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Species History/New History: Different Remembering in Claire Cameron's *The Last Neanderthal*

Neanderthals are newly remembered in the Anthropocene. The current climatic threats recall climate changes suffered by Neanderthals, which in part might have led to their final extinction. We may indeed ask, with William Connolly, "are we the Neanderthals of today . . . ?" (163).[1] At a time when we are called upon to consider our "species history" in light of a new definition of humanity as a "force of nature" (Chakrabarty, "Climate of History" 212, 207), Neanderthals can be a spectre of closure, and their prehistoric extinction looms as our very future. But things also get complicated as to how we may now remember Neanderthals. New genetic and paleontological findings published since 2010 cast Neanderthals in a new light. Among other things, conclusive evidence has finally been offered on human-Neanderthal interbreeding in prehistory, showing how many present-day humans inherit Neanderthal DNA (Green et al. 721; Sankararaman et al. 354). The findings, comments evolutionary biologist Michael Hammer, require us "to modify the standard model of human origins" (qtd. in Kaplan), and, as Terence Keel writes, "to acknowledge the opacity of the human past" (214). A new origin story, it turns out, may now be told about our species and how we relate to Neanderthals (and other early humans).[2] In this case, there may be a new history to remember, and a different future to look forward to, as well.

Canadian author Claire Cameron responds to these findings in her 2017 novel, *The Last Neanderthal*,[3] which is in part a cultural mediation on science and in part a formal and speculative experiment that opens up possibilities of remembrance beyond scientific evidence. While Cameron's text is not particularly sophisticated, I find its dual-time

structure and its speculative aspects very successful, not least at a time when writers of narrative fiction are called upon by critics to vary and expand narrative scales and scopes, and to find ways to link what is narrowly human to the more-than-human, so that they may reflect essential entanglements between humans and non-humans. Whereas prehistoric fiction, to which *The Last Neanderthal* in part belongs, is typically deemed a category of popular or pulp fiction or sensational writing, and is often devalued for its investment in violence, it is worth considering what kind of intervention prehistoric fiction might make in this moment punctuated by climate crisis, and how it may help us read our evolutionary past as reconstructed in fiction. Recent literary studies, it should also be noted, are already starting to find in popular and genre fiction, such as sci-fi and horror fiction, a capacity to engage with deep time and the non-human world, concerns that have become prominent in the Anthropocene (see McGurl 537-39; Heise 279-83).

The Last Neanderthal, a bestseller in Canada, aims to re-present Neanderthals and correct their stereotyping in Western culture.[4] But it also links past to present, and affords us the opportunity to consider our history holistically. The book features Rosamund Gale, or Rose, a contemporary Canadian archaeologist, and Girl, the last Neanderthal, who lived forty thousand years ago. Rose works on an archeological site in France, which contains two skeletons, one of a male human being and the other of a female Neanderthal, and readers can infer that this female Neanderthal is Girl of the prehistoric narrative. The dual-narrative structure of *The Last Neanderthal* evinces several parallels between Rose and Girl in their experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and early motherhood. After a climactic moment when Girl loses her baby, the last Neanderthal born, we immediately learn about the survival of Rose's baby, and the prehistoric is echoed in the present.

This leap in time evokes and responds to our recent revelation that Neanderthals' demise in prehistory was not without a future, and that Neanderthals indeed contributed to, and their DNA continued with, our survival. But this also opens to us a new way of thinking about time and the history that separates us from Neanderthals. The distance separating us from the last Neanderthals is a gap in time that we may fill with a narrative of progress, reiterating the account that Rose herself rejects

in *The Last Neanderthal*: "As humans," states Rose, "we are drawn to the simple story about our species: that we evolved from primitive to become perfection" (87). This "simple story" has more or less been our (modern, Western) conception of human history as a grand narrative of progress toward freedom and rational self-determination, beyond the realm of non-humans, or the state of nature (see Dupré 819). As we will see below, this (hi)story is no longer tenable, not least because human history cannot now be thought of as only human in the first place.

Taking a cue from Cameron's transtemporal leap from Girl's baby to Rose's baby, the death that is bound to life across species boundaries, and from the capacity of the literary to link times and forge relations, I want to map out another story about our species in relation to, not separate from, the non-human. The contiguity *The Last Neanderthal* produces between prehistory and the present allows us to invoke a different sense of time. I turn to James Hatley's notion of ethical time, as theorized mainly in *Suffering Witness* (2000): that time is not an empty frame for progress to perfection or freedom, but an ethical continuity that links not only generations, but also species, and even matter and life.

I will need to offer a brief overview of the emergence of a new interest in and debate about species thinking and species history in the Anthropocene before I turn to ethical time, and how it may provide a viable model for considering our species history as an ongoing record of indebtedness and responsibility that encompasses humans and non-humans. Now signalling non-human ancestry in our origin story and a mode of continuity with us, Neanderthals offer a possible starting point for conceptualizing that species history. Returning to *The Last Neanderthal*, I show how the book allows us to acknowledge Neanderthal inheritance as both an interspecies and intergenerational relation in which the past holds weight in the present, and thereby allows us to consider a larger continuity with non-human life. At once illustrating and suggesting this continuity across time, the form of *The Last Neanderthal*, with its oscillation between past and present, points to a mode of remembering species prehistory as contiguous with, and thus haunting, present-day life. In this way, species history ultimately becomes an ethical address to us, so that we may take responsibility toward life that is not only human.

Species History and Ethical Time

Since historian Dipesh Chakrabarty voiced the need for "species thinking" and for extending historical analysis to "species history" in the Anthropocene (212-13), a debate has ensued around this "species-talk" (Lepori 104), mainly based on how it may smuggle a new universalism into narratives about humanity, reinstating essentialisms while ignoring "realities of differentiated vulnerability on all scales of human society" (Malm and Hornborg 66). Ursula K. Heise, too, notes how Chakrabarty, in positing a species history that "cannot subsume particularities" (Chakrabarty 222), posits a notion of species "with no positive content" (Heise 224). Chakrabarty thus invokes our "shared sense of a catastrophe" to underline a sense of species belonging that, for him, is impossible to experience (221-22). As Shital Pravinchandra insightfully remarks, appealing to catastrophe to ground species thinking would amount to an "unthinking imposition of an ethics of human life preservation" (45), noting that "the same instinct for survival and self-preservation that Chakrabarty is calling upon here is what has led to our present planetary predicament in the first place" (38). Instead of encouraging us to "embrace our vulnerability" so that we may think and act differently from what "we have done so far," Pravinchandra concludes, Chakrabarty asks us to "recognize our vulnerability only to take drastic steps to defend ourselves from it" (38).

If Pravinchandra invites us to embrace our vulnerability, I would argue that our vulnerability as a species should in the first place tell us something about the time we live on Earth, and, in turn, our species history. I take the fact of our vulnerability to point to how that time is neither absolute nor self-evident. This is not to say that we should anticipate an end of time, but that we rather need to reconsider our existence in time and what indeed enables it. Our survival from prehistory to the present is not, or not only, the result of our sheer ingenuity, or of something special about us that destines us to survive. Integral to our survival was the availability (rare in the history of the Earth) of favourable conditions for human life, most obviously climatic conditions. Our current vulnerability in turn attests to how our life is and has always been inseparable from, and in innumerous ways dependent on, non-human life and the natural world in the broadest senses.

Pieter Vermeulen has approached species history through the "notion of immemorial life [that] sutures human history to a more encompassing history of life" (192). The immanence of the Anthropocene brings forth a "realization" that human life is "inescapably part of the natural history of the planet" (186). This realization, Vermeulen adds, is "a historical event in a human history that learns that it was never merely human" (186). In other words, ours is a moment when we learn how we have long disowned the integrity of human and non-human life, and that our human history itself is a misnomer: "Human life in the Anthropocene discovers that what it believed to be its human history has now to be remembered differently—as always already entangled with non-human life" (186).

But this different remembrance requires a different understanding of time in the first place. Indeed, "if the Anthropocene teaches us anything," as Stephen W. Sawyer writes, "it is that time and historicity itself are not specifically human," and that "our understanding of how humans relate to that which we previously defined as 'non-human' requires a temporal analytic that situates 'us' (that is the human as well as that which is beyond it) in time" (para. 37) So, the question is not, or not only, how to extend our historical imagination to recognize our species history's relation to non-human or natural history, but what notion of time may accommodate a fundamental connection of humans with non-humans, as well as what terms may describe this connection. As I argue below, Hatley's notion of ethical time, in its broad application, can offer us such a mode of connectivity as diachronic continuity; it also allows us to frame this connectivity as an ethical relation involving debt and responsibility. This in turn responds to how the crisis we have now entered links humans and non-humans in shared vulnerability. Timothy Clark considers the "strange figure of protest" that is the human and non-human unborn, whose "spectral multitudes" imbue environmental politics with the weight of future generations (46), and the "cry of the nonhuman" makes an equally urgent ethical demand of us in the present (Johnston 636).

Hatley builds on Emmanuel Levinas, for whom "time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but . . . the very relationship of the subject with the Other" (39). To Hatley, this relational idea of time

translates into the time that enables ethical human collectivity across time (and allows any such collectivity in the first place). Ethical time, in other words, unites a particular genos (a culture or ethnic group or a whole species) from within through "an ongoing series of ethical relationships" (60).[5] The notion posits that the time we get to live is filled by and premised on generational indebtedness and responsibility: "When thinking of temporal succession in terms of a difference between generations, one no longer can characterize time as the simple lining up of one moment after another . . . [T]ime is articulated as a differentiation across which and by means of which responsibilities are born" (61). Through this generational differentiation, "voices" of the long dead, and of the unborn, will be audible:

> As a *genos*, one does not live in one's own time, as if time were a habitation, a nesting together of moments and memories for the sake of dwelling securely within one's own place. But one does live time as an address across generations, as a responsibility to carry on the voices of those who have existed by the manner in which one responds to them. And even as one responds, one also addresses those voices who come after one. (61-62)

Hatley also explicitly suggests extending ethical time to encompass relations between species, and between matter and life:

> One might even develop the notion that the very crossing-over of aeons is not confined [to] a passing from one human generation to another, but can be expanded to a multi-dimensional crossing-over of species into species, of kingdom into kingdom, of matter into life. All these diachronies could be as well articulations of responsibility. (63)

Developed in the course of his study of literary and historical testimonies to the "irremediable violence" of the Holocaust (2), Hatley considers ethical time as a mode of generational and collective memory. Yet, again, memory for Hatley can also course beyond the human community, both within and beyond conscious memory. As he puts it,

> nature in its own way might remember humans, even after we have disappeared. As we remember the dinosaurs through their fossils, as well as through the very manner in which our bodies carry on the structures of their previous bodies, so too

> might and probably will future generations far removed from our own time remember our human species. (63)

Above all, Hatley recognizes the role of literature and the capacity of the act of reading to mediate ethical claims: in reading, readers appropriate lost memory and are implicated in its inheritance. In his reading of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Hatley comments on how

> Levi's prologue calls his readers to an uncanny and disturbing responsibility for those very generations that Hitler and his Nazi followers had condemned to disappear. In this way one is given a filiation, is initiated into a *genos*, and so remains in contact with an articulation of time that would again be *diachronic*, that would again allow difference and so open up into the generosity of one generation succeeding another. Levi's prologue gives all of its readers the occasion to become that generation who inherits Auschwitz. (30)

One major lesson from the Holocaust is how an exclusive notion of the human can be deployed to other certain human beings and link them to animality in order to rationalize "inhuman" atrocities against them. Anat Pick writes of how the Holocaust "took to its limit the violence inherent in the distinction between human and inhuman," and she in turn underlines "the insufficiencies of a humanist project of remembrance whose implications for the practical pursuit of justice for living beings are as far-reaching as they are debilitating" (50-51). Pick's reference to "the insufficiencies of a humanist project of remembrance" should prompt us to consider the equal insufficiencies of Hatley's "wave of memory" (60) if it is taken to course through a closed and only human collectivity. This in turn returns us to Vermeulen's different, more-than-human remembrance, and, appropriately, to Neanderthals, and how we may remember them.

For most characters in *The Last Neanderthal*, remembering Neanderthals is itself a mode of forgetting, a continued othering, and few are willing to accept kinship with them. "People resist the idea of being close cousins to Neanderthals," says Rose, "because of how the species has been characterized in the past. No one wants to think of himself as a hairy beast" (163).[6] When Rose pitches a more nuanced view about our Neanderthal inheritance to a local museum curator,

Guy Henri, her findings only spark a fantasy about prehistoric heterosexual romance (87). Guy uses this framing as part of a "marketing plan" (87) to attract visitors to the privately run museum, reasoning: "Sex is interesting . . . Almost as interesting as war" (54). The book itself, however, through its layered temporal structure, links past and present, and gestures to a form of remembrance as generational and interspecies continuity from Neanderthals to present-day humans. Similar to Levi's work in Hatley's reading, *The Last Neanderthal* offers its readers an occasion to consider the presence and present of Neanderthal inheritance: to inherit them, so to speak.

Death and Survival

The Last Neanderthal starts with the last Neanderthals: Girl, Big Mother, and brothers Him and Bent. Their circle also includes Runt, a human foundling adopted by the Neanderthal family, and Wildcat, an actual wildcat and the family's friend. The Neanderthal narrative, focalized by Girl, points us to the tribulations of nature and the Neanderthals' struggle to survive. The book then shifts to Rose's first-person narrative, which shows Rose's lifelong interest in the Neanderthal as it figures in stories, as it appears to her in childhood as a spectre, and as it materializes in the form of a skeleton she discovers and studies in the present. Through its dual-time structure and the relation between Girl and Rose, *The Last Neanderthal* personalizes interspecies continuity between humans and Neanderthals. In the last of the book's four parts, chapter twenty-six ends while Girl, alone with her newborn baby, is at a loss and on the verge of perishing:

> Girl didn't feel anything except that her body was ice and a barren land. There was no meadow or sweet stink. There was no hand left to stoke the fire, no fuel to burn, no food to eat, no milk in her breasts for her baby. Her family would not be of the land. She would freeze in the well of this tree. She would never feel warm. (246)

The unnumbered chapter that follows, however, is entitled "Survival." This is not the survival of Girl or her baby (who, we know, dies frozen shortly afterward). It is rather the survival of Rose's baby, who has been treated for jaundice.

These events are apparently unrelated, but the dual structure of *The Last Neanderthal* impels us to connect them. The story imparts to us a sense of generational succession across species. But the situation, and the very word *survival*, resonates beyond the personal connection between Girl and Rose, and their babies. If the death of the last Neanderthal baby points to the imminent extinction of Neanderthals, the survival of Rose's baby could also intimate the survival of the human species at large, since Rose's is the only baby that manages to live in the book, and since a baby is an almost self-evident symbol of new life.[7] But this is also because the whole evolution of the human species has in a sense contributed to the production and delivery of this very baby. Rose describes the labour of delivering her baby as follows:

> I pushed and felt him move and I kept going, finding the muscles and going past any kind of physical strength I'd ever had before. I growled and yelled and didn't stop, and time didn't move in a linear way. Every body that had come before mine, every change in our species' structure over millennia, every flex of my ancestors' muscles came into play. I pushed and pushed through more years than I knew there were. (229)

In its narrative intersection with the survival of Rose's baby, the death of Girl's baby does not happen in vain. Instead, we might read Cameron's account of its death as a gift for those who live: "What is important about a death narration," Hatley contends, "is that one's own passing away becomes a gift for those who follow, as well as an address to them. Death narratives are vocative; they call to one's survivors for some mode of response" (212n17). By addressing later generations, "one's death is given a future," a "temporal weight" (62, 46). Thanks to the dual-narrative form of *The Last Neanderthal*, the death of Girl's baby receives this kind of future. And by giving future to the death of Girl's baby, and linking that death to the survival of Rose's baby, Neanderthal inheritance becomes present and immediate, personal and collective.

Cameron further encourages her readers to derive ethical, trans-species continuity from the intimate particularities of Girl's and Rose's narratives. Cameron situates Rose's relationship with Girl at the heart of the question of "why we were put on this planet" (168). The question preoccupies Rose, whose lifelong interest in Neanderthals

is itself a mode of species thinking, and it points to a concern not dissimilar to our own concern about humanity's species history (if we address that concern beyond both secular and theological teleology).[8] The structure of *The Last Neanderthal* also leaves the continuity from Girl's baby to Rose's baby as an exclusive connection only readers can make, which serves to implicate readers in a sort of testimony to this continuity, and to the way previous death addresses readers', and humanity's, future life. Importantly, too, Girl's baby has a material future to which we as readers can relate, and beyond what Rose can possibly know. In prehistory, we witness Girl attach her dead baby's arm-bone to her belt as a memento (264). Though Rose notices this small bone among Girl's remains, she cannot understand its meaning (272). This reminder of the baby is therefore left in the care of readers, as if we have been chosen to bear witness to its memory.

Oddkin

The continuity in *The Last Neanderthal* from the last generation of Neanderthals to our present and future human generations is borne out by DNA inheritance, which shows that "the vast majority of living people are [Neanderthals'] descendants" (Sykes 377). But the imbrication of death with life is not limited to species genealogy and DNA kinship. Though she alludes to the new scientific findings about human-Neanderthal kinship, Cameron allows us to go beyond this narrow realm of interspecies filiation. In the book's speculative account of prehistoric life, Neanderthals are not a lone species separate from the natural world in which they live. They are rather repeatedly depicted as having understood their lives and deaths as integral to those of other species and life forms, even their predators, and they actively "make kin" with the natural world around them (Haraway, *Staying* 1).

For the Neanderthals in the novel, death feeds life both symbolically and literally. When Bent, Girl's brother, dies, the family bury him in the shape of a fetus, and none of his tools are buried with him. This is not a mere convenience, but a philosophy of continuity of relations: "Honor lay in the family's using these things in their day-to-day lives. These items held the memory of Bent's work" (90). By using the dead Bent's tools, the family turns his memory into an offering, a sort of debt.

At this scale of the family (which includes the adopted human foundling Runt, who simply partakes of the inheritance), the family's debt to the dead keeps Bent symbolically and metonymically alive.

But the dead can also literally live again, in and with other life forms. As shown repeatedly in *The Last Neanderthal*, death need not be an end; it can rather be a beginning for possible regrowth. Immediately after the family bury Bent, we learn that, long ago, the family buried another brother, Fat Boy, and this time they buried the body in a hole made by a freshly fallen pine tree. The death of Fat Boy gives new life to the tree:

> The root ball left a large hole that was big enough to place a body in with only a little more digging. With the body curled into position under the root ball, Big Mother instructed them to right the tree again. They packed dirt around the bottom to replant the roots. In a short time, Girl could feel that the life from that body had transferred to the tree. The needles turned a deep green and the branches stretched to the sky. (90)

Even predation is a way for death to feed life and create odd kinships. After Big Mother is killed, Girl is at the fish run. She speculates that some parts of the body of Big Mother are in the belly of a female bear, and that this causes the bear to approach Girl:

> The mother bear . . . sniffed curiously. She held up her nose and lingered in a way that reminded Girl of Big Mother. Had this bear eaten her mother's meat? Was the old woman inside? . . . The idea of this bear bringing part of Big Mother to the meeting place in her belly felt efficient, since Girl couldn't have carried the body. She found herself trying to feel Big Mother in this bear. (161)

In these instances, Cameron imagines Neanderthals comfortable with a decentred understanding of life that aligns with the emergent view, especially in science studies and posthumanist philosophy, that "life is not so much in organisms as organisms *in* life" (Ingold 219; see also Braidotti, 32). The last Neanderthals invest in this understanding of life to secure continuity, even though through vulnerability. This continuity is in turn a mode of kinship that mixes death with life and muddles the time of both. To use Donna Haraway's words, Cameron's Neanderthals make *oddkin*: kin formed not through ideological,

genealogical, or biological connection, but through "unexpected collaborations and combinations" across type and time; in this novel, kinship is an active and possibly innovative or experimental undertaking (*Staying* 4). While Cameron may appear to romanticize interspecies relation, there is nothing utopian or idealistic about the premise on which this kind of kinship is thought. Its premise is the simple fact that death feeds life, or, as Philippe Lynes puts it, death is "co-constitutive of survival" (xxv).[9]

This representation of Neanderthals offers us a provocation. If we want to consider our kinship with and indebtedness to Neanderthals based on DNA inheritance, we should also be able to recognize our indebtedness to the previous network of life of which Neanderthals were a part. Doing so will point us to our responsibility for future life, human and non-human, within the frame of Hatley's ethical time. Thinking through this continuity, our species history can thus be an ethical opening-up of our human history, as we move from an exclusive notion of human time and progress, to reckon instead with humanity's essential entanglement with other species and forms of life. *The Last Neanderthal* allows us to capture a sample or index of this larger continuity. As the book connects the death of Girl's baby to the survival of Rose's baby, it shows how such continuity may not only be based on the DNA bond between (most) humans and Neanderthals, but that it can also be considered within a larger mode of inheritance. When her baby dies shortly after it is born, Girl buries its bones "near a tree so that the baby [will] grow into the trunk" (264). Since the death of her baby is already echoed in the survival of Rose's baby in symbolic and dramatic ways (correlative to possible DNA inheritance), we can remind ourselves that this specific tree, too, and other trees to which Neanderthals might have given life—and every other tree, and all life forms in prehistory that could have related to those trees in ecological assemblages—may have contributed in innumerable ways, literally and actually, to the possibility of human life.[10]

Trees, as I've just said, offer a resonant example of how non-human life is integral to ours. Our indebtedness to trees has never been clearer than now, in the Anthropocene, since deforestation is one main reason for our current climate crisis. *The Last Neanderthal* gestures

to the history that will culminate in this crisis when Girl sees violence committed against a tree by, the book suggests, humans:

> Girl didn't know why the slashes were on the tree, but they weren't from an animal claw. They looked as though a body had been testing a stone tooth to see if it was sharp enough. But it was odd to cut into live bark. It hurt the tree, just like cutting skin. Its sap had bled and bubbled up from the wound. To Girl it was a kind of senseless violence. Why wouldn't a body test a tool on a downed log instead? The family injured bodies all the time, but only for food or fuel. This seemed to be neither.
>
> Girl used her fingers to spread the sap into the wound and stanch the bleeding. (219)

Girl's anger, and her attempt to heal the tree, may, again, be deemed an idealized portrayal or a form of romantic primitivism that in some way casts Neanderthals as vanishing "noble savages."[11] This is indeed a justifiable critique. Cameron, however, is also attentive to how conflict between species is a fact of life, and the book records this repeatedly and in detail. While conflict is an inevitable necessity, the wound on the tree is still outrageous because it is *not* necessary; there seems to be no possibility of mutual conflict here, and the wound can rather be read as a sample of how (some) humans have taken it for granted that the non-human exists only for their own sake, manifesting an early sign of a mode of destructive anthropocentrism that views non-humans as sheer resources. Treating non-humans as resources may have been an effective adaptive strategy for a long time. If so, this makes it difficult, but necessary, to counter, as our unprecedented environmental crisis alerts us to the interdependence of planetary life. Indeed, Indigenous cultures for example may point us to alternative modes of relation with non-humans, and Cameron's imaginative account need not stand as a statement on the human species at large and how it relates to non-humans. The tree wound should therefore recall not simply a moment of prehistoric casual violence that may implicate the human species generally in destructive anthropocentrism, but also later, systematic destruction of nature under capitalism and empire, when (some) humans "progressed" by means of mass deforestation, wounding, felling, and clearing as many trees as they could, in order to expand

their territories and economics. And we now know how such large-scale arboreal destruction has contributed to global warming, which, in turn, threatens the very possibility of human life on Earth.

We need not (and should not) idealize Neanderthals, or, for that matter, nature, or the way humans may relate to non-humans. But we could at least consider the simple "pragmatic fact" that, as Rosi Braidotti writes, "we are all part of something we used to call 'nature'" (32); or Heise's trope of multispecies investment, according to which humans and non-humans are "stakeholders" in one large ecosystem (237). In the case of trees, the stakes of interrelation are clear: had trees been left to live, they would have consumed many of the carbon emissions humans have been producing and in turn secured more life to come (see Lewis et al. 25-26).[12]

The wound of the tree is not the only violence the book suggests humans have committed against non-human life in prehistory, and this violence includes aggression against Neanderthals. This prehistoric violence is a believable origin story for human history, a history whose consequences we are encountering in the Anthropocene. By differently remembering our species history, we may recognize its entanglement with the non-human and configure a new history to emerge in and with that remembrance. *The Last Neanderthal* offers us a possible starting moment for that new history, and, actually, for several possible histories.

History and Histories

The Last Neanderthal does not suggest a simple binary opposition between Neanderthals as good and humans as bad. Gesturing to humans' violence and aggression, however, is necessary to acknowledging our evolutionary competition with Neanderthals in prehistory.[13] This prehistoric conflict should have ethical consequences. As I mention above, Hatley draws on Levinas's ethics of otherness; according to Levinas, accusation and responsibility define human existence. As Joanna Zylinska explains:

> My "place in the sun" is for Levinas always a usurpation; it is never *originally* mine. Instead, it belongs to the other whom I may have oppressed, starved, or driven away. No matter how much we invest in the illusion of our own

> self-sufficiency and power, for Levinas we always find ourselves standing before the face of the other, which is both our accusation and a source of our ethical responsibility. (55)

In *The Last Neanderthal*, Girl finds the camp of her elder sister's family deserted, and the book suggests that the camp has been invaded by humans.[14] This points to the probability that one reason Neanderthals went extinct was their conflict with early humans. But this too describes Levinas's concept of ontological responsibility and writes it across species: Neanderthals stand as those others whom humans "have oppressed, starved, or driven away," which points to the need to extend the Levinasian ethical command of otherness to Neanderthals.[15] This invites us to understand evolutionary conflict as indebtedness, and to take in turn our originary violence against Neanderthals as "a source of our ethical responsibility."

This account remains a totalizing and undifferentiated story. I have referred above to the species-thinking debate in the Anthropocene, and the need that emerges to reckon with intrahuman difference. In one of his several comments on these issues, Chakrabarty recommends balancing a universalizing view of humans as a species with attention to intrahuman histories: "to both zoom into the details of intra-human justice—otherwise we do not see the suffering of many humans—and to zoom out of that history, or else we do not see the suffering of other species and, in a manner of speaking, of the planet" ("Whose Anthropocene?" 111). In *The Last Neanderthal*, however, species history is not necessarily a distraction from smaller histories, and its attention to the suffering of other species can help us notice the suffering of humans as well. As I show below, Cameron's text allows us to start thinking about our species history and our different histories together.

In Cameron's account of prehistoric life, humans mainly figure as faceless signs and traces of aggression against non-human life, and, repeatedly, as alien footprints, the very signature of our history as it impacts Earth.[16] Looking at prehistory from the vantage point of the present, we may be able to glimpse how our history is tied up with this destructiveness, and how we are indeed in the thrall of that history in the Anthropocene. But the prehistoric account in *The Last Neanderthal* closes with a brief encounter with an actual human: a woman who is,

unbeknown to Girl, accompanied by Runt. A long blizzard has starved everyone, but, on seeing this early human, Girl starts waving: "The woman looked into Girl's eyes. As she did, tears welled up in her own. She pressed the skin of her hand against Girl's larger hand. The same blood flowed under their skin. Their hearts beat at the same time. They shared a single thought: *We are not alone*" (268). This is a moment of origin for human history that bypasses the scientific evidence of interbreeding and the fantasy of a heterosexual romance. It rather signals shared vulnerability and empathy. That the scene features a female human, not a male one (at least not a visible, adult male), opens this encounter to possibilities beyond the normative nexus of sex and war between humans and Neanderthals.

The first humans we meet in *The Last Neanderthal* are not reducible to any singular sign or concept; we cannot call them a family, in the normative, nuclear sense, since the missing male disrupts the sign of such a normative family, and the absence of this sign allows those figures of humanity to be the very sign of difference, bypassing the encompassing figure of Man as the "generic face" of humanity, as Haraway calls it ("Ecce Homo" 86). They thus enable a contrast between humanity as faceless force of destructiveness (or, for that matter, agency and ingenuity), and humanity as irreducible difference, as a collective of actual humans. In an account of our species history, in turn, humanity can be recognized not as an abstract concept that elides intrahuman differences, but as a (hi)storied mode of destructive anthropocentrism that represses, but is eventually opened to, human and more-than-human difference. Starting from these figures of humanity in prehistory, and from a moment that is typically ours, marked as it is by vulnerability shared with non-humans, our species history can be opened to many different histories: histories past, and histories that we may yet make.

Those early humans, and, for that matter, Neanderthals, trees, and the other non-human life that encompasses them all may still remain too distant from us. The form of *The Last Neanderthal*, the contiguity it creates between past and present, short-circuits this distance. Following Chakrabarty's claim that species belonging is not possible to experience, Vermeulen suggests that species history, coded

as immemorial life, "can enter phenomenological experience only as the experience of an absence, as a lack" (193). In *The Last Neanderthal*, we readers become witnesses to this very absence. While few characters in the contemporary narrative, if any, recognize their continuity with past human and non-human life, in the prehistoric narrative, we are singularly addressed by it.

The question remains: How can humans respond to that prehistoric address? In other words, and to return to Hatley: What kind of future should we look forward to, or seek to bring forth, if we start tying our history to non-human life? I link above the cry of the non-human with the protest of the unborn, and I imagine that attending to these together could give rise to different narratives about the future in fiction and non-fiction alike. *The Last Neanderthal*'s endings point to this very openness to new narratives. In the prehistoric narrative, we do not know what will transpire between Girl and the humans, and we may consider possibilities that will come out of their encounter. In this case, each possibility could point to a different origin story. The contemporary narrative, in turn, renews the prehistoric encounter and its indeterminacy when Rose approaches Girl's skeleton, looks into her eye sockets, and identifies with her: "We are so much the same" (272). The two endings link past and present and telescope our species history. But this history, in both endings, remains open ended.

Notes

1. To be fair, our situation is different, since Neanderthals, unlike us, probably did not bring about the conditions of their demise.
2. Not all humans inherit Neanderthal DNA, nor do we inherit the same percentages of that DNA; according to recent studies, people of African descent carry the least Neanderthal DNA (see Green et al. 721; Sankararaman et al. 354).
3. The book's prologue alludes to the studies' findings (3).
4. *The Last Neanderthal* ascribes to Neanderthals' abilities, skills, affects, social order, and natural morality comparable in many respects to those of humans. Mostly, these are true to scientific evidence, such as the details about Neanderthals' use of tools and of fire, their linguistic ability, their burial practices, and their use of ornaments. Cameron draws on several scientific sources (see Gerry 566-67).
5. Since a *genos* can be a cultural or ethnic group, smaller histories can also be opened to an alternative vision of human–non-human interdependence as diachronies of ethical responsibility. While species thinking may help us go beyond Western anthropocentric modes of history, we need not forget that

postcolonial and subaltern histories are, in the main, not less anthropocentric (see, for example, Oppermann 412).

6. On the history of the representation of Neanderthals in Western culture, see Hackett and Dennell, as well as Sommer.
7. Countering the assumption that humans are superior to Neanderthals because humans survived while Neanderthals did not, Rose points out how Neanderthals existed for much longer than humans have, echoing current concerns about human survival: "They had a stable culture that survived for more than two hundred thousand years, which is far longer than the modern human has endured or likely will" (53).
8. Rose's species thinking can be read as anchored in, rather than disavowing, cultural difference. Rose is, of course, a fictional character; yet, as a Canadian, and as created by a Canadian author (however problematic this label can be as an all-inclusive marker of a national culture), Rose's interest in Neanderthals, and her eventual identification with Girl, can be traced to a specific history of identification with the non-human, with the figure of "the Native," and with extinct species in Canadian culture and literature; Margaret Atwood explores the prominence of such themes in Canadian literature in *Survival* (79) and *Strange Things* (35, 60), respectively.
9. To the hypothetical objection that, "if death is so constitutive of natural life . . . why bother with sustainability?" Lynes responds by reminding us that sustainability can "only make sense in light of an abnormal, 'unnatural,' or monstrous degradation or extinction, precisely what we currently face in the Anthropocene extinction" (xxv).
10. "The existence of every human body," as Aidan Davison writes, "is as much dependent on prehistoric life, elemental diversity, thermodynamics, subatomic flux, and the sun as is climate change" (303).
11. I suggest above that Rose's interest in Neanderthals can be traced to a history of identification with the non-human and with the figure of "the Native" in Canadian culture. One cannot also ignore a possible displacement of a settler/Indigenous narrative in the way Cameron describes Neanderthals.
12. While I follow Girl's reading of the slashes on the tree as "senseless violence," I may also note that Girl is necessarily using the practices of her own species group as a reference point to denounce this apparent act of violence: namely, how, as I quote above, "[t]he family injure[s] bodies all the time, but only for food or fuel." As I have said, we need not idealize Neanderthals; they are neither good nor bad, and their point of view can be just as flawed as humans'. One can therefore also be critical of Girl, noting the speed with which she jumps to conclusions about why the marks were made, moving easily to "other" humans by reproducing her species' assumptions.
13. See for example Delson and Harvati.
14. Evidence accumulates over the course of the scene, including the unfamiliar footprints, the advanced tools, and the unusually seamed hides, as well as the very appearance of humans shortly later.
15. Levinas's Other is human, but, as Deborah Bird Rose writes, "the significance of Levinas's philosophy is too great to be left in a zone of humans-only" (134).
16. We have Runt from the beginning, of course, and the book suggests that he is human. Runt's adoption by the Neanderthal family, which raises questions about

species essentialism, points to hospitality and refuge as a possible mode of relation between humans and Neanderthals.

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