romantic discourses that align childhood innocence with the purity of nature.\(^6\) The child’s precarious relationship with pastoral idylls clearly involves a socialising element as in Rousseau’s *Emile: or On Education* (1762) or Friedrich Froebel’s *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* (1899), and with boy’s adventure stories like R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858), the feminised land forms part of a colonial power struggle to assert Western supremacy. As a contemporary Scottish YA novel, though, *Saskia’s Journey* overturns the casual self-interested dominance of earth, which is replaced with an ethical understanding of and commitment to a fragile ecosphere.

Breslin’s text in that sense is very similar to Julie Bertagna’s *Exodus* series that engages with climate change, and it is notable that this ecological message is being focused upon in post-devolution Scotland by predominantly women writers of children’s literature. Does this mean that nature is being sidelined to women’s issues and thus trivialized? Or is it in fact that women writers, hitherto marginalised from representations of


\(^6\) For further discussion in this area, see Fiona McCulloch, *The Fictional Role of Childhood in Victorian and Early Twentieth-Century Children’s Literature* (Lampeter and New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).
a traditional Scottish nation, are part of a vibrant creative community who are responding to a newer pluralistic Scotland and its relationship to global concerns like climate change? In this essay, I will outline how Breslin’s text pedagogically emphasises current ecological concerns, encouraging an ethical responsibility within future citizens that is reflective of post-devolution Scotland’s cosmopolitanism.  

Breslin sets her spatiotemporal discussion in the recent historical past of 1988, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of a pre-devolved United Kingdom. While politically the emphasis was upon entrepreneurial individualism, there was simultaneously a rise in environmental pressure groups like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and PETA. Saskia’s love of the sea develops into an ethical concern when she finds an ailing seal on her great-aunt Alessandra’s beach. Ben Nicholson “from the local Marine Research Station” (57) is called out to assist the seal and begins to enlighten Saskia about ecological issues: seals “are part of the life system. And each creature on this planet is connected to the other” (66). As Breslin’s title signals, Saskia’s journey is not merely a geographical “train journey north from London” (7) to the village of Fhindhaven outside of Aberdeen; it is a *bildung* of self-knowledge, of family history, and understanding her position of responsibility and connectivity within the planet. For Saskia, “The northward journey is, as so often, a journey into a kind of truth,” which becomes her familial homecoming to Scotland.  

Undertaking this geopolitical and psychological journey to Fhindhaven allows Breslin’s heroine to begin to find haven within herself. The shift from London to northern Scotland offers Saskia space to envisage a possible future for herself, free from her father Alexander’s dominance. Her route from London to trace her Scottish family roots mirrors a larger cultural story: post-devolution Scotland has journeyed away from Westminster’s centralised control to develop its own cosmopolitan outlook, just as Saskia escapes her father’s constraints to reconfigure her identity. Scotland continues to dynamically negotiate its global identity, fusing positive aspects of nationhood with a cosmopolitan worldview, while Saskia chronotopically travels to her Scottish past in order to move forward. Nation and self are in dialogical renegotiation:

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“Scotland … might stand as exemplar of the fact that nations have never been pure and that identity is precisely the dialogue between alternative possibilities of the self.”9 Journeying north represents an uncanny space of imaginative potential and creativity that resists dominant hegemonic modes of thought: “From the south, Scotland is inevitably hyperborean.”10 Breslin certainly draws on such gothic mythopoetic representations, but does so to position Scotland within the realpolitik of planetary concerns. As a contemporary Scottish YA woman writer, Breslin offers a hybrid heroine whose fresh perspective fuses the nation’s past, present and future. Her fictional perspective belongs to a contemporary cosmopolitan outlook, coining a “new cultural buzzword – Scotland.” which “celebrated this pluralism and signalled the demise of any attempt to forge a coherent, unitary national identity.”11 Breslin utilises Scotland’s more socialist community based potential, envisioning empathy through her central character, whose name means protector of mankind.

ENVIRONMENTALISM
James Hillman advocates that “an individual’s harmony with his or her ‘own deep self’ requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world” and, as such, “The deepest self cannot be confined to ‘in here’ because we can’t be sure it is not also or even entirely ‘out there’.”12 Akin to Breslin’s novel, ecopsychology deconstructs Cartesian psychology’s severance of self/other and its privileging of the cogito: “Psychology, so dedicated to awakening human consciousness, needs to wake itself up to one of the most ancient human truths: we cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet.”13 Healing the self, according to Hillman, can only be achieved by recognising this integral relationship, “because in this world soul the human soul has

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10 Davidson, 233.
13 Hillman, xxii.
always had its home.” During her gap year prior to reading accountancy at university, Saskia agrees to her father’s request and visits her great-aunt Alessandra, but soon learns of his ulterior financial motives, hoping to secure money for his ailing business. Her father’s motives are based on phallocratic control of his environment, whereas Saskia learns to appreciate that the true value of life lies not in monetary gain but, rather, in respecting and appreciating the planet and, as such, reconnecting with home.

Significantly, Saskia’s position as heroine in this YA fiction offers an alternative role model that challenges and replaces traditional children’s hegemonic male heroism where the environment is exploited as a convenient resource. Instead, Breslin’s text follows a geopolitical trajectory where interaction with nature is crucially regarded to be dependent upon a need for balance and respect rather than subject to capitalist enterprise. This replaces boy’s adventure stories of derring-do that feminise the landscape as an asset to be disempowered with an interrelationship that recognises the “greater urgency to balance the environment” (123) rather than master it. For Margery Hourihan, “The future of our culture and our planet depends upon today’s young readers,” and, as such, “It is vital to present them with stories which discourage the quest for domination and the use of force and violence to achieve it, and encourage a respect for the environment and for men and women of all cultural backgrounds.”

Learning “to preserve and conserve or we will jeopardize the future” (123) rather than “see[ing] the sea as a resource to be used – for food, oil, gas, minerals,” Saskia realises that “there was a rhythm in it all. The rhythm of life itself” (120). The biosphere’s interconnectedness requires a deterritorialism that respects its biorhythms, which is similar to current debates about fracking, rendering YA literature even more vital as a counter discourse to current global hegemony.

**COSMOFEMINISM**

Humanity’s culpability in the demise or survival of the planet’s fragile ecosystem thematically haunts Breslin’s text. Gaining a fuller comprehension of the ocean inhabitants’ life cycle, Saskia recognises that “it seems to reflect our journey through life” (120) and forges a closer

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14 Hillman, xxiii.

relationship between the immediacy of humanity and the relative remoteness of marine life. Returning to the forgotten childhood haven of her great-aunt Alessandra’s seaside home encourages Saskia to develop this understanding in her epiphanic acknowledgement that “it was not just being part of the physical external landscape that she knew once again, her internal landscape too, was reawakening with experiences that echoed the frequency of her own spirit” (51).

Echoing her ancestral literary mothers such as Katherine Mansfield’s or Virginia Woolf’s interest in the sea, Breslin places her heroine in the liminal space of a coastal home in order to allow Saskia’s hitherto suppressed self to awaken enlightened and defiant in the face of her father’s restrictions. As “Saskia walked along the beach,” we learn that she is “drunk with the imagery, the assault on her senses, the vista of sea and sky” (51) that being by the sea evokes. The ocean permeates and reawakens Saskia’s sensory pleasures with an almost amniotic synergy where she “imagined herself as a creature of the sea,” “flick[ing] her mermaid’s tail” (50). Saskia’s metaphorical rebirth by returning to her great-aunt’s seaside home that she has not visited since childhood reminds the reader that, according to evolutionary theory, life began in the oceans, so Breslin is utilising this for her character to return to it as a vast nurturing womb.

The integration of humanity with environment places Breslin’s ecofeminist text within a genre of YA fiction that is encouraging future citizens to respond ethically and responsibly to their environment. As Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd point out

Since … many ecofeminists argue that the very sorts of oppression that are leveled against women and other groups are directly linked to the oppression of the natural world, children’s texts become a crucial place in which to detect and combat cultural hegemony.16

Breslin utilises children’s fiction, then, as a mode of questioning anthropocentric masculinity and suggesting an alternative ecofeminist outlook. In paganism, fish and the ocean symbolise feminine creativity and fertility, offering Saskia a space of empowerment.

However, Saskia’s Journey does not privilege and naturalise the female relationship with Gaia to the extent that women are removed from civilisation and transplanted into a primitive pastoral. This ecofeminist

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trap, for Breslin, would be a mistake, and Val Plumwood also resists its allure in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), where she argues that women must not retreat to the greenwood but, rather, need to maintain a political negotiation in society to combat the devastating effects of anthropocentric territorialism, for “Do we have to renounce the achievements of culture and technology to come to inhabit the enchanted forest?”

In its desire to predicate a society that transcends gender constraints, it is more accurate to read Breslin’s novel as an example of what Carol A. Breckenbridge and her fellow authors refer to as “cosmofeminism,” which is a fusion of the emergent discourse of cosmopolitanism with “the plurality of feminisms.” In that sense, diversity based upon an understanding and respect for, rather than control of, difference is advocated with a view to building a future cosmopolitan humanity that integrates harmoniously with its surroundings. Crucially, though Saskia rejects her father’s influence towards studying accountancy in favour of marine biology, this is not a retreat from society to nature but, rather, a fusion of scientific rationale and environmental empathy that allows both intellect and emotion to coexist rather than suppressing her ethical dimensions. Similarly, Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen argue: “Ecofeminists observe that the separation of culture from nature parallels the separation of self from other, a separation fundamental to the social construction of masculinity.” Rejecting the capitalist pursuit of accountancy in favour of an altogether more altruistic environmentalism, Breslin’s heroine effectively responds to the problem of how to reintegrate nature and culture across the great western division between them and of how to give a positive value to what has been traditionally devalued and excluded as nature without simply reversing values and rejecting the sphere of culture.

This is further evident in the balance of masculine and feminine synergy in the relationship between Saskia and Ben. By educating Saskia

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20 Plumwood, 10–11.
about environmental ethics, Ben enables her to gain a deep insight into the ocean’s importance to the survival of the planet and, in turn, humanity’s dependence for its future upon maintaining a balance of its resources. Ben signifies a new cosmopolitan approach that does not territorialise and consume the earth’s resources, but which intervenes to protect it and prevent its depletion by unscrupulous capitalism. It is, though, troubling that the female heroine must be educated by the male who, rather smugly, has all the enlightened answers. Is this merely the phallocratic replacement of her father’s narrative with her lover’s? While problematic, it is nevertheless crucial that male literary figures are represented with eco-conscious rather than masculine territorialist outlooks and, thus, Ben is necessary to countermand patriarchal conventions and replace with cosmopolitan traits that complement Saskia’s ethical awakening. For Breslin, the conventional hero is unacceptable in the face of current global concerns and, as such, she offers a reconfigured character who chooses not to dominate but to respect his environmental home.

This is acutely important for contemporary YA fiction, as Hourihan identifies earlier, since it has an ideological opportunity to educate future citizens towards collective responsibility. Breslin’s text, as a *bildungsroman*, imparts to its YA readership an “environmental ethics” which is “concerned with the relationship between morally aware subjects and the objects in their environments.” While *Saskia’s Journey* focuses specifically upon the impact of the decline of the fishing industry upon a small Scottish community where “fishing is the framework which supports the whole infrastructure” (105), its wider intention is to interconnect local with global consequences. Robin Attfield writes that even people mainly concerned for their local territory need to be alert to the global environmental change that often threatens it, and self-interest is added to love of others and love of nature as a motive for environmental concern at the global level. Breslin recognises the futility of viewing ecological crises nationally, instead encouraging a global view of interlocking inseparable concerns. While Alessandra’s fellow local Neil Buchan argues about the need to protect “oor national interest” (67) against supranational EU powers, Ben

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retorts that “much more than protection of self-interest is at stake here”(67). Though appreciating the human effects on a community, Ben recognises the wider “consequences of modern fishing methods” (67) that, if left unchecked, will be catastrophic locally and globally, because “if we don’t formulate some policies on conservation, then the time might come when we have to close our fishing grounds” (66). Ben’s belief is that capitalism’s “wasteful use of resources” (178) in its gargantuan appetite for “industrial fishing” (178) must be curbed, requiring a shift away from short-term national economic gains in favour of a transnational effort to secure sustainability for future generations: “if only we were able to coordinate marine programmes around the world we could make changes that really matter…. We must do it” (179).

While “a broadly anthropocentric approach to environmental values underpins much international environmental policy-making,” Breslin’s text similarly views ecological negligence for the impact that it will have upon humanity’s survival. Such anthropocentrism informs approaches to “central environmental issues,“ as it “focuses ethically on their effects on human beings.” It would seem somewhat ironic, then, that a novel attempting to offer a critique of anthropocentrism apparently inadvertently adheres to such an outlook in its thesis that human depletion of planetary resources must be halted for the ultimate survival of homo sapiens. While this reverberates with monotheistic androcentric notions of man as nature’s caretaker under the directive of the Father, I would argue that Breslin’s environmental ethics is undermining such territorial masculinity in favour of a more cosmo-feminine collective responsibility. Thus, when Neil Buchan asserts the traditional masculinest view “that man has more rights than animals,” it is immediately challenged by Ben’s more contemporary enlightened perspective that “with that right comes responsibility, surely” (66). While “man” is the more economically powerful species, the text is clearly indicating that such power is futile in the face of nature’s response to man-made changes. Saskia notices a poster on Ben’s office wall that reads:

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Only after the last tree has been cut down,
Only after the last river has been poisoned,
Only after the last fish has been caught,
Only then will you find that money cannot be eaten. (171)
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24 Palmer, 18.
Breslin dismisses economic national self-interest in favour of an ethical collective response to ecological urgency. Unlike Light and Rolston’s definition of anthropocentricism, while Breslin is concerned with humanity’s survival, it is not in the traditional dominant anthropocentric sense of economic empowerment, evidenced in Saskia’s rejection of accountancy. The poster’s caption is written on “a black and white photograph of a Native North American” (171), as it is a prophecy of the Cree Indians, reinforcing Breslin’s cosmopolitan concern with those marginalised, including indigenous peoples and nature itself, by the destructive advancement of white capitalism. As such, “Environmental problems call for a global ethic and for global citizenship, which requires a normative ethic of the cosmopolitan variety.”

Like glocal interdependence, the text espouses an integrative relationship between human and environment, evident from Saskia’s question of whether “you think we’re linked to our landscape?,” leading her to consider “the people she had met during her time in the remote parts of Asia” and “how integrated they seemed to be with their country, even down to how they looked and dressed” (56). Although a rather stereotypical perception of remote others, it nevertheless evokes a reconsideration of the balance between nature and culture: asking questions allows Saskia to expand her intellectual and ethical response to her surroundings and to identify her planetary role. Answering Saskia’s question of whether humans are linked to their environment, Alessandra enquires “do you think we are?” (56), encouraging her *bildung* navigation towards adulthood. Alessandra poses the question: “where do our stories and customs come from? There are so many inspired by this area alone that they would fill more books than one person could ever write” (56).

While Light and Rolston insist that our dependence upon planetary survival is anthropocentric, while the earth does not require humanity to survive but, in fact, would positively thrive without, nevertheless Alessandra’s point supports an interdependence view. Though earth does not require *homo sapiens*, our erasure would be detrimental to creativity; Breslin’s text fuses nature’s need of humanity to art rather than economic power. The human capacity for imagination creates an indestructible planetary link that gives voice to nature’s wonders, including the metafictional contribution made by *Saskia’s Journey*. Stories offer not only an aesthetic narrative of their surroundings; they also provide the

\[25\text{ Attfield, 183.}\]
political impetus to reshape the socio-political landscape and its perception of Gaia.

**HOMECOMING – FAMILIAL, CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL**

As well as realising that humans and landscape are interrelated, Saskia recognises that Alessandra’s Cliff House is connected both to the environment and its inhabitants. It is described as almost a living entity, for “her great-aunt had told her that the house was never still” and “the whole back wall of the house was embedded into and supported by the cliff” (20). The “back wall is buried into the overhang, secure, like an eagle’s nest” (38), intermingling nature and civilisation because of “the proximity of the cliff and how it integrated with the structure of the house” (19). Like Saskia’s holiday recollections of her time in remote Asia, Alessandra’s house is not an imposition upon the environment, but borne out of and in rhythmical harmony with it. It is a fusion of civilisation and wilderness, a liminal coastal space that is beyond categorisation. Just as the environmental ethics of the text are concerned with deep ecology, there is a further interest in the psychosocial depths of the unconscious. Before visiting Alessandra, Saskia is warned by her father that his aunt is “a strange old spinster woman in a strange old house. A house full of secrets” (4). Its uncanny gothic setting, geographically remote, overhanging the sea like an eerie eyrie draws on a Scottish literary tradition that transgresses the borders of realism and fantasy fiction. Saskia’s uncovering or solving the riddle of her family secrets positions her in a detective-like role within the gothic house, as she wonders “did it mirror the mood of its occupants?” (115–16). As with Freud’s return of the repressed, Saskia and her family have suppressed traumatic memories that inevitably surface as she uncovers her family history. Attfield writes that “deep ecology is a movement which aims at the flourishing or self-realization of all Earth’s species, and urges us to identify with the totality of life on Earth, the planetary biosphere.”26 As deep ecology is concerned with ecological interconnectedness, so psychoanalysis insists that the conscious and unconscious are interdependent. Thus, just as it is potentially harmful to focus on local at the expense of global environmentalism, it is equally so to ignore the unconscious for the sake of presenting a conscious façade.

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26 Attfield, 4.
Halfway “between falling asleep again and awakening,” Saskia “again heard the soft movement almost directly above her head” (19) that had aroused her from sleep. This in-between state of consciousness/unconsciousness provides a receptive space to the house’s repressed secrets, aware that “her great-aunt had said that she did not go up to the second floor” (19). Alessandra explained that because of “a bit of arthritis,” “I don’t use the attic at all now” (though Saskia notes that she can easily ride a bicycle), intensifying its mysteriousness by advising Saskia that it is “probably best to stay out of the attic at the moment, although I know that you used to like to play there” (12). Attics are a common trope in fiction for the repressed psyche, as is firmly established in Gilbert and Gubar’s study of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984). The basement too is often a gothic metaphor of hidden selfhood – for instance, Bluebeard’s torturous dungeon revisited in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) – and Alessandra poignantly “stood at the door as Saskia went in to explore” the cellar which, poignantly, “was much darker at the far end” (39). Only by traversing these secret chambers can Saskia unravel its mysteries and enable her great-aunt to confront her demons. In the attic she discovers her old seashell collection containing a “Great Stair Shell from the seas of the Southern Ocean where Darach went whaling” (210–11), which allows “another secret of Cliff House [to be] revealed to her” (209), as this was a gift to Alessandra from her fiancé who drowned at sea. Similarly, Saskia’s investigation of the cellar leads to the discovery that “stuffed in behind the barrels was a pile of broken wood” which “was part of the cradle her father had slept in as a baby” (207). Finally, “she went to her great-aunt’s bureau” and found “cheque stubs” and “dealers’ receipts” (208) confirming that she had sold her furniture to finance Saskia’s father’s business. The wardrobe hides an abundance of colourful outfits “hanging like foliage in a rain forest,” at odds with everyday wear that was “all in black or dark grey” (164).

Alessandra’s spartan lifestyle is due to poverty, but also because of repression caused by the drowning of Darach, her brother Rob (Saskia’s grandfather), and the death of her father. When “speaking to her own people, she seemed more at ease … whereas most other times, within the timbre of Alessandra’s voice was another note. Fear” (149–50). Having suffered a complete breakdown and admittance to a psychiatric hospital, her re-entry into a society where “there was a great stigma about mental illness” (218) forces a self-surveillance. She wears understated clothes and erases her mother tongue of “the Doric” (149), having “ironed out her
“Was Alessandra trying to eradicate who she was? Always wearing the same black or grey clothes, her restrained manner, the careful use of language? … her speech had no natural rhythm” (149). This “gave Saskia a keen sense of loss,” who ponders that “surely by deliberately eliminating her native speech Alessandra was eliminating part of her identity?” (149). Saskia feels such loss because, when she was a child, Alessandra had lulled her with oral folk “tales of the north, told in a lilting tongue” (83), forging a strong bond between them as the tales had been passed down through the maternal generations. The rhythmic “sounds, and the natural power of the story” (83) created a semiotic language that linked female adult and child, and it is this lost childhood nurturance which Saskia recalls upon returning to Alessandra and Fhindhaven. Alessandra’s confined lifestyle has held in check her potential and creativity for fear that society will incarcerate her, just as “the madwoman in the attic was the symbol of everywoman under patriarchy.”

But “feminist critics have vigorously contested the metaphor of the madwoman as the key to female authorship,” and, as such, Breslin’s text both liberates Alessandra from patriarchy’s straightjacket and enables Saskia to transcend such social snares to inscribe her own future.

What underlies Alessandra’s repressed traumatic memories, culminating in her “avoid[ing] certain places – the attic room, the beach near the far rocks, and the outside cellar” (150), is ultimately revealed when she unburdens herself about her father’s intended incestuous abuse. He “turned his gaze on me, … following me around the house, always there, watching, waiting” (214–15), emphasising the link between female subjectivity and the controlling masculine gaze. When attempting to escape, she is detained “above the rocks at the headland” and subjected to a symbolic rape: “tearing at my clothes” until “with great force I pushed him away” (215). Avoiding the rocks and warning Saskia that they are “dangerous” (6), Alessandra stifles the traumatic memory of her father’s fall from the cliff onto the rocks below when she pushed him away. It is in this exact spot that Saskia discovers the sick seal, which simultaneously echoes stories of selkies told to her in childhood by Alessandra as well as triggering the return of the repressed. Saskia

28 Felski, 69.
recollects asking her aunt about selkies during a tale, learning that “the old ones say that the silkses look after the souls of the poor drowned fishermen” (83), thus strengthening the connection between the dying seal and traumatic deaths. The selkie, representing “the spirit of the sea” (83) and shapeshifting between seal and human, symbolises Alessandra’s tragic life of doomed love (her fiancé, Darach, and her brother both drown), paternal abuse, and the cycle of life and death.

Uncannily, Saskia is also portrayed in the text as being similar in appearance to Alessandra – “her own reflection was beginning to take shape in the window before her. It was not yet so clear an image as to identify her as Saskia. I could be Alessandra, thought Saskia” (147) – strengthening the familial bond between them but also strongly suggesting a doppelganger, particularly given the importance of connectivity and belief in repetition insofar as “we are in a cycle, part of the earth and the sea … an endless rhythm of life” (201). When Neil Buchan first encounters Saskia, he notes “Yer like the woman herself right enough” (5) and informs Alessandra that “she’s your living image at that age. As like you as life” (9). Life’s endless cycle is clear as Saskia notes that “her hair … was the same colour as her own,” which “was also the same colour as Saskia’s own father’s hair” (10).

Saskia represents the younger generation whose regenerative healing allows her great-aunt to overcome her demons and shows that the cycle is not hopelessly repetitive but instead develops a new direction. Although strikingly similar, even to the point that her great-aunt was the same age as Saskia is now when her great-niece was born, she will not repeat Alessandra’s painfully inscribed life but, rather, will gather strength from her great-aunt’s tragic story to create a more positive narrative for her own unwritten future. Breslin’s text depicts Saskia as Alessandra’s (her name similarly means defender of men) double, a familial repetition signalling the return of the repressed as a “‘compulsion to repeat.”29 Further, the home is unheimlich, simultaneously comforting and unsettling, particularly as Alessandra’s predatory father would menacingly “prowl the house” (195).

As doubles, Alessandra and Saskia also share a fraught relationship with their fathers. John Granton, a controlling and abusive “father [who] suffered from black rages” (95) and “had a dark side” (158) provokes Alessandra to “disobey him” (96), indicating her inner strength. However,

29 Nicholas Royle, The Uncanny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2.
“for every misdemeanour of mine, he would beat Rob” (96) until her defiance is quashed by this “cruel hard man with a filthy temper” (158) and the father’s law prevails. Saskia’s father, while less anathema than her great-grandfather, nevertheless attempts to manipulate his daughter and suffers from a “blistering rage” of “terrifying and dangerous outbursts” (130–31).

Like her great-aunt’s youthful defiance, Saskia too challenges patriarchal authority, significantly, when she is in Alessandra’s home rather than her father’s London domain. Distance evokes a clearer perspective, for “it was only now she saw that, in effect, he’d told her what she was going to do with her life” (49). By recognising his control – “if he did not approve of her actions, he withheld financial support; but more importantly… withheld his love” (130) – of her economic and emotional welfare, Saskia is liberated and begins to plan an independent life, rejecting her father’s insistence that she study accountancy, and instead intending to go “to Aberdeen or St Andrews University and do marine biology” (225). By withdrawing monetary support and familial love, Saskia’s father displays a lack of cosmopolitan ethics that binds him to a masculinist power model of divide and rule. Similar to Breslin’s *bildungsroman*, “Ecofeminists’ empirical claim examines socio-political and economic structures that restrict many women’s lives to poverty, ecological deprivation, and economic powerlessness.”

Additionally, Breslin emphasises the destructive separatism of masculinist authority’s conditional love, set against a restorative cosmopolitan love for planetary others.

Saskia’s journey from dependent childhood to independent adulthood, recognises that “more than likely her father wouldn’t support her if she moved away… But there would be cafes and pubs… where she could work” (225–26). By accepting her new adult status, the gender implications of earning her own money simultaneously become clear because “it came to Saskia why her mother stayed with her father. It was for the same underlying reason that she herself had caved in over her career choice. It had been the easiest thing to do” (225). Saskia refuses to endure the economic enslavement of her mother, indicative of a new generation of independently fulfilled women. Poignantly, her arrival from urban London to the curative idyll of rural Scotland occurs when the

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“fingers of spring were uncurling winter’s fist from the land” (2). She is associated with bringing regeneration and healing in her wake, while emphasising the link between humanity and environment in this symbolic use of weather and setting as pathetic fallacy.

Importantly, Saskia’s paternal grandmother, Esther, is a derivation of the Teutonic goddess Eostre or Ostara, associated with “the spring equinox” (17) and later appropriated by Christianity as Easter. Celebrated in Pagan ritual as the bringer of increased daylight hours, she is also the “goddess of dawn,” known in Greek mythology as Eos or in Roman as Aurora. Homer referred to her as “rosy-fingered,” echoed in Breslin’s allusion to the “fingers of spring” (2). Thus, Saskia’s arrival at the seasonal point of fertility and regeneration aligns her both with her grandmother and the goddess of Spring, particularly as she awakes during her first night at Cliff House to witness “the aurora borealis” (21). Although living in the Northern Hemisphere, Alessandra says of “the northern lights” that “it’s years since I saw them” (23), implying that she is awaiting an awakening from her stasis.

Cured by the Spring arrival of her great-niece, Saskia’s association with the Aurora casts her as a salvationist heroine and links to Alessandra’s referral to her in childhood as “Quine,” which “is like ‘queen’, but here it means girl, little girl, young woman” (25). In folklore the Aurora Borealis is a sign of royal birth, while “an old Scandinavian name for the Lights translates as ‘herring flash’, because northerners thought they were a reflection cast by large shoals of herring in the sky.” Saskia’s association with “queen” and the aurora, signalling a royal birth, underline her significance, and the link between the northern lights and herring interconnects with the text’s concern for the depleted fishing industry, particularly as “in more recent years the herring stocks failed” (42). Saskia’s strong links with her female relatives and curative role in the text offers a pagan resurrection story that defies patriarchal Christian discourse in favour of an alternative story. Some “ecofeminists cite patriarchal religion as the origin of this separation [of culture from nature …] when the shift from goddess-worshipping cultures to male

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deities began.”

Like Saskia’s connective empathy for her planetary home, “In the goddess religions, both the earth and women’s fertility were seen as sacred.”

Her decision to assist the marine research centre and study marine biology contributes to planetary healing. Just as the goddess Ostara is linked to earth’s life-giving star, the sun, “Saskia, Star of the Sea” (105), equates Saskia with giving life to the oceans.

To protect her unwitting widowed sister-in-law and nephew from her father’s sexual advances, Alessandra sent them to Esther’s family in Yarmouth. Saskia’s father held a grudge against his aunt because he never knew why he and his mother had been evicted from Cliff House, but Alessandra informs Saskia that “I loved her” (190) and wished to protect her. Notably, this is a mutual love because “your grandmother named her baby for me” (34). The bond shared by these two women suggests a latent sexual desire, echoed in Alexander’s warning that his aunt is “a strange old spinster woman” (4) and “your typical perverse female” (17), as spinsterhood (particularly if “perverse”) is often associated in literary history with lesbianism. Sheila Jeffries notes that “any attack on the spinster is inevitably an attack on the lesbian,” while Chris Cuomo ponders, “Could it be argued that any representation of the spinster is an implicit representation of the lesbian?”

Further, Alexander’s wife had a close friendship with Alessandra, who “enjoyed her holidays here” because “it gave her time to paint” (133) and, according to Saskia’s mother, “Alessandra and I got on well” (204). Alessandra’s support of female in-laws creates a strong community that provides a protective space from patriarchal society. However, the castrating father intervenes to sever these bonds – Alessandra’s father forces her to lose Esther by his sexually predatory behaviour and, after her traumatic breakdown, Alessandra’s “Doric, the language of … my youth” (25) is silenced.

Alessandra’s nephew removes both his wife and niece from her presence until Saskia returns as a teenager. Alexander insures that they

33 Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, 278.
34 Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, 278.
never have to return to Cliff House by traumatising his young daughter, telling her that “she’s not as nice as you think…. It’s a secret…. You must never tell…. Great-aunt Alessandra is really a witch” (199). He terrorises his malleable child with the phallic fairytale of the spinster witch to manipulate her and sever the female bond. Saskia’s remembrance of this ugly scene is disturbingly similar to Alessandra’s abusive father both in terms of his sinister control and insistence that the fearful child must maintain a conspiracy of silence around “our secret” (200). Also, both Alessandra and Saskia suffer mental disturbances invoked by their father’s terror: Saskia’s fear culminates in contracting meningitis, where her parents “thought you were losing your mind” (203).

Saskia’s adolescent return to her great-aunt is a return of the repressed feminine that has been silenced by the symbolic order’s civilised society. As Alessandra informs her, “there are reasons why we forget or choose to forget…. Your memories of this house will come back to you in time” (25), and it is the surfacing of these dormant memories that allows a healing process to take place in Fhinda haven. Saskia compares her father’s suffocating conditional love to a spider’s web that she sees “in the call box” with its cocooned prey and realises that “to be swaddled against the world was comforting” (130), yet ultimately as destructively stupefying as Sleeping Beauty’s inertial dependence upon Prince Charming. However, in the cycle of generational progress, Saskia’s father imparts “a genuine apology” (205) for his inconsiderate actions which activates a healing process between them.

Saskia’s burgeoning relationship with Ben signals a departure from the traditional patriarchal dislocation evident in earlier family relations between the sexes to a relocated position of cosmopolitan balance. Saskia recognises in Ben’s “considerat[ion] and kind[ness]” a necessary capacity for mutual respect, as “it occurred to her that kindness was an important element in a relationship” (175). Rather than repeating her mother’s economic enslavement, Saskia’s newfound independence leads to the mature outlook that “if a relationship developed between her and Ben, it would be because she wanted it to, as much as he might” (177). Love, for her, will not involve being swept off her feet by a fairy-tale Prince Charming, but will include an intellectual equality that enables her to remain grounded yet growing. Epitomising generational advancement, Saskia will make different choices informed by feminist thought in order to “grind out her own lens through which she viewed the world” (226). Her love for Ben is slowly developing rather than a whirlwind, thereby
ensuring that it will have depth, for “the more time she spent with him and got to know him, the more she liked him” (224). This differs from her naïve earlier romantic encounters where “the opposite usually happened” as “close contact over the ensuing weeks had soured” relations. But “with Ben it was different. Each new aspect of his character was appealing” (224). This newfound consistency and growing interest in a lover forms an integral part of Saskia’s journey towards maturity, and Ben’s cosmopolitan vision is a vital component that she shares. Nevertheless, the resolution is clearly heteronormative, emphasised by Alessandra and Neil’s developing union which has been encouraged by Saskia, who is “pleased with her own scheme to foster this romance” (223). An underlying exotic otherness remains, though, evident insofar as “Alessandra was dressed, as always, in dark trousers and cardigan. But she was wearing a scarf that Saskia had given her. A bright blue scarf” (223). The slash of vibrant colour amidst an otherwise dull conventionality is a reminder of the strong female links in the text, particularly in relation to Alessandra’s closeted exoticism. During her period of mental disorder she “dressed in clothes of wild colours that did not match” (219), and it is this socially unpalatable wild passion that may have been controlled, but not extinguished; at the heart of her wardrobe “lay exotic things” (165).

Saskia and Ben’s harmonious relationship reflects the need for balance and interconnectivity within nature, including humanity. Breslin’s young heroine has had to journey back in her family history in order to discover that her home is not in the alienating city life of Britain’s capital but, instead, is in a rural Highland location “by the sea. Where she belonged” (226). Home, then, is not necessarily an abode, but a space of belonging and connectivity that roots one to the earth and a wider diverse humanity. Cliff House acts as an anchor that helps to ground Saskia, just as she learns that it was used by “the local fishermen … to locate their fishing grounds…. They called it ‘finding the mark’” (178). Ben informs her that this “old form of navigation” is “a bit like dead reckoning … where you can estimate where you are by where you’ve been” (178). Breslin’s epigraph also refers to dead reckoning, emphasising that, having travelled across disturbing psychogeographical terrain, Saskia has found her mark by reaching the destination of home. Each chapter heading, taken from the shipping forecast, mirrors the epigraphical map of the British Isles that charts the route taken by fishermen following seasonal catches that have traversed the globe: “and
in the depths of the oceans the paths of ancient glacial rivers ribbon out, pulling their migrants home” (18).

Clearly, a link is being made here between the spring’s “new hatching” (17) of aquatic migrants and Saskia’s springtime journey as a return home to the spawning ground of her family. This notion of return connects human and environment strongly, for “we are in a cycle, part of the earth and the sea…. It’s where we come from and where we go to” (201). Just as “the herring follow the ancient rivers, the course laid out on the sea bed. When they return here, they are coming home” (201), Saskia is completing the cycle of her family’s trajectory home, but also humanity’s evolutionary return to its fish origins. In her return to nature she increasingly becomes part of it, symbolised by her hair (the thread linking the Granton generations) which grows wilder in this space beyond the encroachments of urban civilisation. “The water was much softer here than in London and her hair had changed texture, become more difficult to manage” (75), just as she too has become liberated and more difficult to manage or control in a space where she has room to freely develop. Cliff House provides her with a room of her own to imagine the endless possibilities of her future, for “one of the reasons she had agreed to visit her great-aunt was to escape the tensions within her own home” (80).

Free from the stifling encroachment of London and the equally suffocating anxiety of her parent’s troubled marriage in which she has become a pawn, Saskia can now breathe in the uninterrupted vastness of this “beautiful” place, “gaz[ing] out to where sea met sky” (82). It is this endlessness and limitless potential she is attempting to impart to Ben, when she says “Do you ever feel different when you are close by the sea? It’s so hard to put into words. Sometimes I feel as if I’m in another space” (103). This other space semiotically exists beyond the territorial confinements of the symbolic order, thus invoking an inner response from Saskia that she struggles to define within linguistic parameters and simultaneously allowing her freedom to experience spiritual connectivity with nature and her self. Because Ben connects with Saskia at a deep emotional level, the communication between them also transcends conventional society, for “it seemed that he understood without her having to spell it out” (178). Notably, the phrasing “all the hues of Cliff House and the bay were imprinted on her eyes. London so distant now, city tones so different” (76) indicates that her urban home is alien to her now and has been replaced in her field of vision by this natural idyll.

Breslin does not suggest, however, that Saskia will remain in parochial stasis: having been healed by the regenerative power of an
her onward journey of intellectual expansion resumes: “her whole field of vision was the sea and the limitless possibility of the unknown” (49). Comparing herself to “Christopher Columbus” (49), Breslin’s young heroine navigates an alternative cartography to her phallocratic territorial forefather to explore the undiscovered depths of the sea and herself. The final sentence, typographically surrounded by the potential of blank space, remains significantly incomplete: “Their cycle complete, the shoals prepare to move on. Guided by the ocean itself they start to make their way out to deeper water, leaving the spawning grounds rich with new life.” (226). The ellipses signal a cyclical journey without end that reflects humanity’s relationship with its earthly home, while Saskia will undoubtedly leave her spawning ground to venture into the deeper water of the unknown and the unwritten of her adulthood. Her homecoming to Scotland has awakened an intellectual, emotional, and ethical desire to navigate a planetary journey. Saskia realises that she must resist being “bound by regulation and inert thought” and instead learn to “think outside the frame” (226). Likewise, Breslin expects her YA readers and a maturing post-devolution Scotland to resist national insularity and transcend boundaries in an ethical cosmopolitan outlook that will help to prevent global disasters. Speaking from the pre-devolved period of 1988, Saskia’s Journey warns that “the waters round Britain, which had been the breeding grounds of a thousand species for a million years, were being ransacked” (225). Breslin is clearly showing how urgent this problem is for contemporary society by predicting that the next twenty years or so would see the results of the European regulations. Ben and his colleagues, and the fisherfolk, needed help and support to protect the fish if there were going to be fish left by the time of the new century. (225)

Saskia sees this as her calling and, in turn, Breslin shows that, as the new century unfolds, we are still in deeply troubled waters.

Though young and potentially insignificant in adult society, Saskia is immensely important as a salvational heroine in this text, just as the relatively small nation of post-devolution Scotland is integral in the wider global requirement of environmental ethics. Similarly, microscopic life is essential for the preservation of humanity: “the fluctuations of the plankton are crucial to the planet” (123). This is because “Larger sea creatures feed on smaller ones, big fish eat little fish, and many fish rely on the plankton” as does “the greediest predator and major polluter of the planet – us” (123–24). Breslin considers the revolutionary potential of “tiny sea organisms, some less than a millimetre in length” (124) in terms
of their capacity to alter the course of life on earth. Saskia’s astonishment that “the future of the planet [could] depend on something so minute” (124) mirrors Ben’s view that “the biggest problem is the destruction of the nursery areas and the species at the beginning of the food chain” (178). While *homo sapiens* might arrogantly alter the face of the planet, seeing itself as the most powerful species, Breslin’s text supports an ethical environmentalism that recognises our interdependence upon the smallest and seemingly least powerful creatures. Respecting such political, cultural and environmental minutiae might be the key to global sustainability.

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