

**Unsettling Entanglements:
Navigating Anthropocene Ethics and
Ecological Kinship in Charlotte McConaghy's
Migrations through Dark Ecology and
the Chthulucene**

Madhumita Majumdar

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores *Migrations* by Charlotte McConaghy as a critical examination of Anthropocene ethics through the journey of Franny Stone, a woman driven to witness the final migration of the Arctic terns. Engaging Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" and Donna Haraway's Chthulucene, the analysis reveals how the novel challenges anthropocentric frameworks, emphasizing interdependence and kinship between human and non-human life. Franny's complex relationship with the terns illustrates Morton's concept of "the mesh," where ecological awareness accepts ambiguity and interconnectedness. Haraway's Chthulucene further frames Franny's journey as an act of "response-ability," embracing vulnerability and care across species. By positioning *Migrations* within ecocritical discourse, this paper argues that the novel advocates for an ethics of bearing witness to ecological collapse, reshaping notions of agency, responsibility, and ethical action in a world irrevocably affected by human influence and inviting a deeper ecological consciousness.

Key Words: Anthropocene, Ecological ethics,
Interdependence, Dark ecology,

RESPONSE-ABILITY

The Anthropocene, a term that marks the epoch in which human activity has the dominant influence on climate and the environment and also that one that poses profound challenges as well as ethical dilemmas that reverberate across disciplines, particularly in literature and ecocriticism. As we continue to grapple with the stark realities of ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change, there remains a pressing need to reassess our ethical frameworks and understandings of interconnection in an era that is characterized by interdependence between human and non-human life. The need to interrogate and reshape ethical paradigms has become imperative, particularly as we confront the complex implications of human impact on nonhuman life. In this context, the paper would use Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020) that navigates these pressing concerns through the protagonist, Franny Stone's quest to follow the last migration of the Arctic terns. In doing so, the novel not only raises questions of ecological ethics and interconnectedness but also aligns with Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" and Donna Haraway's "Chthulucene." These two theoretical approaches critique the linear and hierarchical human-nature dynamics, offering alternative ways to perceive ecological relationships.

This paper utilizes Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology alongside Donna Haraway's notion of the Chthulucene to examine Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*. These theoretical frameworks illuminate to show how McConaghy's narrative challenges anthropocentric viewpoints, exposes the ethical complexities characterizing the Anthropocene, and advocates for a reimagined understanding of human responsibility within interconnected ecological systems. Through this lens, the analysis hopes to highlight how *Migrations* calls for a reconsideration of humanity's

entangled role in the ecological web, moving beyond conventional notions of environmental stewardship to embrace a more nuanced ethical awareness.

Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology responds to the ecological crises defining the Anthropocene by confronting the unsettling awareness of humanity's inseparable connection to ecological decay. Challenging the anthropocentric divide that positions humanity outside of nature, dark ecology argues for a view of humans as irrevocably woven into "dark" or "uncanny" ecological networks. This framework underscores the ethical ambiguity of the Anthropocene, highlighting the complex interdependence among all life forms, human and nonhuman.

Conversely, Donna Haraway's Chthulucene presents an alternative narrative to the Anthropocene through its advocacy for multi species sympoiesis, or "making-with." By dismantling hierarchical relationships, the Chthulucene envisions ecological kinship as foundational to sustainable survival. Haraway's approach emphasizes the significance of shared vulnerabilities and interdependence across species, fostering a multi species solidarity that prioritizes ethical, reciprocal relationships within ecological systems.

Together, dark ecology and the Chthulucene provide a critical framework for understanding *Migrations*, revealing how McConaghy's novel invites readers to confront the shadowed realities of human-nature entanglements while imagining more collaborative, ethical modes of cohabitation on Earth.

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* exemplifies Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology through its refusal to idealize the natural world, instead presenting an intricate, ambivalent portrayal of Franny Stone's ecological journey. Franny's pursuit of the Arctic terns unfolds with a melancholic awareness of her complicity in the very processes driving extinction, echoing dark ecology's emphasis on the paradoxical entanglements of ecological attachment and harm. Rather

than offering a redemptive narrative, her journey confronts the “dark” interconnection with the Anthropocene ecological collapse, aligning with Morton’s concept of the “ecological uncanny.”

The depiction of extinction in *Migrations* invites readers to confront ecological grief and humanity’s role in environmental destruction, urging an honest engagement with loss rather than offering straightforward resolutions. Franny’s sorrow for the dying natural world remains unresolved, embodying the “darkness” of ecological interdependence. This ambivalence resonates with dark ecology’s ethical ambiguity, advocating for a recognition of ecological entanglement without expecting closure. By resisting the simplification of environmental crises or the lure of Utopian solutions, the novel implies that ethical engagement with nature demands an acceptance of the complexities and inherent shadows within ecological relationships.

Through the above discussed dark ecocritical perspective, McConaghy’s *Migrations* challenges readers to grapple with the moral ambiguity of human existence within the Anthropocene. Franny’s journey exemplifies Morton’s call to embrace ecological entanglement, confronting readers with the unsettling truth that human survival is inherently entwined with systems of environmental harm and loss, often lacking straightforward remedies. By rejecting a redemptive storyline, *Migrations* critiques anthropocentric assumptions and draws readers into a dark ecology that highlights the disturbing ethical complexity of coexistence within a destabilized ecosystem.

While Morton’s dark ecology emphasizes entanglement with ecological destruction, Haraway’s *Chthulucene* offers a vision of multi species collaboration and kinship as a pathway toward a more ethical and reciprocal existence. *Migrations* reflects the *Chthulucene*’s emphasis on “sympoiesis” through Franny’s profound connection to the Arctic terns, which transcends traditional human-nature boundaries. Her dedication to following the terns’ migration exemplifies a kinship that

acknowledges the interconnected vulnerabilities of both human and nonhuman life; hence, aligning with Haraway's advocacy for multi species "making-with."

The Chthulucene rejects anthropocentric hierarchies, thus encouraging a recognition of human-nonhuman interdependence as a basis for ethical responsibility. In *Migrations*, Franny's relationship with the terns is emblematic of this interdependence. Her journey represents an ethical commitment to bearing witness to the terns' final migration, demonstrating a respect for nonhuman life that challenges the dominant narratives of control and domination in the Anthropocene. This multi species kinship, or "compost," as Haraway would term it, proposes an ethic that values all species as integral to ecological resilience, underscoring the significance of shared responsibility for the well-being of the planet.

Haraway's Chthulucene envisions a world where humans acknowledge their place within a web of multi species relations, embracing vulnerability as a foundation for ethical coexistence. Through Franny's reverence for the terns, McConaghy's novel embodies this ethic of interconnection, inviting readers to consider an alternative vision of the future where human and nonhuman survival are viewed as interdependent. This ethic not only redefines conservation but also aligns with the Chthulucene's call to "stay with the trouble," facing ecological crises with empathy and multi species solidarity.

The themes of extinction and ecological loss in *Migrations* are deeply connected to both dark ecology and the Chthulucene's perspectives on ethical responsibility. Franny's journey to follow the terns underscores the irreversible nature of extinction, challenging anthropocentric values that prioritize human needs at the expense of nonhuman life. By portraying the terns' migration as the last of its kind, McConaghy illustrates the finality of species loss, calling attention to the ethical weight of extinction as a product of human actions.

In embracing both the ethical ambiguity of dark ecology and the interconnected kinship of the Chthulucene, *Migrations* presents a narrative that re-frames extinction as an ethical crisis requiring deeper introspection and non-anthropocentric frameworks. The Arctic terns' journey becomes a metaphor for the shared precarity of all life forms, aligning with Haraway's vision of a Chthulucene ethic that emphasizes multi species survival. This portrayal highlights the moral imperative of conservation, urging readers to move beyond mere utilitarian views of biodiversity toward an ethical responsibility that acknowledges the intrinsic value of nonhuman life.

In *Migrations*, McConaghy explores the ethical complexities of the Anthropocene, advocating for an ecological ethic that reflects both the unsettling interconnections of dark ecology and the symbiotic solidarity of the Chthulucene. The novel's emphasis on ecological kinship challenges anthropocentric narratives, proposing a vision of environmental stewardship rooted in multi species responsibility and ethical cohabitation. McConaghy's portrayal of Franny's journey as one of both ecological grief and multi species commitment suggests that an ethical response to the Anthropocene must involve embracing both the moral ambiguity and the interdependence inherent in human-nonhuman relationships.

By situating *Migrations* within the frameworks of dark ecology and the Chthulucene, McConaghy's novel contributes to the discourse on Anthropocene ethics, inviting readers to reconsider their roles within the planetary ecosystem. The novel's refusal to simplify or resolve environmental crises, coupled with its call for multi species kinship, underscores the need for an ethical paradigm shift that transcends traditional human-centered ethics. In this sense, *Migrations* serves as both a reflection on the consequences of ecological collapse and a call for a new ethic/s of coexistence that honours the complex, interconnected web of life.

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* presents a profound exploration of Anthropocene ethics, informed by the unsettling truths of dark ecology and the collaborative possibilities of the Chthulucene. Franny Stone's journey with the Arctic terns reveals the moral ambiguity and ecological kinship central to navigating the Anthropocene, urging readers to confront both the dark realities of ecological entanglement and the potential for multi species solidarity. By merging Morton's and Haraway's theoretical frameworks, *Migrations* articulates a vision of ethical responsibility that transcends anthropocentric hierarchies. The call to reconsider traditional boundaries between the human and non-human in *Migrations* fundamentally shifts how we approach ethical questions in the Anthropocene. The novel urges readers to acknowledge that the human experience is deeply woven into a vast, interconnected ecosystem, where boundaries between species and the environment blur. This recognition challenges anthropocentric views, which have traditionally positioned humans as separate from and superior to the natural world, as capable managers or stewards of it. Instead, McConaghy's narrative portrays humans as inseparably part of a complex web of life, where every action reverberates through an ecosystem that includes non-human beings and forces.

Hence, by advocating for an "ethics of care," *Migrations* elevates the agency and intrinsic value of non-human beings, such as the Arctic terns, as crucial participants in life's fabric rather than passive entities under human dominion. In this worldview, animals, plants, and even ecological systems are seen as possessing their own forms of agency and worth, independent of human use or interpretation. Such an approach invites readers to adopt a perspective that values non-human life as essential and valuable on its own terms, fostering a more inclusive ethical framework that treats all beings as interconnected co-participants in the ecosystem.

Migrations presents an eco-dystopian vision of a future marked by environmental devastation, where climate change and habitat destruction have led to the extinction of countless species. This

setting aligns with key elements of the Anthropocene, notably its global ecological consequences and the accelerated rates of extinction attributed to human activity. McConaghy's portrayal of a world nearing ecological collapse underscores the urgency of reevaluating ethical responsibilities toward the environment, highlighting the need for a moral awakening to counteract the anthropocentric impacts.

The extinction crisis depicted in *Migrations* brings to the fore the moral implications of species loss in the Anthropocene. McConaghy's representation of the Arctic terns' migration as the last of its kind symbolizes the irrevocable impact of human actions on biodiversity. This portrayal resonates with scientific discourse on the Anthropocene's sixth mass extinction, raising critical questions about the ethics of conservation and human responsibilities toward endangered species.

In dramatizing the loss of biodiversity, McConaghy underscores the need for conservation as an ethical imperative. The Arctic terns' journey serves as a narrative device to explore the importance of preserving species and ecosystems as a moral priority, particularly in an era where human consumption and expansion threaten ecological stability. By illustrating the loss of inter-species relationships, *Migrations* highlights the ethical ramifications of extinction, emphasizing the need for conservation efforts that transcend utilitarian considerations and prioritize the preservation of ecological integrity.

The concept of conservation is central to the moral framework in *Migrations*, depicted not only as a strategic response to environmental threats but as a profound ethical commitment to ecological preservation. Franny's dedication to following the terns embodies a form of conservationist empathy, an ethic that aligns with philosopher Val Plumwood's concept of "ecological kinship." Plumwood advocates for an ethical model that transcends individualism, promoting an awareness of the interconnectedness of all living beings as necessary to confront the ethical challenges of the Anthropocene.

Through Franny's journey, McConaghy portrays conservation as an obligation rooted in the recognition of ecological interconnections. This approach frames conservation not merely as a reactive measure but as a proactive commitment to fostering ecological resilience and honouring the complex relationships that sustain life on Earth. In presenting conservation as an ethical priority, McConaghy's novel reinforces the moral necessity of environmental stewardship and challenges readers to adopt a conservation ethic that reflects a deep respect for nonhuman life.

The call to reconsider traditional boundaries between the human and non-human in *Migrations* fundamentally shifts how we approach ethical questions in the Anthropocene. The novel urges readers to acknowledge that the human experience is deeply woven into a vast, interconnected ecosystem, where boundaries between species and the environment blur. This recognition challenges anthropocentric views, which have traditionally positioned humans as separate from and superior to the natural world, as capable managers or stewards of it. Instead, McConaghy's narrative portrays humans as inseparably part of a complex web of life, where every action reverberates through an ecosystem that includes non-human beings and forces.

Drawing on Bruno Latour's concept of the "Gaia hypothesis," which conceptualizes the Earth as a dynamic, self-regulating system that includes but is not reducible to human agency, *Migrations* invites us to reconsider what it means to act ethically in a world where human and non-human forces are inextricably linked. Latour's critique of the Anthropocene narrative, which he argues often reaffirms human exceptionalism by positioning humans as the managers or stewards of the Earth, resonates with the novel's depiction of Franny's ambivalent relationship to her own agency. Her journey is not about managing or controlling the natural world but about finding a way to live ethically and responsibly within a world that is both profoundly affected by and resistant to human intervention.

The novel's engagement with Anthropocene ethics, then, is not about offering solutions or resolutions to the ecological crisis but about embracing the uncertainties and ambiguities that characterize our current moment. It suggests that ethical action in the Anthropocene involves more than simply reducing harm or mitigating impact; it requires a fundamental rethinking of our relationship to the more-than-human world, an acceptance of our entanglement with forces and entities that we cannot fully know or control, and a commitment to a form of response-ability that acknowledges the limits of our knowledge and the complexity of our interconnections.

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* offers a powerful reflection on Anthropocene ethics, underscoring the urgency of recognizing humanity's ecological responsibility toward the nonhuman world. Franny Stone's journey embodies the ethical challenges of the Anthropocene, highlighting the moral imperatives of conservation, empathy, and accountability in addressing the environmental crises of our time. McConaghy's narrative serves as a call to adopt an ethical framework grounded in ecological kinship, advocating for a vision of conservation that respects and values the intrinsic worth of nonhuman life.

In *Migrations*, McConaghy's emphasis on witnessing, rather than controlling or preserving nature, underscores a profound ethical stance—one that embodies the idea of "response-ability" as posited by Donna Haraway. This notion of response-ability shifts the ethical framework from one of dominance and management to one of participation, humility, and accountability. Instead of positioning humans as stewards or managers of the Earth, this perspective recasts humanity as active participants within a larger ecological matrix, embedded in the ebb and flow of inter species relationships and ecological processes. Bearing witness, in this context, becomes a form of ethical action that does not aim to dominate or preserve in traditional senses but to acknowledge and respond to the ecological losses and transformations around us. This act of witnessing is imbued

with a sense of shared vulnerability and collective responsibility, urging a view of the world not as a resource to be used or controlled but as a dynamic and fragile web of life with which we are interconnected.

The text compels us to reconsider the traditional boundaries that separate the human from the non-human, urging an understanding of the intricate web of relationships that define our existence. In doing so, it challenges anthropocentric paradigms that prioritize human agency above all else, advocating instead for an ethics of care that recognizes the intrinsic value and agency of non-human beings. McConaghy's exploration of ecological dependency prompts a rethinking of what it means to be ethical in a world characterized by complexity and ambiguity, where our actions are not merely individual choices but part of a larger, entangled ecosystem of life.

In doing so, *Migrations* situates itself within a broader discourse in environmental literature that seeks to articulate new ways of thinking, being, and acting in a world rapidly changing due to anthropogenic forces. McConaghy's work urges readers to embrace the complexities of ecological entanglement and calls for an ethical orientation that respect diversity of life. This approach is a deliberate rejection of simplistic or anthropocentric perspectives that separate humanity from the natural world, advocating instead for an inclusive ethical imagination that is expansive, nuanced, and deeply attuned and sustaining aspects of life on Earth.

This stance is particularly crucial as we confront the unprecedented challenges of the Anthropocene, where human actions have led to climate change, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and a cascade of ecological crises. By embracing an ethic of response-ability, *Migrations* becomes a testament to the urgency of collective action and solidarity. It calls upon readers to recognize that the crises we face are not isolated events but symptoms of a deeper disruption in our relationship with the environment, driven by anthropocentric attitudes and practices that neglect the intrinsic value of non-human life. This perspective

demands that we rethink our ethical frameworks to address the fact how all life forms are connected and the shared responsibilities that come with such interdependence.

Ultimately, *Migrations* resonates as a poignant call to action—a reminder that our collective future hinges upon the ethical choices we make within this intricate, fragile world. In engaging in such ethical action as a participatory and relational practice, the novel compels us to cultivate a sensibility that is sensitive to the complexities of ecological systems and the myriad forms of life they support. As we navigate the uncertainties of the Anthropocene, *Migrations* stands as a powerful literary expression of the need for an ethical imagination that is inclusive, adaptive, and oriented toward a deep recognition of our entanglements with the more-than-human world. Through its portrayal of ecological grief, interspecies kinship, and an ethic of care, *Migrations* calls us to engage meaningfully and responsibly with the web of life that sustains us all, fostering a vision of solidarity that is essential to navigating and responding to the ecological challenges of our time.

References:

- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- McConaghy, Charlotte. *Migrations*. Flatiron Books, 2020.
- Moore, Jason W., editor. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. PM Press, 2016.

- Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Wilson, Alexander. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Between the Lines, 1991.
- Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press, 1984.