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# AN ANTHROPOCENTRIC COMPARISON OF HAN KANG'S THE VEGETARIAN AND RENATO BARETIĆ'S *OSMI POVJERENIK (THE EIGHTH COMMISSIONER)*

## Abstract

A geological era may be marked by a crucial agent of change whose influence on other species is incontestable. The current era, referred to by some as the Anthropocene, views humans as the main geological agents of change. Therefore, the relationship between humans and nature has been placed, more strikingly than ever before, at the centre of literary studies. In this paper, the inevitability of the Anthropocene will be shown in two novels with extremely diverse cultural backgrounds: Renato Baretić's *Osmi povjerenik (The Eighth Commissioner)* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. Despite both novels being products of different literary traditions that are seemingly unrelated to the current era, their stories are nonetheless anthropocentric at their core, displaying a new way of looking at the human-animal relationships, through the point of view of observers who are powerless to form these relationships themselves.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, animals, human-nature relationship, otherness

## 1. The Beginnings of the Anthropocene

The term *Anthropocene* has, since it was first devised by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, been used to denote “the current age, in which human activities are so omnipresent that humanity itself has developed into a global geophysical force, at least as influential as natural forces” (Keulartz and Bovenkerk 1). This idea has taken over the academic world and significantly influenced not only natural sciences, but humanities as well, because it encapsulates the idea of humanity’s awareness of our effect on the planet.

The greatest issue scientists face when it comes to defining the Anthropocene is that it “is simultaneously a geologic epoch, a scientific term, and a cultural concept with no single, definitive narrative” (Reno 3). It is deeply embedded in all aspects of academia which in turn opens different contexts which add up to its definition, but also its meaning. Correia and colleagues confirm this in their study of the 20th century literature related to the Anthropocene, concluding the following:

Reification of the Anthropocene will have enormous symbolic significance, with the potential for providing a convenient and powerful concept that will endure and unite diverse fields interested in the study of environmental and planetary change. Any formal definition of the Anthropocene epoch must fall under the scope of geological sciences and their authorities, but failing to align it to the broader meaning of the concept can limit some of its potential rhetorical and symbolic power, and even result in a division of the concept into multiple “Anthropocenes.” (1873–74)

The concept of the Anthropocene is ubiquitous and, even though devised in one discipline, should not be limited by it, because its traces can be found in all aspects of academia. Jussi Parikka points out that “the concept of the Anthropocene is perceived by a growing number of scholars as a challenge to the traditional humanities, but also as ‘a useful trigger for a variety of approaches that are interested in the nonhuman and post-human’” (qtd. in Mussnug 116). In other words, regardless of understanding it as an opposition to modernity, or a logical step in the development of human thought, the importance of the Anthropocene is undeniable.

When it comes to this new era in the geologic record, the research centered around it focuses mainly on the environmental changes where its influence is

the most obvious. This is confirmed by Tonnessen and Oma who point out the following:

The role and place of animals has so far received relatively little attention in the Anthropocene discourse, which has been dominated by references to climate change and other large-scale phenomena. But in the end, the living conditions of most if not all animals have to form an important part of what we regard as being at stake. Furthermore, on some accounts, animals have played a central role in how the Anthropocene emerged. (ix)

The role of animals as characters in literature can be perceived from many different points of view. They can be understood as symbols, but they can also serve as a metaphorical device, or manifestations of characters' inner thoughts. Mario Ortiz Robles points out that "the presence of animals in literature (...) suggests that literature is that discourse whereby humans simultaneously declare their difference from animals and take the measure of their suggestive similarities" (2). However, through the lens of the Anthropocene, the view on animals and nature as a whole has significantly changed, which is why this paper will focus on the relationship between humans and animals as it appears in two 21st-century novels of significantly diverse cultural backgrounds undoubtedly influenced by the Anthropocene.

## 2. The Anthropocene and its Alter Egos

The term *Anthropocene* is used to mark an extremely wide worldview, with Jussi Parikka detailing that it "triggers massive amounts of paperwork, data, discussions, conferences, art works and philosophical ideas as well of course as misrepresentations in its wake" (51). In other words, it is seen as the accumulation of the effects of human activities on the planet that has seeped in every aspect of academia. However, despite being so influential, its beginning is a matter of great debate among the scientists, with some tracing it to the agricultural revolution circa 10,000 BC (Ruddiman 2005), others to the 1610 Orbis spike which followed the Columbian Exchange (Lewis and Maslin 2015), while others still mention the 1784 and the Industrial Revolution (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2002). The most commonly accepted date is the one proposed by the Anthropocene Working Group which is July 16, 1945 (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015), when the Trinity Nuclear Test was conducted. However, almost mirroring the debate at its beginning, the debate on its name (and scope) is just as pervad-

ing, with scientists claiming the term Anthropocene is inadequate, and at times misleading. Other popular names proposed for this era are Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene.

The term Capitalocene, proposed by Andreas Malm and Jason Moore, places emphasis on capitalism as a “world-ecology, joining the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity” (Moore, “The Capitalocene Part I” 1). This term places emphasis on humanity’s impact on the environment, including the historical aspect as well as the current condition of society. As Moore elaborates in the Introduction to his book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*, “the Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (6). Furthermore, in his essay “The Rise of Cheap Nature,” Moore emphasizes that the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene are not one and the same, stating the three arguments that set them apart:

First, it insists that the history of capitalism is a relation of capital, power, and nature as an organic whole. (...) Second, the history of capitalism cannot be reduced to the burning of fossil fuels, in England or anywhere else. (...) Third, the Capitalocene argument challenges the Eurocentric—and frankly false—view of capitalism as emerging in England during the eighteenth century. (81)

In other words, Capitalocene sees a new capitalism emerging, one not focused on the organization of labor and industry, but on the organization of nature and life conditions. It regards humanity not as a phenomenon which is apart from nature and which interacts with it, but one which is a part of nature, and which constantly interacts with its other integral parts.

The formation of Plantationocene and Chthulucene as counterparts to Anthropocene is strongly connected to Donna Haraway. In her article “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” she explains how the term Plantationocene was first coined during a conversation between her and several other scientists for *Ethnos*, a journal of anthropology, in which “the participants collectively generated the name Plantationocene for the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor” (163n5).

**204** Ennan Wu and Yichang Xu, in their paper “Plantationocene,” point out that

both Capitalocene and Plantationocene “oppose attributing the responsibility for Earth’s changes to all of humanity, asserting that the hierarchical system that has dominated the globe since the 16<sup>th</sup> century is the culprit exacerbating environmental degradation and social inequity” (2). In other words, while emphasizing humanity’s global impact, the Plantationocene takes into account the historical development of different regions of the world more so than the actual consequences. However, while the Capitalocene focuses on the destructive nature of production, organizing both natural and social forces, the Plantationocene focuses on the political and colonial impact on ecology.

Chthulucene is the name Haraway coined to mark “the dynamic ongoing symchthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake” (“Making Kin” 160). Interestingly, it emphasizes the coexistence of multiple species, temporalities and spatialities at the same time, which makes its scope much greater than Capitalocene and Plantationocene. Haraway explains it in her book *Staying with the Trouble* the following way:

Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished, and the sky has not fallen—yet. We are at stake to each other. Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story. (5)

These alternatives to the Anthropocene deal with the same issue from different perspectives, addressing the drawbacks the Anthropocene has been criticized for, namely highlighting its misrepresentation of the relationship between humans and the environment by providing an oversimplified, homogenized view of humanity’s role in the shaping of the world, while setting aside complex historical contexts (Dalby 2015; Zalasiewicz et al. 2017). However, Moore in his introduction to the *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* book in discussing the nomenclature issues, states the following:

This new thinking—whatever name we give it—reflects (and shapes?) a certain zeitgeist. The notion that humans are a part of nature, that the whole of nature makes us, is one readily accepted by a growing layer of the world’s populations. (10)

In other words, the name we give to this way of thinking is not as relevant as its impact on humanity and its awareness of the surrounding world. Haraway furthermore states in her article "Making Kin," that "issues about naming relevant to the Anthropocene, Plantationocene, or Capitalocene have to do with scale, rate/speed, synchronicity, and complexity" (159). Therefore, in this article the usage of the name the Anthropocene is meant to underline the fact that this new era makes us, more than ever before, aware of our impact on the planet and the consequent changes occurring on global scale, following the ideas Eileen Crist proposed in her article "On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature," in which she writes the following:

This name is neither a useful conceptual move, nor an empirical no-brainer, but instead a reflection and reinforcement of the anthropocentric actionable worldview that generated "the Anthropocene"—with all its looming emergencies—in the first place. (14)

### 3. Biopolitical Divides and Naturecultural Convergence

As the notion of the Anthropocene developed, and the position of humans as agents of geologic change became firmly established, extreme changes in our environment became the center of scientific focus. In Foucault's words, "modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (143). To put it another way, we cease to exist as a species, and our role is changed to the one resembling Timothy Morton's hyperobjects, "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1). The role humanity has been assigned to in the Anthropocene removes the boundary set between private and public spheres, effectively making the decisions of an individual so important that Horn and Bergthaller point out they "[concern] not only particular ecosystems, but the entire Earth system" (142). While Foucault in his work stresses knowledge as *bio-power* which ensured humanity's place as a catalyst of change, Horn and Bergthaller focus on this phenomenon from an anthropocentric perspective, regarding it in quite a different way, stating the following:

In the context of the Anthropocene, however, biopolitics appears under a somewhat different aspect: it must be considered in terms of a much more encompassing control of *biological processes*. Insofar as it seeks to prevent famine and disease, its calculations cannot be restricted to the

human population, but it must take into account the populations of all other species on whom the well-being of human beings depends. (...) Ultimately, it is concerned with regulating the ecological conditions of human existence. (117)

In other words, the anthropocentric view of biopolitics is one that emphasizes the relationship formed between humanity on the one side, and other species on the other. However, the divide which is opened when biopolitics is being discussed in anthropocentric terms is, according to Horn and Bergthaller, “drawn by society itself and can therefore no longer be ‘natural’ in any conventional sense—even if the necessity of drawing it is conceived and justified in terms of its naturalness” (117). In discussing the ways in which biopolitics opens and closes the ontological divides between species, Horn and Bergthaller stress that “the challenges of the Anthropocene are the challenges of a world in which humanity must learn to accommodate itself to the limits of the Earth system” (120).

María Puig De la Bellacosa, in her article “Ethical Doings in Naturecultures,” provides a different view on the biopolitics and the divide it creates arguing that “common understandings of biopolitics mostly remain focused in preserving human life” (152), while in the natureculture worldview, humanity’s existence is regarded as “interrelated with that of nonhuman beings” (153). Natureculture is for De la Bellacosa “a cosmology that affirms the breaking down of boundaries of (...) the animal and the human” (157). Natureculture therefore provides a new way of observing the interrelations of species in the Anthropocene. This is, however, not the only strand of thought that shifts the “attention to non-human ways of life, an awareness of the ontological connectedness between multiple agencies and entities” (De la Bellacosa 158), that essentially displace humans from the center. While Socio-technical theory and Actor Network Theory share views that are similar to those of natureculture, their focus is more social, meaning that “they ‘dis-objectify’ nonhuman worlds by exposing their liveliness and agency, they ‘de-subjectify’ the human by thinking it as an agency among others” (De la Bellacosa 158). However, both biopolitics and natureculture can be regarded as two sides of the same coin we refer to as the Anthropocene.

#### 4. Human and Nonhuman Animals

The understanding of the Anthropocene as a human-created issue that only humans can resolve is a great part of the reason the divides which biopolitics 207

opens happen. Florence Chiew has compared the views of philosopher Paul Albertis and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty that have written extensively on the topic:

For Alberts, human actions are so influential and so detrimental in their effects that they threaten the sustainability of planetary life. For Chakrabarty, human actions are endangering not the life of the planet but that of human existence. The former view imbues a sense of autonomy and power to the identity of the human while the latter nurtures a sense of humility and even self-effacement so as to recognise the scale of human life in relation to life in the cosmos. Both readings, however, remain wedded to a self-evident notion of the human, returning us to a dichotomous treatment of the interaction between human and nature that continues to pervade many interventionist projects seeking to pinpoint the source of culpability for environmental degradation. (5)

The Anthropocene, in putting humans as the central figures of change, is seen as a result of human exceptionalism. However, it is worth noting that, as Hayden Fowler points out, while marking “crisis point in our physical relationship to the natural world, it also signifies a barely recognized ideological, emotional and psychological turning point on how we re-calibrate, re-engage and re-enchant our relationship with a transformed natural world and imagine alternative futures” (247). The Anthropocene does not celebrate humans as a species, the prefix *anthropo-*, a Greek term for “human,” is not meant to place humans above animals or nature, it merely places blame on the ones responsible for all the negative changes and it compels them to face the consequences of their actions. Ben Dibley goes even further in stating that in Anthropocene we “face the literal ‘death of Man,’ in which the human species is ecologically extinguished” (22). In other words, humans are gradually turning into a mere stratigraphic layer containing the story of our influence on the planet.

In his book *Thinking Through Animals*, Matthew Calarco approaches the problematic of human-animal distinction from the point of view of critical animal studies, pointing out that “one of the defining characteristics of our age is the radical breakdown of the human/animal distinction” (6). The barriers formed by philosophers for centuries separating human and nonhuman animals are now proving to be fragile and faulty in their premises, and pro-animal philosophers such as Peter Singer, Tom Regana and Paola Cavalieri are now



equalizing human and nonhuman animals in their theories. As Calarco furthermore explains, “the idea that certain fundamentally relevant ethical characteristics (sentience, subjectivity, intentionality, and so on) are found in identical or similar forms among human beings and animals is a significant corrective to the countertendency in the tradition toward human exceptionalism” (20).

The changing relationship between human and non-human animals is widely debated in human-animal studies as well, where the focus is placed on social, cultural, ethical and environmental dimensions of the relationship between humans and animals. In *Animals and Society*, Margo DeMello gives an extensive historical overview of the development of this field of study, concluding that “we keep redefining the criteria we use to differentiate humans from other animals, as we discover bit by bit that animals are a lot cleverer—and a lot more human—than we thought” (53). Uta Maria Juergens follows this line of reasoning as well, pointing out that “humans and nonhuman animals are alike in two respective, unique ways: individuality and epistemic equality” (2). Even though faced with a lot of obstacles from different fields of study because of its interdisciplinary nature, this worldview aligns with the ideas of the Anthropocene in emphasizing the importance of cultivation of a human-animal relationship which will be shown through the analysis of *The Eighth Commissioner* and *The Vegetarian*.

## 5. The Portrayal of Animals in *The Eighth Commissioner*

The plot of Renato Baretic’s novel *The Eighth Commissioner* follows a young, ambitious politician named Siniša Mesnjak who gets involved in a scandal. The president of his political party, in order to prevent any further wrongdoings which could ruin the party’s reputation even more, sends him to the island of Trećić, described in the novel as “Croatia’s most remote inhabited island” (“naš najudaljeniji naseljeni otok”; all trans. mine, 14), where Siniša is expected to serve as a commissioner whose task is to organize the first local elections. However, once he arrives on Trećić, he quickly realizes his mission was not going to go according to the plan, because the residents of Trećić do not care about politics, and live life according to their own rules.

Since the imaginary island of Trećić has a very unusual culture of life, it is quite extraordinary that the author decided to include one of the most endangered mammals on the planet, the Mediterranean monk seal, in the plot. Interestingly, in 1935 Croatia became the first country to protect this species by 209

issuing “the decree of the Directorate for Maritime Affairs in Split, and it has remained protected under Croatian law ever since” (Radošević). However, it is worth noting that this decree unfortunately did not stop the fishermen in driving the species to the brink of extinction, leading to the current estimated population of about “450 to 600 mature individuals” (“Turning the Tide”). Sin-iša finds out about the existence of this species on the island when he meets his predecessor, the seventh commissioner, Domagoj Brkljačić. After briefly working as a commissioner, Brkljačić started losing touch with reality, and, instead of returning home, he decided to quit his job and live on Trećić as a lighthouse keeper. There, he managed to somewhat befriend a pair of Mediterranean monk seals which he named Tristan and Iseult.

In her book *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway uses the term “companion species” not as a phrase that would make animals seem lesser than humans, but to emphasize the entanglement of other species with humans on a cultural as well as natural level (3-42), even though the term is widely debated because of its ethical, legal and societal implications (Singer 1999; Favre 2011; Balcombe 2016). Sanders aligns with her reasoning in writing that “the richest body of literature dealing with human-animal relationships focuses on how people come to define their animal companions as unique individuals” (408). This is clearly shown in the relationship formed between Brkljačić and the monk seals, because the companionship they formed is one in which they are equals, capable of existing on their own, but instinctively seeking each other’s companionship. Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy lean on Haraway’s ideas stating that “the concept of companion species punctuates the reality that we have never been human. Humans have always been part of co-constitutive relationships with other species” (17). Furthermore, Steven Best explains that “the rigid boundaries between human animal and nonhuman animal keep shrinking, as it becomes increasingly obvious that *Homo sapiens* is not a monad, ruggedly independent, or a God above, but rather part of a vast, differentiated evolutionary continuum” (16).

Traditionally, Croats referred to Mediterranean monk seals as the *humans of the sea* (Gomerčić et al. 288), while the seventh commissioner calls them his *sea cats* because of their habit of bringing him fish. Giving animals human traits has been extensively researched, with Keulartz and Bovenkerk highlighting “a recent study [which] suggests that people increasingly attribute human-like characteristics to wild animals, and that this anthropomorphism results in changing

strategies for wildlife management” (3). Furthermore, Manfredo et al. point out that there is a noticeable “shift in values from domination, in which wildlife is for human uses, to mutualism in which wildlife is seen as part of one’s social community” (1). This is true for literature as well, where Mario Ortiz Robles points out that in the Anthropocene, we have the “need (...) for literature to make us see with clear eyes how animals have always been part of our imagination, inventing us as much as we have invented ‘them’” (9). In *The Eighth Commissioner* this anthropocentric aspiration is present in the bond formed between the two Mediterranean monk seals Tristan and Iseult, and seventh commissioner who regards them as his family. The animals here are not mere plot instruments, or symbols, they are shown as beings with their own free will that are simultaneously a part of and apart from the human world. Despite the formation of a biopolitical divide between species by the island’s society, the anthropocentric influence is still present in the actions of the seventh commissioner who changed his life in order to fit into the island’s biological processes.

In their paper, Miloš and Holy point out how the island is presented as a utopia in the novel, therefore requiring of the main character to “experience change, and [to] find his place in new surroundings” (43), which is precisely what the seventh commissioner did in forming the bond with the animals. Since he lost his real family, and the islanders did not accept him because of the work he was sent to do, he found solace in animals that accepted him and opened a place for him in the ecosystem of the island. Although the novel is not explicitly anthropocentric, it still leans into the anthropocentric worldview reminiscent of natureculture ideas by expressing the relationship formed between humans and animals, one in which they are equals, with them sharing the world they inhabit while still accepting the divide placed between by the human-centered issues of the Anthropocene.

## 6. The Portrayal of Animals in *The Vegetarian*

*The Vegetarian* is a novel by Korean writer Han Kang, winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature. It is important to note that in contrast to *The Eighth Commissioner*, whose plot is linear and told by a single narrator, the plot of *The Vegetarian* is somewhat more intricate, containing three different narrators and an episodic plot, with time leaps. Additionally, while the human-animal relationship shown in *The Eighth Commissioner* is quite amiable, the one shown in *The Vegetarian*, where the animals appear only in nightmares, is macabre.

*The Vegetarian* follows Yeong-hye, a young woman who decides to stop eating meat after having nightmares filled with blood-soaked images of the animals she consumed in her lifetime. The story of her life is told in three parts, from three different perspectives: *The Vegetarian* is told from her husband's point of view and shows the reaction of her family to her vegetarianism, *Mongolian Mark* is the part told from the perspective of her brother-in-law, and shows his obsession with her Mongolian mark that had not faded away in her childhood, as is the case in most children, and, lastly, *Flaming Trees* shows her struggle with her body and her eventual death from her sister's point of view. The only time the reader gains access to Yeong-hye's thoughts, they are her nightmares in which she is a murderer or murdered, surrounded by what she calls is a "palimpsest of horror" (Kang 28) that takes different animal shapes. After her father's attack and her suicide attempt, the reader finally gains an access to her state of mind and the explanation of her actions:

The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. It's lodged there permanently these days. (...) Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. (49)

Although trapped in her remorse and shame for consuming animals, she somewhat gains freedom from her thoughts when she serves as a model for her brother-in-law who is an artist. Once he paints flowers on her body, she says it is "stopping the dreams from coming" (97), and in that moment her desire to become one with nature becomes apparent. Her actions, even though difficult to explain in the beginning, all point to her desire to stop being human and to discard everything that makes her human in order to make way for a new reality which would center around her newly formed relationship with nature. Finally, her fusion to nature becomes complete in the third part of the novel when she completely stops eating, claiming all she needs is water.

Ann and Davis describe *The Vegetarian* as an eco-literary novel because it "addresses the subject of ecology and eco-consciousness by presenting human  
212 violence towards nature and their general attitude towards nature, a sense of

guilt, innocence, repentance and reconciliation with nature, and becoming nature” (2467), while here the definition is further expanded to include an Anthropocene aspect as well. Even though this novel, much like *The Eighth Commissioner*, is not outright an anthropocentric novel, it nonetheless contains traces of such a worldview. From the acknowledgment of humans as animals and as murderers, to desperate desire to become one with nature, *The Vegetarian* is different, by both being a part of the problem and attempting to face it, and it embodies the anthropocentric desire for the humanity to at least see the consequences of their actions. Additionally, the ideas present in the natureculture concept of species’ entanglement are present in the novel as well, particularly in Yeong-hye’s memories of eating meat and in the nightmares that plague her because of her actions.

The issue of becoming other has extensively been written about, particularly in the field of philosophy. Matthew Calarco, in deliberation on the relationship between human and nonhuman animals references the ideas of Gilles Deleuze in writing that “becoming-other is a refusal to enact the ideals and subjectivity that the dominant culture associates with being a full human subject and to enter into a relation with the various minor, or nondominant, modes of existence” (58). This is what Yeong-hye is essentially doing in becoming one with nature. In connection with nature, she is entering an entirely different mode of existence, one which might seem minor, but is equally as dominant as her previous one. The culture she is leaving, although prevalent in the Anthropocentric worldview, is nonetheless not shown as being of a greater importance. In fact, the culture she originates from, the one she is essentially losing with her choice, is shown as being suffocating and hindering, while the mode of existence she aspires to is shown as liberating despite it being the unknown.

## 7. “Otherness” as a Key of Identity Formation

As the notion of the effect Anthropocene had had on literature developed, nonhuman animals have, more than ever, played a vital role in the understandings of literary works, especially when it comes to the human-nonhuman animal, or human-nature relationships. In the case of *The Eighth Commissioner* and *The Vegetarian*, once the main characters are isolated from their surroundings and left to their own devices, they find solace in nature via animals they meet. In *The Eighth Commissioner*, nature became a shelter where one could find a place they belong, while in *The Vegetarian*, becoming one with nature meant chal-

lenging the weight of the culture one belongs to. Here it is apparent that animals, although regarded as part of the unknown, that is nature, help in forming one's identity within the Anthropocene. Mateusz Tokarski explains this connection in the following way:

What we see especially clearly in the Anthropocene is the fear that as we become the creators of our world to larger and larger extent, the natural world is losing a transcendence which would ensure a more meaningful relationship with our surroundings, and in effect, a richer human life. What we search for in this situation are ways in which we can re-establish that transcendence and re-engage in a more meaningful relation with the places in which we live or visit. It is in this state of deprivation that we are addressed by wild nature in a radically new fashion. The wild presents itself to us no longer as chaos and disorder, but rather as a realm of nature independent of our control and governed by its own order and directedness. (195)

Through Tokarski's understanding of the relationship formation in the Anthropocene, we can gain a better understanding of the types of human-non-human animal relationships the two novels, *The Eighth Commissioner* and *The Vegetarian* contain. Regardless of their cultural backgrounds, there is a dichotomy between meaningful relationships, and 'wild nature' is imagined through the animals in both novels.

The world we have created is one in which we have essentially lost most of our meaningful relationships with our surroundings. In these two novels, we can see the attempt of the main characters at finding the lost relationships in nature, which they regard as otherness. In the case of the seventh commissioner this is seen in his decision to isolate himself in the lighthouse and spend his days working as a lighthouse keeper when the islanders refuse to accept him. Domagoj Brkljačić finds solace from rejection in nature he surrounded himself with and in the companionship, he found in the monk seals, thus turning otherness into his safe space. Yeong-hye shows the same yearning for a stable relationship precisely because all her relationships are either superficial, as is the case with her husband and sister, or severely damaged through years of abuse, as in the case with her father and mother. In becoming vegetarian, she rejects the bonds that tie her to her family and cultural background and decides to become a part of nature, part of otherness. Ann and Davis identify Yeong-hye as an ecophile,

a person who loves, or is in love with nature, for whom “nature proves to be a higher state than everything else in the world” (2470). This is undoubtedly her most powerful emotion which greatly rules her actions, culminating in her desire to become a tree.

Otherness as a concept is prevalent in animal studies, especially in discussions on the difference between human and nonhuman animals in terms of ethics. Matthew Calarco in his book *Thinking Through Animals* shows how the notion of the otherness forms in the following way:

I learn to group Others into recognizable and repeatable categories, thereby neutralizing their singularity and domesticating their strangeness. On occasion, however, I have an experience with a particular Other that calls into question my typical ways of thinking and relating. Perhaps I notice someone’s deep vulnerability, or someone desperately in need, or someone who does something that makes me reflect on the selfishness and insensitivity of my daily existence. In such moments, I encounter the Other as ethically different, as radically different from me, as irreducible to my usual ways of understanding and my usual projects and interests. The Other here issues a challenge to my way of life and allows me to recognize that there are Others who are fundamentally different from me and to whom I unthinkingly do violence in my daily life. (31)

He emphasizes that this encounter with ‘the Other’ is not sufficient to force one to change one’s ways. However, this experience can have a long-lasting effect on a person, slowly changing their views and adjusting them to an entirely different worldview, and this is exactly what happened to Brkljačić and Yeong-hye in the novels. They have lived their lives unsuspecting that something might happen that would completely change their worldview in such a way that it entirely uproots their existence. Calarco goes further explaining how the awareness of the existence of *the Other* influences a person, stating that “to inhabit this zone of indistinction is to gain a fuller sense of what it means for animals to exist in an economic and political order that seeks to reduce them to nothing but meat to be consumed” (59). The relationship of Koreans towards meat and Croatians to monk seals shows a deep disregard for nature and nonhuman animals, a worldview which has just now, with the advent of the Anthropocene, started to change.

Otherness is an important concept when it comes to these two literary works and their representations of the human - nature and human - nonhuman animal relationships. Staszak has defined the creation of this phenomena the following way:

The creation of otherness (also called 'othering') consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us. The out-group is only coherent as a group as a result of its opposition to the in-group and its lack of identity. (...) Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. (43)

The construction of otherness apparent in both novels slowly increases through chapters, illustrating the differences between the two main characters and the worlds they are a part of. The *other* that the commissioner and the vegetarian represent in their communities is then mirrored in their identities, which change greatly over time. Seth Epstein reflects on the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty who "suggested the cultivation of a lived, shared, and empowered human identity as a species (which) would facilitate the reframing of a political thought to encompass the human - nonhuman relations (...) rendered inescapable by the conditions and consciousness of the Anthropocene" (416). Thus, the bond formed with nonhuman animals, and by proxy, nature, is in both novels told from the point of view of an observer powerless to form it themselves, a key addition to thinking about the Anthropocene this paper presents. In Yeong-hye's case, this happens through the eyes of her husband, brother-in-law, and her sister: the reader is only privy to her actions, while her subconscious is shown through her dreams. However, her desire to be a part of nature, and not a murderer or a murdered person, is still in focus. The same happens with the seventh commissioner, whose relationship with nature, which he forms after losing all other relationships in his life, is told from the point of view of the eighth commissioner, a stranger who he just met.

## 8. Conclusion

As the notion of the novel in the Anthropocene developed, it is important to foreground a concept of animal agency which originated as a way of understanding animals in novels not as metaphors nor as anthropomorphized characters, but as characters in their (imagined) otherness. As Kari Weil explains,

216 "animal studies' approaches to the novel thus contest the idea of 'the animal' as



the singular other against which ‘the human’ has been constructed in order to rethink our understanding of both terms” (121). In other words, even though they have continuously been regarded as others, literary studies shaped by the Anthropocene now seek new ways of defining both *the human* and *the animal* not as others, but as two intertwined links in the ecosystem. Weil goes on to point out that the newly shaped Anthropocene era “signals the culmination and the threatened status of grand humanist narratives of progress” (121).

In this paper, two novels from different cultures are used to show that despite belonging to different genres, because of the era in which they were created, one where the notion of our impact on the world is ever pervading, they contain traces of how to think the Anthropocene through the point of view of an observer powerless to form it themselves. The topics *The Eighth Commissioner* and *The Vegetarian* deal with are not exclusively Anthropocentric in their origins, but the way they are presented shows a novel way of looking at the world inherent to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The relationship formation displayed in the novels shows that human and nonhuman animals are on an equal footing, and that they furthermore rely on one another to find their place in the ecosystem. Furthermore, the issue of the loss of culture and the characters’ subsequent reaction to the events and turning towards nature shown in both novels further acknowledges the fact that the Anthropocene era has seeped into all genres of literature and that the worldview it brings is increasingly pervading.

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# ANTROPOCENTRIČNA USPOREDBA ROMANA *VEGETARIJANKA* HANA KANGA I *OSMI POVJERENIK* RENATA BARETIĆA

## Sažetak

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Geološko doba može biti obilježeno ključnim agentom promjene, čiji je utjecaj na druge vrste neupitan. Sadašnje doba, koje neki nazivaju antropocenom, postavlja čovjeka kao glavnoga geološkog agenta promjene, stoga je odnos između ljudi i prirode, upečatljivije negoli ikada prije, stavljen u središte književnih studija. U ovome će se radu neizbježnost antropocena prikazati dvama romanima iz izuzetno različitih kulturnih okruženja: *Osmi povjerenik* Renata Baretića i *Vegetarijanka* Hana Kanga. Iako su oba romana proizvodi različitih književnih tradicija, na prvi pogled nepovezanih s dobom u kojem živimo, njihove su priče ipak antropocentrične u svojoj srži, prikazujući nov način gledanja na odnose ljudi i životinja kroz perspektivu promatrača koji su nemoćni te odnose sami oblikovati.

**Ključne riječi:** antropocen, životinje, odnos čovjeka i prirode, drukčijost