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EDITOR’S NOTE

I am so pleased to welcome you to our first ever issue of The Kudzu Scholar. We have seen some big changes in the past year to Kudzu, including our new website, a rebranding of the publication to Kudzu House Quarterly, the approval of Kudzu House’s 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity status, and the addition of a blog, The Kudzu Vine. Needless to say, we have been quite busy here at KH! The move to a scholarly issue is a much needed addition. A clear indication of the importance of the new scholarly arm of the journal is how many strong works we received for our issue’s call for papers, and we are pleased at the resulting array of writers whose work appears in the following pages.

This issue’s theme is “hybridity.” This journal itself is steeped in this concept. Kudzu House gets its name from “Kudzu: a species invasive to the south,” and “House: from Greek: οἶκος, ‘eco.’” Because human’s recent level of impact on the surrounding world has rendered conceptions of natural and native to be impossible, our journal is interested in the places where the boundaries between nature and art erode. We think that hybrid spaces, arts, and solutions are the best chance for environmental sustainability. This group of essays all approach environmental writing with different methodologies, texts, and goals, but they all examine how writers defy binaries and absolutes.

This issue begins with an essay on Guy Davenport by W.C. Bamberger, in which he reads “Tchelitchew’s tree is a sign of both solidity and the energies of growth and change, and of the ways people can come together by way of these energies.” His blend of biology and gender theory inform a savvy exegesis of Davenport’s work. This paper is followed by Sarah Nolan’s essay “Voicing the Hurricane: Considering Caribbean Ecopoetics,” in which she explores the relationship between lived experience and eco-poetics. She looks at how the narrator of Lyn Hejinian’s My Life “establishes the entirely subjective mental and historical spaces that construct the book when she identifies the autobiographical piece as ‘an oral history’ on paper” (10, qtd Hejinian p. 9). This rich discussion of experience and ecology is further enriched by Aaron M. Moe’s essay “Telling an Animal’s Story from a ‘Human’ Point of View” when he looks to Philip Levine’s poem “Animals are Passing from our Lives” and wonders “how can one cross the species barrier to tell the story of another animal without having the human perspective eclipse the animal?” (22). Ultimately, both writers are left questioning how language can represent experience, be it human or animal.

Steven Skattebo turns his Master Gardener eye on metaphors for composting in contemporary ecopoetics to interrogate the misappropriation of the term, wondering “should we worry about scientific accuracy when we borrow scientific terminology for literary purposes?” It is a fascinating question, and he explores it across a wide array of environmental writers. Next, Nathan Frank reviews Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway by
Arthur Krokoer, and he emphasizes that “[f]or Krokoer, body drift refers to the destabili-
zation of normative boundaries” (36). Frank unpacks the complexities of drift, “beginning
here with the drifts of theory itself and then of bodies, will eventually lead him to explore
the drifts of code, history, archive, screen, and media” (36). These essays push us beyond
distinctions of technology and environment, they bring the ideological nature of language
and communication to bear on how we relate to space and place.

Homesteading as Ecocritical Evolution” asks “what, exactly, fills the middle ground opened
by a departure from strict notions of wilderness and the natural as binary oppositions to
the inhabited space and the artificial” (40). His theoretical engagement with the idea of
urban homesteading destabilizes environmental rhetoric(s) of “nostalgia” (42). He points
us to hopeful and interesting developments in this popular trend. Dante Di Stefano’s essay
“We Must Carve Joy Out of Stones: The Neo-Transcendentalist Poetry of Ruth Stone
and Jason Shinder” examines how the legacy of Thoreau and Emerson in Shinder and
Stone “provides a late twentieth century rejoinder to Thoreau’s question, ‘Will you be a
reader, a student merely, or a seer?’” (54). The issue ends with an excellent review, “Fluid
Inventiveness” by Lizz Bernstein of The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place
edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster, We can think of no better
collection to speak to Kudzu’s mission.

I conclude this note on the eve of the Autumnal Equinox, as the last embers of Sirius’
extended wrath finally give way to the first cool evening. The heat has been exhausting this
summer, and everywhere I look I can see the sense of relief the world around me seems
to be feeling. In the face of the many ecological and social problems that we are daily
overwhelmed with through the immediacy of new media, the essays you are about to read
all reach toward kinds of hope, places of relief and revision. They all suggest that we must
not despair in the face of environmental change, damage, and loss. Instead, we must adapt!
With this in mind, I would like to invite you to explore the hybridity issue of The Kudzu
Scholar; we hope you enjoy another issue of Kudzu House Quarterly!

Thanks so much for reading, and as always:
may the Kudzu grow!
Cheers,

M.P. Jones
Editor-in-Chief
In 1966, in his book-length poem *Flowers and Leaves*, Guy Davenport wrote about the glowing, biomorphic tree in Pavel Tchelitchew’s painting *Hide-and-Seek*. The poem is written in an elliptic style that owes much to Pound’s *Cantos*:

Tchelitchew’s
Tree with knuckles from before the flood
A harp this tree and a world this tree,
Syntax of Darwin, Roentgen, and Ovid (108-109).

Twenty-five years later, Davenport began his essay “Civilization and Its Opposite in the Nineteen-forties” with a more direct exegesis of the same work:

Hide-and-Seek is a system of visual puns. . . . Children playing hide-and-seek are deployed in the branches of an ancient tree, which is also a hand and a foot. In a cyclical progression of the seasons . . . Tchelitchew has constructed a poetic statement that is at once beguilingly magical, Proustian, Rilkean, and boldly biological. Its vivid sexuality in conjunction with a lyric innocence has disturbed people. It has remained an enigma (15).

The tree in this 1942 painting, Davenport notes, is a “hymn to innocence,” painted in New York as halfway around the world children were being marched into camps to be gassed. Davenport doesn’t try to parse out the visual puns in the painting, rather leads us to
understand that it is a sign of a struggle toward a rebirth conducted during those dark years, a gathering together of all that was most human in art from the archaic and “primitive,” through the most modern. Tchelitchew's tree is a sign of both solidity and the energies of growth and change, and of the ways people can come together by way of these energies. In different forms and means of expression, Davenport—a self-declared “Thoreauvian”—returned to this idea again and again.

In “Gunnar and Nikolai,” a story in A Table of Green Fields (1993), Davenport refers twice to “the friendly trees.” In the first instance, twelve-year-old “Nikolai” (not, as it turns out, his real name) is seen travelling across the Baltic Sea in a sailboat travelling at a fantastic speed. When he gets to shore he folds and refolds the pieces of the boat until they are reduced to handkerchief size and fit into his pocket. As he begins walking toward his appointment with Gunnar Rung, a sculptor for whom he is to model, he walks through “the dark cool of the Troll Wood,” where, as Nikolai knows, Søren Kierkegaard used to walk. There, an eagle in a spruce gazed at Nikolai with golden feral eyes, in acknowledgment of which he put both hands against a mountain pine, the tree friendly to spruce. Without one near, it would not grow. The eagle rolled a hunch into its shoulders, and Nikolai hugged the mountain pine (22).

The relationship of the two trees is a bridge Nikolai uses to establish a once-removed but real bond with the eagle. These friendly trees come up again twenty-five pages later:

When Colonel Delgar was turning the dunes and heaths of Jylland back into forests, he found out that if you plant a mountain pine beside a spruce, the two will grow into big healthy trees. Spruce alone wouldn't grow at all. Mycorrhiza in the mountain pine's roots squirt nitrogen and make the spruce happy and tall (47).

“The Friendly Trees” is Davenport's coinage. The passage from which he took facts and inspiration for this is in John W. Harshberger's The Vegetation of the New Jersey Pine-Barrens. Harshberger's account is more detailed. It tells us that if the two trees were left side by side for very long the spruce is adversely affected. The accepted term for this phenomena, which is present in other symbiotic plant relationships, is not “friends,” but “nursing” plants.

After some years of trial it was found that the pine would hamper the growth of the spruce and so it was cut down at an early age. It was discovered then that even if the mountain pine was cut down at an early age, it imparted to the adjacent spruce trees the ability to grow. The phenomenon is not understood, but it is supposed that the roots of the mountain pine are inhabited by some mycorrhiza which produces the nitrogen necessary for the growth of trees, and that this organism is transferred to roots of the surrounding spruce trees. Once this infection has taken place, the presence of the mountain pine is no longer necessary and it is usually cut down (161-162).
Davenport’s art reshaped the facts in several ways. Where Harshberger writes that plant biologists only “suppose” that the mycorhiza (a fungus in a symbiotic relationship with the roots of some plants) is the agent for kick-starting the growth of the spruce, Davenport’s story takes it as fact, an alteration that reinforces the idea that boys masturbating together helps them to grow strong and emotionally mature. This idea is a constant in many of Davenport’s stories—pairs of adolescent boys masturbating and delighting in the amount of semen they produce. This mutual “squirting” (and the comradely exchange of underpants) brings the boys happiness.

What is perhaps more significant in Davenport’s artful adaption of the biological facts is that he nowhere mentions that once the mountain pine has “sprinted” the spruce into more vigorous growth it must be cut down or it will then retard the spruce’s growth. The parallels with mentorship and the ancient Greek custom of a soldier taking an adolescent boy as his erotic object (and there is debate over whether this involved actual physical penetration or physical comforts of a simply companionable sort) until he is old enough to be required to marry and father children would certainly have been known to Davenport, who was a classical scholar and translator of ancient Greek texts. This idea is, however, implicit in Davenport’s stories such as “Gunnar and Nikolai.” As Nikolai poses, Gunnar introduces him to a world of ideas about science and art and sex and how to live one’s life. Gunnar, however, has a girlfriend with whom he may soon make a baby and Nikolai will soon be left to grow into his own life with his contemporaries. Perhaps Davenport elided the hard fact that the mountain pine would be cut down because his own version of this is present, in a more subtle form, on nearly every page of his many stories about intellectual mentors and adolescent boys.

An even more subtle reference to the idea of trees as models of mentorship occurs in the story “The River” in The Cardiff Team, Davenport’s last collection to be published in his lifetime. In this story a character says in passing, “It was in Vienna that Vilhelm Ekelund saw a tree that looked like Plato” (49), and refers to it again three pages later. This reference is not explained, but the source can be found in a selection of Ekelund’s aphorisms that Davenport read in 1986, The Second Light.

A mighty tree, which among ordinary specimens had exceptional size and perfection, was looked upon with reverence and religious feeling by ancient man. And the direction of the future will point toward the “primitive,” the instincts and divinations of prehistoric times; (Lessing applies this in regard to metempsychosis).

When I was reading Humboldt a few years ago, I was struck by this thought. The oak tree contains a profound culture symbol; the Germans still describe its leaf as heroic; the color of bronze in the autumn. The life of a tree is admirable and joyous. There are trees individualized to a greater or lesser extent.

In an epigram of Greek origin a walnut tree complains about how the boys knock down its fruits and hurt it by throwing stones at it.

The maple resembles a Nordic woman, but its relative the platan is Greek, a masculine gentle genius. In Vienna I saw a platan with a great resemblance to Sophocles or Plato (16).
The character’s passing reference to this passage, which few readers are likely to have picked up on and located, is a sort of fractal, a miniature but complete replication of the ideas that run through this story and others—and could easily have been incorporated into Davenport’s thoughts about *Hide-and-Seek*.

The pairing of the mountain oak and the spruce appears only in those few places referenced above. Another pairing that was a constant through the years of Davenport’s writing life was that of apples and pears. One of Davenport’s collections of fictions is even titled *Apples and Pears*, after the novella-length story that fills most of its pages. His writings offer explanations of the symbolism of the pairing, as here:

> Apple is the symbol of the Fall, pear of redemption. Apple is the world, pear heaven. Apple is tragic. A golden one . . . began the Trojan War. . . . (59)

These comments, some 650 words of them, come at the end of his essay “Shaker Light.” This essay was originally published in House and Garden (as “Celebrating the Shaker Vision”) in July 1986. This is one of the few places where the trees are mentioned, rather than just their fruit.

Davenport was a master of form, of subtlety and structure, but “Shaker Light” comes to a structurally awkward end. The comments on apples and pears and the trees they grow on seem to have been tacked onto the end of this essay, by way of a mention of the fact that the Shakers were the first to sell seeds in printed packets. At this point, as if he can no longer maintain even the semi-detached, scholarly but warm, tone he has maintained throughout the essay, Davenport breaks into the essay with a personal anecdote. This begins “Just around the corner from my house in Lexington, Kentucky, there stood for well over fifty years a pear tree and an apple tree that had grown around one another in a double spiral.” Long-time readers of Davenport’s work prick up their ears at this, sensing that these trees, which he passed every day for twenty years, were the inspiration for his passages about the fruits and perhaps for much of his thinking about the parallels between our lives and those of trees.
This suddenly stepping to the front of the narrative stage concludes with Davenport telling us,

The day before yesterday this intertwined apple and pear were in full bloom. In every season these trees have been lovely, in autumn with their fruit, in winter a naked grace, in summer a round green puzzle of two kinds of leaves; but in spring they have always been a glory of white, something like what I expect an angel to look like when I see one. But I shall not see these trees again. Some developer has bought the property and cut down the embracing apple and pear, in full bloom, with a power saw, the whining growl of which is surely the language of devils at their business, which is to cancel creation (59).

It clear from the tone here, from the fact that Davenport broke the flow of his essay in a tone of “We interrupt our program for this important bulletin” urgency, that the loss of these wound-together trees was an emotional blow. Davenport, despite his dark view of civilization’s treatment of people and trees coming into bloom, clearly was not prepared for this particular mentorship to come to such a violent end, not prepared for the loss of his own pair of friendly trees.

Works Cited

Harshberger, John W. *The Vegetation of the New Jersey Pine-Barrens* (N. Y.: Dover, 1970 [1916]).
VOICING THE HURRICANE
CONSIDERING CARIBBEAN ECPOETICS

Sarah Nolan

Lyn Hejinian's prose poem, My Life (1987), regularly repeats the phrase, “a pause, a rose, something on paper.” Appearing as the title of the first section of this autobiographical poem and then occurring in various forms throughout, this phrase implicates language in the poem's ongoing investigation of epistemology by emphasizing the play between the tangible object (“a rose”), its production in language (“something on paper”), and the force that creates such a gap—“a pause.” In short, in the translation from material reality to text, the rose is no longer itself, but becomes a nondescript “something.” In emphasizing the rose's breakdown into an undefined object, Hejinian's book emphasizes an inevitable gap between materiality and text that is central in emerging conceptions of ecopoetics. To push this further, the investigation of language and textual expression of the physical world that is evident throughout My Life is a task of ecopoetics, an emerging branch of nature poetry studies, which considers how language and form function to most accurately express a typically (at least partially) natural environment. In My Life, though, the speaker establishes the entirely subjective mental and historical spaces that construct the book when she identifies the autobiographical piece as “[a]n ‘oral history’ on paper” (9). While I would argue that the poem's central investigation of how a lived reality is expressed in text is fundamentally ecopoetic, the field is not equipped to deal with the elements of history, memory, and subjective experience that shape the poem. So, I am left wondering, why has ecopoetic critique been unable to deal with poems, like Hejinian's, that foreground not only language or physical nature, but also epistemology, history, and memory?

Ecopoetic scholars like Jonathan Skinner, Marcella Durand, Forrest Gander, Katherine Lynes, and Scott Knickerbocker have in recent years recognized this oversight and begun to question the field's limited applications. In “The Future of the Past: The Carboniferous & Eco-Poetics,” Forrest Gander writes, “I, myself, am less interested in “nature poetry”—where nature features as theme—than in poetry, sometimes called eco-poetry, which investigates—both thematically and formally—the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception” (172). Articulating the need for both “nature” and “culture” alongside “language,” Gander's statement is representative of a developing thread in ecopoetic theory that acknowledges the importance of non-physical experience in environmental expression. More recently, Katherine Lynes similarly points the field of ecopoetics toward an inclusion of culture when she writes,

[e]cocritical definitions of ecopoetics usually involve advocacy for nature. I concur with this quite logical aim, but I would also argue that there are times when ecocritics should also consider that the focus of ecopoetics is the advocacy for the human subject, using tropes or categories of nature. We should reorient ecocritical expectations of what ecopoetry can or should do so that we can include voices of human subjects, which are, at this point, largely excluded from ecocritical attention. (525)
Lynes observes that while ecopoetics is traditionally focused on “advocacy for nature,” it must also “include voices of human subjects” that have long been left out of such discussions. Integrating developments from eco-postcolonial theory and environmental justice into developing ideas of ecopoetics, Lynes’s article reveals the critical need for developments in ecopoetic theory. Without further developing the definition to more closely match the needs of the field, ecopoetic critique remains isolated to a small-subset of nature poetry, unable to deal with poetry that engages in current issues and critical concerns.

One path for this changing direction of American ecopoetic theory is to look to poetry of other cultures that might be more aware of the ways in which both personal and historical realities shape an individual’s subjective environmental experience. These transnational poetries provide models that are, like American ecopoetics, interested in language and form but are also dedicated to accounting for and preserving unique personal, historical, and physical experiences. In History of the Voice (1984), Edward Kamau Brathwaite observes that “[t]he hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience?” (10). Brathwaite identifies language as a central concern of Caribbean poetics as he ponders the disparity between real environmental experience and the inaccuracies that occur in textual representations of those moments, but he also considers the cultural loss that occurs when the formal elements of the writing are transferred from another nation. In this sense, Brathwaite models how one can be both interested in language as language and still be cognizant of history and personal experience. This is a step that ecopoetics has begun to take in light of ecocritical calls by scholars like Patrick Murphy and George Handley for more global inclusiveness. Beginning to look at conceptions of ecopoetics outside the U.S., namely Indian ecocritic Nirmal Selvamony’s concept of “oikopoetics,” ecopoetic theory has gestured toward inclusions of cultural and personal facets of lived experience, but this has remained confined to India and has yet to inform readings of American poetry. In this paper, I will expand on these previous endeavors by considering the ways in which Caribbean poetry’s emphasis on language and form as expressions of an individual’s culturally, personally, and historically inflected environmental experience, contributes to American conceptions of ecopoetics. By considering these two previously disparate fields together, American ecopoetics can begin to include poems like My Life that depict environmental experiences as composed of historical, cerebral, remembered, and physical spaces rather than an objective experience in nature that can easily be shared by all. In this shift, the field becomes more inclusive of poetry that would previously be excluded from ecopoetic critique.

As a scholar of American poetry, I am particularly aware of the caution with which I must approach this project in order to avoid overlying the cultural uniqueness of the texts. However, the intention of this paper is not to impose American ideas on Caribbean poetry, but to bring debates over cultural expression that have been ongoing among postcolonial scholars into the developing definition of American ecopoetics. In their introduction to Postcolonial Ecologies (2011), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley argue that the “legacy of capturing and renaming nature leaves the postcolonial writer in the position of having to renegotiate the terms of taxonomy, struggling to articulate new relationships and new meanings in the tired language of empire” (11). As a result, for decades, postcolonial critics have debated how to best contend with the ongoing influence of colonization on language. From Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s well-known stand against English to Chinua Achebe’s recognition of its limitations, scholars around the world debate how to express a postcolonial environmental experience in Western languages and forms. For ecopoetics, such
debates over the many influences that are imposed upon language raise interesting questions about language's influence on expressions of real-world experience throughout the world.

The Caribbean, in particular, has suffered a great deal of environmental displacement as a result of colonization. In the introduction to *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* (2005), Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée Gosson, and George Handley argue that “there is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and settlement than the Caribbean” (1). This intense gap between the human population and the place has inspired some Caribbean scholars to focus specifically on the environment. Brathwaite, for instance, calls for the use of “[n]ation language . . . which is influenced very strongly by the African model [and] . . . its contours, its rhythms and timbre, its sound explosions” remain removed from imperialist English models (13). Rather than striving for a language that reflects indigeneity or even homogeneity among the people of that region, Brathwaite is intrigued by the possibility of a form that is inspired by the rhythms of the Caribbean environment. Although Brathwaite’s ideas risk imposing new but equally limiting forms on Caribbean poetry, his questions inspire attention to form and the problems that arise when imported poetic ideas elide the experiences of Caribbean writers. As such, the debates that are already underway in postcolonial studies over how to best express the environment parallel debates over ecopoetics.

When these two fields come together, ecopoetics gains insight into non-Western environmental experiences and begins to account for the ways in which Caribbean poets navigate the gaps between subjective experiences and language and, perhaps more importantly, how these poets integrate their individual culture and history into that project. Turning, then, to a consideration of what a Caribbean ecopoetics entails and how it is distinct from dominant American conceptions of the term, I will identify and explore two conventions of Caribbean ecopoetics—first, how language is critiqued and redeployed to more accurately express both the place, its history, and the poet’s individual experiences; and second, how traditional form and rhythm are challenged to express the Caribbean experience. In some ways these Caribbean methods are similar to previous understandings of ecopoetics in the United States, but relentless attention to individual experiences, history, and culturally-infused forms, as seen in Caribbean poetry and criticism, has not yet been accounted for in discussions of ecopoetics.

Turning first to the role of language in Caribbean ecopoetics, Shane Keane’s “Coming Back,” demonstrates the importance of language through the lens of cultural context. The poem begins:

Beaches are full of dirty nails after rain
a shivering heat in my belly
like love
like disaster like old words
I found once on a rusty tin in January
as a child speeding past my first temptation
don’t go out go out either in the hot sun nor
in the pouring rain
pride like the sea secretes little by little
odd kinds of music
you might get old nails in your little foot
Don't come in come in
the house of the lord without a good hat (Keane 228)

From an ecocritical perspective, this poem might be read as an example of the pollution that invades the natural environment or, alternatively, as a sort of ecophobia that is ubiquitous in the postcolonial environments. Yet, this poem’s environmental facets are closely tied to language. The speaker connects critiques of language as “old words,” with the erasure of Caribbean culture by dominant Western forms. As he equates “dirty nails” on the beach “after rain,” with “old words / [he] found once on a rusty tin,” the speaker implies the dangers (“you might get old nails in your little foot”) of deteriorating language. In this sense, as the words become rusty and old, they are more dangerous than helpful—a danger that is manifested in physical risk and starkly contrasted with the pleasant and even nostalgic images of the beach.

Still, this is a poem that most readers would not recognize as an ecopoem. Unlike the most widely identified ecopoetry, such as the work of Gary Snyder and A.R. Ammons, this poem does not directly address nature or wilderness. In fact, the references to nature occur only within the context of the human subject’s actions. Yet, the poem’s investigation of language’s ability to represent an experience in an environment is ecopoetic. In Sustainable Poetry, Leonard Scigaj posits that ecopoets “can only attempt to find fresh language as far removed from clichés as possible to evoke what one cannot completely convey in language, but can experience fully in the lived moment” (68). In other words, Scigaj argues that ecopoets refresh language to more accurately express a sensory experience. This positions Keane’s poem closer to ecopoetics as it is currently defined. Even more importantly, though, this poem’s interest in language as a reflection of colonial influence and its erasurial effects on Caribbean history, draw questions of heritage into conceptions of ecopoetics. In other words, since this poem investigates language through a lens of historical context and potential loss, it exemplifies how the ecopoetic project of restoring freshness to language is more widely applicable and thus more globally relevant when the historical erasures of standard language are recognized. As the speaker goes on to connect the “old words” and “dirty nails” with “the lord,” a figure of overarching power and ultimate control, he articulates the importance of historical preservation in the face of colonial influence:

Would he really come one day
to make a sentence containing any or all of the following
all old nails on the beach
think of all the music you might lose just constructing
sentences (Keane 229)

The speaker questions whether the god-like figure can “make a sentence” that contains “all old nails on the beach,” and asks the reader to consider “all the music [he] might lose just constructing / sentences.” In this moment, he questions the ability of an over-arching power to articulate the complexity and variety of a place. As he posits that trying to fit the nuances of this place into a single mode of expression (“a sentence”) elides the “music” of the place, the speaker implicitly connects music with a more distinctly cultural form of expression, which, unlike sentences, can accommodate the complexity of “dirty nails” and “old words.”
This use of music as a cultural representative brings us to the second convention of Caribbean ecopoetics—the formal and rhythmic element of expression. In Olive Senior’s “Ancestral Poem,” the speaker articulates the need for unique forms and rhythms by pointing to the imbalance between dominant Western rhythms and cultural heritage. She writes:

Now against the rhythms
of subway trains my
heartbeats still drum
worksongs. (Senior 321)

As the speaker explains that her body relates more to the rhythms of “worksongs” than to “subway trains,” she articulates the central concern of Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice* and simultaneously expresses an ongoing problem faced by Caribbean writers. Brathwaite observes that due to the imposition of English forms and rhythms in writing, Caribbeans “haven’t got the syllables . . . to describe the hurricane, which is [their] own experience, whereas [they] can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall” (8-9). In this sense, the rhythm is modeled after a foreign landscape and is thus ill-suited to expressing the Caribbean. However, it is important to note that although individual poets within the Caribbean might experience and thus express that environment quite differently, Brathwaite points out that the restrictions imposed by alien forms prevent those writers from making those individualized formal choices. Similarly to Senior’s speaker, then, Brathwaite calls for Caribbean poets to break away from imposed forms and create something more suitable to the particularities of their environmental experience.

In this way, as the form and rhythm of the poem become adaptable to the experience rather than fixed by imported traditions, they are more capable of accuracy. In fact, Claire Harris’s poem, “Framed,” implies that such a move is necessary in order to express the experience of modern Caribbeans. In an interview in *Talk Yuh Talk* (2001), Harris explains that she does not “stick to established hierarchies of form and genre, because [she] know[s] that there is more than one ‘corpus of ideas’ within which/part of which one can be ‘human’ and ‘enlightened’ in the world; that all forms of human culture are, in the final analysis, equal” (63). Indeed, her poem represents this need for diversity as it challenges fixed forms by replacing them with experimental ones:

She is the woman in a broken pair of men’s shoes her
flesh slipped down like old socks around her ankles a tray
of laundry on her head I am there too but I would not
be like her at supper she set the one plate and the whole
cup at my place for herself a mug a bowl my leavings . . .
They said I resembled her I spent hours before the mirror
training my mouth to different lines

At night while I read she folded the blanket on her
narrow board coalfire smooth on her face she boiled (Harris 278)
As you can see in this poem, Harris demonstrates how an altered form and rhythm is appropriate to her Caribbean experience by connecting form and content. In terms of content, the speaker positions herself beside a woman who is closely associated with the slave history of the Caribbean. She is physically worn (“her / flesh slipped down like old socks”) and psychologically inferior (“for herself a mug a bowl my leavings”) to the speaker, who is associated with more intellectual endeavors like reading and education.

In this sense, the poem places the speaker and the woman in opposition—each representing a different facet of the nation's history. While the “she” in the poem refers to a historical role, there is a resemblance between the “she” and the speaker. This is clear as the poem closes:

| I would not     this is all there is     I |
| could not     I left school     I left     she faded     the |
| island faded     styles changed     you hid the dusty |
| painting in the attic     But I am still there     the one in the |
| middle ground     my face bruising the lines of soft white |
| sheets     my hand raised as if to push against the frame (Harris 278) |

The speaker explains that once she realizes her cultural heritage, she defects from her path of Western education, a move that leaves her removed from both the Western world (“I left school”) and the Caribbean (“the / island faded”). In this shift, though, she also reveals that “styles changed” and that she is “the one in the / middle ground.” This middle ground or hybrid space is where she begins “to push against the frame” of the page’s “white space,” experimenting with form and the visual elements of poetry, and where we move away from content and toward the formal choices that make this piece and example of Caribbean ecopoetics.

In terms of form, as the poet challenges the traditional role of poetic lines and punctuation, she tries to locate a form that is more suitable to expressing her hybrid state. Harris explains that in her poetry “each word is chosen precisely because it can be mined for sound, rhythm, sense, each line broken or begun, placed just so on the page, for the same reason” (Interview 63). Similar to Brathwaite’s call for a move away from European forms, Harris’s lines deviate from standard line breaks yet do not conform to sentence structures. They are, in a sense, hybrids in their own rights as the text is in lines, but not arranged in formal line breaks. In this way, as this poem employs a new form and thus a new rhythm, it demonstrates how form can be altered to more accurately express the experience of a place—environmental and cultural. Breaking the lines with caesuras instead of traditional line breaks formally hybridizes the poem, but also adds a new rhythm. This rhythm is irregular, moving from long, unbroken lines into short, fragments of only a few words. As Brathwaite observes, such a rhythm “more closely and intimately approaches [the Caribbean] experience” because it is based more on sound than on meter (12). Thus, as Harris varies her line length using the caesura and avoids fixed forms, she can vary her rhythms to suit the sounds of her subjective experience. As such, her poem highlights the need for such a formal and rhythmic shift in practice, but also by explaining the liminal cultural position of Caribbean inhabitants.

These two proposed elements of Caribbean ecopoetics—language that preserves subjective experience and form that allows for more accurate rhythms—are important
contributions to ecopoetic theory. In reading Caribbean ecopoetics and recognizing the potentially symbiotic relationship between language, form, history, memory, and personal experiences, we are exposed to new models for ecopoetic studies that consider not only natural or green space but also other elements that compose experience. I would like to consider how these insights might inform readings of American poetry that would otherwise remain outside the scope of the field. Hejinian’s *My Life*, for instance, defies the formal restraints of poetry and engages with subjective, historical, imagined, and remembered material. Such an autobiographical project would certainly fall outside the purview of ecopoetics as it is typically understood. By re-conceptualizing ecopoetics, though, we can consider how Hejinian’s piece works toward more accurate expressions of an experience in a place—an environmental, historical, and subjective experience. Through her search for a language that most accurately conveys the immediate sensations of experience and her application of that search within her poetic expression of her own life, Hejinian’s *My Life* exemplifies the usefulness of a more global conception of ecopoetic theory. By recognizing that the ecopoetic search for a more accurate language does not only preserve experiences in nature, but also culturally inflected environmental experiences, ecopoetics moves beyond the limited scope of Western nature or environmental poetry and into a more transnational approach to ecological poetry.

Turning, finally, back to *My Life*, I argue that this Caribbean-informed conception of ecopoetics allows us to recognize Hejinian’s poem for its ecopoetic sentiments without having to discount the subjective core of the book—its autobiographical element. In previous conceptions of ecopoetics, though, *My Life* would not be considered an ecopoem. It rarely centralizes environmental themes and is highly involved in anthropocentric concerns—two elements that have caused the piece to be placed squarely within the realm of language poetry and not in terms of ecopoetry. However, as we begin to reconceptualize ecopoetics, it is clear that the lack of nature in Hejinian’s work does not disqualify it from an ecopoetic reading. In fact, the poem’s radical formal structure and its central focus on maintaining the simultaneous sensations of experience, including how history and memory shape that subjective experience, makes this an ideal book through which to consider how a Caribbean-informed ecopoetics enhances the applicability and effectiveness ecopoetic theory. Through the search for a language that accurately conveys the immediate sensations of experience and her application of that search within her own poetic form, *My Life* participates in what we have determined via Caribbean poetry and scholarship is a fundamental quest of ecopoetry worldwide—to challenge language and form in order to express a subjective experience in an environment through *language*.

To show this, I will first consider how Hejinian’s critique and redeployment of language can be read ecopoetically in light of my previous discussion of the Caribbean and then turn to how the form and rhythm of *My Life* challenge prescribed environmental experience. In terms of language, not unlike the Caribbean concerns over imposed structures that were discussed earlier, for Hejinian, the inability of a word to represent the physical world is rooted in the restriction of language to traditional expectations of usage. In “The Rejection of Closure” (2004), she argues that “[t]he meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word’s lateral reach, its contacts with its neighbors in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the outer world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference” (Hejinian, “Closure” 372). Hejinian emphasizes that words must be determined by their context and continually rejuvenated to match that context. As a result, once the speaker ceases to refurbish her words and instead assumes the traditional language of her father,4
it quickly overwhelms the articulation of her own subjective experiences. She states: “It was at about this time that my father provided me with every right phrase about the beauty and wonder of books” (Hejinian, My Life 48-9). In accepting her father’s “right” phrases, the speaker’s unique experiences of “beauty” and “wonder” are replaced by her father’s experiences of those sensations because she has only his phrases with which to articulate the experience. Only when the speaker can escape the outdated language of her father can she begin to locate words that are particular to her experience. Once the speaker appropriates her “father’s” words as a replacement for a language inspired by the current moment, she is confined by pre-established meanings or the “right” way of speaking about the world.

Just as postcolonial scholars face the challenges of writing in imposed alien languages, and Caribbean writers contend with having no indigenous language to which they can revert, Hejinian faces the imposed language of her predecessors, a force represented by her “father”. Through a Caribbean-informed eco-poetic lens, however, it is clear that Hejinian’s eco-poetics is rooted in the words themselves, which she determines, as Shane Keane does, must be critiqued and redeployed to more accurately express one’s subjective experience. No longer accepting pre-set language as an accurate and undistorted signifier, Hejinian seeks a subjective language that is inspired by the senses. However, in doing so, she must problematize the Western epistemological structures behind language in order to demonstrate how these logical systems create a gap between language and the experience of physical reality that it purports to represent. Addressing this issue of logical structures, the speaker states: “In California during the summer the shadows are very dark and cool, the sunlight hot and bright. But, because we have only seven days, the light seems to be orderly, even predictable” (Hejinian, My Life 55). In these lines, the speaker addresses an important shift from experience to logic. Initially, the day is characterized by sensory experience (“dark,” “cool,” “hot,” and “bright”), but a transition occurs with the introduction of time (“seven days”). Shifting away from experience, the imposition of time makes the light “[seem] to be or- / derly, even predictable.” In this sense, as the speaker moves toward the logical structure of the calendar, a force that imposes restriction and order onto time, the entire experience of the day is transformed. It is no longer characterized by the experience of feeling “shadows” and “sunlight,” but by the abstract presence of “light.” As such, with the shift toward a system of logic, experience becomes less tangible to the speaker, seeming rather than being. Experience is, then, essentially replaced by a system of categorization in which perceptions of reality are shaped by a system of logic that controls the viewer—in this case, the logic of the Western calendar.

In Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History (1999), Paul Naylor argues that “My Life, by drawing attention to the limits of language, draws attention to the limits of logic and, more significantly, to the fictive element in the process that produces both language and logic—the signifying process” (123). This interest in language as a product of logic is articulated when the speaker continues her previous investigation into time. She states: “The Mayan calendar has more days” (Hejinian, My Life 55). While her initial introduction of time invoked “order” and predictability, in this case, time is the liberator as it is invoked from a competing system of logic (“The Mayan calendar”). In other words, as the source of logic is revealed as something unfixed, the influence of that system becomes an issue of perception and thus demonstrates that viewing the world through a new system of logic constructs a new reality. If, for instance, it was the logical structure of “The Mayan calendar” through which the day was viewed, perhaps the light would not appear as “shadows,” “sunlight,” or as “light,” but as something entirely different. As it would be determined by a new system of
logic, it would create a different reality. In this sense, as the speaker introduces “The Mayan calendar” and emphasizes that it “has more days” than the calendar used in “California,” she destabilizes that which is typically considered fixed. While time is a concept regularly relied upon, here it becomes a function of a subjective worldview. In this, the speaker critiques the imposition of Western epistemology on subjective experiences, just as Keane does in his critique of “sentences” that was previously discussed, and thus engages in a redeployment of language that aligns with the tasks of Caribbean-informed ecopoetics.

Having identified the imposition of Western epistemology onto words, Hejinian seeks a way to overcome it. This brings us to how form and rhythm challenge prescribed environmental experience, as we saw in Harris’s “Framed,” even within American poetry. The shift away from the influences of Western epistemologies is not only a problem with language, but also a formal consideration throughout My Life. As Hejinian explains, “[f]orm does not necessarily achieve closure, nor does raw materiality provide oneness. Indeed, the conjunction of form with radical openness may be what can offer a version of the ‘paradise’ for which writing often yearns—a flowering focus on a distinct infinity” (Emphasis hers; “Closure” 368). The poem achieves such a focus on “distinct infinity” through its examination of the boundedness of language and the open nature of form. The key phrase discussed in the opening of this paper (“A pause, a rose, something on paper”), for instance, occurs numerous times throughout the book, often slightly altered from the original version. The most notable of these alterations include: “A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook”; “I found myself dependent on a pause, a rose, something on paper”; “A pause, a rose, something on paper implicit in the fragmentary text” (16; 28; 55). These are only a few examples of the variations that this phrase undergoes throughout the course of the book. Undeniably, each of these moments expresses an interesting facet of Hejinian’s poetics; however, after considering all of the phrases together, it becomes clear that each uses the original line in a unique way. As such, there is no progression or meaningful connection between the alterations despite the fact that they use the same words. The poet’s decision to recycle particular phrases and alter them throughout the book expresses the dynamic presence of words—they are not fixed structures but forces that can be renewed and re-framed for new usages—and also introduces an irregular rhythm. While the phrase appears again and again and appears to provide a stable rhythm, the disjunction between its various appearances destabilizes the reader’s expectations for a recurring rhythmic refrain and thus problematizes and even nullifies the rhythm by destroying a consistent message. Thus, the poem challenges traditional forms and rhythms to better suit the poet’s expression of her environmental experience.

My Life demonstrates this formal shift through its radical simultaneity. Not prioritizing one event over another, Hejinian creates a form that is not confined by Western epistemology. The speaker articulates this need for simultaneous expression when she states, “How am I to choose between all the subjects I have remembered” (Hejinian, My Life 102). This question introduces an issue of prioritization that remains essential to Hejinian’s ecopoetics. In order to express an experience outside the influence of Western logic and removed from prescribed structures that may distort meaning, the poet must remove the poem from forms that impose such logic. In Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts (1998), Charles Altieri argues that Hejinian’s poems often demonstrate “a refusal to submit subjective play to the logic of meaning, as if apparent arbitrariness were the price necessary to maintain an overall aura of singular purposiveness resistant to all categorical frameworks” (178). In other words, by rejecting meaning or closure, the poet manages to remove her text from
the boundaries of Western epistemology. By creating a poem that embraces simultaneity and foregrounds the apparent multiplicity of language, Hejinian develops her ecopoetics by moving toward a more accurate expression of her subjective experience—an experience that includes her physical environment, history, culture, memory, and mental wanderings. As such, all experience occurs simultaneously in the poem, leaving the reader often confused by the lack of logic or closure, but also pushing the poet's subjective environmental experience and its translation to language closer together.

In this sense, Hejinian’s *My Life*, while certainly autobiographical and integrating those memories into representations of individual experiences, is not a traditional autobiography or a traditional poem and certainly not a traditional ecopoem, if there is such a thing. However, Hejinian’s interests throughout this book are closely aligned with those of ecopoetics. While early understandings of this term might exclude the poem for its subjective foundation, the discussion of Caribbean ecopoetics in this article reveals that the poet’s life inevitably shapes how she experiences an environment and rather than choosing to overlook those influences, encourages ecopoetic theory to embrace that subjectivity. This new transnational generation of ecopoetic theory accepts that an accurate or objective representation of environment is impossible and moves beyond the limiting conventions of pseudo-objective experiences toward a more complex, multi-faceted perspective. This is an important shift toward inclusion. Rather than remaining restricted to American environmental or green poetry, ecopoetics can now consider how poets conceptualize and express environments alongside subjective experiences that are shaped by historical, remembered, imagined, and physical space. In doing so, the term ecopoetics moves beyond a little-known and loosely defined branch of American nature poetry studies and instead becomes a practical lens through which to read a wide array of poetry.

Notes:

1 What I am identifying as an oversight here is the earlier practice in ecopoetic theory to look only at poems that explicitly engage with natural environments. Scholars like John Elder, Leonard Scigaj, and J. Scott Bryson, among others, are considered foundational to ecopoetic theory and conceptualize the field as attentive to the natural world while often encouraging protection of it. While these ideas are now changing alongside developments in ecocriticism more generally, the limitation to traditional ideas of nature that is prevalent in early ecopoetics remains in much ecopoetic critique today.

2 In the United States, cultural influence is certainly not a consideration of ecopoetics. However, in conceptions of the term in other parts of the world, culture gets more attention. This is especially clear in Nirmal Selvamony’s “Oikopoetics and Tamil Poetry” (2011), which integrates culture into a definition of ecopoetics by acknowledging how it shapes one’s relationship to nature and thus how that environment is expressed in language. However, these ideas have yet to be applied to poetry outside of India and certainly have not been applied to American poetry. Additionally, Selvamony’s conceptions of oikopoetics or ecopoetics do not account for linguistic or formal shifts—two elements that are broadly covered by Caribbean poets and critics, including Brathwaite, and are foundational to current understandings of ecopoetics in the United States. As such, while Indian ecopoetics’s interest in culture would provide useful insights into reading American poetry, it would not include the formal and linguistic shifts that are prevalent in American and Caribbean ecopoetics.

3 Ngugi Wa Thiong’o articulates this position at length in *Decolonising the Mind*. Chinua Achebe, who takes the opposite stance, makes his position clear in Rosemary Colmer’s interview entitled “The Critical Generation.” A similar debate occurs in the context of the Caribbean between Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, who disagree about the need to radically alter
traditional forms. While Brathwaite advocates for a break away from imperialist English models, Walcott accepts and embraces the influence that his English roots have on his writing.

4 The speaker initially appropriates her father's language when she states: "It is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences originated. So I borrowed my father's typewriter" (Hejinian, My Life 40). Here, the speaker recognizes that once the instant of experience has passed, it is impossible to return to that particular "state of mind." In order to do so, then, she must appropriate the language of a prior time—in this case, her father's time—to articulate that experience.

Works Cited


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I have seen a squirrel, running up the trunk of a tree, leap into a back dive, and clasp the trunk of another tree five feet away, so that now he or she scurried down to the ground. I have seen another squirrel leap from one wispy twig at the top of an oak to another twig with utter abandonment. I have seen a squirrel leap off the eave of a two-story home and barely clasp a thin branch of a maple tree that bent over like a fishing rod. Squirrels are fearless, and they are completely at home in their bodies amidst the expansive environs of a tree's canopy.

I, too, am a climber. I began ascending rock in the 1990’s and later worked as an arborist for four summers. Squirrel’s inspired me, and now that I climb much less, I still watch them for hours vicariously participating in the elation all climbers know.

But this is the crux. Am I projecting my inner events upon the squirrel’s? How do I know that the squirrel experiences an existential joy from playing in the trees in ways that I, in my human body, can only imagine? Do squirrels play? After a long climb, do they have that sense of satisfaction that comes from doing what one does best?

Generally in American culture (though this is changing), we are tempted to dismiss any idea that a squirrel has mental events, let alone existential ones. Even though we “know” mammals have mirror neurons, many people still doubt whether their capacity to empathize is on par with human empathy and human emotions. For some, to say a squirrel experiences elation through playing is anthropomorphic. When anthropomorphism becomes a fallacy, the animal becomes merely a mirror in which we project ourselves. However, if we see continuity between species rather than stark division, we recognize that humans may share a similar interiority as other animals, especially mammals. In the latter case, anthropomorphisms and zoomorphisms are not fallacious. Instead, they have the potential to illuminate similarities across species lines.

Still, how can one cross the species barrier to tell the story of another animal without having the human perspective eclipse the animal? Can a human tell the story of another animal? To put it another way: even though we may share similar emotive states, I cannot know what it is like for the squirrel to climb because I don't have claws and a tail. I am not agile enough to climb and leap and scurry as squirrels do. At what point are my projections erroneous?

I am interested in this blurry boundary between humans and other animals—especially when it comes to humans attempting to tell another animal’s story.

The fact that humans try to tell the animal’s story from the animal’s point of view, time and time again, complicates the boundary. Take, for instance, Philip Levine’s “Animals are Passing from our Lives” (36). The speaker of the poem is a pig who tells the story in first-person narration: “It’s wonderful how I jog / on four honed-down ivory toes / my massive buttocks slipping / like oiled parts with each light step” (In 1–4). These lines establish the pig’s mental space, but already, dissenters might object. How do we know the pig thinks it
is “wonderful”? How do we know that a pig is conscious about his or her “massive buttocks”? Levine projects human concerns into the pig’s mental space. Readers might identify with pig, but it may be a false identification.

In the next stanza, the pig struggles to come to terms with his or her fate: “I’m to market. I can smell / the sour, grooved block, I can smell / the blade that opens the hole . . .” (In 5–7). Again, is the pig conscious of death? As the poem progresses, the pig retells a recurring dream, a nightmare, in which “the snouts drool on the marble, / suffering children, suffering flies, // suffering the consumers / who won’t meet their steady eyes / for fear they could see” (In 10–15). We know pigs have a hippocampus. We know they dream. We don’t know what those dreams are like. Is not Levine, then, projecting an existential dream into the pig’s interiority?

Levine projects, but as the poem arrives in the final lines, the narration gives way to what T. S. Eliot called objective correlatives. For Eliot, poems ought not express emotion; they ought to evoke emotion through the work of potent images. (See his essay “Hamlet and His Problems.”) In Levine’s poem, the final three images evoke a frantic and hysterical panic . . . a primal fear:

. . . The boy who drives me along believes

that any moment I’ll fall
on my side and drum my toes
like a typewriter or squeal
and shit like a new housewife

discovering television,
or that I’ll turn like a beast
cleverly to hook his teeth
with my teeth. No. Not this pig. (In 15–24)

To sense, as a human, a taste of this kind of panic through reading the poem, one must not simply read it aloud. The poem must be performed. One must squeeeaaaaaal with a frantic energy. One must pretend to lose a load in one’s pants. Hysteria must make one’s arms and shoulders shake. One must actually turn like a beast and snarl when hooking his teeth with my teeth, breathing heavy breaths in and out, in and out. Heavy, heavy, breaths. A performance of the poem leads one into the pig’s inner state of being—the state of mammalian panic and fear.

I have no doubt that animals other than mammals experience fear, but my source is Jaak Panksepp’s work on affective neuroscience who has focused on mammals. He is a professor at Washington State University, and he helped prove that mammals share seven primal emotions. His scholarly research includes the books Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions (1998) and, with Lucy Biven, The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotion (2012). His articles boast titles such as “Can Anthropomorphic Analyses of Separation Cries in Other Animals Inform Us About the
Emotional Nature of Social Loss in Humans?” and “The Quest for Long-Term Health and Happiness: To Play or Not To Play, That Is the Question.”

In a 2013 interview, Pamela Weintraub distills his work: “basic emotion emerges not from the cerebral cortex, associated with complex thought in humans, but from deep, ancient brain structures” (Panksepp and Weintraub)—and the deep brain structures are the same across mammals. The seven fundamental emotions are “RAGE, FEAR, LUST, CARE, PANIC/GRIEF, and PLAY.” Panskepp capitalizes them “because the evidence supports a category of evolutionary homologous experiences, equivalent across different species of mammals” (Panksepp and Weintraub). Much of the interview discusses how Panskepp tickles and plays with rats. Rats play.

So do squirrels.

And so do pigs. Pigs, squirrels, and rats also experience FEAR, PANIC/GRIEF, and RAGE. This is why Levine’s poem successfully tells the story of a pig. True, he projects a haunting dreamscape within the pig’s consciousness (that could be erroneous, but could be “true”—we don’t know). As the narration unfolds, the objective correlatives of drumming one’s toes like a typewriter and squealing and shitting like a housewife who discovers television for the first time and locking teeth evoke these primal emotions we humans share with pigs.

The second objective correlative is particularly evocative. On one level, he plays with a sexist stereotype of a June Cleaver-esque housewife all frantic with joy. For some, such an image evokes laughter. Perhaps on a darker level (though as feminism illuminates, the housewife stereotype is dark as well), some people would sadistically laugh at a pig squealing and shitting in the final moments before slaughter. OhmyGod—OhmyGod! Hands flailing in sick imitation of the pig’s terror.

Given Panskepp’s work, it would be unethical to dismiss Levine’s poem as a mere projection when pigs have the capacity to experience that existential fear and panic just like humans.

I know, though, that readers may not be able to go that far with me when I use the term “existential.” G. A. Bradshaw’s Elephants on the Edge is my rejoinder. In it, Bradshaw exposes how elephants—who have a larger hippocampus than humans and therefore a greater capacity for memory!—experience trauma on par with humans who have survived genocide. One chapter, “The Existential Elephant,” exposes how affective neuroscience has proven that animals have a sense of self and experience PTSD.

If pigs who witnessed slaughter could survive, they would have PTSD as well. Trauma is trauma whether one is a pig, a human, an elephant, or a squirrel. PANIC is PANIC. FEAR is FEAR.

Levine finds a way to tell the pig’s story from a “human” point of view. Really, it is from a mammalian point of view. Even though drumming one’s toes like a typewriter is a human-centered image (drawing on the trope of dancing like a typewriter), it and the other images evoke a panic experienced across species lines. Dissenters may object that Levine still creates images that resonate within a human psyche rather than a pig’s. Pigs may think about hooking teeth, but not drumming toes like a typewriter or discovering television. However, these images evoke an emotion that—though diminished compared to what a pig experiences prior to slaughter—correlates to the interiority of a pig, and they blur the supposed boundary between humans and other animals. From a theoretical standpoint,
these objective correlatives contribute to Derrida’s project in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. “Limitrophy,” writes Derrida, “is therefore my subject.” He continues: “Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I’ll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply” (29). Perhaps there is no other or better way to tell an animal’s story from a “human” point of view than to turn that line into a rich and vast blurry boundary.

PANIC, FEAR, and RAGE are a crucial aspect of that blurry boundary. Humans can tell an animal’s story in authentic ways, for we, too, experience these primal emotions.

At this point, I am interested in telling the story of a particular squirrel. I, like the squirrel, experience *play* in the form of climbing. I have watched human climbers for hours. Just by watching and empathizing, I know when the joy of *play* suddenly evaporates to PANIC. It makes me suddenly CARE. After watching squirrels climb for hours, I have witnessed that same, sudden transition from *play* to PANIC, and it makes me CARE as well. In both cases, I read the emotions made manifest by the climbers’ body—squirrel or human.

The next step in telling the story of the squirrel is to find a couple of poignant objective correlatives that blur the species barrier. Easier said than done.

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Works Cited


What does it mean when we claim that ecocriticism is multidisciplinary? When we compose literary texts about nature, should we worry about scientific accuracy when we borrow scientific terminology for literary purposes? For example, the act of composting offers writers rich metaphors of redemption and renewal. Is it important that we get the scientific facts straight? Can we make horticultural terms such as compost mean whatever we like, and then claim to be interdisciplinary?

In this paper I analyze some creative texts on composting, from the perspective of Master Composter (a subdivision of the Master Gardener program) and student of plant sciences.

Let’s start by defining our key term: “Composting is the practice of creating humuslike organic materials outside of the soil by mixing, piling, or otherwise storing organic materials under conditions conducive to aerobic decomposition and nutrient conservation” (Brady and Weil 535). In short, while humus formation is a natural action, composting is a cultural activity.

Whitman’s “This Compost”

With this definition of compost in mind, it becomes clear that Whitman’s poem “This Compost” isn’t about compost. It is about humus, which is a different substance, both chemically and in the manner in which it was formed. Whitman accurately describes the regenerative properties of the soils in the pastures and the woods. He is describing humus, the decomposed matter on the surface of the soil horizon, formed without human intervention. Composting, on the other hand, is the deliberate human activity of assembling organic materials in a certain way to speed up the (thermophilic) decomposition process.

One might argue that the meaning of the word compost was different in the 1850s, but the Oxford English Dictionary does not suggest this. In fact, it cites scientific writing from the 19th century regarding humus and compost, defining the terms as we do today. Even composting described by the Romans is virtually the same process used today.

This predicament may be resolved literarily by claiming that Whitman was deliberately personifying the earth, so earth becomes its own gardener and composter.

Kumin’s “The Brown Mountain”

Poet, author, and farmer Maxine Kumin in “The Brown Mountain” vividly describes the decomposition process in a compost pile. Though her years of farming, observation, and ecological sensibility place her in the same category as Wendell Berry, there is one problematic description in her poem. While she correctly describes composting as the assemblage of materials, she claims that the steaming pile releases “methane vapor” instead of carbon dioxide, which is most likely the gas in question. An aerobic, steaming, thermophilic compost pile releases small amounts of carbon dioxide; methane is a by-product of anaerobic decomposition found in many landfills. Methane is a much more harmful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, and unfortunately some anti-environmental groups claim on their websites that composting is bad for the environment, and that we should throw
more organic waste into landfills. We don't need to give our detractors ammunition by making comments linking compost to methane.

While it is theoretically possible that the mare's placenta mentioned in the poem (which probably shouldn't be placed in a compost pile to begin with) could produce a small amount of methane, that amount would be insignificant and might be broken down into carbon dioxide as it moved through the compost pile. 2

**Compos(t)ing Literary Criticism**

*This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* by Jed Rasula is not about compost. It is a book on postmodern poetics, sprinkled with gratuitous and vague metaphors from the plant sciences: "Walden... is a compost of rhetorical jubilation" (1); "Compost... affords a commanding prospect of correspon-
dences, resonant parallelisms, glimpses of independent figures, participating in a fortuitous isomorphism" (2); "The poets in *This Compost* have affirmed the poem as a space possessed of a nature, which absorbs 'symbol detritus' like the photosynthesis of light in chlorophyll" (197). These statements are nonsensical from a horticultural perspective, though some literary critics find value in describing "poetics of composting" or "compost poetics" where, in the fashion of Alice in Wonderland, words can mean whatever the speaker wants them to, as metaphors of compost are stretched beyond recognition. For example, Jack Hicks ("Poetic Composting in Gary Snyder's Left Out in the Rain") refers to "recomposting—turning the soil over one more time" (250) and to Snyder's composting himself (255). *Composticide*, perhaps?

I'm reminded of Richard Levin's main requirement for avoiding interdisciplinary misdeeds: “Know enough about the other discipline to use it in ways that will not seem absurd to its own practitioners” (33).

**The Writing Process as Compost**

Hellen Sellers (*Page after Page*) aims to assist young writers by comparing the writing process to the maintenance of a compost pile. It appears that she has done her compost homework: she mentions some possible ingredients ("eggshells, coffee grounds, onionskins, and paper"), notes that "[y]ou are allowed to pee (but never shit) in your compost pile" and knows to keep it moist (121).

However, one gets the feeling that she over-stretches the metaphors in order to make them fit the process of writing. For example, she wants students to write from their own experiences, and acknowledges that older writers have more from which to draw. On the other hand, if the students "are young, say eighteen, their compost pile might be fairly small and compact, though rich" (118). The problem with the analogy is that small compost piles don't work. A cubic yard is considered the minimum size for effective thermophilic decomposition to occur. Also, she claims that "the compost pile, to be successful... has to be kept covered—and most people have kept the lid on childhood" (Ibid.). In fact, most commercial compost piles are uncovered, as well as most backyard piles, though covering of the latter may be of use in drier climates or during times of drought. But Sellers needs to have "covering" as a key feature in the metaphor because she wants young writers to "uncover" events from their past. She also claims that once you dump the ingredients, compost will form "without any intervention from you at all" (118), but then later claims "you are supposed to water it" (121).

This stretching of metaphors to fit rhetorical purposes is a common hazard for us in the humanities (may I dare suggest
that if the metaphor breaks down it becomes composted?).

Devotional Writers

Compost is ripe with metaphors of transformation for the religious writer. Clever and insightful are writers such as the Carmelite Vilma Seelaus (“Crisis and Transformation: Turning Over the Compost Heap”) who claims that the compost heap’s mysterious inner life “can offer deepened understanding, fresh meaning for our present dark times” (81). In her analysis of the writings of Teresa de Avila, there are a few minor inaccuracies: compost “turns into pure, organic soil” (82); she confuses humus with compost: “Nature actually makes its own compost through the changes of the seasons” (83). She also compares the composting process with death and resurrection, but scientifically-speaking, compost is never dead; it is alive with microorganisms breaking down and transforming organic matter. Perhaps her most clever comparison is that of linking the heat of an active compost pile with the work of the Holy Spirit (84).

Other religious writers who have capitalized on the redemptive quality of the composting process include Balfour Brickner (Finding God in the Garden: Backyard Reflections on Life, Love, and Compost). He mistakenly states that compost is rich in the “elements” of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash (69), when in fact it has these elements and compounds in much lower quantities than what is found in commercial fertilizers. Compost is recognized scientifically as an excellent soil conditioner, but not as a rich, fast-acting fertilizer as such. He also claims that composting creates new soil (89), but from a soil science perspective new soil is formed only within the existing soil horizon. Compost is a soil conditioner, not a soil.

Knowing your compost: essayists

Berry, Pollan, and Perényi

In Wendell Berry’s essay “The Work of Local Culture” he describes “A battered galvanized bucket hanging on a fencepost” (153). Over the years, leaves, nuts, insects and other detritus have accumulated in the old bucket and have broken down into a dark humus. He correctly calls the contents humus and not compost, and he then expounds on the “irresistible metaphors” the bucket provides. What is noteworthy from a horticultural perspective is the accuracy of his description of the decomposition of organic matter. Berry is certainly an experienced and knowledgeable horticulturist, and I’m confident many plant scientists would enjoy reading his essay and approve of its contents.

The only possible quibble might be when he concludes that humans need to build soil (154). From a soil science perspective, soil is created only within the soil horizon. The bucket is hanging on a fence, a few inches above the soil horizon. Yet, the contents of the bucket are not compost, since they were not assembled by any human. One soil scientist I interviewed stated that “with a stretch of the imagination” you could say that what is in the bucket is the beginning of a histosol (a soil order which is high in organic matter). 3

Journalist Michael Pollan deserves special mention for his chapter entitled “Compost and Its Moral Imperatives” in his book Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education. He astutely describes American cultural attitudes towards lawns, gardens, and especially composting, claiming that “[i]n American gardening, the successful compost pile seems almost to have supplanted the perfect hybrid tea rose or the gigantic beefsteak tomato as the outward sign of horticultural grace” (66).4

A major influence on Pollan was Eleanor Perényi, whose 1981 gardening classic Green
Thoughts: A Writer in the Garden includes a fascinating chapter on composting and some of the more colorful twentieth-century compost pioneers.5.

**Compost-oriented fiction**

There may be another growing body of literature in which scientific accuracy fits in with literary ambitions. Professor Leah Bayens has identified such a growing body of fiction focused on composting, where compost is less metaphorical and more literal, often serving as a backdrop to human drama.6

One such work is Radical Prunings: A Novel of Officious Advice from the Contessa of Compost by Bonnie Thomas Abbot. The self-proclaimed “jaded horticulturalist” (228) narrator offers sharply opinionated advice about gardening, while working in commentary on romance and life in general. Though compost is in the subtitle, it is simply one of the many features of organic gardening promoted in this book, which easily passes any test for horticultural accuracy. For example, she warns against using pet waste and synthetically-treated grass clippings in the compost pile (95-96, 182), and lays on the guilt for those who don't compost:

Every time you run a potassium-rich banana peel through the garbage disposal instead of adding it to your compost pile, I want you to be so wracked by guilt that even an hour in the confessional won't fix it... you will feel the flames of Hell licking at your ankles if you dare put your grapefruit rinds in the rubbish bin (100).

On one occasion, in her zeal for composting, she might stretch the boundaries of scientific accuracy as she moves into metaphor, shifting from the compost pile to the world in general. After accurately describing how to make and use a backyard compost pile, she wants to assure the reader that any big chunks still in the pile will, with patience, eventually break down: “Eventually everything organic will compost, as will you. As will I” (65). Of course, if it occurs outside the compost pile it would simply be decomposition, not composting. The only way a human could become compost would be to be buried in a compost pile, which, interestingly, appears to be a sub-theme in the compost-oriented fiction genre, as the next two examples illustrate.

The opening line of Deadly Row to Hoe by Cricket McRae begins with compost front and center: “Chickens gabbled and pigs rooted through the compost pile outside the dark and dusty shack” (1). This idyllic setting is quickly shattered as a human leg is discovered sticking out near the bottom of the pile (3). Though the compost pile soon shifts into the background as the riveting mystery and touching life dramas unfold, throughout the novel McRae displays an impressive knowledge of organic gardening. The only possible quibble in the entire book is when compost is casually described as “dirt” (4), which has negative connotations.

One of the more intriguing discussions of the composting process occurs when the protagonist is discussing the murder in question with a friend (who, unbeknownst to her, is the killer). She wonders why the body was only partially buried in the compost pile:

I figure the killer planned to come back and move the body later. I mean, they couldn't think she'd stay in the compost forever, right? Unless they thought she'd eventually turn into compost. I suppose someone might think that if they don't know you have to turn a pile like that pretty often (226).

A basic rule for backyard composting is that meat is forbidden, and a cadaver would certainly qualify as meat. The pile in question
was, however, part of a small commercial operation, so the pile was large enough to conceal the body, at least for a while. Though I managed to discuss compost poetry with my science professors, I decided not to consult with them as to the feasibility of composting humans, but I suspect it would be decompositionally problematic, especially since the victim was wearing heavy leather boots. I will leave that issue to some other researcher.

The second dead-body-in-my-compost novel is by self-published novelist Don Legacy in his narratively-challenged work *Full Rising Mooner: The Most Inappropriate Man in the World*. The rambling story line loosely centers on a body part found in a commercial compost pile. However, other than brief mentions of the compost business as a backdrop, there is only one extended description of the compost process itself. Legacy has done some compost homework, though his unrelentingly odd humor interferes with the scientific descriptions. Among the suitable ingredients for a compost pile we have

1. Carbon/wood source, like wood chips, fallen leaves, cardboard, or a Republican's brain. 2. Nitrogen-rich source, like vegetable scraps, sewer sludge, or the hacked-off appendages of a brain-dead animal activist (102-103).7

A delightful short story in the “compost-oriented fiction” genre, and one that is somewhat less morbid, is David Heddendorf’s “Can’t Wait” in his Meridian Stories collection. The opening line introduces the central intrigue: “When she heard that her next-door neighbor Anna had died, Ginnie thought right away of the compost heap” (111). (At least she didn't die in the heap). The author accurately describes the composition of a passive compost heap as Ginnie observes her neighbor adding kitchen scraps over the years to the pile in the adjacent back yard. Though the story includes human interest items such as the romantic life of Anna's granddaughter and Anna's health, the compost pile itself is a central character in the story, and not just a backdrop for human drama. Shortly before her death, as Anna pokes the pile, examining it carefully with her pitchfork, Ginnie asks how it is. “Oh, it's very nice, thank you. The nicest I’ve ever had, maybe. I wanted to use some before I planted, but it wasn’t quite ready then. Now look at it! Soft and smooth, like baby food. I can't wait for spring” (112). When she receives word of Anna's death, Ginnie thinks of the compost pile: “Here lay a treasure any gardener would covet, a resource loved and tended by a conscientious person—and now it could end up lost forever” (113). As realtors, renovators, and potential buyers visit the now empty house, and finally as new neighbors move in, Ginnie plots her acquisition of the coveted compost, wrestling with her conscience. When she observes that the new neighbors do not share her love of gardening, she can justify the surreptitious acquisition of the beloved pile.

Finally, special mention is warranted for perhaps the only example of an erotic composting sub-genre. Award-winning novelist Alan Hollinghurst includes a brief description of composting in his novel *The Line of Beauty*, where a hot compost heap serves as a backdrop to a passionate romance between the narrator and his lover.

...the dusty sour smell of the yew was mixed with the muted sweetness of a huge compost heap, a season’s grass cuttings mounded high in a chicken-wire coop. Leo came up to Nick and hesitated for a second, looking away, trailing his fingers over the warm cuttings. ‘You know, these composts get really hot inside,’ he said.... ‘Too hot to touch--like a hundred degrees’ (34).

Later in the novel the narrator fondly remembers the compost heap: “...that quarter
of an hour with Leo by the compost heap, which was his first sharp taste of coupledom" (59); “It [the compost heap] came to Nick in a flash of acute nostalgia, as though he could never visit that scene of happiness again” (305).

While the compost imagery serves mainly as a backdrop for heated romantic passion, the horticultural description is quite accurate. A pile made primarily of grass clippings will be high in nitrogen and will readily heat up the pile, reaching temperatures of 150 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit. Assuming the British narrator was using the Celsius system, his statement of “like a hundred degrees” would be a slight exaggeration.

These are just a sample of recent works written by authors who have done their horticultural homework and who may help bridge the gap between scientific accuracy and literary usefulness.8

Scientific accuracy in literature

Those of us in the humanities may not see any great difference between compost and humus, or fertilizer and conditioner, or decomposition versus composting. However, equating humus with compost is like calling a jungle agriculture, a meadow a salad, or even a garden a salad, simply because a few plants are shared. Another analogy: compost doesn’t happen naturally any more than cooking does. Only humans cook food; in nature, it’s eaten raw. Likewise, only humans gather organic matter so that it cooks (i.e. thermophilic decomposition). Cooking organic matter is composting.

There is a limit, of course, to the insistence that metaphors be scientifically accurate. I don’t believe any scientist would suggest that Hemingway’s novel be renamed The Earth Also Rotates in Such a Manner as to Make the Sun Appear to Rise. But if those of us in the literary arts want environmental scientists to take us seriously, if we really do believe in the value of interdisciplinarity, we should work at educating ourselves in the sciences as we write about the natural world.

I don’t believe the power of a compost metaphor is necessarily reduced when placed under scientific scrutiny. When Vilma Seelaus describes how we can become personally transformed to give life to others, she states that “it takes faith to believe that the unsightly pile of blackened banana peels and the other half rotted ingredients of the compost heap will eventually be rich soil” (7). In my view, once we begin to understand the chemical reactions and biological transformations that occur in a compost pile, the process can become even more amazing, since we can more efficiently design our compost piles and use the valuable end product more effectively.

In “Sacred Waste: Ecology, Spirit, and the American Garbage Poem” Christopher Todd Anderson analyzes various “garbage” poems, suggesting that scientific terminology can be “both metaphorical and literal” (53) and echoes Gary Snyder’s sentiments that we should not fear science (Ibid.), concluding that in the contemplative space of the dump, the compost pile, or the deserted waste place, we may find that which repels us, but also what we value most: an ongoing struggle to understand complex physical and spiritual relationships between the self, human society, and the world we inhabit (54).

I also would like to echo Glen A. Love’s belief that “as students of literature and the environment, we have much more to gain than to fear from the company of sciences, particularly the life sciences” and that “scientifically informed ecocritics have an opportunity to reinvigorate the teaching and study of literature and to help redirect literary criticism into a more consequential social and public role” (39, 64).
My goal has not been to set up a false dichotomy between science and metaphor. We can have useful metaphors and scientific accuracy at the same time; the texts of Wendell Berry and Michael Pollan come to mind. I suggest that scientific accuracy should be a part of nature writing, especially when so much—i.e. climate change—is at stake. However, I also confess that I, too, am guilty of factual inaccuracy in one of my recent creative endeavors. In an attempt at interdisciplinary boundary crossing, I have offered a creative interpretation of the scientific process of composting: a three-minute music video on compost I performed for my local Master Gardener program.

When I discussed Whitman's poem “This Compost” with a soil scientist, he was a bit surprised that someone would write a poem about compost. When I asked him about the use of compost instead of humus in the poem, he replied that maybe the poet thought the word compost sounded better. So, when I composed a song about the composting process, “compost happens” sounded good, but the fact is it doesn’t just happen; composting is a deliberate cultural activity to facilitate the breakdown of organic matter. Decomposition happens, but, alas, it has too many syllables. So, when I created this musical tribute to the aerobic decomposition of organic matter, I chose a phrase for the chorus that sounded better.

Oh well. “Compost happens!”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pxaasqv3Ec

Notes:

1 Thanks to Professor John Duval at the University of Arkansas for help with this insight.

In an interesting analysis entitled “(De)composing Whitman” Paul Outka wrestles with "the fundamental contradiction that 'nature' is both a construct and isn’t” (43); “Our linguistic experiences of nature may be constructed, but that doesn't change the facts about where we spring from, what we depend upon, and where we end up” (54). He states that in Whitman “the circuit from corpse to poetry travels through the transformative filter of a healthy, ahuman earth” (56, emphasis mine). However, when Whitman refers to the regenerative ability of humus—though he calls it compost--there is in fact a very human link; linguistically the words for "human" and "humus" have the same roots, and in fact the word “Adam” comes from the Hebrew word for ground or earth. So, calling the earth a composter and referring to humus may both be examples of humanizing the earth.

Alan Trachtenberg (“Whitman's Romance of the Body: A Note on ‘This Compost’”) also comments on personification and “the renaming of earth as compost” (196). Joe Amato (“No Wasted Words: Whitman's Original Energy”) speculates on Whitman’s scientific knowledge and its influence in his poetry.

2 Soil scientist Dr. David Miller from the University of Arkansas shared with me his perspective on Kumin’s compost pile: “Does a steaming compost pile give off methane? My short answer is no, not if it is managed properly. As you point out, composting occurs because of the activity of aerobic organisms, so as long as the pile remains well-aerated only CO2 will be given off. But what happens if the pile is not managed properly, by which I mean what might happen if the pile isn't stirred often enough? Might it go anaerobic and generate methane? I say it’s a possibility, particularly if the material being composted is easily broken down and rich in nitrogen----as in a mare’s placenta mixed with some cat vomit. Under these conditions, very rapid aerobic decomposition would quickly deplete the O2 content within the pile. If the pile were (too) large, perhaps the rate of O2 diffusion into the pile could then not keep up with the rate...
of O2 consumption within the pile, resulting in the onset of anaerobic conditions and possibly the production of methane. So, with bad management (pile too large, too much readily decomposable material, insufficient turning of the pile, etc.) I could be convinced that a compost pile could give off methane. Now, if it were to be produced, would it escape the pile and enter the atmosphere, or would it somehow, as you suggest, be broken down into CO2 as it diffused toward the surface of the pile? Methane is pretty stable stuff. Yes, it is readily oxidized by molecular O2, but the activation energy required to initiate this reaction is high. So I would guess that it could and would escape from the pile and enter the atmosphere."

3 Personal interview with Dr. Kristofor Brye, soil scientist, University of Arkansas. “Histosol: An order of Soil Taxonomy. Soils from materials high in organic matter” (Brady & Weil p. 936). A key feature of soil from a soil science perspective is that it is “the collection of natural bodies occupying part of the earth's surface...” (Ibid., 947, emphasis mine). Anything manufactured outside of the earth's horizon (i.e. the earth's crust) is not soil. Compost is not soil. “Potting soil” is not soil. Thus, the scientific classification of the stuff in Berry’s bucket is fascinatingly problematic.

4 Pollan is a controversial figure. I have had more than one plant science professor comment that when it comes to his horticultural descriptions, Pollan is right on the mark, but that his strict ideas regarding diet are too extreme.

5 The life (and death) of J. I. Rodale makes for fascinating reading. Perényi describes him as a “Jeremiah” (42) for his cutting-edge ideas, but not all of his eccentric views (e.g. theories of language, effect of electricity on plants) have been accepted by science. He may be most remembered by his ironic death at age 72 during the taping of an interview with Dick Cavett. He had just bragged about his excellent health and how he would live to be 100 when he dropped dead of a heart attack.

6 Bayens makes a case, however, that in fact in many of these texts “compost functions as a state-of-being metaphor, equipment for living..., and essential strategy for dwelling in and making peace with despoiled places” (paper presented at Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), Lawrence, Kansas, May 29, 2013. I am deeply indebted to Bayens for introducing me to many of the texts in this section of my paper, along with the concept of “compost-oriented fiction” as an emerging genre.

7 Though the alleged story line should make for an interesting novel, the puerile sex-crazed ramblings, gratuitous vulgarity, and the failure of the narrator to focus make this novel practically unreadable.

8 In Gene Logsdon’s The Last of the Husbandmen: A Novel of Farming Life there is an episode in which two farmers decide to have a contest to see which plot of land can grow more corn: one with chemical fertilizers and one with organic only. “Nature’s Acre” wins over “Chemical Acre” in part due to large quantities of compost used in the former (263ff). In Ruth Ozeki’s All Over Creation guerrilla gardeners in Oakland use compost while planting trees (255-256). A much earlier novel, Ian Fleming’s Goldfinger (1959), includes a brief passage on compost as a simile to the narrator’s wealth: “My treasure of gold is like a compost heap. I move it here and there over the face of the earth and, wherever I choose to spread it, that corner blossoms and blooms” (126). Though the simile is sound, it would be better to incorporate the compost into the soil rather than just simply using it as a mulch.
ARTHUR KROKER’S “BEAUTIFULLY TANGLED KNOT” OF CONTINGENCY, COMPLEXITY, AND HYBRIDITY

Nathan Frank
Review of Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway
By Arthur Kroker
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012

What you animate animates you back.

~ Adam Levin, The Instructions

Once we recognize our posthuman bodies and minds, once we see ourselves for the simians and cyborgs we are, we then need to explore the vis viva, the creative powers that animate us as they do all of nature and actualize our potentialities. This is humanism after the death of Man: what Foucault calls “le travail de soi sur soi,” the continuous constituent project to create and re-create ourselves and our world.

~ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire

Clocking in as the twenty-second installment of the Carey Wolfe-edited series on posthumanities, Arthur Kroker’s Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway (2012) unpacks the considerable works of Judith Butler, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway. Kroker recasts these postmodern feminists’ respective theoretical projects as continued and completed conversations with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Marx such that they simultaneously supplement the old canon while forming a new one in the process. Kroker also traces the vectors of Butler’s focus on contingency, Hayles’ interrogation of complexity, and Haraway’s pioneering hybridity, whose strands “we can only know with certainty” are “deeply tangled with the different axes of the human condition: sexuality, gender, race, ideology, class, and religion” (143), and when woven together, form “a beautifully tangled knot” (15). The resulting knot is the beginning of Kroker’s highly synthesized theory of drift, which, beginning here with the drifts of theory itself and then of bodies, will eventually lead him to explore the drifts of code, history, archive, screen, and media, and which will come to be situated between the processes of acceleration and crash in his most recent Exits to the Posthuman Future (2014). For Kroker, body drift refers to the destabilization of normative boundaries “as the fateful talisman of the posthuman future,” for “it is as if the great narratives of theoretical critique—power, sex, gender, species-logic, race, code—have suddenly been set adrift, and yet for all that, wonderfully intermediated, entangled, and worked through” (19). Theories of contingent bodies (Butler), complex bodies (Hayles), and hybrid bodies (Haraway) all attest to such a drift, and the listlessness of such a drift in turn attests to Kroker’s urgent theoretical energy, since, anticipating a crash after acceleration, the drifts in question are also high-speed and turbulent. We are thus “in desperate need of a new way of being multiple, hybrid, and bodily” (17), and it is Kroker’s intimation that this “new way” might be, following Haraway’s effective capstone mediation of Butler and Hayles,
“a form of thought that is, in effect, a way of working through the contemporary human condition” (139). This new way, then, will provide Kroker the knotty stuff of his future exits.

But before we exit, we must first come to grips with the various postmodern spaces we have entered. There is Butler's contingent space, the “foreclosed space of queer sexual economy” (45), and Hayles' complex “space-time spectrum of digital reality” (64), but ultimately, Kroker gravitates toward Haraway's space of hybridity, “a liquid space of difference” where “what counts” “is not the mapping of borderlines but those liminal zones where boundaries begin to slip, where skin becomes less a passive covering than an active material-semiotic agent, and where other gestures, other voices, are finally understood as the basic co-texts of an approaching future of companion species” (134). It is not that Kroker finds Haraway's thought to be necessarily more compelling than that of Butler or Hayles (indeed, an exuberant panegyric permeates Body Drift at all levels; Body Drift is as much a celebration of critical theory as it is a rehearsal of, intervention in, and contribution to critical theory), but that hers must be seen as a staging zone for furthering the thought experiments that began with disparate problematics for each of the theorists, separately, before they thematically “converged on critical analysis of different bodily inflections in contemporary society” (137). It is that Haraway's hybridity lends itself to body drift in a way that advances questions about “the contested space of power itself” precisely because its own current is fed by the refreshingly vital tributaries of Butler and Hayles. Haraway's drift, precisely because it is hybrid, combines the flotsam and jetsam of commingled theoretical vectors.

Kroker's focus on Haraway’s hybrid spatiality bleeds into temporality, too, since Haraway's hybrid futures splice and fuse Butler's genealogically contingent pasts with Hayles' chaotically complex presents. In fact, Haraway's hybrid, for Kroker, is nothing short of “a creative opening to the future” (109), as a hybrid body represents, “in Haraway's analysis,” “the very inception and now actualized future of the body in revolt” (115). There seems to be an element of kairos inherent in Haraway, as her rhetoric activates the future just as it transforms—that is to say, as it hybridizes—her own way of thinking about her own body in revolt: “Not waiting passively for the capricious experiments of biotechnology to produce spliced bodies, Haraway has made of her own mind a biopolitics on creative hyperdrive” (125). In this way, Kroker positions Haraway as the original of a new species that she herself theorizes, since she “breaks beyond the discursive limits of received theoretical analysis” to become prototypical and exemplary of “the partial, the interrupted, the spliced, the remixed that populate the future of biopolitics” (124).

Such readings of Haraway and her hybridities bring a number of theoretical possibilities into play. Kroker demonstrates, for example, that Haraway's form increasingly matches its content, and so hybrid theories manifest themselves in increasingly hybridized iterations. In much the same way that she draws from her postmodern feminist heritage to advance theories of power on, in, and through bodies, so too does Haraway hybridize hybrid theory as Butler queers queer theory, or as Hayles complicates complexity theory. Kroker builds on this tradition, and he apparently revels in it. Drifting through drift theory, his form is one of flamboyant and fast-paced drift. He may syntactically or paratactically lose you, cutting ideas adrift in compounding clauses or snowballing metaphors. On the other hand, he may float back into familiar territory or circle it like a whirlpool of theoretical force that increases its intensity with proximity to the vortex, at which point he takes flight and soars through theory as the creative genre that he (as founding editor of ctheory.net) celebrates. Indeed, whereas the signifiers of other theorists are prone to float or flicker, Kroker's tend to
do exactly what he theorizes that they do: they drift along contemporary currents that are at once contingent and complex, and which combine into a hybridized contingent-complex supercurrent.

Ecologically speaking, this contingent-complex supercurrent carries theories and bodies to the edges of a new species-logic, and again, the leading edge of the frontier is charted by Haraway. If the mapping of dynamic liminal zones (as opposed to static “borders”) is “what counts,” consider Haraway the consummate cartographer, for her “maps are everywhere”:

maps to navigate “The Cyborg Manifesto,” maps to better explore the world of primate visions, maps that creatively reenvision the oncomouse under the sign of genetic determinism, maps for visualizing the bifurcated regimes surrounding the “apparatus of bodily production,” maps of “daughter of the man-hunters,” maps for discovering elusive pathways around “sex, mind and profit,” mappings of the “theories of production and reproduction,” and even genealogical maps for deciphering the enigmatic phrase “In the Beginning was the Word.”

But most compelling of all, there is Haraway’s mapping of the legacy codes of the coded trickster—her cartography of immune system discourse in “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies” (127-128).

The ecological weight of this last and “most compelling” cartography is profound, as Haraway reads “the changing meaning of the immune system” as “increasingly important as part of the larger debate on boundary exchanges among bodies, technology, and nature in the twenty-first century” (128), and, since these “boundary exchanges” may also be “disturbances” in which the “porous, fluid negotiations marking exchanges between machines and humans and nature and culture,” they carry the potential to spark the first instantiations of “violent border crashes” (129). In other words, what is at stake in mapping fluidity, dynamism, and hybridity is precisely the material cost of any given ecological transaction, and this cost might very well disturb symbiosis, prey on the received interpretations of species-logic, or portend the emergence of invasive species. Immunity is always, after all, a protection against something in the logic of zero-sum games whose winners’ gains circumscribe the losers’ annihilation. Haraway’s maps, then, could be said to lead Kroker closer to his Exits than any other theorist if they mark “the truly predatory forms of earth-alienation that can only be effectively resisted by ethically reconciling humans with their biomaterial companions” (21).

Finally, Haraway’s connecting of the capitalist and ecological dots—by way of a digitization of the global landscape—goes a long way in instructing Kroker’s theories of drift, since it is precisely “that capitalism in the age of information culture has given rise to” these truly predatory forms in the first place. Once again, Haraway builds on the other theorists to culminate in the effective capstone necessary to move Kroker forward, since, in this case, her mapping of hybridity is mapping in her terminology what Hayles has been mapping all along as “the information-intensive environment” (c.f. How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis, 2012).
If the strands of Butler, Hayles, and Haraway bundle themselves into a beautifully tangled knot, Kroker’s *Body Drift* invites us to consider Haraway’s own knot within the knot and, in metacritical fashion, Kroker’s own knotted mess of bodies that will accelerate, drift, crash, and ultimately exit into futures of posthumanity. That Kroker uses the image of the knot so pervasively as he works toward the image of the drift makes it all the more striking when he extricates Haraway’s hybrid knot from the theoretical core (“Haraway makes of her own thought a knot of hybridities,” 103) and highlights how she—and she alone among the theorists—sets it adrift, for Haraway is the one who reveals “the world as a knot in motion” (134), a drifting worldknot. But here something very interesting occurs between the two images—that of the knot and that of the drift: their scales merge, so that what drifts is not always and only what drifts through the world but is the world itself. To think of drifting bodies in terms of drifting worlds may seem overblown until Kroker reminds us that each of these worldbodies is a contingent, complex, and hybrid knot that not only moves through an information-intensive environment but is an information-intensive environment, an immunity-seeking ecology unto itself. In Kroker’s readings of the theorists and therefore in his own theory, space and time, form and content all bleed together, contributing to each other’s currents and intensifying the ever-accelerating drift of bodies, entangling with each other’s strands to continually grow and tighten the knots of the world—or the worlds of knots—and to relish the beauty bound up in the contingency and complexity of this mess. Kroker’s pyrotechnic approach therefore ignites theory so that it may animate and re-animate (to hybridize my epigraphs) ourselves, our world(s), and ourselves *qua* world(s).
The artificial notion of wilderness is perhaps no longer the central question of ecocritical thought. Rather, the more pressing and problematic distinction that has yet to be made is what, exactly, fills the middle ground opened by a departure from strict notions of wilderness and the natural as binary oppositions to the inhabited space and the artificial. An answer, or part of the answer, lies in movements that encompass aspects of ecology, economy, culture, and societal transformation, that movement which is referred to broadly as new agrarianism. The precedents for changing the way human beings live in their environment predate this category of social change, but a renewed interest in local food, community gardens, farmers markets, and public produce is beginning to shift these marginal ideologies to the mainstream. Perhaps partially because of its more recent entry into this stage in the popular imagination, and partially because of its slower and less willing shift from leftist ideology to the center, urban homesteading is often overlooked in scholarly inquiry in favor of addressing community gardens and public produce projects. While I do not intend to disparage these valuable projects, my goal in this essay is to make room in theoretical inquiry for urban homesteading, as I contend it embodies a shift in our collective sense of place in nature across multiple categories: social, cultural, economic, spiritual and ethical, and by merit of its ability to transform lifestyle beginning at the household level, merits inquiry.

This movement constitutes a messy amalgamation of ideologies and ecocritical postures, each with its own distinct idea of what the urban homestead constitutes, what it accomplishes, and how it might offer an alternative to a strictly consumerist lifestyle. The movement embodies the problematic ideology of pastoral connectedness, something like that exemplified in Thoreau’s bean field in *Walden*, or as examined in William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness.” Yet it offers an answer to the challenge Cronon issues when he calls for an end to thinking about nature as strictly defined by a “set of bipolar moral scales” framed by the “human and the nonhuman, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and the unfallen” (89). Rather, urban homesteading represents a shift towards two important ideological positions Cronon identifies, the “critical self-consciousness” and the treatment of all nature, including that in the urban environment, as “wild” and ultimately dependent on “our management and care” (88-89).

In order to explore the extent to which urban homesteading occupies the “middle ground” Cronon proposes, this work examines texts offering practical advice and environmental ethics and ideology to proponents of the movement, specifically focusing on Kaplan and Blume's 2011 *Urban Homesteading: Heirloom Skills for Sustainable Living*, and drawing on other guides, handbooks, and instructional literature published within a few years of *Urban Homesteading*. The primary goal of this work will be to determine how the minutia and practical operations of these movements reflects evolving theoretical paradigms with regard to our place in nature, and how such movements are perpetuating and transforming theory that governs ecocritical consciousness. I argue that while theories such as Cronon’s and Merchant’s have made space for a partnership with the environment and helped to broaden the definition of the
“natural” and “environment,” the increasingly widespread practice of urban homesteading (hereafter abbreviated, UH) has given partnership theories validity in cultural consciousness, and in turn, allowed for the extension of nature to that environment that exists in our “own backyard” (Cronon 86). My curiosity in this admittedly broad analysis is directed towards the ways that practice embodies theory, and in turn, the ways ecocritical theory drives production-centered relationships with the environment. To this end, I devote the bulk of my work to a theoretical examination of the practical and instructional aspects of urban homesteading literature and conclude with both the more problematic aspects of the movement and its potential for filling theoretical space as well as transforming social and economic realities and spaces. Operating on the premise that practice and theory act in a cyclical manner, I address the implications of practical operation for ecocriticism and draw theoretical observations that might help shape the implementation and practice new agrarian movements in the future. I hope by this preliminary investigation to lay the foundations for more focused research into this movement as the theoretical and social implications of environmental consciousness become a more integral part of the collective American cultural consciousness.

**Theoretical Commonalities**

It is difficult to take the theoretical pulse of a movement so fresh on the social scene and so defined by regional norms and boundaries. Still, a critical inquiry insists on some effort of this sort. Most instructional literature regarding UH begins with a stated ideology, guiding principles, or the acknowledged intent of the book. In this section, before much of the text relegates itself to more practical instruction, ecocritical posture of the author is more obvious and explicit, a more obvious commodification of ecocritical concepts. A cursory overview of several instructional UH texts reveals commonalities and contradictions in the author's theoretical approach. The reasons behind such contradictions and their implications will be explored later, but a brief discussion of the theoretical and ideological premise these texts build their practical application upon is a pertinent place to begin.

The localized nature of this movement defies universal categorization or generalities, but each regional variant of the UH system does share some common ideological and theoretical ground. While some practitioners operate more consciously out of a specific ecocritical theory, many seem to have adapted ecocriticism and ecological awareness as an unstated precursor to practical engagement with their own environment, rather than an acknowledge step in adapting ecocritical consciousness. I offer for the purposes of this essay a somewhat reductive definition of the ecocritical theory that UH has co-opted in forming a more culturally viable ideology. The tenets of productive partnership ideology are best summarized in three points:

I. *Changes in the way humans live in their environment must begin locally.* UH movements ground the global intentionality of ecocriticism and environmental justice, theory which operates in a global “space,” in the localized, tangible, and personally experienced “place.” UH invests the ecocritical concept of space with tangible benefits, both for the human and the environment, demonstrating in action that “those who feel a stake in their community think of it as their place,” and in this case, the “community” may be as small as a backyard (Buell 63).

II. *The means of changing the way humans consume begins with reclamation of heritage skills and methods of production typical of the agrarian experience.* To
move forward, we must look back. The UH movement draws on a heritage of agrarianism and the ideological importance of the agrarian in American history. The key difference, of course, is that traditional notions of where production happens and who can be a producer have been exploded. A renewed fascination with the same sort of “small, independent family-sized farm” that Jefferson privileged has been paired with notions of “partnership with nature” and sustainability to form a method of producing foods from urban space as a means of sustenance and of environmental enrichment (Kolodny 27, Merchant 119).

III. **A partnership with the environment, especially in urban spaces, is beneficial both for the human and for the environment in which they live.** The test of whether or not an ecological movement qualifies as one which is adheres to this interpretation of ecocritical consciousness is the degree to which there is equal benefit for both the human and environmental participants in the relationship. UH movements reassert the belonging of the human species in nature, conceding that our capability to destroy is prodigious, but need not be inevitable. A counter to extensions of the idea of “wilderness” that seem to surmise that “the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves,” the UH movement contends that the best way to restore nature is to reclaim urban spaces, using “knowledge and community relationships to recreate place” where once there was only a wasteland of space (Cronon 83, Fisko 319).

The transformation and adaptation of ecocritical concepts into this ideology guiding interaction with nature is most apparent in these central tenets, and does something to answer the questions where this theoretical transformation to practice takes place, how it takes place, and for what reasons. I refer to the theory and ideology of UH not interchangeably, but with a recognition that concepts of ecocriticism familiar to scholars are most evident in an adapted, but clearly ecocritical form, sometimes stated in and sometimes underlying the ideology of UH texts and other expressions of and responses to the movement. Expressions of ecocritical engagement and consciousness take on theoretical significance in both ideology and practice.

### Eco-historical Adaptations

Commonalities between the ideological approaches espoused in various instructional texts are numerous. An emphasis on self-reliance or self-sufficiency guides much of the rhetoric of these text’s ideology. *The City Homesteader*’s author Scott Meyers first details the level of disconnect common in modern life, before asserting as a guiding factor for his production of the book that “the urge for self-sufficiency is a powerful force in the human DNA” (5). Similarly, Deanna Caswell and Daisy Siskins’ more moderate *Little House in the Suburbs* asserts “humans are makers,” before concluding that American society has “lost touch with that take-care-of-yourself-ness that people had before discount megamarts” (7). Even the highly practical book of how-tos, diagrams, and instructions for various homesteading skills, *Back to Basics*, begins with a peripheral reference to “independence – the kind of down home self-reliance that our grandparents… took for granted,” the same set of skills and attitude the editors believe “moderns think has vanished forever” (7). This particular emphasis on self-reliance borrows from another influential ideological paradigm in UH texts: a deep respect for seemingly arcane skills, and an association between the practice of these skills and a higher quality of life.

Such rhetoric borders closely on nostalgia. In some texts more than others, the personal disposition and history of its author(s) emphasizes historical precedent for such lifestyle and skills, and often even
the personal history of the respective author’s family. Meyers attributes his book to his grandparents, and Caswell attributes her attraction to UH to time spent working with her grandparents in the preparation of meals from food grown on their land (17). Further, both City Homesteader and Little House situate themselves as the descendants of a historical tradition of self-sufficiency. Meyers, from the first line of his text, expresses admiration for “early homesteaders” before discussing later in his introduction a generalized category of “the pioneers,” making the connection between these homesteaders, well versed in skills but short on supplies, and the modern homesteader, well supplied but in “short supply” of skills and experience (6). Caswell and Siskins rely on familial lineage for some explanation of their lifestyle, but also recall a surprising historical precedent to contrast the image of the pioneer settling a hostile frontier: the “village blacksmith” (6). The author’s remind their reader at the book’s outset to recall as one “reminisce[s] about the “simpler” times… remember not everyone lived on a farm” (6). Little House (the most recent publication studied in this work) represents a more moderate, self-aware ideology of ecocritical engagement, as it embodies a shift from more radical and complete alterations to urban lifestyle, not to mention the explicit inclusion of the suburban space as a place of cooperative relationship between human and environment. Such a shift warrants a study of its own, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

Such responses, while often nostalgic and problematic, in the ideological premise undergirding UH are in part a response to prior texts, such as the central text under examination in this essay, Kaplan and Blume’s Urban Homesteading: Heirloom Skills for Sustainable Living. The ideological premise of this text is much more comprehensive and situated in national environmental issues. Unique among the set of texts surveyed here, Kaplan and Blume base much of their investment in UH on combating the “disintegration of life brought about by global capitalism’s profound disrespect for natural limits,” rather than a less politically-charged and more personal desire for self-sufficiency and alternative living (7). Such productive partnership ideology guides practical advice in everything from “growing food and learning how to preserve it” to conservation issues, such as “water, or compost, or recycling the waste stream,” all while building, through production a more ecologically conscious ideology (Kaplan/Blume x). The movement, according to these authors, spans the country, “growing rapidly and expressing itself in diverse ways,” though the book focuses on growers and members in the Bay Area of California, the home of both authors and the Institute for Urban Homesteading (ix). In short, Urban Homesteading takes on the prodigious task of remaining local while addressing national concerns, and does so by interweaving ideology and practical action in such a way that the two are often indiscernible from one another. Thus the ideology of UH texts varies along a spectrum of general vs. local as well as personal versus collective responsibility, while the practical advice and instructions that compose the bulk of such texts generally supports a similar ideological objective, as well as a responsibility to address potential ideological pitfalls.

This tension is crucial to the guiding ideology of UH as a movement. This new ideology (I refer collectively to the underlying ideology that guides each of these texts) draws on romantic notions of partnership with nature, while generally differentiating itself from these notions, as in Urban Homesteading, where the authors note “disastrous misalignments” between progress and the people it its way, and insist that readers “be the change
[they] want to see” (Kaplan and Blume 4-5). This ideology represents a conscious adaptation of nostalgic veneration of historical relationships to nature as well as an awareness of their pitfalls. I call this ideology practical ecocritical revisionism, a reflection not only of the historically-conscious nature of the ideology, but of its critique of theoretical interpretations of nature that devalue the human’s role in producing and consuming responsibly, or remove humans from the equation entirely.

**Ecocritical Evolution in UH Texts**

Unlike Meyers, Caswell and Siskin, or the editors of Back to Basics, Kaplan and Blume only peripherally engage in the ideology of a return by acknowledging the need for “relearning heirloom skills,” the opposing force to a “relentless march towards convenience” (5). The authors of these demonstrate an awareness of the implications of a return to the romanticized ideal of human interaction with nature, varied in interpretation but consistent in advocating a move towards more environmentally conscious living. These authors also demonstrate a concession to the spatial and economic limitations of the UH movement. Where Thoreau planted and hoed his bean fields in solitary contemplation, the very picture of the farmer who he declares “can work alone in the field or the woods all day… and not feel lonesome, because he is employed,” the population density of even small cities or suburbs where homesteading takes place necessitates community interaction, and the movement embraces the necessity of and potential for community-building UH entails (Thoreau Solitude). Kaplan and Blume characterize the movement as one of “proactive response,” taking actions to make “immediate difference in the places we call home,” acknowledging the role of the “old way” while highlighting the new social nature of the movement, “based on reciprocity and cooperation” (6). Such interdependence demonstrates the local nature of the movement and a renewed cultural optimism that situates the individual in the context of the community. This might be described as the general place of UH in the spectrum of individual versus communal, but a movement towards the center is in progress.

Interdependence is emphasized less in Little House, but concessions to the need for community involvement and interdependence are present, and peripherally included in some of the instructions in Back to Basics and City Homesteader. Little House includes a chapter devoted to the planning and orchestration of co-ops, food-swaps, and barter meets, perhaps reflective in its conservative scope of the more limited population and participation of suburban centers, as compared to urban centers of new agrarianism (196-205). City Homesteader encourages the use of yard-swap programs and community gardens as well as community-supported-agriculture (43, 175). Such cooperative ventures suggest that UH entails not just a radically altered perspective on human interaction with nature, but on interaction between community groups and neighborhoods. The scale of the goals of the UH movement and similar new agrarian efforts demands cooperation, but as these texts demonstrate, the fundamental change must begin on an individual level. It remains, then, to attempt to situate the ideology outlined from these texts into the larger theory of ecological engagement that guides human interaction with environment.

Cronon distinguishes several criteria for that ecocritical theory or ideology which might occupy the “middle ground,” including ideology which acknowledges the “full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural,” one which additionally leaves room for “the city, the suburbs, the pastoral, and the wild,” each in its “proper place” (89). This last qualification offers potential for the refutation of urban homesteading
as an ideological and practical fulfillment of these criteria, but Cronon addresses the distinction by citing Wendell Berry’s suggestion that “the only thing we have to preserve wilderness with is domesticity,” and Gary Snyder’s suggestion that one can “experience the wilderness anywhere on earth” (89). I propose then that the urban homestead, in this case, fits Cronon’s definition of wilderness as a place where “we try to withhold our power to dominate,” favoring instead cooperation and sustainable practice to benefit from, preserve, and enrich the natural environment of the urban (87).

While the concept of “middle ground” is central to the ideology guiding UH, other related ecocritical concerns are worth acknowledging. UH has co-opted much of the “discourse about environmental justice” precisely to do the “work” Harvey proposes might have an effect on cultural “institutions, practices, [and] power relations” (372). Such “work” is perhaps most evident in movements such as public produce, exemplified in Darrin Nordahl’s Public Produce, which offers some explanation for the surge in interest in UH as an environmental justice responsibility. Nordahl traces the imperative for the expansion of urban homesteading to the crisis year of 2008, when a combination of “economic and climatic turmoil” illustrating the effects of climate change, converged to intensify reconsideration of the “benefits… [of] returning our urban lifestyle to its agrarian roots, and reinstalling a modicum for self-sustenance” (Nordahl xi). This return takes a variety of forms, but UH exemplifies perhaps one of the most profound and diverse in terms of ideological engagement with the environment, and holds at its core values adopted from environmental justice, namely the “survival of people in general, and of the poor and marginalized in particular” (Harvey 386). A key difference between new agrarian movements, and especially UH, and more traditional environmentalism is interest in repurposing, preservation, and productive management of urban and suburban lands. Where traditional environmentalism is chiefly concerned with the preservation of “endangered species, national parks… [and] threatened landscapes,” the concerns of UH are quite literally, in many proponent’s backyards (Taylor, quoted in Harvey 386). Urban homesteading fits the description of a movement of environmental justice because it strives to reintroduce nature into urban settings in such a way that both recognizes its wildness and acknowledges the responsibility of human beings to care for it, the result being a healthier populace and planet (Cronon 89).

Urban homesteading fills the newly vacated theoretical space that Janet Fiskio attributes to an “agrarianism of the margins,” an unconventional commodification of traditional agrarian ideals and notions of the American pastoral made to fit the changing face of American culture, society, and economy (302). Urban homesteading situates the movement in cultural, social, and economic spaces that criticism has, for the most part, only suggested. In this essay I make correlations to those theoretical suggestions in the practice of UH. The day-to-day operations of the urban or suburban homestead, from a container garden to a full-scale quarter acre mini-farm, are deeply situated in a theory concerned with ecological engagement and environmental justice. Moreover, many homesteading practices and methods of urban revitalization are, as Fiskio acknowledges, explicitly and intentionally counter-cultural and politically contentious, citing land rights attributed not to ownership of property, but rather “a kind of urban usufruct… their ability to feed themselves from the land and the community they have formed in this space” (317). Thus in both a theoretical and a tangible physical sense, regional UH movements “recreate place” in environments formerly abandoned to disuse
or unproductive aesthetic purpose (319). This interaction between the theoretical and the practical application of theory is difficult, at times, to convey, as theory and practice blend so readily in new agrarian movements (as in Kaplan and Blume) that it is often difficult to tell them apart. This cyclical interaction is a key attribute of the UH movement that has allowed it to grow so rapidly and in so many localized manifestations. Thus, as this cyclical process is central to understanding and theorizing UH, I hope in the remainder of this work to work around a purely theoretical discussion of the human in nature and put practice and theory into conversation in detailing the ways advocates of the UH movement are answering the question of place and environment in their lifestyle and food choices. Taking into account the effects of practice in forming theory, I will address the way that such practical adaptations of theory are shifting our understanding of ecocritical consciousness.

Practical Application of Environmental Engagement

Urban homesteading, in this way as well as in matters of practice, is deeply rooted in permaculture, an ideology that emphasizes the construction of self-sustaining systems to mirror nature in functioning within larger ecosystems. The investigation of day-to-day practices in the physical reality of UH is critical to a theoretical understanding of how the movement is building space for itself in ecocriticism, and how this process can enrich ecocritical understanding as well as ground ecocriticism in real-life application. Thus, in this section I discuss “environment” as a space comprised of urban and suburban settings, in an effort to avoid any fixation on outdated notions of “wilderness” as Cronon defines it, and the unproductive discussion of the “pastoral” as outlined by Garrard, a romantic notion imbedded most deeply in literature and not in economic and social reality (Cronon 86-87, Garrard 33).

The practical applications and functions of urban homesteading are informed by the permaculture ethic, which Kaplan and Blume define in three main components: “earth care, people care, [and] fair share” (19). Though the immense variety of functional evidence falls into these categories loosely defined, these three tenets all revolve around a core of “critical self-consciousness” and sustainability. While permaculture does not constitute a theory in ecocriticism proper, such ideology provides a foundation for understanding the theoretical implications of everyday practice in UH. In order to proceed in some order, I will classify the practical applications of urban homesteading according to my own labels, themselves a reflection of the guiding rationales of permaculture. The first and most inclusive category is sustainable means, that is, a self-conscious choice to utilize natural resources responsibly, and to utilize materials for production from what is already present in the environment (including man-made materials when appropriate), which I will label “earth care.” The evidence in this category operates on one level as a naturalization of the urban, subverting and manipulating man-made materials for the purposes of sustainable cultivation and propagation. Kaplan and Blume cover a myriad of such techniques, including “sheet mulching,” a technique for enriching urban soil using cardboard and straw, “backyard compost bins,” structures often built of scrap materials (pallets, scrap wood, wire, etc) and used to recycle organic waste into nutrient rich soil additive, and a variety of building methods that utilize natural materials, such as adobe, cob, straw-bale and bagged earth (62, 66, 196-200). Most of these materials constitute support systems for production or habitation, and form either structures or enrichment networks built to manage environmentally derived resources, such as a
greywater system to recycle waste water from human residences, or a rain tank to capture and store precipitation for later use (Kaplan and Blume 220, 229).

The more moderate theoretical stance of *Little House* is clear in a dialed-back approach to food production. While the text gives similar instructions as to propagating and planting, it does not address soil enrichment beyond basic composting, operating instead on the assumption that the suburban soil will be less likely to need enrichment, or else growers can opt instead for the controlled soil environment of a container or raised bed garden (31-42). Caswell and Siskin likewise deemphasize the recycling and repurposing of materials and resources, omitting entirely any guide to constructing the materials required for gardening, animal keeping, or human habitation. Where Kaplan and Blume advise urbanites to “value the edges and the marginal” for production capability, or even “de-pave” their neighborhoods for growing space, Caswell and Siskin emphasize cautious movement towards full-scale production (as in a step by step process from container to row gardening) and reiterate that such changes are reversible, assuring readers that “the grass will grow back” (*Urban Homesteading* 44, 52; *Little House* 31-46, 37). While both texts work towards sustainable development and self-sufficiency for growers, they address a very different audience with varied theoretical perspectives. Aesthetic appeal remains a central issue in *Little House*, a concession to neighborhood restrictions on front-lawn gardening and governing boards that regulate land use, where *Urban Homesteading* largely operates outside of such restrictions, assuming that gardens of any sort will either be on public spaces or in backyards, either of which should be an aesthetic and practical improvement over the status quo. Moreover, Kaplan and Blume operate on the construct of “giving and punishing mother,” temporarily robbed of her fertility by human incursion, but able to be made fertile (and friendly) again by responsible land use and dramatic restructuring of urban spaces (Merchant 140). Kaplan and Blume’s practical advice on renewing urban spaces commodifies older preservationist theory, extending notions of “careful stewardship” to urban environments instead of imagined wilderness (Merchant 140).

Caswell and Siskin’s text, in turn, mirrors the movement of populations to the suburbs by moving such ideas stewardship and self-sufficiency into the suburbs, with the notable difference that the suburban counterpart never really acknowledges the gendered undertones to its theoretical premise, emphasizing instead a partnership with nature that mainly works to restore self-sufficiency and reconcile the consumptive lifestyle with a more moderate and reflective occupation of environmental space. In other words, Kaplan and Blume’s theoretical emphasis remains firmly grounded (excuse the pun) in the feminine environment, whereas more recent UH texts emphasize the human need for self-sufficiency and simplicity, in which nature is a means, not an end in itself, and certainly not an entity in itself. Similarly, much of the practical evidence in both texts departs from theoretical engagement with nature in favor of more productive actions that mainly benefit human participants, and emphasize human cooperation.

“People care,” underlies the cooperative and interdependent nature of UH. The remaining categories of practical evidence might be thought of as cooperative, interrelated pairs. Urban homesteading operates within limits to individual production, a reality that necessitates the formation of productive communities that support individual homestead efforts through mutually beneficial collectives. Limits to individual production include acreage, income of family units and time
constraints in balancing income-generation and homesteading efforts. Kaplan and Blume address these peripherally, suggesting radical restructuring of methods of provision of sustenance, such as downgrading employment or withdrawing from the job market entirely as an answer to time constraints and income restrictions, but in a larger sense placing individual challenges in the context of supportive communities, suggesting the “best way to manage the demands of homesteading is to share them” (35-37). Sharing the practical burden of implementing urban homesteading ideology and ecocritical theory requires partnership, representing a practical reality as well as a “survival strategy for the 21st century” (Kaplan and Blume 88). This distinction mirrors Cronon’s claims that “we are responsible” for both the “tree in the garden” and the “tree in the wilderness” (89, Emphasis mine).

Perhaps for this reason, the problematic suggestion of embracing urban homesteading as a means of opting out of participation in a national economic system is downplayed in more recent texts, in favor instead of a kind of ideological compromise that allows for consumptive living if it is done consciously, and with a minimum of extraneous consumption (Kaplan and Blume 35). Simplicity is privileged as an ideological construct over environmental transformation, in what might be read as a kind of pendulum-swing from more radical, and admittedly challenging, approaches to lifestyle change that demand a wholesale abandonment of cultural and social norms. Little House reconciles this radical departure with historical premises for urban and suburban self-sufficiency, citing the examples of those individuals whose professions demanded, much like modern professionals, that they stay close to the town or city (6). Additionally, Caswell defends their text’s placement of UH principles into a kind of neutral relationship with consumptive behaviors:

We don’t dig wells, and we’re not reclaiming acres of land. But we get back to the land – it’s just tiny, well-groomed, two-minutes-from Target land. And it still counts! … You can be totally back to basics and drive a pimped-out minivan (20).

Meyers, in City Homesteader, makes a similar case for small-scale self-sufficient behaviors with an emphasis on food production, advising readers, even those with no land on which to grow, that they can “grow and eat homegrown food” (9). Other practical advice offered in Meyer’s text addresses food preservation and alternatives to consumption of household cleaners and chemicals (91, 199). Both texts ideological stance or reactionism to more hardline lifestyle change theories (Kaplan and Blume are but one example) may seem like an ecocritical step backward or an instance of ideological half-measure designed to reconcile consumptive behaviors with issues of environmental justice without real change, but I contend that such reactions are a mediation of the more demanding and artificial constructs of the human relationship to environment UH has thus far taken for granted.

Making space for moderate lifestyle changes with respect to consumption and land use does not necessarily oppose more radical notions of repurposing or sustainability, such as those in Urban Homesteading, but rather make the movement and ideology more appealing to a wider populace, and therefore more likely to be accepted in mainstream culture. We return in this point to problematic theoretical constructs of nature, as employed by both categories of UH texts. The more radical changes of the sort that Kaplan and Blume propose with regard to social cooperation as a key element of UH are much more heavily emphasized in Urban
Homesteading than in more recent texts, and emerge from a more isolated cultural context. Kaplan and Blume's theoretical premise is built on the operation of long-run and heavily invested communities in the Bay Area of California, where constrictions of space and a more progressive political climate coincide to help make co-operative food production and the sharing of restorative environmental partnership more culturally viable. This is not to say that UH can only thrive in the Bay Area or similar urban environments, but adaptations of both the theoretical premise and practical expressions of that theory to unique geographical and cultural climates are to be expected and encouraged. Thus, we can, perhaps, reconcile a more human-centered outlook on environmental engagement in later UH texts (Little House and City Homesteader) with earlier, more explicitly environmental texts as a movement, not towards a degradation of ecocriticism, but towards regionally modified adaptations of environmental engagement. Put quite simply, inhabitants of varied socioeconomic arrangements can interact with their environment in different, though not unequal, ways. Encouraging this varied interaction is critical to the propagation and sustained activity of the UH movement as an ecocritical expression.

Just as ecocriticism has deviated from its origins in Eurocentric romanticism and constructs of nature as various iterations of pastoral ideal, UH as a movement operates as a discourse guided by those “beliefs, social relations, institutional structures, material practices [and] power relations,” regionally modified to meet the needs of both the environment and its inhabitants (Garrard 35, Harvey 372). While the various adaptations of UH problematize and complicate our understanding of the “partnership ethic” espoused by Merchant, I contend that such multiplicity is not only inevitable, but given the deeply regional needs of a heterogeneous population and geographically diverse set of spaces in which inhabitants must live, this co-opting of ecocritical discourse and its localized translation is necessary if ecocriticism is to move from a largely theoretical engagement to a matter of everyday life. On these grounds, Harvey's generalization of such “multiplicity of discourses” as “confusing” is not inaccurate, but I sustain that any theoretical push towards a more "harmonious trajectory of development" will leave out both the adaptations of ecocritical theory and the practical iterations of such theory at the detriment of ecocriticism as a field. To return to such practical engagement, we must address the remaining body of evidence that transcends social cooperation to deal with the realities of food production, on either an individual household or a collective level, namely, what to do with the food that is produced.

The final categories of practical evidence deal with the outcome of a successful effort in the prior categories, or “fair share” of products and resources. Once a community system is established to support individual homesteaders, and structures and systems are in place to enable and sustain the production of beneficial plant and animal materials, the question remains of what do with the products, beyond that which is the individual grower’s own sustenance. In this sense the urban homesteading ideology returns briefly to Thoreau’s insistence that “if one would live simply and eat only the crop he raised … he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground,” before departing from this romantic generalization to address the realities of 21st century production and market demand that Nordahl acknowledges when he concedes that “it is unrealistic to believe that in the near future Americans will only eat locally grown, seasonally available produce” (Thoreau Economy, Nordahl 4). Urban homesteading's answer to this
economic and cultural reality is to preserve, share, and sell.

Preservation provides long-term food solutions for the individuals that produced it, though it may also offer a product to sell or trade in venues such as farmers markets or food co-ops (Kaplan and Blume 153-157, 147-148). *Little House* and *City Homesteader* likewise address the preservation of food, and in fact, this follow-up to the production of food constitutes a significant part of the texts. Caswell and Siskin go as far as to provide instructions and recipes for various preserved foods, natural household products, and even gifts and crafts (125-179). These authors advocate preservation not based on environmental imperative or communal responsibility, but on personal taste and nutritional value (126). Likewise, Meyer provides instructions for food preservation based on its value as “healthy, real, and free of artificial preservatives,” as well such skills and products value in making the possessor “prepared for anything” (91). Primarily, methods of food preservation and trade between local food-producing venues offers an alternative to consumption that supports a global industrial agricultural network, recalling Cronon’s prediction that to dwell self-consciously in nature will require that we “make a home” in nature, using our environment and preserving the autonomy of nature simultaneously and in conjunction (89). Instructions and recipes for canning, drying and otherwise preserving locally grown foods are a practical response to a much larger theoretical engagement with the issue of industrialized agriculture, a way of opting out of a “large-scale, abstract” food production system governed by “invisible networks of authority, expertise, and exchange” (Heise quoted in Fiskio 306-307). In short, food preservation represents the final step in a process that ideally allows communities and individuals to control the “means of production” from seed to table (Fiskio 318). Regardless of whether the participant engages in such practice with knowledge of the theoretical premise behind such actions, or if he/she merely chooses such practices as a matter of convenience or preference (as *Little House’s* authors seem to), the same theoretical premise is being actualized. Urban homesteading struggles in the same theoretical mire as many disciplines or movements, fragmented on levels, united on others, and generally seeking the same outcomes through varied and localized means, both in practice and in theory.

**Conclusions**

Urban homesteading, as exemplified in this sample of its materials, exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between practice and theory. While an examination of the various methods of soil-enrichment in various texts of the recent movement may seem trivial, a close examination of even the most tedious detail yields theoretical implications. Namely, those practices that respond most directly to concerns of preservation of environment, such as *Urban Homesteading*, have in their physical manipulation of environment and repurposing of urban land for production of food, and the distribution of products, skills, and services in an interdependent and reciprocal community, have by Fisko definition, “created place,” a kind of physical and theoretical push to “[deterritorialize and reterritorialize] space” in their favor (319). Even more moderate texts that operate on a smaller, more privatized reterritorialization have by their everyday practices allowed participants to occupy a new kind of environmental space, a hybrid of self-reflective consumption, sustainable production and preservation of food resources, and to a more limited extent, the formation of communities of producers in urban and suburban spaces. The theoretical movement of these more moderate authors towards a theoretical center, as part of the cycle of practice and theory, demonstrates a theoretical response
to the physical realities of more radical restorative practice. Those unable to shed consumptive lifestyle completely opt instead for a middle ground of self-sufficiency and self-conscious consumption. Put off by the political and spiritual eccentricity of the UH movement in its Bay Area manifestation, moderate UH movements adopt a more neutral, less spiritual or gendered theoretical premise that in turn informs more moderate, less physically and emotionally demanding practice. As these developments continue, the overall awareness of alternatives to consumptive living grows, as do the options for those interested in “simpler” or more “real” lives closer to the food they eat and the products they consume.

The various theoretical postures in UH are far from united in their ideology or their underlying theory, but most adhere loosely to Cronon’s notion of “critical self-consciousness” and long-established (though sometimes problematic) traditions in ecocriticism of sustainability and communion with the environment (Cronon 89). Urban homesteading (I refer here to the movement broadly) as a theoretical and ideological imperative separates itself from pejorative notions of the “pastoral,” such as those outlined by Garrard, by not only making the human part of nature, but making responsible treatment and preservation of nature a social and ecological imperative (33). In this way the movement reinforces notions of interdependence and ecosystem, transplanting these ideas from their typical wilderness setting into the world of the urban sprawl.

This transposing of theoretical concept gives body to the “partnership ethic” espoused by Merchant’s feminist critique of ecocriticism. While the movement’s theoretical advancement and popularization of ecocritical concepts is substantial, the movement should be scrutinized for its theoretical failings and contradictions. Limitations to space prevent me from such critique in this essay, but I would be remiss not to identify, in a brief manner, some issues that may have been evident in the course of my argument. First, while the UH movement claims to represent diverse people groups and respect “indigenous people and values,” the movement is as of yet, a largely white, middle class phenomenon (Kaplan and Blume 5). Racial and class issues pervade the movement, much like the divide in wider environmental movements of the 90s that Harvey outlines, and it might be rightly argued that UH as a movement falls into the trap of “liberal illusion” Harvey borrows from Benton, a social situation in which “rights are merely abstract” and a vast majority of the population remains physically unable to actualize these rights (389). Indeed, in many cases the movement has mistaken “promise for fulfillment,” while glossing over the socioeconomic realities of who is able, by their means of time, money, and physical ability, to practice methods that work towards self-sufficiency (Harvey 389).

Gender is an equally problematic issue in UH, but not quite the problem one might expect. As my small sampling indicated, the majority of recent UH literature tends to come from female authors, and online presence is equally dominated by women. On the one hand, I am inclined to applaud the movement as a vehicle for ecofeminist discourse, but I must also recognize the extent to which the movement seems counter to expectations for feminist women in its apparent domesticity. Recent publications have brought this issue to light, including a 2010 entry in Salon, entitled “I am a Radical Homemaker Failure,” where author Madeline Holler recounts her struggles to adhere to a lifestyle of simplicity, self-sufficiency, and domestic labor while growing increasingly frustrated with a sense of financial insecurity, and of being “left behind” by friends advancing in careers and purchasing new luxuries. These realities, while not strictly gendered, must also be addressed
in a consideration of UH as an ecocritical development.

Urban homesteading represents a hybrid of theoretical postures, attempting to fulfill through action a variety of theoretical expectations. In addition to the mediation and self-awareness Cronon espouses, urban homesteading represents a popular move towards “viewing nature as a partner,” retaining those “positive features of engagement with nature” and synthesizing them with the social and ecological concerns of Cronon to produce a practical ecocritical revisionism and an expression of such ideology in lifestyle that supports the environment and human beings as members of the same urban ecosystem (Merchant 119). While the focus of UH is environmental and social, its political implications are numerous and increasingly being addressed in its literature and the literature of similar movements, such as public produce. New agrarian movements in general, but UH especially, represent “an argument not only for food access but for food sovereignty,” and effort to circumnavigate destructive agribusiness and produce “fresh, affordable, culturally appropriate foods” on a local level (Fiskio 318). Urban homesteading represents an adaptation of the classic Jeffersonian ideal of the farmer-citizen, a more theoretically inclusive and more economically viable model for interaction with environment, while still to a large degree a matter of “democratic freedom and responsibility” (Berry quoted by Fiskio 319). More than nationalist or political sentiments, however, UH represents a legitimization of ecocriticism and an actualization of theoretical concepts of environmental space, theory made real by physical action, for the benefit of its participants and their communities.
Works Cited


WE MUST CARVE JOY OUT OF STONES  
THE NEO-TRANSCENDENTALIST POETRY OF RUTH STONE AND JASON SHINDER  
Dante Di Stefano

But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard…Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?[1]

— Henry David Thoreau, from Walden

But I have to ask now, having given Emerson his high-toned say, whether these phrases, these assertions, strike any recognition. He is one of our bedrock thinkers, and his thought is on subjects that, being of the spirit and the supposed verities, ought not change that much over time. And yet it seems to me, reading, that we have landed on a different planet, that not only do the beliefs about the art match nothing that I have heard any artists talking about, but the conception of the human that is invoked is almost impossible to square with anything available in our secular marketplace. People don’t talk this way, or think this way, not about poetry—or anything. [2]

— Sven Birkerts, from “Emerson’s ‘The Poet’ —A Circling”

As Sven Birkert notes in his essay on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Poet,” reading the Transcendentalists today seems like reading work from another planet. In the age of Smartphones, Texting, and Twitter, the era of telegraphy seems far too remote to be easily relatable. Emerson’s talk of the poet’s soul, Beauty’s transcendence, and Nature’s correspondence to the divine seems antiquated to the point of quaintness in a time when you might read, without horror, a Facebook post about drone warfare on your iphone while shopping for Christmas presents before Thanksgiving at Target. Had Henry David Thoreau written Walden today, he would not have lamented a culture confined in books, but, rather, he would lament the captivity caused by computer screens, mass consumerism, and digital displays. His caveat, however, would remain the same: we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor. The Neo-transcendentalist poetry of Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone provides a late twentieth century rejoinder to Thoreau’s question, “Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?” Both poets affirm that they are seers and, in so doing, confirm a linkage to each other and to Emerson’s ideal poet. Thematically, Shinder and Stone share, with Emerson’s ideal poet, the drive: 1) to consecrate the contemporary through their writing, and 2) to use nature to apprehend both the divine and the ordinary.
Neo-transcendentalist poetry might be defined as poetry in dialogue with Transcendentalist thought, particularly with the core elements of Transcendentalism that look for correspondences “between the higher realm of spiritual truth and the lower one of material objects.”[3] Although Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone do not uniformly embrace such correspondences, both poets explore what Stone, in her poem “Connections,” calls “the ledge over the abyss/ between the lobes” and find, there, sights “freighted with the universe.”[4] As Roderick Frazier Nash notes:

Transcendentalists had a definite conception of man’s place in a universe divided between object and essence. His physical existence rooted him to the material portion, like all natural objects, but his soul gave him the potential to transcend this condition. Using intuition and imagination (as distinct from rational understanding), man might penetrate to spiritual truths. In the same manner he could discover his own correspondence with the divine being and appreciate his capacity for moral improvement. [5]

Stone and Shinder lived in a secular marketplace, far removed from the Second Great Awakening that contextualized Emerson’s America. For Stone, the “divine being” matters less than the interconnectedness of ecosystems, the whiplash trail of galaxies, the organizing principle implicit in Einstein’s theory of relativity. In Shinder’s poetry, God’s mercy and presence is actively sought and questioned; Shinder, no dogmatic believer, leverages his doubt into an affirmation of the human. Nevertheless, these two Neo-transcendentalists use intuition and imagination to engage the mysteries Emerson and Thoreau might have considered spiritual truths.

The ideal poet that Emerson proposes in his essay “The Poet” penetrates spiritual truths in order to interpret the profound “secret of the world.”[6] In announcing and affirming the beauty of things, the poet consecrates the contemporary through his writing, and uses nature to apprehend both the divine and the ordinary. Emerson says:

For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole, — re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight, — disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive, or the spider’s geometrical web. Nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own.[7]

The poet, according to Emerson, orders the “fossil poetry” of language and reconciles the factory-village and the railway with the beehive and the spider’s web. This reconciliation is sacramental in that it restore the grace created by communion with “the life of God.” Nature adapts to technological innovation, adopting even that which violates it. The poet synthesizes this process of violation, adaptation, and adoption in “the metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.”[8] Nature rests within,
and outside, the poet; the natural world corresponds to an essential human nature. The poet gazes at both natures, but no gaze is stable.

The nesting of human nature within the natural world preoccupies Ruth Stone in her poem, “Tendrils.” The poem, in its entirety, reads:

While leaves are popping bullets of air
they are saying something—
a flux of otherness,
a pulse of organic sex.
But the wind sucks up
the slightest moth
or spider that leaps
throwing its web in the shadows—
a continuous tongue of foreign talk.
It is a matriarchy,
perhaps a grandmother,
vast and all knowing, this caster
of violent,
untranslatable language.[9]

The tendrils here are the phonemes, strung into words, draped in the syntax of a line. Those tendrils describe the arcs in air made by moths and spiders; they speak the violent, untranslatable, language of leaf, wind, and web. The proper subject of the poem dwells the untranslatable language of leaf “popping bullets of air.” Buffeted by a breeze, bracketed by dashes, this language embodies “a flux of otherness/ a pulse of organic sex.” The natural world voices “a continuous tongue of foreign talk.” Mother Nature's matriarchy casts the poet into a flux of symbols. Stone's poem echoes Emerson's contention: “For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.”[10]

Ruth Stone's “Tendrils” conveys an apprehension of the divine in the ordinary; the poem reconnoiters the creative power of the natural world as it presses in on a human nature gazing outward. Stone's poem embodies Donald Hall's notion of “the unsayable said.” Hall states:

Poets encounter inarticulateness as much as anybody, or maybe more: They are aware of the word's inadequacy because they spend their lives struggling to say the unsayable. From time to time, in decades of devotion to their art, poets succeed in defeating the enemies of ignorance, deceit, and ugliness. The poets we honor most are those who—by studious imagination, by continuous connection to the sensuous body, and by spirit steeped in the practice and learning of language — say the unsayable.[11]

Stone's poem, and Hall's notion of “the unsayable said,” reiterate Emerson's notion of the poet as “Namer or Language-maker,” whom, by “second nature,” retraces the preverbal origins of the symbols (leaf, wind, and web) offered up by the natural world.[12] Unlike Hall
and Emerson, however, Stone's poem does not admit the dislocation and detachment that makes things ugly. “Tendrils” resists the beauty/ugliness binary that underwrites Emerson's, and Hall's, conception of poetry. Instead, Stone emphasizes the ferocity latent in all creative acts.

Similarly, Stone's poem, “Yes, Think,” turns the brutal order of the natural world into a parable about the ordering of human nature. The maternal tone of the poem contrasts with the harsh truth the poem unpacks: that suffering is natural. The poem reads:

Mother, said a small tomato caterpillar to a wasp,
why are you kissing me so hard on my back?
You’ll see, said the industrious wasp, deftly inserting
a package of her eggs under the small caterpillar's skin.
Every day the small caterpillar ate and ate the delicious
tomato leaves. I am surely getting larger, it said to itself.
This was a sad miscalculation. The ravenous hatched
wasp worms were getting larger. O world, the small
caterpillar said, you were so beautiful. I am only a small
tomato caterpillar, made to eat the good tomato leaves.
Now I am so tired. And I am getting even smaller. Nature
smiled. Never mind, dear, she said. You are a lovely link
in the great chain of being. Think how lucky it is to be born.[13]

Mother Goose meets Mother Nature in these lines and explains “the great chain of being.” This is a poem with multiple mothers. The poem employs the conceit from fable and folklore of talking animals. The small tomato caterpillar mistakes the wasp for a mother. The wasp inserts her eggs under the caterpillar's skin, an act of violence described as “kissing.” This kissing delivers the ravenous hatched wasp worms that will kill the caterpillar. The last two lines of the poem end with the reassurance from Mother Wasp, Mother Nature, and Mother Stone, that the caterpillar's fate should not be cause for lament. Suffering and death are part of “the great chain of being” and being alive, “a lovely link” even for a short spell, is the greatest fortune of all.

What might, at first glance, appear to be the parasitic malevolence of the wasp, becomes an allegory for living in a delicately balanced universe. Reading “Yes, Think” in this way recalls Emerson's statement:

The poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought. Why covet a knowledge of new facts? Day and night, house and garden, a few books, a few actions, serve us as well as would all trades and all spectacles. We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word. Also, we use defects and deformities to a sacred purpose, so expressing our sense that the evils of the world are such only to the evil eye. In the old mythology, mythologists observe, defects are ascribed to divine natures, as lameness to Vulcan, blindness to Cupid, and the like, to signify exuberances.[14]
Mother wasp is no mere symbol of the predatory. Baby caterpillar, no mere symbol of prey. Wasp worms, no mere symbol of dwindling. With terrible simplicity, Ruth Stone reanimates a few symbols (wasp, caterpillar, and worm) and turns those symbols to a sacred purpose. Nature, or the great chain of being, substitutes for divinity. Stone's poem contemplates divinity on the threshold between life and death. The defect and deformity, implicit in a symbiotic relationship that ends in death for the caterpillar, signifies not sorrow, but exuberance: think how lucky it is to be born, even when faced with dying, even at the farthest edge of life.

In addition to apprehending the divine in her poetry, Ruth Stone consecrates and critiques the contemporary. Oftentimes, as in her poem, “Male Gorillas,” the critique applies to societal gender norms. In this poem, the speaker describes the male patrons of a donut shop lined up at the counter as: “twenty three silver backs.”[15] In the poem, the female speaker has to wait and after waiting, then, insists on her order, which she takes to an “inoffensive table along the wall.”[16] She, being female, is at the bottom of the hierarchy, separated from the silver backs, who “are methodically browsing/ in their own territory.”[17] The last two lines of the poem position the speaker as primatologist: “This data goes into that vast/ confused library, the female mind.”[18] The lines contain wry humor, but the anthropological vantage point catalogues and consecrates the habitat of the donut shop. Emerson looked for a poet who could consecrate railways and factory villages. In this poem, Ruth Stone consecrates the greasy spoon and gently critiques the late twentieth century blue collar, or middle class, American male in his natural environment.

Stone's poem, “Things I Say to Myself while Hanging Laundry,” likewise consecrates the contemporary world while offering a vision of divinity written in the language of physics. What Newton and Darwin were for Emerson, Einstein and Oppenheimer were for Stone. Stone's contemplation of Einstein in this poem brings her into close conversation with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jason Shinder, and Donald Hall. Stone's poem goes:

If an ant, crossing on the clothesline
from apple tree to apple tree,
would think and think,
it probably could not dream up Albert Einstein.
Or even his sloppy moustache;
or the wrinkled skin bags under his eyes
that puffed out years later,
after he dreamed up that maddening relativity.
Even laundry is three-dimensional.
The ants cross its great fibrous forests
from clothespin to clothespin
carrying the very heart of life in their sacs or mandibles,
the very heart of the universe in their formic acid molecules.
And how refreshing the linens are,
lying in the clean sheets at night,
when you seem to be the only one on the mountain,
and your body feels the smooth touch of the bed
like love against your skin;
and the heavy sac of yourself relaxes into its embrace.
When you turn out the light,
you are blind in the dark
as perhaps the ants are blind,
with the same abstract leap out of this limiting dimension.
So that the very curve of light,
as it is pulled in the dimple of space,
is relative to your own blind pathway across the abyss.
And there in the dark is Albert Einstein
with his clever formula that looks like little mandibles
digging tunnels into the earth
and bringing it up, grain by grain,
the crystals of sand exploding
into white-hot radiant turbulence,
smiling at you, his shy bushy smile,
along an imaginary line from here to there.[19]

Stone consecrates the quotidian of clotheslines. She consecrates the things we say to
ourselves when we are alone doing the ordinary household chores that never end. She builds
from the most miniscule ant a reverie that carries a cosmos freighted with all of its scientific
laws. Of Emerson’s poem “The Snow-storm,” Albert Gelpi wrote:

The power of Nature makes new forms of the known world, and Art can do no better with
its more deliberative and self-conscious effort than to strive to translate into its own materials
(paint, stone, words, and so on) the new creation hurled into being by the momentary blast
of the night-wind. [20]

In “Things I Say to Myself while Hanging Laundry,” Stone makes new forms from the
known world. Little could be more recognizable, more relatable, more mundane than doing
laundry and letting your thoughts wander as you do. Stone's thoughts, however, wander a crooked and quirky path into the "white-hot radiant turbulence" of imagination and Nature (biochemical and human).

Deliberately and self-consciously, Stone's poem strives to translate the correspondences she intuits in poetry, science, and self. The title of the poem establishes a playful tone that belies the grave intelligence breathing through these lines. Stone begins by following an ant as it crosses the clothesline "from apple tree to apple tree." The clothesline, a trope that recurs throughout Stone body of work, is always associated with a line of poetry. In her poem, "Clotheslines," Stone writes: "Words like midges swarming in a cloud/ move between the clotheslines."[21] Words, or lines of words, "like the whale's fabulous sieve of baleen,/ feed on the microcosm of the world."[22] Stone's ant crossing the clothesline, then, breaks the poem into meta-fiction at the outset. However, it must be remembered that this ant crossing the clothesline is only a hypothetical ant arising from the speaker's self-talk as she hangs laundry; later in the poem, the ant multiplies into a plurality of ants and those ants slip from the hypothetical to the concrete as they cross the "great fibrous forests" of laundry "from clothespin to clothespin."

Stone establishes a complicated series of correspondences between the ant(s) the speaker imagines, the denied possibility of an ant imagining Albert Einstein, and the genius of Einstein's imagination. Stone moves easily from the rhythms of colloquial speech to a contemplation of the cosmos. The poem shuffles back and forth in time between the big bang and the present. Ant, speaker, and Einstein elide in the blind dark, smiling "along an imaginary line from here to there." Hymenoptera, hominid, physicist, and poet all walk along the same line, "carrying the very heart of life in their sacs or mandibles,/ the very heart of the universe in their formic acid molecules." Even the symbol of Einstein's genius, his "clever formula that looks like little mandibles," E=MC2, corresponds to the insect's anatomy. Stone offers us a poetics of mass-energy equivalence. The interconnectedness of signs and nature evokes Emerson:

"Like love against your skin," each line of this poem carries the whole sense of nature. What does not make sense to the male gorillas sitting at the counter of the donut shop, what scares the small tomato caterpillar, what the ant crossing the clothesline never imagines, is the understanding that the poet, or the physicist, brings forth in her capacity as seer. Again, small caterpillar, the understanding remains: that you are a lovely link in the great chain of being, traveling along an imaginary line from here to there.

Like Stone's small tomato caterpillar, the poetry of Jason Shinder voices yearning on the threshold of life and death. Shinder's body of work contemplates love, suffering, and relationships as lovely links in the great chain. His is an earn spirituality, a poetry of hunger and striving. In, perhaps, the central poem in his body of work, "Once before the Ocean,"
Shinder addresses God in a manner that never appears in Ruth Stone's work. Shinder's poem says:

I dreamed I was the first man to speak to God.
He leaned over the mountains, oceans and sod.
He said, We must carve joy out of stones.
He said, Fear of love is joy. It leaves no one alone.

When I wake I see his shadow.
The sun burns with the darkness of every sparrow.
In the middle of a busy street my eyes close.
His spirit shines out of every window.

Angels will wind up my broken parts.
In The Book, a man's good heart
makes his bones open up with wings.
I lower my head on my knees and I sing.

Once I stood before the ocean, God's house.
The quarter-moon was an old man in bed, praying out loud.
My mouth froze around the O in His name,
as if frozen around everyone's pain.[24]

Shinder's poem references Robert Frost's sonnet, “Once by the Pacific,” a sonnet which in turn references Shakespeare's Othello; Frost ends his sonnet with the lines: “There would be more than ocean-water broken/ before God's last Put out the light was spoken.”[25] Frost and Shinder alike address the suffering and grief at the heart of human nature. Both poems speak in the language of depression, but Shinder's holds out the promise of hope, albeit what he called, a “stupid hope,” a faith in humanity absent in Frost.

Stupid hope binds Shinder's vision to that of Emerson's in the essay, “Self-Reliance.” Shinder invokes this hope through the figure of a solitary man “in the middle of a busy street.” Emerson says:

But now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man, nor is his genius admonished to stay at home, to put itself in communication with the internal ocean, but it goes abroad to beg a cup of water of the urns of other men. We must go alone. I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how chaste the persons look, begirt each one with a precinct or sanctuary! So let us always sit. Why should we assume the faults of our friend, or wife, or father, or child, because they sit around our hearth, or are said to have the same blood? All men have my blood, and I have all men's. Not for that will I adopt their petulance or folly, even to the extent of being ashamed of it. But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation. At times the whole world seems to be in conspiracy to importune you with emphatic trifles. Friend, client, child, sickness, fear, want, charity, all knock at once at thy closet door, and say, — 'Come out
unto us. ’ But keep thy state; come not into their confusion. The power men possess to annoy me, I give them by a weak curiosity. No man can come near me but through my act. “What we love that we have, but by desire we bereave ourselves of the love.”[26]

Shinder’s poems are silent churches, his lines like century old wooden pews. In “Once before the Ocean,” the ocean, “God’s house,” is both Emerson’s internal ocean and Ruth Stone’s cosmos, bursting with a “white-hot radiant turbulence.”

In the first line of Shinder’s poem, the speaker situates himself as another Adam: “I dreamed I was the first man to speak to God.” In so doing, the speaker becomes one of Emerson’s representative men, who “apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common-wealth.”[27] The common-wealth he apprises us of is the truth that human isolation is not mechanical, but spiritual, and that, therefore, this isolation must be a form of ascendancy. Shinder’s speaker dreams a dialogue with a God. Shinder’s God seems to have cadged epigrams from William Blake. When God speaks he says: “We must carve joy out of stones” and “Fear of love is joy. It leaves no one alone.” In the “Proverbs of Hell,” Blake says: “Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth.”[28] Sorrowing in the internal ocean of his loneliness, the speaker in Shinder’s poem relays the dictate of God “to carve joy out of stones,” to be what Emerson would call a “Namer” and “Language-maker.”

As “Language-maker” Shinder carves joy out of the stones of Frost’s “Once by the Pacific” and William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy.” From Frost’s poem he derives the ocean and the language of depression. From Blake’s poem he takes angels, the burning sun, and the imagery of light and darkness. Indeed, the central lines of Blake’s poem might stand in as the central lines of Shinder’s body of work: “and we are put on earth a little space/ that we may learn to bear the beams of love.”[29] Shinder’s poems artfully attend to what this learning process might entail, how we might bear the beams of love given to us during our brief time on earth. Interestingly, when God talks to Shinder’s speaker about bearing the beams of love, God declares inclusively: “we must carve joy out of stones.” Shinder separates neither the divine from the human, nor the internal ocean from the eternal ocean, and he never forgets the real waves of the sea. Even in the busiest street, God’s presence shines out of every window, and angels will “wind up” the broken parts of the speaker’s being. The last two lines of the poem return to the realm of Emerson’s “Language-maker”: “My mouth froze around the O in His name,/ as if frozen around everyone’s pain.” Again, these lines describe and fulfill Donald Hall’s “unsayable said,” aware of the inadequacy of language, yet affirming a stupid hope in the promise of communion. For Shinder, unlike Emerson, desire does not bereave. It binds.

Formally, “Once before the Ocean” is the most tightly made poem in Shinder’s body of work, bound together by terminal lines. There is only one instance of enjambment. By using terminal lines, Shinder renders the poem incantatory, makes it less conversational, and obscures his use of end rhymes that otherwise might seem singsong. Usually, enjambment would do this obscuring work; this poem provides a rare exception. The first and third quatrains employ true rhyme: God/sod, stone/alone, parts/heart, wings/sing. Aurally and symbolically yoking these words together parallels the poem’s yoking of the divine with the human, suffering with song, the earth with flight, fear of love with joy. In the second and fourth stanzas, Shinder employs slant rhyme: shadow/narrow, close/window, house/out loud (doubling the assonance with an apocopated rhyme), name/pain. Again, these couplings produce a broken music that mirrors the poem’s central themes. Shinder uses slant rhyme
in the stanzas that occur outside (in the street and before the ocean). True rhyme occurs in
the stanzas that address the internal ocean (the world of dreams and prayers). Inside, the
poem formally implies, music achieves a perfection that fractures as it flows outward into the
imperfect world.

Shinder's poem is finely organized and as Emerson notes: “whenever we are so finely
organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal
warblings, and attempt to write them down.”[30] The poem consists of four quatrains, each
independent in terms of ideas, but bound together by tone. The first stanza posits the lonely
dilemma of a man and details his conversation with God; this stanza occupies the region
of dreams and prophecy. The second stanza pulls the speaker into the waking world where
“the sun burns with the darkness of every sparrow.” This stanza locates its speaker in the
busy street, the territory of Emerson’s mob; nevertheless, God shines from the windows. The
third stanza takes place in the internal ocean, where the speaker’s spiritual and psychological
wounds are displayed. This stanza occurs within the amnion of light that is prayer. Its last line
simultaneously curls inward and leaps outward: “I lower my head on my knees and I sing.”
The final stanza takes place in the wide open, before “God’s house,” the eternal ocean, all of
creation. The poem ends frozen on the pain that bonds all of creation together, on the verge
of song. As Shinder says in the poem, “Lives of the Romantics,” “the one thing I have over
angels is I have to sing out of adversity.”[31] The formal tightness of the poem underscores
the thematic concern with the sense of confinement that comes from carrying an internal
ocean of grief and brokenness, which may lead one, contrarily, to carve joy from the stones
and sing.

To carve joy from the stones and sing is the proper task of any poet. For Ruth Stone and
Jason Shinder poetry was an art as simple as drinking water from a wooden bowl. It was their
nature. Emerson relates that:

He who shall sing…must drink water out of a wooden bowl. For poetry is not ‘Devil’s
wine’, but God’s wine. It is with this as it is with toys. We fill the hands and nurseries of our
children with all manner of dolls, drums, and horses, withdrawing their eyes from the plain
face and sufficing objects of nature, the sun, and moon, the animals, the water, and stones,
which should be their toys. So the poet’s habit of living should be set on a key so low and
plain, that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of
the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water. That
spirit which suffices quiet hearts, which seems to come forth to such from every dry knoll
of sere grass, from every pine-stump, and half-imbedded stone, on which the dull March
sun shines, comes forth to the poor and hungry, and such as are of simple taste. If thou fill
thy brain with Boston and New York, with fashion and covetousness, and wilt stimulate thy
jaded senses with wine and French coffee, thou shalt find no radiance of wisdom in the lonely
waste of the pinewoods.

In Shinder’s poetry, particularly, tipsiness miraculously comes from drinking water out
of the tap or admiring the gift of sunlight on an ordinary day. His habits of living, perhaps,
were set on a key so low and plain that the common influences could still delight him, despite
the fact that he traveled through New York’s rarified literary world. Shinder died in 2008
of non-Hodgkins lymphoma and leukemia. As Shinder himself noted in a New York Times
Magazine article, he saw cancer as: “a tremendous opportunity to have your face right up
against the glass of your mortality.”[32] Melanie Thernstrom, his friend, who wrote the article continued:

Seeing cancer as a spiritual avenue was unfortunately incompatible with seeing illness as an ill: a problem to be combated with medical science. For half a year he was vaguely troubled by lumps in his throat before he got around to seeing an internist. The doctors wanted to start chemotherapy, he told me, but he didn’t want to ruin the summer — he had plans to go on a writing retreat in Greece and to spend time at his house on the Cape. He was careless with his medication; he was perpetually late to treatment; in the hours before chemotherapy, he could be found ice-skating with a date who didn’t know he was sick.[33]

From such simple pleasures, from such an unpretentious life, Shinder built the earnest music of his poetry. Emerson’s valediction is apt: “Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only...though thou should walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble.”[34]

As Jason Shinder walked the world over, he wrote poetry that constantly consecrated the mundane details of late twentieth and early twenty-first century American life. First and foremost, he was a poet of relationships, a love poet in the broadest sense. His greatest poem of romantic love, “The Beginning of Love,” provides an example of poetry in dialogue with Emerson’s ideal poet. The poem reads:

I go to my love
    the way I go to the ocean.
    I lie down

for her like a raft
    when the wish to float
    no longer matters.

I am the angel
    the cold leaves
    in her breath.

I open up her heart
    like a rose
    and pull the bee out.

Sometimes, late at night,
    I sit on the edge
    of the bed imagining

the shape of words
    that will comfort her.
    In August I wrap
a cold towel
around her forehead.
I always take out
two glasses. When I open
the car door for her
I can imagine anything
but staying at home,
lying in bed,
staying at home.

And when she’s away
I can see her through
the moon falling
on the floor
in the shape
of an hourglass.[35]

As in the previous poem discussed, Shinder uses the ocean as metaphor here. He begins the poem with the simile: “I go to my love/ the way I go to the ocean.” Formally, the lines, floating in the vast blank expanse of the page, imitate tiny waves lapping the shore. The line breaks induce a sense of buoyancy throughout the poem. Shinder breaks lines by prepositional phrase in the poem’s final stanza, giving each prepositional phrase its own line, and thus, simultaneously, slowing down and accelerating the way the lines deliver meaning, which further compounds the image of waves suggested by the poem’s beginning lines.

The most amazing aspect of this poem, and in fact of Shinder’s poems in general, is its deft use of the commonplace tropes of traditional love poetry. He gives us ocean, angel, moonlight, breath, rose, heart, and bee. In a lesser poet’s hands, these clichés of love poetry would seem juvenile. Even an accomplished poet writing today would most likely treat these tropes with irony, or, at least, with a level of self-awareness that would defend against embarrassment. However, Shinder’s sincerity, his open-heartedness, and his skill allow him to access these images in new ways. Emerson’s discussion of the poet’s connection with the conventional applies:

The poet pours out verses in every solitude. Most of the things he says are conventional, no doubt; but by and by he says something which is original and beautiful. That charms him. He would say nothing else but such things. In our way of talking, we say, ‘That is yours, this is mine;’ but the poet knows well that it is not his; that it is as strange and beautiful to him as to you.[36]

Although Shinder resists the temptation to say nothing else but the original and the beautiful, there are, arguably, no more beautiful and original lines in the poetry of his contemporaries than: “I open up her heart/ like a rose/ and pull the bee out.”
The speaker opens the beloved's heart. He opens his own heart to the possibility of love. Late at night on the edge of his bed he cannot open his mouth to shape the words that will comfort her. He opens his imagination to what those words could be, but the words do not enter. He opens the car door for her and opens, again, his imagination, which is homebound and bedridden. Finally, when she is away, an open window lets in moonlight, which shapes in shadow an unexpected hourglass on the floor. The hourglass suggests the feminine form, time, mortality, the fleeting nature of everything human, and the end of the beginning of love. Shinder's poem consecrates the single life in its contemporary American formulation. It also consecrates the vulnerability that floods the beginning of love. In these acts of consecration, Shinder does what Emerson found lacking in the poets of his age; “with sufficient plainness” and “sufficient profoundness” Shinder addresses himself to life and dares to “chant our own times and social circumstance.”[37]


While lovers sleep, I dig my nails into the earth,
holding up traffic. Just now a cloud has pulled up
while I was talking to the Emptiness
of the Universe and my voice plugged into the waves
at the bottom of the ocean.
My heart is taped up like a child's drawing
of the moon over the broken window of the sky
where the wind always comes back to fill my lungs.
I will dance on my shadow. I will open my mouth
with the air inside my mother's coffin.
I will be the arrow breaking apart in the body
of the blackbird, which appears at my window, singing.[38]

As in “Once before the Ocean” and “The Beginning of Love,” the images of ocean, shadow, moon, window, and heart recur. This poem addresses one of Shinder's central concerns: exploring how one might sing while adrift in the emptiness of the universe, bound to death and yet alive and ever present. Stone's poem picks up strands of this central concern. The poem addresses her husband, the poet, Walter Stone, who committed suicide in 1959, leaving Ruth to raise their three daughters. “That Day” reads:

Since then we've gone around the sun fifty times.
The sun itself has rushed on.
All the cells of my skin that you loved to touch
have flaked away and been renewed.
I am an epidermal stranger.
Even enormous factories. So much.
Even the railway station—
ball-wracked. Eliminated.
Now the dead may be pelletized,
disgorged as wafers in space.
Some may be sent to the sun in casks,
as if to Osiris.
Where is that day in Chicago
when we stood on a cement platform,
and I held your hand against my face?
That given moment-by-moment light,
which, in a matter of hours from then,
had already traveled out of the solar system.[39]

Ruth Stone talks to her husband here and she also talks to “that given moment-by-moment light,” which rushes forward like a torrent, creating a cataract of absence and longing in the poet’s heart. Stone digs her nails into the earth and plugs her voice into the waves and particles of the photons that travel out of the solar system hours after they have arrived in the present moments we are forever shedding.

Both poems speak in the voice of the “epidermal stranger.” To be an epidermal stranger is to be an “arrow breaking apart in the body/ of the blackbird.” The blackbird in Shinder’s poem alights outside his window and sings. The poet sits outside himself (in nature?) and becomes the disintegration that breaks into song. The air inside his mother’s coffin causes the speaker to open his mouth. Sorrow brings forth. Grief damns, but, as Blake said, damns brace.[40] There is nothing more bracing than grief. There is nothing more bracing than the realization that one is an epidermal stranger, a creature whose skin sheds constantly, wed to earth, cloud, and traffic. There is nothing more bracing than to feel your heart is taped like a child’s drawing of the moon over the broken window of the sky, and to know you will one day be disgorged as a wafer in space and sent to the sun in casks. Shinder and Stone both meditate on loss and the transient nature of existence. Despite the fleetingness ascribed to a world where the sun itself has moved on, both poets draw strength, while dancing on their own shadows, from the simplest things: apples, ants, clotheslines, sparrows, blackbirds, and stones. All of the poetry written by Stone and Shinder carves joy from such simple stones. As Donald Hall put it: “Words are to poems as stones are to the stone-carving sculptor.”[41]

The act of carving words into poetry inaugurates what is beyond speech, what binds all of human experience. “Arrow Breaking Apart” and “That Day” exemplify poetry that says the unsayable, as does Donald Hall’s poem, “White Apples.” Hall’s poem reads:

when my father had been dead a week
I woke
with his voice in my ear
I sat up in bed
and held my breath
and stared at the pale closed door
white apples and the taste of stone
if he called again
I would put on my coat and galoshes

Donald Hall does not punctuate this poem because in death there is no punctuation. A
death father will never call his son again and yet his voice will break in the son’s ear again and
again. Loss breaks and breaks like a window or the waves of the sea. From this brokenness,
however, one might build, in a poem, what Hall describes as “a secret room.” Hall
explains:

The unsayable builds a secret room, in the best poems, which shows in the
excess of feeling over paraphrase. This room is not a Hidden meaning, to be
paraphrased by the intellect; it conceals itself from reasonable explanation.
The secret room is something to acknowledge, accept, and honor in a silence
of assent; the secret room is where the unsayable gathers, and it is poetry’s
uniqueness.

In “White Apples,” the unsayable gathers around the line: “white apples and the taste of
stone.” In Ruth Stone’s “That Day,” the unsayable gathers around the line: “I am an epidermal
stranger.”

In Jason Shinder’s “Arrow Breaking Apart,” the unsayable gathers in the poem’s last
two lines: “I will be the arrow breaking apart in the body/ of the blackbird, which appears
at my window, singing.” All three of these “secret rooms” resist explication and transcend
paraphrase. Certainly, the bones of mortality and the shadow of sorrow coast through these
lines, but the words are more than the weight of their saying.

If brokenness opens a door to the secret room, then love is the lintel, the jamb, the knob,
the lock and key, and the threshold these poets are continually crossing. Emerson’s thought
pertains:

Every promise of the soul has innumerable fulfilments; each of its joys ripens
into new want. Nature, uncontainable, flowing, forelooking, in the first
sentiment of kindness anticipates already a benevolence which shall lose
all particular regards in its general light. The introduction to this felicity is
in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is the enchantment of
human life; which, like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm, seize on man
at one period, and work a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to
his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with
new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society.[45]

The many felicities contained within the poetry of Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone afford ample evidence of the poets’ benevolent spirits; their enchantment with human life, notwithstanding all of its difficulties, unites their poetry. Love has worked a revolution in their minds and bodies. Shinder and Stone remain pledge to domestic and civic relations even as they are carried into new sympathy with nature. They were heroic. Their words are sacred. Their open imaginations establish a marriage between these lonely poets and all of human society.

Galaxies of immutable light sustained Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone. As observers of nature, and human nature, both poets were apprenticed to that light. Jason Shinder called that light, “stupid hope.” Ruth Stone read that light in clotheslines and in the laughter of women that “gathers like reeds in a river.”[46] Emerson concludes his essay on love by discussing that light:

Thus are we put in training for a love which knows not sex, nor person, nor partiality, but which seeks virtue and wisdom everywhere, to the end of increasing virtue and wisdom. We are by nature observers, and thereby learners. That is our permanent state. But we are often made to feel that our affections are but tents of a night. Though slowly and with pain, the objects of the affections change, as the objects of thought do. There are moments when the affections rule and absorb the man, and make his happiness dependent on a person or persons. But in health the mind is presently seen again, — its overarching vault, bright with galaxies of immutable lights, and the warm loves and fears that swept over us as clouds, must lose their finite character and blend with God, to attain their own perfection. But we need not fear that we can lose any thing by the progress of the soul. The soul may be trusted to the end. That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on for ever.[47]

The love that Emerson describes here is transcendent and transformative. It is no mere consolation, but a light, traveling in an imaginary line from here to there, like the light that travels through the dark vacuum of space.

An impartial love which seeks virtue and wisdom writes itself into the lines that Shinder and Stone transcribed during their short stays on earth. Ruth Stone died on November 19, 2011. She spent fifty-two of her ninety-six years on earth, a widowed mother. Jason Shinder spent fifty-three years on earth, a bachelor who loved and respected women. Both poets consecrated the elements of the late twentieth century American experience in their poetry. They used nature to apprehend the divine, whether the divine be the Judeo-Christian God of Shinder’s work, or Mother Nature and the laws of physics in Stone’s work. They died in the midst of the technology revolution, in a consumer culture that ran counter to their poetry.
Their era belongs more to Jean Baudrillard than it does to Emerson. In his book, Consumer Society, Baudrillard notes:

We have reached the point where “consumption” has grasped the whole of life; where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode; where the schedule of gratification is outlined in advance, one hour at a time; and where the “environment” is complete, completely climatized, furnished, and cultured. In the phenomenology of consumption, the general climatization of life, of goods, objects, services, behaviors, and social relationships represents the perfected, “consummated,” stage of evolution which, through articulated networks of objects, ascends from pure and simple abundance to a complete conditioning of action and time, and finally to the systematic organization of ambiance, which is characteristic of the drugstores, the shopping malls, or the modern airports in our futuristic cites. [48]

In the past thirty years the “climatization of life, of goods, objects, services, behaviors, and social relationships” has cut off a climate of stars, moon, sun, rain, clotheslines, ants, friendship, love, and genuine connection. The hyperreality generated by mass consumerism and the technology revolution has created a situation wherein we are more connected than ever, and yet, more separate, lonelier, more desperate than those men in Walden who live quiet lives of desperation.[49] Facebook has replaced the mailed letter and the coffee klatch. Most people would rather text than talk on the telephone. University undergraduates do research on Wikipedia. Teenagers and adults spend hours on end playing videogames that simulate war and crime. Drones have replaced combat troops and fighter pilots. Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone knew that “unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.”[50]

How much more important, then, for Stone and Shinder to stand as representatives of humankind, who might apprise us “not of wealth, but of the common-wealth.”[51] How much more difficult the work of the poet, as Thoreau explained it in his essay “Walking,” in a time when the pixels of a computer screen have come to define the pedestrian. Thoreau says: “He would be a poet…who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to the page with earth adhering to their roots.”[52] Donald Hall begins his essay, “Poetry and Ambition,” by making the following claims about late twentieth century American poetry:

I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems.

An ambitious project—but sensible, I think. And it seems to me that contemporary American poetry is afflicted by modesty of ambition—a modesty, alas, genuine ... if sometimes accompanied by vast pretense. Of course the great majority of contemporary poems, in any era, will always be bad or mediocre. (Our time may well be characterized by more mediocrity and less badness.) But if failure is constant the types of failure vary, and the
qualities and habits of our society specify the manners and the methods of our failure. I think that we fail in part because we lack serious ambition.[53]

Ruth Stone and Jason Shinder spent their entire lives trying to write great poems. Both poets synthesize, in their work, elements of English Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Modernism, Deep Imagism, and Confessionalism. They did not lack ambition, but the earnestness and sincerity with which they wrote sometimes disguised the ambitious nature of their work.

Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone nailed words to their primitive senses and transplanted them to the page with earth adhering to their roots. By understanding their parallels with each other, and with their Transcendentalist predecessors, the crack in the door to the secret rooms they built inside their poems opens a little wider. From that crack streams the light of galaxies and the knowledge that we are put on earth a little space, and yet we may still learn to bear the beams of love. Of course, we cannot console ourselves with the bravery of minks and muskrats. Of course, we land on a different planet every day. Of course, the poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought. Of course, while leaves are popping bullets of air, they are saying something. Of course, we must carve joy out of stones. Of course, the great majority of contemporary poems, in any era, will always be bad or mediocre. Like a wreath blown off a fresh grave, poetry is always losing its heart. Poets like Jason Shinder and Ruth Stone are constantly chasing after it, and finding it, and putting it back in place.

Works Cited


Shinder, Jason. *Every Room We Ever Slept In*. Sheep Meadow Press (Riverdale-on-Hudson, 1993).


[8] Ibid., p. 290.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.


[33] Ibid.


[37] Ibid., p. 304.


[44] Ibid., P. 3.


[49] “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.” Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. W.W. Norton (New York, 1951), p. 22.

[50] Ibid.


FLUID INVENTIVENESS
THE BIOREGIONAL IMAGINATION: LITERATURE, ECOLOGY, AND PLACE
Lizz Bernstein

The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place, edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster, grew out of emails exchanged by the editors through the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). The editors note in their “Acknowledgments” that “royalties from the sale of this book go directly to ASLE to further its mission ‘to promote the understanding of nature and culture for a sustainable world by fostering a community of scholars, teachers, and writers who study the relationships among literature, culture, and the physical environment’” (xii-xiii). Genres in this collection include memoir, poetry, web sites, short stories; real and invented environments exist side by side, examined equally for what they reveal about our perception of place, grouped in sections called “Reinhabiting,” “Rereading,” “Reimagining,” and “Renewal.” Lynch, Glotfelty and Armbruster have created textual juxtapositions that defy boundaries, replacing them with imaginative connections.

The opening interview, “Big Picture, Local Place: A Conversation with David Robertson and Robert L. Thayer Jr.,” provides historical context for bioregionalism, as Robertson and Thayer were colleagues of Gary Snyder, the most well-known spokesperson for the concept. Snyder’s inspiration is again remembered in John Lane’s “Still under the Influence: The Bioregional Origins of the Hub City Writers Project.” In a more neutral tone, Rinda West’s “Representing Chicago Wilderness” studies the communication strategies of Chicago Wilderness, a consortium formed in the 1970s and dedicated to connecting Chicagoans to the biodiversity of their metropolitan environment. The last four essays in this section are close readings of lived experiences in four watersheds, subject matter suitable to our fluid understanding of bioregionalism. Norah Bowman-Broz says of Eric Collier’s 1959 memoir Three against the Wilderness that the author’s “narration of the restoration project, map[s] the flow of his family’s mental ecological register,” as they experience “creative relations” and “interspecies influences” along Meldrum Creek (81, 80). As a result of these connections, “the Western colonial image of man as subject moving relentlessly across an objectified landscape gives over to a reciprocal flow of human/nonhuman influences and intents” (81). In the next decade, however, hydroelectric power helped to reenergize the Western colonial image (74). Chad Wriglesworth’s “The Poetics of Water: Currents of Reclamation in the Columbia River Basin” documents the fluidity of the ecological imagination among the region’s writers, noting that Woody Guthrie was hired in 1941 by the Bonneville Power Administration to compose “pro-hydroelectric folksongs,” while regional journalists “linked local prosperity to hydroelectric dams,” and federal reclamation played the protagonist in novels of the Northwest (87, 88). Contemporary poets, meanwhile, “communicate the fluid relationships between rhythms of language and watersheds by imagining the Columbia River as a sort of poem” (86-87). If the Columbia River is being read as a poem, Italy’s Po River is a dirge for the “agony of a disappearing, age-old culture of interdependence between people and places,” as described in Serenella Iovino’s
essay, “Restoring the Imagination of Place: Narrative Reinhabitation and the Po Valley” (110). Still, Iovino asserts that imagination can “restore the intimate osmosis of inside and outside, of human mind and the mind of place” (110). The final essay in this section is by Bart Welling, who examines the ways creative writers have contributed to reinhabitation work in “This Is What Matters: Reinhabitory Discourse and the ‘Poetics of Responsibility’ in the Work of Janisse Ray.” Recalling Collier’s “reciprocal flow,” Pacific Northwestern poets’ “fluid relationships,” and Iovino’s “intimate osmosis,” Welling quotes Ray describing her grandmother’s hole-riddled house in Georgia’s Altamaha River Watershed as “only a permeable screen” between herself and “the rest of life” (126). This final essay in the “Reinhabitation” section warns those who speak “reinhabitory discourse” to recognize all the residents of a given habitat as stakeholders in it, loggers as well as environmentalists, insiders and outsiders, lest “[r]einhabitory discourse as a poetics of responsibility [. . .] ossify into a new poetics of authenticity, “ damming the flow of the many voices that can tell what Ray herself calls “odd, funny stories we never schemed for ourselves” (128-129).

“Rereading” begins with Christine Cusick’s “Mapping Placelore: Tim Robinson’s Ambulation and Articulation of Connemara as Biogregion.” Robinson moved to Ireland’s Aran Islands in 1972 and became worried about the voices and stories, human and nonhuman, being lost by virtue of “too often [being] held hostage to narratives of colonial conquest and rebellion” (135). According to Cusick, Robinson’s work, which combines nonfiction prose and painstaking cartography, “relies on linguistic navigation, [. . .] both scientific acuity and cultural connotation” (138). Cusick asserts that “simply asking questions, expressing interest, and listening to answers,” in “attunement to locale [. . .] is where the hope of bioregionalism lies,” suggesting how Robinson’s “ambulatory writing” can serve as a model for other bioregional documentarians (143, 141). Movement and voice are of utmost importance in “The Challenge of Writing Biogregionally: Performing the Bow River in Jon Whyte’s ‘Minisniwapta: Voices of the River’” by Harry Vandervlist. Whyte’s piece, a concrete poem in genre, is unfinished, without “artistic closure,” a fitting description for the best that bioregional thought and texts have to offer (156). Disappointingly, Whyte’s poem does not reproduce well in the pages of the anthology, appearing too light and too small and so not capturing the grandeur of the river Whyte describes and depicts. Nevertheless, according to Vandervlist, Whyte “was a strong proponent of the concept that place and mind cocreate each other,” and his unfinished poem suggests the eternal and unfinished natural processes Whyte’s mind sought to map (160).

What Whyte calls cocreation, Ruth Blair refers to as “a constant process of relationship and negotiation among phenomena” in “Figures of Life: Beverley Farmer’s The Seal Woman as an Australian Bioregional Novel” (165). Two photographs capture this negotiation, depicting both the human and nonhuman phenomena of Swan Bay. Reproduced in tones of gray, the photos are Beverley Farmer’s own and lend a personal touch to Blair’s essay, bringing the land/seascape of Farmer’s novel into lively closeup and suggesting cooperation between critic and author (168, 169). The intimacy of these photos contrasts sharply with the emotional distance of the minimalist map depicting Queenscliff and Otway Plain Bioregion of Victoria, Australia, that also illustrates the essay (165). The very design of The Bioregional Imagination facilitates its message of collaboration between place and mind that Blair ascribes to The Seal Woman as “the sense of human embeddedness in particular physical contexts” (167).
Humans are not only embedded in physical contexts, but also in temporal ones, and Heather Kerr asks, and answers, whether bioregional literary criticism can be “fruitfully applied” to authors from periods before the modern. She reads Charlotte Smith’s pre-Romantic poetry of southeast England for its “localism,” which she describes as a striking contrast to Smith’s “novelistic cosmopolitanism” (182). Kerr reads Smith’s poetry as “an unswerving attentiveness to the effects of systemic injustice in the period following the French Revolution,” attending to Smith’s verse for “the ways in which particular bioregions offer ethnically preferable alternatives to generally institutionalized injustices, whether interpersonal or international” (183). From this perspective, bioregional criticism is both timely and timeless, examining historical epochs as bioregional cocreations of nature and culture. Accordingly, the essay following Kerr’s time travels from Smith’s nineteenth-century England to Russell Banks’s twentieth-century New England, which Kent C. Ryden insists cannot be understood as a literary region “without taking into account how its natural identity helps shape its cultural identity” (201). In “The Nature of Region: Russell Banks, New England, and New York,” Ryden reads Banks’s fiction as an unsentimental realism that unpacks bioregionalism’s own class biases: “[P]erhaps bioregionalism as a sociocultural phenomenon depends on a certain level of educational class, or economic attainment” (201-202).

But even as bioregional criticism in this anthology does not shy away from difficult self-examination, “Critical Utopianism and Bioregional Ecocriticism” by David Landis Barnhill offers suggestions for moving beyond self-criticism. Barnhill maintains, “[U]topian thinkers, including literary critics, claim that utopian imagination is essential. If we have any hope of really discerning the outrages of today’s society and moving toward a better one, we must cultivate the ability to imagine something else” (214). Working beyond real time and place to imagined realms on fictional planets, Barnhill applies utopian bioregional literary criticism to Ursula K. LeGuin’s The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974) and Always Coming Home (1985), noting LeGuin’s development as a bioregional utopian thinker in the decade between the two novels. “Critical Bioregionalist Method in Dune: A Position Paper,” Daniel Gustav Anderson’s reading of Frank Herbert’s novel, converses with Barnhill’s reading of LeGuin:

Dune’s thorough-going critique of […] uneven political order opens a utopian space in which one can see capital’s ghastly shadow and imagine bioregionally responsible alternatives. These alternatives are presented precisely in terms of local control and full enfranchisement—in other words, radical democracy—thus offering exactly the kind of critical utopianism David Landis Barnhill rigorously advances elsewhere in this volume. (229)

Thus, the bioregional critical imagination becomes intergalactic in the pages of this anthology. The maps illustrating the chapters on LeGuin and Herbert picture imaginary planets, but isn’t that what all ecological thinking does? Bioregional thinking about humans in space and time is mind mapping.

Part Three, “Reimagining,” opens with Jill Gatlin’s poetry explication. “‘Los campos extraños de esta ciudad’ / ‘The strange fields of this city’: Urban Bioregionalist Identity and Environmental Justice in Lorna Dee Cervantes’s ‘Freeway 280’” continues the discussion begun by Barnhill’s musings on bioregionalism’s privilege. Gatlin notes that “urban and minority literatures […] must be recognized alongside traditional bioregionalist nature writing for the movement to be truly inclusive and effective” (247). Immediately following Gatlin’s essay that argues for “moving bioregionalism
beyond universalism,” is Erin James’s piece called “Bioregionalism, Postcolonial Literatures, and Ben Okri’s The Famished Road,” arguing that while bioregionalism and postcolonialism seem compatible, “bioregional critics have generally overlooked postcolonial texts, limiting their purview to American literature” (247, 263). Anthologies like this one provide space for diverse contributions since no one critical school can read every text in all ways. On the other hand, James makes the valid point that “the global environmental crisis is not limited to one type of place and, as such, we must become skilled at reading place-based aesthetics beyond our own places and cultures” (264). Libby Robin, in “Seasons and Nomads: Reflections on Bioregionalism in Australia,” provides a reading of “the very sort of nomadic or migratory lifestyles that so much bioregional discourse critiques,” answering James’s call to action with an unsentimental discussion of bioregionalism’s “different dominant meaning in Australia,” where the term “is a government word” (278, 282). The unpredictability of Robin’s essay made it my favorite, and it was affirming to read, “Seasonality is the privilege of the temperate world where most major world civilizations evolved,” having wondered myself whether the nostalgic, near-fetishistic veneration of seasons may have contributed to the long denial of climate change in some quarters (280). Robin points out that “Australian regional literature is highly scientifically engaged. In remote places it is often scientists who shape place-consciousness through the way they envision the ecological structures of the country” and notes, “[b]ioregional writings must recognize ecological limits as they also enable hope. Science is important here, alongside humanism” (285, 290). Bioregional critics need to think, not just feel.

This anthology explicitly challenges the rhetoric of bioregional thinking, and “Reading Climate Change and Work in the Circumpolar North” by Pavel Cenkl introduces the “polarizing politicized language about the North,” a place presented, on the one hand, as humanity’s last chance for retaining a bit of wilderness, and on the other as America’s last chance to discover a giant oil deposit (297). Cenkl closely reads Nils-AslakValkeapää’s 1997 book, The Sun, My Father, an English translation of poetry honoring cultural and ecological identity of the Sámi in northern Scandinavia, hearkening back to other essays in this book, both argumentatively and visually. The emphasis on nomadic “mobility and movement” recalls Robin’s immediately preceding essay, while the “textual representation of reindeer herd migration” of Valkeapää’s Poem 272, horizontally spanning two pages, is reminiscent of John Whyte’s Minisniwapta pictured in Vandervlist’s essay (302, 158-159). Valkeapää’s writing makes connections for readers; as Cenkl says, “the potentially marginalizing specificity of his home place is balanced by a continuing invitation to his readers […] to participate, celebrate, and engage in the unique attributes of this northern landscape” (304). Bioregional writing about the movement of humans, animals, water, and even time, erases or at least obscures political boundaries, facilitating communication among those who, in some contexts, represent competing factions.

The final two essays of Part Three dwell on boundaries, meeting places full of potential. In his essay “Douglas Livingstone’s Poetry and the (Im)possibility of the Bioregion,” Dan Wylie uses the term “ecotone,” a transitional place with “fuzzy boundaries,” to describe the littoral zone, “this patently singular seam between the geological and the marine” (317, 312). Livingstone, South African marine biologist and poet, embodied a littoral zone of science and art. According to Wylie, Livingstone’s poetry collection Littoral Zone features a map of Livingstone’s water pollution measuring
stations “as nodes around which most of the poems are written” and which also illustrates this chapter (318, 313). Wylie finds no sentimentality in Livingstone's poetry; even “such valorization of love as Livingstone finds is haunted […] by an apocalyptic sense of humanity’s impending, deserved demise” (322, 326). Nevertheless, Livingstone’s work as a scientist along the littoral zone provided inspiration for his art, as trash on the beach sometimes prompted poetic meditations, “[t]he poet himself is a node of coalescence” (320). Wylie’s essay has a melancholy tone that perhaps reflects the psyche of his subject and that leads easily into Anne Milne’s examination of the fictional Lemuel Gulliver, who, like the real Douglas Livingstone, negotiated boundaries. “Fully motile and AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS: Thinking the Feral into Bioregionalism” provides “some feral ecocritical thinking to discomfort our fine and earnest notions of place”; the feral is disturbing, according to Milne, because “unlike the wild, the feral is recognizably and comfortably familiar. The feral lives among us almost as if it belongs” (331). Gulliver returns to England from his travels among the Houyhnhmns able to converse with horses and unable to fully reintegrate into Englishness; Gulliver, like Livingstone, negotiates boundaries, a littoral zone of “ontological uncertainty,” with language (336). According to Milne, Jonathan Swift “imagined the exploited body of the feral boy, Peter of Hanover [. . .] to ask his essential question, ‘Who are we as humans?’” (335). Milne asserts that Peter of Hanover can tell us “much about the ethics of care for children in eighteenth-century Germany”--and thus provide some possibility of answering Swift’s question.

The ethics of care for children remains an excellent measurement of who we are as humans, and Part Four of The Bioregional Imagination, “Renewal,” suggests that ecopedagogy is one expression of that care. The lesson plans and curricula being discussed in “Renewal” are for college undergraduates and graduate students, who represent, as all our children do, the next generation who will be tasked with caring for Earth. Laurie Ricou’s non-linear teaching guide “Out of the Field Guide: Teaching Habitat Studies” features her course outline (“deliberately spare and cryptic”) for the term project in English 5012A/001: The Shapes of Habitat (358, 350-351). Students choose species out of a hat and spend the semester studying their choices from multiple intellectual and experiential perspectives. Ricou’s vision of her class is romantic and a welcome counterpoint to the pessimism of Douglas Livingstone and Jonathan Swift: “Sixteen habitat projects overlap and reach for interconnections. [. . .] Participants try to adopt other identities, and doing so they become celebrants of the uncelebrated, the ignored, the invisible, and the underfoot” (363). At Western Kentucky University, Wes Berry uses his English classes to promote ecoliteracy and writes about “teaching bioregional ideals to today’s wired students” in “Switching on Light Bulbs and Blowing Up Mountains: Ecoliteracy and Energy Consumption in General Education English Courses” (366). Berry approaches his syllabus pragmatically, helping students “see connections between their own places and the broader world” by getting them to “focus on our fossil-fueled economy and their roles in it” (368). Berry hopes that his brand of bioregional teaching “cultivates [. . .] a cosmopolitan care of place that, like the students’ beloved ‘interwebs’ [. . .] understands no region is an island unto itself” (376). Hard on the heels of this hope comes Laird Christensen, writing about “Teaching Bioregional Perception--at a Distance” to Green Mountain College environmental studies grad students who learn “how to perceive their own bioregions through distance education” (379). This article reminded me that education is now part of the “global absentee economy” Berry’s Kentucky students learn about.
further, Christensen's virtual classroom, like Berry's brick-and-mortar one, is made up of students living “paradoxical lives, desiring clean air but enjoying [their] mobility fueled by airplanes and cars” (374, 370). Christensen's students are frustrated by his first assignment, “a formal report proposing bioregional boundaries based on geological, hydrological, and biotic circumstances,” because they discover “most definitions are inherently imprecise or contingent” (382, 383). Like poor Gulliver, Christensen's students are disoriented by going beyond known political boundaries of place, but bioregional education is transformative precisely because "one humbling lesson of this assignment is that our tidy categories are too simplistic to fit the world beyond our minds” (384).

The Internet itself is a world beyond our minds where the old political boundaries are meaningless, and the current generation of college students "must navigate the vast terrain between local natural history and global electronic connectivity," as Kathryn Miles and Mitchell Thomashow write in "Where You at 20.0” (391). Miles and Thomashow team teach an interdisciplinary seminar called “The Future of Life on Earth” “that introduces basic concepts of place, biodiversity, and climate change” to “give students lifelong learning tools to promote creative solutions and a continued sense of wonder” (393-394). Isn’t that what we all want to do as parents, teachers, and mentors of the next generation? Miles and Thomashow suggest the Social Media Generation uses devices as tools for expressing its ethics of care: “Again and again, their response to [their generation’s] challenges is to emphasize the immediacy of relationships. Phone calls from helicopter parents, the constant flow of text messages, the idea that friending is not only a verb, but something to do robustly and continuously, are very much at the heart of their collective identity” (402). Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster made a brilliant choice to culminate this section with “Where You at 20.0” because it is an optimistic piece, showing, yes, that young people can be taught to see the interconnected world sustainably, but also that older generations can learn to trust young digital natives, whose bioregional imaginations display “their sense of reciprocity and gratitude regarding the natural world, their vigilance about the Internet, and their yearning to incorporate bioregional precepts in their lives” (402).

For teachers inspired by this anthology to add bioregional concepts to their own lesson plans, Kyle Bladow has produced “A Bioregional Booklist” with summaries of eighteen examples of bioregional thinking and writing. Most of the works on the list date from the last two decades, but Planet Drum’s 1978 publication edited by Peter Berg, Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology, and Kirkpatrick Sale’s Dweller's in the Land: The Bioregional Vision from 1985 provide historical insight into the bioregional imagination, which, based on what I see in this anthology, continues as fluid as ever.
CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES:

W. C. Bamberger is the author, editor or translator of more than a dozen books. His work also appeared in Kudzu Review 2.1. He lives in Whitmore Lake, Michigan.

Aja Bamberger has been published in Yondering: The First Borgo Book of Science Fiction Stories, and elsewhere. Her art has appeared on Sein und Werden and The Quint. She lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Elizabeth Bernstein directs the Athletic Association Writing Center at The University of Georgia in Athens, where she has been teaching composition since 2001.

Nathan D. Frank writes creative literary theory as an independent scholar from his home in Colorado, where he recently graduated with a Master of Arts in English Literature from the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. He has forthcoming articles from Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches and Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture theorizing the nation and virtuality, respectively. When not reading or writing, Nate loves his family, travels, runs.

Aaron M. Moe is an assistant professor of English at Saint Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana. He has published several articles on animals, ecology, and poetry. His book, Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry, appeared in 2014. Committed to circulating discussions on ecopoetics, he co-founded and co-edits the journal, Merwin Studies: Poetry | Poetics | Ecology.

Luke Morgan is a master’s student in Texas Tech University’s Department of English, studying Literature, Social Justice, and Environment. In addition to his theoretical work on new agrarian
movements, he is currently developing a project to place urban homesteading concepts into educational environments such as public school campuses, and plans to work with schools in Lubbock, TX to observe pedagogical as well as cultural effects of this practice on local community development and student engagement.

Sarah Nolan is a doctoral candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno, where she studies twentieth and twenty-first century American poetry and its connections to ecopoetic theory. Her dissertation embraces new understandings of environment as it considers how developing conceptions of ecopoetics can contribute to interpretations of poems that are not often recognized as environmental. Aside from academic interests, she enjoys traveling, hiking, walking her dogs, and exploring the many wild spaces surrounding Reno.

Steven Skattebo is an undergraduate Horticulture major, Master Gardener, freelance translator, and former Associate Professor of Spanish. He gardens and composts in Fayetteville, Arkansas, within the Ozarks Bioregion.

Dante Di Stefano’s poetry and essays have appeared recently, or are forthcoming, in The Writer’s Chronicle, Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora, Shenandoah, Brilliant Corners, The Southern California Review, and elsewhere. He was the winner of the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award, the Ruth Stone Poetry Prize, the Phyllis Smart-Y oung Prize in Poetry, and an Academy of American Poets College Prize. He currently serves as a poetry editor for Harpur Palate and he was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.
M. P. Jones IV: Editor-in-Chief

Madison Jones is a fifth-generation Alabamian and recently received a master’s in literature from Auburn University, where he read for *Southern Humanities Review*. Recent poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Harpur Palate, Portland Review, Tampa Review, Canary Magazine*, and *Town Creek Poetry*, among others. His poetry has been awarded Auburn University’s 2013 and 2014 Robert Hughes Mount, Jr., Poetry Prizes, sponsored by the Academy of American Poets, among others. His creative nonfiction has appeared in *Sleet Magazine* and *decomp magazine*; and an article on W.S. Merwin’s recent poetry collection *The Shadow of Sirius* appears in the current issue of *Merwin Studies. Live at Lethe*, his first collection of poetry, was released by Sweatshoppe Publications this past fall (2013), and his second manuscript, *The Broken Branch* is seeking publishers. For more information, visit his author’s page: ecopoiesis.com.

Robin Conn Ward: Executive Design Editor

Robin Ward is the mastermind of our website design, having achieved a degree in computer networking from Cochise College and Web Development from ASU. Robin’s interests lie in the hyper-real, the increasing development of an artificial world in the face of an eroding biosphere.

Arthur Wilke: Managing Editor

Arthur Wilke is a provocateur of environmental studies of the literary and socio-political realms. Known for undertaking such extended expeditions as the Appalachian Trail, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, as well as many others without the privilege of a name, Arthur studies the real world relationships of humanity, wilderness, and the environment. When he can be torn away from the woods, he is most often found tinkering with old cameras in search of the big Other, reading the latest Žižek, and agreeing way too much with Gore Vidal and Edward Abbey.

Jane Alford: Assistant Editor, Nonfiction

Jane Alford is our resident ecofeminist and strict grammatician (someone around here has to be). She’s always on call, reminding us of the right place for a direct object and when we’re describing women as such. She received her BA in English and history from the University of Montevallo and is currently pursuing her M.Ed. in English Language Arts at Auburn University. She is particularly interested in language acquisition and teaching English to speakers of other languages. She enjoys adventures of the outdoor variety, growing food and cooking it, and playing with her loyal feline, Romeo.
John Nicholson: Layout Editor

John, who now lives in Southside, Birmingham, has his BFA in Fine Art from the University of Montevallo, tends to work part time so as to keep an open schedule for various vices. He loves banana pudding, Zeppelin, and his one pair of pants that fit just right, and he’s down to hike with you any day of the week if you ask him. He doesn’t mind taking your batteries to be recycled, either.

-nickelsun88@gmail.com

John Abbott: Assistant Editor, Poetry

John Abbott is a writer, musician, English instructor, and avid reader. When he isn’t involved with one of these activities, he enjoys walking the bogs and woods of Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he lives with his wife and daughter. For information about his writing, please visit johnabbottauthor.com.

-jabbott@kudzuhouse.org

Charlie Sterchi: Fiction Editor

Charlie Sterchi lives in Auburn, Alabama, where he is a master’s student in English at Auburn University. His surname is Romanche for “one who dreams of Jeannie” and may possibly be the inspiration for the American sitcom I Dream of Jeannie, created by Sidney Sheldon and starring Barbara Eden and Larry Hagman, that ran from September 1965 to May 1970. To this very day, dreaming of Barbara Eden and other genies – but mainly Barbara Eden as she appeared in her famous, shall we say celestial, television role – remains an involuntary patrilineal preoccupation among Charlie and his kin. When he isn’t watching TV Land, Charlie enjoys reading Lorca and Barthelme whether in or out of the bath.
Say it is an unknown benefactor who gave us
birds and Mozart, the mystery of trees and water
and all living things borrowing time.
Would I still love the creek if I lasted forever?

—Jim Harrison’s “Debtors,”
from Songs of Unreason