

**“What We Will Be”: Embracing Ecological Otherness
in *The Cautious Traveller’s Guide to the Wastelands***

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role and dimensions of ecological Otherness in the novel *The Cautious Traveller's Guide to the Wastelands*, particularly focusing on the novel's main characters' changing ways of relating to the Other. It does so through thematic analysis, moving from negative to positive ways of relating to the ecological Other. The ecological Other in the novel is represented by a fantastical environment known as the Greater Siberian Wastelands.

The characters largely begin with an overwhelmingly negative view of the ecological Other, with fears and prejudices enforced by the culture and society around them. However, over the course of the novel, they gradually become more acquainted with the environment around them. As they do, their fears begin to fade, and they begin to embrace the ecological Other. The characters and the environment become with each other in a myriad of ways, interacting and intra-acting with each other. The human characters become more-than-human, eventually becoming part of the ecological Other.

Key words: posthumanism, ecocriticism, ecological Otherness, human exceptionalism, becoming with, more-than-human.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased effort across disciplines towards “mapping the tangled relations between humans and nonhumans” (Karkulehto et al. 2020, 1). This thesis contributes to this discussion. Further, as Karkulehto et al. (ibid.) write, “the need to find new ways of encountering, discussing, and thinking of entities and environments where human and nonhuman entangle in increasingly intricate patterns has never been more urgent”. This thesis is born out of that sense of urgency. In Sarah Brooks’s *The Cautious Traveller’s Guide to the Wastelands* (henceforth *Wastelands*), the human and nonhuman are inseparably entangled, and this thesis aims to explore that entanglement through the lens of ecological Otherness.

Wastelands is a 2024 speculative fiction novel set in the late 19th century. In the novel, Siberia has undergone rapid and fantastical ecological and environmental changes over the course of the 19th century, and this area, now known as the Greater Siberian Wastelands, has been walled in by the Russian and Chinese empires to contain these changes. The only way to cross it is by a heavily armoured (and very expensive) commercial train owned by The Trans-Siberia Company (henceforth the Company, as it is referred to in the novel). The Company is a large trading corporation based in England, with a monopoly on the Wastelands trading route. The book follows the crew and passengers of the train over the course of a three-week crossing from Beijing to Moscow. “The Wastelands” refers to the physical area, as well as the ecosystem contained in it.

My analysis is concerned with the three main characters of the novel: Marya Petrova, a young woman who embarks on the journey under a false name to clear the name of her father, the Company’s former glassmaker; Dr. Henry Grey, a disgraced naturalist who wants to study the Wastelands and collect specimens along the journey to bring to the Great Exhibition in Moscow; and Weiwei Zhang, a young woman who was born on the train and has grown up as part of the crew, and who forms a friendship with a stowaway “Wastelands creature” named Elena. Elena, an important character in herself, has taken on a human appearance and stowed away on the train out of curiosity to know more about it.

The novel includes excerpts from a fictional travel guidebook with the same title as the novel – *The Cautious Traveller’s Guide to the Wastelands* –, written by the fictional author Vladimir Rostov, who chronicled his experience crossing the Wastelands. Within the context of the novel, Rostov’s guide is considered the definitive travel guide to the Wastelands, and

the characters often refer to back to it for guidance during the crossing. For this reason, this thesis also refers to the guide at times to better understand the societal views of the ecological Other in the novel.

This thesis uses thematic analysis to explore dimensions of environmental and ecological Otherness. The overarching theme of ecological Otherness has been divided into two larger themes: firstly, the ways this Otherness is created, viewed, and maintained in *Wastelands*; and secondly, the ways Otherness comes to be accepted, dismantled, and even embraced by the characters. These larger themes are further divided into smaller “subthemes” to better illustrate the different dimensions of Otherness and Othering in the novel. The research questions are as follows: How is the ecological Other present in the novel; how is this Otherness constructed and maintained; and finally, how do the characters’ ways of relating to the ecological Other change over the course of the novel?

Chapter 2 outlines the posthumanist and ecocritical frameworks used in this thesis, as well as some theoretical concepts central to the following analysis, and describes the methods used in the analysis. Chapters 3 and 4 provide the analysis itself, beginning with the negative ways of relating towards Otherness in *Wastelands*, and moving into the changing and positive ways of relating. Chapter 5 presents the final conclusions.

2 Theory and Methods

This chapter outlines the theories, concepts and methods used in this thesis. Section 2.1 is dedicated to theory and concepts and provides explanations of posthumanism and ecocriticism as well as of the concepts of ecological Otherness, human exceptionalism, becoming with, and more-than-human. Section 2.2 explains thematic analysis and describes how it is used in the following analysis.

2.1 Theory

This thesis uses the frameworks of posthumanism and ecocriticism. Posthumanist thinking seeks to challenge anthropocentric attitudes and break down the supposed dualisms of nature and culture. In their book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad, a key voice in posthumanism, defines that “‘posthumanism’ marks a refusal to take the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ for granted, and to found analyses on this presumably fixed and inherent set of categories” (Barad 2007, 32). Ecocriticism as a framework for literary analysis has much the same goals as posthumanism. As Jessica Ruzek (2014) illustrates, posthumanism and ecocriticism are very closely connected, as both seek to question the human-centric assumptions and practices of the current era. Ruzek (2014, 8) states that “[w]hile posthumanism situates itself against the practices of humanism, ecocriticism engages directly with literature to embark on new analyses of literary representations of nature and nonhumans”. To be ecocritical is, almost always, to be posthumanist.

As the title suggests, the focus of this thesis is on ecological Otherness. Otherness is a quality attributed to things and beings that are or are perceived as different, unfamiliar, and outside the norm. Ecological Otherness is Otherness in the context of ecology, nature, and the environment. The ecological Other is anything and everything on the other side of the (largely artificial) boundary of culture vs. nature, and human vs. nonhuman. In *Wastelands*, the ecological Other is represented by the Wastelands area and the beings – flora and fauna – that live there.

A concept that is central to both posthumanism and ecocriticism, and to this thesis, is human exceptionalism. As Donna Haraway (2008, 11) explains in her book *When Species Meet*, “the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism [...] is the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies.” This concept is, in turn, closely tied to Haraway’s concept of *becoming with*. This concept highlights the interconnectedness

of all things, including between human and non-human: “To be one is always to become with many” (Haraway 2008, 4). These two concepts are oppositionally linked, since human exceptionalism positions humans as outside the reciprocal dependencies and processes that becoming with emphasises.

Finally, much like becoming with, the term *more-than-human* is used to “foreground how human lives are [...] entangled in the material worlds of which they are a part” (Lorimer and Hodgetts 2024, 34). It “challenge[s] the primacy of superior human worth or value” (Price and Chao 2023, 180); it rejects humanity, and human qualities, as the pinnacle of existence. It emphasises the existence of qualities and beings beyond the human in a more positive light.

2.2 Methods

Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). This can be done either with a specific research question in mind, or a research question can arise during the pattern-identifying process. Thematic analysis is a very versatile and widely applicable tool as it is not tied to any specific theoretical framework.

In the case of this thesis, the pre-formulated research question relates to how ecological Otherness is presented in *Wastelands* and how the novel’s main characters’ ways of relating towards it do or do not change over the course of the novel. I catalogued instances where these ways of relating were present, grouping instances with strong similarities together. From these groups emerged the themes into which the analysis in this thesis is divided. These themes are grouped into two overarching themes, with Chapter 3 discussing negative and Chapter 4 positive ways of relating towards the ecological Other in the novel. Section 3.1 discusses the fear of Otherness and the consequent actions taken by those who fear it; section 3.2 further discusses how medicalisation and the pressure to socially conform are utilised by entities in power in order to keep the Other in check; and section 3.3 analyses how human exceptionalism enforces Othering even when it does not demonise it. Section 4.1 analyses the environment’s agency in interaction and intra-action between humans and the non-human Other; section 4.2 examines how the characters become with the environment and become more-than-human in consequence; and finally, section 4.3 analyses the breaking of boundaries and how the characters have come to embrace the ecological Otherness.

3 “What We Are Not”: The Other as an Antithesis of Conformity

This chapter discusses the characters’ and the society’s negative ways of relating to the strangeness and unknowability of the Wastelands. It examines how the ecological Other is constructed and the fear it creates. The ecological Other is widely demonised, largely because of its strangeness. The fear of the Other is upheld by a pressure to conform to social norms, and the society in general, and the Company in specific, use medicalisation as a tool to enforce this pressure. In contrast, the naturalist Henry Grey does not fear the Wastelands, instead regarding it with a reverential curiosity. However, he too still views it through a human exceptionalist lens which reinforces its othering.

3.1 “That Which Is an Abomination”: Fearing the Ecological Other

At the beginning of the novel, the Wastelands is presented as hostile and strange, even unknowable. It is something to be feared, to be kept away and at bay at all costs. This is evident in the measures taken by both the Russian and the Chinese empires, as well as the Company, to contain the changes and shield themselves from them. The empires have built a literal Wall, stretching thousands of miles and guarded at all times, around the area to prevent the changes from spreading further. All contact with the Wastelands is forbidden, and crows, the only birds which still fly over the border, are feared and hated as birds of ill omen: “This is why people in China throw stones at them; they are tainted” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 34). The only way to enter and cross the Wastelands is on the heavily armoured and gunned train owned by the Company; and at the end of every journey, the train must pass a Vigil of a day and a night to make sure the train has not been compromised before it is allowed back outside the Wall. If something is found to be growing on the train, it will not be allowed to cross the border back out, and all the crew and passengers will be left to die of asphyxiation in order to keep the Wastelands out. As Rostov’s guide puts it: “All inside will sacrifice themselves for the good of the Empire” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 47); or, rather, they would *be sacrificed* by the Empires safely outside the Wall. The fear of the Wastelands is so extreme and absolute that the powers that be would rather let all crew and passengers die than risk letting the Wastelands out. Despite these measures, even the train is seen as tainted; as it drives through Beijing on the way to the Wall, “shutters will be slamming shut, water boiling on stoves will

be thrown out as tainted, couplets will be muttered to ward off bad dreams” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 13).

Among the first-class passengers is a cleric named Yuri Petrovich, who exemplifies this demonisation of the environment. He says: “Greater Siberia [...] reveals nothing but the absence of the Lord’s eyes. *It cannot be studied*, you cannot hope to look for meaning in that which is *an abomination*” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 92; emphases added) and “Here only the devil walks, and leaves ruin behind him” (ibid.). Petrovich is obviously not alone in this way of thinking: he functions as the embodiment of the fear and disgust that inspired the empires to build the Wall and the people of Beijing to throw their water out as tainted.

3.2 “Don’t Imagine”: Medicalisation as a Tool of Othering

Marya Petrova has grown up in a very restrictive family culture, where her mother has always policed Marya’s way of being as a woman. There is a clear parallel here with the Wastelands. The advice which is repeated throughout the novel is *don’t imagine, don’t think*. This is supposed to protect the mind against the influence of the Wastelands, but it is also the same advice Marya has been given, “[a]dvice that she had been expected to take all her life – don’t think so much, don’t ask questions all the time. Don’t *imagine*” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 163). Too much imagination on the journey can lead to something called “the Wastelands sickness.”

The Wastelands sickness is a result of how the Wastelands affect the mind. A major symptom is a growing affinity for the Wastelands, an affinity “that drives men to throw themselves at the windows of the train, to scratch their fingers bloody at the doors, desperate to reach the outside” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 14). This calls to mind the historical treatment of hysteria, as well as how homosexuality used to be a diagnosable illness (and, in fact, how being transgender largely still is), as if non-conformity and affinity for Otherness are dangerous deviations from what is right. Medicalisation is used as a tool for othering and as a way of keeping the Other in check, both in the novel and in the real world. As Karkulehto et al. (2020, 3), among others, point out, “the treatment of animals and nonhumans is connected to the treatment of the humans who are, in varying contexts, viewed as lesser, weaker, subordinate, or substandard.” Those diagnosed with “Wastelands sickness” are seen not only

as afflicted by but also in some way affiliated with the Other, and thereby become Othered themselves.

Near the end of the novel, when Marya's investigations into the events leading up to her father's firing lead her to being perceived as a threat by the Company's men, she is imprisoned in the hospital car under the guise of Wastelands sickness. Her first urge is to protest that she is not ill, but she quickly recognises that "[s]he can stamp her foot and scream and plead that there is nothing wrong, she is perfectly fine, but that will only convince them more [...] no one will listen if they believe she is tainted" (Brooks [2024] 2025, 286). The Wastelands sickness is believed to affect a person's reasoning, to make them mad, and this creates a situation where a person suspected of being infected is denied credibility and the ability to speak for themselves. Marya, unable to defend herself, is denied her agency due to the suspected illness, and the medical diagnosis of Wastelands sickness thereby becomes a tool of oppression through Othering.

3.3 "The Urge to Trap and Display": Ecological Othering and Human Exceptionalism

Unlike many other characters, the naturalist Henry Grey is not afraid of the Wastelands. Rather, he is fascinated with it, wishing to study and understand it. However, like the other characters, he still views the Wastelands as an Other. His role in the novel is to function as a representation of the human need to possess, categorise, and comprehend. The main interest of the Wastelands for him is what the Wastelands can do *for him*; he believes that by studying the Wastelands, he can revitalise his own career and reputation. He believes it is his God-given mission to study the Wastelands, to categorise it, to tame it by trapping it behind the glass cases of the Great Exhibition. He displays a human exceptionalist worldview, one where humans are the centre of, above, and separate from everything.

In stark contrast to Yuri Petrovich, Grey regards the Wastelands with increasing reverence, even naming it "the New Eden". However, in his view, this Eden was created by God for humans to study and learn things from it: Grey's New Eden only exists *for humans*, to be made use of, and to revive his disgraced career.

With the help of a crew member, Grey makes it outside when the train stops to gather water. He goes to collect samples of the Wastelands, and Weiwei is sent to bring him back on the

train. Elena tells Weiwei: “He must not take anything. It is not his to take” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 235), but not only does Weiwei fail to stop Grey, she, too, also takes a piece of lichen for herself and helps Grey smuggle his samples back on the train.

When Grey finds out about Elena’s presence on the train, he extends the same reverence to her as he does to the rest of the Wastelands, naming her his *Eve*. But despite this reverence and the holiness he attributes to her, he still treats her as nothing more than one of his samples, attempting to capture her with a dart gun. Elena, meanwhile, regards him with more compassion than fear. Weiwei tries to protect Elena, thinking to herself that “it is not just Grey who doesn’t understand, it is Elena. Elena who watches and mimics and believes that this means that she understands how people work, but there are cruelties she doesn’t grasp, like the urge to trap and display, to possess for the sake of possessing” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 315). Grey’s naturalist and human exceptionalist way of thinking is explicitly presented as a form of cruelty. His attempt to capture Elena also has a strong parallel to the real history of human zoos, where non-white people were put on display as animals. The novel explicitly ties the Exhibition to othering and Otherness: “This is what the Exhibition is saying – Look at our achievements, look at what we have made. Then look at what we are not” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 358).

In the end, Grey dies of an ulcer while trying to catch Elena. His death symbolises the death of naturalism and rational thought within the novel, as the Wastelands changes spread through the train. There is no room for Grey’s kind of human exceptionalism in the changing, fantastical world.

4 “We Are the Terrors Now”: Embracing Ecological Otherness

This chapter analyses the characters’ changing ways of relating towards the Other. It discusses the meaning and agency found in the Wastelands and how the characters knowingly and unknowingly interact and intra-act with it. The characters are and the environment around them are in a constant state of becoming with each other, and as a result, the characters are also in a constant state of becoming Other. As the characters come to see and understand these changes, they also begin to accept and welcome them. They embrace the ecological Other by taking it into themselves, and thereby become part of it.

4.1 “A Mind, Thinking”: Meaning, Agency, and Intra-action

Over the course of the novel, The Wastelands comes to be portrayed as something – somethings – with clear agency, something with thoughts and intentions and consciousness. There may not be *reason* within the landscape – at least not in the way meant by Grey and Petrovich – but there is *intention*. The turning point occurs when the train is momentarily engulfed by an enormous flock of birds. Marya, watching the flock through a telescope, finds that she is in turn being watched by the flock: when she puts her eye to the lens, she sees the eye of a bird looking back at her. What she remembers from this moment afterwards is “[t]he feeling of intent. Of a mind, thinking” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 176). This experience is a catalyst for her changing view of the Otherness around her.

Marya’s experience is echoed in Elena’s question to Weiwei: “Why do you call it this? [...] This name you have given to it. As if there is nothing out there. As if it has been emptied, left behind, when it is full of living, thinking things” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 142). The Other is not an unknowable or a mindless threat, but is instead, like Elena says, made up of countless living, thinking things that have as much agency as the humans travelling past. The very name that the area has been given is called into question.

An important way in which this meaning presents itself to the characters is through the interconnectedness of the Wastelands ecosystem. Before his death, Marya’s father Anton – the train’s former glassmaker – and the train’s cartographer Suzuki Kenji experimented with telescope lenses to better map the Wastelands. The result is a telescope which allows them to literally see the interdependencies and connections in the Wastelands ecosystem. As Suzuki

tells Marya: “We saw veins running through every living thing, connecting one to another, like threads... [...] we soon realised that the threads, the veins [...] stretched through the whole of the Wastelands, connecting everything” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 248–249). They form complicated patterns across the land, flora, and fauna of the environment. Suzuki likens it to a tapestry, to seeing both “the pattern and how the pattern is made” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 248). Further, he tells Marya that “the unpredictability of the changes, their random nature – is not the true danger at all. What is dangerous is that there *is* meaning, intent behind them, and we can see it now with our own eyes” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 249). Like Marya, Suzuki has come to see the Wastelands in a different way, as something(s) with intention.

The veins, the threads of the tapestry, are the visual representation of the interconnectedness of everything, as well as the changes continually occurring in the ecology of the Wastelands. Further, the lines do not only appear within the nature of the Wastelands: they also intra-act with the people traveling through it. Suzuki adds that they “saw the train in the patterns – its shape repeated in the leaves, the rail running through the bark of trees” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 249). The repeated crossings have left their mark on the nature from which the humans have been trying to keep separate. It is the train’s effect on the environment around it that first makes Elena sneak on board: she “wanted to know what it was [...]. Why it made the ground tremble and the air taste wrong” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 138). Despite their attempts to pretend otherwise, the people in their armoured train, and the train itself, are part of the Wastelands ecosystem, too, and as they change the environment, so the environment in turn changes them.

When Weiwei asks Elena what the Wastelands feels like, Elena tells her that “[i]t is beating [...] like a heart. That is how it feels. But not just one thing – many things. Everything together” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 140). Everything in the Wastelands, to borrow Haraway’s words, always becoming with many. Instead of moving through the environment in isolation, unchanging, the crew and the passengers of the train are constantly becoming with the ecological Other(s) around them, and in becoming with it, becoming more Other themselves.

4.2 “They Changed. They Thrived”: Becoming More-Than-Human

Weiwei’s view of the Wastelands’ Otherness begins to change when she befriends a stowaway, a girl named Elena. However, Weiwei soon discovers that Elena is not a *human*

girl: she is “[n]ot a scared, lost stowaway, in need of protection, but a Wastelands creature, a not-quite-girl” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 132). She merely mimics the form of a human in order to blend in on the train. Despite her young appearance, she is also old enough to have encountered Rostov many years ago, when he was making the train journey across the Wastelands to write his guide. The guidebook describes Elena: “A child, though she observed me in a manner quite unchildlike. A girl, but as unformed and as wild as the water around her. A not-quite-girl” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 124). The moniker of *not-quite-girl* is telling: she looks human, but is *not quite*, *not enough*. Yet she is, in reality, descended from humans. According to Rostov’s guide, “[w]hen the changes began, there were those in Greater Siberia who were pulled towards the forests and marshes” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 135). Elena tells Weiwei: “Before I was anything, there were humans who were drawn to the water. When the land began to stir, they heard it calling. They changed. They *thrived*” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 141; emphasis added). Rostov and Weiwei call her a *not-quite-girl*, as if she is not human enough, but she is in fact *more-than-human*. Her ancestors did not fear the changes, but instead embraced them and *thrived*, showing that the Wastelands is *not* inhabitable for humans.

Like Elena’s ancestors, the crew of the train is beginning to change with the Wastelands. The mere act of looking through the telescope is enough to affect physical changes in both Suzuki and Anton: The lines they see become animated tattoos on their skin, and later, when Anton dies, Marya finds “[w]ater pooling beneath her father’s face, grains of sand on his cheek” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 126). Initially, the characters see these changes as a symptom of Wastelands sickness. However, after spending weeks on the train, tracing her father’s footsteps, Marya tells Suzuki: “What if [...] it was not a warning, not a sickness but a *connection*? [...] We thought it was the loss of his reputation, his livelihood, that broke him but it was more than that, it was the loss of all this [the Wastelands] that killed him” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 325). The understanding and insight Marya has gained on the journey has makes her see the changes in a less frightening and more positive light.

Elena’s story mirrors the changes the other characters go through over the course of the novel. It puts into perspective how these changes are not necessarily damaging or harmful in nature. The changes in Anton’s and Suzuki’s bodies would be considered by many as symptoms of Wastelands sickness, as a dangerous contamination. Instead, when contrasted with Elena’s story, these changes are presented in a more neutral, even positive light. The humans are

merely adapting to the environment around them, becoming with it and becoming not less-than but more-than-human in order to thrive in and with the environment around them.

However, just as with the changes in the environment, the changes in the humans and nonhumans are reciprocal, too. As the train crew are being transformed by the Wastelands, Elena is being changed by the train. When Weiwei asks what she is *now*, Elena answers that she does not know (Brooks [2024] 2025, 142). Later, when Elena and Weiwei notice the train being followed by shadowy, fox-like creatures, Elena tells Weiwei: “I told you [...] I don’t know what I am any more. [...] And *they* do not know what I am, either. [...] I can’t hear them any more, I can’t feel them. I don’t know whether they are taunting me or calling me back” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 208). The constant becoming-with is always intra-active; that is to say, reciprocal. As one party changes another, so they are changed in turn.

4.3 “The End of the Cautious Traveller:” Breaking the Boundaries of Otherness

The Trans-Siberian Express has been making the crossings across the Wastelands repeatedly over the course of many years, and with every crossing, the Wastelands ecosystem has become more and more familiar with the train. The end result of this is that the Wastelands begins to take the train into itself, and the outside begins to break into the train. First it appears in mycelia start to appear and grow through the train, first unnoticeable behind the walls, but gradually becoming more and more apparent. The lichen Weiwei has collected also begins to spread along the walls. Soon the entire train is turning into a wilderness, with moss and streams and leafy plants. In this space, as the boundaries begin to break between outside and inside, nature and culture, human and nonhuman, with other boundaries beginning to break down, too: “In the whispering, moving wildness, the old order is falling apart; the lines between Third and First [class], passengers and crew, are blurring” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 334). The artificial boundaries created and upheld by culture become largely irrelevant.

Amidst all this boundary-breaking, the ecological Other becomes something desirable. When the changes inside the train begin, the crew and the passengers are at first afraid of them. However, as the changes spread, this fear disappears somewhere in the “whispering, moving wildness.” Instead of panicking or trying to fight the changes, the crew and the passengers are singing and dancing among the magical plant-life. Marya, for her part, lets Suzuki’s animated tattoos spread over her own arms, knowingly and intentionally forging a physical connection

with the Wastelands. She has already been othered by the world around her; now she chooses to embrace her own Otherness.

At the beginning of the crossing, the terror was the Wastelands outside, and the crew and passengers identified themselves with the world outside the Wall. At the end of the crossing, things have changed: as the train stops for the Vigil, Marya thinks: “We are the terrors now” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 322). The train, overtaken by the strange nature, does not pass the Vigil. Instead of submitting to being sacrificed for the greater good, however, the crew and the passengers of the train decide to disregard the Vigil and break out through the Wall. As they do, the Wall crumbles down in a flood behind them: another boundary breaking. For the crew and passengers of the train, this happens after they have gone through the process of learning to view the Otherness of the Wastelands in a more positive light, and they are knowingly helping the Wastelands expand into the Russian Empire. The people outside, however, have not yet gone through the same process. As the train drives past station after station, Marya notes: “We are bringing terror with us [...]. We are bringing tainted Wastelands air, that’s what they think. The Company has taught them to be afraid” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 358). This emphasises that the fear does not only arise from a feeling of strangeness but is manufactured and maintained by those in positions of power. At the same time, however, “others reach for the train as it passes [...]. They stretch out their hands, pull at the vines that hang around it, as if they want to take its strangeness for themselves” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 355). This shows that there are, and have always been, people who have felt more sympathetic towards the Otherness of the Wastelands – it is only that until now, they would have been deemed at risk of Wastelands sickness and been othered themselves for expressing this sympathy.

After stopping at the Great Exhibition, the train continues into Europe, bringing with it the fantastical changes that had previously been confined to the Wastelands. This process is chronicled in the epilogue, which is presented as a book written by Marya, titled *The End of the Cautious Traveller*. She describes how the environment is changing with new flora and fauna, “wings and claws and teeth that demand new ways of coexistence” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 367). The world is changing rapidly, and according to Marya, there are many who embrace it, who welcome the train as it passes and even come to travel on it for a while. Like Marya, Weiwei and Suzuki have stayed with the train. Elena is no longer travelling with them, but sometimes Weiwei reaches out of the train window to greet the landscape Elena is a part of, literally embracing the environment she used to fear. Marya writes that in the summer, they keep the windows open and “breathe transfigured air” (Brooks [2024] 2025, 369). This is

a stark change from the beginning of the novel, when the train's doors and windows were locked tight and covered with bars, and the air itself was considered tainted.

Marya further describes: "It is not only the landscape that has changes; our own bodies are alive with transformations" (Brooks [2024] 2025, 369). Her own arms, for example, have been covered in silvery scales. The becoming with, becoming together, that has been a major theme of the novel, continues as do the ecological changes. The characters are now more firmly than ever entangled with the ecological Otherness around them; what is more, they have become part of it, and there are many others in the world who wish to become part of it, too.

However, there are also many who still see these changes as negative and protest against them. A major group doing is led by Yuri Petrovich, who still sees the changes and demonic, continuing to represent the fear and disgust that led to othering of the Greater Siberia in the first place. Regarding these different reactions, Marya addresses the reader: "We leave you to find ways to live alongside it, to make the choice that faces us all – whether to turn away from the changes, to fight, to flee; or whether to welcome them in" (Brooks [2024] 2025, 366). In the book, as in the real world, "[t]he time has come for human cultures to seriously think [...] about all the nonhuman critters we share our world with, and to consider how to strive for more ethical cohabitation" (Karkulehto et al. 2020, 1).

Marya's conclusion to her book's introduction is a poignant one: "I write this book as a way of remembering what we have been, and of finding a way through this new world to what we will be" (Brooks [2024] 2025, 369). It embraces the changes have happened, as well as the changes that are coming, looking to the future with open-minded curiosity.

5 Conclusion

This thesis has used thematic analysis to explore the different dimensions of othering and ecological Otherness in *Wastelands*. It has especially focused on the characters' changing ways of relating to the ecological Other. At the beginning of the novel, the society's – and the characters' – prevailing view on the Wastelands is overwhelmingly negative: it is first and foremost seen as a threat. One of the main ways this view is upheld and enforced is through social norms and medicalisation as a tool for Othering, as anyone with an affinity towards the Wastelands can be branded mentally ill. The language used to enforce Otherness is the same as the language used to enforce patriarchal social norms: the advice given to guard against Wastelands sickness – don't think, don't imagine – is the same advice that Marya has always received on how to behave properly as a young woman.

The major exception to this negative way of relating is Henry Grey, who reveres this Otherness and places it on a pedestal; but even he nonetheless still views it through a human exceptionalist lens as something to “trap and display”. He grows more and more reverential over the course of the novel, but his desire to dissect the Wastelands and put it on display never alters. He dies before reaching his goal, which signals the death of his naturalist, human exceptionalist worldview.

As the novel progresses, the characters' ways of relating to the landscape begin to change. A major factor in this is a better knowledge of the Wastelands, which challenges the characters' previous understanding of it. The Wastelands is not, in fact, a true Wasteland, but teeming with life; and this life is not a mindless monstrosity, but something(s) with as much agency and intent as the humans travelling through. Everything in the Wastelands is connected, in constant conversation with everything else. The train, and the humans, are not separate from this: they affect the environment and are in turn affected by it. This intra-action results in changes that are at first feared, but this fear decreases as the characters' understanding of the changes and the environment grows.

By the end of the novel, the ecological Other is no longer something to be afraid of. As the nature seeps into the train, the characters who once feared instead welcome it in, panic turning to curiosity and glee. They embrace the changes both in the environment around them and within themselves. As the boundaries of ecological Otherness starts to break down, other societal and cultural boundaries break down, too, as does the literal boundary of the Wall

enclosing the Greater Siberian Wastelands. The passengers and crew of the train break out of the Wall's confinement, bringing the changes with them into Europe and beyond. The world changes around them, and the people change in intra-action with, always and constantly becoming with and together. As Marya observes: "We grow and change, as everything must" (Brooks [2024] 2025, 367). The spreading changes force the wider world to confront the Other that has hitherto been safely confined behind the Wall. The world once again faced with the same choice it faced at the beginning of the fantastical changes in Greater Siberia: to either reject it as an Othered threat, or to accept and embrace it.

There are of course many parallels here to real life environmentalism, othering, and other social issues. This is why literature – and media more broadly – about these topics, and analysis of that media, is so important. It holds a mirror to the world and can help us find a way from what we have been to what we could be and to grow forward together towards a kinder, more sustainable more-than-human future.

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