ANTHROPOCENE MODERNISMS: ECOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS OF THE "HUMAN AGE" IN ELIOT, WILLIAMS, TOOMER, AND WOOLF

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by

Rebekah A. Taylor

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Dissertation written by

Rebekah A. Taylor

B.A., Augusta State University, 2007

M.A., Middle Tennessee State University, 2010

Ph.D., Kent State University, 2016

Approved by

_____, Chair, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Kevin Floyd

_____, Chair, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Ryan Hediger

_____, Members, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Tammy Clewell

_____
Emariana Widner

_____
Deborah Barnbaum

Accepted by

_____, Chair, Department of English
Robert Trogdon

_____, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
James L. Blank

LIST OF FIGURES

For my family

In loving memory of Ann.

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This document is one expression of my interest in what we might call nature, and despite all that is wrong in the world, I am fortunate to pursue an academic career during a time when scholars in the environmental humanities, ecocriticism, new materialisms, biopolitics, and animal studies are bringing concerns of the nonhuman world into focus. I am thankful for the list of

scholars working in these fields who create such a rich intellectual community devoted to important issues facing our world. Much of the highly theoretical and intellectually rigorous work being done by my colleagues was, and still is, put into practice on a piece of land in northern Georgia where my family's cabin rests.

In many ways, then, this dissertation has been a lifetime in the making. As early as I can remember, my parents and grandparents taught me to live deliberately and pay attention to the variety of nonhuman bodies that surround me. Trees provide the warmth for my family's home, and while I was often not keen on our wood cutting and splitting adventures (especially in my teenage years), handling the wood of fallen trees attuned me to the variety of insects, grubs, mosses, and spiders that live and work between the bark and heart of a tree. So, I have to acknowledge such influences as my grandmother who salvaged every last green bean from her garden and was not bothered by the indiscriminate marks left by bug or beetle, nor whether those critters ended up in her cooking. And my mother who not only initiates the majority of our firewood expeditions but also models a way of living that is in sync with the natural world and includes getting my hands dirty and never taking more than I need. I have to also acknowledge my father's influence, the man who not only built the family home with pine trees from the land, but would also pause midstride to show me an animal track or an especially interesting rock. This attentiveness extends to unlikely things for my father, a man who makes promises to automobiles and keeps them; he is the expert of recycling and repurposing, and I am constantly forced to think about ordinary objects in new ways when they become part of a system they were never intended for but fit perfectly. My interest in the human relationship to the natural world, and my concern over the reality of our current environmental emergency, follows these influences. Therefore, this dissertation, and my interest in environmental approaches to literature

more broadly, comes in part out of a love for things like fresh vegetables picked from the garden, goats and rabbits, and 1985 Dodge Ram vans.

Aside from their influence, my parents remain an unwavering support system. They are my still point, and there is no way I could ever repay all they have given me. I also want to acknowledge my grandfather, Tom Vasil, who taught me to write letters, speak out, and resist mediocrity. My nieces and nephews are a constant bright spot, and my brothers and sisters-in-law are the best friends of my life.

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Introduction to Anthropocene Modernisms

We now recognize the twentieth century as a moment of great environmental consequence, a period of time in which the "world's population quadrupled…the global economy expanded 14-fold, energy use increased 16 times, and industrial output expanded by a factor of 40," and, consequently, "carbon dioxide emissions also went up 13-fold, and water use rose 9 times" (Kennedy xvi). Increased carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere is, of course, a defining characteristic of the new phase of the human-Earth story, and one of great consequence, as amounts are now measured to be "one third over preindustrial levels" (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, and Crutzen 2229). Carbon dioxide is the principal agent of global climate change, and The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change cites two main factors for increased atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide—leading to global warming—fossil fuel use and land-use change (IPCC). Both are specifically human caused. The last century saw "The Moment of Great Acceleration" when the "geological transformation of the Earth by humans increased by vivid orders of magnitude" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 5); the year 1945 determined the scope of this transformation when the atomic bomb added a radioactive layer to the Earth's crust, which had already been significantly altered by industrialization, urbanization, and agricultural practices. Writing in the 1950s, William Thomas captured the rapidity of the change that characterizes the modernist period:

> The United States alone in the last forty years has consumed more minerals and fossil fuels (coal and petroleum) than all mankind used in the previous millenniums of existence. So far in the twentieth century, 70,000 square miles of

> land in The United States have been absorbed by towns, cities, and urban industrial developments, with another 16,000 square miles covered by artificially impounded water…With more people on the earth than at any time in the past, this is really a most extraordinary period in which to be living. Can we, the participants, pull aside enough to read the plot of the spectacle we are in? (xxxvi)

The cumulative impact of the human species and its systems, made obvious in the twentieth century, as the above figures demonstrate, is now theorized under the title of the Anthropocene. Modernist studies is keen on placing modernism in its historical context by considering everything from the little magazine and the radio to the lure of Paris and movements in architecture and fashion. However, at present the simultaneous transatlantic emergence of a new form of literary production—now often referred to as high modernism— has scarcely been considered with regard to ecological changes and the human relationship to the material world during the early twentieth century.

The modernist period has been categorically omitted from environmentally-focused discussions for too long. The spotty narrative that persists in literary criticism and environmental history, I argue, is partly responsible for the fact that "human beings are currently in the denial phase of grief regarding their role in the Anthropocene" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 183). Denial of anthropogenic, or human-caused, global change seems absurd when one understands that this knowledge is at least a century old, despite the fact that *Anthropocene* was only coined in 2000 and is only now gaining popularity in the lexicon. I want to point to early evidence of awareness of our ecological interconnectedness and the recognition that humans could be an agent of global impact. I also want to suggest that as a species, humans might have progressed beyond the denial

phase if not for certain digressions and regressions, which are evident in the history of literary scholarship that perpetuated certain concepts of nature.

Through an analysis of literary modernism in its historical context, I argue that the ideas that define the Anthropocene today were already prominent, even if the articulations were not as sophisticated or the instruments as scientifically advanced. Furthermore, this dissertation does not take it as coincidence that a new literary form emerged at the very moment that scientists pinpoint the advent of this new epoch, the Anthropocene. Working to more rigorously situate modernist literary texts in terms of emerging environmental issues and "nature" ideology suggests that simultaneous transatlantic literary experimentation coincides with changes to local and global [eco]systems, as well as cultural and ideological shifts in the way humans understand themselves as an interconnected part of the natural world rather than separate from it. In *The Modernist Papers*, Fredric Jameson argues that "modernist techniques of representation were adapted to accommodate shifts in human experience at the turn of the twentieth century" (Bulson n.p.), and I want to suggest that considerations of ecological awareness and environmental crises are missing from the discussion of these "shifts."

The Anthropocene, our emergent geological era marked by human impact, was only brought into serious conversation in the 2000s, but the concept is implicitly retroactive—currently being rigorously debated and entering the popular lexicon, but defining an epoch that began at least a century ago. For some the Anthropocene was in motion in 1784 with the invention of the steam engine. Some anthropologists estimate much earlier, however, arguing that this focus on the steam engine negates the impacts of indigenous cultures and early agricultural practices that have left their mark on the land, though it is doubtful that pre-modern practices will be registered in the fossil layer long term. In other words, scientists now believe

that the human species, particularly post-industrialization, will have altered the planet to the extent that there will be a "marker" level depicting the Anthropocene—the strata, or rock layer, above and below will be recognizably different than the strata of the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, and Crutzen 2229).

Because of its enormity, and our limited cognitive function, the Anthropocene presents profound interpretive problems, particularly in terms of scale, and it is exactly our inability to think about the Anthropocene directly that makes modernist literary experimentation so illuminating. This dissertation is informed by Timothy Morton's ideas about the hyperobject—a thing "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans, and which defy overview and resist understanding" (*Hyperobjects* 1). Scholars across disciplines have taken up Morton's coinage to refer to the Anthropocene as a hyperobject and others note similar issues of scale and conceivability simply described in different terminology. Since coining the term and publishing a book by that name, Morton has published extensively on applications of the term and living and thinking in "the time of hyperobjects" ("Poisoned Ground" 37). Because hyperobjects—in this case, the Anthropocene, and also modernity—can be "thought and computed but not directly touched or seen" (37), they require "seeing on different scales at once" ("Victorian Hyperobjects" 498). I am arguing that the texts in this dissertation encourage exactly the kind of thinking that a hyperobject requires and that somehow in the spaces between the fragments, as we use our imagination to experience the slipperiness, disjunctions, shifts in and out of different consciousnesses, genres, times and places, we approach an experience of the Anthropocene, of modernity, of this condition resulting from both.

Because hyperobjects—including modernity, the Anthropocene—are so "massively distributed in time and space" humans can only experience their symptoms. Morton often uses

the example of global warming, which we cannot touch or perceive in its entirety, but we still cannot avoid experiencing symptoms of global warming, symptoms that are both "real"—uncanny weather patterns that act on human bodies and infrastructure—and discursive—the presence of global warming "looms like a shadow" over routine weather conversations (*Hyperobjects* 99). The writers in this dissertation respond to the symptoms of modernity and these symptoms are strangely consistent with those that describe the Anthropocene. A symptomatic approach, in the tradition of Fredric Jameson, is particularly illuminating because the modernist project often treats nature on "latent" rather than "manifest" levels (*The Political Unconscious* 60). Further, thinking closely about a symptom points to its cause, so that I consider the ways modernist literary experimentation performs the opposite of what we have long thought.[1] From this perspective, expressions of alienation from environments (including other humans), and the way in which formal fragmentation also expresses this alienation, becomes a symptom of environmental degradation and the hyperawareness that humans and environments are interconnected and interdependent. Likewise, mourning and melancholia are symptoms of great loss or trauma, and the stream of consciousness technique can be read as a symptom of the collapse between interior and exterior that the Anthropocene signifies. The modernist novel form, then, seems to capture the moment that it became clear there is no such thing as a "background" to human life.

Certainly, my texts' attempts to resolve the symptoms—understood as the source of the fragmentation—are ultimately insufficient because the texts themselves are also material,

[1] Acknowledging Jameson's influence, Lawrence Buell develops the "environmental unconscious" in *Writing for an Endangered World* (22-26). In this book, Buell suggests we must attend to the "unconscious" level because of "the impossibility of individual or collective perception coming to full consciousness at whatever level: observation, thought, articulation and so forth" (22). In addition to my focus on size and scale, Buell lists impediments such as, "scientific ignorance, inattention, specialized intellectual curiosity, ethnocentricity, self-protectiveness, the conventions of language itself" (22).

limited, confined by time and space just like their human creators and readers. This is a problem that these writers are extremely self-conscious of and yet again speaks to the complexity of the realities that they are trying to express. At the same time that modernists yearn toward totality, coherence is undermined by the texts' fragmentation. As a visual indication of this, we might think of the way that the curves that demarcate the three sections of *Cane* suggest a circle but never form the completed shape. Toomer wrote that these curves (perhaps resembling parentheses) "vaguely indicate the design" (qtd. in Sollors 360), but only "aim" for a circle.

Fig.1. The three marks that indicate the three sections of *Cane.*

This dissertation also draws heavily from the recent so-called "material turn" in the environmental humanities. Environmental crises remind humans of our vulnerability at the same time that understanding the human as a geological force critiques human exceptionalism and implies similarities between humans and things like rivers, the wind, or a volcano. So, while the Anthropocene denotes that there is a definite distinction between human and Earth in the sense that humans can have an impact "on" the planet's systems, on another level the fact that humans are "walking talking minerals" (qtd. in Bennett n.p.) comes into focus. In other words, the Anthropocene "suggests that the exceptions are not exceptional and that there is little reason to posit a hard, ontological dichotomy between human and ahuman forces, with regard to their temporalities or scope of effect" (Bennett, "Earthling, Now and Forever?" n.p.). In a new materialist framework, the new appreciation of human species' materiality is coupled with a renewed interest in the agency of seemingly inanimate bodies. This dissertation also attunes to the way in which modernist literary experimentation invites its reader to "think as the stuff of the world," to use Stacy Alaimo's phrase. Reading modernist literary production in the new frame of

the Anthropocene suggests there is an ecological ethic at work in these texts as we become re-enchanted with this "stuff of the world" by considering it afresh. Therefore, we might recast the way these texts are read, taught, canonized. Instead of ignoring and omitting the modernists' ambiguous statements on nature, we might think of this moment at the turn of the twentieth century as symptomatic of the awareness of collective human impact and the problems of agency that result from recognizing humans as geological agents.

In both form and content, these representative texts, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, and Jean Toomer's *Cane*, encourage perspective shifts, operating on multiple levels and scales, suggesting ecological commentary on received notions of nature, the human inside of deep time, and the agency and vitality of the nonhuman world and more. The texts in this dissertation suggest the ability of the Anthropocene and hyperobjects to reorient us in a productive way that results in a more profound appreciation of our shared existence with other humans and the non-human. This new perspective is crucial in reorienting our day-to-day actions and cultural norms. These writers encourage the equivalent of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," as objects and bodies are treated in all of their plurality. Wallace Stevens's poem delivers on the title's promise, and in one moment views a blackbird from a perspective so that "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one" (11-12), and in the next from the perspective of the observer, where "The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs" (53-54). So, it might be said of the waves in Virginia Woolf's text; seen from at least as many angles, the waves—water, consciousness, life, death, ocean, time—remind us of the dynamic, transformative, fluctuating interactions between human and material world. For the modernists, and in the Anthropocene, nature is far from a passive construct; instead, as

Alfred Whitehead puts it, nature is a "continuous stream of occurrence" (qtd. in Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 117).

It is important to note that my project here concerns historicizing as distinct from "periodizing."[2] I am not invested in making an argument about when modernism began and ended, but there is a robust body of scholarship devoted to just this. Like the Anthropocene, modernism can be traced to many different origins, and like all cultural change, that in the early twentieth century is dynamic and uneven, as Raymond Williams argues in his studies of culture.[3] The debate over "year zero" is irrelevant to some extent yet illuminating. Irrelevant because scientists admit that boundaries of epochs, like literary movements, are inevitably hazy, and on the scale of a geological epoch, a hundred years give or take is immaterial. Illuminating because the Anthropocene is the first epoch to be named and debated in real time (as far as we know). As the Anthropocene emerges, scholars from diverse fields join the conversation and attempt to reconcile history, archaeology, anthropology, and literary and cultural production. Charting perceived and perceivable shifts in human culture and human nature against measurable geological figures yields complex commentary about the narrative of the human history, culture, and the evolution of our species.

The arguments here might be made of many additional texts of the early twentieth century, but it is ultimately the synchronicity of certain formal similarities between texts and the fact that these arise very near the moment that the Anthropocene takes hold that unify them, rather than any certain starting date and ending date. For modernism is just as difficult to narrow down to a certain moment as is the start of a geologic epoch. And so, the Anthropocene becomes a catch-all, what Jedediah Purdy describes as an "effort to meld [all these phenomena] into a

[2] See Morag Shiach, "Periodizing Modernism"
[3] See Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*

single situation, gathered under a single name…Such a term is pragmatic: it tries to help people to act by gathering the elements of their predicament together in a tractable way. The environment had to be named before people could join together to try to save it. The Anthropocene has to be named before people can try to take responsibility for it" (Purdy, *After Nature* 4). Elsewhere, Purdy observes that the Anthropocene has been set up as a Rorschach blot ("Anthropocene Fever" n.p.), in the sense that its apparent hypothetical nature allows for a variety of applications and interpretations. This dissertation considers the possibility that "Anthropocene" and "modernism" describe similar phenomena, which texts such as *The Waste Land, Spring and All*, *The Waves,* and *Cane* attempt to articulate.

We must acknowledge that there are a few skeptics who dismiss the magnitude of anthropogenic change altogether. As one commentator scoffs, the Anthropocene began "[w]ith the idea of course" (Anderson n.p). Climate deniers predictably find the Anthropocene to be a construct invented to further political agendas or scare the populace unnecessarily. As I write this, the U.S. Republican party is receiving negative attention at COP21, the 2015 Paris Climate Conference. As the United Nations Conference on Climate Change brings together world leaders to negotiate an agreement to combat and adapt to climate change, an NPR headline spouts, "Much of the World Perplexed that Climate Change Debate Continues in U.S." This debate (where there should be no debate) is especially problematic because the U.S. is the second highest emitter of greenhouse gases behind China. Still, Arnold Schwarzenegger was the only Republican to attend or even acknowledge COP21 negotiations, and meanwhile back in the U.S. The House continues to block the Clean Power Plan, which would limit carbon emissions from existing power plants (Mooney n.p.).

This persistent denial and corresponding insistence on categorizing nature as independent from the human is not irrelevant, as I will show, and warnings about human impact and the entanglement of our species with the earth are not novel. In any case, while we must acknowledge the work scientists are doing to measure the scale of human impact, even if science did not corroborate, there is no doubt a *perceived* shift to a new epoch in the early twentieth century. These nuanced discussions concerning the measurements of the Anthropocene are important, but this dissertation joins the vast majority of scientists who accept that there is an Anthropocene in order to explore the ways in which the concept of the Anthropocene is fruitful for scholars in the humanities in addition to those in the hard sciences. Therefore, this dissertation explores the many ways in which thinking through the concept of the Anthropocene might illuminate our understanding of literary modernism. Whether the Anthropocene is "good" or "bad"[4] and regardless of its exact start date, its primary catalyst, or even if the fossil evidence thousands of years from now will confirm what current geologists speculate, I argue, the new epoch—whether only perceived or quantifiable—took hold or was well underway by the early twentieth century. There is the consensus among early twentieth century thinkers and current accounts of modernism that "something happened" and "something changed," and it is time we consider the shifts and representations of these shifts in ecological terms.

Like the so-called modernist condition, the Anthropocene creates a cultural response—the "Anthropocene Condition" or more clinical sounding "Anthropocene disorder" results from the "sum of these changes, the vast and irreversible human impact on the planet" (Purdy 4). If we read modernism as a reaction or response to modernity, and if modernity and the Anthropocene are practically describing the same set of causes, then there is a way to think about the modernist

[4] Illustrated in the debate between ethicist Clive Hamilton and the journalist Andrew Revkin at a 2013 seminar on the Anthropocene. The transcript of this good-bad debate can be found here: http://grist.org/climate-energy/is-the-anthropocene-a-world-of-hope-or-a-world-of-hurt/

condition—defined by alienation, fragmentation, self-consciousness—as also the "Anthropocene condition." Commonly referred to as "the human age," human nature, emotion, and ego are wrapped up with discussions of the Anthropocene in complicated ways. With the concept of the Anthropocene comes the suggestion that "humans have belatedly realised that they have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale" (Morton, "The Oedipal Logic of Environmental Awareness" 7). In "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," Bruno Latour asks, "How can we simultaneously be part of such a long history, have such an important influence, and yet be so late in realizing what has happened and so utterly impotent in our attempts to fix it?" (1). Indeed, there is a sense of hopelessness in the fact that as a species we have crossed all sorts of boundaries and thresholds, the sense that we are just watching as a tragedy unfolds. It is a tragedy, Latour imagines, where the "human actors may arrive too late on the stage to have any remedial role" (11). However true this is for the current generations, I think the "newness" of the Anthropocene implied in current conversations is somewhat misleading, and I am suggesting that dialogues very close to those we are having now were already taking place in the early twentieth century and even earlier.

Early Twentieth Century Formulations of "Anthropocene"

At the very moment when the Anthropocene was taking hold, historical documents and literary experimentation reveal the realization that humans could significantly impact the Earth, an action that in turn has great consequences for our species due to our interconnectedness—a central concept in contemporary environmental theory. Rather than being "belated," perhaps this realization has come and temporarily gone, even if early arguments to this effect were not as scientifically sophisticated as today. When putting modernist literature into the context of the

Anthropocene, it is important to note that the sophisticated instruments and methods used to calculate the magnitude of anthropogenic change were not put into use until later. This is not to say that scientists were not speculating and forewarning, and much of the science that led to environmentally significant innovations was in the works during the early twentieth century. Radiometric dating was first proposed to measure the age of the Earth somewhere around 1904, for example (Dalrymple 206). Additionally, concerns over ozone depletion led Gordon Dobson of Oxford University to build the first instrument for measuring total ozone from the ground in the late 1920s (the Dobson unit or DU is now a measure of ozone concentration) (Somerville 127). The Keeling Curve, the definitive measure of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, was put into commission in 1958 but provides a visual representation of the Anthropocene that extends beyond its official name ("The Keeling Curve").[5] Using ice-core data, scientists are able to demonstrate the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide using a persuasive line graph. Recently, the parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide surpassed the threshold of 400 ppm for the first time in recorded history.[6] These graphic depictions are crucial because, as we have noted, the Anthropocene is not otherwise perceivable. Still, extremely detailed scientific reports are even now sometimes met with denial of anthropogenic impact, so it could be argued that cultural attitudes about nature and the human are just as, if not more, important as the quantitative measurements.

The etymology of *Anthropocene* takes us to the late nineteenth century, for the term is a variation of Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani's (1824-1891) use of "anthropozoic" to describe the time lapse of human induced change (Zalasiewicz 835). Swedish Nobel Prize winning

[5] See the most recent measurement here: https://scripps.ucsd.edu/programs/keelingcurve/

[6] See Andrea Thomson and Brian Kahn's "What Passing a Key CO2 Mark Means to Climate Scientists" here: http://www.climatecentral.org/news/co2-400-ppm-scientists-meaning-19713

chemist Svante Arrhenius first theorized that the greenhouse effect could be enhanced by human activity in an 1896 publication, "On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground" (Somerville 35). Arrhenius, along with Guy Stewart Callendar, was the first to suggest that burning increasing amounts of coal, oil, and fossil fuel would result in a measurable increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide, but his investigations were practically ignored and work completely forgotten by the 1970s (Budyko and Israel 1). Various scholars currently note how the carbon dioxide problem is treated as novel in 1970 publications, and again and again is treated as novel in each following decade, so that even now this information has an impression of discovery to the general public despite the fact that it is not so very new at all. Although the ideas "received short shrift in the geological community, seeming absurd when set aside the vastness (newly realized, also) of geological time," there were several precursors to the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, and Crutzen 2228).

As another example of early twentieth century Anthropocenic awareness, consider the opening sentence of Nathaniel Southgate Shaler's 1905 book *Man and Earth*: "The situation of man with reference to the material resources of the earth deserves more attention than has been given to it" (1). Shaler continues, "[w]e may be sure that those who look back upon us and our deeds from the centuries to come will remark upon the manner in which we use our heritage, and theirs, as we are now doing, in the spend-thrift's way, with no care for those to come" (1). Shaler's book is now out of print (but digitized in the free Internet Archive) while we think and write with the exact same sentiment over a century later.

George Perkins Marsh also anticipated current dialogues about the Anthropocene in his

key text on the intersection of human time and geological time.[7] Marsh's *Man and Nature* was first published in 1864 under the alternate title of *Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. Although the text fell out of popularity (because of Marsh's "savant-like approach," fluency in twenty languages, and subtitles such as "*Extirpation of Quadrupeds*") and only returned to print in 2003, it was the "most influential text of its time next to Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*" (Lowenthal xv). Even one hundred and fifty years ago, Marsh warned about the cumulative effect of human impact as an "interrelated whole": "Anyone who wields an ax knows its likely impact, but no one before George Perkins Marsh had gauged the cumulative effects of all axes—let alone chainsaws" (Lowenthal xv). Marsh's insistence on a "cumulative" approach is echoed by Timothy Clark in this century, as he criticizes forms of environmental activism that "bizarrely link[s] the intensifying devastation of the world with such things as a person's day to day" ("Towards a Deconstructive Environmental Criticism" 45). The scale of human impact is a crucial point in conceiving the Anthropocene: "even trivial personal decisions about food, ways of travelling to work, gardening etc. all become significant or not depending on the contingency of how many others have done, are doing or will do them, anywhere on earth, implicating acts of seeming irrelevance in incalculable impacts" (Clark, "Climate Change Ironies" 136). Likewise, in the 1885 edition of *Man and Nature,* Marsh writes, "The immediate effects in such cases now elude human understanding, but who shall say that the mathematics of the future may not compute the measure of such agency and calculate even these small cosmical results of human action?" (Marsh 465, footnote).

Today, the Anthropocene Working Group, part of the Subcommission on Quaternary

[7] Significantly, Marsh attributed humans' "irrationality" for our dangerous treatment of the environment. It is irrational, Marsh noted, to destroy the very base of one's own subsistence. This suggests, again, a focus on human nature and mind (Thomas xxix).

Stratigraphy, is charged with just such calculations. They will decide if the term Anthropocene becomes officially formalized in the Geological Time Scale (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, and Crutzen 2228). At the time of writing this, a proposal is under review, and the current target date to formalize the Anthropocene epoch is 2016. It would appear that the term and the event it names are here to stay ("Working Group on the 'Anthropocene'").

An international symposium entitled "Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth" organized by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and held at the Princeton Inn from June 16 to June 22, 1955 was one of the first interdisciplinary efforts to understand the impact of human activity on the environment. The resulting publication from this conference is perhaps the most exhaustive and representative example of the research that defined the careers of top scientists in the early twentieth century. As the current website notes,

> The lasting result of "Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth" was an immense volume with the same name, edited by William L. Thomas, Jr. of the Wenner-Gren Foundation and published by the University of Chicago Press. Thanks to the establishment of an editorial office at the Princeton Inn, it was possible for the authors to provide final versions of their papers quickly and for the publication to appear within months, a remarkable accomplishment given that it was the era of manual typewriters and mechanical typesetting. The authoritative papers it contains were important in shaping the research agenda of the environmental and social sciences over the next several decades, and they are relevant and interesting even today. ("Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth")

The “immense volume” is over fifteen hundred pages, covering everything from deforestation to watershed biodiversity, and is often shockingly current and relevant. One essay by Donald H. McLaughlin, at time of writing the President of the Homestake Mining Company and former Dean of the College of Engineering at University of California, Berkeley (1941-1943) and Professor of Mining Geology at Harvard University (1925-1941), begins with the subtitle: “Man as a Geologic Agent.” McLaughlin writes, “in addition to possessing characteristics that will make him a remarkably fine index fossil, man through his works has attained a geological significance that is altogether out of proportion to the shortness of the period in which he has been the dominant form of life on the globe or to the length of time he is likely to survive if some current trends persist” (851).

Current discussions of the Anthropocene practically echo McLaughlin verbatim. Although most thinkers note, as Mark McGurl does in a 2011 article “The New Cultural Geology,” that the “[Anthropocene] was nonetheless meant to apply retroactively to the state of the earth since the Industrial Revolution” (383), there is an implied novelty to this awareness. The false sense of newness is not only historically inaccurate, the novelty likely contributes to the fact that these ideas are still under debate, even though there is a scientific consensus. Indeed, had turn of the twentieth-century warnings been heeded, the debate might be over. Of course in the realm of rational discourse, the debate *is* over, as it is widely known that 97% of scientists agree on anthropogenic climate change, yet the illusion of debate somehow continues (NASA). Like many of the scientists who participated and published in *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth,* exemplary modernist literary texts betray a heightened sense of the interconnectivity of human and material world and the realization that humans are capable of affecting the delicate balance if that interconnectivity is ignored.

Early formulations of the Anthropocene took another form as well. In addition to thinking about the physical evidence of human impact, early twentieth-century thinkers theorized the Psychozoic or more commonly, the *noosphere*, a "psychically reflexive human surface" from the Greek *noos* meaning "mind" and *sphaera* meaning sphere (de Chardin 103).[8] Today, discussions of the noosphere tend to focus on technology, specifically the world wide web, and the way in which the internet creates a collective consciousness. Princeton's Global Consciousness Project,[9] which touts a mission of studying the "consciousness of the world," is one such twenty-first-century discussion of this idea of a noosphere (GCP). However, the addition of the noosphere to the geosphere and biosphere was proposed in the early twentieth century to signify the emergence of consciousness, sentience, thought, and more specifically and more in line with its current usage, collective consciousness and shared thought (Inkster 110). One of the proponents of this additional earth system, Vladamir Vernadesky, argued that in the twentieth century, and for the first time in history, humankind was becoming a "single totality in the life of the earth" (n.p.). Regardless of the validity of the noosphere, the fact that a new earth system based on the human was even being considered is suggestive of the Anthropocene. Further, expressions of the noosphere move beyond Enlightenment obsessions with individual mind and reason to critically consider human nature and collective impact. The noosphere's interest in the human mind as somehow congruous to an earth system suggests, now that we are living in the Anthropocene, that human nature might be the key to reversing, or at least slowing, some of the systems that we

[8] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was serving as a research associate of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research at the time of his death in 1955. He also was an adviser to the National Geological Survey of China and a member of the French Academy of Sciences and a predominant thinker of the noösphere in the early twentieth century. By some accounts, he was responsible coining the term along with Edouard Le Roy and Vladamir Vernadsky (de Chardin 103). Father Teilhard, as he was often called, noted the "reflexive awareness" and "consciousness raised to its second power; for man, *to know what he knows*" (109, italics in original).

[9] The Global Consciousness project is in collaboration with The Institute of Noetic Sciences. "Noetics," from the same Greek "nous," also studies human consciousness and the way in which consciousness might be shared (http://www.noetic.org/).

have put into place. The noosphere and the timing of its conception suggest that human consciousness, will, and intention cannot be separated from the physical realities resulting from collective human impact. Finally, the noosphere invites us to consider the possibility that it is literally "man the thinker" (*homo sapien*) who is the agent of the Anthropocene, suggesting that it is in the realm of imagination where worlds are made and affected.

Several thinkers in the environmental humanities have suggested the entanglement of human mind with physical realities of our "human age." Timothy Morton jokes in his Wellek lecture, "our unconscious is showing…no one likes their unconscious pointed out" (n.p.). Morton refers to such things as geoengineering and the way it might be said the Earth has been transformed to mirror our nature. Again, this is not a new idea. William Thomas described the cycle in a 1956 publication, writing, "Nature has always contained man, but all the while is being changed by man in the course of his own self-transformation. The dichotomy of man and nature is thus seen as an intellectual device and should not be confused with reality" (xxxvii). Other twenty-first-century approaches to this idea include Karan Barad's concept of "intra-action," which suggests that objects, observers, and observations are always already "entangled, mutually constitutive, and coevolving. Matter, humans, and mind are some elements of the fabric of the universe, where a tug or shift in one part of the fabric influences and changes every other time-space-matter node in the system" (Glotfelty, "Corporeal Fieldwork" 223). Modernist literary production seems to be fertile ground to explore the link between mind and environment, as it is characteristically interior and psychological, but not to the exclusion of extratextual physical realities.

Further, it is no longer sufficient to treat the modernist focus on human thought processes as plainly anthropocentric. Rather, I argue, we might recast our understanding of

experimentations with stream of consciousness to allow for the shockingly posthuman moves that texts like *The Waves* suggest. In such texts, mind and external world are entwined on a multiplicity of levels. The form makes this serious business, as whatever exists in the consciousness becomes both content and form, but again, this is not true to the exclusion of extratextual environmental concerns. Timothy Clark notes this potential in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* in his section on ecofeminist approaches, which is guided, appropriately, by a discussion of *The Waves*: "What other critics simplify as an exclusively human 'inner' mediation or stream of consciousness emerges instead as a kind of plural dialogue of multiple agencies and 'subjects'" (115). The chapters that follow discuss how formal characteristics of modernism complicate the simple distinction between internal and external, human and other, all by utilizing the human mind and imagination.

In the way that highly aesthetic modernist form privileges rhythm, sound, abstraction over narrative or some sort of outmoded realism, it suggests the world must be experienced by re-sensing. Things like rhythm and imagination become strangely ecological in the texts in this dissertation. Woolf was explicit about the way rhythm, a rhythm markedly originating in the natural world, would structure her novel *The Waves*. One diary entry on Wednesday August 20, 1930 reveals Woolf imagining the book as a sequence of dramatic soliloquies "running homogenously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves" (*Diary* 312). For these modernists, rhythm becomes a way to control the sensory experience of the text and access the material world. Woolf identified a similar tendency in Eliot's masterpiece as well, clearly illustrated in her description of hearing *The Waste Land* at a dinner party: "Eliot dined last Sunday & read his poem. He sang it & chanted it rhythmed it. It has great beauty & force of phrase: symmetry, &

tensity. What connects it together, I'm not so sure…One was left, however, with some strong emotion. The Waste Land, it is called" (Woolf, "Eliot Chants" 137).

First, in response to Woolf's curiosity about what "connects it together," it should be noted that it is precisely the rhythm that often provides coherence to high modernist texts like Eliot's. Woolf explicitly noted of her book in progress, "[w]hat it wants is presumably unity" (*Diary* 343), and it is rhythm that she believed would provide that unity. Woolf imagined blood like a torrent running from end to end and spoke of the achievement of the book as being its "saturated, unchopped, completeness; changes of scene, of mood, of person, done without spilling a drop" (343). Further, rhythm creates a sensory, emotional experience that is not necessarily dependent on the construction of the human. In other words, the fact that Woolf describes being left with "some strong emotion" speaks to the performative (as opposed to representational) characteristics of literary modernism that will be of great interest in this dissertation. Rhythm engages a reader's senses, and crucially, it is often the material world that performs these rhythms, thereby engaging a reader with the nonhuman as much as the human.

While the ecological is often associated with things like dirt, trees, the local and the tangible, new scholarship in the environmental humanities focuses more on human imagination, consciousness—the abstract, expressive, and aesthetic more than one might think. The crucial point is that one is not lost in favor of the other. They must work in tandem, and ecocritical work must account for both. If artistic production takes us to thinking about a tree, we must think about that tree very literally as well.

The Environmental Tradition and the Role of Literary Criticism

As the introduction to the over 1,000 page *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) notes, we are at a point of just-enough-critical-distance to challenge earlier accounts of modernism; however, this "comprehensive" study of modernism completely neglects what is arguably the most important issue of our day: a state of environmental emergency that has, just at the human level, resulted in up to 25 million environmental refugees worldwide, by some estimations (Somerville 168). The editors acknowledge that "[m]uch of the work done in modernism's multiple and shifting locations has been interdisciplinary in orientation, drawing on such diverse disciplines as anthropology, architecture, art history, book history, design, film studies, performance and theatre studies, philosophy, photography, and theology" (2). But while the *Handbook* contains various chapters that could be considered ecological in the way that Timothy Morton argues that everything is part of "the mesh," the absence of ecological theory from the above list speaks to the complicated and controversial position environmental issues has often occupied in the current social and political climate, as well as the academy.[10] Even while the editors of the volume argue for a more culturally "thick" sense of modernism's connections to a wide variety of non-aesthetic practices (to supplement existing purely aesthetic ones), and noting the current interest of modernist studies in situating modernism within the "sociocultural matrix out of which it emerged" (2), the lack of attention to environmental concerns seems a glaring gap in this project.

[10] A sample of other modernist studies handbooks that completely or nearly completely omits environmental issues or approaches are *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (1999), *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* (2005), and Wiley-Blackwell's *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* (2006). Anne Raine notes two recent exceptions Eysteinsson and Liska's *Modernism,* which contains the chapter "Modernism and Ecological Criticism," and Stephen Ross's *Modernism and Theory*, which includes a chapter on "Green" theory (Raine 113).

Further, it would seem that early suggestions of humans as ecological forces across disciplines were also ignored, not anthologized, left out of the academy, and the grand narrative, comparable to the treatment of minority voices. However, his dissertation demonstrates that early twentieth-century thinkers from various fields anticipate current dialogues about the Anthropocene, and literary modernism is more historically aware and ecologically conscious than we suspected.

While the fact that Timothy Morton was invited to give the 2014 Wellek Lectures[11] on ecological theory suggests that there is progress, Morton's comments as he opened the first talk speaks to the complicated status of environmental approaches to literature. "No major theory anthology contains any ecological theory," Morton observes. "It's weird, the nonappearance of ecology in theory world." Morton continued by calling out major publishers (Norton, Routledge et al.), saying that he would not be using anthologies in his classrooms until ecocriticism in some form was included. To build on Morton's point, the relative nonappearance of modernism in the ecological theory world, and the relative nonappearance of ecological theory in the modernist studies world, is also "weird." In another talk titled "The Humanities in the Age of Ecological Emergency" Morton challenges the humanities, saying, "humans created the Anthropocene with its global warming. Not jellyfish, not fungi, not coral reefs…I'm from the humanities and supposedly the humanities know a thing or two about humans. We shall see, right? It's imperative therefore that the humanities be in the mix of thinking that addresses the Anthropocene. Not as a decorative adjunct to science, but alongside it, fueling it, thinking it, analyzing and critiquing it."

[11] The Wellek Lectures are an annual series sponsored by University of California's Critical Theory Institute and reserved for the most distinguished voices in contemporary critical theory.

Likewise, I think that modernist studies and ecocriticism might "fuel" each other in interesting ways, and the theoretical apparatus now in place might help explain the "nature problem" in modernism in a way that we did not have the vocabulary to express before new explorations in environmental approaches to literature. As Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin note in the introduction to *Eco-Joyce,* "For all of its focus on urban cityscapes, alienation and psychological and philosophical contingency, modernity itself has to be seen as ushering in a new conception of the natural world and our relationship to it" (Brazeau and Gladwin 9). The fact that modernist anthologies and "comprehensive studies" of modernism mostly ignore ecological theory is indicative of the inconsistent speed at which ecocriticism has achieved standing in the humanities, and it should appear alongside the study of gender or race or any other substrate of the human condition and experience. In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton writes that "we are used to wondering what a poem says about race or gender, even if the poem makes no explicit mention of race or gender. We will soon be accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it" (11). In addition to the general hesitation to embrace ecocriticism that Morton is speaking to, there are more specific formal reasons that modernist literature seems an unlikely study for environmental approaches. I will summarize those reasons below, and argue that the perceived disqualifiers are actually what make "high" modernism interesting and fruitful for an ecocritical approach.

Notwithstanding the occasional nod, critics seem unsure of where to fit modernist literature into the grand narrative of human and nature. The "greening of modernism," to use Bonnie Scott Kim's phrase from her book *The Hollow of the Wave,* arguably only began as recently as 2010, and 2014 saw the first extended ecocritical study of a modernist author *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce,* despite the fact that ecocriticism was

established in 1992 as a serious field of study. Joshua Schuster's recent book *The Ecology of Modernism* (2015) argues that the "curious failure of modernist poets to develop an environmental ethic was a deliberate choice not an inadvertent omission" ("The Ecology of Modernism" n.p.). The book's blurb continues by claiming that Schuster "shines a light on the modernist interval between the writings of the bucolic and nature-extoling romantics and the emergence of a self-conscious green movement in the 1960s" (n.p.). Again, I find this sense that modernism represents an "interval" problematic and indicative of a more general refusal to encounter literary modernism on its own terms rather than measuring it against some existing paradigm. Although he makes a claim about literary modernism, Schuster curiously avoids engaging exemplary modernist texts to any sustained degree.

Anne Raine very recently published the important essay "Ecocriticism and Modernism" in the *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014). Raine notes, as I have, that these fields are only starting to merge and suggests robust areas for future inquiry. Raine's work to demonstrate that environmental concerns were very much a part of the modernist project is extremely important, but I take issue with one point in this essay. The opening sentence of Raine's chapter reads, "[i]f British ecocriticism began with a re-greening of Wordsworth, and American ecocriticism galvanized around a reclaiming of Thoreau as nature writer, one might expect an ecocritical account of literary modernism to begin with Harriet Monroe" (98). Monroe is an important figure, certainly, for her activist work and participation with John Muir's campaign to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley. Yet Raine goes on to admit that Monroe's literary output is not characteristically modern, nor particularly "good." In this point, Raine's opening analogy fails: Wordsworth and Thoreau are writers of great influence and esteem that have come to define the literary production of their period. It appears self-defeating to Raine's insistence that literary

modernism offers a rich deposit of alternative views of nature to suggest Monroe's literature offers the analogous of Wordsworth or Thoreau to modernist literature, when Monroe's literary output promotes a depiction of nature that is more in line with nineteenth century than twentieth century thought. Or as Raine puts it, "Monroe's own nature poems tend to exemplify the conventionality, sentimentality, and vague notions of 'the infinite' that T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound sought to banish from modern poetry" (98). It would seem, then, that literary criticism has not adapted to its subject. If we think of nature differently, it is already everywhere in the canonical modernist texts, I argue. So instead of Harriet Monroe, we might locate the beginning of ecological modernisms with T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Woolf; Marianne Moore not Harriet Monroe.

In ecocriticism's early days (the 1990s), the field was most interested in representations of nature and bringing attention to what might traditionally be called nature writers. However, while first wave ecocritics focused on texts with an obvious environmental agenda, current approaches consider "all cultural texts as products of an ecological world," to paraphrase Glen Love (in Cusick 162). Robert Kern takes this idea one step further when he asserts that "ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful . . . when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere" (260). In Kern's evaluation, the very thing that made modernism seem an unlikely subject for early ecocritics actually is what should fascinate us about it; because, as I previewed before, "nature," *the term,* rarely appears in modernist literature. Indeed, nature is hardly named at all. But, as Marianne Moore famously remarked, "omissions are not accidents" (vi). And omissions are not even omissions if we allow for things to look a little different than we are used to, and it is no coincidence that the omissions (of proper "nature") begin sometime around the turn of the twentieth century when scientists began to suggest anthropogenic global change. I argue that it

is the fact that modernism does not perpetuate the construction of nature handed to it that makes it most interesting ecologically. Additionally, if the modernists dissolve the cultural construction of Nature, are they not doing exactly what Morton demands the ecological thought must do in such titles as *Ecology without Nature*? One possible reading of the fact that the word "nature" never appears in *As I Lay Dying*, then, is because modernist literary form expresses interconnectedness and dissolves rigid distinctions between human and nature.

Therefore, one reason that modernism is not an obvious study for environmental approaches is the fact that modernism is a markedly urban phenomenon. The "programmatic urbanism" (*Eco-Joyce* xv) of modernist literature posed a challenge to early strains of environmental critique, which took "environment" to mean "landscape," "natural environment," everything "not human" or the opposite of culture, but this is changing as well. In the inaugural publication of the field, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), William Howarth glosses "ecocritic" as "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (69). Today, in Harold Fromm's words, ecocriticism has evolved to an "all-encompassing category of intellectual inquiry" (198). Now, we recognize that natural and built environments are already "all mixed up" (Buell 20), and as Greg Winston notes, "[u]rban nature, if previously an oxymoron, for second-wave ecocriticism has become increasingly fertile critical ground" (Winston, *Eco-Joyce* 140). In addition to the inherent richness and complexity of urban spaces, ecocriticism has an ethical obligation to engage with urbanized environments if for no other reason than over half of the world's population lives in urban areas. Dialogues that treat urban spaces dismissively might also risk ignoring the experiences of those who make urban spaces home, as Michael Bennett's ideas on "social ecocriticism" suggest. While much has been

done in the way of answering for what Bennett calls the "urban challenge to ecocriticism" (31) in his 2001 article in *ISLE* entitled "From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Spaces," scholars in the humanities should not perpetuate this false division between urban and rural, but recognize that every text has an environment and attune to these environments with equal attention. This is particularly the case with modernist studies whose subject matter has been tagged as urban in potentially problematic ways from the outset.

Lawrence Buell, for example, notably addresses the question of whether urban setting and subject matter disqualifies a text from ecological analysis over the course of his evolving career. The trajectory of Lawrence Buell's scholarship—from his first book in 1995 to his tour-de-force *Writing for an Endangered World* in 2001—helps to illustrate the way in which urban or unlikely texts gain new relevance. Buell explains in *The Future of Environmental Criticism,* "I found myself agreeing with those who thought the concentration on 'environment' as 'nature' and on nature writing as the most representative environmental genre were too restrictive, and that a mature environmental aesthetics— or ethics, or politics – must take into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns" (Buell 23). Further, environmental inquiry must consider "un-natural" environments if it is to have relevance in the twenty-first century, as urban centers are home and reality to a majority of the planet's population. Furthermore, many current thinkers go so far as to argue that we are living after the end, or death, of nature, to use the title of Bill McKibben's 1989 *The End of Nature*.[12] The charge to expand its focus then becomes an issue of survival for the environmental humanities on a practical level. For, if ecocritics stick to studying "nature," they might find that

[12] See Margaret Ronda, "Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene"

their subject has disappeared or was never "real" to start with—as Timothy Morton repeatedly challenges his readers and listeners: What does an atom of nature look like?

In *The Making of Green Knowledge* (2001) Andrew Jamison suggests that there "is a need, in short, for a collective memory, a usable past, an attempt to fashion a narrative [of environmental politics] that might just bring us a bit closer together" (9). However, Jamison's is one such account that pinpoints environmental consciousness and the "period of awakening" (he is discussing U.S., Norway, Sweden) circa 1960 (Jamison 83). Even in Jamison's attempt to trace the "environmental movement" in reverse, he jumps to Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and the Sierra Club and makes no mention of any of the key figures I will mention throughout this dissertation (no Marsh, no Arrhenius, no Keeling). Despite the environmental impact of the first half of the twentieth century, contemporary Western accounts of environmental consciousness consistently and problematically either begin in the 60s with Rachel Carson or begin with Thoreau, or Wordsworth, and skip to Rachel Carson, from Romanticism and Transcendentalism to Earth Day. So, while critical inquiry has neglected to create a dialogue concerning nature in high modernism, this is not the case for the periods before and after. Literary scholarship has championed the Romantics and American transcendentalists as well as the nature writers and conservationists (i.e. Rachel Carson) of the 60s and 70s, securing their place in the narrative of environmental awareness. Doing so helped to retain a certain version of nature that I argue the modernists challenge. For example, Nature was categorically external and "other" for Ralph Waldo Emerson. Such othering of nature is likely foundational to the "first" industrial revolution as we blindly went full speed ahead, allowing for destructive and irresponsible practices.

Current thinkers can now recognize certain shortcomings of, say, the "back to nature" movement of the late nineteenth century, which, Neil Smith notes, found nature "domesticated, sanitized, sprawled out on coffee tables" (Smith 9). It might seem dismissive and counterintuitive to suggest that certain strands of environmentalism[13]—especially of the 60s and 70s variety— digress from more responsible ecologically informed practices, but that is exactly what Timothy Morton, one of the most prominent voices in ecological theory today, argues in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) and elsewhere. While undeniably important for changing policy and legislation, certain forms of environmentalism risk being less ecological in Morton's sense. According to Morton, certain cultural appropriations of environmentalism risk becoming "addicted to Nature" (95) or "mourning for a mother we never had" (95). The problem is establishing an "environment" or "Nature" that is separate from us that needs saving rather than recognizing the innumerable ways humans and nonhuman already are literally inseparable.

Even at the turn of the twentieth century, this construction "Nature" was already potentially loaded with human hubris, and "environment" would become even more disengaged from the actual physical world it intended to describe as the century progressed. In *Ill Nature: Rants and Reflections on Humanity and Other Animals*, Joy Williams writes that "environment" is "[s]uch a bloodless word. A flat-footed word with a shrunken heart…Urban planners, industrialists, economists, developers use it. It's a lost word, really. A cold word, mechanistic, suited strangely to the coldness generally felt toward Nature" (4-5). The modernists have been described as failing to develop an "environmental ethic" as noted above (see Schuster), but I want to offer a more affirmative reading to the absence of the word *nature* in modernist literature and argue that in form and content, literary modernism suggests an alternative that is more

[13] See Paul Wapner, "The Changing Nature of Nature: Environmental Politics in the Anthropocene."

indicative of current environmental theory than we might suspect. Instead of a "concept of a something, a thing of some kind of over yonder, called Nature" (3), modernism might offer an example of what it means to do away with that construction in the strict sense: "in a world where we truly cared for what we now call environment, there would be no need to point it out as such. We would be it in the most radical sense" (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 104). Certainly, this dissertation pays attention to distinctions between individuals and environments, but Morton's interest in deconstructing rigid boundaries between human and nature offers a way to reconsider some of the more mystifying moments in the modernist project.

Consider Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Vardaman's puzzling statement that "My mother is a fish" (185). Indeed, Vardaman's observation should not be dismissed as the absurdity, but the clarity, of a six year old, as Faulkner grants him philosophical insight on a number of subjects far beyond the capacity of a six year old throughout the novel. Vardaman's profound revelation demands the reader's contemplation as it starkly stands alone on the page as one of the shortest chapters in literary history. As a thought experiment, if we substitute "nature" for "fish" as "fish" would undoubtedly be classified as "nature" in the human-nature divide, Vardaman's statement becomes: *My mother is nature*. This is only one of many moments in *As I Lay Dying,* and indeed Faulkner's entire canon, where the author suggests ecological thought to an alarmingly Mortonesque degree. Nature is present through its absence, as broadening our definition of nature and acknowledgement of human as nature demonstrates. Vardaman simultaneously acknowledges that all animals, human and other-than-human, are both "full of blood and guts" (37) and that the "other" is an "*is* different from my *is*" (56). This is nothing if not the essence of ecological thought. Is it possible that we took a step backwards and are only

now coming back to the very same place that we were a century ago? Historicizing modernist literature in terms of ecological awareness and ecological thought seems to suggest so.

The absence of recognizable, typical "Nature" proper in literary modernism is one of several explanations for the gap in the scholarship of both modernist studies and in the scholarship of the environmental humanities; however, ecocriticism is slowly including and finding value in modernist literature, while modernist studies seems much slower to accept ecocriticism as a valuable approach. The increasing, but still spotty, publications considering modernism from an ecocritical perspective are almost always targeted at an ecocritical audience, and the spottiness in effect gives the impression that Joyce or Woolf, or whomever is the subject of study, is the anomaly. On the contrary, I want to make the case that the modernist shift in literary expression is symptomatic of a new era of human impact on the natural world. The period must be situated in the existing narrative of human and nature, particularly since the "intersection of human temporality and geological time," Morton's description of the Anthropocene, is so close to the moment when traditional modes of literary expression no longer sufficed. If the modernists were correct in believing that avante-garde art was always ahead of the understanding of the majority (Gasiorek 182), then it seems we might owe their ecological vision a second look.

Defining Modernist Form(s) / Aesthetic(s)

Formal experimentation is a hallmark of literary modernism, and I have selected texts that exemplify this experimentation because I believe the authors were attempting to capture this "new reality" of the "new epoch," for one thing. In particular, I am interested in a type of collage-method that is evident in all of the texts in this dissertation. *The Waste Land*, *The Waves*,

Spring and All, *Cane*—all of these texts experiment with genre and the totality is pieced out of fragments of various sorts. Collage brings modernist displays of fragmentation into a coherent work of art, and each fragment references outside of the text to its own material context, narrative, situation, time and place. Furthermore, the individual pieces of the collage mix the social, the political, the cultural, the ecological. There is nothing that is not art, and there is nothing that is not nature. In Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet" she advises the aspiring writer to "let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever comes along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole…That perhaps is your task—to find the relation between things that seem perhaps incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment" (191).

Additionally, all of the texts in this dissertation might be categorized as "experimental" and problematize traditional genre categories, blending existing genres and creating new ones. The inventiveness of these texts and the mixture of genres speaks to the complexity of the issues at hand. Of *Spring and All*, Webster Schott writes that there is "no point in trying to classify the book. It is neither fiction, criticism, poetry nor fact. It is all—or parts of all" (86). In her diary, Virginia Woolf described *The Waves*, then under the title of *The Moths*, as an "abstract playpoem" (203). Jean Toomer's *Cane* was perhaps most troubled by what Blyden Jackson's essay labels "An Issue of Genre," and Warren French targets *Cane*'s genre-defying qualities as a "principal cause of the neglect of *Cane*" (317). French continues by suggesting a sort of discomfort caused by these things that are beyond our ability to fit them neatly into a box: "If critics could not classify it, they seemed unable to deal with it—a pathetic indication of the paralysis of much American literary study" (317). French's observations on *Cane* resonate with

the problem of other high modernist texts and nature more generally in the Post-Darwinian Anthropocene. Indeed, the texts in this dissertation are especially interested in things that operate in defiance of categorization: smoke, water, song, imagination. There is no easy hierarchical ordering because individuals in a system are always acting on one another, entangling with one another, and "becoming with" one another, to use Donna Haraway's phrase. Bacteria cannot be lower than the human because it comprises the human (and, indeed, is much older and more resilient), for instance. As collage blends but celebrates differences, literary scholarship has to let go of its own outmoded epistemologies in order to acknowledge evolving understandings of the human and nonhuman world.

Modernists create collages in the literal sense—bringing fragments together to create their total artwork—or employ collage aesthetic by genre-bending and blending. The birth of modern collage is traced to Paris in 1912, Jane Goldman reminds us, when Picasso stuck an oilcloth to his painting, "encouraging formalist interpretations suggestive of self-reflexive aesthetics—but it also made the picture surface resonate with references back to the 'real world,' itself apparently constituted in the detritus of printed matter intruding into the aesthetic realm" (*Modernism* 54). Picasso's invention of the collage method (*papier collé*) and the implications for modernist appropriations of this method, then have particular resonance with new materialist approaches in the environmental humanities that seek to read narratives of "storied matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 1). William Carlos Williams composed his collage-like books, including *Spring and All,* by scribbling impressions on scraps of paper and prescription pads in the pauses between his physician's duties. These reflections of the moment come together in a collage that inevitably references the realities out of which the pieces were formed. The very materials of the prescription pad itself refer to human invention and frailty, but Williams transformed the

material from its original function to procure pharmaceuticals. The papers instead capture the poet's response to the delivery of a baby, an aged and dying patient, fragments that become entangled with other meditations on the objects that comprise our daily life: eyeglasses, furniture, automobiles. This is just one example of the way that these authors literally inscribe the material world into their aesthetic productions.

Collage technique becomes one way of ordering the fragments of modern existence into a coherent totality, but also suggests the entanglement of human, object, earth, matter in ways that warrant more critical attention. Just as collage relies upon juxtaposition of everyday materials—string, newspaper clippings, photographs—glued to a pictorial surface (*OED*), the world's "material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (Iovino and Oppermann 1). Collages suggest relationships and systems, and the result is something new, or a new way of looking at existing "old" stuff. Further, the collage form evokes Donna Haraway's idea of the figure, "material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another" (*When Species Meet* 2). Finally, collage enacts a telescoping effect in all of these texts, as this form encourages us to read on multiple scales and levels. As we zoom in and out between specific and general, local and global, human and nonhuman, we are reminded of other lifeworlds, different ways of seeing and being. Meanwhile, these texts possess the uncanny ability to make us think on multiple scales at once. As we read, we contemplate geological time but also focus in on the small, the distinct, and the particular; we are ever aware of objects, things, and the narratives they tell.

Undoubtedly, for modernist studies, aesthetics and form are indispensible. Not only have these categories come to characterize literary modernism in the scholarship, but the practitioners

themselves were very conscious of creating a new form, of breaking with tradition, and "making it new," to repeat Pound's exhausted motto. We have correspondence, essays, diaries that reveal the artists' obsession with form, and many major modernist texts include a meta-narrative aware of their own form and composition. Each of the texts included in this study—*The Waste Land, Spring and All, The Waves,* and *Cane*—present themselves as little worlds. For this reason, my chapters will be text driven and in each I will delve into the systems that make up each of these microcosms in order to discern the ecological vision presented within. If the modernist novel becomes "an art that does not *report* the world but *creates* it" (Fletcher and Bradbury 396), this dissertation asks: how is the created world defined in comparison to the experienced world? Read as symptomatic of the Anthropocene, can the modernist aesthetic suggest a corrective to the perceived problematic relationship between humans and the material world?

Again, observing that traditional modes of representation no longer sufficed, writers in the modernist literary tradition respond to perceived shifts in reality and experience on levels of both content and form. In addition to the collage-like fragmentation, the resulting characteristics of modernist style as it has been canonized include the stream of consciousness technique, which replaces linear narrative and omniscient narrator and often results in the disturbance of chronology and spatial order (Lodge 550). To compensate for the formal unity that a traditional narrative and narrator provide, modernist texts are often structured by symbol or motif, in this way exhibiting what David Lodge calls a "metaphoric mode" (552). Furthermore, writing after the devastation of World War I and during a time characterized by skepticism—a response to the perceived anarchy left in the wake of Darwin,[14] Freud, Einstein and others who challenged truth

[14] The Critic Victor Strandberg writes, "Under the double impact of Darwin's contention that man is only an animal and Freud's contention that he is hardly a noble animal at that, modern writers have indeed tended to scale man sharply downward in the great chain of being" (476).

and reality on fundamental levels—the modernists are understood as using the aesthetic realm to order, control, or create unity, or what Fredric Jameson calls a "poetics of totality" that is missing from the experience of the modern world. As Lawrence Rainey puts it in his introduction to Modernism: "it was modernism's central achievement to have devised rigorous, difficult, yet coherent forms that were set over and against the chaotic contingencies of the present" (xxii). This is a conception of modernist fiction that, in Rainey's view, the writers themselves supported, a view that Eliot's interest in the ability of Joyce's "mythic method" to control and order corroborates.[15] In this way, modernist literary form is symptomatic of cultural, political, ecological shifts, and it is on the latter point—the ecological—that this dissertation will focus. If we continue to discuss the modernist art piece as a corrective, as the space that these writers turned to in order to make sense of their world, even to "fix" it, then we must take these statements seriously, and this is one reason that I do not think it is necessary to go outside of the canon to find ecological concerns, though we must also challenge the boundaries of the canon. In other words, the fact that this dissertation largely treats canonical high modernists does not mean to suggest that there is not a more global approach to these issues. My primary concern within the limitations of this project is to show how the received modernist canon can be re-read in the Anthropocene, but future work must continue to attune to non-Western experiences and perspectives. Further, it is my initial observation that thinking through the Anthropocene will illuminate approaches to global modernisms as much if not more so than the original canon because our current epoch highlights our species' impact across national boundaries.

[15] Eliot identified this mythic method in a 1923 essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" where he famously commented on Joyce's way of "controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177).

So what does it mean to suggest that there is something ecological about modernist literary form, that perhaps this experimental process of literary form helps its reader to think ecologically? On the most obvious level, stream of consciousness creates moments of radical encounters with human and nonhuman alike. Additionally, streams of consciousness affect a messy openness at the very same time that the modernist desire for order presents the illusion of totality where concepts of earth and world come under scrutiny. In another important sense, it is not the resulting totality that makes modernist literary form ecological, nor most interesting, but the way that the fragments form relationships, assemblages, systems, forcing us to think on different scales—of the part and the whole—to attune to distinctions but also entanglements. Descriptions of modernist form that focus on this fragmentation-totality paradox echo certain descriptions in environmental studies, such as Gregory Bateson's definition of ecology as "co-evolving systems whose boundaries are blurred by their interaction" (Walsh 72). Likewise, posthumanist thinkers such as Cary Wolfe remind us that systems are not closed off from their environments. Boundaries are not only blurred but porous and permeable. For all of the texts in this dissertation, form creates content in this respect: fragments contain independent meaning and point to a context all their own but interact with and refer to other fragments and the textual totality in which they are embedded.

The unified, coherent modernist totality is aesthetically pleasing and in some ways easier to treat than the constant interplay between part and whole that also characterizes modern fiction. Potentially, though, it is the privileging of the totality and the way that modernist texts have been taught as "closed systems" that has contributed to the oversight of very real ecological concerns that are central to the modernist project. Additionally, the view that the modernists were outside of history, or at least wanted to be, in some way cannot lead us to treat these texts as if they were

produced absent of any real interaction with the place and time that formed them. Indeed an important connection exists between the texts and the extratextual and intertextual environments that emerge there. We have to remember that James Joyce reportedly told his friend, "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book" (Budgen 69). The book, of course, is *Ulysses*. The same might be said of William Carlos Williams's transcriptions of the immediate, Eliot's attention to place in *The Waste Land*, Woolf's characterization of London but also the coast, and *Cane*'s Georgia and Washington, D.C. The ambition to capture reality, though clearly impossible to complete, forced these writers to engage with the full complexity of these places, meaning their robust nonhuman reality. Therefore, these texts are rigorously environmental, in a way that extends beyond more reductive engagements with "nature" privileged in some environmental literary traditions.

This dissertation argues, therefore, that aesthetics and form can also be historically aware, and it is the interaction between systems that interests ecology just as much as the details of individual systems. In the article "Historicism and Literary History: Mapping the Modern Period" David Lodge notes modernism's paradoxical combination of historicism and the "yearning to escape from history" (552). To argue that modernist experimentation is symptomatic of historical conditions, particularly environmental ones, is to embrace this paradox and consider the way in which an ecological vision is present within each text's microcosm, and also how each microcosm is shaped by the historical and material conditions that produce it. From this standpoint, the text becomes the specimen of interest, and this is why I will spend a chapter on representative samples. Historicizing modernist literary expression means paying attention also to the environments that shaped it, that these texts are in conversation with, and the

growing awareness that the human species is capable of having a profound impact on Earth's systems.

More specifically, what might we gain from re-reading the modernists in this time of great ecological awareness, where foundational concepts such as human and nature are once again approached with skepticism, in the Anthropocene? Modernism's revolt against Enlightenment thinking, realism, and basic distrust in the tradition, religion, institutions, and foundations of Western culture extends to received notions of nature. The modernist insistence on troubling fixed categories of meaning, such as nature, aligns modernists with scholars in the environmental humanities in provocative ways that warrant more critical attention. Carol Cantrell is one who has noted the modernist "distrust in the foundations and institutions of Western culture" and the application of this distrust to the blending of modernist studies and ecocritical approaches. In her article, "'The Locus of Compossibility': Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place," Cantrell notes that this "distrust" is "part of a more elusive sense of things, a sense virtually all modern artists shared, that they had experienced a revolutionary change in 'the given,' including 'the given' we call nature" (26). Cantrell's essay is one of the best for outlining what literary modernism might offer ecocritics, but written in 1998, this article predates such concepts as Donna Harraway's *natureculture*s, Stacy Alaimo's *transcorporeality*, and Timothy Morton's *mesh*—all of which substitute binary treatment of nature with a focus on relationships, systems that break down distinctions. Still, it is the modernist attack on dualistic thinking, and the way their art offers as a substitute something more in line with the concepts above, that makes these writers immediately relevant to an approach that combines ecocritical ideas with the study of modernism. Furthermore, this distrust resulted from the fact that these

writers witnessed such profound changes to the material world. This, if nothing else, uniquely situates them in a position to comment on the emerging Anthropocene.

Literary modernism's "slipperiness" must also be thought of as disrupting, blurring the traditional distinction between human and nature—human impact on the material world and the consequences of that impact make it clear that traditional binary distinctions cannot hold. For Jebediah Purdy, author of *After Nature*: *A Politics for the Anthropocene*, the Anthropocene "finds its most radical expression in our acknowledgment that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. Because we shape everything, from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas, there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings" (2-3). Primarily because of their size, Hyperobjects complicate traditional distinctions between internal and external, or as Emina Musanovic puts it, hyperobjects dissolve "foreground and background distinction" (104). As an artistic movement, modernism signals this absence of externality in its form as much as its content: "[e]xtreme forms of realism began to set streams of consciousness free from the people who were having them, and the hand-holding benevolent narrator vanished" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 10-11). In the Anthropocene, we are aware that the air, water, space, and other places that once were external to us are very much not. I will refer to this as interconnectedness and loss of externality, for modernism and the Anthropocene remind us of both our interconnectedness and the fact that "nature" is universal, independent, and apart.

The Example of Water

With all of this in mind, the elemental, and water in particular, becomes a key focus in this dissertation for several reasons. First, water's physical characteristics make it an apt substance in both form and content. The notion of streams of consciousness borrows from

water's material properties, its fluidity and valence. But these texts' treatment of water also pushes us outside their textual boundaries. It spills out. Through water, we are reminded of the Thames, the wave and tide cycle, pollution, drought, and even the slave trade. Simply put, these writers comment on contemporary environmental concerns that become visible in rivers, lakes, streams, oceans, while the character of water makes it an apt metaphor for their artistic purposes, at the same time that literary form mimics water's physical properties. Describing James Joyce's treatment of water in his chapter of *Eco-Joyce* entitled "'Aquacities of Thought and Language': The Political Ecology of Water in *Ulysses*," Greg Winston speaks to the way the modernist interest in water and all of its paradoxes works to complicate embedded binaries of nature and human: "[w]ater in Joyce's fiction is physical and pragmatic, technical and scientific, social and political; it is also spiritual and mythic, represented for its powers to preserve life and to take it away. Water courses through his works as setting and character, image and symbol, style and form" (141).

I will focus on water most centrally in my discussion of *The Waste Land* and *The Waves,* but *Spring and All* and *Cane* engage the substance meaningfully as well. In *Spring and All*'s poem segment "XX" (later titled "The Sea"), for example, Williams mimics the sound of the waves—"Oom barroom" (223)—in their playful but threatening dance with a young female's body. *Cane*'s perplexing and emotional sketch "Rhobert" figures life as "murky, wiggling, microscopic water" (55). Rhobert is suspended in a delicate balance between life and death, in a body of water that is "being drawn off" to leave only the oppressive ooze of mud, into which Rhobert sinks and will likely disappear (56). It is no coincidence that Toomer chooses water to articulate this precarious balance of human agency and vulnerability. As Winston puts it, literature of the early twentieth century "recalls a time before we took water for granted" (157).

Further, water is employed as the source of life; it connects our globe and provides a "net" of sorts. Lawrence Buell refers to oceans as "the closest thing on earth to a landscape of global scope" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 199). This is true, too, of Woolf's canon and all of the authors in my study. James Fairhall argues "water is the most transformative and therefore the most magical and closest to creation and destruction" (240) in his discussion of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which invokes air, earth, fire, and water as does Eliot's *Waste Land*. The duality of life-giving and life-threatening informs a range of modernist texts, as in Eliot's "Death by Water" section of *The Waste Land*.

While water's availability is the sign of a civilized society, as Charles Fishman's *The Big Thirst* demonstrates, problems with water—namely our inability to control it, to manufacture it—remind us of many things, including the fact that resources are limited and so are human lifespans. For all of these writers, water is just as intimately connected with finitude and death as it is with life, and it only takes a flood, a drought, a tsunami, or an act of contamination to remind us of this as well. Water's importance was made all too clear in the twentieth century on the local level as urban sewage treatment and disposal became necessary. By one estimation, contaminated water killed tens of millions of people in the twentieth century, and the "provision of safe water for modern cities, begun in the nineteenth century and carried forward in the twentieth, was decisive in shaping modern life" (McNeill 147). Other events involving bodies of water demonstrated for those living and writing in the early twentieth century the way in which water connects species and communities.

One notable example is the Nippon Chisso factory in Minamata which was established in 1910, and which manufactured acetaldehyde, and dumped inorganic mercury-laden waste into Minamata Bay. This mercury was then converted into methyl mercury by bacteria and resulted in

fish die-offs, but that was not enough to stop the Chisso company from spewing mercury into the bay. Soon, the mercury affected cats, children, and finally enough people to begin legal action (McNeill 138-139). Greg Winston sees early twentieth-century literature as the logical starting point for scholarship concerned with questions of water because

> public availability and access to water had become a defining feature of urbanism and modernity. Massive public reservoirs, diversion canals and transport systems ushered in what Charles Fishman dubs "the golden age of water" starting in the late nineteenth century, as the resource became relatively inexpensive, readily available and seemingly limitless in most industrialised nations…Tracing water's course through literary works that have previously benefited from scant ecological interpretation, or none at all, can contribute to an expanded awareness of the world, the text and the resource in question. (139)

To this end, this dissertation pays close attention to the treatment of water, particularly in Chapters 1 and 3, but the observations about Eliot and Woolf might be made of modernism more generally. Water systems provide the first visual evidence of human impact on a geological scale; therefore, it is significant in the frame of the Anthropocene that this material is infused with expressions of life and death.

Oceans and other bodies of water are especially interesting for those in the environmental humanities for obvious, and perhaps less obvious, reasons. Life cannot exist without water, as we know. Certainly, water systems provided some of the earliest indications of human impact on a geological scale; illness due to poorly disposed waste and rudimentary sewer systems, or as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* demonstrated, the ability of pesticides and other chemicals to permeate watersheds, become stark reminders of the interconnectivity of our world and the

entanglement of humans with the material world. Recent headlines such as "Rocks Made of Plastic Found on Hawaiian Beach" remind us that our impact on the Earth is permanent—to be read in the fossil layer even if our species becomes extinct—and entangled with natural processes in profound ways.[16]

In the Anthropocene, oceans are ever-gaining attention and significance, but still retain the illusion of externality for many people, even today. In part, this is convenient, as oceans are plagued by what Callum Roberts in *The Unnatural History of the Sea* calls "collective societal amnesia" (36). In other words, we like to forget our impact on oceans, or the so-called "Last Great Wilderness" of the human imagination (Ramirez-Llodra n.p.). The drastic decline in diversity and abundance of life is just one of the many issues facing the oceans, and one scholar working at the so-called "material turn" of ecocriticism, Stacy Alaimo, provides a sobering list, a sample of which is: "Ocean acidification. Dead zones. Oil 'spills.' Industrial fishing, overfishing, trawling, long lines, shark finning. Bycatch, bykill. Ghost nets. Deep sea-mining. Habitat destruction. Dumping. Radioactive, plastic, and microplastic pollution" (186). Still, for many, these problems seem far removed from human interests, as it is still common to imagine the ocean as kind of a self-contained, self-renewing space, illustrated, for instance, by Rush Limbaugh's comments on the Deep Horizon disaster to the effect that the ocean would take care of the spill itself.

In the Editor's Column of *PMLA* titled "Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of Commons," Patricia Yaeger notes that the "sea functions in literature and culture as a trope

[16] An article forthcoming this year by Zalasiewicz et al. suggests that plastic is so ubiquitous and recognizable that the material might become the stratigraphic indicator of the Anthropocene. Meaning, the human legacy at some point in the future may potentially be a recognizable layer of plastic in the fossil record. I will say more about this in Chapter 3. See the article by Zalasiewicz and colleagues, "The Geological Cycle of Plastics and Their Use as a Stratigraphic Indicator of the Anthropocene," here:
http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2213305416300029

instead of a biotic world or swarm of agencies. But even shadowy or unnatural tropes have real-world consequences. Figures of the boundless sea or the oceanic sublime encourage humans to treat it as an inexhaustible storehouse of goods" (535). For Stacy Alaimo, the paradoxical imagining of oceans as either inexhaustible resources or "abyssal voids" speaks to a cultural refusal to understand the material realities of the deep sea. And this "persistent (and convenient) conception of the ocean as so vast and powerful that anything dumped into it will be dispersed into oblivion makes it particularly difficult to capture, map, and publicize the flow of toxins across terrestrial, oceanic, and human habitats" ("Oceanic Origins" 188).

As Alaimo's scholarship on oceans suggests, however, these expansive bodies of water are sites of great potential for encouraging ecological thought because so many agents collide there, making interdependence painstakingly clear. Given that terrestrial humans are "disconnected from the vast liquid habitats that cover much of the planet…narratives, theories, paradigms, and practices that reveal interconnections between these spheres may encourage marine environmentalism" (188). Throughout her body of work, Alaimo develops the concept of trans-corporeality—sharing with Morton's mesh interest in a new understanding of the "human as perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" as "the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty" ("Oceanic Origins" 187). Alaimo approaches this new way of thinking about "nature" with a particular focus on the porousness of the human body, and the way that mundane actions become political because of this entanglement. Oceans, and water generally, are a reminder of our materiality and enmeshedness for these writers who make use of water, both for its molecular and metaphorical potential, in a

way that anticipates the Anthropocene and current scholarship in material ecocriticism, particularly that of Morton and Alaimo.

Preview of Chapters

All of the texts in this dissertation were written in the period between the Wars (and all but *The Waves* published immediately after the War's end in the 1920s) when human impact on environments and human vulnerability was at the forefront of human consciousness. T.S. Eliot's iconic poem *The Waste Land* provides a logical and descriptive starting point for the reconsideration of literary expression after the First World War within the frame of the Anthropocene. In a compacted space, *The Waste Land* exhibits all of the characteristics of literary modernism that make it most expressive of the Anthropocene. As I previewed above, I pay particular attention to the active elements at work in the poem, and suggest that Eliot anticipates global warming with the paradoxical and deranged behavior of water that threatens human life either in its scarcity or abundance. We ache with Eliot at the thought of destroying a world that, it turns out, we love very deeply. In addition, I situate Eliot's poem within the more general concern with time in the work of writers like W.B. Yeats and popular newspapers in order to demonstrate the pervading feeling that humanity and/or the Earth teetered on the verge of a new epoch—the Anthropocene, perhaps. Finally, as Eliot delivers a conviction of human nature out of the thunder, readers in the Anthropocene are likewise challenged: "what have we given?" (401).

Presumably issued as a challenge to Eliot's iconic poem, William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* reiterates the difficulty of approaching something as huge and incomprehensible as modernity or the Anthropocene straight on. Williams's part prose, part poetry collage

disorients and befuddles its reader as it alternates between meditations on local environments and odd thought exercises that invoke the human species' fortuitous extinction. Taken as a totality, Williams's reality decenters human perception at the same time that it relies on the imagination to approach knowledge and truth. Ultimately, Williams's treatment of the imagination suggests a deconstruction of the inherited notion of human in order to allow for a more genuine interaction with the material world, though the material world is also in flux and increasingly unfamiliar, as demonstrated by the estranged season of spring.

As the only novel in this study, *The Waves* utilizes the stream of consciousness technique to perform a mesh, which replaces traditional distinctions between foreground and background with an enlivened entanglement of human and nonhuman, individual and environment. *The Waves* performs the Anthropocene when Woolf demonstrates the fragility of human life and our construction of world by removing the "center point," Percival. The result is a similar bittersweet groundlessness that the Anthropocene inspires. Through Woolf's use of metaphor and anthropomorphism, the reader experiences a world that is particularly strange and enchanting, while this technique extends materiality across ontological categories of human and nonhuman; humans are as material as time, water, and death. Further, Woolf's meditations on deep time and the disjunction in scales between the italicized interludes and the rest of the novel resituate the human inside of earth's time and by doing so further express the Anthropocene.

Cane adds an important voice to the American environmental tradition, a voice that perhaps has been underemphasized. This final chapter also raises the problem of thinking about racial identities in the Anthropocene, when discussions of the collective human species as geological agent potentially erase political categories. Far from rejecting nature as a site of violence, the black characters in *Cane* recognize the beauty and vivacity of the natural world,

while Toomer invites his reader to consider the ways in which the natural world might also be victim to destructive ideologies that have historically oppressed certain racial groups. The consequences of human impact on earth's systems are made visible in *Cane* as Toomer invokes material realities of agribusiness, sugar production, and the lumber industry. Further, this chapter emphasizes *Cane*'s interest in song in order to suggest ways that the aesthetic might be understood as causal, to use Timothy Morton's phrasing (*Realist Magic* 20). Song has a particular history in the African American tradition, and in *Cane* song becomes a system of communication that is not semantic but shared between human and nonhuman.

Chapter 1: "Fear in a handful of dust":

The Waste Land's Meditation on our Anthropogenic Age

Thomas Stearns Eliot secured himself as a figurehead of modernism with the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922. First published in Eliot's own *Criterion* and *The Dial* without notes, *The Waste Land* appeared the same year as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Jacob's Room. The Waste Land* is for many the greatest poem of the twentieth century. It is the seminal masterpiece of literary modernism touted as the "pinnacle of modernist expression" (Brown and Gupta 266). Perhaps more than any other text, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* captures the moment after the First World War that often demarcates the start of the period of literary modernism. Marked by the prestige and maturity indicative of the so-called "high" phase of modernist production (Hanna 53), *The Waste Land* hailed the "Age of Eliot" and has come to define literary modernism more generally. This chapter revisits this, the "iconic modernist long poem" (Hampson and Montgomery 77), to suggest that it can be read as an expression of the emergent Anthropocene. Ecocritical and new materialist considerations of Eliot's project bring the elemental into clearer focus—in all of the scholarship on *The Waste Land*, critics have not sufficiently attuned to the poem's use of the nonhuman, elemental world—fire, water, air, thunder—in literal, material terms. Rather than just suggesting that these are psychological, symbolic moments, might this poem demonstrate how human meaning making unavoidably relies upon the material realities of the nonhuman? Can Eliot's engagement with the elemental communicate an Anthropocenic interest in the human entanglement with Earth's geology? As

one voice forebodes, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (30),[17] we are reminded of the limits of Earth's sustainability and our own vulnerability. In this moment and many others, *The Waste Land* invites us to pay particular attention to the interdependence of psychological, physical, and textual landscapes.

I also hope to complicate the way the poem is widely anthologized and characterized solely in terms of its pessimism. Reading *The Waste Land* as a symptom of our emergent epoch, I argue, reveals a deep awareness of the potential for humans to impact environments, and in this reading, alienation, loneliness, and despair only come from the knowledge that humans are deeply connected and dependent on one another and the nonhuman. Further, I want to ask, does reading *The Waste Land* in the frame of the Anthropocene suggest a sort of prescience in terms of environmental issues? Are the conditions of modernity—the condition of *The Waste Land*—and the condition of the Anthropocene one and the same? Read symptomatically, might this, like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," be a love song about that which might be lost? For, Graham Harman reminds us that it is only in the case of a malfunction that we notice things.[18] When everything operates status quo, there is far less awareness of the mundane. It can be said, then, that *The Waste Land* is hyperaware of changing material conditions, and the implication of the human in those changes, indicative of the Anthropocene. In this sense, depression, alienation, and sadness, reference their opposite; "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a poem about the fact that humans are social animals who need each other, not alienation, if read as a symptom. In "Elemental Love in the Anthropocene," Stacy Alaimo sees in "Prufrock" the "specter of the patiently dying world" (300). This image, for Alaimo, like so many of the images in *The Waste*

[17] In-text citations containing only numbers refer to lines of Eliot's poem. If referencing Eliot's note, I will cite by page number and include the title of the text like so: (*Waste Land* 1).

[18] See the interview in *Figure/Ground,* for example: http://figureground.org/interview-with-graham-harman-2/

Land, "conjures up the despair of those who passionately love this lavishly creatured world" (300).

The Waste Land is typically anthologized as an apocalyptic poem, and I think this classification is useful, if we are deliberate in our sense of the concept. In *Mourning Modernism,* Lecia Rosenthal notes that "the end of the world" took many different forms for the modernists: "the end of humanity, the end of nature, the exhaustion of the earth as habitat" (4). All of these levels of apocalypse resonate with current conversations of the Anthropocene, and I think Eliot, like Yeats before him, makes use of "the power of the aesthetic by staging the imagination at the brink of destruction" (Rosenthal 5). *The Waste Land* beckons its reader to visualize our own death, and also this age of global warming, climate change, and the Sixth Extinction, albeit preliminary, subtle, and in highly aestheticized terms: "(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)," the voice calls to us (26). *The Waste Land* is a landscape—literally and figuratively—that is unpredictable, unreadable, and inhospitable such as the one that now looms large over human history.

Insofar as apocalypse might refer to the end of the age, thinking through the concept of apocalypse is illuminating for humanities scholars wishing to situate literary production inside of environmental history. Certainly, writers such as William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis expressed the sentiment that humanity was in the process of experiencing the end of an era, a notion again corroborated in the sciences by the early formulations of Anthropocene. As preliminary remarks, it is important to note that the meaning in the original Greek *apocálypsis* most closely translates to "uncovering" or "revelation" (McGrath 113). For my purposes, it might be more accurate to think of Eliot's poem as post-apocalyptic, or expressing the moment beyond this realization when living must still happen. This line of thinking correlates with

current environmental theorists who suggest we are already living "after the end of the world" (Morton, *Hyperobjects*). I will say more about the apocalyptic trend in modernist literary production shortly.

Additionally, *The Waste Land* shifted literary expression and criticism, and every author in this study had a direct relationship with it either personally or retrospectively, as critics have used *The Waste Land* as a caliper by which to measure other writers on a variety of criteria. William Carlos Williams described the poem as an "atom bomb" (*Autobiography* 174), and Warren French refers to *Cane* as a "Black Waste Land" (318), illustrating the poem's effect both on those writing in the wake of the text and critics' insistence to see the poem as defining the period. Eliot's experimentation with form installed the collage technique as common practice amongst the high modernists. In his review, Grover Smith calls it the "music of allusions" and a "palimpsest or layered mixture of historical times" (23, 50). As mentioned in the introduction to this study, the fragments that Eliot brings together into the collage form suggest the fragmentation of the material world while its totality also provides a momentary unity. Meanwhile, the text is always referring to itself and also referring outward.

Further, the poem has taken on a life of its own, presently known in name and reputation more than it is actually experienced firsthand. Indeed, Eliot gave new meaning to the term "wasteland," which has become synonymous with a post-apocalyptic scene devoid of hope, faith, or the potential for renewal. Films such as the *Mad Max* franchise use the word "wasteland" liberally in promotional material to describe the setting and scene, and *Mad Max: The Wasteland* will be the next installment, forthcoming in 2016. While these Eliotic appropriations of the term typically imply a human-induced apocalypse brought about by war, or the like, in fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, "wasteland" once indicated a space that is markedly not

affected by humans—"land in its natural, uncultivated state" ("wasteland," n.). Therefore, Eliot's poem ensured that an already shifting definition was permanently engrained in the popular consciousness. In the tradition of Eliot, a standard wasteland is not only ecologically ruined, but also spiritually devoid.

Judith Paltin gives an excellent explanation of the etymology of wasteland in her article "'An Infected Carrier of the Past': Modernist Nature as the Ground of Anti-Realism." In summary, she notes, "what before the fourteenth century had chiefly meant 'untouched,' even as early as the English Civil War more often had become 'to lay wasted,' quite a different designation" (781). Patlin argues, and I concur, that the "intricate and dense history that the title phrase unlocks implies that 'nature' as a category is more central to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* than is generally admitted" (781). As Patlin suggests, critics very rarely treat the ecological concerns that are actually quite central to the poem with any sustained seriousness. Patlin notes that the "nearest versions to an ecocritical approach find *The Waste Land* may be read as an imagist version of the pathetic fallacy; its empty and devastated landscapes serve to express the poet's 'grouse against life' in his own words…that is, according to critics, life as experienced from within modern economic and social conditions" (781). This speaks to a larger trend in criticism discussing high modernist texts to treat the psychological as entirely separate and distinct from the environmental, again perpetuating this false dualism that these texts work to dissolve.

Traditionally, critical interpretation of *The Waste Land* has been divided as either reading it as an exclusively confessional and personal poem or a manifesto of the age. Those who take it as the former often cite Eliot's own words (later in life, to be sure) that the poem is "just a piece of personal grumbling" and it is this expression that Valerie Eliot uses as a sort of epigraph to the

facsimile edition (1). Although in the same breath, Eliot admits "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism" (1). The most astute critics and readers admire *The Waste Land*'s simultaneous ability to express individual emotion, capture its distinct moment in history at the end of the First World War, and also maintain a sense of timelessness. I argue that while attentive to its own specific, immediate time and place, *The Waste Land* also invokes the here and now, our current moment, "the age of unintended consequences," to use Ulrich Beck's famous phrase (119).

One limitation of thinking about *The Waste Land* simply as pathetic fallacy as many do, is that the landscapes are often not treated as literal in these readings. Yet, it is clear that Eliot's poem is entangled with the environments with which Eliot interacted. Lawrence Rainey notes that the financial district of London—known as "The City"—is the "principal locale for *The Waste Land*" (*Annotated Waste Land* 5). "The sense of inhuman isolation which suffuses *The Waste Land*," he writes, "owes much to this perceptible dwindling of living inhabitants, their homes consumed by a voraciously expanding commercial life" (11). Indeed, a quarter of the City's population left between 1901 and 1911 as commercial banks and insurance companies took over, according to Rainey (11). There are many other examples of ways in which we might locate *The Waste Land* in a specific material reality. The "unreal city" is, on one level, as real as Joyce's Dublin. Eliot locates us in "The Burial of the Dead" where the crowd "flowed over London Bridge" (63) and "up the hill and down King William Street" (66). Eliot knew King William Street from working at Lloyds Bank, and it does in fact lead from London Bridge to the heart of The City of London. Another landmark, Saint Mary Woolnoth (67), provided reprieve from the "dust and tumult of Lombard Street," as Eliot wrote for *The Dial* (Touch Press) in

defense of the building to save it from demolition. Another scene recreates Highbury, part of the suburb of Islington in North East London—"a gloomy suburb of the petite bourgeoisie" according to John Hayward (Touch Press): "Trams and dusty trees, / Highbury bore me" (292-293). It will become important to note that the water systems central to *The Waste Land* are very real as well. What if we think of the human consciousness in material terms and take textual landscapes more literally? In the Anthropocene, as I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, we must attune to multiple levels of meaning at once, and this is what I think the modernists would have us do as well. For, as Margot Norrris notes, "[e]cological disaster is not only material and external, but also imaginary and internal and, arguably, 'rooted' in separations and disjunctions in perceptions of the environment" (115).

Epigraph and the Age of the Earth

In Part V of Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), he describes the great loss and destruction of The Great War. Pound's outrage about the War is well-documented, but his characterization of the Earth as an "old bitch gone in the teeth" (Pound n.p.)[19] in this text speaks to an aspect of the modernist project that has unexpected resonances for readers in the emergent Anthropocene. The modernist obsession with time—more precisely, formulations of cyclical time (natural, geological) and human time (linear) takes different shapes in the projects of the different writers in this study, but all expose an obsession with time and the juxtaposition of human time and geological time. There are potentially unlimited avenues through which to enter

[19] There is much to say about the obvious figuration of the Earth as female here and in the examples that will follow. From one feminist or ecofeminist perspective, it is possible to see that Mother Earth metaphors as destructive and a further perpetuation of patriarchal / destructive practices to subjected minorities, nonhuman animals, and natural environments. See, for example, Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, or Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.*

into a discussion of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but following the title we might begin with the epigraph, and, with the Anthropocene in mind, show that the obsession with time might be understood as early articulations of the symptoms of the Anthropocene, where humanity feels itself coming to the end of an era, a cycle, a geological epoch. In this context, Pound's expression of the Earth as a "bitch gone in the teeth" suggests the sort of "death of nature" rhetoric that dominates one strand of environmentally concerned scholarship today. Therefore, I want to read the epigraph to *The Waste Land* in the context of a profound cultural sensibility that the earth is aging and entering an era of unsustainability. An anonymous 1922 review of the poem published in *The Criterion* describes the "purgatorial quality" of life that is "neither hellish nor heavenly" but a "tangle of the sordid and the beautiful" ("Mr. Eliot's Poem" 137). *The Waste Land* captures the moment before the denial sets in, marked by awareness and emotional response.

Along with its dedication to Pound, the "greater poet," *The Waste Land* begins with an epigraph alluding to the myth of the Cumean Sibyl. As it now reads, the allusion to the Sibyl replaces Eliot's original epigraph from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—Kurtz's dying "moment of complete knowledge," ending with "the horror, the horror." While Pound felt Conrad was not "weighty enough to stand the citation," Eliot found Conrad's words appropriate and "somewhat elucidative," according to the correspondence (Valerie Eliot 125). Both epigraphs share a sort of too-late awareness of human nature and mortality, but the current epigraph might be read as speaking to the pervading idea that a cycle was ending, the Earth was aging, or the human species was irreversibly altering its own fate.

Translated from Greek, the epigraph reads in its entirety: "For I once saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, 'Sibyl, what do you

want?' She answered, 'I want to die'" (Eliot 3). According to myth, upon her request Apollo granted the Sibyl as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth as well. So, in her extreme old age, her body has begun to decompose into liquid, and she must be contained in a jar. In this state, the Sibyl wishes to die, but she cannot, and will not for many years, but will continue to live in an increasingly decomposed state. The Sibyl and her condition becomes an allegory for the condition of the human in *The Waste Land*, literary modernism, and the Anthropocene. It is not her age or even her condition that is the ultimate tragedy, but the knowledge of her condition and her inability to do anything about it. She is as close to "death"—her end—as one might come but is deprived of the ability to act on her own behalf to resolve the situation. Ultimately, it is not possible to escape the system, as we are finding in the Anthropocene. We do not have another earth, another atmosphere, and in that sense, we are much like the sibyl.

Eliot's epigraph, and the poem's concern about the limited fertility of the Earth more broadly, speak to a larger early-twentieth century concern over time and the human species' interaction with time. William Faulkner's strange, early text *The Marionettes* (1920) contains these lines: "the earth is already old, the earth is like an aged woman gathering faggots in a barren field. Soon quiet snow will streak the earth with tears, but there are no tears in the earth's eyes now, she is blind with things that she has seen…the earth is a hunched and sightless woman holding herself together with her hair" (38-39). Here, Faulkner perhaps echoes the myth of the Sibyl with his depiction of a body so old it must be held together with hair. There is the sense, too, in Faulkner's figuration of the earth, that it is much older than a human lifespan—"the things she has seen" indicates a perspective outside or above human time. Aside from this, though, the prevalence of these images speaks to a hyperawareness that the Earth's resources are not

limitless.

It is not only modernist literary experimentation that suggests a problematic correlation between the age (and gender) of the Earth and human species. One can find evidence to support this reading of Eliot's epigraph in the context of the pervading hypersensitivity to Earth's age in popular culture as well. One only has to look to popular newspapers—particularly British but also American—to find headlines espousing the age of the earth. A September 1902 issue of the British newspaper *Hull Daily Mail* contains a segment titled "Old Mother Earth" and describes a meeting of the British association where one Professor Milne illustrated what must be an earthquake saying, "it was as if Old Mother Earth drew her outside coat closer around her, and it got puckered in the process because her wasting figure was no longer big enough to fill it out" (5). The science writer Hudson Maxim writes in a 1913 edition of *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, "Now the tread of the heavy ages jars; Earth feels her old wounds and aches at old scars" (6). From Pound's avant-garde poetry to popular newspapers, the sentiment that "Mother Earth's" days were numbered occupies early twentieth century "high" and "low" culture, and turn-of-the -century literature warns that Nature, once bountiful, yielding, nurturing, is now conceived of as a hag, a crotchety old woman long in the teeth and prone to fits. A September 2, 1910 cartoon from Liberty, Mississippi's *The Southern Herald* under the headline "How Old Mother Earth Hides Her Age," features a coy, feminized Earth playing off cultural beauty standards that privilege youth. Oddly enough, the associated article reports the debate over the age of the Earth in the scientific community, which the unnamed author admits, remains a mystery but the consensus is simply "old" ("How Old Mother Earth Hides Her Age"). The prevalence of these images suggests the way in which rapid

Fig. 2. "It's nobody's business how old I am." From *The Southern Herald*, 1910.

industrialization and urbanization affect the popular conception of the "earth mother." Consider the historically changing gender roles and anxiety over female reproduction (amplified by the emerging birth control/abortion industry), and the conceptual metaphors become quite loaded. This is the moment behind Eliot's infertile, barren wasteland.

Additionally, Eliot's allusion to Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" emphasizes the modernist obsession with time and the end of the epoch of human domination. Moments such as "But at my back in a cold blast I hear" (185), and "But at my back from time to time I hear" (196), along with the refrain in "A Game of Chess," which builds with increasing frequency, "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" (141; 152; 165; 168-69), a reader is aware of her own vulnerability to time. Further, in the first allusion, the poetic persona "hears" at his back "the rattle of the bones" (186) and in the second it is the "The sound of horns and motors" (197). This anxiety over time and the human place in time is articulated through Eliot's collage form that alternates between "prophetic" sections and voyeuristic observations about trivial human preoccupations with social gossip (139) and the like. Scholars frequently refer to Eliot's prophetic tendencies, and early discussions, making much of his religious conversion, positioned him directly in the tradition of Biblical prophets and thereby suggest certain spiritual or religious correlations.[20] Others employ the term more loosely to differentiate these "prophetic" moments from first person monologues and voices in dialect. In my reading, the "prophetic mode" should be understood as the latter, and specifically to describe a voice that appears to be outside of time, not subjected to the same limitations of human perception, and typically issuing a warning of some sort that is not necessarily religious, though there are certainly religious implications at times. This is the voice that most often communicates environmental emergency—"The river's

[20] See, for example, Florence Jones, "T.S. Eliot Among the Prophets" and Cleanth Brooks's "The Waste Land: A Prophetic Document."

tent is broken" (173)—but as is true with the other texts in this dissertation, the interplay between the first person and the prophetic potentially attunes a reader to the local and the global, the present and the future as thinking ecologically requires.

I would be remiss not to note that Eliot's sense of impending apocalypse and his speaker's feeling that death is nipping at one's coattails are inevitably influenced by the destruction of the First World War. Paul Fussell's landmark *The Great War in Modern Memory* accounts one Guy Chapman's feeling of being watched by "spectres" and similar reports from the battlefield. Fussell reads line 359 of Eliot's poem— "Who is the third who walks always beside you?"—in light of such accounts. Interestingly, in Chapman's report, "wastelands" is used with a new meaning—land wasted by the war: "There is a secret magic about the waste lands [i.e., environs of the derelict villages on the edge of the battlefields]. While you wander through the corrupted overgrown orchard, there is always someone at your back. You turn. It is nothing but the creak of a branch" (qtd. in Fussell 137). Yet, James Applewhite says it best when he cautions us to remember that *The Waste Land*

> may have been pushed to new intensities of revulsion and hysteria by the horror of events, but it depends for artistic success upon techniques already well in hand before the conflict. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* helps us see a connection between the utter sordidness of modern warfare—with trenches filled with water, mud, rotting bodies, and rats, from which huddled soldiers could see only the sky—and the depression and despair that followed it, once the hysterical edge of intensity had worn away. It is more accurate to see the Great War as a destructive pressure that elicited, as responses from a few richly-

> prepared artists, certain spurts of great work than to see it as central stimulus of modernism. Modernism was already in being before the war. (421)

Surely, the millions upon millions of human deaths in the First World War would have seemed like an extinction event, and Eliot is undeniably affected by such obvious destruction, as all of the writers in this dissertation are, perhaps Woolf most markedly. When read in the context of Fussell's crucial study mentioned above, *The Waste Land* does seem a "memory of war," as Fussell calls it (326). I want to acknowledge the War but agree with Applewhite that the poem is better understood as expressive of the sum of modernity—the condition of modernity—rather than War, only.

Water's Paradox: Drought and Drowning

The Waste Land's involvement with the elemental and non-human—fire, thunder, earth, water—suggests an interest in the Earth's geology and also acknowledges the limitations of human agency. Eliot's treatment of water is particularly rich in the frame of the Anthropocene, for its simultaneous live-giving and life-taking properties. *The Waste Land* captures the paradox of water in this age of environmental emergency, and the kind of neurosis of a civilization at risk of sea level rising, dispersed extreme floods, but also extreme lack of water resources and drought. Eliot's poem expresses the derangement, to use Timothy Clark's term, of a species facing its own extinction, yet individuals find themselves either paralyzed in patterns of normal, trivial behavior or disturbingly intrigued by the threat of disaster (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 14). Similarly, it is as if the War rages just outside while voices in *The Waste Land*'s "A Game of Chess," for instance, anxiously obsess over the inconsequential, hypothetical, and trivial. Water is destabilizing in *The Waste Land* because it is now too much and now not enough—we need water to survive but not too much, and we cannot depend on water to behave in familiar patterns.

Likewise, in the Anthropocene, water is both a scarce and precious commodity and an uncontainable threat to human life, particularly in coastal areas. Additionally, the interest in water runs through the poem and connects the fragments, suggesting a unity that is repeated on our planet, as water provides a visible and invisible net that connects our globe. Eliot's interest in water is not only symbolic; this is affirmed throughout his body of work, and in *The Waste Land*'s reference to specific lakes and river systems: the Thames, most notably. The poem all at once shows us "Fear in a handful of dust" (31) and warns us to "Fear death by water" (55), as both drought and drowning become reminders of the limits of human domination.

Early on, the poem acknowledges human vulnerability in an environment that is devoid of water. In Part I: "The Burial of the Dead," drought is also associated with notions of the environments' sudden unreadability:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. (19-24)

Aside from the Biblical allusions, this passage speaks to human shortsightedness and the inability to reconcile with an unfamiliar environment. The "stony rubbish" suggests ruins of a past civilization that humans—long gone—constructed in this place. This is the first time that the poet takes us from the realm of the immediate activities in human life and memory, to what I am calling the prophetic mode that most invokes the Anthropocene. The ominous voice invites us to see in the final words of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" "what is past, or passing, or to come"

(32). The fragments of the poem move the reader in and out of this prophetic mode—from immediate human consciousness and the trivialities of daily life to ruminations on death, war, and the material world. This telescopic effect situates individual lives and experiences within a larger expanse of history and time; in the imagination, a reader experiences varying views, dialects, personalities, and then is slipped suddenly to the places that push the limits of the imagination in order to confront individual mortality and the limitations of the human species.

Drought and lack of water, a general dryness, is linked to death throughout the poem as we wait for rain that will allow spring, fertility, and life. If *The Waste Land* is read as suggesting infertility, as the popular approach to the poem through the grail legend of Fisher King has led critics to do, extinction is imminent. In any case, without reproduction, of course, there is the slow diminishment of life. To quote Soule and Wilcox's *Conservation Biology,* "[d]eath is one thing, an end to *birth* is something else" (8). In *The Waste Land* "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying" (328-329), and, "Dry bones can harm no one" (390). Literary critics have too long treated drought in *The Waste Land* as symbolic of a spiritual, psychological absence that is exclusive of a literal concern of the topography.

The only exception comes in a somewhat unexpected side note in the book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992) by Robert Progue Harrison, a professor of Italian at Stanford University. Harrison suggests a reading of *The Waste Land* in line with one of my central arguments about modernist literary experimentation in the frame of the Anthropocene: we must take these texts as all at once symbolic, allegorical, metaphorical, but also embedded in specific concerns about the environments that inform the texts. Harrison's remarks are among the best I have read on the subject, so I will quote them at length:

> We have been taught, among others by Eliot himself to read *The Waste Land* as a testimony of despair over a civilization in spiritual decay. But that is only one aspect of the testimony. Poetry does not only monitor spiritual states of being, or what one used to call the 'spirit' of an age; it also registers the spiritual effects of a changing climate and habitat. As the external environment undergoes transformations, poets often announce them in advance with the clairvoyance of seers, for poets have an altogether sixth sense that enables them to forecast trends in weather, so to speak. (149)

Harrison does not stop there, though. In the next moment, he suggests that the greenhouse effect might be understood as the objective correlative of the poem (149). Harrison does not elaborate on his use of objective correlative here—the theory that Eliot developed in the essay "Hamlet and his Problems," where he writes that the "only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (qtd. in Svarny 34). To cite Harrison once more, the "wasteland grows within and without and with no essential distinction between them, so much so that we might now say that a poem like Eliot's *The Waste Land* is in some ways a harbinger of the greenhouse effect. Or better, we can say that the greenhouse effect, or desertification of habitat in general, is the true 'objective correlative' of the poem" (149). Both of Harrison's observations seem to be true—*The Waste Land* anticipates our current moment of ecological crises and also thinks through the awareness of this condition to create the desired effect.

While at first this reference to the greenhouse effect may seem unsubstantiated, let us remember that scientists were suggesting the dangers of increased greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide in particular—as early as the 1820s, and Svante Arrhenius brought attention to the issue in 1896 as the introduction to this study noted. Scientist and inventor Alexander Graham Bell is sometimes credited with popularizing the term "greenhouse effect" in a 1917 paper, describing the Earth as a "hot house" (Surtees n.p.). Bell is only one of the many scientists at the turn of the twentieth century who noted the potential for increased greenhouse gases to cause the Earth to warm or get a "fever." It is not unrealistic, therefore, to think that Eliot would have had this sort of thing in mind when writing *The Waste Land*. In any case, Eliot was responding to larger material circumstances that are connected to the specific reality of the greenhouse effect, and scholars must attune to the material and ecological issues at work in this poem and the body of modernist texts.

In Part V "What the Thunder Said" desertification creates a frantic feeling as the reader, along with the speaker, waits for water, and the enjambment runs on for over fifty lines, a mere sample of which follows:

> Here is no water but only rock
> Rock and no water and the sandy road
> The road winding above among the mountains
> Which are mountains of rock without water
> If there were water we should stop and drink
> Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
> Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
> If there were only water amongst the rock

Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit

Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit

There is not even silence in the mountains

But dry sterile thunder without rain (331-342)

Just as the poem conjures an exhausted traveler who cannot rest nor find relief, the reader of the poem is not given permission to breathe, to rest, as the lines run on and on, even mimicking water's dripping in a moment indicative of psychosis at worst and desperation at best: "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop / But there is no water" (357-358). Water is critical to the landscape, the poem, and the human, and in the frame of the Anthropocene, this drought and implied desertification, takes on new meaning. In most cases, desertification is the end result of a combination of land degrading practices: mechanized agriculture, deforestation,[21] rerouting of waterways, and so on. Eliot's mention of the "cracked earth" (369) further suggests desertification, where already dry areas become completely arid. Desertification speaks to the unequal and unpredictable exhaustability of water resources, as well as modern issues of distribution.

But there is not a complete absence of water in *The Waste Land*. Part IV "Death by Water" is the shortest section of the poem, but Ezra Pound and others have insisted that it is integral to the meaning of the poem, though "the exact significance …has always been very difficult to determine" (16, footnote). Read in the frame of the Anthropocene, this section reiterates human mortality, materiality, and the entanglement of human and environment. The entirety of "Death by Water" follows:

[21] See Yi-Peng Lai "The Tree Wedding and the (Eco) Politics of Irish Forestry in 'Cyclops': History, Language and the Viconian Politics of the Forest" in *Eco-Joyce* for a discussion of deforestation and reforestation practices in Ireland and England in the early twentieth century.

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,

Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell

And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once as handsome and tall as you. (312-321)

For Eliot, water is the ultimate foil to illusions of human domination, and death is the end to all hubris. The "whispers" (316) suggest the ease and effortlessness with which the water destroys the "handsome" (321) flesh. Though humanity has believed itself to be in control of the proverbial "ship," we were never steering. Additionally, the whirlpool here alludes to other formulations of cyclical time—Yeats's gyres, Wyndham Lewis's vortex—as water removes all evidence of Phlebas's age, his life, and returns him to the common minerals of the sea.

Waterways are especially vulnerable to human detritus, and water systems become one of the first indications that something is going wrong, as I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 3 on Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. According to Bonnie Kime Scott, "[m]odernists noted the capacity of rivers to connect through time and global distance and they detected the growing threat of human pollution to their beauty and viability" (59). "Part III: The Fire Sermon" reveals a striking concern over the health of watersheds, and begins,

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;

Departed, have left no addresses. (173-181)

Pollution becomes the "testimony" of human activity, left behind to tell a story that endures longer than human life. So, for Eliot, it is the Thames and it is every river that "sweats / Oil and tar" (267-268).

The Mississippi River formed a particular impression on Eliot from his childhood in St. Louis. Discussing his boyhood, Robert Crawford notes Eliot's fascination with the phenomenon of the spring freshet: "[g]rowing up in St Louis beside the Mississippi; the 'big river', was to Eliot an experience which he felt 'incommunicable to those who had not shared it" (12). The yearly flooding suggested to Eliot water's unpredictability and uncontainability, characteristics of water that I have noted seem to be infused into *The Waste Land*. In his *Dry Salvages* the River is the "strong brown god" (35) and Eliot's 1950 Introduction to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* suggests a particular interest in rivers' formal potential, as Eliot tellingly writes that a "river, a very big and powerful river, is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination" (21). Eliot is mistaken as many natural forces determine human patterns of movement and experience, but nevertheless Eliot's attention to rivers, in particular, suggests an ecological vision that he has yet to be granted. Eliot's most interesting commentary comes in all places, in his 1950 Introduction to *Huckleberry Finn.* This essay is frequently overlooked by

critics but strikes me as significant, as he finds the river to be one of the two elements that make it a great book. More importantly, Eliot writes that the "River gives the book its form" (21). To quote this passage again, "A river, a very big and powerful river," he writes, "is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination…It is a treacherous and capricious dictator…

> The river is never wholly charitable; it changes its pace, it shifts its channel, unaccountably; it may suddenly efface a sandbar, and throw up another bar where before was navigable water…As with Conrad, we are continually reminded of the power and terror, of Nature, and the isolation and feebleness of Man….the river itself has no beginning or end. In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end, it is no longer the River. (22-24)

With this interest in rivers evident, we might do a better job as critics of paying attention to the materiality and agency of water itself. The modernist hypersensitivity to the outside world is at least in part due to the recognition that all of this rapid change has repercussions, as the "river sweats oil and tar" (266-67), polluted water sources harm all sorts of ecosystems and inevitably put human life at risk. Therefore, trauma to the material world—water and air pollution, for example—heightens ecological awareness; first, pollution makes human impact visible, and second, the fact that polluted systems consequently act on the human body reminds us of the inextricability of human and world, as well as the falseness of "nature" as a construct separate from human life. For we are all connected by water whether by invisible groundwater systems or the great rivers and oceans. Eliot's early awareness will only become more acute as the century progresses—the potential for the human species to significantly alter the world becomes painfully clear through nuclear bombs and pesticides, automobiles and the paper industry.

I have mentioned the issue of unreadability, and I would like to say more about the way the poem enacts an unreadability that is Anthropocenic, or indicative of the Anthropocene. All of the texts in this dissertation treat this issue in some way, but Eliot's is perhaps the most explicit. The sense that this "new" landscape is incomparable to anything that has come before is illustrated in such moments as when the poetic voice asks, "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" (19-20), and then answers this hypothetical question with, "You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images" (21-22). The questions posed by the nervous voice in "A Game of Chess" reiterate this inability to know: "What is that noise?" (117), the speaker asks, then "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?" (119). This question is absorbed into the very landscape of the poem in the next section, "The Fire Sermon," when "The wind / Crosses the brown land, unheard" (174-175). These moments are indicative of what Timothy Clark labels "emergent unreadabilty" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 47). Because the Anthropocene is emergent—an event so novel that there is no "available, matching or adequate discourse in representation, discussion or judgement" (47)—there is a sense that the complexity of Eliot's moment, and ours, is unreadable, unknowable. Like Yeats's "Second Coming" where the "falcon cannot hear the falconer" (2), *The Waste Land* depicts an acute awareness that there is a new game board to use Clark's analogy (66). The "general malaise of the Anthropocene," results at least in one sense Clark notes, "as people come to realize how deeply inherited modes of thought and practice are contaminated by unintended side-effects" (66). In its simultaneous insistence on aesthetic coherence and recognition that "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (301-302), *The Waste Land* is one text that might be understood as wrestling with this emergent unreadability that defines the modernist and Anthropocene conditions. Furthermore, the fact that the poem ultimately abandons the art that it

creates in order to correct the condition, as I will discuss below, suggests that it is attuned to the level of complexity at hand.

"What the Thunder Said" and Elemental Ecocriticism

The final section of *The Waste Land* suggests a relationship with the elemental that is not only catastrophic but also hopeful and mutual. As the last section opens, we are aware of the capriciousness of the elements, but as it progresses readers also become attuned to the potential for coexistence. The "dry sterile thunder" (342) soon gives way to a powerful but benevolent thunder, accompanied by relieving rain that has eluded us thus far. Out of the wasteland, the wind comes, "bringing rain" (394) and "Ganga was sunken" (395). Again, Eliot's privileging of the Hindu sacred "Ganga" rather than "Ganges" speaks to the import and multiplicity of meanings infused into this water system. Significantly, it is the natural world that ultimately delivers the poem's resolution: "Then spoke the thunder" (399). And as the thunder reverberates and ushers in the finale of the poem, there is, perhaps, a posthuman shift that encourages an introspective critique of human nature. The thunder and the poem take us beyond human language systems, and these are not throwaway moments. Rather, the message that the thunder ultimately delivers is of great consequence in my reading of the poem.

Eliot's thunder reminds us, as new materialist approaches in the environmental humanities remind us, that "matter is a precarious system and dynamic entity, not a reservoir of tractable commodities" (Cohen and Duckert 5). "How did we cease to know that earth, air, fire, and water move, rebel, ally, crush, and desire?," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert ask in the Introduction to *Elemental Ecocriticism* (5). Thinking through and alongside the elemental, these writers posit, might "assist in imagining a world that is postsustainable, intracatastrophic,

and yet a place for hope" (6). The series of questions raised by new explorations in elemental ecocriticism is instructive to reading *The Waste Land* in this context: "Rather than centers that do not hold and pitiless revelation, might the elementals in their widening gyre open portals to spaces that pulse with inhuman life? Can they restore vivacity to substances (mud, water, earth, air), chemical processes (fire), and natural phenomena (earthquakes, floods, landslides) over which we have imposed an imagined ecological sovereignty?" (6). Rather than wishing for shelter and relief, by the end of the poem, the reader's attention is redirected in surprising ways to the relationship between human and nonhuman and given a recipe for existing in this entanglement.

The critical consensus that Eliot fails to deliver a *deus ex machina* bringing us out of the wasteland is accurate on one level, but this conclusion dismisses the way in which the poem places responsibility on the individual to examine his/her own "attitude." The "solution" might be partly internal as well as external, if those distinctions even hold, this poem suggests. Through "The Three Great Disciplines" Eliot takes his reader beyond the realm of language with the syllable "Da":

> "Then spoke the thunder
>
> Da
>
> Datta: what have we given?" (399-401)

Thunder, the material world, is depicted as dominant here. While the human speakers and activities in the poem are generally characterized by confusion, paranoia, uncertainty, the thunder booms authoritatively, inspiring the "awful daring of a moment's surrender" (403). However, the "answer" to the thunder is not a quick fix, no deliverance achieved through epic battle or anything of the sort. At the close of the poem we are left pondering control (*damyata*)

and compassion (*dayadhvam*). "Da," "Da," "Da": "control yourselves, give, and have compassion" (18). I have not yet read a critic who takes these moments in the poem seriously. Indeed, this tends to be glossed over completely. Perhaps, this omission tells us something about human nature as well. If critical responses to *The Waste Land* are any indication, there seems to be a refusal to treat things like human greed and negligence as serious causes of this condition of the Anthropocene. Indeed, this type of self-examination is uncomfortable and contrary to academic acumen. Nevertheless, the texts in this dissertation encourage such introspection and continually point to human nature: our psyches, imaginations, and ways of inhabiting the earth.

There is no "going back" from the wasteland. Eliot does not invoke the pastoral nor advocate a flee to nature in the tradition of the romantics or transcendentalists. Rather, he challenges the human as a *part* of nature to take responsibility for the whole. In a way, the poet's, and the poem's, inability to resolve the problem at hand through the manipulation of language, as all good modernists should, presents yet another way of thinking about unreadability, or unknowability. The "Shantih shantih shantih" (433), which finally closes the poem, is again beyond the realm of Western language systems, as the failure of language is unavoidably linked to the perceived failure of world. Having no words to put to the signified, the chant becomes an exercise in living in this new reality that the modernist project responds to. Typically, modernist literary production understands itself as immune to the sort of fragmentation that plagues the material world. Therefore, the fact that in *The Waste Land* the poet cannot maintain this sense of redemption through art, leaving the reader with a moment that insists on a conviction of human nature and ultimately leaves the poem open. The poem's conclusion suggests that the tenets—"Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (Give. Sympathize. Restrain) (432)—must be pushed outward.

If the poem is read all the way through, consumed without use of annotations or notes, it becomes an exercise. The meaning is inherent and form creates the meaning, as this dissertation argues that successful literary modernism does. As I read, I practice the chants. It is a meditation. The reader is complicit in various meditations from the Buddhist Fire Sermon, chants from Sanskrit and Hinduism, all leading to the final three words of the poem spread across the page, that strangely enough translate to the "the peace that passeth all understanding." At the very least, it is clear that Eliot felt that these Eastern practices had something to offer.[22]

Future ecocritical inquiry might pay overdue attention to the Eastern, particularly Buddhist, elements in the poem. The ecological potential of Buddhist concepts is a growing dialogue in the environmental humanities.[23] Gretta Gaard's "Mindful New Materialisms: Buddhist Roots for Material Ecocriticism's Flourishing," for instance, demonstrates how Buddhist concepts of impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (anatta), and dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*) "echo conceptual formations of the new materialisms and material ecocriticism" (291). Gaard's ideas about group meditation and breath—"one of the many 'flows' that illustrate our interbeing and invite us to embark on a journey of mindfulness wherein the illusion of a separate self is involved" (291) are a suggestive context in which we might revisit these puzzling moments of modernism's most talked about poem. Indeed, in several performances of *The Waste Land* this closing chant, "Shantih shantih shantih," joins the many voices that comprise the poem together so that it is said in unison ("T.S. Eliot reads"). Yet a

[22] Only recently have scholars acknowledged Eliot's involvement with Buddhism, according to Craig Raine, who notes such things as "the idea of previous lives, of reincarnation, of buried lives" in *The Waste Land* (80). Originally, *The Waste Land* also referenced *Samsara*, the Buddhist wheel of rebirth, also known as the wheel of endless becoming, but Pound purportedly missed the reference and cut it (Svarny189). Further, Raine believes that Eliot's coinage "Unreal City," "owes a great deal" to Buddhist ideas of *maya* or illusion (82).

[23] See also Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*, for example.

reader who consumes the poem start to finish (ignoring for a moment Eliot's appendaged notes), inevitably begins to sing and chant and "rhythm," as Woolf described the author doing ("Eliot Chants" 137). In doing so, a reader performs not only human voices, but also the rooster's "Co co rico co co rico" (392), the nightingale's "Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug jug" (203-204), and finally the thunder's resolute "DA" "DA" "DA" (400, 410, 417). There is no mistaking the fact that Eliot's poem engages the physical, nonhuman world and literally enacts the entanglement of human and world, a world that is threatened by and threatening to our very existence.

Chapter 2: Imagining with the Anthropocene:

Evolution, Extinction, and Estranged Spring in *Spring and All*

To read *Spring and All* (1923) in its entirety from start to finish rather than the way it is more commonly experienced—through individual poems anthologized under titles such as "The Red Wheelbarrow"—is to be a passenger on a virtual rollercoaster. The text intentionally disorients its reader, who is first dropped in *medias res* then quickly propelled forward to "Chapter 19," next to an upside down Roman numeral marking "Chapter XIII," then back to "Chapter VI," an Arabic number "Chapter 2," Roman numeral "Chapter XIX," only to land and remain in a disproportionately long "Chapter I"—a wonderful twenty-seven-part collage of prose and free verse poetry. The disorientation produced by the formal structure of the text is reinforced in the content, and as Williams tests the limits of his reader's imagination, I argue, he anticipates the condition of the emergent geological epoch defined by human impact, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene replaces the Holocene—the unusually stable period of about the last 11,000 years that supported the development of sophisticated agricultural practices and allowed for massive, and recently rapid and destructive, human population growth. The Anthropocene marks human species' intersection with geological time (understood in material, geological, measurable terms), but also brings about psychological "condition" or "disorder." The Anthropocene is too complex and massive a reality to be understood readily. Thus it requires imagination to approach reality, and Williams takes the imagination very seriously —it is there that the material, political, aesthetic converge.

Today, Williams's reputation in American literature is grounded in his interest in the minutiae of American life, but this should not be to the exclusion of his treatment of things like geological time, as I will show. In "Innovations in Poetry" Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery note the roots of this omission in passing, when they write, "[p]oems that have long stood on their own in anthologies take on a different resonance in the context of the improvisatory speculations on imagination and reality that comprise the prose sections" (71). In this chapter, I pay particular attention to *Spring and All*'s neglected prose passages, but it is ultimately the interaction between the alternately geological and quotidian components of this collage that ignites the imagination. Consumed as a whole, *Spring and All* challenges its reader to think very big and very small. The Anthropocene also requires us to think globally—about the cumulative impact of 7.3 billion people—but also very specifically—about plastic bottles and the tiny, critically endangered Panamanian golden frog (*Atelopus zeteki*), for instance (Kolbert 9).

Establishing Scales

Before delving further into the *Spring and All*, it is important to note that my reading of *Spring and All* is informed by Timothy Morton's idea of the hyperobject and issues of scale developed in Timothy Clark's newest book *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept.* First, we remember that *hyperobject* is Morton's term to describe "massively distributed entities that can be thought and computed, but not directly touched or seen" ("Poisoned Ground" 37). The Anthropocene is a hyperobject, for the full reality of the human species' impact on Earth's systems is incomprehensible in its totality, although we might use charts, graphs, language, to approach an aspect of it, such as measuring parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. For Timothy Clark, the Anthropocene "enacts the demand to

think of human life at much broader scales of space and time, something which alters significantly the way that many once familiar issues appear. Perhaps too big to see or even to think straight, the Anthropocene challenges us to think counter-intuitive relations of scale, effect, perception, knowledge, representation and calculability" (Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* 13). Aesthetic practices, including literature and visual art, then, can help us to think about this condition of the Anthropocene that is too big—like modernity—to approach directly; even though artistic production and analysis might not independently "solve" the issue at hand, it provides an avenue through which we might cheat our limitations, if, of course, the critic accounts for her own terrestrial boundaries. This is a function of the imagination and art that Williams is deeply invested in pushing to its extreme. Experiencing *Spring and All* means thinking on the scale of the Earth at one moment, witness to billions of years of evolution and extinction, and taking on the perspective of a single flower that emerges in anticipation of spring the very next moment. Additionally, in the process, a reader momentarily draws nearer to an awareness of this paradoxical condition of the Anthropocene—we are mortal and finite but also part of the machination of a species that can literally alter a planet's basic systems.

Certainly human perception is limited by our physical bodies, which are but specks of dirt on a hillside, as the character Kabnis puts it in *Cane* (114). Williams reminds his reader that the imagination need not be so limited, however. The texts in this dissertation necessarily fail at approaching their subject—"modernity"—directly. Still, formal experimentation allows these authors the ability to draw nearer to the hyperobject modernity (and the Anthropocene). Like modernity—this all-encompassing term that describes the prosperity and catastrophe of the human species' evolution—expression of the Anthropocene necessarily depends on disjunction and jolting perspective shifts between the big and the small, the immediate and the imaginary.

Thus, these modernists approach their total vision obliquely and incompletely, and even this, Williams insists, requires the help of the imagination. As readers and critics, we must think *through* the size and expanse of modernity, of the Anthropocene, to fully account for the way in which modernist experimentation with form is symptomatic of its embededness in an emergent, unfamiliar world. We occupy this "expanded question mark" of the Anthropocene just as Williams and his contemporaries did (Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* 3). Here, I find the new materialist call to read the discursive and the material, the cultural and the natural, *diffractively*, or through one another rather than in separation, especially useful (Iovino and Oppermann 9).

As a preliminary example of the way in which Williams employs an "Anthropocenic" scale in order to reorient the human species inside of time, let us consider the moment in "Chapter XIX," when the speaker moves from the present to meditating on "that huge and microscopic career of time, as it were a wild horse racing in an illimitable pampa under the stars, describing immense and microscopic circles with his hoofs on the solid turf, running, without a stop for the millionth part of a second until he is aged and worn to a heap of skin, bones and ragged hoofs" (183). Contemplating this "huge and microscopic career of time," the speaker turns our attention to the Parthenon frieze, marble sculptures attributed to the sculptor Phidias (also spelled Pheidias) around 5th century BC. Here, Williams zeroes in on a depiction of a cavalry, soldiers on horseback, the horses reared. Williams's description is as follows:

> In that majestic progress of life, that gives the exact impression of Phidias' frieze, the men and beasts of which, though they seem of the rigidity of marble are not so but move with blinding rapidity, *though we do not have the time to notice it*, their legs advancing a millionth part of an inch every fifty thousand years—in that

> progress of life which seems stillness itself in the mass of its movements—at last SPRING is approaching. (182, italics added for emphasis)

Here, Williams directly takes up the problem of the limits of human perception. Just because we cannot perceive something moving, for instance, does not mean it is not moving. If viewed on a different scale, the cavalry is moving with "blinding rapidity," perhaps from the perspective of a rock or asteroid.

In the above example, Williams takes up problems of both speed and size in relation to human observation. First, speed is one of the greatest obstacles facing environmental awareness due to the fact that, at least until recently, change happens at a speed that is either too slow for humans to register or it is not shocking enough to cause concern.[24] So if the average life expectancy in the U.S. is roughly 80 years, even those things that are observable over time (glaciers receding and so on) cannot be perceived with the human eye in the immediate sense. This problem is similar to skepticism about evolution, which people can only deny because they do not witness it in real time. Testing our imaginations to think on a big enough or small enough scale, we can think of other things in this anthropogenic age, which although they "seem of the rigidity of marble are not so but move, with blinding rapidity" (182). In another sense, we literally "do not have the time to notice" things like the oceans warming, coral reefs dying, amid the perceived frenetic pace of modernization, a feeling that is perhaps even more pronounced in the digital age characterized by what Jakob Nielsen calls "information pollution" (n.p).

[24] Although Rob Nixon specifically addresses violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence not viewed as violence at all" (2), his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* adds an important layer to this conversation. Nixon points to "rapidly eroding attention spans" and the "attosecond pace of our age, with its restless technologies of infinite promise and infinite disappointment, prompts us to keep flicking and clicking distractedly in an insatiable—and often insensate—quest for quicker sensation" (8).

Still, even the Anthropocene, we have to admit, is a "mote in the eye of geological time," to use Nicholas Mirzoeff's words (213). In any case, no more can we see the Anthropocene, now at most a measly 250 years long, Mirzoeff notes, than we can register the "ephemeral 10,000 years of the preceding Holocene" (213). The closest we can get, he argues, is to "visualize" the Anthropocene, and "to visualize the Anthropocene is to invoke the aesthetic"; thus, he relies on the imagination to approach reality just as Williams asks his reader to view the Earth from far above and outside of time to gain a new, more-than-human perspective. Literary expression such as Williams's collage can condition us to think different scales, both "huge and microscopic" (182), to use his phrase.

In *The Ecological Thought* Timothy Morton argues that the "best environmental thinking is thinking big—as big as possible, and maybe even bigger than we can conceive" (20). Williams's manipulation of his reader's imagination encourages this kind of "thinking big," but this is not at the expense of also thinking very small and ordinary.[25] Williams insists on both. The familiar poems accomplish most of the work of thinking small, and, if we bring our imaginations to the poems, the effect is similar in that we are attuned to other realities outside of our immediate, limited experience. Thinking big cannot come at the expense of concern for things like flowers, Williams insists.

Let us practice this manipulation of scales by following the introductory discussion of "thinking big" with occupying the small space of a flowering plant for a moment. For this is the experience of reading *Spring and All* in its entirety—Phidias' frieze is directly followed by the

[25] This is an unresolved tension for ecocritics and one of the common critiques of Morton's work. In Ursula Heise's review of *Hyperobjects*—a book dedicated to this thinking big—Heise writes, "More difficult for Morton's argument is his seamless transition from the subatomic realm of the extremely small to the cosmological realm of the extremely large without any discussion of the fact that theoretical physicists have found it very difficult to reconcile quantum mechanics with relativity theory" (n.p.).

poem originally titled “I” and later canonized as the title poem “Spring and All” or by its first line, “By the road to the contagious hospital.” This is one of the more popular poems, and commonly the critic will focus on this unnamed [human] narrator and hypothesize on his/her identity, probably a doctor, they assume. However, there is another “they” that typically goes unidentified. I will begin my excerpt about half way through the poem, after the scene has been described:

> Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
> dazed spring approaches—
>
> They enter the new world naked,
> cold, uncertain of all
> save that they enter. All about them
> The cold, familiar wind—
>
> Now the grass, tomorrow
> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
>
> One by one objects are defined—
> It quickens: clarity, outline of a leaf
>
> But now the stark dignity of
> entrance—Still, the profound change
> has come upon them: rooted, they
> grip down and begin to awaken. (183)

Here, we imagine spring from the perspective of the individual plants that respond to the Earth’s warming temperatures. In this thought experiment, we are grounded in the earth, certainly not zooming above. This is not earth from space, but earth as a perennial grass, weed, or flower

might experience it. Williams employs the human senses to help his reader imagine this "birth." The plants are granted with agency, sentience, but also vulnerability. As a reader experiences this poem, it becomes an exercise in "becoming with" the plants, as Williams actively entangles human and nonhuman in the act of becoming worldly. Donna Haraway engages the idea of "becoming with" in her book *When Species Meet*, writing, "[i]f we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming with—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake" (244). For Haraway, humans are always already becoming with other species—the bacteria in the folds of our skin, the companion species that human lives are entangled with, and the technological devices that become companions. Finally, this poem illustrates the tendency of Williams to demand his reader to consider time from the point of view of something so insignificant as a single plant. This is the opposite of thinking big, but like the Phidias's frieze example, attuning to the moment that a plant breaks through the topsoil requires cheating our own perceptual limitations. Certainly, issues of perception apply to the small and specific as well—for, we literally "*do not have the time to notice*" (182) the grass grow. As it is the imagination that, for Williams and thinkers of the Anthropocene, must aid us in thinking on more-than-human scales, let us spend some time thinking about exactly what imagination means for Williams, and how attending to the imagination both aids in ecological awareness and also brings human nature into focus, as the Anthropocene requires.

Extinction and Evolution

Extinction and evolution seem unlikely topics for Williams's *Spring and All,* a manifesto on modern poetry published the year after Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Writing in *The*

Autobiography of William Carlos Williams after World War II, Williams compares *The Waste Land* to an atom bomb and describes the feeling of being "set back" and "defeated" by the poem because Eliot had "turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world" (174). Williams set out to rebuild poetry from the ground up using common language, in contrast to Eliot's often elevated and allusive style. In praise of Williams, Webster Schott writes that "[h]is was a found art that raised everything it touched—trees, birds, people and dogs, water and fruit, love and flowers—to a level of startled awareness" (x). This is the aspect of Williams that anthologized poems out of their original context perpetuate, and it is certainly an important component of his project. Yet, reading books such as *Spring and All* in the Anthropocene draws attention to the fact that these imagistic meditations on flowers and wheelbarrows are intermingled with profound commentary on subjects such as extinction and evolution, which occur in ways that suggest a radical reorientation of the human species inside of geological time.

Presumably, Williams's text answers Eliot's "pessimistic" text with the hope that Eliot's is missing; yet, the spring promised by the author and suggested in the title arguably never comes. This spring is unfamiliar and disturbingly associated with the extinction of the human species in Williams's book. It certainly is not the traditional picture of spring found in texts before the twentieth century.[26] Despite his disdain for Eliot's tendency to internalize and "psychologize" (Breslin 26), Williams is responding to the same condition that, I argue, requires certain uses of the imagination and aesthetics; so similarities emerge in the two poets' ecological vision as they both approach the Anthropocene, albeit from different angles.

[26] In *How to Read Literature like a Professor*, Thomas Foster writes, "For as long as anyone's been writing anything, the seasons have stood for the same set of meanings. Maybe it's hard wired into us that spring has to do with childhood and youth, summer with adulthood and passion, autumn with decline and middle age and tiredness but also harvest, winter with old age and resentment and death" (178).

Williams's comments on *The Waste Land* have led many, including Michael North, to read *Spring and All*, published the year after Eliot's masterpiece, as a "direct challenge" to *The Waste Land* (147). Indeed, Williams openly criticized Eliot and never came around to admitting any likenesses between his project and Eliot's lifework, a fact that led James E. Breslin to write that "Williams's estimate of Eliot is properly accounted a contribution to demonology rather than literary criticism" (38). Whatever the personal differences, both writers echo each other, in dimensions such as the use of seasons to provide formal structure and comment on this new, unknowable world. I will say more about Williams's use of spring and the problem of the seasons in the Anthropocene momentarily. Ultimately Williams, like Eliot, responds to the modernist condition and finding that old modes of expression are not sufficient to articulate this new reality. In a mission to capture this so-called new reality better than Eliot, Williams arguably created works that are even more obscure than his rival's. *Spring and All* is fragmented and incomplete—it is riddled with ellipses, which strategically come to enact a stated disjuncture, or at the very moment that the reader feels the poet is about to reveal an absolute truth, leave the reader to complete the thought using only her imagination.[27] The formal structure, the insistence that only imagination can access reality, which is suddenly too vast and entangled with geological time to perceive directly, and the strange but inevitable meditations on realities like evolution and extinction, all seem appropriate when *Spring in All* is considered as a product of the emergent Anthropocene.

Spring and All joins other modernist projects, including *The Waste Land*, that consider the possibility of human extinction, or at the very least, the potential that the Earth is entering an

[27] For example, this fragment lingers in white space and is never completed: "It is in the presence of a" (206). Another notable instance is when the fragment "The imagination is a—" hangs in the middle of the page, surrounded by indifferent prose that does not acknowledge nor seek to resolve the unsettling incompleteness (209). Other examples abound.

age of unsustainability. Human activity in the Holocene has led to the Sixth Extinction event, as according to scientists, we are currently experiencing loss of biodiversity at an unprecedented speed. Currently, extinction rates are as much as 1,000 times higher than natural background rates (Cafaro 387). Certainly, in the Anthropocene, the possibility of the human species' extinction is brought to the forefront. Like the Anthropocene, extinction is a hyperobject, in the sense that a species' slow decline typically happens over the course of many years and across space so that it is not detectable by the naked eye. Though today a person might "witness" extinction at an alarming rate, even the most attuned observer requires information networks to experience extinction (at best) tangentially.

In the landscape of *Spring and All,* human extinction shocks our senses because it is fortuitous, a fact reiterated through images of spring—this season when all things come to life and are new. For instance, Williams describes the "annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth" when "nothing but the lower vertebrates, the mollusks, insects and plants remain," a time when the world will be "made anew" (179). Taken literally, this exclamation becomes a radical ecological statement that privileges the wellbeing of Earth's systems and nonhumans over human interests. Here, and throughout *Spring and All,* Williams critiques anthropocentrism, or the "stance, perception or conception that takes the human as centre or norm" (Clark, *Cambridge Introduction* 3). After the annihilation of "every human creature on the face of the earth," the nonhuman persist,

> Houses crumble to ruin, cities disappear giving place to mounds of soil blown thither by the winds, small bushes and grass give way to trees which grow old and are succeeded by other trees for countless generations. A marvelous serenity

> broken only by bird and wild beast calls reigns over the entire sphere. Order and peace abound. (179)

In this thought experiment, a "final and self inflicted holocaust" that is "all for love" (179), spring in all of its metaphorical qualities—hope, peace, life—can be completed only in the absence of humans and human infrastructure. This passage joins others in literary modernism, such as the frequently referenced "Time Passes" section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where nature thrives in the absence of humans. Again, in these moments, both Williams and Woolf offer alternatives to anthropocentric views, or the "almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value" (Clark, *Cambridge Introduction* 2). Instead, moments such as this one decenter the human, remind us of human limitations and vulnerabilities, and attune us to nonhuman lifeworlds that human exceptionalism incorrectly presumes less significant, "lower," or less sophisticated.

Furthermore, these passages anticipate dialogues in environmental ethics such as Paul Taylor's work as indicated in *Respect for Nature*, which established the concepts of anthropocentrism versus biocentrism, an ongoing dialogue in environmental studies. Taylor's work emphasizes the fact that, in terms of the Earth's ecosystem, humans are but one species-population among many, and as biological creatures, we have no particular right to dominate the Earth's systems, but an innate responsibility to more vulnerable creatures. Properly coexisting, he argues, means accepting five realities, the two most relevant of which are that "as a species we humans are a recent arrival on our planet, a relative newcomer" and "while we cannot do without [non-human species], they can do without us" (102). I do not mean to align Williams with radical philosophies in deep ecology such as those in favor of a reduction of the human population; certainly the doctor-poet was committed to human health and recognized humans as

an important part of the dynamic world around him. However, moments such as those quoted above do reorient the human inside of geological time, which suggests a posthumanist interest in human materiality as only one amongst innumerable other living and nonliving materialities. Williams's imagined world where "lower" life forms dominate echoes J.R. McNeill's reminder that "[f]or most of earth's history, microbes played the leading role of all life and shaping the atmosphere. In the twentieth century, humankind stumbled blindly into this role" (51). Future ecocritical inquiry might pay more attention to the way in which Williams displays an ecological vision that not only considers the inanimate object, but also other nonhuman organisms that are entangled with human life in significant ways.

Additionally, it is crucial to note Williams's active revolt against anthropocentric views of the world because this is the foundation on which he lays his manifesto of the imagination. In order for the imagination to operate on a scale that is necessary to approach hyperobjects (such as modernity or the Anthropocene), it cannot be dependent on the Enlightenment construct of the "human." For Williams, imagination is not necessarily reliant on or limited to the human, though it is an exceedingly valuable consequence of our evolution. A dehumanized, disembodied imagination better accounts for the flux and energies of the universe and allows for a "freer" experience for Williams.

Williams further tests his reader's imaginative capacity when he introduces the idea of plagiarism in correlation with these hyperobjects, evolution and extinction. To imagine both our evolution and extinction demands a very large scale; to imagine that this cycle has taken place more than once not only requires a scale too big to describe, it also is counterintuitive to human nature. As Timothy Clark puts it, "[w]e inhabit distance, height, and breadth in terms of the given dimensionality of our embodied, earthly existence" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 38). Indeed,

in Williams's posthumanist thought experiment, evolution is a type of plagiarism, as the cycle of life, driven by these opposite impulses of evolution—progress—and extinction—death, has been repeated time after time in the Earth's history. Williams writes, "Through the orderly sequences of unmentional time EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE BEGINNING" (181). The voice continues, "[e]very step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new" (181). In Williams's treatment of evolution and extinction, newness is dependent on repetition of the cycle: death, birth, evolution, death repeat. So things that are "new" are not new at all, but a product of the same material and elemental forces of the Earth.

Indeed, the very concept of the human is at stake. The persona continues, "In that colossal surge toward the finite and the capable life has now arrived for a second time at that exact moment when in the ages past the destruction of the species homo sapiens occurred" (182). Is there a scale of time in which the "homo sapiens" whatever that comes to mean, has already evolved and become extinct? The suggestion that evolution has previously reached its current pinnacle only to start over decenters the human and critiques human exceptionalism in important ways: reading *Spring and All* from this scale the human species is a coincidence of time and natural history, pointing to our evolved materiality, as does the focus on our bodily limitations and the need for imagination to access "the real."

The subtext here also must be noted. Williams is undoubtedly speaking of literary tradition and the modernist charge to "make it new" here. Breslin puts it this way: "Modern writers are required not just to develop new forms appropriate to a new idea of order, but to develop forms appropriate to an age in which all fixed ideas of order have been called into

question. For the modern artist, nothing is given. The past is a souvenir; he must write an entirely new script" (30). The layers of reference here are fascinating in terms of new materialisms and the environmental humanities. I want to think about these two things—what is happening to the world and what is happening in art coemerging, entangled, dialectical, referential. These aren't separate arguments for Williams and it is also impossible, I argue, to separate text and Earth, imagination and Earth, human and Earth. Recognizing humanity as a consequence of evolution, more specifically, Williams critiques the concept of a unified material world that exists as the backdrop to humanity. Oddly and contradictorily enough, he does this by evoking the (human) imagination while decentering the human through the imagination, the only apt tool. For, "[o]nly the imagination is undeceived" (181).

Further, this "newness" carries an important quality of truth. For Williams (and the modernists) old, recycled, traditional modes carry an element of falseness precisely because they are not organically sprung from the current moment. Williams takes up the problem with "making it new" in "Chapter VI" of *Spring and All.* Consider the complexity, for instance, in the moment when the poem's persona asks the reader to consider that "[n]ow in the imagination, all flesh, all human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million, billion years" (181), and in the next moment announces "It is spring!" (181). Only when the human, or at least certain constructs of the human, are extinct can the world become new; the imagination is loosed and can create once more. Spring strangely points to death, an inversion of our expectations that further dares the imagination because it is human death, our own death. One might think of Eliot's haunting question in *The Waste* Land: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" (71-72). In the climate of one of the promised but unrecognizable springs, "now, for the first time, everything IS new" and "for the moment

everything is fresh, perfected, recreated" (181). However, the very next line, as the section continues, the speaker tells us that the "terms 'veracity' 'actuality' 'real' 'natural' 'sincere' are being discussed at length, every word in the discussion being evolved from an identical discussion which took place the day before yesterday" (181). Here, in typical fashion, the promise of spring, of the new, and of the "real" is immediately undermined, suggesting the difficulty of art to accomplish all that one might hope.

Thus far, I have demonstrated that Williams wishes his reader to think about time and space on a much larger scale, one big enough to consider the "blinding rapidity" with which a carving in a rock moves, and long enough so that lower vertebrates are the highest lifeform, or have become so again. In a moment that I read as an allusion to Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous "transparent eye-ball" from the essay "Nature," Williams addresses the potential nihilism that results from thinking on this scale: "The inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the world it inhabits can only result in himself crushing humiliation unless the individual raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe. This is possible by the aid of the imagination. Only through the agency of this force can a man feel himself moved largely with sympathetic pulses at work—" (192). Certainly, Williams encourages a certain "humbling" of the human species, as I have shown. Yet, rather than "crushing humiliation," the imagination might offer a way to think across space and time to engage with the "sympathetic pulses at work." Moments such as this one are rich with ecological potential, and this is a much different aspect of Williams's project than the imagist elements scholars have privileged, although Williams's interest in the quotidian also serves to attune readers to the wonderful vibrancy of the world around us.

Certainly, human existence as plagiarism seems potentially defeatist, and similar issues are raised in discussions of the Anthropocene. Why should we care about the Earth if it is just going to start over after we are gone? Why should we care if there is nothing we can do to disrupt these hyperobjects we cannot even see but only experience through its symptoms? Williams seems to answer this problem with his infamous poems that concentrate the reader's imagination on ordinary objects: "He who has kissed / a leaf / need look no further—," he writes in the poem "XXIV."[28] The material world, along with the redemptive potential of the imagination and art, bring us to a magnifying experience with the material world that Williams and those in the environmental humanities will argue, does matter. I will offer one final moment in *Spring and All* in consideration of this tension between thinking globally and concern for the individual:

> It seems that there is not time enough in which to speak the full of our exaltation. Only a day is left, one miserable day, before the world comes into its own. Let us hurry! Why bother for this man or that? In the offices of the great newspapers a mad joy reigns as they prepare the final extras. Rushing about, men bump each other into the whirring presses. How funny it seems. All thought of misery has left us. Why should we care? Children laughingly fling themselves under the wheels of the street cars, airplanes crash gaily to the earth. Someone has written a poem. (180)

In this unsettling moment, Williams works through parody on one level to suggest the absurdity of people who resolve to do nothing or act irresponsibly. Certainly, the passage generates concern as we do not want children to behave in this manner. On another level, this poem

[28] "The Avenue of Poplars"

suggests the ability for the "end of the world" to result in the freedom of expression; exaltation and mad joy for all that we love and might be lost. What is most interesting though, perhaps, is the final line that closes this thought experiment, as the poet moves quickly on to his next subject. This line, "[s]omeone has written a poem," is a favorite in both Williams scholarship and popular culture reappropriations of Williams. The intentionally ambiguous conflation of text and world here leaves us unsure whether the preceding scenario is inside this poem that someone has written—have we just been described the content of a poem about this last day before the world comes into its own? In another way, the fact that someone has written a poem is the solution, the resolution, the finale, the game changer. In yet another way, *Spring and All* performs the chaos of our physical world; it is wild and unpredictable, and its uncanniness is only amplified by the awareness that our species is powerless against this chaos.

Williams is attuned to the intersection of human time and geological time, and the staggering speed with which humans might alter the geosphere and biosphere given their relatively short timeline as a species. "Chapter 2" professes, "The Volcanoes are extinct. Coal is beginning to be dug again where the fern forests stood last night" (182). Coal, of course, marks the Anthropocene in a variety of ways. Paul Crutzen, when coining the term Anthropocene, noted the way in which coal production triggered massive shifts in the Biosphere (Vaidyanathan 53). Scholars recognize that coal becomes a critical player in the Earth's composition beginning with the Industrial Revolution and coal mining. Currently, geologists such as Gary Stinchcomb analyze coal silt in sedimentary layers, labeling coal layers "anthropogenic events"—a geological layer caused solely by humans "as clear a geological mark as a volcanic eruption" (Vaidyanathan 53). Williams notes coal's economic value, which is apparently more important to the mining industry than the plant growth that stands in their way. Ferns are ancient species of

trees, but not typically of any economic value. That a forest of ferns can be leveled over night suggests the potential drastic human impact in a situation where the indigenous species inhibit mining. Trees that have been alive for longer than a human lifetime disappear in a relative galactic millisecond—just as the human evolution is a violent blip on a long timeline.

Significantly, in *Spring and All* automobiles are often the vehicles through which the speaker encounters geological time. Indeed, we know that the automobile and other fossil fuel powered machines literally intersect geological time, as perhaps one day, ice core samples and fossil layers will tell the story of the atmosphere, where billions of tons of carbon has been dumped by our curious, self-destructive species. Consider this in "XXIV"[29]:

I ride in my car
I think about

prehistoric caves
in the Pyrenees—

the cave of
Les Trois Frères (*Spring and All* 229)

The Trois Frères cave paintings in Ariège, France were discovered in 1914 and include the famous engraved and painted "Sorcerer" figure ("Trois Frères" n.p.). One scholar puts "The Sorcerer" in the *therianthrope* genre, paintings of human-animal composites, and dates this and other paintings to around 12,000 BCE (Norman n.p.). The earth tells the story of the personal automobile—it is written all over. In a way, all of the years of human history are subsumed by

[29] Or "The Avenue of Poplars"

the last two centuries for without them there would not be an Anthropocene. Further, this poem's form collapses the seemingly insurmountable expanse of time between prehistoric and current moment just as, if we think on a geological scale, human evolution from cave painting to car driving has taken place in only a fraction of the planet's existence.

This is not the only occurrence where Williams's persona in present day, in a personal automobile, conjures prehistoric time, and strangely automobiles inspire ecological meditation such as in the following: "Thoughtless of evil we crush out the marrow of those about us with our heavy cars as we go happily from place to place" (180). This passage evokes the Anthropocene as the "age of unintended consequences"; it is a complex system that our species has put into motion and most likely cannot stop. A large portion of this has to do with carbon dioxide emissions. Morton calls the automobile the "veritable engine of the Anthropocene" (Morton, "How I Stopped" 259). Yet, Williams never puts the burden on the automobile. It is the human that is "thoughtless of evil." From another perspective, imagination is the real engine of the Anthropocene—trains and cars, certainly, but are not these things a reflection of the human minds that created them? That imagined them into existence? As early formulations of the noosphere suggested, the "thinking layer" is far from immaterial; on the contrary, human thinking has great consequence. In any case, Williams considers the impact of the collective human species—their "destructive action and thinking at the human scale" (Clark 5-6). *Spring and All* refers more than once to "beastly humanity" (190) and the implicit "we." Certainly, one person in one automobile is not the source of concern, but the collective dependence on fossil fuels. As of 2011, the number of cars in the world had surpassed one billion (Tencer n.p.). Significantly, in the landscape of *Spring and All*, it is not only the individual who is constantly

negotiating the border between existence and annihilation, but our species, and it is the focus on the collective impact of the species that further evokes the Anthropocene.

Estranged Spring

Again, in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, Timothy Clark argues that the Anthropocene "entails, among other things, a refusal to be so sure that we do know what rain is. We find ourselves asking of unfamiliar weather, 'What does it mean?, like a pagan priest fearfully reading the future from the flight of birds" (48). Other scholars identify the same estrangement as a characteristic of the Anthropocene. For the modernists, seasons and the natural cycles are robust metaphors and structuring devices because the traditional progression of the natural world that is well established in the literary tradition might now be reworked to suit the feeling that humanity and Earth have entered a new era. And certainly, this is not only true in literary experimentation; the world is actually unreadable due to the environmental issues that we have already discussed. The four seasons, then, become a way to express the paradoxical intimacy and estrangement inherent in modernity and the Anthropocene. *The Waste Land*'s opening line, "April is the cruellest month" (1) followed by the paradoxical line "Winter kept us warm" (5) emphasizes the apparent malfunction of human and world. The traditional progression of the seasons—therefore the traditional literary trope of the seasons—cannot be trusted. The seasons interested both Williams and Eliot through the end of their lives. Williams published "The Descent of Winter" in 1928 directly after *Spring and All* and Eliot's final work *Four Quartets* has much to do with the seasons and their increasing unreadability. Notably for this discussion, the final section "Little Gidding" features "Midwinter spring," described as a season all its own (49), but spring never actually arrives in this text either. Instead, we are caught in the transition

from winter to spring "between melting and freezing" (49) when "There is no earth smell / Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time / But not in time's convenant" (49). Like Eliot, Williams is critical of "demoded" representations (*Spring and All* 188) that do not sufficiently capture the essence of the modern world. Disrupting this time honored seasonal trope becomes yet another performance of early twentieth century reality, and the fact both men turn to the natural and material is of no coincidence.

With the traditional trope of the seasons in mind, critics often read Williams's first long work *Improvisations Kora in Hell* (1920) as a kind of "descent into winter," a reading that is backed by the author's perspective on his own work. In this reading, *Spring and All* is kind of a coming out of winter into spring. Williams reportedly thought of himself as springtime in a proverbial hell (Schott xiii). But does spring ever actually come in *Spring and All*? We are promised spring over and over. The poem plays on our expectations of seasons, and certainly spring is always approaching, but this season is different than what tradition tells us we should expect. In "Chapter VI," the voice urges us forward, "Now in the imagination, all flesh, all human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million years. The bird has turned into a stone within whose heart an egg, unlaid, remained hidden" (181). Again evoking extinction, these passages make the reader desperate for renewal, for spring, which is kind of an absent-present throughout the text. We are always waiting, but this is no Romantic picture of spring. Rather, the reader is estranged from and all the while enchanted with the material world, which holds the possibility for imagination but does not depend on human observers. For, as Williams puts it, "reality exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructability of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but— " (235). Here, the ellipsis leaves us hanging, once again, as the poem enacts its mission to free "words by

the imagination." Additionally, Williams's insistence on the "dance" of the material world speaks to the limits of human control and "nature's" ability to surprise and disrupt any easy rationalization placed upon it. Speaking of earth, air, fire, and water Cohen and Duckert write that the "elements are never easy"; instead they are, "[i]rreducible and initiatory, they are lively as language, a storied tumble of relation, sudden rupture, and material burgeoning" (8). The texts in this dissertation certainly agree. This spring will be like no other, for what are the connotations of spring in the Anthropocene? In a world affected by anthropogenic climate change, will this distinction between the seasons even hold?

Certainly, spring is always approaching, over and over and over the narrative voice proclaims, "[i]n that progress of life which seems stillness itself in the mass of its movements—at last SPRING is approaching" (182), and in the next moment undermines itself altogether –"At any rate, now at last spring is here!" (184). "Meanwhile, SPRING, which has been approaching for several pages, is at last here" (186), the voice assures us. Reading *Spring and All* in the Anthropocene, this elusive or unrecognizable spring required for Williams to make all things new as spring typically does, can no longer be counted as a certainty. Writing in 1991, Jonathan Bate notes that the "force of the image [of spring] depends on the stability of the notion of spring, the knowledge that every winter will be followed by a spring which will bring warmth and new life" (*Romantic Ecology* 2). Bate hypothesizes that global warming might shift seasonal patterns making the reading of literary texts that rely on a seasonal structure or trope problematic.

Might we one day have to historicize in terms of seasons—might we have to explain to the new generation that there used to be this season when flowers bloomed and birds migrate North. We might read *Spring and All* as reorienting its reader to a "new world" where seasons

are unpredictable. For even global warming is unpredictable—an uncanny winter storm dropping a foot of snow where it does not typically snow is enough to make some people doubt that the Earth is warming. Yet, there is something strange and unfamiliar, and as Timothy Morton writes in *Hyperobjects* we do not feel "at home" in the biosphere (28). Revisiting modernist texts in the Anthropocene means asking of the textual—and discursive-- treatments of weather "what does it mean?" (see *Hyperobjects* 99). By withholding spring, Williams prolongs winter and undermines the insistence that all things are new (in sense that spring brings renewal), while suggesting at the very same time that things are new in the sense that hyperobjects have the potential to reorient us and experience the material world with a new intentionality.

Flowers are one of Williams's favorite subjects. Flowers pervade his canon, and although often treated very literally, carry associations of love and illness, life and death. Certainly, the association of flowers with spring is obvious, and we have already seen how the title poem "Spring and All" invites the reader to take on the perspective of a flower on the verge of spring. *Spring and All*'s conclusion is far from satisfactory. It resolves nothing. Left intentionally open to once again "free" imagination, Williams leaves the reader with her own imagination to connect and ponder the disperse images that comprise the closing poem "XXVII,"[30] which begins:

Black eyed susan

rich orange

round the purple core

the white daisy

[30] "The Wildflower"

is not enough. (236)

It is appropriate that the poet leaves us to contemplate these flowers, to wonder whether spring has come, and why the daisy is not enough. It is impossible, for Williams and for us, to know what this "new world" will look like. To occupy it is to grow increasingly aware of both the imaginative power and limitations of our species.

Imagination: The Fifth Element?

It should be noted that this aspect of *Spring and All* is at times contradictory, confusing, and obscure, but it clearly occupies much of the artist's energy and is relevant and robust in the frame of the Anthropocene. For starters, Williams is particularly concerned with the ability of art to access the world and provide readers access to the world—or what he often calls "reality." Works of the imagination are "experience dynamized into reality" (220), which resist representation. Williams emphasizes that art must be consumed in order for the creative energies—what he will call imagination—to be utilized, released, and carried forward in a productive way. He insists on imagination as the vehicle of knowledge to the point of redundancy. Imagination frees us of the "beautiful illusion" (199) and bridges the gap between self and world.

First, the imagination is energy. For Williams, imagination is a form of energy that is, at least from one perspective, significantly material. Williams writes that the imagination is an "actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the understanding of— " (207). Here, once again, form enacts content as the poet leaves the reader to fill in the ellipsis—using her own imagination, cleverly—with all of the things that imagination helps us understand; most immediately, imagination helps us

understand the unfinished sentence, Williams proves. Further, imagination infuses art with this energy: "the work of the imagination is not 'like' anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth—at least one small part of them" (207). Therefore, experiencing art, Williams argues, means "unlocking" the energy of imagination that is stored there and by doing so, one also experiences the Earth because the forces that transfuse art are the same forces that transfuse the earth. Just as physics tells us that energy cannot be destroyed, Williams's energy—imagination—is indestructible but certainly transferrable. It is figured as a constant, collective pool, which is all around if we decide to acknowledge and access it.

Thinking about the imagination as material and elemental means acknowledging that human, human history, and the physical, elemental Earth are already always entangled. After all, the "voice of the Delphic Oracle itself, what was it? A poisonous gas from a rock's cleft" (185). What might be considered human imagination—the Delphic prophecies—becomes already a result of human interactions with the material world. Further, Williams insists on treating matter in all of its materiality, and the fact that the Delphic gases influenced people to perform a variety of actions, inspiring love and war—through the medium of the human oracle—speaks to the way in which the supposedly inanimate becomes vibrant from the right perspective. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it this way: "the elements are as restless as the human imagination, seldom content to remain in their allotted place. They ceaselessly embrace to compose new things and in that process disclose surprising worlds, challenging narratives, the tangling of nature's chain" ("The Sea Above" 107). Further, noting that pre-Copernican thinkers celebrated matter in all of its complexity, the Introduction to the recent volume *Elemental Ecocriticism* asks, "How did we forget that matter is a precarious system and dynamic entity, not a reservoir of tractable commodities? How did we cease to know that earth, air, fire, and water move, rebel, ally, crush,

and desire?" (5). I would add the following question: Is there a way that certain modernist texts attempt to revive matter? Eliot's "What the Thunder Said" seems to suggest so. The modernist interest in these "restless" materials—water, air, fire, earth—might find renewed interest in light of these questions.

The fact that imagination has been "used from the first" (207) speaks to another quality of the imagination: its timelessness. In a way, imagination is outside of time for Williams and is depicted as a place where a person can encounter other times and places, as we have already seen. However, it is important to note that imagination is not divorced from the present; it is deeply involved with the senses, with experiencing the immediate, at the same time that it allows access to far away places and times. Therefore, in Williams's sense, utilizing one's imaginative capacity becomes an ecological practice because it means interacting with human and nonhuman others across time and place.

Spring and All opens with the following lines: "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between. Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa,—all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon" (177). This excerpt is interesting for many reasons. First, Williams insists that the experience of a real ocean and textual ocean does not have to be very different, if of course, the reader is willing to use the imagination. This has great implications for ecocritical inquiry. Williams insists that a reader is able to experience the ocean—"if there is an ocean it is here"—or a wheelbarrow, or a flower, through the imagination whether that encounter takes place in the imagination or in "real life" is of little consequence. For ecocritics, this suggests the ability of cultural production to inspire care, concern, awareness for the material and natural world. Even those places as far reaching as

Africa and The Parthenon. This suggests that I do not have to go to Bangledesh to experience Bangledesh—on some level—that could create a sense of intimacy just as Williams and his reader "are one" in the imagination across time and space through the imagination. "Good" art, or work of the imagination, "rouses rather than stupefies the intelligence by demonstrating the importance of personality, by showing the individual, depressed before it, that his life is valuable—when completed by the imagination. And then only. Such work elucidates—" (194).

The poet addresses himself to the reader's imagination, and declares, "This is [the imagination's] book. I myself invite you to read and to see" (178). Speaking to the ability of the imagination to reach across time and space, he writes, "In the imagination we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, 'I' I mean also 'you.' And so, together, as one, we shall begin" (178). Here, Williams acknowledges that texts are discursive and emergent. Often, the poetic voice resorts to all caps, and screaming across the textual divide, further dissolves the boundary between text and life, author and reader. Imagination is required to reorient us to a world that is new and complex and unrecognizable. Art, as products of the imagination, help us to think about ourselves in relationship to the word. This is what Williams argued was required of the modernists in the face of "newness" and this is what is also required of us in an emergent epoch of the Anthropocene. So for Williams, imagination is also the source and site of hope—the hope that he saw as potentially lacking in Eliot, but I believe that Eliot performs a similar argument with Shantih and Da Da. Williams writes that the "ship has sunk. But the men are good swimmers" (185). The imaginations ability to access reality, for Williams, presents endless possibilities of newness based on the immediate experience of the actual: "Yes, hope has

awakened once more in men's hearts. It is the NEW! Let us go forward! The imagination, freed from the handcuffs of 'art,' takes the lead!" (185).

Chapter 3: "The Great Beast Stamping"*:*

The Waves as an Allegory of the Anthropocene

If Eliot and Williams experimented with poetic convention in an attempt to better conform literary expression to the experience of modernity, Virginia Woolf joins writers such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Marcel Proust in the reinvention of the novel. Modernist fiction such as Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves* offers an extended space to engage many of the same Anthropocenic qualities we have already discussed: meditations on deep time, collective human impact on the physical world, and the agency of nonhumans, for instance. In addition, Woolf's novel form employs the single most defining characteristic of modernist fiction: the removal of an omniscient narrator and the replacement of linear narrative with interior monologue and the (aptly named) stream of consciousness technique.[31] Consequently, the modernist novel is intensely psychological and interior, and "reality" is fluid, erratic, and entirely filtered through characters' consciousnesses; there is no illusion of an exterior or background, resulting in a leveling effect that is significantly expressive of the Anthropocene, a point we will return to momentarily. Further, in its stream of consciousness technique, *The Waves* performs the entanglement of human and earth because in the pages of the novel environments, objects, and bodies become the substance of human thought, imagination, and

[31] Defined simply, stream of consciousness is a stylistic innovation in narrative, which responds to the "crisis of representation" in the early twentieth century and "purports to represent the thoughts of an individual character without any intervention of a narrator figure" (P. Lewis 3).

existence. Therefore, humans—in this case, the six friends Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Louis, and Jinny—become literally made up of nonhumans and each other on the page.

Additionally, Woolf attunes these six consciousnesses to explicitly ecological concerns as they interact with both their natural and built environments; the friends are consistently engaged with the way the physical world works and concerned about rapidly expanding human-built systems' role in the broader sense of earth and human history.

A number of subtexts, literary devices, and Woolf's rich, poetic language augment this surface level engagement with the material world to result in a complex expression of the emergent epoch of the Anthropocene. Woolf's vision of patterning the novel after the rhythm of the ocean's waves, for example, demonstrates one way in which the physical world is literally infused into the very content of the novel (*Diary* 312). Additionally, in ways that anticipate new materialisms in the environmental humanities, Woolf's metaphor enlivens the material world and also concretizes and estranges abstract things such as human emotion, time, and even capitalism. The novel is undeniably human at the same time that the italicized narrative interludes create a frame that points us to a reality that is completely independent of the human and will carry on in our absence. Yet, Woolf offers an additional complication: the friends' lives *are* dependent on the reality of these interludes in an important sense; humans rely on the elemental foundations of life—here, water and sun, particularly—even if these systems are indifferent to us. In other words, while the interludes undeniably operate separately from the friends' lives, and on a significantly different scale than human drama, the ubiquity of water, both material and metaphorical, also unifies the interludes and novel proper. Water bookends the novel, as it opens on the sea and closes with the final haunting sentence, "*The waves broke on the shore"* (297). In this way, nature literally outlives the humans, whose lifespans are completed within a single

sunrise and sunset, as indicated by the framing segments. In all of these layers, *The Waves* becomes an unexpected allegory of the Anthropocene, and this chapter will explore some of the many ways that this is true.

Ecological Form and the Mesh

Beginning with the most general formal characteristics of the novel, let us consider the ways the stream of consciousness technique performs a collapsing of foreground and background, expressive of the currently theorized condition of the Anthropocene. First, if we consider that the Anthropocene is a hyperobject, again meaning that it is a thing so vastly distributed in time and space that we cannot perceive it directly, there is no "outside" of the Anthropocene or a place that we can go (on Earth) to not be living in the Anthropocene. Secondly, the Anthropocene (and modernity, and environmental crises) make it very clear that there is no separate, distinct stage on which human life operates, analogous to a "setting" in fiction, perhaps. This is not to say that there is no physical world outside of the human; certainly there is, and Woolf's novel reminds us of that, again most notably through the italicized interludes that chart the position of the sun and the tide cycle—all of which operates independently of the individual human. But these boundaries are unmistakably permeable, and in the Anthropocene the collective human species has been capable of altering Earth's systems to a measurable degree.

Therefore, background and foreground become in reality all part of one very complicated system in which humans act on nonhumans, and, conversely, humans are increasingly acted *on* by the environments that they have shaped. According to Bruno Latour, the Anthropocene inverts foreground and background so that "human societies have resigned themselves to playing

the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject," and it is "human history that has become frozen and natural history that is taking on a frenetic pace" (11-12). Similarly, Jason McGrath describes the Anthropocene as a "world in which human creations eventually fade into and join a background of objects and processes that long preceded and will long follow them" (114). McGrath practically describes the modernist novel, where traditional components "character" and "setting" and "plot" dissolve into a stream of entangled bodies, agencies, and relationships. Further, if we have transformed the world and now it is transforming us, there is the feeling of, as Timothy Morton describes it in *Hyperobjects*, living in a world that is "too close to call a world, an ecological real that is right under our skin—it is our skin. We find ourselves waking up inside the ecological mesh of lifeforms. There [is] no outside" (192). I argue that the stream of consciousness technique results in a similar experience of world for the reader; as we read *The Waves* we cannot tell where Rhoda's consciousness stops and the physical world starts, perhaps because the two are more entangled than we might have thought: "The wave breaks. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room" (107). Rhoda's insistence here that she is part of the water cycle, at the same time that she acknowledges herself as distinct and subject to the force of the wave, speaks to Woolf's anticipation of current ecological theory, which expresses a similar appreciation for human life as comprised of the same "stuff" as the material world, but not at the expense of taking responsibility for the fact that humans are distinctly capable of acting on the same material substances.

To summarize, then, one of the most provocative ways that the highly aestheticized and experimental modernist novel might be understood as "Anthropocenic" is the tendency for both the Anthropocene and texts such as *The Waves* to problematize the traditional distinction

between exterior and interior. Woolf's achievement is that filtering reality entirely through human consciousness, as she does in the majority of the novel, does not limit the experience of the external world, but rather opens the reader to the vibrancy of what might have been presumed to be inanimate. *The Waves* is not anthropocentric in the detrimental sense, therefore. Instead, its fluidity gives the impression, as Woolf's character Jinny describes it, that "[t]here is nothing staid, nothing settled in this universe. All is rippling, all is dancing" (46). Therefore, I argue that *The Waves'* form is ecological in the sense that it troubles artificial categories of human and non-human, active and inert, internal and external by performing what Timothy Morton and others refer to as a "mesh": "a flowing, shifting, entangled mess of ambiguous entities—entities that become even more ambiguous the closer we look…a very curious, radically open form without center or edge" ("The Mesh" 22). *The Waves* enacts an ecological awareness, or the mesh, creating a microcosm of sorts within its covers, but not at the expense of interacting with its own historical moment and extratextual concerns about the human species' involvement with the Earth's geology.

The Waves illustrates Timothy Morton's mesh in literary form and suggests an ecological vision very similar to Gregory Bateson's definition of ecology, "co-evolving systems whose boundaries are blurred through their interaction" (Walsh 72). Ecology, as a branch of biology, is concerned with the relationship between living organisms and their environment (OED "ecology, n.") and has its origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, author of *The Riddle of the Universe,* most often credited with having coined the term in 1866 (Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* 149). Since Haeckel, multiple disciplines have adopted an "ecological approach" to their subject. Put in a different way, ecology is the study of

the "complex interactions that bind organisms and their environment together" (Loreau xi).[32] So then "ecosystem" "represents the entire system of biotic and abiotic components that interact in a given location" (Loreau 164). Finally, something is "ecological" if it addresses the interrelationships between living organisms and their environment ("ecological, adj." OED). [33] In the twenty-first century, we understand environment not as a synonym for nature, necessarily, but environment includes all living and non-living things that a given agent comes in contact with; in the case of humans, an environment includes other humans and innumerable other things.

As a substitution for nature, Timothy Morton has offered "the mesh," meaning and standing for the "interconnectivity of all living and non-living things" (*Ecological Thought* 28). Morton's mesh is messier and more inclusive than many environmentalist illustrations of a "web of life" (75), but shares an interest in relationships among things with those who imagine ecological interconnectivity as a web,[34] as does Paul Robbins in *Political Ecology* noting, "any tug on the strands of the global web of human-environment linkages reverberates throughout the system as a whole" (5). In *The Waves*, Woolf certainly imagines a web of sorts connecting the friends and their actions affect one another in physical and emotional ways—in other words, Robbins's "reverberation" might be understood as one agent interfering with another's life in some way or as an empathetic response, in the case of human and non-human animals. For

[32] See Glen Love's *Practical Ecocriticism* for a discussion of "practical ecology" as a bridge between ecology as science and the variety of ecology used in humanities (6-7, 61-64).

[33] Haeckel used ecology first in *The History of Creation* 1876 and then "ecological" in *Evolution of Man* 1879 (OED); "ecosystem" not in OED until 1935.

[34] Woolf uses the image of the spider web in *A Room of One's Own* as well, and there, it is only when the web is disturbed that "one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (63).

instance, articulating the web, Bernard remarks, "[h]ow strange to feel the line that is spun from us lengthening its fine filament across the misty spaces of the intervening world" (89). In this instance, Bernard is commenting on his friend Neville and their physical distance: "He is gone…Between us this line," Bernard continues. In a way, it would seem, Bernard is a mouthpiece for his creator on this subject, as Woolf wrote in her diary October 11, 1929: "whenever I make a mark I have to think of its relation to a dozen others. And though I could go on ahead easily enough, I am always stopping to consider the whole effect" (259). This is a consistent image among the friends, as Louis imagines a "filament" (124) joining his body to others', yet, as Louis qualifies, "we differ, it may be too profoundly, for explanation" (127).

Accordingly, the six friends who speak in *The Waves* explicitly articulate the paradox of ecological interconnection and difference; while the friends allegorize the relationship of individual agents in an ecosystem, they are inevitably autonomous and different, individual. All definitions and applications of ecology have this one thing in common: parts and wholes. The foundational concept of ecology is that there are things that are separate, defined, autonomous, but this is not true without the paradoxical fact that nothing is separate, nor autonomous, and the boundaries which define living things are permeable and dependent upon and informed and defined by the larger system. [35] Bernard is the most vocal on the subject observing, "we are not single, we are one" (68). Later, he reflects, "[w]e exist not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter" (246). In the concluding section of the novel, which Woolf devotes entirely to Bernard's perspective, he compares the friends' lives to a symphony composed of various instruments, sounds, and players, but forming a whole that is inseparable from the parts: "How

[35] Morton writes that the "concept of the mesh gives rise to an ethics and politics based on (1) the utter singularity and uniqueness of every life-form and (2) the lack of fixed identity anywhere in the system of life-forms. Though they seem radically different, (1) and (2) actually entail each other" ("The Mesh" 22).

impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole—again like music. What a symphony, with its concord and its discord and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! Each played his own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum or whatever the instrument might be" (256). Again, in his old age, Bernard repeats, "it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (276). Yet again, he reflects, "[h]ere on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan's tears. I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt" (289).

In her writing process, Woolf imagined her novel working as a symphony, defined by the interconnectivity of part and whole.[36] A diary entry on Tuesday, December 30, 1930 shows Woolf very intentional about her resistance to chapter divisions and traditional structuring devices in favor of rhythm: "Suppose I could run all these scenes together more?," she writes, "by rhythm chiefly. So as to avoid those cuts; so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end—I dont (sic) want the waste that the breaks give; I want to avoid chapters; that indeed is my achievement, if any here: a saturated, unchopped, completeness; changes of scene, of mood, of person, done without spilling a drop" (*Diary,* Vol. 3 343). This torrent of blood is yet another form of the flow metaphor that signifies the totality of life for Woolf, which is not blood but water in the novel. This rhythm of life, again first established by the waves crashing on the shore, effectively creates the impression that human and nonhuman participate in a network of comingled lives, agencies, and forces. The highly experimental nature of the novel should not, as

[36] A diary entry, Saturday December 20, 1930 reveals that Woolf listened to the Beethoven Quartet during the composition of *The Waves*.

the previous references to Woolf's diary prove, preclude the fact that the author was quite intentional with its form, a form that I argue is provocative in terms of ecological thought.

This interconnectedness is articulated in Woolf's artistic vision in both non-fiction essays and most poignantly, perhaps, through the formal experimentation of *The Waves.* Not only is this true in the way the friends articulate their simultaneous sameness and difference—as they all do—but also in the way Woolf weaves their consciousnesses together and into the very form of the novel. Through the stream of consciousness technique, a reader experiences an ecological vision rather than it just being suggested. Despite the subjectivity that a consciousness presupposes—private, unknown, intangible—the experience of *The Waves* is quite open and ecological. This is because the friends are open to a variety of "others" and observe all aspects of their environment—whether human, non-human, living, inanimate, urban or "natural." In *The Ecological Thought* Timothy Morton writes, "ecology equals living minus nature plus consciousness" (19). This equation describes *The Waves* as the novel acts out the mesh at the formal layer and through the characters' consciousnesses. For the mesh is "vast yet intimate: there is no here or there, so everything is brought into our awareness" (*Ecological Thought* 40). Morton echoes Bernard here, who reminds his friends, his reader, "We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities" (118).

In Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet" she advises the aspiring writer to "let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever comes along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole…That perhaps is your task—to find the relation between things that seem perhaps incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment" (191). Woolf's description

sounds a lot like Morton's description of his mesh. Morton's mesh is the interconnected whole, and again, the mesh includes living and nonliving forms. It is "a flowing, shifting, entangled mess of ambiguous entities—entities that become even more ambiguous the closer we look…a very curious, radically open form without center or edge" ("The Mesh" 22). No substance flows, shifts, and entangles like water, and there is no mistaking that water is the substance of life in *The Waves.* Water is just one of the ways Woolf expresses the "strange agencies of ostensibly unremarkable substances, systems, and objects" (Alaimo 193). Water is, from one perspective, a common and unremarkable substance, but under Woolf's manipulation, it becomes the medium for a conscious appreciation of the world around us.

Woolf's use of water and waves is both literal and figurative. The italicized portions that begin each segment describe an actual earth cycle: high tide and low tide, crests and troughs. The rhythm of the waves and the tides is controlled by a complex system involving the moon and the sun, and for Woolf, this rhythm establishes a pattern for human life. Yet, Woolf insists the human cannot be divorced from this cycle; water is intimately a part of the friends, permeating both their bodies and their minds. Through water imagery, Woolf and her creations communicate philosophical observations and truths, and the wave cycle offers yet another way to think about regeneration and circularity: in *The Waves*, water, waves, and the ocean, are evoked to stand for the totality of life and the friends' mortality.

Water

Truly, water permeates every level of Woolf's novel, from its title and its structuring rhythm, to the way characters' minds mimic the behavior of water in their fluid, shifting streams of consciousness. Water structures and energizes; it is human and nonhuman, material and

metaphorical; it unifies and fractures. Like the Anthropocene, water makes a mockery of rigid distinctions between external and internal, and this is true both on our planet and in Woolf's novel. In the physical world, we know that the human body is up to 60% water (USGS); this is true at the same time that 663 million people lack access to safe drinking water around the world, according to the World Health Organization's 2015 report (WHO/UNICEF). *The Waves* captures this paradoxical quality of the material that is so much a part of us—in our very composition—yet distinct, threatening, and impossible to control. Like Eliot's paradoxical treatment of drought and drowning in *The Waste Land*, Woolf grasps onto the potential for water to communicate the complexity of modern life, and it is no surprise that writers in the early twentieth century infuse water with such significant meditations. As we've already noted, polluted and disrupted bodies of water were some of the first indications that the dichotomy between human and material world, internal and external was not so definite as we supposed.

It is worth noting that this novel's interest in water reminds us of the author's personal, embodied experience with water and the ways in which Woolf's artistic production results from real, sensory experiences with the physical world. *The Waves* is in the company of *The Years* and *Night and Day* for the fact that it is structured after Earth's cycles, and Lawrence Buell observes that it is "no coincidence that [Woolf] titled several books after natural processes" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 108). It is no coincidence for many reasons, including Woolf's general interest in the natural world. Louise Westling notes that "[f]rom the beginning of her career, Virginia Woolf was acutely attuned to the dynamic bodily fullness of the nonhuman world. Her diaries are full of descriptions of landscape, commentaries on the weather, and musings about the vast natural forces that surround and embrace the land and its life" (858). Additionally, *The Waves* signals Woolf's personal connection to the coast, most likely stemming from summers at

the Talland House in Cornwall where she "enjoyed her formative, blissful, experience of hearing waves and a window blind moving" (Goldman, *Cambridge Introduction* 4). Water becomes connected to creativity and artistic expression for Woolf, in, say, a similar way that wind functions for Wordsworth.

This is certainly the case in *The Waves*, and Woolf repeatedly uses water imagery to describe the novel-in-progress in her diary; the idea for the novel was "trickling in" as "the idea of some continuous stream, not only of human thought, but of a ship, the night…all flowing together" (*Diary* Vol. 3 139). She imagined the characters—or the characters' minds—as "islands in the stream" (229). Further, the artist-writer characters in the book engage water and the waves in their attempts to express immediate realities in written language. For example, sometimes we get the feeling that Bernard is Woolf's mouthpiece when he reminds us that "rhythm is the main thing in writing" (79). In a moment of pure ecstasy and sublimity with the natural world, Neville explicitly links water imagery and artistic expression: "Now begins to rise in me the familiar rhythm; words that have lain dormant now lift, now toss their crests, and fall and rise, and fall and rise again. I am a poet, yes" (82). These are just two of the many moments in the novel where the physical world provides the substance of not only thought, but also art. Certainly, I am not the first to suggest that water is central to Woolf's project. Patrizia A. Muscogiuri, for instance, describes Woolf's "thalassic aesthetic," noting that water is pivotal to her politics (101). Muscogiuri describes the

> "unknown" sea into which Woolf wishes to dive in her writing, an ever-moving ocean of people, a flesh-and-blood, interpersonal version of the traditional metaphor of the sea of life… in Woolf the sea becomes the substance of life itself and emerges as a source of not only (genuine) "poetry" (the "poetry of existence")

> but also fresh politics, and the voice of the sea as voice of the other – both in the sense of the other "inside" and in the sense of those innumerable unknown others bodying forth the Woolfian sea of life. (105)

Additionally, I find Muscogiuri's discussion of surface versus depth useful for thinking about the way Woolf treats environments. Indeed, the antithesis between the apparently smooth, uniform, and homogeneous ocean and what lies beneath the surface—its depth and mystery—is one of the many things that intrigued Woolf about water, as we will see.

In the first of many paradoxes, water is time—both time immemorial and the expression of a single moment. In *The Waves* water measures earth time and human time and serves as a reminder of the comparative impermanence of human life. As an example of the expression of deep time, or time outside the perception of the human, consider Louis's repeated description of a "great beast stamping," a metaphor that, it should be noted, is also evoked in the italicized interludes, suggesting its centrality and Woolf's insistence that human experience is patterned after the material world. Indeed, the very first page of the novel, in our introduction to Louis, he "hear[s] something stamping…A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps" (9). A moment later, this puzzling metaphor is explicitly linked to the wave cycle, when, in the second instance, Louis insists to his friends that the "beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps" (10). Again, years later, on graduating boarding school, we have Louis reflecting on human history, and the "bird flies; the flower dances; but I hear always the sullen thud of the waves; and the chained beast stamps on the beach. It stamps and stamps" (58). So the beast and the waves' thuds become reminders of time and human vulnerability to time as the friends inevitably grow older and approach their deaths, just as the tides come and go. The fact that Louis "hears" time reminds us of Andrew Marvell's

"To His Coy Mistress," where Marvell writes, "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (21-22). We might also recall Eliot's appropriation of Marvell in *The Waste Land* as one speaker hears at his back a "cold blast" (185), "the rattle of the bones" (186), and the "sound of horns and motors" (197).[37] The beast, likewise, becomes a sensory and material experience of time, which also thuds for the reader in the rhythm of the waves.

Additionally, the fact that this figuration of time as a beast stamping is repeated in the italicized portions, which I read as a more literal suggestion of a reality outside of human observation, suggests that the beast might be read as deep time itself; it is the eternal sound of the waves on the shore. The beast will continue to stamp, because the waves will continue to crash on the beach, long after Louis is there to hear it. Woolf writes in the fourth interlude: "*The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping*" (150). Critics have hardly touched these puzzling moments of the novel, but a contemporary reader might envision the aurochs that haunt Hushpuppy, the protagonist of the 2012 movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild.* The aurochs are reminders of humanity's ancient past and reminders, according to Hushpuppy's teacher, that "any day the fabric of the universe is going to unravel" (n.p.).

According to Patricia Yaeger's article "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* and Dirty Ecology," the "returning aurochs mark the movie's geologic concern, its interest in eras" (n.p.). So while Hushpuppy conjures previously extinct pig-like creatures, Louis imagines an elephant-like beast, and the stamping is just as ominous. Louis's beast recalls the mammoth and mastodon, reminders of a past epoch, and victims to what scientists call the megafauna extinction—a wave of large mammal extinction that coincides with the beginning of the Holocene, the stable period that has

[37]Certainly, Virginia Woolf knew *The Waste Land* well, as Eliot read it to her in 1922 and she set the type for the Hogarth edition (1923) herself (Goldman 17). Woolf reflected on *The Waste Land* extensively in letters and diaries as well.

allowed the human species to prosper in the absence of predators (Kolbert 46). Woolf's beast and Hushpuppy's aurochs, then, evoke both the material conditions of human evolution and the very delicate balance of life—the relatively short distance between domination and extinction.[38] Finally, the beast is typical of Woolf's propensity for animal metaphor as a way to embody and materialize difficult, abstract, mind-blowing concepts such as geological time. The beast seems mystifying, but it is far easier to grasp than 1,000 years much less 1,000,000.

In contrast to these meditations on deep, geological time, water also performs the moment, the experience. For instance, from Bernard's first notable encounter with water as a child, a bath that enlivens him with "bright arrows of sensation" (26), water becomes a medium through which he can know the world. Bernard tells us that "[r]ich and heavy sensations form on the roof of my mind; down showers the day—the woods; and Elvedon; Susan and the pigeon. Pouring down the walls of my mind, running together, the day falls copious, resplendent" (27). As this example illustrates, experience, awareness, and engagement with the world might be understood as isolatable drops of water. Bernard's description evokes the water cycle, and the process of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. Here, water is infused with life; it is sensory and notable for its valence, its ability to collect experiences into a reservoir that comes to express one's life. Later in life, Bernard opens the seventh section again imagining increments of time as drops of water: "[a]nd time lets fall its drop. The drop that has formed on the roof of the soul falls. On the roof of my mind time, forming, lets fall its drop" (184). This image of condensation and precipitation once more speaks to the material qualities of H_2O, but also

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38 Some scientists hypothesize that even this extinction event somewhere around 13,000 years ago was human-induced, sometimes referred to as the "prehistoric overkill hypothesis."

See Christopher Sandom, Søren Faurby, Brody Sandel, Jens-Christian Svenning, "Global late Quaternary megafauna extinctions linked to humans, not climate change" here: http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/royprsb/281/1787/20133254.full.pdf

evokes an hourglass of sorts. As "time tapers to a point" (184) and a drop falls, Bernard draws closer to the end of his life. If moments are drops, perhaps, a day is a ripple: "Each [day] spreads the same ripple. The being grows rings, like a tree. Like a tree, leaves fall" (283). Therefore, we might say that some rippling is beneficial because ripples indicate variety and awareness, but the novel also suggests the trauma that results from ripples that exceed the normal amount of oscillation and undulation. Things like war, or the untimely death of a friend, for example, might result in cataclysmic, irreversible damage for the humans who experience the shock, as we will see later in this chapter. Still, even the most tragic human death is just a crash of the waves on the shore in the larger scheme of the novel (and the world).

Furthermore, the six (or seven including Percival) friends whose lives make up the story of *The Waves* behave like water, mimicking water's fluidity and valence, a fact that suggests difference and interconnectedness in interesting, ecological, ways. Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, writing three decades before ecocriticism it should be noted, also perceives the way in which the characters mimic natural systems as they "alternately collect and break apart. In collecting they merge their individual selves and create a totally new organism, a party of people; in breaking apart they take on their own particular identities" (137). Schaefer's language tellingly performs the action of the waves, just as the friends perform the waves, both in action and discursively. This is one of many posthumanist moves where Woolf imagines the natural, material world as the primary category of comparison rather than the other way around. Simply put, I would like to suggest that rather than waves resembling people, people resemble waves in this novel, a distinction that will have greater implications in my reading of the italicized interludes shortly. Aside from obvious similarities between the waves and the friends' physical behaviors in the plot—"*The waves fell; withdrew and fell again"*(150), while the friends come together, separate,

and come together again—the stream of consciousness or inner monologue technique plays this separation and interconnectivity out on the page and in the reader's own consciousness. Form creates content as the friends' consciousnesses splash and break, separate and flow into one another.

However, if a drop or a ripple in a body of water is indicative of a moment of consciousness, bodies of water also become reminders of human vulnerability and death, and the ability of bodies of water to drown, to take life, are just as prominent as the life-giving properties of water in the novel. This is a point that we will linger on in order to unpack Woolf's insistence on treating water in all of its paradoxical complexity. Additionally, the ability of objects to reorient a human to the profundity of life becomes significant in the frame of new materialisms and environmental approaches to literature. Woolf's interest in the ability of inanimate objects and nonhuman bodies to trigger awareness—to offer an escape from the "waste"—speaks to her larger ecological vision, which works to decenter the human in order to account for the rich variety of nonhuman others in any given system.

If we allow that the novel imagines the totality of life as one big current—a fluid substance in which we all are only conditionally buoyant—this image best describes the friends' need to latch on to each other and the physical world as life rafts. It is important to note that this "torrent" is present in both natural and human built environments, and the city is particularly prone to the kind of uniformity that troubles Woolf and her characters. If the pool of water is "too smooth," in a way, we forget to live. So in one respect, Woolf suggests that to be unaware is to be dead; not to experience the world is not to exist. Consider, for example, Louis's observation of London: "This is the mean; that is the average. Meanwhile the hats bob up and down; the door perpetually shuts and opens. I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation

and despair. If this is all, this is worthless" (93). Observing the rhythm of the city, Louis asks, "Where then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster? The circle is unbroken; the harmony is complete." Yet Louis, noting the "central rhythm" and the "common mainstream" observes that he is "alien, external" (94). Likewise, Bernard imagines that "We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shade…We have to leap like fish, high in the air, to catch the train from Waterloo. And however high we leap we fall back again into the stream" (216). In Woolf's estimation here, modernity makes humans especially vulnerable to a current that is too swift for humans to "make comparisons" as Bernard puts it (216). Catching the train allows for brief moments of interaction and sensation, but for the friends, it also becomes symbolic of a life that is too dominated by the totality of the current—the "[m]ust, must, must" (234)—and not full enough of those extraordinary moments that form distinctive on the roof of one's mind.

To illustrate Woolf's, and the modernist, tendency to infuse water with all of the complexity of life and death, consider the notorious, and exemplary, "fin in the water" scene. In all of the critical discussions of the fin in the water, however, scholars seldom consider the ecological implications of this fin in a real, material sense. The image, named "fin in a waste of waters" according to Bernard's catalogue in his notebook, first appears like so:

> Leaning over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason, it springs up as one might see the fin of a porpoise on the horizon. Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time come to uncover and coax into words. (189)

Drawing from a similar experience that Woolf recorded in her diary,[39] scholars have interpreted this moment broadly as a sign of hope or life against a perceived void. In this sense, this image joins a host of others where a tangible disruption in an otherwise homogeneous surface signals a profound sense of the physical world of which the human speaker is only a part, but a significant part. Further, as we have noted, Woolf's treatment of water, and particularly the ocean, collapses the supposed division between human and nonhuman, internal and external. To provide one more example of the provocative ways that Woolf engages the human and the deep sea, consider Neville's description of himself, where he suggests intimacy with others in profoundly watery terms: "My net is almost indistinguishable from that which it surrounds. It lifts whales—huge leviathans and white jellies, what is amorphous and wandering; I detect, I perceive. Beneath my eyes opens—a book; I see to the bottom; the heart—I see to the depths… love makes knots; love brutally tears them apart. I have been knotted; I have been torn apart" (214). Through Woolf's treatment of water, the "world burgeons with unexpected life," as one scholar interested in material ecocriticism puts it (Cohen x). The deep sea, a particularly "far away place" is brought into immediate contact with the human who is "indistinguishable" to use Neville's phrase.

From an ecological perspective the fin in the waste of water, like Neville's reference to a host of sea creatures above, reminds us of the diverse and abundant life beneath the surface of the ocean. It is no mistake that Woolf gave this image to Bernard, the aspiring writer who wishes to make sense of experiences through language. In the final section of the novel, Bernard in old age, laments, "[n]othing, nothing, nothing broke with its fin that leaden waste of waters. Nothing

[39] Woolf first recorded, "It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is: One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean…I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book" (*Diary* Vol. 2 113). Later, upon completing *The Waves* Woolf wrote in her Writer's Diary, "I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to the end of *To the Lighthouse*" (165).

would happen to lift that weight of intolerable boredom. The terms went on. We grew; we changed; for of course, we are animals. We not always aware by any means; we breathe, eat, sleep automatically" (245-246). As one often does when observing elusive wildlife in their natural habitat, Bernard questions continuously whether the fin was actually there. The question of whether the great sea actually does contain life becomes an existential question, where his life can only matter in relation to another. But it is important to note that in *The Waves* it is not just the ocean that is granted this depth, but the entire lithosphere, evidenced by mentions of the "subterannean" (142), volcanic fissures and geysers (25) and mineral veins (12, 95, 134, 290). This depth and the unknowns therein evokes geological or deep time and contrasts with the immediate individual human moment, a point we will return to shortly.

Rhoda's character offers a poignant example of Woolf's interest in the paradoxical life-giving and life-taking qualities of water. Further, Rhoda's particular relationship with the nonhuman world—objects and things, notably—provides an introduction to the ways in which *The Waves* anticipates current conversations in the new materialisms, the topic that will interest us next in this chapter. As a way to preview that discussion, consider the way the following examples combine Woolf's interest in water with an interest in a type of "thing-power." Rhoda's example will illustrate the way in which Woolf suggests an appreciation for the material world—and the materiality of the human—is a necessity for full awareness, for life. Indeed, *The Waves* exhibits profound thing-power, defined by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* as the affirmation that "so-called inanimate things have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies" (18). While things and objects exist independently, and "make things happen" independently (5), for Bennett attuning to

this vital materialism also draws attention to the relationships between humans and nonhumans and the way we act on each other, alongside each other, or in partnership.

In this context, Rhoda is notable precisely because of her immateriality, and Woolf makes no mistake that Rhoda's inability to fully realize her shared materiality with the world around her is what ultimately causes her to drown. In this aspect of her character, Rhoda stands in contrast to the others, particularly the other female characters Susan and Jinny, to whom she constantly compares herself. The "hard" things that pull the other friends out of the flood of life elude Rhoda. For instance, Susan consistently "grounds" herself in the domestic farm life, a quality that makes her identity stable and defined by things that are tangible: "I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees…I cannot be divided or kept apart" (97, ellipses mine). Jinny's stake against the current is her body, as she embraces her own materiality and physicality: "I stream like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way, but rooted" (102). In another illustrative moment, Jinny tells us, "I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my body. My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light" (129). In contrast to Susan and Jinny's assertions of embodiment, Rhoda consistently imagines that she has no face, saying of Susan and Jinny, "[t]heir world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy…whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second" (43).

In attempts to compensate for her own perceived immateriality, Rhoda often latches on to inanimate objects as a way to keep her from "drowning." This is one way the "inanimate" object raises consciousness, or as Bennett puts it, actively "resists." In one moment Rhoda laments: "Alone, I fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself

back to the body" (44). Direct contact with the physical world becomes necessary for Rhoda, and sometimes the other friends too to a lesser extent, any time that they feel consciousness in danger of slipping from the physical world into a too-smooth homogeneous state of unawareness, such as sleep, or death, or simply the rush of daily life that makes sensation and connection difficult. Crucial to my reading of the text, it is objects, things, and the inherent vitality of the material world that serves to pull the friends out of this moment of simulated near-death. If modern life is a smooth surface of uniformity, even monotony, it is often the object, the thing, the nonhuman that disrupts this "unconsciousness" and enlivens the friends to the immediate experience of the world around them. Consider another example, when Rhoda wrestles with sleep, a state of unconsciousness, and objects are figured as the source of life, in a sense: "I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the head of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink" (27). And a moment later, "Oh, to awake from dreaming! Look, there is the chest of drawers. Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled" (28). Aside from the obvious figuration of human life in material terms, the metal rail, the wooden drawers become demonstrative of life for Rhoda.

I will offer one final example, still in Rhoda's consciousness, which comes after a moment of trauma in the novel, the death of Percival:

> There is the puddle, and I cannot cross it. I hear the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head. Its wind roars in my face. All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the enteral corridors for ever. What then can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely? (159)

Here, the ordinary object has much to do with human life, even human identity. The suggestion that a stone might be able to bring Rhoda "into her body" and create life in the face of death has profound implications for the way in which Bennett and others working in the new materialisms argue that "encounters with lively matter can chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests" (122). In the Anthropocene, there is no mistaking that the "thing" and the human have much to do with one another. New research suggests that plastic might become a key stratigraphic indicator of the Anthropocene. Plastic is so widely and substantially distributed on the earth and even in marine settings—both the bottom of the ocean floor and fresh water sources—that it might mark the Anthropocene in the fossil layer (Zalasiewicz, et al. 2). If this is the case, we can imagine that plastic is the legacy of the human for future anthropologists. We might literally be remembered in terms of these objects we deem disposable and inconsequential.

Woolf's interest in the nonhuman is explicit, demonstrated through the many functions of water, Rhoda's desperate need to connect to objects, and even claims such as "we live in things"(49) in another Woolf novel, *Between the Acts.* Furthermore, it must be noted, Woolf's novel form performs this "flattening" or "horizontal" awareness by bringing the human, nonhuman, elemental, and inanimate together in one "stream" where contact is inevitable. Bennett sees this "leveling" as a move in the right direction: "to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility" (10). Recognizing the agency of the physical world, and attuning to the ways that humans, also material and comprised of the same "stuff," are entangled with things, leads to a new way of inhabiting the world where human interests are not the only interests to consider. It is clear from these examples that Woolf makes use of the inherent properties of

water, a material that both sustains life on our planet but also threatens life; its force is enough to break through a levee, sweep up bodies and infrastructure in its current, or "pick bones in a whisper" (316) as Eliot writes in *The Waste Land*. Water signals the elemental and the eternal, a universe that is active and agentic. I want to turn now to a discussion of the nonhuman world, including the elemental, invisible "forces," and objects or things, in *The Waves*.

Strange Materialities

Like the new materialists, *The Waves* takes interest in the observable forces that animate the human and nonhuman world, and the novel enacts this energy—its rhythmical oscillations—through its experimental form. When Jinny asks, "What moved the leaves? What moves my heart, my legs?" (13), the reader must pause and wonder with Jinny— what does make these things happen? Later Jinny articulates this energy thus: "I see every blade of grass very clear. But the pulse drums so in my forehead, behind my eyes, that everything dances—the net, the grass; our faces leap like butterflies; the trees seem to jump up and down. There is nothing staid, nothing settled in the universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph" (46). Woolf continually gives the impression that far from a passive construct completely distinct from the human, nature is a "continuous stream of occurrence," as Alfred Whitehead puts it (qtd. in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 117). Often, her metaphorical mode works to further achieve this effect, such as when Rhoda observes, "[w]ith intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising the fissures" (64). For Woolf and current thinkers, the same energy is consistent

between human and nonhuman; it entwines us with the material world, but also, in many ways, exceeds us.

In another moment, standing still in the woods, Bernard hears the "murmur of the waves in the air" (18). Certainly, physics tells us that many types of energy are observed in the form of waves: electromagnetic, light, acoustic, heat, and liquids, of course. Physics will also remind us of the Wave Particle Paradox, or the Wave Particle Duality, coined in the early twentieth century to describe the "schizophrenic" properties of light and matter to behave both as waves and as particles (Prutchi and Prutchi 135; Falkenburg 266). Derek Ryan notes in his "quantum philosophical reading" (366) of *The Waves* titled "Woolf and Contemporary Philosophy" that Woolf was acutely aware of and intrigued by discoveries in ontology, physics, and philosophy concerning matter and the universe, including wave and particle theories of Heisenberg and Bohr (362). Niels Bohr, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1922, explained this quantum paradox—the fact that light and matter can be extended waves and well-defined particles at the same time—so that "waves and particles as different faces of reality. Depending on the experiment, we see one but never both" (Perkowitz 12).

Interest in the duality of matter is evident in *The Waves* as the author manipulates perspective and creates a both / and situation where things are both very big and very small; fluid and distinct; much like the surface of a body of water, appearing smooth, homogenous from one scale but is actually a rippling mesh of things at closer vantage point. Furthermore, Woolf's treatment of waves—energies—and specific, tangible objects speaks to one of the critical insights of object-oriented-ontology, and one of the more frustrating aspects of the limits of human perception and artistic expression: although nature might best be explained in terms of paradoxes—both waves and particles—we can never experience both of these things at the same

time. In his article "Here Comes Everything," Morton describes the characteristically withdrawn nature of objects using an example of a two sided coin: "no matter how many times we turn over a coin, we never see the other side *as* the other side—it will have to flip onto 'this' side for us to see it, immediately producing another underside" (165). Metaphor becomes a way, for Woolf and others, to account for this strangeness of things and re-enchant us to the elusive quality of the physical world.

Through both experimental form and metaphor, *The Waves* practices a new materialism, rendering reality in an intimate and perplexing flow of agencies and objects. The result is an enchantment and an estrangement indicative of the Anthropocene, where our own materiality becomes undeniable. Furthermore, *The Waves* enacts a "good" anthropomorphism, also often through metaphor—good because this particular form of anthropomorphism does not suggest human domination but reiterates the inherent mystery, complexity, and instability of the physical world. In *Guerilla Metaphysics* Graham Harman suggests metaphor "offers the closest point of approach to objects" (98), and this is how I take such metaphors as the great beast stamping, or Rhoda's insistence that "the swallow dips her wings in dark pools" (105, 126, 164, 223). While there is no simple explanation of this metaphor, it seems to encompass the whole of life and death for Rhoda, and invokes images of contact, sensation, experience for the reader. Consistently, anthropomorphic metaphors work both to animate the material world and to blur the fast distinctions between human and nonhuman, all while we are forced to consider familiar objects from a new perspective.

One might find the tendency to animate the material world predictable in the friends' early years, in their imaginary kingdom of Elvedon, but the friends do not lose their inclination to attribute "things" with energy and power as they age. Rather, the tendency toward "childlike"

anthropomorphism becomes even more pronounced as the friends develop into adults and the world becomes increasingly difficult to access directly. Another achievement of Woolf's aesthetic, then, is the fact that the nonhuman world is not only teeming with life for Woolf's characters, but also for her reader. By performing the mesh as it does, Woolf's novel magnetizes her reader to these realities that sometimes become obscured and ignored.

Similarly, in the Anthropocene, "nature" is all at once something that we are desperately aware of but also alienated from. As Timothy Clark puts it in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, the "Anthropocene entails, among other things, a refusal to be so sure that we do know what rain is. We find ourselves asking of the unfamiliar weather, 'What does it mean?'" (48). The friends explicitly express this strangeness of a material world that is both intimate and shockingly withdrawn, a strangeness that extends across humans and nonhumans. Entering college, for example, Bernard notes that the "complexity of things becomes more close" (76). For Bernard, this complexity results in a fragmentation of self—"Bernard in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive. That is what they do not understand, for they are now undoubtedly discussing me, saying I escape them, am evasive" (76). The self, as a material object, then, expresses the same characteristics of the material world. This is a phenomenon that Timothy Morton calls "strange stranger: "an uncanny, radically unpredictable quality of life-forms. Life-forms recede into strangeness the more we think about them, and whenever they encounter one another—the strangeness is irreducible" ("Here Comes Everything" 165).

Consider the friends' experience of the train and London, and the way these environments produce experiences that are new, curious, enchanting, and intimate, yet somehow distancing; experiences that require metaphor and anthropomorphism to approach. In one moment, Rhoda tells us, the "train now stamps heavily, breathes stertorously, as it climbs up and

up" (65). The train's breath—steam exhaust from the burning of wood or coal perhaps—and its stamping—echoing the great beast and the waves that hauntingly set the rhythm of the novel—reminds the reader of the very real ways that railroad systems shape human life and the earth's surface, to degrees that extend even past the human agents who put the systems in to place. Seeing London for the first time, Louis observes, "London crumbles. London heaves and surges. There is a bristling of chimneys and towers. There a white church; there a mast among the spires. There a canal. Now there are open spaces with asphalt paths upon which it is strange that people should now be walking" (31).

Bernard has a similar reaction to London and expresses the dual feeling of deep interconnectedness and estrangement when he notes "[h]ow fair, how strange, glittering, many pointed and many-domed London lies before me under mist." Upon further observation of "these beautiful human beings" (113) in the city, and after a moment of "tunneling" to the profound ancestral depths, he reflects, "[a]m I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these starers and trippers; these errand-boys and furtive and fugitive girls who, ignoring their doom, look in at shop-windows? But I am aware of our ephemeral passage" (114). Here, Bernard encounters his species as an ethnographer might. This environment, humans included, is strange but Bernard's response is involuntarily pathetic. As such, Woolf demonstrates the way refiguring human experiences in material terms can reveal connections across objects that are ordinarily seen as ontologically different. As Jane Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter,* "an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchal structure" (99).

The novel's preoccupation with time, both human and geological, becomes central when reading it in the context of the emergent Anthropocene, where issues of scale and dimensionality take on new significance. Repeatedly in *The Waves* time is figured in highly aestheticized, material terms: "the clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert. The black bars on the clock face are green oases. The long hand has marched ahead to find water. The other painfully stumbles among hot stones in the desert. It will die in the desert" (21). Metaphors such as this one give the impression of viewing this abstract thing, time, from a perspective outside of the human in order to be able to view it on "all sides" to use Morton's example above. While this metaphor is estranging, we are not used to thinking about time as embodied and vulnerable to the elements, it also brings us nearer to time because we can identify with the sensations of being hot, thirsty, tired. In a strange moment, we feel sympathy for time, the very thing that antagonizes humans and reveals our own vulnerabilities.

Examples of Woolf's interest in extending materiality across ontological categories abound. Everything is material for Susan, who we remember makes her life in the country, farming, raising children, and living off the land. In Susan's consciousness, emotion is capable of being buried or held in the hand: "I will take my anguish and lay it upon the roots under the beech trees. I will examine it and take it between my fingers" (13). Additionally, for Susan, experiences are materialized as a part of her body that anchors her against the fluidity of life. For example, at school, "I have torn off the whole of May and June and twenty days of July. I have torn them off and screwed them up so that they no longer exist, save as a weight in my side" (53). In another moment, Bernard materializes the sum of his existence: "Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers" (251). The physical action of taking these things that are presumably so particular to and entwined with

human experience, such as "anguish," and suggesting that they are material capable to be held in the hand and buried in the ground not only enters the inanimate and abstract into the mesh of life, but insists the reader think about the shared materiality of humans and nonhumans.

This is ecological and evocative of the condition of the Anthropocene in the sense that the human—as geological agent—is now literally inscribed in the earth's systems. Certainly, humans are not the only agents, even if we are agents potentially capable of great collective impact. According to Szersynski, "the human is the first geological force to become conscious of its geological role" (171). At least as far as we know, humans are the only species to wrestle with what it means to live in an epoch defined by its destructive potential. The Anthropocene brings our materiality to the forefront due fact that it is part of the earth in very visible, physical ways. Understanding ourselves as geologic agents comes at the price of acknowledging our own materiality that we are *just* a geologic agent. This is another way Woolf anticipates dialogues of the Anthropocene: in *The Waves* human consciousness and life itself—this mysterious essence—is treated as an object, a thing equally material as water, and not inseparable from it.

In a material metaphor that further blurs the distinction between human and the natural world, Louis imagines himself as a plant of sorts, with fibres and roots that thread "round and round about the world" (20). More often than not, Louis's use of the plant metaphor and time, particularly a time in the distant past, goes hand in hand:

> My roots go down through veins of lead and silver, through damp, marshy places that exhale odours to a knot made of oak roots bound together in the centre. Sealed and blind, with each stopping my ears, I have yet heard rumours of wars; and the nightingale; have felt the hurrying of many troops of men flocking hither and thither in quest of civilization like flocks of birds migrating seeking the

> summer; I have seen women carrying red pitchers to the banks of the Nile. I woke in a garden, with a blow on the nape of my neck. (95-96)

Louis explicitly invokes geological time or deep time and suggests the intersection of the human in geologic time: "Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing…Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile" (12). The Nile is often evoked in literature as the so-called "cradle of civilization," but certainly we know that geologic time measures back much further than that. Further, for Woolf, going *down* means moving out of history and into prehistoric and primeval time. In other words, access to larger scales of time exist beneath, in the way that, perhaps, buried fossils signal the past and a scale of time much more vast than the immediate experience. Elsewhere, Louis refers to his life as "this inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs, when women carried red pitchers to the Nile" (66). This is just one of many places that Louis "tunnels" from his present moment to the ancient past, usually arriving in Egypt. Lucio Ruotolo is one scholar who has written about Woolf's use of a technique called tunneling, which, according to her diary, she discovered (or at least named) during the process of writing *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Interestingly, Morton also imagines tunneling as a way of thinking through the mesh in order to get at a deeper ecological awareness. In an applicable moment, Bernard reflects, "I wish to go under; to visit the profound depths… Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy" (114). Morton's tunneling, like Woolf's, leads to a greater understanding of what it means to (not be) human and a greater compassion for others.

Louis is not alone in his interest in the great depths or deep history. Despite his immediate urban setting, Bernard exhibits awareness of human time and geologic time, suggesting humans—as species—as just another wrung on the evolutionary ladder. "The growl

of traffic might be any uproar," he contemplates, "forest trees or the roar of wild beasts" (113). Imagining thus, he continues, "[t]ime has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. I think also that our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence" (113). The modern world, in this passage, is a façade; a thin layer on the Earth's crust that gives the perception of advancement / sustainability. In the next moment, temporarily distracted by the buzzing city, Bernard returns to his previous train of thought:

> No, but I wish to go under; to visit the profound depths; once in a while to exercise my prerogative not always to act, but to explore; to hear vague ancestral sounds of boughs creaking, of mammoths, to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding, impossible to those who act. Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these starers and trippers; these errand-boys and furtive and fugitive girls who, ignoring their doom, look in at shop-windows? But I am aware of our ephemeral passage. (114)

Again, the mammoth invokes extinction, or as Georges Cuvier referred to the phenomenon, "a world previous to ours" (Kolbert 36). Coupled with Bernard's awareness of "our ephemeral passage" a reader is reminded that humans will also leave an imprint in the fossil record. In the final pages of the novel, to tell the story of his life, Bernard has to

> recall things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that and become part of it…There is the old brute, too, the savage, the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches; whose speech is guttural, visceral—

> well, he is here. He squats in me. Tonight he has been feasted on quails, salad, and sweet bread. He now holds a glass of fine old brandy in his paw. He brindles, purrs and shoots warm thrills all down my spine as I sip. It is true, he washes his hands before dinner, but they are still hairy. He buttons on trousers and waistcoats, but they contain the same organs… that man, the hairy, the ape-like, has contributed his part to my life. (290)

Here, and elsewhere, Woolf encourages her reader to consider the human's evolutionary past, which ultimately points to her interest in thinking about the materiality of all of the living world, including humans. Even those attributes most often used to prove human exceptionalism—the mind and the soul—are treated as material in *The Waves.* As has been noted, interest in the materiality of matter works to both enchant and estrange things, resulting in a new appreciation for the entanglement of previously unacknowledged agents.

In the essay "The Narrow Bridge of Art," Woolf reveals her awareness of deep or geologic time. In the process, Woolf also reveals that she was ahead of her time in recognizing the fact that, as Elizabeth Kolbert notes, "from an earth history perspective, several hundred years or even several thousand is practically no time at all. From a human perspective, though, it's an immensity" (234). Woolf ruminates, as she imagines all of humanity does, that

> The age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one's fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist — it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create, and the fine

> fabric of a lyric is no more fitted to contain this point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock. ("The Narrow Bridge" n.p.).

This sentiment is infused into *The Waves* and Bernard who ponders the expanse of space and time in relation to his own humanity, "[a]nd the light of the stars falling, as it falls now, on my hand after travelling for millions upon millions of years—I could get a cold shock from that for a moment—not more, my imagination is too feeble" (268). In addition to moments such as Bernard's, the formal structure of *The Waves* suggests a reorientation of sorts in terms of human time and deep time.

Woolf invokes what we today call the Anthropocene by manipulating time and space through the interplay between the italicized portions and the novel proper, in the way the friends evoke geologic time in their use of metaphor, and contrasting imagery of surface and depth. The story of the friends, which is the central action of the book, takes place betwixt—one gets the feeling of "beneath"—nine italicized portions. While *The Waves* follows the friends from childhood to death—the span of their existence—a reader ultimately experiences the sum of their existence in only a matter of one day: one sun rise and one sunset; one cycle of the tides. In other words, while the friends live many days, growing tired at times of the monotony of their existence, for the reader, and in the frame of the narrative, not even an Earth day has passed. The effect of this, then, is to telescope the human and to remind the reader that our species is but a speck in a long expanse of time and space.

Loss of World Played out in the Human Realm

Currently, Woolf's invention of a new genre with *The Waves*, a genre she labeled a drama-poem, is understood to be her way of articulating her modernity: "Woolf was acutely

conscious of being modern and equally keen to understand and define what was distinctive about modern times and contemporary literature[…][She] sets out to invent new forms so as to convey experiences not expressed by literature so far" (Spiropoulou 2, 8). I would like to suggest ecological causes and explanations for these perceived new experiences by way of arguing that Woolf felt and anticipated the coming Anthropocene. "On or about December 1910 human character changed," Woolf famously writes in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (4). This is perhaps the most often quoted (and misquoted) passage in all of Woolf's expansive canon. Although Woolf was ostensibly speaking to changes in domestic relationships, this sentiment appears throughout her personal and public writings, and the feeling that "something has changed" also informed her artistic vision and pursuit of new literary form. And, of course, Woolf is not alone in her attempts to "make it new." In a letter to Clive Bell August 19, 1908, Virginia Woolf explains her intent to "re-form" the novel and "capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes. I take a good look at woods in the sunset, and fix men who are breaking stones with an intense gaze, meant to sever them from the past and the future-- all these excitements last out my walk, but tomorrow I know, I shall be sitting down to the inanimate old phrases" (*Letters* Vol. 1 356). In a 1919 essay "Modern Fiction," republished in the 1925 collection *The Common Reader,* Woolf writes that "life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" (105). Later, in *A Writer's Diary* June 27, 1925, Woolf muses that she will invent a new name for her books to "supplant 'novel'": "A new ---- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (78).

Today, the fact that Woolf imagined herself standing at the starting line of a new epoch strikes us as prescient, as we, too, debate whether we have entered the Anthropocene. As before

mentioned, many thinkers in Woolf's day repeated her sentiment, including her fellow modernists discussed in this dissertation. Modernism as a movement has also come to be defined by a split with the past. In her reading of Woolf in *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation*, Lecia Rosenthal cites Maurice Blanchot's "On a Change of Epoch" from his collection *The Infinite Conversation.* Blanchot understood the magnitude of human impact as, I argue, did Woolf, writing in Woolf's lifetime, "[w]hen, for the first time in the history of the world, one has at hand the material power to put an end to this history and the world, one has already departed historical space. The change of epoch has occurred" (qtd. in Rosenthal 42).

This notion of change on a large scale and at great speed—the type of change that characterizes the Anthropocene—is prevalent in both Woolf's nonfiction and fiction. In *The Waves* great change is articulated most often aesthetically by a crash, shatter (13), quiver, drop; a wave falling "*with the concussion of horses' hooves on the turf*" (108) or thudding "*like a great beast stamping*" (150), for example. In some moments, such as when Neville comments that "sometimes one trembling star comes in the clear sky and makes me think the world is beautiful and we maggots deforming even the trees with our lust" (226) or Jinny observes of the masses that "[t]hey will not let the earth even lie wormy and sodden" (194), the suggestion of human impact is more explicit. In all cases, Woolf suggests, it would seem that colossal change is the consequence when the delicate balance, the rhythm of life, is disrupted.

With great richness, Woolf demands her reader consider the consequence of interconnectedness when a crucial part, a foundational part, expires, dies, or becomes extinct. This consequence is, unfortunately, something living humans know all too well as we witness extinction and its impact on ecosystems in real time. Woolf might not have anticipated the rate of

loss of biodiversity that we face today, but I want to suggest that something very significant and eerily similar happens to the group of friends upon Percival's death in India about the middle of the book. Percival's death in *The Waves* mimics Mrs. Ramsay's death in Woolf's earlier, and more popular, novel, *To the Lighthouse,* and I think it is important that she repeats the technique. Through the removal of a central agent, both novels illustrate the great consequence of untimely elimination of a crucial member of a given community, or to push this further, the consequence of species extinction in a given ecosystem. In both cases, the death causes a resounding effect of a disproportionate magnitude. The effect is so great that Mrs. Ramsay and Percival's deaths are likely symbolic of war and modernity, and the sum of all the disruptive forces Woolf perceived as characterizing her moment in history. Yet, while these deaths are attributed with all the weight of history, this should not discount the impact that the single deaths have on the other members of the immediate community. For Woolf shows how a seemingly insignificant disruption can lead to monumental change within a given system. As, say, the destruction of the coral reefs would impact the "[t]housands—perhaps millions—of species [that] have evolved to rely on coral reefs, either directly for protection or food, or indirectly, to prey on those species that come seeking protection or food" (Kolbert 130).

The idea of world, as I have noted before, relies on a fixed point of reference and a sense of objectivity. As Morton puts it, "[w]orlds need horizons and horizons need backgrounds, which need foregrounds" (*Hyperobjects* 104). One consequence of the deaths, Woolf suggests, is a feeling of groundlessness—loss of world—much like we are experiencing in the Anthropocene. For the modernists, this loss of world defined their moment and their artistic expressions of the moment. What I find most interesting about the "Time Passes" section and Percival's death in *The Waves* is this expression of loss and hyperawareness that things are not the same, which I

find to be indicative of the Anthropocene. More specifically, I want to argue the modernists felt this on the verge of the Great Acceleration and Woolf aestheticizes a moment of deep ecological awareness. This is the awareness in literary form. In Graham Harman's *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, he notes that "entities are generally ignored…as long as they function smoothly. Usually it is only their malfunction that allows us to notice them at all" (15). As entities, Harman offers the examples of chairs, streets, organs, and so on, and I also think about literary experimentation of the early twentieth century from this perspective when considering it ecologically: a sense of brokenness or fragmentation makes these writers feel interconnection so deeply. In *The Ecological Thought* Timothy Morton suggests that perhaps "loneliness is a sign of deep connection" (16). In this way, we might understand modernist literary experimentation as symptomatic of a new era in the human-nature saga.

The central section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), "Time Passes," is perhaps the most often cited example of the way in which Woolf wishes to decenter the human in order to suggest an understanding of systems that is more attentive to the agency of nonhumans. In the interlude of this novel, ten years pass at disproportionate speed. In the time represented by this section, the mother, Mrs. Ramsay, dies, World War I takes the life of the son, Andrew Ramsay, the beautiful daughter Prue Ramsay dies in childbirth, and the family unit is destroyed. Christina Alt argues that "Time Passes" decenters the human through the "description of the slow action of nature upon the Ramsay house, in the midst of which human events are relegated to brief parenthetical asides" (8-9). Alt's is a common reading of this section. Louise Westling describes the "twenty-page transitional section"[40] as beginning "after a day rich with family life and close exploration of the intense personalities and subjectivities of its members…The vast forces of the nonhuman

[40] Woolf manipulates time and scope in the formal structure of *To the* Lighthouse: the first section spans 125 pages but only 24 hours in the life of the Ramsays versus the 20 pages and 10 years of "Time Passes."

world flow over and erase all the intricate structures of the human community. In such a context, the tragedies of the novel's human protagonists appear only as belated parenthetical asides, and centuries of humanist assumptions are overturned" (860). Acknowledging Merleau-Ponty's influence on Woolf and early-twentieth-century thought, Westling suggests that the "Time Passes" depicts humanity's embeddedness on such a cosmic scale that "individual human lives are only droplets thrown briefly into the air by the vast sea of dynamic being" (865).

Similarly, in her Foreword to the novel Eudora Welty describes the "interlude" as working its way "forward and backward and around, freely, within its own realm of time imagined and can inundate the void, too, when people are no longer there" (x). So, while the novel opens with the Ramsay family vacationing at their summerhouse on the coast of Scotland, to quote Yeats, "the center cannot hold" ("The Second Coming" 3). In "The Window" Mrs. Ramsay's perspective is dominant; she is clearly the "glue" that holds the family together. This glue is removed, and the last section finds the characters, primarily Mr. Ramsay, attempting to understand the world the way it is now. Mr. Ramsay's refrain, "[y]ou will find us much changed" (*To the Lighthouse* 148) suggests, as Westling argues, that Mr. Ramsay is "chastened and humbled"; through Mr. Ramsay, Westling continues, Woolf has "rejected humanist pretensions of separation and transcendence, returning to a focus upon embodiment and thus reversing her culture's long dismissal of the living world" (863). Humility, brought on by Woolf's "rhetorical model," which Westling notes, "restores humanity to its place within the bodily community of earth's life and refocuses attention upon the limitations and responsibilities that must humble our species if we are to survive" (872). There is more to be said about this in the context of the Anthropocene. Perhaps, the modern period witnessed a similar moment of awareness due to the World Wars and other drastic changes previously noted. *To the Lighthouse*

seems to suggest "the guilty recognition that we have the power to shatter our own universe is exactly the tragic recognition…that we need to embrace; we need to scale up not only our self-knowledge, but our self-image as quasi-subjects with the terrible power to change the planet, not just individually, but as species-being…" (Yaeger n.p.).

It is useful here to consider the relationship between the Holocene and the Anthropocene in order to understand the way Woolf aestheticizes and allegorizes a new epoch through the loss of center. The Holocene is the name for the current epoch (up to the start of the Anthropocene), which is dated from the conclusion of the last ice age about 11, 700 years ago (Kolbert 107). The Holocene is characterized by "unusually clement and stable climate" (Szerszynski 168). In the Holocene, the human species has flourished, having no real predators and establishing agriculture. David Quammen puts it this way: *Homo sapiens* have "succeeded extravagantly at the expense of other species" (qtd. in Kolbert 204). If the Holocene is defined by stability, the Anthropocene denotes uncertainty. Specifically of interest is the ironic fact that humans—the agents of the Anthropocene—are stripped of our agency to interfere with the systems we have put into motion.

Vladamir I. Vernadsky, already mentioned as one of the first to articulate the Anthropocene in the early twentieth century through the concept of the *noosphere,* saw the World Wars, as Woolf did, as a decisive moment in geology and not just history. Articulating interconnectedness in a 1943 essay "The Biosphere and the Noosphere," he writes that "Mankind, as living matter, is inseparably connected with the material-energetic processes of a specific geological envelope of the Earth—its *biosphere*. Mankind cannot be physically independent of the biosphere for a single minute" (n.p.). And writing in 1926, Vernadsky noted that the First World War was responsible for a radical change in what he called his "geological

conception of the world." Vernadsky spoke of "entering the noosphere" in almost identical rhetoric to those who argue that we are entering, or have entered, the Anthropocene—"The noösphere is a new geological phenomenon on our planet. In it for the first time man becomes a *large-scale geological force*," he wrote (n.p.). In "The Biosphere and the Noosphere" Vernadsky continues:

> In our country that First World War resulted in a new, historically unprecedented, form of statehood, not only in the realm of economics, but likewise in that of the aspirations of nationalities. From the point of view of the naturalist (and, I think, likewise from that of the historian) an historical phenomenon of such power may and should be examined as a part of a single great terrestrial *geological* process, and not merely as a *historical* process…Now we live in the period of a new geological evolutionary change in the biosphere. We are entering the noösphere. This new elemental geological process is taking place at a stormy time, in the epoch of a destructive world war. (Vernadsky n.p.)

Vernadsky understood, as we currently understand, that it is the total impact of human species as a whole that warrants a new epoch named after them.

In a similar way, the imagined worlds in both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* experience a shift from stability and predictability, mastery and comfort, to a "radically new state" (Szerszynski 169). Before the symbolic split, the war, and death, Mrs. Ramsay reflects that "there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out… in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest" (105). Shortly, though, in the "Time Passes" section, Mrs. Ramsay dies suddenly and Mr. Ramsay's arms, "though

stretched out, remained empty" (128). The war is evoked, and then there is the "thud of something falling" (133). The vacation home is left vacant, deserted, "like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it" (137). Invoking what we now call the Anthropocene, and our current precarious position, Woolf imagines a scale that is potentially tipped by the falling of a single feather: "For now had come that moment, that hesitation when dawn trembles and night pauses, when if a feather alight in the scale it will be weighed down. One feather, and the house, sinking, falling, would have turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness" (138).

In *To the Lighthouse* loss of mother dramatizes loss of world just as Percival's death in *The Waves* also functions to dramatize loss of world. In *To the Lighthouse* readers have to actually reorient themselves to a new perspective, a new narrative, and new interests as Woolf's artist-mouthpiece Lily Friscoe moves to center stage. Because Percival is "absent-present" from the start –the "voiceless centre of their circle" (Goldman 69) –the effect is slightly different in *The Waves*. Again, as an unavoidably limited species, we best understand these things in terms of someone who looks like us, acts like us, essentially is us. If we only understand loss in human terms, then this seems to be a way to help us think about what it should feel like when something becomes extinct. In a way, then, the friends' drama is both trivialized and amplified because of this. A reader feels the import of every action and the way that every feeling and action is amplified because of this hyperawareness that time is limited. Mortality becomes the vehicle to think about ecology. At exactly the same moment though, the earth carries on its cycles—the tide rises and falls as does the sun, and the birds go about their business unawares.

For the friends in *The Waves,* Percival is the reference point, the thing that defines world as objective, fixed, shared (see Clark). At the last gathering before Percival travels to India, Jinny

remarks, “Let us hold for one moment love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival” (145). Upon his death in the very next section of the novel, as Neville imagines Percival’s fall from his horse, Woolf writes, “[t]here was a surge; a drumming in his ears. Then the blow; the world crashed; he breathed heavily. He died where he fell” (151).

Formally, *The Waves* suggests unity and coherence on multiple levels—interwoven voices, narratives, and consciousnesses, poetic catalogues, persistent metaphors and imagery—but as Tammy Clewell notes of *To The Lighthouse,* Woolf’s “refusal to allow art to console in a world that has been fragmented by personal and social loss” is represented by a “modernist text that distances the reader from the consoling and recuperative function of literature itself” (51). Indeed, the friends are never able to reconcile Percival’s death—the devastating loss of youth and unfulfilled potential, the senseless accident and meaningless way it happened. Percival does not die in battle for noble cause, but rather falls from his horse due to apparent neglect. The consequent “persistent mourning” is amplified for the reader by the fact that Percival is never known on his own terms, and his body rests in a foreign land. In *The Waves*, apart from the given rises and falls of life, the friends experience “sustained grief and ongoing mourning” (Clewell 95). Like my reading of *The Waste Land* in Chapter 1, reframing this sense of mourning in our emergent Anthropocene, attunes us to its source.

Similarly, in the third part of his Wellek Lectures 2014, Morton stated that “depression is the imprint of coexistence.” Likewise, mourning suggests highly sensitive attunement to other beings. For Woolf, war symbolized the ability for the world to be changed with great speed and scope. For what are we afraid of more than our own death? In the section “Time Passes” of *To the Lighthouse,* Woolf asks the question: What happens when our world changes to a significant

degree? What happens when a human or humans disappear? What happens when the very thing we have placed our world on is gone? Again and again, through highly aestheticized moments, Woolf illustrates "the split." Set during the First World War, multiple scholars have noted the way "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse* serves as a metaphor for the modernist period as a whole.

Mourning, melancholia, or nostalgia, are key conversations in modernist studies, and not coincidentally, these themes are also notable in conversations about the Anthropocene. Consider the article "Learning to Die in the Anthropocene" by Roy Scranton, where the writer asks the following questions, which he believes are the problems the Anthropocene poses: "What does it mean to be human?' and 'What does it mean to live?' In the epoch of the Anthropocene, the question of individual mortality—'What does my life mean in the face of death?'—is universalized and framed in scales that boggle the imagination" (n.p.). Scranton argues that learning to live in the Anthropocene is also learning to "die not as individuals, but as a civilization" (n.p.). While scholarship on mourning in modernism is not explicitly ecologically nor necessarily environmentally informed, this novel's hyperawareness of human materiality and mortality becomes ecological when it attunes us to the disproportionate opportunity for impact in a relatively short time span. Many scholars in Woolf studies approach her through an interest in mourning and nostalgia. Lecia Rosenthal, for one, considers *To the Lighthouse* by examining ways in which the text, "with its fragmented lyricism, temporal compression, and drift toward the cosmic, register and give form to those vast, wide-ranging, and complex set of events summed up by the blunt category heading of 'the war'" (58). The World Wars are disruptive forces of great magnitude, and again Morton's concept of hyperobjects seems conducive. WWI is something of such force and scale that it practically incomprehensible, but even if the War

could not and cannot be perceived directly in its entirety, its symptoms reverberate through human lives and history even now.

Concluding Remarks /Future Directions

If, as Lawrence Buell notes, *Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf's equivalent work to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (106), then *The Waves* (1931) is Virginia Woolf's *Finnegans Wake.* Indeed, many scholars, including Eric Warner, liken these two riddles of modernism. Warner finds this comparison helpful and revealing because both *Finnegans Wake* and *The Waves* represent the artists' "highest aesthetic endeavor" and pursuit of the "palm of innovation so assiduously courted by modernist art" (1). Also like Joyce's "encyclopedic interconnectedness" (Butler 4), Woolf imagined bringing everything into the world of the text, writing that, "everything is the proper stuff of fiction" ("Modern Fiction" 110). In "The Introverted Novel" John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury write that Woolf's works, like Joyce's, are "self-manifesting; they constitute a total universe and sustain themselves within the completeness of their own vision" (409). Originally conceived under the title *The Moths*, Woolf imagined the book as a "mystical eyeless book" (*Diary of Virginia Woolf* 203). The reviews were mixed and sometimes brutal. Readers were both enchanted and puzzled by the book, illustrated by the fact that Leonard Woolf proclaimed *The Waves* his wife's best novel and masterpiece (DiBattista 146), and meanwhile, Virginia Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth saying, "[Leonard] thinks very few people will survive the first 100 pages" (*Letters* Vol. 4 357). And then there was Vita Sackville-West's comment that the novel was "so bad that only a small dog that had been fed on gin could have written it" (401). It is reported that both reviews humored Woolf. These comparisons begins to explain the relative

lack of ecocritical scholarship on *The Waves*; even as Woolf studies takes increasing interest in environmental approaches, *The Waves* is hardly mentioned.

The Twentieth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf gathered under the theme of "Virginia Woolf and the Natural World" in 2010, and the selected papers from this conference cover a gamut of environmental approaches to Woolf's biography and works, indicative of the growing critical attention to the significance of the natural world in her work since the advent of ecocritical approaches to literature in the 1990s. Thus far, scholars have particularly been interested in Woolf's affinity for flowers and birds, and feminist readings are especially prominent, though at times reductive,[41] with Bonnie Kime Scott leading the way with multiple ecofeminist publications. Scott, working at the intersection of modernist studies and ecocriticism, summarizes *The Waves* in the Preface to Justyna Kostkowska's case study. Her introduction provides an effective gloss to a text that otherwise resists summarization:

> Woolf's seventh novel hardly reads like a novel at all, when we go looking for a plot, or characters in recognizable contexts, a narrator, or even the stream of consciousness writing seen as so characteristic of modernists. But we do find structures of other kids: language rich in image and metaphor, rhythmic, and repetitive; mystical mythical intervals that track the rise and fall of the sun in a garden or over the sea, setting the mood for various phases of life; and those phases reported on by a set of six speakers—three male, three female—friends who reconnect throughout their lives, and are as apt to represent one another as themselves in their observations. (iii)

[41] As recently as 2011 in *Modernism and Style* Ben Hutchinson, for example, only reads Woolf's texts as searching for the "female sentence," reducing Woolf's style to "femininity," while Proust's style he labels memory and Joyce's history (243).

Scott's gloss indicates the standard reading of the novel and Woolf's experimentation with the traditional literary trope where dawn symbolizes childhood and dusk symbolizes old age. While Scott refers to the italicized interludes as "mystical mythical intervals" many, including Jane Goldman, refer to these nine italicized portions as "pastoral interludes" (69). Early scholars in particular use the term pastoral to describe the italicized sections,[42] but Scott, writing from an ecocritical perspective, likely understands the specific historical and cultural associations that come with labeling a text pastoral.[43] My issue with "pastoral" as a descriptor for these sections speaks to my larger project, where, in the case of the waves, nuances such as this become the difference between a traditional Romantic use of the pathetic fallacy[44] wherein human perception and emotion is the primary focus (and the sea happens to conveniently mirror the speaker's emotion) and a radical posthuman move where Woolf imagines the material world as the primary category of comparison.

Starting at the most basic level, the italicized sections are not pastoral because there are simply no humans directly mentioned, and the pastoral tradition relies upon the sort of solitary human figure against a passive rural backdrop. Humans are implied, inevitably, but it is not being attentive to Woolf's project to suggest that humans are in any way central to these interludes. Rather, the waves set up the standard for measurement in the novel, and it becomes possible to read the friends as waves rather than the other way around: "*the wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously"* (7).

[42] Jane Goldman also insists on this pastoral reading in "From Mrs Dalloway to The Waves: New elegy and lyric experimentalism," Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf (2010).

[43] The pastoral has several characteristics including a return, an escape, the treatment of harmony and balance, and so on. See Terry Gifford, "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral" in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment* (2014).

[44] Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," for example, where the waves signify for the speaker the "turbid ebb and flow of human misery."

Human activity is also present by mention of the house that the sun illuminates, presumably built by humans, but the dwelling is a thing all its own and suggests a time beyond, or after, the human. Consider the following example from the fourth of these sections, which describes the earth in the morning light:

> *The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. Suddenly tumblers revealed themselves upheld by streaks of light. Tables and chairs rose to the surface as if they had been sunk under water and rose, filmed with red, orange, purple like the bloom on the skin of rip fruit. The veins on the glaze of the china, the grain of the wood, the fibres of the matting became more and more finely engraved"* (109-110).

In the above example, human-made objects are animated with natural language. Rather than a human figure describing the natural world in human terms, Woolf reverses the roles. But there is no human narrator interacting with the environment, as one would expect in a pastoral text. There is only the sun rise and the sun set and the waves; birds and other animals, not humans, busy themselves playing and working, granted realities all their own. This is an important distinction because, as I will argue later, Woolf intentionally leaves the human out of these italicized sections to suggest something about time, space, and planet earth's prerogative to carry on absent of a human observer.

Still, some critics have suggested that the bird community which the reader follows throughout the italicized sections are actually stand-ins for the friends and that we should understand them as symbolizing the friends in the novel proper. While there are similarities, I am more likely to attribute these similarities to the fact that many species share common behaviors:

communication, work, play, and so on, and our readiness to assume the birds must symbolize the friends says more about our own anthropocentrism than the text itself. In the second interlude, for instance, the birds

> *sang emulously in the clear morning air, swerving higher over the elm tree, singing together as they chased each other, escaping, pursuing, pecking each other as they turned high in the air. And then tiring of pursuit and flight, lovelily they came descending, delicately declining, dropped down and sat silent on the tree, on the wall, with their bright eyes glancing, and their heads turned this way, that way; aware, awake; intensely conscious of one thing, one object in particular*. (73-74)

In the next moment, "*one of them, beautifully darting, accurately alighting, spiked the soft, monstrous body of the defenseless worm, pecked again and yet again, and left it to fester*" (74). In the fifth interlude, the birds begin to work, *"[b]ubbling and chuckling they carried little bits of straw and twig to the dark notes in the higher branches of the trees*" (149). While there is an undeniable and unavoidable human gaze in these descriptions of the bird activity, these separate italicized passages are wholly devoted to the position of the sun, wave and tide activity, and animal life. Therefore, these prefaces serve to decenter the human and suggest a larger scope systemic awareness. As I have only scratched the surface here, this is something that future scholarship on *The Waves* and Woolf's canon in general might attune to with more specificity.

Timothy Morton has used the analogy of the refrigerator to think about ecological concerns. The contents are there, he argues, regardless whether "a human subject has opened the epistemological refrigerator door" ("How I learned" 259). In *The Waves* the italicized portions remind us of this fact. Though Woolf acknowledges the contents in the refrigerator, so to speak,

the friends whose lives comprise the central drama of the novel—with all their reflections, obligation, tragedy, uncertainty—need not; the sun rises and sets and the waves continue to crash on the shore all the same. Woolf understood, it is obvious, that the sun and moon affect the waves and the tides and that the human lifespan is but a measure of spring tides, neap tides, sunrises, and sunsets. Nevertheless, today *The Waves*, Woolf's most difficult and experimental novel, takes on new significance as her richest ecological statement and a highly aestheticized allegory of the Anthropocene.

Chapter 4: Jean Toomer's Singing Bodies: Recovering Nature in *Cane* and The Anthropocene

In the previous chapters, I demonstrated the potential for modernist formal experimentation to balance thinking big and thinking small, revealing an ecological sensibility. To experience the fragments in Eliot's and Williams's collage, or the shifts in consciousness and point of view in Woolf's novel, is to encounter an assortment of human and nonhuman others on a variety of scales. These authors are careful not to eliminate all distinction of individual bodies in their meditations on the great expanse of human history and geological time. Likewise, I argue that thinking through the Anthropocene—this hyperobject initiated by the collective human species—need not come at the cost of specific cultural, political, and economic concerns. Woolf's fin in the water reminds us that the expanse is actually teeming with life, millions of species with lifeworlds all their own. Williams finds the viewpoint of a flower just as significant as a telescopic perspective zoomed out far enough to contemplate humans' role in Earth's history, and Eliot insists that human life desperately depends on the material environment. *Cane*'s collage is no different—the book takes an interest in the most ordinary expressive matter, such as pine needles, and also forces a reader's imagination to ride along with a song that is not bound within any single terrestrial body. Still, some believe it is one of the dangers of thinking through the Anthropocene that all of humanity becomes grouped into a faceless whole, so that we are a single geological agent and not a diverse mix of lifestyles and personalities. Perhaps, the Anthropocene risks measuring a person's "impact" in terms of carbon emissions rather than

some deeper philosophical value, for instance. This chapter acknowledges and actively resists the potential for the concept of the Anthropocene to erase historical categorical divides—such as race and gender—that are arguably only beginning to get the attention they are due.[45]

Like the world of *Cane*, this chapter emphasizes the fact that the Anthropocene is a distinctly material phenomenon, and as such, it can attune us to material agencies and the undeniable ways that human systems impact human and nonhuman bodies. This is to say that the Anthropocene is far from a "social construction." Certainly, this dissertation takes interest in both the material and discursive implications of the Anthropocene—like modernity, the term refers to a variety of changes that are both epistemological and ontological. Yet, whether we decide to think through the Anthropocene or not, it is there, initiated by us and acting on us, now independent of human life yet deeply entangled with it. A similar reality motivates new material feminist theorists Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman to reclaim nature, not as a social construct, but as an "active, signifying force; an agent in its own terms; a realm of multiple, inter- and intra-active cultures. This sort of nature—a nature that is, expressly, *not* the mirror image of culture—is emerging from the overlapping fields of material feminism, environmental philosophy, and green cultural studies" (12). This nature, which is *not* the "repository of sexism, racism, and homophobia" (12), has rich applications for the study of African American literature, including *Cane*, in the Anthropocene. Certain human systems—slavery, for example—rely upon constructions of "nature" that are self-serving and politically motivated. However, nature becomes its own foil when it does not behave according to these constructions.

[45] The 2014 conference "Anthropocene Feminism," was motivated by the question: "What does feminism have to say to the claim that humans now act as a geological force in ways that are independent of or indifferent to social, cultural, or political will or intent?" ("CFP"), illustrating the concern that the hermeneutic of the Anthropocene might be adverse to politically motivated conversations. See CFP here: http://c21uwm.com/anthropocene/

In Jean Toomer's *Cane*, race, gender, and environmental concerns are already always entangled and addressing one necessarily means attuning to the others. As a preliminary example, consider how Toomer's condemnation of "the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon" (3) applies to the treatment of both Karintha (and other female bodies) and the material world. Karintha's beauty makes her body a commodity from an early age, as men want her and take her, but "[m]en do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (5). Here, the attitude of the generalized male is characterized by greed rather than humility and is destructive to both human bodies and nonhuman bodies—Karintha's loss of innocence is a result of the same attitude that drives the system of cash crops, which rapes the soil, and the lumber industry, which turns trees to sawdust and disrupts numerous ecosystems in the process. Michael North notes that the repeated references to "a growing thing ripened too soon" signifies "a cruel violation of the organic" and that the "balance between organic and mechanical has shifted" (173). This is one way attuning to the physical realities of *Cane* requires dealing with oppressive and destructive systems that set out to dominate both human and nonhuman bodies.

Reading Toomer's masterpiece in the Anthropocene, furthermore, refocuses our attention to aspects of the book that remain perplexing but now become also strangely familiar and descriptive of this anthropogenic age. I argue that *Cane* reclaims nature in all of its paradoxes and pluralities, and it is these paradoxes, in part, that make the book starkly Anthropocenic. *Cane*'s ecological-ness is slippery, multilayered, and highly aesthetic, but it begins with interest in specific, extratextual (or intertextual) places and times. Like the other texts in this dissertation, *Cane* is involved in a relationship with the place(s) that inspired its creation. The book both represents an existing world and creates a new textual world. Leaving no doubt to the locales,

Toomer names the settings—Georgia, Washington D.C., and Chicago—specific streets, landmarks, and natural features ground *Cane* in one material reality while it works toward a characteristically modernist totality of its own. For most, the bookending Georgia sections are most memorable, but the book's aggregate interplay between rural and urban, South and North, prose and verse, creates subtexts of migration, exploitation, interconnection, and alienation that make *Cane* especially ripe for consideration in this study.

Cane is an exercise in reclaiming nature, but this is no sanitized, passive construct. On the most general level, the concept of nature put forth by Toomer in *Cane* is akin to Gary Snyder's preferred definition in *Practice of the Wild*: "the physical universe and all its properties" (9). The material world resists fixed categorization in *Cane*, just as Toomer never uses the word "nature," "environment," nor any variety of this construct, like all of the writers in this dissertation. In its place, Toomer's book performs a world of "gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain," as William Stanley Braithwaite wrote in *The New Negro* (Braithwaite 44). Toomer infuses the material world with life and agency—most notably in the way that matter performs and communicates, often through song, which is held as the highest expression of truth. In this way, the world is felt, experienced with the body and the senses in a way that resists Western, constructed systems of meaning and language.

Additionally, the vitality of the material world throws the falseness of historically oppressive binaries into relief for the characters in *Cane* and its reader. Nature provides important proof of the limitations of human power that those who benefit from systems like slavery hope to ignore; forces like drought, the boll weevil, or a hurricane make it clear that all humans are vulnerable to the same natural forces, whether master or slave, rich or poor. Though bodily vulnerability is a shared reality of the human condition, this does not mean that all bodies

are equally vulnerable; certainly, racially marked bodies are disproportionately subjected to toxic environments, for instance.[46] The Anthropocene—with its global warming, extreme weather events, and rising sea levels—exposes such inequalities as well in the way undeveloped island nations suffer for the carbon emissions of global superpowers like the U.S. or China. Places like Bangledesh or the Maldives are doubly vulnerable because these nations lack the economic resources and infrastructure to "shield" citizens from the conditions that will soon overtake these island states completely (Gosh n.p.).

Cane recognizes the exceptional vulnerability of colored bodies and also suggests that for humans bound in slavery, deep connection to the natural world can be a form of active resistance to destructive ideologies. bell hooks states this point poignantly in her memoir-essay "Earth Bound on Solid Ground" when she writes,

> Even when that land was owned by white oppressors, masters and mistresses, it was the earth itself that protected exploited black folks from dehumanization… No man can make the sun or the rains come…This relationship to the earth meant that southern black folks, whether they were impoverished or not, knew firsthand that white supremacy, with its systematic dehumanization of blackness, was not a form of absolute power. (68-69, elipses in original)

In part, hooks is responding to the pervasive feeling that African American voices have been excluded or minimized in the nature writing tradition and environmental conversations more broadly. Taken on its own terms, in all of its materiality, the natural world is more than a site of violence for hooks; nature also offers an alternative to destructive human practices.

[46] See Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* or Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* for more on this.

Environmental approaches to texts like *Cane* likewise work to dismantle oversimplified stereotypes of the black experience with nature that arguably still persist today.

Nature's Song

First, to demonstrate that *Cane*'s ecologicalness is completed in the aesthetic realm, an argument that has implications for the study of high modernism more broadly, I pay particular attention to the seriousness with which the book treats song. *Cane*'s experimental form enacts song—through techniques like repetition and refrain—mirroring the interest in song that persists at the content level throughout both the verse and prose sections. Aside from humans, the most vocal bodies in Toomer's collage are the wind, trees, night, and cane, but built environments—the walls in "Theater," for example—might also carry song, a fact that attunes the reader to a variety of environments. Therefore, *Cane*'s interest in song is one way Toomer does not limit language, truth, and sentience to the human, but suggests a partnership where the melody is carried now by humans, now by the trees, the wind, the dusk, woven together yet distinct like voices in a chorus. For instance, "Carma" opens as the cane leaves sway "rusty with talk, / Scratching choruses above the guinea's squawk, / Wind is in the cane. Come along" (14). Yet, in this same sketch, song is also performed by the human body; Carma "does not sing; her body is a song" (15). At times, the natural world is granted a language so complex that human characters (and *Cane*'s reader) are left to ponder what exactly an utterance or song might mean. In the poem "Georgia Dusk," for instance, "the pine trees are guitars, / Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain. . . / Their voices rise . . . the chorus of the cane" (21-23).[47] Even when we cannot

[47] In this chapter, poems that are titled separately and have been published separately will be cited by line number for universal references. Citations will refer to page numbers for verse fragments that are part of larger prose sections.

quite translate the "words," the rhythm reverberates in characters and readers' imaginations and demands an ecological experience. Imagined as a musical score, the natural world initiates a kind of call and response that encourages interaction between environment and human, text and reader.

"Singing bodies" are more than a poetic device for Toomer; though at times song is invoked metaphorically, it is also treated very literally as the auditory expression of the natural world. Further, the emphasis on sound and song in *Cane* suggests one way in which human and nonhuman might communicate through expressions that are not relegated to human language. Recently, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that the brain registers speech and music very differently. The report notes that "speech and music circuits are in different parts of the brain's sprawling auditory cortex, where all sound signals are interpreted, and that each is largely deaf to the other's sonic cues, although there is some overlap when it comes to responding to songs with lyrics" (Angier n.p.). In addition, the report in *The New York Times* cites neuroscientist Josef Rauschecker who reminds us that "there are theories that music is older than speech or language" (n.p.). The human brain reportedly gives "specialized treatment to music recognition" and "regards music as fundamental a category as speech," according to Rauschecker (n.p.). The ability of song to communicate in a way that is recognizably different than language is of great consequence in the context of African American cultural production, which demands that we take song seriously.

Cane does not treat song as semantic—it is alluded to but never directly transcribed onto the page because there are not necessarily "words" to these songs. Likewise, African American slave songs often mixed lyrics with improvisatory sounds that are not "words" in the strict sense. Thus, *Cane* asks the reader to attune to other expressions that are not, perhaps, included in our

typical definition of communication, but might be just as impactful, or even more so. Further, the "singing" that Toomer identifies is often a direct product of these bodies' material realities. Trees' pine needles are singers in the poem "Georgia Dusk," and their song is created when they "fall like sheets of rain" (22). This is the "resinous" (25) "sacred whisper of the pines" (26) and the "Chorus of the cane" (23). Resin invokes the material properties of the pines while the trees are figured as older, wiser than the reader who never learns the "lyrics" to this song. Certainly, these "singing bodies" are a way for Toomer to animate the physical world, to bring it to life and suggest the nonhuman world interacts with humans, but also performs and communicates apart from the human agenda. Still, my emphasis on song should not preclude the fact that Toomer is equally engaged with the material reality of these "singing bodies." Later in this chapter, we will consider the lumber industry and the very real, material consequences of this industry for the trees, for instance.

Indeed, song is omnipresent in *Cane,* and song literally infiltrates the prose sections of *Cane* in sketches such as "Becky," where an otherwise linear narrative is interrupted with chant-like song set off with ellipses: ". . . O pines, whisper to Jesus . . ." (10), echoes the refrain. As this example illustrates, *Cane*'s insistence that song is the highest, purest form through which "truth" might be communicated becomes ecological because nonhuman bodies also communicate through song either independently or in unison with human participants. Significantly, the pines evoked in the quote above and other trees throughout the book are imagined as companions, fellow beings who are similarly subjected to destructive practices. From one perspective, *Cane*'s active, singing trees make them not just passive props. Rather, we

might read Toomer's insistence on illustrating the expressiveness of trees as a way to restore their agency in light of the pervasive images of trees as the sites of lynching, for example.[48]

Most often in *Cane* black characters reclaim the natural and material world as their own in the sense that it speaks for them, protects and guides, or at the very least signals a reality that exists outside of the immediate, socially determined moment. Likewise, song typically belongs to black characters and suggests a communion with the natural world that is indicative of a certain ethic. However, we might say that the material world is on the side of justice for Toomer, regardless of race. This is illustrated by the example of Becky, the ostracized "white woman who had two Negro sons" (8). As concern for Becky grows, and the sketch reaches its climax, the text's insistence that the pines act on her behalf becomes more intense, from a whisper to a shout: " . . . Pines shout to Jesus! . . ." (10). It would be inaccurate to say that it is possible for nature to literally act on the behalf of certain people—the pines cannot stop what happens to Becky, and we are left to assume she is buried under the brick mound of her collapsed cabin (10). Yet, nature is not complicit in human agendas, either; trees, for example, had no willful part in the lynching that violated their branches. Rather, nature's promise results from it acting exactly as it is and according to its own rules and motivations —which are significantly older and greater than the human, which is only a part of this intricate, mysterious thing called nature. "Becky" foreshadows the vignette "Blood Burning Moon," which is perhaps the most disturbing and explicit illustration of song as a response to injustice.

Cane's "Blood Burning Moon" is a short story about the violent murder of Tom Burwell, which results from a quarrel with Bob Stone, a white man who "takes" the shared love interest

[48] This is an important, complex dialogue. See Daniel J. Martin's essay "Lynching Sites: Where Trauma and Pastoral Collide" and Scott Knickerbocker's reading of Marilyn Nelson's "A Wreath for Emmett Till" in *Ecopoetics.*

Louisa as a "master should" (44). Before any characters are introduced, the full moon emerges strangely out of the dusk and is immediately recognized by the black characters as an omen. Therefore, the "Negro women improvised songs against its spell" (39). Louisa also sings to the "evil face of the full moon" (40). Soon other animals, including dogs and chickens, join in with the women who "sing lustily. Their songs were cotton-wads to stop their ears" (40). Here again the material world both warns of impending violence and joins in the response. Though the song is futile to protect Tom Burwell after he avenges Louisa by killing Bob Stone, song is the only available response for Louisa, and the fact that the moon inspires the song that is echoed throughout the material world suggests a relationship with nature that is not characterized by violence but protection and companionship. Certainly, it is the white mob that burns Tom alive, not the moon, and at the story's close, the "full moon in the great door was an omen which [Louisa] must sing to" (49). This sketch ends with a verse imposed by the author, just as the sketch in Kabnis that describes the horrific murder of a pregnant woman ends, as we will see momentarily. The full moon inspires song and, Toomer implies, song is Louisa's only form of agency, but it is a form of agency.

As these examples demonstrate, in *Cane* song is participatory, performative, and at times subversive. *Cane*'s insistence on nonhuman agencies is of great consequence for those oppressed by systematic racism. One of the many effects of song in *Cane*, then, is to remind us of the limitations of human agency, at the very same time that the book recognizes the potential for human action to result in environmental degradation and the oppression and destruction of human and nonhuman others. In *Cane* the persistent singing, whispering, and humming of natural and built environments signals for the black characters a reality that is not determined by the race and gender politics of their current moment. Song is Louisa's only response to Tom

Burwell's horrifying murder, and the full moon both demands and witnesses her song. For the reader, this song is heavy with meaning and attunes us to the fact that systematic racism and global capitalism are ultimately harmful to a variety of bodies—human and nonhuman—involved. In this way, Cane's "hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs" (114) remind us of a time when song was not only subversive but potentially encoded with meaning for slaves.

For instance, some believe that songs such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd" contained directions to the Underground Railroad.[49] Critical discussions of spirituals and folk song argue that song might be used for social commentary, critique, and resistance. While this project is not interested in making any distinctive intervention in the robust scholarship that exists on song in the African American tradition, I mention this in order to note that song should be taken seriously.[50] For Toomer, song *is* effective and affective, and I find that much of *Cane*'s ecological vision is communicated through song. While the highly aesthetic nature of canonical modernist writers has seemed to exclude them from involvement in certain "real-world" issues (namely, environmental concerns), *Cane* reminds us that even though, again, the word *nature* never appears to describe a conceptual place outside of the human, there is quite a lot to say about the ecological vision at work in the book if critics take it on its own terms.

Additionally, the fact that *Cane*'s song carries an element of pain and estrangement reminds us that highly aesthetic is not necessarily synonymous with beautiful. Song in *Cane* might also warn, judge, threaten, and remind a listener of what is unavailable, lost, or ruined. We

[49] See James B. Kelly, "Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual 'Follow the Drinking Gourd.'"

[50] John Wesley Work's *Folk Song of the American Negro* (1914) and 1940 anthology *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* are indispensible for cataloguing the prevalence of song in the African American community and a contemporary discussion of the meaning of these songs.

might think of Frederick Douglass's poignant description of song in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which includes the following:

> [The slaves] would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone…This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. (8)

More often than not, the songs that fill the pages of *Cane* do not have recognizable words. These songs are typically not semantic, but pure expression. In this way, as in Douglass's description above, song resists representation. And, significantly, song is performative in that it literally acts; it has an agency all of its own.[51] Douglass imagines that hearing the song of the slaves could inspire ethical action in a person. Despite the fact that these songs seldom have decipherable words, Douglass argues, they could impress minds of the "horrible character of slavery" (8). All of the weight of slavery is wrapped up in song for Douglass, and the songs in *Cane* are similarly

[51] This could be said of jazz as well, a truly modernist form (North 170-171). From one perspective, African Americans historically have used song to "free language from domination." Michael North convincingly argues that, particularly from a linguistic perspective, "it is impossible to understand either [Anglo-American or African American] modernism without reference to the other, without reference to the language they so uncomfortably shared, and to the political and cultural forces that were constricting that language at the very moment modern writers of both races were attempting in dramatically different ways to free it" (11).

packed with layers of meaning to a listening ear. Consistently, *Cane*'s authorial persona engages the reader; "come along," it calls to us, and in "Kabnis" it tells us to "hear [the night winds'] song" (142). These explicit demands to heed the book's song enact the way in which Toomer's various characters are affected by song: they *must* sing, they *must* join the song, it acts on them and through them. Thus, it is through song, I argue, that *Cane*'s ecologicalness is experienced through aesthetic form.

Toomer's sporadic use of the utterance "eoho" is another example of the way in which he engages with the historical, material conditions of slavery while challenging his reader to experience the world without familiar language. "Eoho" has no single definition, but is a song, a chant, a call,[52] a sound linked to slave songs, mostly likely originating before slaves began to appropriate the English language, but persisting long after. In their book *The Sounds of Slavery*, Shane White and Graham J. White note African Americans' "richly detailed patterns of sounds" (22) and "elaborate vocal creations" that were often not translatable into the English language (23). White and White mention *eoho* as an example, along with other expressions, such as the celebratory "OoooooOOOooo-da-dah-dah-ske-e-e-e-t-t-t-ttt" (22). Like Eliot's "Shantih Shantih Shantih," perhaps, Toomer's eoho acknowledges a realm of understanding where language is expressive of universal feelings or truths for which semantics is insufficient. Not coincidentally, Toomer's "eoho's" come in moments when the form breaks down, whether in prose or verse, often after elipses or line breaks, suggesting that the artist himself could not articulate the thing at hand. In "Harvest Song" for example, the speaker, too weary and too pitiful to continue with semantics turns to eoho. This moment in the poem appears like so:

My throat is dry. And should I call, a cracked grain like the oats

[52] See *Cane*'s "Calling Jesus" for one use of eoho in the book (75).

. . . eoho— (93)

Here, the speaker trails off and eoho is left to fill the void of all that cannot be said. Furthermore, if we successfully expand expectations of language, it becomes possible to attune to nonhuman "richly detailed patterns of sound" as well, such as the whispering trees or the rooster, who "heralds the bloodshot eyes of southern awakening" (46). It is evident in any case that, like Douglass, Toomer takes seriously song's ability to communicate complex truths, and the fact that the natural world participates, or even originates song, decenters the human and invites new ways of participating with the world.

Close attention to song further engages the material conditions that brought *Cane* into existence. First, it is no coincidence that Toomer described *Cane* as a "swan-song" of a dying culture (qtd. in Nicholls 21). In a letter to *The Liberator*, Toomer described his time in Sparta, Georgia, which inspired him to write *Cane,* and song, he writes, is the vehicle of inspiration:

> A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accounts about, and of which, till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. (qtd. in North 166)

Here, Toomer leaves no doubt that song acted upon him, and also forced him to act by writing the book we know as *Cane.* According to Toomer, at its very inception, *Cane* is infused with song. The book enacts the need to push the song outward and carry it forward.

The closing novella "Kabnis" features the autobiographical title character Kabnis, a mixed race man from the North who is in Georgia on a teaching assignment. Even without Toomer's admission that "Kabnis is *Me*" (Byrd and Gates 172), the fact that Kabnis is a "portrait

of the artist" becomes very clear, particularly in Kabnis's anxiety over capturing this new reality that arouses in him profound beauty and pain. Kabnis imagines song as the only medium that might carry the sum of his experiences in the South, yet knows that even this is insufficient: "If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul" (112). Again, in Kabnis's longing to embody the South, Toomer explicitly reminds us that song comes from bodies and further suggests aesthetic production is undivorceable from the material realities that produce it.

The whole of "Kabnis" is provocative and poignant on the issue of song, and Toomer's use of song in this section also speaks to the book's investment in complicating notions of nature that figure it to be stagnant and entirely separate from the human. For Kabnis, the "Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering" (111), and the cracks in the walls are "the lips the night winds use for whispering" (111). Here, the natural world uses the built environment to create language and communicate with Kabnis, and the result is a sorrowful recognition of coexistence. The song is sorrowful for both Kabnis and the reader because it highlights those human-implemented systems that impede Kabnis, and others like him, from fully participating. The song and the beauty of the natural world, combined with his condition as victim of systematic racism, leads Kabnis to exclaim, "Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and . . . tortures me" (114). This correlation becomes even more pronounced in the second section of "Kabnis" when the news of Mame Lamkins's horrific murder entwines with the singing and shouting that spills over from the church and ripples through the valley. Against the preaching, yelling, and singing, Kabnis learns about a woman, Mame, who was murdered because she was pregnant with a white man's baby, and upon

her murder, in the words of Layman: "some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there soppy in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her bely open, an th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away" (124). The singing in the background is replicated by Toomer in the form of the book as the scene closes, and

> The church choir, dipping into a long silence, sings:
>
> My Lord, what a mourning,
>
> My Lord, what a mourning,
>
> My Lord, what a mourning,
>
> When the stars begin to fall. (125)

This moment is one of many in the book when form suggests that song—or verse—draws nearer to expressing emotion than standard prose. The song that surrounds Mame's murder attunes the reader to assiduous injustices at the same time that it operates outside of the system of language associated with the oppressive systems at work on marked bodies, both human and nonhuman.

Song is important, also, because of its plurality. Nature's song lures Kabnis and the reader to a calm meditation in one melody, but as we have seen it also awakens a sense of injustice and even inspires rage. To illustrate the former, Kabnis imagines that the "half-moon is a white child that sleeps upon the tree-tops of the forest. White winds croon its sleep song":

> rock a-by baby . . .
>
> Black mother sways, holding a white child in her bosom.
>
> when the bough bends . . .
>
> Her breath hums through pine-cones" (113),

This verse interlude continues, interspersing racially coded bodies with a familiar nursery rhyme, so that Kabnis and the reader are both soothed and disturbed by this song of the wind. The image of a black mother nursing a white child invokes the realities of slavery, and links to a moment soon after this song ends when Kabnis imagines himself a "bastard son" of the Earth (113). Certainly, the entire first section of "Kabnis" alternates between beauty and pain with song as the vehicle. In one moment, for instance, Kabnis kills a chicken with his bare hands — for Kabnis a reminder of his second-class manhood because the chicken shares his dismal living quarters. And in the next moment, as he is "about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the nights' beauty strikes him dumb" (114). This paradoxical experience of the natural world will interest later in this chapter, as I argue that the Anthropocene presents a similar condition where concern and wonderment is tinged with estrangement and vulnerability.

Toomer's sentiment in *The Liberator* quoted above and repeated elsewhere has led to the common reading of *Cane* as an elegy. Certainly, Toomer felt that modernization represented a loss, a viewpoint that was not popular with some who felt Toomer, an outsider, romanticized the harsh conditions of Southern blacks. Yet, *Cane*'s song of the rural South adds an important voice to our understanding of African Americans' historically complicated relationship to place, the early twentieth century Great Migration, and the historical and current tension between growing ecological awareness and destructive practices. Although cities such as Harlem symbolized new freedom and opportunity, particularly during the Renaissance of the 20s and the 30s, several moments in *Cane*, such as the verse "Song of the Son," suggest a loss. In this poem, it is "just before an epoch's sun declines" (8), and the "sun is setting on / A song-lit race of slaves" (11-12). The poet, then, becomes the vehicle to carry on "the everlasting song" (20). Likewise, Claude McKay's 1922 volume *Harlem Shadows* both celebrates Harlem's energy and possibility

and mourns the loss of home— Jamaica, for this poet—and a markedly rural way of life. By the time of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), urban places are far from the utopia they were once imagined to be, and many African Americans become displaced or subjected to poor living conditions.

With this in mind, it is important that *Cane*'s insistence on treating the material realities of place extends to urban environments as well. Seventh Street is a "bastard of Prohibition and the War," in the sketch by that name (53). This is the same Seventh Street that runs through a historically black section of Washington D.C. In his description, Toomer hints to the complicated social and political factors involved with African American movement North and toward urban centers. The increasingly exasperated refrain "Who set you flowing?" implicates human subjects and activities in its demand: "Who?" rather than "What?" becomes an important distinction. While it is tempting to locate the impetus for The Great Migration solely in terms of labor market—supply and demand is a much simpler and more attractive explanation than things like systematic racism. Cheryl Lester is one scholar who reminds us of the unspeakable violence of the Jim Crow era and other, even more obvious, motivations for black people to leave the South in the early twentieth century. Lester's essay "Racial Awareness and Arrested Development: *The Sound and the Fury* and the Great Migration (1915-1928)" reminds us that the migration was an act of protest, a demonstration of black agency and self-determination, and a crucial step toward the awareness of Southern racialism (129-131).

Further, Toomer's account of Seventh Street as a "bastard of Prohibition and the War" draws attention to repressed histories that complicate the celebration of Harlem and other urban centers as the land of opportunity. Daniel Okrent, author of *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, suggests the "strong racist element" to Prohibition, which is best understood as not

really about alcohol consumption; rather, Okrent argues, Prohibition becomes a catch-all for a variety of political agendas insistent on the disenfranchisement of African Americans (Okrent n.p.). Prohibition was yet another expression of systematic control that, at its height, even regulated soft drink distribution and consumption.[53] Michael Cohen notes that wealthy whites feared that consuming any sort of "drug" might result in unruly minorities seeking pleasure, breaking the law, or general slovenliness (n.p.). Toomer draws on these stereotypes when he suggests that it is Black blood that contains the real "drug": "Blood suckers of the War would spin in a frenzy of dizziness if they drank your blood. Prohibition would put a stop to it. Who set you flowing?" (53). Here, there is something essential, and enviable, in African American identity that is irreconcilable with the dominant culture. Despite all attempts to suppress song, it finds its way into crooks and crannies, it pushes back and disrupts. In this way, song is analogous to nature, where water seeps around dams and ailanthus trees spring up in the cracks of concrete. In some ways, then, repression reveals the true character of things like song and nature. Proving its resistance, Seventh Street also performs a song, albeit in a different key than the Georgia countryside. Nevertheless, the song is composed out of the interaction of both human and nonhuman agents. Seventh Street is a "crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington" (53).

The song that spills out of human and nonhuman bodies in *Cane* is illustrative of "living matter" and the "collective poetry of life" that interests material ecocritics such as Serpil Oppermann. Far from being inert, matter is creative and expressive, and attuning to song in *Cane*, like paying attention to the stories that bacteria and rocks tell, "opens up multiple

[53] See Grace Elizabeth Hale's article "When Jim Crow Drank Coke" in *The New York Times*, for example.

intersections between the processes of materiality and discursive practices that shape social ideas, cultural artifacts, artworks, literature, ethics, and epistemology" (Oppermann 35). Song is just one of the many illustrations of the way *Cane*'s interest in real, material, ecological concerns exists alongside the insistence that the aesthetic and sensory is necessary to truly experience the world. Concerns about environmental justice, systematic racism, racial and gender identities are equally important and not unrelated environmental concerns.

Sugarcane, the Boll Weevil, and More on *Cane*'s Material Realities

In addition to all of its interest in the aesthetic, the sensory, liminal, and the paradoxical, *Cane* engages a specific reality formed from a distinct set of material conditions and with very real, material consequences. The world of *Cane* exists because of transplanted species—human beings, sugarcane, the boll weevil—and practices with very real environmental impact—slavery, agriculture, and the lumber industry. Further, the text is inseparable from the material conditions that produced it. Introducing the 1923 edition, Waldo Frank wrote that *Cane* not only describes the South, but it is the "aesthetic equivalent to the land." "This book *is* the South," he wrote (138, italics in original). Again, I would like to approach this idea of totality through ecocriticism's investment in revealing the relationships between text and world, a central focus of the so-called "material turn" in ecocriticism, named material ecocriticism. "Storied matter"—"a material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (Iovino and Oppermann 1-2)—has fascinating potential for the study of writers of color, who literally and figuratively write themselves into existence, just as texts such as *Cane* demonstrate an appreciation of the material world that anticipates and resonates with material ecocriticism's central tenets in significant

ways. Approaching *Cane* from this angle, we glean a sophisticated picture of "nature" that is more in line with current ecological thought than might be expected.

Cane's engagement with the material world begins on the most surface layer with the pervasive sawmill and the "pyramidal" smouldering pile of sawdust, which contributes to the smoke that becomes one of the central motifs of the book. In the opening vignette, "Karintha," smoke "curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley" (5). The sawmill and the smoke it produces haunt the novel as a kind of reminder of human impact and direct antagonist to the pine trees, which are imagined as compatriots and fellow musician poets without exception. In "Karintha" the smoke is so heavy "you tasted it in water" (5). In addition, throughout *Cane* Toomer is careful to remind his reader of the length of time that it will take the discarded remains in the sawdust pile to burn. Lingering long after the lumber is carried away, the sawdust piles speak to the waste and futility of logging practices. Taken one step further, the sawdust pile is a text that tells a narrative—of human impact and biodegradation, but also because of Toomer's artistry, a narrative of the human story on Earth, the narrative of *Cane.* Smoke infiltrates the atmosphere and human bodies—it burns eyes and acts on taste buds—and smoke signifies the physical and chemical transformation of the trees via the lumber industry.

Winding in and out of both the prose and the verse passages, the smoke unifies the text and the human and non-human realities. In "Song of the Son," human voice and natural world collude to create an "everlasting song" (20):

> Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
> O Pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
> Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,

And let the valley carry it along.

And let the valley carry it along. ("Song of the Son" 1-5, page 17-18)

Smoke is in an important sense the embodiment of paradox, as its gaseous state of matter makes it both material and immaterial. The smoke is created by humans but also independent of them as it floats just out of reach, impossible to contain or return to its original state, evidence of emissions into the atmosphere. It is worth mentioning too that the indeterminate gray color of smoke, like dusk, again blurs the black / white distinction and reiterates Toomer's interest in these experiences of the material world that are double, coexistent.

The sawmill and smoke enter again with a vengeance in the poem "Georgia Dusk" where the fourth stanza reads:

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile

Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low

Where only chips and stumps are left to show

The solid proof of former domicile. (13-16, page 19-20)

Cane describes the same cut-and-get-out-method of lumbering that William Faulkner was critical of in texts such as *Go Down, Moses*, a practice that stripped the land quickly and completely. Like Faulkner's wilderness, which "soared musing, inattentive, myriad, eternal, green; older than any mil-shed, longer than any spur line" (*Go Down, Moses* 307), I read Toomer's anthropomorphism as a subtle protest against this profitable, but ecologically devastating, business. Furthermore, when "the pines whisper to Jesus" as they do throughout *Cane,* a reader imagines them protesting institutional racism as well, as trees were too often implicated in lynchings and witness to a variety of other injustices by no consensus of their own. Figuring the smoke as the "ghosts of trees" (14), as Toomer does here, grants the natural world with a type of

vitality that informs the overall concept of nature presented by *Cane*, one that is less in line with dominating Western ideas and more conducive to sustainability, a picture of nature that ultimately resonates with current ecocritical scholarship in significant ways. Additionally, suggesting that logging is the destruction of domiciles (line 16) speaks to a comprehensive view of ecosystems; rather than seeing trees solely for their use-values, Toomer considers the repercussions of eliminating trees that housed innumerable species, species that might seem dispensable but certainly are not.

The poem "Reapers" is perhaps the most explicit illustration of Toomer's sensitivity to animal life and the way capital-driven practices impact voiceless, even undesirable, persons:

> Black horses drive a mower through the weeds
> And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,
> His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
> Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade. (5-8)

The poem is obviously critical of agriculture as business. "Reapers" is one of the most often canonized and discussed of the titled poems interspersed between the prose sections of *Cane.* Critics tend to focus on the human subjects, but I have yet to read anyone who grants Toomer an ecological sensibility, despite the poem's clear involvement with the natural world. "Reapers" invokes the correlation between the system of agriculture built on black bodies and machines. While the poem suggests that mechanized agriculture is more harmful to the natural world—the mower murders a rat and is accompanied with "squealing" but the scythes are "silent" (4)—the juxtaposition of the two images reminds us of a long history where machine and human interweave. Historians suggest that the cotton gin actually increased the demand for slave labor, for example (Lakwete 187). Such entanglements of human and machine are further invoked in

Cane through descriptions of the sugarcane mills. Sugarcane processing, specifically the feeding of the mills, reportedly resulted in ground up appendages and bodies ("Conditions in the Sugar Works" n.p.), another byproduct of the business of agriculture. For *Cane* to be critical of the cash crop system is expected, but the critique of agriculture apparent in "Reapers" and elsewhere in *Cane* suggests a more complicated sensibility to the collective human impact on the natural world. Nevertheless, the fact that this poem is only read in terms of racial identities to the exclusion of an ecological sensibility is indicative of a larger problem in literary criticism when it comes to granting black voices authority to comment on "nature." Certainly, the speaker feels compassion for the rat, who, like himself is a victim of a system that disregards colored and nonhuman bodies. The rat is given the personal pronoun "his" rather than, perhaps, "its" suggesting yet again Toomer's sensitivity about animal life. Clearly, agriculture-as-business is far from some Jeffersonian ideal of the American imagination. *Cane*'s poem mentioned above, "Reapers," makes this clear as the poem first relies on associations to the Grim Reaper, then condemns agro-business as the scythes that open the poem are joined by an indifferent mower that "blood-stained, continue[s] cutting weeds and shade" (8).

Certainly, agricultural practices are an unexpected culprit in the system of the Anthropocene. In "She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn: Thinking Through Agrilogistics," published in *Diacritics* (2013), for example, Timothy Morton lists the following as among the "immediate unintended consequences of agriculture—epidemics, drastic social and gender stratification, and general misery (exemplified by the sudden lost in average human height in the Fertile Crescent)" (100). In addition, in *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Kolbert points to agricultural runoff as one of the causes of ocean acidification, which in turn damages coral reefs, which leads to another list of unintended consequences (141). The paradoxical reality of

agriculture is evident in *Cane* just as the Anthropocene highlights the role of agriculture in both human and earth history. While industrial agriculture is a positive outcome of the relatively stable conditions of the Holocene epoch, that which is being replaced by the emergent Anthropocene, in that industrial farming has supported our species' rapid population growth and, at least temporarily, bypassed natural limitations of production, the human and nonhuman costs are high. The transatlantic slave trade is just one of the histories in which the evidence of the global food industry has been cowritten onto human bodies and physical environments.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the success of the cash crop system depended on importation of non-native species. Toomer's title species, sugarcane, is not a native species to the Western hemisphere but transplanted like the African Americans brought to be the labor behind cash crops. Likewise, scientists note, another characteristic of this anthropocentric age is the total rearrangement of species on the globe due to human activity. Elizabeth Kolbert puts it this way:

> One of the striking characteristics of the Anthropocene is the hash it's made of the principles of geographic distribution. If highways, clear-cuts, and soybean plantations create islands where none before existed, global trade and global travel do the reverse: they deny even the remotest islands their remoteness. The process of remixing the world's flora and fauna, which began slowly, along the routes of early human migration, has, in recent decades, accelerated to the point where in some parts of the world, non-native plants now outnumber native ones. During a given twenty-four hour period, it is estimated that ten thousand different species are being moved around the world just in ballast water. (198)

Reading *Cane* as an environmentally aware text, then, transplanted species like sugarcane and the boll weevil point to the material conditions of the Anthropocene in unexpected ways.

Further, the material realities of sugar production again reveal entanglements of human bodies and the natural world, and Toomer carefully describes the way sugar production is dependent on the subjugation of human and nonhuman bodies. Indeed, the modern sugar industry evolved directly alongside institutionalized slavery, as the demand for sugar stimulated sugar plantations first in the Caribbean and then the Southern United States. For example, Toomer breaks from the action of Tom Burwell and Bob Stone in "Blood Burning Moon" to offer the following description:

> A large pile of cane-stalks lay like ribboned shadows upon the ground. A mule, harnessed to a pole, trudged lazily round and round the pivot of the grinder. Beneath a swaying oil lamp, a Negro alternatively whipped out at the mule, and fed cane stalks to the grinder. A fat boy waddled pails of fresh ground juice between the grinder and the boiling stove. Steam came from the copper boiling pan. The scent of cane came from the copper pan and drenched the forest and the hill that sloped to factory town, beneath its fragrance. (41)

Toomer's description of sugar production here is strikingly accurate, from the grinding of the mill to the boiling and curing process. Several historians have noted that this intensive process created particularly harsh and dangerous conditions for slaves and indentured workers. *Cane*'s attention to sugarcane production is also important because the cotton belt has traditionally gained more attention from scholars and in the popular imagination, as John Rodrigue argues in his book *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*.[54] Further, we might consider the way in which sugar's ability to act on the human body—to lure and addict us—is indicative of the way human history is always already entangled with the material world. Often referred to as "white gold" in

[54] Also see "Sugar Changed the World" here: http://sugarchangedtheworld.com/

early literature, sugar production and consumption has indelibly left its mark on human history and human bodies in profound ways.[55] (Diabetes, obesity, tooth decay, just to name a few.) *Cane* is aware of the enticement of sugar, as men chew on the "white pulp of the stalks, but there was no need for them to, if all they wanted was to taste the cane. One tasted it in factory town" (41).

The boll weevil is yet another species introduced to North America in the late 19th century, though it is an unwelcome guest, probably by "hitching a ride"[56] during trade and travel. In *The Sixth Extinction* (2014) Elizabeth Kolbert explains the consequences of species being moved around the world, calling the introduction of a new species into an environment a sort of Russian roulette:

> As in the high-stakes game, two very different things can happen when a new organism shows up. The first, which may be called the empty chamber option, is nothing. Either because the climate is unsuitable, or because the creature can't find enough to eat, or because it gets eaten itself, or for a host of other possible reasons, the new arrival doesn't survive (or at least fails to produce). Most potential introductions go unrecorded—indeed, entirely unheeded—so it's hard to get precise figures; almost certainly, though, the vast majority of potential invaders don't make it. In the second option, not only does the introduced

[55] The 2007 documentary *The Price of Sugar* reveals the ongoing injustices surrounding the global demand for sugar, as the poor and dispossessed are currently forced to work under extreme conditions to harvest the spice in the Dominican Republic.

[56] Human recreation and travel is linked directly to the redistribution of species across the globe. Both terrestrial and aquatic plant and animal species can becomes "hitchhikers," "stowaways," "piggybackers," and if the conditions are right, invasive species can disrupt ecosystems and affect human health. The Global Invasive Species Database (issg.org) catalogues the thousands of species that are categorized invasive, along with all of the intentional and unintentional ways humans have interfered with normal distribution. As an example of the former, consider the fact that European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) were allegedly introduced to the U.S. as part of a movement to introduce all the birds of Shakespeare to the States (*Global Invasive Species Database* n.p.).

> organism survive; it gives rise to a new generation, which in turn survives and gives rise to a new generation. This is what's known in the invasive species community as "establishment." (201)

The boll weevil definitely established itself in the South, becoming an economic game changer and a cultural icon—present in a variety of art forms—during the 1920s and 1930s. Of course the human role in the boll weevil's establishment is hardly noted, and people tend to ignore the larger impacts on systems that Kolbert speaks to. Predictably, capitalists were concerned about their profits rather than the environmental impact and used several questionable methods to rid themselves of the so-called pest. One method involved dusting crops, by hand or airplane, with the highly toxic poison calcium arsenate, for example.[57] By way of understanding the weevil's economic impact consider that in 1915 (before the boll weevil) Georgia produced 2.8 million bales of cotton. Less than ten years later, Georgia's annual cotton production was only around 600,000 bales (USDA).

Yet, it is not for economic reasons that *Cane* is especially interested in the boll weevil and other things that disrupt the dominant, white agenda. Again, invasive species remind us of the limits of human power, as unintended consequences become nature's foil to attempts to control, order, or engineer ecosystems. For people of color in *Cane*, as well as elsewhere in the African American tradition, species that are perceived as pests to capitalists are strange but welcome reminders that the systems that oppress them are tenuous and constructed, and certainly not reinforced by nature. *Cane*'s poem "November Cotton Flower" is instructive on this point and tellingly invokes the puckish weevil. It begins:

[57] See Alabama's Agricultural Experiment Station Reports, for instance. The second report dated 1929 describes methods and outcomes and is available here: https://aurora.auburn.edu/bitstream/handle/11200/1860/1049CIRC.pdf?sequence=1

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold

Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,

And cotton, cotton, scarce as any southern snow

Was vanishing. (1-4)

First, this excerpt points to the economic impact of the boll weevil and the loss of cotton production. This section is followed by other omens of impending natural disaster such as "drouth" (or drought) in line 6 and dead birds found in wells (7-8). Out of this, the November cotton flower blooms—strangely out of season and invoking human impact on the Earth's climate. While the "Old folks" are initially startled (10), the flower "soon assumed Significance" (10-11):

Superstition saw

Something it had never seen before:

Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,

Beauty so sudden for that time of year. (11-14)

Here, the untimely blooming of the cotton flower, like the boll weevil's ability to make cotton "scarce as any southern snow" (3) is a source of hope and empowerment for the African Americans who witness it. Nature resists domination. It foils human plans and acts upon our bodies. The boll weevil comes to signify this tenacity in the Blues tradition and elsewhere in African American cultural production.

African American songs and literature often admire the weevil's persistence, endurance, and adaptability. The boll weevil is both capable of wreaking havoc but also an imagined comrade—almost always personified—in the fight against white, Southern ruling class. The weevil is often displaced and looking for a home, again suggesting a parallel between the black

condition and the weevil's imagined state.[58] All of these elements are apparent in one version of the song "The Boll Weevil,"[59] popularized by Huddie William Ledbetter, better known as the notorious "Leadbelly." Though every recording and transcription seems different due to the improvisatory nature of the Blues genre, most versions contain the lyrics: "Farmer take the boll weevil and put him in the ice. Boll weevil said to the farmer 'you treat me mighty nice'" (Ledbetter n.p.). Here, and in other various scenarios—the farmer also typically puts the boll weevil on the sand—the weevil adapts and remains stoic. In the article "From Cotton Boll to Rock 'n' Roll: A Brief Account of the Boll Weevil as Musical Migrant," Andrew Scheiber reads the black interest in the boll weevil in light of the fact that "cotton was not just a crop or even an industry but part and parcel of a system of oppression in which many black peasants found themselves inescapably enmeshed" (108). Yet again, the environmental and the material are indistinguishable from human history. Some scholars point to the fact that the boll weevil infestation might have contributed to the Great Migration as well—with cotton production down, Southern blacks were more likely to go elsewhere to find work.[60] Finally, in *Cane*—"November Cotton Flower"—and elsewhere, the boll weevil reminds us of a system of agriculture that is not based on subsistence. This chain reaction of invasive species, the unintended consequences of agriculture, drought and flood, undermine the illusion of total control and alert us to the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman. This is a point that, *Cane* suggests, has the potential to inspire a greater ethic of care for human and nonhuman others.

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[58] This sense of displacement is something that African American literary expression and modernism generally shares. For instance, Granny, in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, tells Janie, "us colored folks is branches without roots" (16).

[59] Hear an original recording here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJjdHpFwS9I

[60] See Robert Higgs, "The Boll Weevil, the Cotton Economy, and Black Migration: 1910–1930"

Nature's Pluralities and Paradoxes

For John Wesley Work, Jr., the first African American scholar of folksong, song is a spontaneous reaction to the dislocation and trauma of slavery. Song is a "psychic phenomenon" and rather than weep, curse, or fight, the dislocated Africans, "through their bitter tears sang a sweet song, a weird song, a new song in a strange land" (17). *Cane* is a meditation on this experience of "sweetness" and "weirdness," and, reading *Cane* in the Anthropocene, a reader cannot help but think that this paradoxical experience of the world is now a shared condition of the human species. Furthermore, I argue, *Cane* benefits from being considered alongside texts such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, not to be measured by Eliot's poem, but to illustrate that the simultaneous sweetness and weirdness (to continue with Work's descriptors) is very much a common thread in all modernisms. However, this does not mean that the experience of modernity, of the Anthropocene, is "fair" or "equal" nor that environmental racism can be ignored. Rather, the emergent Anthropocene might remind us that we are all exposed, estranged visitors subjected to the forces of the physical universe, and the illusion that one group might have control over another is simply derangement as the very world we depend on for life begins to act upon our bodies in new profound ways. Byrd and Gates find it the "grand achievement of Toomer" that *Cane* is "perhaps the first work of fiction by a black writer to take the historical experiences and social conditions of the Negro, and make them the metaphor for the human condition, in this case, the metaphor for modernity itself" (226).[61]

Further, Byrd and Gates write that the use of binary oppositions has a long history in the African American literary tradition, and DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) insisted that the "duality of the Negro citizen" was a "necessary and problematic by-product of anti-black

[61] Michael North also reminds us in *Dialects of Modernism*, that blackness is, in a way, modern, and that Eliot, Pound, Stein experimented with black identity as well (8-9).

racism and segregation" (227). Toomer's response to DuBois, and his interest in embracing duality as a characteristic of modernity, is instructive to my reading of nature in *Cane.* We remember that in *The Souls of Black Folk* DuBois wrote of "double consciousness," "twoness," and described "two warring ideals in one dark body," "An American, A Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (n.p.). Toomer identified a similar doubleness, but his insistence on recognizing and retaining opposing parts speaks to his larger artistic project, including his interest in things like dusk, which is paradoxically day and night, light and dark, or smoke, both solid and gas, air and earth. In the frame of the Anthropocene, the way nature can be both violent and nurturing, beautiful and merciless, becomes indicative of not just the black condition, but the human condition, though these paradoxes might be experienced more violently by underprivileged groups when amplified by social, economic, and political systems. Responding, one imagines, to DuBois, Toomer described this "complementary vision": "[w]ithout denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony" (qtd. in North 167). Toomer's insistence on deconstructing binaries without eliminating either opposing element suggests a sophisticated treatment in line with new materialisms. For nature's paradoxes cannot be, and should not be, reconciled because doubleness is the realistic condition of the material world, of modernity, and of the Anthropocene.

Toomer's own inconsistent racial identity,[62] speaks to his personal inability to reconcile this vision with a society insistent on categorization along binaries, epitomized in Jim Crow era

[62] Historical documents are just as confusing as primary material. As a sample, the 1900 federal census lists Toomer as black. In the 1910 census, he is a mulatto. When Toomer registered for the draft in 1917, he listed "negro" for race, but the 1920 census lists him as white, although there is evidence that someone responded on Toomer's behalf, and there is the added complication that, according to George Hutchinson, the term "mulatto" was removed from the U.S. census forms in 1920, making it necessary for Toomer to claim either/or (North 163). The 1930 census also lists him as white, however, as does his marriage license for his 1931 marriage to Margery Latimer, although

"whites only" swimming pools, separate restrooms, water fountains, waiting rooms and so on—where an individual becomes this *or* that, with no acknowledgement of the in between spaces, nor the shared human DNA and condition.[63] Toomer's *both / and* strategy that directly responds to DuBois's sense of "warring parts" also speaks to Toomer's treatment of (ideological) nature, and certainly, nature is an entity that is similarly politicized and subjected to these destructive ideologies and practices, analogous in some ways to the colored body.

So, pushing this idea one step further, I want to suggest that the natural world too is a site of doubleness, or more than doubleness. Not only is an irreconcilable duality apparent in the condition of the self, but also applicable to an individual's relationship to the natural world and an inherent quality of the material world itself; *Cane* suggests a plurality that is "Anthropocenic," or indicative of the Anthropocene, where opposing experiences exist simultaneously. First, *Cane* suggests, humans are both a part of and separate from "nature," a fact that has great resonance with current ecological theory. Humans are both embodied and interconnected; so many of my cells are not human, yet I am a part of a distinct species that is capable of altering an entire planet's composition. Literary modernism, I have argued, complicates a binary understanding of nature as something outside of the human and rather presents an idea of the natural world that is "both"—both separate in some way (i.e. are capable of feeling alienated *from* it) and inseparable (i.e. when I eat food, am I not ingesting "nature"?).

Latimer reportedly knew that Toomer was black (Byrd and Gates 232). Toomer felt his marriage to Latimer was simply between two Americans and was frustrated by the way the press sensationalized the marriage based on race (Rusch 105).

[63] Toomer's biographer Richard Elridge sees him as insisting on a new, indeterminate American race in *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness*.

Furthermore, plurality is an inherent characteristic of nature, if we acknowledge that it is in constant flux, operating by its own set of rules, which is only amplified by unjust human systems. We remember Kabnis's heartwrenching moment where he is overcome with emotion, caught between an overwhelming sense of the injustice he faces and the beauty that surrounds him. It is worth repeating:

> Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night's beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. Sharp stones cut through his thin pajamas. The shock sends a shiver over him. He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes. 'God Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, Do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me an ugly world. Ha, ugly. Stinking like unwashed niggers. Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and . . . tortures me. (114, ellipsis in original)

Read in the context of environmental justice, and still pervading stereotypes that suggest black people are disinterested in nature and somehow innately urban,[64] this passage finds a man who is prohibited from experiencing an environment at no fault of his own but due to a complex system of ecological racism. This excerpt from "Kabnis" also illustrates the way in which *Cane* is quite intuitive of the way in which "nature" and "naturalness" is held for ransom as a tool of oppression. In this way, Kabnis's ecological awareness is a burden due to the constraints placed on him by society. This excerpt is also indicative of the way *Cane* is deeply engaged in nature's

[64] See Dorceta Taylor's work including the essay "Women of Color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism" for table summaries of empirical studies illustrating disproportionate distribution of resources, representatives, and involvement affecting the African American community, particularly women.

materiality and the ability of the material world to enchant, to create wonder, beauty, and sustenance. In another moment, Esther "will not permit herself to notice the peculiar phosphorescent glitter of the sweet-gum leaves. Their movement would excite her" (35). Here, it is the sweet gum leaves' inherent, material properties that act on Esther and attune her to a reality that exists outside of the human, constructed reality that makes this experience problematic for her.

Further, *Cane* suggests systematic oppression can impede the ability of a person to experience the natural world on a basic, sensory level. If song is the organic, sensory expression of a truth, the free verse "Harvest Song" speaks to the limitations of song—and art generally—but also, for the reader is a "song" that communicates mixed emotions, as song so often does, both profound beauty and sadness, perhaps. The speaker, who is a field slave, laments, "I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it / I have been in the fields all day. My throat is dry. I hunger" (93). Though the slave hungers, there is no satisfaction in eating. The basic, animal, biological systems in his body are infiltrated by the condition of slavery so that he is prohibited even a basic interaction with the material world. In the next moment, again overcome by hunger, the speaker tells us: "I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer me their / grain, oats, or wheat, or corn? I have been in the fields / all day. I fear I could not taste it. I fear knowledge of my / hunger" (93).

It is not only taste, but also sight and hearing that are withheld from the speaker. First, sight: "My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time. / I am a blind mind who stares across the hills, seeking stack'd fields of other harvesters" (93). The speaker repeats several times throughout the verse, "it would be good to see them." Further, "My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time / I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvesters

whose throats are also dry" (94). Therefore, "Harvest Song" poignantly illustrates the desperate and pathetic need to connect with other humans and the material world. The profound sense of alienation is starkly modernist but also, again, a symptom of the innate intimacy of self and world. Human systems—institutionalized slavery, the Anthropocene—make the material of highest importance while creating a problem of accessibility. If we are most aware of things when they are broken, African American writers become authorities on the condition of modernity, of the Anthropocene.

Nature's potential violence has long been noted in African American cultural and literary history, and for many years, oversimplified accounts that reduced nature to *only* a site of violence, rather than allowing for all of nature's "doublenesses," were widespread. Still, as the editors of *The Colors of Nature* put it, we cannot ignore that the natural world is undeniably a site of trauma, pain, rage, grief for too many: "I recalled an African-American friend cajoling me to see that in his familial past the woods were not a place one might go for solace and recreation but a place where one might be dragged, beaten, or lynched" (Deming and Savoy 12). In the twenty-first century, African American writers who formulate the natural world as site of violence and antagonistic to human subjects have an unexpected resonance. *Cane* reminds us that in the Anthropocene, nature—defined as the Earth and all of its systems, not some pristine wilderness place "over there"—is both life force and antagonist. Thinkers of the Anthropocene discuss this reversal and paradox of agency at length: the human species has significantly altered the composition of the planet, yet at this late stage of recognition, it is potentially beyond our control to reverse the effects of global warming, and, even more, we are now subjected to the very environment that we have created. Bruno Latour puts it this way in his essay "Agency at the time of the Anthropocene": "Through a complete reversal of Western philosophy's most

cherished trope, human societies have resigned themselves to playing the role of dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject!" (11-12). Reading *Cane* in the frame of the Anthropocene, where headlines report the likes of "Air pollution in China is killing 4,000 people every day, a new study finds," grants Toomer's pragmatic plurality new prescience. We must allow for those characteristics in nature that are not particularly appealing or favorable to human agendas.

In any case, African American writers of the early twentieth century—notably Toomer, Hurston, McKay, Hughes—recognize the intimate entanglement of human and natural world, while also suggesting that this interconnectivity carries with it the threat of danger, violence, due in part to the actions of other humans, but not always. For example, Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is alert to the "words of the trees and the wind" (25), features of the world that exist outside of the sociopolitical climate for Janie, but she is also entangled with a dangerous and politicized landscape. Most poignantly, Hurston explores this paradox through Janie's participation in the sharecropping system and the layers of injustice revealed by the Okechobee hurricane that devastates the Everglades and ultimately results in Teacake's death. Janie and Teacake are twice vulnerable. First, because of their shared human limitations: as they attempt to outrun the hurricane, Tea Cake gasps, "'De lake is comin!'" and Janie replies, "'Us can't fly'" (162). Certain forces of the Earth and this universal nature are completely out of human control, but the Okechobee hurricane is not purely a "natural" disaster; like other extreme weather events in recent memory, the hurricane's devastation is exaggerated by political, social, economic systems in place. This is illustrated most profoundly in the scene where Tea Cake is forced at gun point to examine victims' corpses in order to determine if they are white or black—

if white, they will be buried in a coffin, if black, he should just "'sprinkle plenty quick-lime over 'em and cover 'em up'" (184).

Still, the closing image of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, like the closing image of *Cane*, is unmistakable for its deep sense of interconnectedness and hope found in the natural world. The wind "picking at the pine trees" turns Janie's thoughts to Tea Cake and Hurston writes that, in the solace of her room, "[h]ere was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (193). Here, the novel ends with a markedly ecological vision that is far from the overgeneralized sense of violence that dominates critical approaches to African American Literature. The threat of the natural world can only properly be treated along with its complementary pair, which in this case, is something like security and a marked sense of hope. *Cane*'s conclusion is similar, closing with the "birth-song" (160) of the sun: "Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" (160).

These final moments constitute a reclaiming of nature—not only for African Americans but also reclaiming nature to itself in the sense that it is taken on its own terms. This is nature that is alive and agentic, accessible in its shared materiality, but also removed and independent from human life. In "Earthbound on Solid Ground," bell hooks calls for a renewed connection to the earth, arguing that ecological awareness is a form of resistance: [f]or when [black folks] are forgetful and participate in the destruction and exploitation of the dark earth, we collude with the domination of the earth's dark people, both here and globally" (70). hooks's appropriation of

"interbeing" and her allusion to the earth as witness illustrates the simultaneous awareness that humans are both inseparable, always entangled with nature in significant ways, but that nature stands outside of human life in ways that must be apprehended as well. In addition to the distinct ecological vision presented by the conclusions quoted above, it is important to note that in both *Cane* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* it is human implemented systems that impede in what might be called an uninhibited relationship with the natural and material world.

This is to say "nature" has not only been politicized throughout human history, but also used as a tool of oppression in that African Americans' relationship with the natural world was (and still is according to some) determined for them. In such ways as forced labor or by withholding "nature" from certain groups, either by literally denying them access to environments or discursively by perpetuating certain stereotypes. Literary critics, scholars in the humanities, and environmental studies must also consider whether professional practices have suppressed certain versions of nature or done so by omission, whether consciously or unconsciously. It will not do for the humanities to perpetuate the feeling that *Cane* so poignantly captures: there is a lively world full of beauty and possibility, varied and distinct human and nonhuman bodies, but it is only available to the wealthy, white, free.

Just as quickly as the Anthropocene entered our popular idiom, it has attracted critique. On one scale, as I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the Anthropocene runs the risk of being "raceless," a charge that directly conflicts with the still pervading feeling among African American scholars that race has yet to be sufficiently attended to in the humanities, and particularly in terms of environmental approaches to literature. Junot Diaz's condemnation of the "unbearable too-whiteness" of American literature and literary study in *The New Yorker* is echoed time and time again (n.p.). In *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black*

Experimental Writing (2014) Anthony Reed describes an "era of official 'color blindness,' where now optimistic, now nostalgic 'post-'s proliferate... We not only need to consider historical gaps and erasures but also to think about and produce inhabitable futures on terms other than those of the present, generating theories adequate to the complexities and contradictions of black life" (1). Additionally, writing relatively recently, Ruffin argues that "[f]or as long as Africans have been Americans, they have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature" (1). The strategy for many writers has been to anthologize a variety of primary texts in order to let black voices speak for themselves and by doing so illustrate the range of experiences with nature. Joining *The Colors of Nature*: *Culture, Identity, and the Natural World* (2002) in this project are *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature* (2009) and *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (2010).

Kimberly Smith asks us to consider why there are no black Thoreaus or John Muirs. To make her point, she offers a poignant example in the Introduction to her *African American Environmental Thought* (2007), citing DuBois's essay "Of Beauty and Death":

> There mountains hurl themselves against the stars and at their feet lie black and leaden seas. Above float clouds-white, gray, and inken, while the clear, impalpable air springs and sparkles like new wine. The land sinks to meadows, black pine forests, with here and there a blue and wistful mountain. (qtd. in Smith 1)

In the passage above, DuBois describes Arcadia, one of the first national parks, and if one did not know it was DuBois, one might have assumed it authored by Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold or another of the voices in the American nature writing tradition. Yet, Smith and colleagues point out, there are very seldom any black voices included in nature writing

anthologies and these elements, which might constitute an ecological vision, are easily dismissed if a reader or critic is not attuned to them. Certainly, DuBois's primary agenda throughout his lifetime was race equality, but this passage begs us to consider whether attuning to his ecological imagination might open new lines of inquiry into his body of work.

In her Introduction to *Black Nature*, the self-proclaimed first anthology of African American nature writing just published in 2009, Camille T. Dungy suggests a paradigm shift is needed in order to remedy the problem: "we must change the parameters of the conversation… Many black writers simply do not look at their environment from the same perspective as Anglo-American writers who discourse with the natural world" (xxi). I would argue that the Anthropocene and certain moves in the environmental humanities and new materialisms provide a way to change the parameters of the discussion. Reclaiming nature attunes us to the shared human experience while appreciating the physical and material realities of the emergent Anthropocene also highlights the way human systems have subjected certain bodies to disproportionate suffering. Caring for nature, in the broad sense, means changing the practices that promote both racial violence and environmental degradation, and often the two are inseparable.

Afterword

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) features the puzzling amalgamation, Dr. Matthew O'Connor, who is the epitome of the alienated, fragmented modernist condition in a human form. In the section of the novel entitled "Watchman, What of the Night?" Nora, the hopeless lover of Robin, comes to the doctor to ask, "tell me everything you know about the night" (86). This question prompts a fascinating diatribe on sleep, consciousness, reality, identity, epistemology, and the aching awareness of human vulnerability. Interspersed in Dr. O'Connor's existential monologue, which goes on page after page, are surprising, and easily dismissed, ecological moments such as when the doctor recalls his own enraged outburst, yelling, "Do any of you know anything about atmosphere and sea level?...sea level and atmospheric pressure and topography make all the difference in the world!" (99). This mention of sea level is shocking in the landscape of the novel but also not shocking in the twenty-first century, when "worst-case scenario" reports indicate that burning remaining fossil fuels could cause sea level rise at the rate of one foot per decade (Schlanger n.p.).

In September 2015 Google Maps began to picture parts of coastal California under water; specifically, L.A. neighborhoods such as Malibu and Santa Monica were depicted as being under water presumably due to rising sea levels (Smith n.p. ; Swanner n.p.). Apparently, Google has revised the map, calling it a "glitch," but for many, the depiction of Southern California under water speaks to its precarious situation, whether intentional or not (Klinkenberg n.p.; Cueto n.p.). Certainly, sea level is always just below our conscious thought in 2015. Matthew O'Connor's outburst seems exceptionally explicit; early twentieth century literary experimentation—

modernist literary expression—is not always so obvious in the ways it demands us to reevaluate, resituate, and linger on the human species' position in a world that we are both changing rapidly and being changed by. Still, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the modernists captured more than what is typically described as the "modernist condition," and articulations of this condition must include ecological considerations to properly account for literary expression of the historical moment. For modernity is certainly an ecological event.

In addition, scientists who study the Anthropocene and all of its implications, including global climate change, have taken particular interest in the twentieth century. The early part of the century set into motion what has become known as "The Moment of Great Acceleration," when human activity triggered a domino effect and every category measuring human impact sharply increased (i.e. water use, atmospheric carbon dioxide, tropical forest loss) ("Great Acceleration"). If the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme's charts measure quantitative changes, cultural production can help us understand the lived experience of this "human age." The emergent Anthropocene epoch means that we should take the modernist project seriously in terms of the way these texts engage with the physical world, and continuing to bring modernist studies and the environmental humanities into dialogue will only illuminate both fields.

This dissertation begins to suggest some of the Anthropocenic qualities of literary expression of the early twentieth century. Engaging with these texts uncovers additional layers, so that I have been continuously surprised and confused by them but increasingly certain that they have much to offer to conversations about this, our "human age." For one, these texts do not offer a magical reboot. The reader stays entangled. There is no satisfactory resolution or escape, just as we are denied a reset button as much as we may currently need one.

Significantly, wrestling with the ecological implication of the texts in this dissertation consistently points the scholar back to human nature(s): attitudes, perceptions, presumptions, limitations. Without exception, these texts indicate that a conscientious way of inhabiting the world requires acknowledging shared human vulnerability and extending concern to the nonhuman. Eliot's *The Waste Land* performs a Buddhist chant; *Spring and All* pushes our imagination to the brink of its own destruction; in *The Waves* we crash up against all it means to be human, which turns out to be less human than we thought; and in *Cane* we become part of a song that we might not have otherwise had time to hear.

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