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LIMINAL SPACES AND THE ECOMORPHIC SELF IN ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT. ***Liminal Spaces and the Ecomorphic Self in Alistair MacLeod's Short Stories*.** Starting from the observation that Cape Breton Island, the distinctive setting of Alistair MacLeod's fiction, is a "borderland" lying at the intersection of complementary elements (past – present, tradition – individuality, humans – environment), this paper proposes a general discussion of liminality in the author's work as well as a close reading of two of his short stories, "The Road to Rankin's Point" and "Island", with the aim of highlighting how a relational, ecomorphic self-arises in the wake of symbolic encounters that lead to a reassessment of the subject's position within their biological and cultural milieu.

Keywords: *Alistair MacLeod, Cape Breton, liminality, borderlands, ecomorphism.*

REZUMAT. ***Spaţii liminale şi sinele ecomorfic în povestirile lui Alistair MacLeod*.** Pornind de la observaţia că Insula Cape Breton, cadrul natural tipic al povestirilor lui Alistair MacLeod, este o „zonă de frontieră" situată la intersecţia unor elemente complementare (trecut - prezent, tradiţie - individualitate, oameni – mediu înconjurător), această lucrare propune o discuţie generală a liminalităţii în opera autorului, precum şi o lectură atentă a două dintre creaţiile sale, „Drumul către Rankin Point" şi „Insula", pentru a evidenţia modul în care un sine relaţional, ecomorf, apare în urma unor întâlniri simbolice care duc la reevaluarea poziţiei subiectului în raport cu mediul său biologic şi cultural.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Alistair MacLeod, Cape Breton, liminalitate, zone de frontieră, ecomorfism.*

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1. The locus of writing: Cape Breton as a "site of exchanges"

In an interview published in 2005, aptly titled "A Lesson in the Art of Storytelling", Canadian author Alistair MacLeod declared:

> It's definitely true that we all live our lives set against a particular landscape, but while we're living in that microcosm, we're also living in a larger macrocosm, and the people out there understand the basic problems that occur in every other culture. (Baer 347)

To the casual reader, this confession may seem somewhat perplexing. Author of only a handful of stories and a novel, MacLeod is one of those Canadian writers who appear not to have been impressed by the vastness of their country and its equally vast thematic potential. The limited typology of his characters and plots – people of Gaelic ancestry surprised mostly in moments of existential crises – may suggest that MacLeod's literary reputation is largely due to his keen descriptions of provincial life, a subject dear to a whole host of writers since the earliest Europeans set foot upon these hostile but captivating northern premises. In fact, in the same interview, he admits that his fascination with the place emerged from the experiential poverty of the novice writer, for whom Cape Breton represented the whole expanse of the known world and a rich enough repository of literary material (Baer 338-39).

Yet, this peculiar insular setting does not imply an insular vision. As Claire Omhovère explains, in MacLeod's narratives "Cape Breton is never pictured as a self-contained, sufficient, and secluded haven", but as a "site of exchanges" (57), in which individual and collective identities are continuously interrogated, contested and altered by a host of internal and external influences. Frozen in time and governed by ancestral laws, the island exerts a distinctive *push-pull effect* upon its inhabitants. For many of MacLeod's younger characters leaving the island represents the prerequisite for finding their own path in the world. As the narrator of "The Vastness of the Dark" declares, "almost any place must be better than this one with its worn-out mines and smoke-black houses" (MacLeod 33). However, as the story continues, he learns that breaking the ties with his home is more than a "physical thing", since the lives of one's ancestors remain inextricably linked with one's present and future: "Their lives [are] flowing into mine and mine from out of theirs. Different but in some ways more similar than I had ever thought" (56). As Omhovère further notes, MacLeod's characters are "constrained with a double bind", since "staying in Cape Breton is just as impossible as leaving it" (51-52). For them, the island remains "a glass prison" (MacLeod 56), allowing for a contemplative gaze at what lies outside, but never granting full release. In consequence, they develop an ambivalent rapport with their native place. Like

the narrator of MacLeod's earliest piece, "The Boat", they habitually reject tradition, with its cultural and societal constraints, but at the same they decry its loss in a continuously changing modern world (Riegel 237).

However, the same quality of being open, which enables the island to be a "site of exchanges", also makes it vulnerable to external forces. In MacLeod's works, Cape Breton is "inescapably contaminated by elsewhere" (Mason 155). This contamination may be cultural, as illustrated by the tourists who come to photograph the place in "The Boat" (Mason 155), or, more importantly, it may have an economic foundation. Indeed, as Tremblay suggests, MacLeod's stories, of which many are concerned with demanding lives of miners, fishermen or farmers, can be read as realistic explorations of "physical labour and structural impoverishment as an extension of global market force" (665).

Thus, like the entire Maritime region it is part of, Cape Breton is as much a periphery of Canada, as it is a relic of the Old World – dependent on both but never fully reclaimed by either. Consequent on this fuzzy emplacement, the protagonists of MacLeod's stories are often haunted by a sense of inadequacy and futility, drifting through life "[l]ike flotsam on yet another uninteresting river … bound for some invisible destination" (MacLeod 55).

Drawing on these observations, in this paper I propose a general discussion of MacLeod's narratives and a reading of two of his short stories that are illustrative of a perception of Cape Breton as a *borderland* or *interstitial space*, in which identities are in a state of constructive flux engendered by the interplay of forces located within and without the individual. To this end, I have chosen a route that both diverges from and complements the aforementioned views, my interest being in what may be called the "self forming" potential of liminality, rather than its cultural or economic motives and implications. More precisely, as I will try to illustrate in my analysis of the selected texts, "The Road to Rankin's Point" (1976) and "Island" (1988), for MacLeod's protagonists the insular experience is punctuated by concrete or symbolic departures and returns, which are not merely severances or reunions, but occasions for initiatory journeys leading to revelation and self-discovery. Regardless of their duration or intensity, these ritualised transitions frequently imply a *linkage* or *harmonisation* of the inner realm and the environment. Central to this *ecomorphic transformation* is the attainment of an "unselfconsciousness that allow[s] for fleeting moments of unification between individuals and the wider world", as well as "of every element in a set of natural circumstances with the conscious mind that perceives those surroundings" (Nichols 79).

For a proper theoretical grounding of the analytical segment of my paper, in what follows I will provide an introduction to liminality in MacLeod's fiction in light of a series of theoretical insights offered by border poetics.

2. "Between-and-betwixt": liminality and interstitial spaces

Liminality, a concept lying at the core of border poetics, is a constant of MacLeod's fictional universe. Thematically, most of his stories exhibit a preference for subjects associated with "border", "transition" or "interaction" and their concrete or symbolic manifestations: departures and returns ("The Boat", "The Return", "The Closing Down of Summer", "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood"), growth and initiation ("In the Fall", "The Road to Rankin's Point", "To Every Thing There Is a Season", "Second Spring", "Island"), memory and remembrances ("Winter Dog", "The Tuning of Perfection", "Vision", "Island"), experience, myth and myth-making ("The Boat", "In the Fall", "Vision", "Island"). MacLeod's protagonists are also frequently surprised in a state of *in-betweenness*, in which endings have a regenerative potential, as can be seen in this passage from "The Closing Down of Summer":

> Evening is approaching. The sand is whipped by the wind and blows into our faces and stings our bodies as might a thousand pinpricks or the tiny tips of many scorching needles. We flinch and shake ourselves and reach for our protective shirts. We leave our prone positions and come restlessly to our feet, coughing and spitting and moving uneasily like nervous animals anticipating a storm. In the sand we trace erratic designs and patterns with impatient toes. We look at one another, arching our eyebrows like bushy question marks. Perhaps this is what we have been waiting for? Perhaps this is the end and the beginning?
>
> (MacLeod 204)

As we watch the characters readying themselves for the journey that will take them to another continent (for a contracted job in the Transvaal mines of South Africa), we discover that for the liminal subject in-betweenness is filled with restlessness, anxiety and uncertainty. Indeed, Bhabha explains, the liminal condition is characterised by a "disturbance of direction", manifested through a "hither and thither, back and forth" movement (2), evoked here by the "erratic designs and patterns" traced in the sand by the "impatient" actors in the above scene.

Regardless of whether the liminal condition is associated with a real, symbolic or imaginary border (Müller-Funk 77), its underlying uncertainty derives from its ambivalent, dualistic nature. On the one hand, the in-between space is the realm of hybridisation, carrying within itself a great transformative power. Viljoen and Merwe attribute this to "creolization", or the ongoing process which enables the subject to find a way "out of the impasse of being caught on the threshold between past and present." (3) For Thomassen, the

same power derives from the almost absolute freedom of the liminal condition – the freedom from "any kind of structure" that fuels "creativity and innovation, peaking in transfiguring moments of sublimity." (1) Liminality is thus an occasion for self-reflection, as it forces the subject to think about the role one should play in this indeterminate, chaotic state (Thomassen 2). Because in a transitional phase individuals must continually reposition themselves, liminal experiences are quintessentially "affective" and "formative, representing "leaps into the unknown" (Stenner 15). They can be considered centres of "as-yet-unactualised potentiality", analogous to "those railway rotunda where trains can be redirected into new directions, or perhaps, … a little like stem cells that have the potential to become any sort of cell." (Stenner 16)

On the other hand, the fundamental "restlessness" of the liminal experience is a consequence of a necessary ritualistic "disrobing" of the border subject. "Transitional beings", says Turner, are characterised by "a parsimony of symbolic reference", a total privation of individual substance which is "the very prototype of sacred poverty" (237). For its entire duration, in-betweenness implies a symbolic dissolution and de-personalisation of the subject, which ensures integration into the communal and the universal. Transitional beings "have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows." (Turner 237)

However, since "the role of the boundary as either of these two potentialities can be manipulated through interaction" (Larsen 98-99), eventually it is up to the border subject to turn the liminal experience into something creative or destructive. The indefiniteness of this "betwixt-and-between period" (Turner 243) may be empowering, as it facilitates the adoption and merging of several perspectives that are otherwise denied to the individual (Elbert Decker and Winchock 5). If the creative force of the threshold is successfully actualised, the transitional experience will result in a new, post-liminal self – in other words, in a symbolic "replenishment" that complements the aforementioned ritualistic "disrobing". Hence, in-betweenness is inexorably tied with the question of selfhood, in the sense that liminal spaces may "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal", leading to the creation of "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." (Bhabha 2) Irrespective of the outcome of the experience, any crossing of a physical or symbolic border is therefore a major ontological experience, "[a] kind of metamorphosis, some sort of death and rebirth" (Görling 157).

A close reading of MacLeod's short stories reveals the presence of all of the aforementioned characteristics of liminal spaces: dual power (destructive and constructive potential), transformative energy (the ability to create new

identities or to renew existing ones) and triple layering (real, symbolic and imaginary borders). In my discussion of the two short stories I will address some of the implications of the first two of these characteristics. On the other hand, triple layering being an aspect too broad to be adequately addressed within the limits of an essay, hence, with it I will restrict attention to some general observations at this point.

The lives of MacLeod's insular characters are governed by a triad of forces: (i) fateful encounters and turning points (conflictual situations or traumatic experiences during which the individual is confronted with others and/or oneself), (ii) the natural or cultural environment (generating various dichotomies, such as humans vs. nature, individual vs. community), and (iii) the fuzziness of experience and perception. Individually or in combination, these forces are responsible for the creation of liminal experiences and of concrete or symbolic borders and interstitial spaces. Concrete borders are represented by physical spaces that are either inhabited by border subjects or are capable of transforming ordinary individuals into border subjects. Most of them are natural locations endowed with a great liminal power (the sea, the shore or the island), whose main function is to expose humans to the elements and allow for a two-way communication between realms that have drifted apart through modernisation. In MacLeod's stories, the elemental makes its presence felt either by echoing the rhythm of human activities or, quite frequently, by encroaching upon human habitats. The interstitial areas resulting from such contacts are often signalled by phonaesthetic devices intensifying the feeling of flux and suggesting the absorption of humans into a sempiternal reality. We can see this in the following passage from "In the Fall", where the sea acts as a reminder of the vulnerability of humans in face of the timeless forces of nature, as indicated by the artful combination of fricative and plosive sounds expressing both continuity and disruption:

> Now it is roiled and angry, and almost anguished; hurling up the brown dirty balls of scudding foam, the sticks of pulpwood from some lonely freighter, the caps of unknown men, buoys from mangled fishing nets and the inevitable bottles that contain no messages. And always also the shreds of blackened and stringy seaweed that it has ripped and torn from its own lower regions, as if this is the season for self-mutilation – the pulling out of the secret, private, unseen hair. (99)

Other natural formations, such as rivers and trails (and their man-made counterparts, roads and railways), are routes along which initiatory journeys take place. As in the previous case, such transitions are often marked by moments in which nature forces itself upon humans, drawing them out of their technologised urban safety zones so as to make possible the communion with others, as this scene from "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" suggests:

> All afternoon the road curves and winds ahead of us like a bucking, shimmering snake with a dirty white streak running down its back. We seem to ride its dips and bends like captive passengers on a roller coaster, leaning our bodies into the curves, and bracing our feet against the tension of the floorboards. My stomach vanishes as we hurtle into the sudden unexpected troughs and returns as quickly as we emerge to continue our twists and turns. Insects ping and splatter against the windshield and are transformed into yellow splotches. The tires hiss on the superheated asphalt and seem almost to leave tracks. I can feel my clothes sticking to me, to my legs and thighs and back. On my companion's shirt the blotches of sweat are larger and more plentiful. (48)

Complementary to natural locations, a second category of physical borders is represented by domestic spaces, exemplifying both potentials of liminality. Thus, the kitchen most frequently embodies the common ground of experience, serving as a space of compromise and a leveller of individual differences. "The kitchen was shared by all of us and was a buffer zone between the immaculate order of ten other rooms and the disruptive chaos of the single room that was my father's" (5), confesses the narrator of "The Boat". By contrast, the pen, stable or barn are either sites where traumatic events take place or spaces of ritualistic initiation. It is in such locations that children and adolescents undergo a premature transition to adulthood by witnessing the cycles of life and death, the breeding practices and the slaughtering of animals ("In the Fall", "Winter Dog", "Second Spring"). They are complemented by places and objects associated with different occupations (the mine, the boat, the lighthouse), reminding us of the fragility of human bodies and the transitoriness of individual and collective existence. In the most extreme cases, bodies are disfigured and dismembered through accidents, and the scenes are witnessed and remembered by various characters who are thus given lessons in compassion, humility and resilience, as this fragment from "The Vastness of the Dark" illustrates:

> And also of the finding of the remains of men flattened and crushed if they had died beneath the downrushing roofs of rock or if they had been blown apart by the explosion itself, transformed into forever lost and irredeemable pieces of themselves; hands and feet and blown-away faces and reproductive organs and severed ropes of intestines festooning the twisted pipes and spikes like grotesque Christmas-tree loops and chunks of hair-clinging flesh. Men transformed into grisly jigsaw puzzles that could never more be solved. (54)

As for the symbolic borders, they are not strictly place-bound (that is, specific to Cape Breton or Nova Scotia), but rather universal in character; therefore, I will only enumerate them here. They include dichotomous pairs

(individual – community, father – mother, tradition – change, light – darkness), temporal borders (past – present, youth – maturity, children – elders) and epistemological ones (reality – perception, experience – narration).

With the above remarks in mind, I will devote the next section of this paper to discussing "The Road to Rankin's Point" and "Island". The selection is motivated by several thematic commonalities shared by the two texts: the dissolution of traditional values, suffering, endurance and survival, as well as the questioning of individual experience through forays into the past and the future. Rather than trying to exhaust their rich interpretive potential, I will focus on two aspects that add to the issues presented so far: the extent to which the characters are successful in actualising the valences of the liminal experience (as a destructive or constructive force) and how this experience is accompanied by the possible emergence of an ecomorphic self.

3. "Enjoined and indistinct and as single as perfection": liminality and ecomorphism in MacLeod's short stories

"The Road to Rankin's Point" is the text that closes MacLeod's first volume, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. Narrated in the first person, it presents the story of Calum, a young man dying of leukaemia, sent by his family to his grandmother in Cape Breton to convince her to move into an old people's home. During this experience, he immerses in the family's past and learns about the deaths witnessed by his relative, which exposes him to his own inexorable physical decay and mortality even more acutely.

As the story unfolds, Calum is gradually transformed into a border subject through a double-displacement of a complementary kind. On the one hand, the shadow of his impending death makes him project himself into a predictable but unbearable future; on the other, his journey takes him back in time, since the anticipated meeting with his grandmother exposes him to the history of his kin. The main strategy employed here for constructing the character as a border subject is a variation on the aforementioned semantic paucity (Turner 237). Indeed, from the outset, we learn that the story is told in retrospect, but re-actualised as a sequence unfolding in front of our eyes, like a ritualised repetition of the traumatic event:

> I am speaking now of a July in the early 1970s and it is in the morning, just after the sun has risen following a night of heavy rains. My car moves through the quiet village which is yet asleep except for those few houses which have sent fishermen to their nets and trawls some hours before.
>
> (MacLeod 143)

Here, Mason explains, "the adverb 'now' cancels out the clear temporal meaning of the object of the sentence, the 'July in the early 1970s'", leading to a "deliberate obfuscation of the narrator" (156). Calum is thus placed in a vague present in order to be kept in the interstitial space formed by the intersection of past and future until the very end of the initiatory journey. While his memories create a rush of physical sensations, they are fuzzy and elusive, "[l]ike the vaguely heard melody of some turned-down radio station heard softly in the background" (MacLeod 144). Trapped so in the residuum of the remembered event, he remains in a state of suspended animation – a metaphorical "embryonic" form common with the subjects of ritualistic transformation, who are "neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another" (Turner 236).

To highlight Calum's liminal condition, MacLeod makes use of a number of biological metaphors. For example, at several points along his journey, Calum is confronted with the sight of his own blood, which, according to Turner, is another frequent symbol for "liminal personae" (235-236). In fact, blood has a double connotation here, signalling both the substance that sustains life and the protagonist's forgotten Gaelic heritage. It spurts out in key moments, such as upon Calum's arrival at his grandmother's farm, which announces the second stage of the initiatory process. Though at first he feels like a "double agent of the spy movies" (MacLeod 158), afraid of the "intensity of life" (158) he might recognise in his grandmother, their interaction not only makes him decide to stay with her but also initiates a partially ecomorphic transformation. In the presence of his kin, his characteristically human fear of death is replaced by a physical awareness that makes him understand and accept the immutable laws of nature. He sees himself "almost as the diseased and polluted salmon" (165) that return to their spawning place before they die. As the journey is further invested with metaphorical load, Calum finds new strength through exposure to his grandmother's suffering. The empathetic experience initiated through Calum's gesture of trimming her fingernails and completed by the disclosure of his terminal condition is a purifying act taking place under the watchful eyes of dogs – the non-human spectators of this genuine rite of passage, but also symbols of the "ambiguity of fate" (Sugars 137):

> She holds my hand so fiercely, as if I might pull her from the dark waters of a dream. I try to respond to the pressure with my own hands, for I too had somehow hoped I might be saved. Suddenly both of us burst into tears. We are weeping for each other and for ourselves. We two who had hoped to find strength in each other meet now instead in only this display of weeping weakness. The dogs cock their ears and whine softly. Moving from one of us to the other they rest their trusting heads upon our laps and look into our eyes. (MacLeod 175)

The final stage of Calum's transformation begins after this communion in suffering. On the next night, lying in his bed, he feels himself "falling back into the past … hoping to have more and more past" as he has "less and less future" (176). After one last bout of nostalgia for the comfort of mythical times filled with "second sight and spectral visions and the intuitive dog and the sea bird's cry" (176), he leaves the house to take a look at the ocean. Outside, he hears the barks of his grandmother's collies and realises she has passed away. He drives up to her place and finds her lying in the middle of the road (underscoring Calum's initiation with her own in-betweenness). The ritualised transition is now over: in the closing scene, Calum wipes the memory-banks of his own presence and *re-members* himself, symbolically, as his own angel of death, becoming meaningful again by fusing his inner darkness with that of the night:

> The darkness rises within me in dizzying swirls and seems to yearn for that other darkness that lies without. I reach for the steadying gate post or the chair's firm seat but there is nothing for the hand to touch. And then as with the music, the internal and the external darkness reach to become as one. Flowing toward one another they become enjoined and indistinct and as single as perfection. Without a seam, without a sound, they meet and unite all. (179)

As this final scene shows, the ecomorphic transformation is only partial in this story. On one hand, Calum's unselfconsciousness is not a natural consequence of the ritualised transition, but a deliberate palliative choice. On the other, the story being a retrospective, we are given no proof that the "ambient unity of self and surroundings", integral to an "ecocentric ecology" (Nichols 78), endures after the liminal stage. Rather, this text is similar to "The Boat", which Riegel describes as "a work of mourning" (237), in that it decries the loss of innocence through experience. For Calum, Rankin's Point represents the fundamental leap into the "darkness" of adulthood by accepting truths that had previously been devoid of significance (the value of family and the importance of blood ties). Thus, Calum's story exemplifies how liminality is often "a stage of reflection" in which "ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents" (Turner 240).

The second text chosen for detailed discussion, "Island", offers a more dynamic perspective on liminality while also proposing an enduring solution to it. Disguised as a simple love story, it is a study in loneliness and the recuperatory role of memory. A woman named Agnes, born on an island, becomes the lighthouse keeper, following her family tradition. She falls in love with a mysterious red-haired young man with whom she has a child. After her lover dies

in a logging accident abroad, she is gradually estranged from her relatives and humanity, metamorphosing into an almost ghostly presence. Many years later, she is visited by two red-haired young men – one who claims to be her grandson, and another, who appears to be a spectre of her long-gone lover.

"Island" is atypical among MacLeod's writings as it is the only story with a female protagonist. In addition, the author is unusually heavy-handed with the character, giving her no narrative voice and even forcing her to accept a mistaken identity (we learn that her middle name was erroneously written in her birth certificate as Angus, instead of Agnes). Her case is the opposite of Calum's: instead of "symbolic poverty" she is endowed with an excess of significance. Nonetheless, what makes her a liminal subject is that her identity arises from the continuous interaction of internal and external forces, constructed through her own contact with others as well as construed (or rather, misconstrued) by the people around her. In fact, the readers are also invited to participate in the process, since MacLeod refuses to reveal who she actually is, providing, instead, fragments of her, based on how she is perceived and judged by others.

At the beginning of the story, we see her in a characteristically liminal position, standing at the window, waiting (we later understand) for the red-haired young man:

> All day the rain fell upon the island and she waited. Sometimes it slanted against her window with a pinging sound, which meant it was close to hail, and then it was visible as tiny pellets for a moment on the pane before the pellets vanished and rolled quietly down the glass, each drop leaving its own delicate trickle. At other times it fell straight down, hardly touching the window at all, but still there beyond the glass, like a delicate, beaded curtain at the entrance to another room. (369)

A number of words and phrases in this passage ("waited", "close to", "hardly touching", "there beyond" or "entrance to another room") announce the treatment she will receive throughout the story. Even before her self-imposed isolation on the island, she is singled out as an oddity. She is born prematurely from parents past their childbearing years, and her birthplace, birthdate and name are incorrectly recorded. Admittedly, she is the only person born on the island. As such, she embodies qualities that might turn her into a "monster", another common actor in rites of passage, whose role is to "startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment that they have hitherto taken for granted" (Turner 240).

On closer reading, we notice several similarities between Agnes and Calum. Both are "freaks", since both deviate from the normalised image of the individual (one as a diseased body, the other as a distorted identity). Like

Calum, Agnes is trailed by death, being the descendant of the original family of settlers who "had gone to the island because of death, or rather to aid in death's reduction" (MacLeod 374). Her story is paved with a series of tragic losses (her parents, her lover), delimiting the various stages of her transformation. The core traumatic event, the untimely death of her lover, sets her on a path of willed depersonalisation, a gradual symbolic "de-membering". She accepts the position of a border subject, choosing loneliness as the only blissful state that can recuperate a future that was not meant to be. By doing so, she unwittingly continues the tradition of her ancestors, the MacPhedrans, whose names "became entwined with that of the island" (376) to the extent that the place itself "became known generally as MacPhedran's Island while they themselves became known less as MacPhedrans than as people 'of the island'" (376).

With Agnes, loneliness is primarily an extension of the interstitial condition she experienced in the presence of her lover. Various scenes in the story prove that their relationship rests under the sign of liminality and their interaction takes place mostly in threshold spaces. Thus, she first notices the boat that brings him to the island "from the window of the kitchen" (378). Later, she recollects their lovemaking by "how her breath and his had become one" (384) and, after they part, she scours "the grey boards of the floor thinking she might see the outline of their bodies" (384). They intersect even in their conversations, for he seems to be capable of verbalising her unformed thoughts:

> She was defensive, like most of her family, on the subject of the island. Knowing that they were often regarded as slightly eccentric because of how and where they lived. Always anticipating questions about the island's loneliness. "Some people are lonely no matter where they are," he said as if he were reading her mind. "Oh," she said. She had never heard anyone say anything quite like that before. (381)

Consequent on losing him, Agnes develops a ghost-like self, slowly morphing from a body into an idea, progressively abstracting herself from the world. Her years glide by "in a blur of monotonous sameness" (404) while she becomes "more careless of her appearance" (404) and less aware of her surroundings: "Gradually during the next years things changed even more, but so quietly that, in retrospect, she could not link the specific events to the specific years" (405). As her sense of space and knowledge of time decline, she is also deprived of her distinctive physical traits. Once her child-bearing years are over, she becomes an androgynous presence, who "had passed into folklore" and turned into "the mad woman of the island" (406), thereby fulfilling her prescribed mythical destiny. Eventually, with her, the *woman-island* becomes coterminous with the *woman is land*.

As the story concludes, Agnes acquires a truly ecomorphic self, the linkage with the environment being complemented by her transformation into an "unselfconscious" subject through the suspension of her sensorial and cognitive faculties. In this final stage, she reveals herself through what she *does not do* and what she *is not*. While waiting for her alleged grandson to return, she chooses not to look "in the direction of his possible coming so that she *could not see* him *not coming* if that was the way it was supposed to be" (411, my emphasis). This symbolic negation is doubly significant, for it unburdens Agnes of the ambiguity that has surrounded her worldly existence, marking, at the same time, the end of her liminal condition. Unlike Calum, who embraces darkness in a final, desperate attempt to accept his mortality, Agnes "dissolves" into the night, becoming opaque to further hermeneutic forays:

> The wind was rising as the temperature was dropping. The hail-like rain had given way to stinging snow and the ground they left behind was beginning to freeze. A dog barked once. And when the light revolved, its solitary beam found no MacPhedrans on the island or the sea. (412)

For Agnes, this final metamorphosis is both fulfilling and liberating. Relieved of the constraints of individuality, she becomes the stuff of legend, achieving a higher significance as the last of her clan. And yet, as she is withdrawn from the scene, we are left with a permanent absence, signalled by the ontological impossibility embodied in the "found no MacPhedrans" formula. Through this, we may argue, Agnes actualises the potential of *meontic nothingness* – a form of nothing eloquently described by Timothy Morton as "shifting and spectral, palpable yet not quite 'there'" (276), an epiphanic manifestation of liminality which "coexists anarchically alongside us, physically before us, and despite us" (279).

4. Conclusions: *econtology* and the making of the self

This examination of the valences of liminality in "The Road…" and "Island" allows us to formulate a number of conclusions. For MacLeod, the island is the place where identity is negotiated and shaped by individual and communal forces (personal choices, kinship and tradition). Typically, the protagonists of these stories are surprised on initiatory journeys or in the wake of life-changing encounters which force them to re-evaluate their position relative to others and themselves. As Creelman (1999) has pointed out, in MacLeod's case individual identity becomes rooted in the "movable ground of a community's inherited cultural memory". To a large extent, this fluid rooting implies the harmonising of interior and exterior, past and present, to the point of reaching "unselfconsciousness". Thus, as both of the discussed texts suggest, the image of the self in MacLeod's fiction is, to a large extent, a relational one.

This "ontological relatedness" (Malette 123) or "symbiosis that replaces dominion" (Nichols 80) gives rise to an *econtology*. As the cases of Calum and Agnes illustrate, "unselfconsciousness" is preceded by the emergence of an ecomorphic self, along a three-stage process. First, the subject is displaced through a traumatic event caused by natural or man-made circumstances. The characters are either singled out and forced into isolation or they deliberately withdraw from the community, thereby placing themselves in a liminal position and assuming a (temporary) border identity. The anxiety inherent in this move calls for the repositioning of the individual, which is often done by opening up a channel of communication with what lies outside the self (the natural and cultural milieus). We also notice in these stories a kind of isomorphism: the transitional subjects take up features of their environments, sometimes to the extent of becoming one, as in "Island". At the end of this symbolic death and rebirth, once the individuals have transcended into a world larger than themselves, a new identity will emerge.

We may thus conclude that MacLeod's short stories are not only accounts of the hardships and crises of Cape Bretoners but morality tales that make us wonder who we are and where we are heading. Indeed, according to Vaughn, these maritime narratives "reassert the presence and primary impact of a familial and cultural matrix against our modern conditioned idea of a sundered individuality, where such a matrix may be lost, unexamined or unconscious" (113). In a similar vein, while discussing the role of tradition and community in the lives of MacLeod's characters, Cynthia Sugars argues that MacLeod's stories confront us with a fundamental ontological question: "Can we ever choose to be who we become, or is this always something thrust on us by the legacy of the dead?" (136) As I have tried to suggest in this paper, the answer lies somewhere *between*. With their existence underpinned by "roads" and "points", many of these insular protagonists will rarely feel accomplished. Yet, they remain living proof that borders and boundaries are never entirely fixed. Like the toil-hardened miners in "The Closing Down of Summer", they remind us that we are "[n]ever merely entombed like the prisoner in the passive darkness of his solitary confinement" but capable of "always expanding the perimeters of our seeming incarceration." (MacLeod 201)

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