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## **'Bodies of water': The Ecofeminist Water Poetry of Jorie Graham and Alice Oswald**

*Victoria Penn*

### **Abstract**

This thesis explores the water poetry of Jorie Graham and Alice Oswald as an ecofeminist response to the climate breakdown. I begin by situating Graham and Oswald's work in the broader contexts of feminism, using foundational feminist voices to understand how female identity is formed, with a particular focus on the role of naming. I show how the notion of a coherent, lyric speaker, able to straightforwardly address that which they describe, is challenged by the eco-poetic understanding that we are inextricable from nature, and that this assumption of wholeness comes under particular strain in the context of the late-stage climate disaster.

By engaging with their predecessors in the genre of nature poetry, Graham and Oswald inhabit and depart from these foundational ways of being in and writing about nature. Graham continues the transcendentalist respect for nature but rejects the idealised pastoral 'retreat', and complicates the transcendentalist ideal of self-sufficiency. Oswald writes largely against the Romantic Egotistical Sublime, and favours poetry which attempts to speak from within nature. Through an extended exploration of Oswald's *Dart*, I show how human identity is shaped by rivers, and how our dependence on this aqueous element is intertwined with our histories of place.

Through this in-depth exploration of water in Graham and Oswald's poetry, I show how they both reflect human dependence on water and our interconnected identity as part of a wider whole, and how the climate emergency necessitates a wider acknowledgement of this multiplicity of identity.

**'Bodies of water': The Ecofeminist Water Poetry of Jorie Graham  
and Alice Oswald**

**Victoria Jane Penn**

**PhD Thesis**

**English Studies**

**Durham University**

**2022**

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'Your sleep beside me is the real, | the loom I can return to when all loosens into speculation'.



*Your silence is brushing the bottom of something it had thought never to touch again. You are now immersed and re-enveloped in something that erases all boundaries. Carried away by the waves. Drowning in the flood. Tragic castaway in unrestrained turmoil. — Luce Irigaray*

## Introduction: 'I watch the weather make the sea my soul'

### I. 'Language Goes Two Ways'

What use is language in the face of a climate collapse? How can nature poetry, made up of a language stretched inadequately over something which resists absolute definition or categorisation, seek to engage with the rapidly more endangered natural world? How do our philosophies of selfhood and the configuration of self in relation to nature shape both the human and the natural, and how does ecopoetry seek to redefine this relationship between humanity and the natural world? How does water inhabit and enable this redefinition of our existence?

To address some of these questions, this thesis considers the poetry of Jorie Graham and Alice Oswald through the lenses of ecopoetics and ecofeminism. I chart the ways in which both poets use water as the basis of this interconnection between humanity and nature, as that which flows through, around, into, and out of us and gives us life is also able to destroy our places, habitats, and fragile perceptions of existence.

Gary Snyder is an environmental activist and poet who has written widely on the subject of nature and ecology, and on our human understandings of the natural world. I use his work here as a foundation for a preliminary discussion of Graham and Oswald's position within these wider debates of ecopoetics and ecofeminism. In 'Language Goes Two Ways', Snyder suggests that 'language does not impose order on a chaotic universe, but reflects its own wildness back', challenging the commonly understood idea that 'the world is chaotic, but language organizes and civilises it'.<sup>1</sup> Snyder suggests that 'the world (and mind) is orderly in its own fashion, and linguistic order reflects and condenses that order' (p. 130). Language, according to Snyder, 'goes two ways: it enables us to have a small window onto an independently existing world, but it also

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Snyder, 'Language Goes Two Ways', in *The Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 127–131 (p. 128). All further references to this work are to this edition.

shapes — via its very structures and vocabularies — how we see that world’ (p. 128). Language, then, can enable an understanding of existence, but also, as Snyder acknowledges, ‘it may be argued that what language does to our seeing of reality is restrictive, narrowing, limiting, and possibly misleading. “The menu is not the meal”’ (p. 128). However, Snyder goes on to argue that ‘rather than dismiss language from a spiritual position, speaking vaguely of Unsayable Truths, we must instead turn right back to language’ (p. 128), using poetry as a means to explore and expand language and meaning. Snyder suggests that:

Creativity is not a unique, singular, godlike act of ‘making something’. It is born of being deeply immersed in what is — and then seeing the overlooked connections, tensions, resonances, shadows, reversals, retellings. What comes forth is ‘new’. (p. 128)

Snyder likens the mind to nature throughout the essay, as ‘the workings of the human mind at its very richest reflect this self-organising wildness’ of nature (p. 128). The natural world, ‘which includes human languages’, is ‘patterned according to its own devices’, and Snyder describes language as ‘naturally evolved wild systems whose complexity eludes the descriptive attempts of the rational mind’ (p. 127). This elusiveness of the mind and nature ‘only means that we live in a realm in which many patterns remain mysterious or inaccessible to us’ (p. 127). Snyder suggests that ‘in spite of years of personhood, we remain unpredictable even to our own selves. Often we wouldn’t be able to guess what our next thought will be’ (p. 127). Snyder here introduces the idea that humans are inherently connected to the natural world, that before we begin to attach our rational perceptions of meaning, value, and understanding to that around us, or even to ourselves and our identities, we have an innate connection to this unpredictable ‘wildness’ of nature. Our minds and selves ‘pattern’ themselves according to the ‘wild systems’ of the natural world of which we are a part before we learn to identify ourselves in human terms as traditionally outside nature, distinct from the earth and water from which we were born. Snyder concludes that ‘the faintly visible traces of the world are to be trusted. We do not need to organize so-called chaos. Discipline and freedom are not opposed to each other’ (p. 130),

advocating a return to these natural origins outside our 'narrowing, limiting' perceptions and understandings of that around us.

To introduce the critical contexts of this thesis, and in light of these ideas, I will now consider Graham's 'Reading Plato' alongside Oswald's sequence of 'Sea Sonnet' poems in some detail in order to illustrate the ways in which both poets engage with language and the natural world. Throughout this thesis I will use a combination of close reading and ecofeminist critical contexts to inform these ideas and as an effective way of considering how these large issues and areas of enquiry manifest, operate, and interact in particular poems, which is my focus.

The form of Jorie Graham's early poem 'Reading Plato', which organises the poem into regular six-line stanzas until the last line, and the shape of the poem, with one long line followed by a shorter one, would suggest a 'civilisation' of the scene through language and its poetic rules of form. The free-flowing content seems to ignore this, however, as the sentences ebb and flow through the form, reflecting the 'wildness' which the speaker observes both of nature and within the human. The observed nature remains 'patterned according to its own devices', and indeed the direct reference to the natural world comes in the isolated last line which does not fit the structure, suggesting that nature remains outside human imposed order, 'uncivilised'. Graham suggests that this assertion of control is not absolute, nor successful, as the natural world coexists harmoniously with the human but does not concede to our attempts to define or control it. As the speaker observes nature's wildness, the language that she uses mirrors these formless patterns and flows through the imposed structure, displaying the freedom of her subject.

Oswald's first 'Sea Sonnet' takes a different approach, depending upon the sonnet form to structure the content and using alliterative, regular stresses and punctuation to sound out the poem's subject, as in oral poetry tradition and Old English verse. This form, whilst polarised from Graham's approach, uses language to orally reflect the landscape, which could be seen as a

reversal of Wittgenstein's concept 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world'.<sup>2</sup> For Oswald, the limits of the world mean the limits of the language, which observes this world in the sounds and rhythms chosen to best mirror the cyclical, regular rhythms and sounds of the sea. The un-civilisation of language by nature is evident here, as the natural world is so present in the language of the poem that the musical qualities seem about to override the strict form's control.

Oswald observes nature's power as 'the sea and the weather| instantiate each other'.<sup>3</sup> The tight form and rhythmic, musical language perform the content, as the balanced phrases 'instantiate each other', the repeating rhythm mirroring the water cycle and the ebb and flow of the sea's movement. The strong rhythmic stresses, which follow the Old English verse form of two stresses and a caesura followed by two more stresses, set up a balance between the first half of a line and the second. The delayed 'I' (l. 9) suggests that nature achieves this balance without human input, since the human presence in the poem is not directly referenced until the third stanza. Oswald draws attention to the form in the title, labelling the poem a 'sonnet', and yet the order of 'Sea' before 'Sonnet' remains throughout the poem. The order associated with the sonnet form is not imposed on the 'chaotic universe' of the sea, but rather 'reflects its own wildness back', providing a canvas on which the natural world manipulates language to represent itself. This poem, whilst it approaches nature with a stricter form than Graham's, used to shape the content more precisely, also exemplifies the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature, as the form works with the alliteration, rhyme, and enjambment to observe nature 'according to its own devices'.

The 'Sea Sonnet' discussed above begins a sequence of identically named sonnets in Oswald's *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* which consider how the sea evades concrete definition through language. Titling all three poems with the same descriptive rather than symbolic heading inhibits

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<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 1922), p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Sea Sonnet', in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 19, ll. 1–2. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

the usual imagery and function of a title in introducing the poem as an individual contemplation. Instead, this label forces the reader to notice the form of the poem alongside its subject. Titling several poems in this way makes the point that language cannot contain water within one poem, or indeed within many, but also suggests the way in which the speaker is inextricably drawn to this subject, imagining it through different metaphors and lenses as the collection continues. Oswald, through this sequence, performs the 'two ways' of language, providing 'small window[s] onto an independently existing world', whilst also shaping 'how we see that world', and calling into question how independent the individual human can be in the wider coexistence of nature and humanity together.

The second sonnet begins with an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of water: 'The sea is made of ponds — a cairn of rain', which captures how water flows from one form into another, resisting concrete definition.<sup>4</sup> Oswald here brings language together to pair opposites — a cairn as a solid, physical, human-made marker of an unmoving point of reference, and rain as a temporary, placeless entity which continually moves from one state to another — to consider the sea which resists such binaries. By doing this, however, and by bringing these opposites and contradictions together in the poem, Oswald shapes our perception and understanding of the sea, 'turn[ing] right back to language' to address the ineffable properties of water.

As in the first 'Sea Sonnet', the second uses the sounds of language to perform that which it describes, relying on this aural aspect of poetry rather than the inherent meaning of the words used:

The sea crosses the sea, the sea has hooves;  
the powers of rivers and the weir's curves  
are moving in the wind-bent acts of waves. (ll. 7–9)

The sibilance here evokes the sound of the sea in continuous movement, and the harsh consonants of 'crosses' perform the noise of a wave breaking against another wave or on the

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<sup>4</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Sea Sonnet', in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 20, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

seashore. The cacophony of bodies of water in the poem, first 'ponds', here 'rivers', 'weir', and 'waves', observes how language seeks to define through offering many different ways of imagining these bodies of water, but simultaneously, as each is thrown up and covered by the next, Oswald recognises the inadequacy of any one word to describe the sea's vastness. Instead of relying on our comprehension of language as it follows certain rules and expectations, Oswald uses the sounds of the sea to create the sonnet, harnessing the ambiguity and multiplicity of language to reflect that of the sea.

Enjambment and unpredictable punctuation resist the strong rhythm of the iambic pentameter throughout the poem, which narrates the way that water flows through our definitions and categorisations. The expected rhyme scheme of the sonnet form is absent, and instead Oswald uses partial rhymes such as 'hooves', 'curves', and 'waves', to draw the images of her poem into proximity with one another and create almost a new language with which to approach the sea.

At first water trickles through the poem, as caesuras and end-stopped lines attempt to hem it in, but by the end of the poem the sentences span stanzas, and the last sentence ends with the end of the poem, with the emphatic line 'and nothing but the sea-like sea beyond.' (l. 14). The strong iambic rhythm here adds a finality to this line which is reinforced by the final full-stop and the declaration of 'nothing but' the sea. The ambiguity of this line — whether this means that nothing but sea can be seen, or exists, or can exist — resists finality. Having given so many different ways of imagining the sea in metaphor through the poem, this conclusion surrenders to the inevitable definition of the sea as 'sea-like', as no other language or concept can hope to understand the sea or grasp its entirety.

The self-definition of the speaker is absent from the second 'Sea Sonnet', but in the third sonnet Oswald introduces a relationship between 'You' and 'I', who 'walk light as wicker in virtual

contact'.<sup>5</sup> The identity of 'you' and of 'I' remain unexplained through the poem, as Oswald comments on the place of the individual human in this contemplation of the natural, oceanic world. The unity of 'we' is absent throughout the poem, as 'you' and 'I' remain in 'virtual contact' and the speaker observes the other character:

I saw your body floating on the darkness.  
[...]  
your singularity and the sea's  
inalienable currents flow at angles . . .

and if I love you this is incidental  
as on the sand one blue towel, one white towel. (ll. 8–14)

This focus on 'singularity' and the other person as a 'body' marks the human presence as something dependent on water but with no power over it: 'floating on', 'flow[ing] at angles' with the 'inalienable currents' of the sea. Concepts crucial to human understandings of existence — 'love' and 'time' — are dismissed as 'incidental', and the speaker notes that 'time and water cannot touch' (l. 9). Our ideas of the core concepts of being are built through language, but are easily dissolved by water's vastness in the poem, 'Not one thing close to another' (l. 2) as 'Prepositions', that which we rely upon to structure and make sense of language and therefore existence, 'lie exposed' (l. 5), and it remains clear that the sea holds absolute authority over human existence.

Graham's 'Reading Plato' also explores the departure from order to wildness. This title points towards a strict order, referencing Plato's Theory of Forms, in which each earthly object is an imperfect copy of a perfect artefact on a higher plane of existence. Our earthly counterparts strive towards a level of perfection which they can never reach. This appears an odd title, then, for a poem which begins:

This is the story  
of a beautiful

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<sup>5</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Sea Sonnet', in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 21, l. 4. All further references to this poem are to this edition.



lie [...].<sup>6</sup>

Plato sees art as a mimesis of our imperfect reality, a copy of a copy, and a further step removed from perfection. Graham immediately undermines this hierarchy of perfection however, as she begins with a 'story', a 'beautiful | lie':

[...] what slips  
    through my fingers,  
your fingers. (ll. 3–5)

The beginning of the poem moves through many levels of artifice towards the bottom of Plato's hierarchy. Graham shifts the focus and goal of the language she uses from a perfect mimesis of reality to the artistry of a story, allowing its creativity to step outside this imitation into its own existence. The importance of the story is in the craft, the making of the lure, rather than its closeness to reality, and so Graham's objective becomes the telling of 'a beautiful | lie' rather than the exact truth. By removing the poem and its subject from this order of mimesis attempting perfection, Graham allows the 'chaotic universe' that she observes to remain 'patterned according to its own devices'. The poem's form, whilst striking to the eye, is complex to read. Both form and content present an idea — Plato's form, poetic form — and then step out of this order, preferring instead to observe how language and nature are 'orderly in [their own] fashion'.

Graham watches her friend make a fishing lure, not a direct mimesis of reality but a beautiful piece of art, a 'hobby' (l. 13). The term 'hobby' is often used to diminish expectation or shield the creator from criticism of their art. A hobby cannot be criticised with the same criteria as high art, its value lies not in success or likeness to perfection but in the enjoyment of the creator; it is created for the individual, not for the scrutiny of others. Describing his efforts as a hobby, therefore, allows Graham's subject to be closer to that 'wildness' of nature, shifting the objective of his action from mimesis to individual satisfaction. Instead of striving towards human

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<sup>6</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Reading Plato', in *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974–1994* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 23, ll. 1–3. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

appreciation, the friend strives towards wildness and beauty, but also the practical use of a lure.

Graham explains that:

[...] He makes them  
out of hair,

deer hair, because it's hollow  
and floats. (ll. 29–32)

His craftsmanship, care, and attention reanimate the deer in metaphor, as though accidentally achieving the Platonic ideal:

Dismembered, remembered,  
it's finally  
alive. (ll. 57–59)

Death and life are juxtaposed through the use of opposite prefixes, 'dis', meaning apart, and 're', meaning again, as Graham describes the effectiveness of the lure and its components in imitating the essence of something alive. The psychological connections brought to mind in 'remembered' become secondary to its literal meaning, 're-membered', which collapses the act of creation into that of remembering. The poem holds these opposites in harmonious coexistence, refusing to 'impose order' but instead 'reflects' and 'condenses' the natural order.

The quick succession of clauses as the lure comes together mirrors the anticipated thrashing of the fish when caught, further emphasised by the alliterative, harsh 'k' noise through 'quick and frantic':

they're true—feelers,  
antennae,  
quick and frantic  
as something  
drowning. (ll. 19–23)

This onomatopoeia and urgency perform the purpose of the lure, bringing the ideal to life. Language is constructed like the lure, laboriously and with practical care, it 'must be| so believable' (ll. 17–18) that it becomes the ideal it sets itself. Instead of attempting to civilise

nature through language, Graham juxtaposes seemingly irreconcilable concepts to mirror nature's wildness in a 'beautiful| lie'.

Another coexistence of opposites in Graham's poem is through gender, which is never directly addressed, yet remains pertinent throughout the poem. The male friend remains 'speechless' (l. 11), engaged in an act of creation which does not require language. This silence creates a tension between his hobby and Graham's act of creation, the poem, which is made of language, but the two still coexist naturally, as both take pleasure in the act of creation. Graham uses the 'story' aspect to remove herself from reporting absolute truth, likening her act to that of the creation of a lure, so just as he makes a lure from pieces of deer hair, she creates the poem from pieces of language which she reanimates. Later the man is joined:

and the men

wade out into the riverbed  
at dawn. (ll. 42–44)

Without language, the men participate in what seems a primal instinct to converge, to be part of the masculine hunter tradition of silent men waiting for the catch. The language that Graham uses to craft the poem observes the gender tension as 'these men' (l. 63) are always separate from her and her language. Despite their attempts to be apart from nature and master it through creating a 'beautiful lie' with which to catch fish, their silence, although unconsidered, and their very humanity situate them as a part of nature. Graham observes the irony of them 'trying to pass' for the natural world of which they are already a part, and observes their silence through her crafting of a poem in language, simultaneously creating and dissolving the gap between male and female in the poem.

## **II. 'The body repeats the landscape': Eco-poetics and Ecofeminism**

Ecocriticism and eco-poetics consider the natural world and the relationship between humanity and nature outside the assumption of human supremacy. Eco-poetics seeks to refocus nature

poetry on the natural world in and of itself, rather than as it appears to or affects the human consciousness. Eco-poets seek to explore the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature as we remain inextricable from the life cycles of the planet upon which we depend for our continued existence. Meridel Le Sueur suggests that ‘the body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other’, which encapsulates this concept of humanity and nature as part of each other, constantly feeding into one another as individual life cycles perpetuate the whole.<sup>7</sup> Offering a broader explanation of this relationship between humanity and nature, Timothy Morton suggests that:

I find that I am a symbiotic community of primate, bacteria, small crustaceans that live in my eyelashes. I discover that this symbiosis goes down to the cellular level. Inhabiting ‘me’, giving me energy, are mitochondria evolved from anaerobic bacteria hiding from their own version of ecological emergency, the one we call *oxygen*. These bacteria brought the emergency on themselves by excreting oxygen — a fact that should reveal to us that what is called Nature is better described as a palimpsest of catastrophes [...]. My very body, then, is not strictly *me* or *mine*, a fact that should strike us with a degree of uncanny horror. I can type these words because a bacterial symbiont supplies me with energy.<sup>8</sup>

Morton here captures, on the ‘cellular level’, the inescapable ‘symbiotic community’ of nature and humanity. Eco-poets and ecocritics suggest that the consideration of humanity, of ‘*me* or *mine*’, is inextricable from a consideration of nature, that which ‘supplies me with energy’ to exist, but which also depends upon ‘me’ for their own perpetuation of existence.

Rosemary Radford Ruether urges that ‘we need to discover our actual reality as latecomers to the planet. [...] We are the parasites on the food chain of life, consuming more and more, and putting too little back to restore and maintain the life system that supports us’, suggesting a reversal or reconfiguration of the anthropocentric mindset.<sup>9</sup> Radford Ruether argues that:

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<sup>7</sup> Meridel Le Sueur, ‘The Ancient People and the Newly Come’, in *Ripening: Selected Work*, ed. by Elaine Hedges (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), pp. 39–62 (p. 39).

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Morton, ‘Ecology without the Present: Some Psychoanalytic Precipitates’, *Sitegeist: A Journal of Psychoanalysis and Philosophy*, 7 (2012), 7–20 (pp. 7–8).

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature’, in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. by Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 322–333 (p. 330).

We need to recognise our utter dependence on the great life-producing matrix of the planet in order to learn to reintegrate our human systems of production, consumption, and waste into the ecological patterns by which nature sustains life. This might begin by revisualising the relation of mind, or human intelligence, to nature. Mind or consciousness is not something that originates in some transcendent world outside of nature, but is the place where nature itself becomes conscious. We need to think of human consciousness not as separating us as a higher species from the rest of nature, but rather as a gift to enable us to learn how to harmonize our needs with the natural system around us, of which we are a dependent part.<sup>10</sup>

Radford Ruether here succinctly captures the essence of ecocriticism, and by extension ecopoetry alongside it. The ‘revisualising’ of the mind as not ‘outside of nature’ but instead as an inextricable part of it is the starting point from which ecocritical and ecopoetic concerns seek to reconfigure our relationship with nature.

Ecofeminism, a term first coined by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Morte*, is described by Charlene Spretnak as a ‘historical, symbolic, and political relationship [...] between the denigration of nature and the female in Western cultures’.<sup>11</sup>

Spretnak explains that:

The dualistic thinking that has shaped so much of the Eurocentric worldview is perhaps the central concern of ecofeminist philosophical and political analysis. Countless ramifications follow from the Eurocentric notion of ‘the masculine’ being associated with rationality, spirit, culture, autonomy, assertiveness, and the public sphere, while ‘the feminine’ is associated with emotion, body, nature, connectedness, receptivity, and the private sphere. The reductionism of this orientation is accompanied by several assumptions that are essential to patriarchy: that the cluster of attributes associated with the masculine is superior to that associated with the feminine; that the latter exists in service to the former; that the relationship between the two is inherently agonistic; and that a logic of domination over nature and the female should prevail among (male) humans in the ‘superior’ configuration.<sup>12</sup>

These human-constructed binaries and hierarchies which place man above woman and nature attempt to justify the oppression of that which is perceived as Other (women, nature, black and minority ethnicities) by that which is considered ‘the absolute’ (man, white, human).

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<sup>10</sup> Radford Ruether, p. 330.

<sup>11</sup> Charlene Spretnak, ‘Critical and Constructive Contributions of Ecofeminism’, *The Bucknell Review*, 37 (1993), 181–189 (p. 181).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

Ecofeminism seeks to move away from this reductive, binary philosophy of existence and instead considers the interconnection of nature and humanity outside these imposed hierarchies of gender and power. By exploring the roots of this ideology of women and nature as Other, using terms borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a starting point, this thesis will consider the ways in which ecofeminism provides a theoretical background for poetics of nature and water, and how the relationship between water and humanity continues to evolve through contemporary poetry.

Carolyn Merchant delves into the traditional equation of nature with the female when she observes:

[...] the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe. But another opposing image of nature as female was also prevalent: wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos. Both were identified with the female sex and were projections of human perceptions onto the external world.<sup>13</sup>

Merchant here explains the domination of women and nature through the imagining of both in terms of their resources: 'nurturing mother[s]' reduced to vessels for child birth/ production of resources. These 'projections of human perceptions onto the external world' — the imposition of gendered hierarchies onto nature, the consideration of nature as lesser than or under the control of humanity — are the assumptions which ecofeminism seeks to challenge.

Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen go further, and claim that:

It is not possible to address women's oppression without addressing environmental degradation. That these two worlds, the human and the natural, are inextricably interconnected may seem so obvious that it's hard to imagine that they are usually addressed separately.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, 'Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health', *Society and Nature*, 2 (1993), 1–35 (p. 3).

Gaard and Gruen here address one of the key foundations of ecocriticism, which is that 'the human and the natural, are inextricably interconnected', and that the degradation, mistreatment, oppression, or neglect of nature has a direct and immediate effect upon humanity, as our dependence upon and existence as part of nature forces us to share in the climate catastrophe. Gaard and Gruen argue that 'domination is built in to such dualisms [...] because the other is negated in the process of defining a powerful self. Because the privileged self in such dualisms is always male, and the devalued other is always female'.<sup>15</sup> By negating and devaluing the Other, patriarchal systems have projected the male/female hierarchy onto nature, carrying over these philosophies of women as lesser, weaker, and subdominant to nature.

Merchant explores the reflection of these ideas in traditional, pastoral nature writing that assumes nature as female, under male control:

But while the pastoral tradition symbolized nature as a benevolent female, it contained the implication that nature when plowed and cultivated could be used as a commodity and manipulated as a resource. Nature, tamed and subdued, could be transformed into a garden to provide both material and spiritual food to enhance the comfort and soothe the anxieties of men distraught by the demands of the urban world and the stresses of the marketplace. It depended on a masculine perception of nature as a mother and bride whose primary function was to comfort; nurture, and provide for the wellbeing of the male. In pastoral imagery, both nature and women are subordinate and essentially passive. They nurture but do not control or exhibit disruptive passion. The pastoral mode, although it viewed nature as benevolent, was a model created as an antidote to the pressures of urbanization and mechanization. It represented a fulfilment of human needs for nurture, but by conceiving of nature as passive, it nevertheless allowed for the possibility of its use and manipulation.<sup>16</sup>

Merchant here explains the way in which nature has traditionally been figured as the provider of resources for the exploitation of male-dominated society. Nature is viewed as an 'antidote' to urbanisation as Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution began to take hold and the individual consciousness threatened to be dissolved into the machine. The Romantic Egotistical Sublime, in which the poetic mind 'escapes' into nature in order to come to some revelation

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<sup>15</sup> Gaard and Gruen, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Merchant, pp. 8–9.

about the self, can too often continue the exploitation of nature as ‘passive’, as a resource both physically and emotionally for the enlightenment of the self. Ecofeminist poets such as Graham and Oswald seek to move away from this consideration of nature as separate from the human, and instead consider the way in which we are deeply and inextricably connected to the natural world, and how this affects our own assumptions of gender and power.<sup>17</sup>

These pivotal ideas of ecopoetics and ecofeminism are reflected in Graham’s ‘Reading Plato’. Terry Gifford suggests that ‘there can be no “innocent” reference to nature in a poem’, and that any reference to nature will inevitably ‘express a notion of nature that relates to culturally developed assumptions about metaphysics, aesthetics, politics, and status — that is, in many cases, ideologies’.<sup>18</sup> Graham’s title ‘Reading Plato’ addresses these ideologies, making the reader aware of the cultural and historical implications of Plato’s philosophy at work within the poem. The friend in the poem is inextricable from the primal need to hunt, the historical tradition of man attempting to order nature for his own survival. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker asks us to:

[...] Imagine

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<sup>17</sup> Modern ecocriticism often assumes that the loss of a distinct, discrete sense of selfhood is a force for ecological good which unmoors us from our perceptions of ourselves as singular and isolated entities bounded off from the rest of the world. However, it is important to consider the implications of such a shared, communal identity. Psychosis is often the result of a loss or fragmentation of self, and trance states of communion in religious ceremonies or rites are necessarily brief, as prolonged dispersal of the self into the external can have disastrous consequences. The individual is conditioned into its singularity; one experiences the world through a set of eyes, as an embodied being (for the most part) in one form, and so the dispersal of the self or the acknowledgement of ourselves as watery beings who are always connected and eternally in flow seems hard to grasp. It is also important to consider the implications of dissolving this individuality for marginalised voices. The lyric ‘I’ for such voices is a tool to be withheld from poetry or used to express difference and to combat the ‘largely monochromatic, monolingual expression of sameness’ which often characterises poetry; to escape from the largely male legacies of post-war and Romantic poetry which seek to homogenise the lyric ‘I’ into a universal voice which promotes the Western, white, male voice and Others any voice which does not fit this criteria. See Sandeep Parmar’s article ‘Not a British Subject’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 December 2015 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/>> [Accessed 24 October 2022]; Harriet Tarlo’s ‘Introduction’, in *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2011), pp. 7–20; and Tarlo’s ‘Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction’, *How2 Journal*, 3.2 (2007). <[https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/ecopoetics/introstatem/ents/tarlo\\_intro.html](https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/introstatem/ents/tarlo_intro.html)> [Accessed 24 October 2022] for a wider exploration of this.

<sup>18</sup> Terry Gifford, ‘The Social Construction of Nature’, in *The Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 173–176 (p. 176).



the body  
they were all once  
a part of (ll. 59–62).

This invitation precedes the separation of man and nature, considering a time when the cohesion of the two was a reality which humanity accepted, and yet this is confined to the imagination, as ‘these men’ (l. 63) now consider themselves set apart from the ‘green banks’ (l. 64).

Oswald also acknowledges the ‘inextricable interconnectedness’ of nature and humanity in her ‘Sea Sonnet’ sequence as in the first sonnet she declares:

I watch the weather make the sea my soul,  
[...]  
and when it rains, the very integer  
and shape of water disappears in water. (ll. 11–14)

The air, the water, and the human soul are all connected and interact with each other outside human comprehension, as the speaker is reduced to an onlooker, observing the continual fluctuation of water into another state which resists categorisation and constantly redefines itself.

### **III. *Thinking With Water: Hydrocriticism and the ‘Aquatic Turn’***

I am especially interested in how Oswald and Graham utilise the physicality of water in their poetry to explore these ideas surrounding ecofeminism and our dependence upon the natural world more broadly. Both ‘Reading Plato’ and the ‘Sea Sonnet’ sequence explore a natural scene with water at the centre, and observe human interaction with this nature. Snyder’s assertion that ‘language does not impose order on a chaotic universe, but reflects its own wildness back’ is made clear in these poems as nature remains unconquerable and humanity a part of it rather than abstracted from it, and so language can only hope to reflect ‘its own wildness’. The poems

also draw attention to their own artifice, Graham through directly calling out the 'story' and 'beautiful lie' she is about to tell, and Oswald through the strict sonnet form which uses the volta and strong, alliterative stresses to regiment the poems, only for the content to flow through the form just as the ocean does. By immersing language into the observed aqueous world and surrendering to it, the poets begin to 'see with language' instead of using it to attempt to control nature, and so create an image of humanity coexisting in harmony with nature and water specifically.

Contrary to this traditional 'passive' view of nature as something which provides resources for and nurtures the absolute, autonomous, authoritative male self is the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature. Water connects human waste to hydro and ecological systems, which in turn feed, sustain, and alter human bodies with these same waste chemicals, often disproportionately affecting poor and marginalised communities. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis assert that:

Water reminds us that relationality is more than a romanticized confluence of bodies. Water also circulates contamination and disease. Pollutants travelling through rainclouds and groundwaters, or pieces of plastic carried by ocean currents underscore other, more difficult communications.<sup>19</sup>

Chen et al argue that 'the relationality of water cannot be considered without critical attention to anthropogenic intervention, as human bodies are the cause of much of this toxic transit' (p. 12), noting that 'ongoing industrial pollution, mega-dam construction, massive groundwater extractions, and large-scale irrigation schemes re-choreograph relations in harmful ways' (p. 12). The complex relationship between nature, specifically water, and humanity, is thus far from the romanticised imaginings of the nineteenth century.

A recent example of this can be found in the town of Flint, Michigan, which, in 2014, 'switched from purchasing and distributing water from DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewage Department] to

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<sup>19</sup> Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, 'Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn?', in *Thinking with Water*, ed. by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), pp. 3–22 (p. 12). All further references to this work are to this edition.

treating water at its facility in Flint', changing the town's water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River.<sup>20</sup> This river had notoriously been used 'as a dumping ground for decades' worth of industrial pollutants', and 'was popularly known as a repository for shopping carts, old cars, and the occasional corpse'.<sup>21</sup> The town 'had lost tens of thousands of jobs and half of its population to deindustrialization and white flight'.<sup>22</sup> Government records show that in 2015, over half the population of Flint was Black or African American,<sup>23</sup> and Benjamin Pauli highlights that more than forty percent of its residents 'lived below the poverty line [...] and with an ever-shrinking tax base, it teetered perpetually on the brink of fiscal collapse, barely able to sustain basic city services'.<sup>24</sup>

The switch took place despite concerns from the residents and officials, and inevitably, 'within a few weeks of the switch, residents started complaining about the colour, taste, and odour of their drinking water'.<sup>25</sup> The polluted water 'was causing rashes, especially in children', and 'red water and discolouration were observed throughout the distribution system [...] there was an unusually large number of water main breaks'.<sup>26</sup> The situation deteriorated quickly, and in summer 2014, risk of E. coli contamination 'resulted in the issuance of three boil-water alerts within a 22-day period'.<sup>27</sup> Attempts to counter this issue only added to the problem, as 'extra chlorine generated hazardous levels of trihalomethanes [...] and brought the city into violation

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<sup>20</sup> Susan J. Masten, Simon H. Davies, and Shawn P. McElmurry, 'Flint Water Crisis: What Happened and Why?', *Journal: American Water Works Association*, 108.12 (2016), 22–34 (p. 23).

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>23</sup> United States Census Bureau, 'QuickFacts: Flint City, Michigan' <<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/flintcitymichigan>> [Accessed 28 September 2022].

<sup>24</sup> Pauli, p. ix.

<sup>25</sup> Masten, Davies, and McElmurry, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Safe Drinking Water Act'.<sup>28</sup> Failure to ensure that water pipes were properly protected against corrosion meant that in 2015 'the city had a serious problem with lead in its water'.<sup>29</sup>

Neimanis and Mielle Chandler, in their chapter 'Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics', argue that as water 'changes forms and cycles through various manifestations of bodies, societies, and polities, diffusing, spreading, and bringing back to us the very matter we cast away, water shows us that at every level we are of water'.<sup>30</sup> Though this inevitable and inextricable connectivity through water may sound at first like an idealist possibility for universality and equality, Neimanis and Chandler are quick to note the bleaker side of this inter-relationality, as they argue that 'to harm water is not simply to harm ourselves; it is, as so many ecologists have shown, to harm the conditions for the proliferation of life itself' (p. 62). Water's ability to flow, interconnect, and exceed human understanding is met all too often by human acts of damming, channelisation, pollution, and unequal distribution which loads this seemingly (from a wealthy, Westernised, global-rich perspective at least) ubiquitous element with human hierarchies of power.

Neimanis highlights another example of this toxic confluence of humanity and nature in *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, in which she describes the politics of location for humans as watery bodies which are inextricable from this relationality:

In addition to fat, vitamins, lactose, minerals, antibodies, and other life-sustaining matters, North American breast milk also likely harbours DDT, PCBs, dioxin, trichloroethylene, cadmium, mercury, lead, benzene, arsenic, paint thinner, phthalates, dry-cleaning fluid, toilet deodorizers, Teflon, rocket fuel, termite poison, fungicides, and flame retardant [...] as Williams notes, if breast milk were sold at the grocery store, in some cases it would exceed allowable levels of chemicals in foods on the shelf next to it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Pauli, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis, 'Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics', in *Thinking With Water*, ed. by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), pp. 61–83 (p. 62). All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>31</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 33. All further references to this work are to this edition. See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962) for a harrowing account of how these toxins leak into

This environmental pollution which ‘pool[s] in mothers’ milk foreground[s] the need to think about bodies differently — as not at all those discrete, zipped up skins of Enlightenment individualism’ (p. 33), Neimanis reflects, marking a departure from these traditional ways of thinking about nature as something containable and controllable, and instead considering how vulnerable the human body is to our own pollution of the natural world upon which it relies for life.

Neimanis follows the aqueous gestation of these pollutants long after they have been forgotten and flushed down urban toilets or drains, noting that ‘these toxins do not readily break down; instead, they concentrate, and they enter the food-chain — from plankton, to fish, to large marine mammals’ (p. 35). These marine mammals ‘attract and magnify fat-soluble toxins’ (p. 35) in their blubber, which gestate and concentrate over seasons and their long life-spans. Neimanis continues to explain how these toxins re-enter human bodies:

Sea mammal fat is then consumed by humans in Arctic communities as a traditional dietary staple. As a result, the breast milk of 36 Inuit women in the Canadian Arctic contains two to ten times the amount of organochlorine concentrations of samples from white women hundreds of kilometres to the south. (pp. 35–36)

Our relationality through water thus carries with it the human imbalances of power, our misunderstanding of ourselves as abstracted and isolated from the natural world around us, and the reality of this generational gestation of toxic human waste.

Another example of how ‘water has a particularly intimate relationship with political and social power’ (p. 6) is highlighted as Chen et al explain that:

In many cases, the achievement of domination over watercourses (however temporary) coincides with an intensification of social domination. The construction of the Sarder Sarovar mega-dam in India’s Narmada Valley, for example, has displaced and disenfranchised approximately half a million people. [...] In spite of discourses promising a fair distribution of benefits, the imposition of managerial control over the Narmada River had brought more water (and, therefore, economic wealth) to already-privileged

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the soil from everyday chemical use, and how they affect ecosystems and human lives for generations thereafter.

constituencies, while radically dispossessing the mostly tribal populations of the region.  
(p. 6)

With such examples in mind, it becomes impossible to consider ourselves as ‘those discrete, zipped up skins of Enlightenment individualism’, and a politics of location, the deep imbalance of power which is expressed in and through many watery inhabitations, locations, and experiences, becomes apparent.

These examples illustrate the importance of water in discourses surrounding ecology and related disciplines. The rapid multiplication of subfields of ecology which focus on water and its many vessels and identities speaks to this ‘oceanic turn’ in ecocriticism.<sup>32</sup> There is a growing realisation of both the inextricable interconnection between water and humanity and, as our interactions with it become more and more politicised and droughts and floods become commonplace, the unequal weight of these irreversible changes which falls on the poor, minority ethnicities, and/or those who do not hold power over their situations.

Hester Blum’s ‘Introduction: Oceanic Studies’ opens a 2013 special issue of *Atlantic Studies*, in which she argues that:

Whether in Atlantic, Black Atlantic, transnational, or hemispheric studies; or in ecocritical, spatial, planetary, or temporal reorientations, the seas have bounded, washed, transported, and whelmed the terms and objects [...] of the critical courses that literary, historical, and cultural studies have shaped in recent decades.<sup>33</sup>

The special issue, Blum argues, ‘proposes that the sea should become central to critical conversations about global movements, relations, and histories. And central not just as a theme or organizing metaphor with which to widen a landlocked critical prospect’.<sup>34</sup> Blum thus outlines the importance of water, specifically oceans, in all considerations of diverse human existence and experience, and how our interactions with and dependence upon our oceans shape our very nature.

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<sup>32</sup> Laura Winkiel, ‘Introduction’, *English Language Notes*, 57.1 (2019), 1–10 (p. 1).

<sup>33</sup> Hester Blum, ‘Introduction: Oceanic Studies’, *Atlantic Studies*, 10.2 (2013), 151–155 (p. 151).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

A 2019 issue of *English Language Notes* similarly centres on ‘Hydro-criticism’, and includes articles such as Isabel Hofmeyr’s ‘Provisional Notes of Hydrocolonialism’. Hofmeyr begins with a discussion of Koleka Putuma’s performance poem ‘Water’, which seeks to ‘reclaim [...] the ocean from a decolonizing perspective, foregrounding the histories of slavery that it brought, but also examining how one might unseat and reimagine these genealogies’.<sup>35</sup> Hofmeyr aptly highlights that ‘as global warming and climate change take hold, and as sea levels rise, we are reminded that we all live in the aftermath of the hydropolitics of imperialism’ (p. 13). In consequence, ‘much ocean-related literary criticism manifests a deepening engagement with the materiality of water’ (p. 14).

The ‘hydropolitics’ of water are also addressed by Paul Gilroy, who focuses on ‘the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic’, and uses ‘the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol’.<sup>36</sup> Gilroy foregrounds his concern with ‘the flows, exchanges, and in-between elements that call the very desire to be centred into question’ (p. 190), considering the intersection between human systems of oppression and violence and the water which carries these ‘living, micro-cultural, micro-political systems’ (p. 190) from place to place.

Similarly, Christina Sharpe’s *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* introduces the ‘Trans\* Atlantic’, which is:

That s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the Black Atlantic but also in excess of its currents [...] a variety of ways that try to get at something about or toward the range of trans\*formations enacted on and by Black bodies.<sup>37</sup>

Sharpe explains that:

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<sup>35</sup> Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘Provisional Notes on Hydrocolonialism’, *English Language Notes*, 57.1 (2019), 11–20 (p. 12). All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 4. All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>37</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 30. All further references to this work are to this edition.

The asterisk after a word functions as the wildcard, and I am thinking the trans\* in that way; as a means to mark the ways the slave and the Black occupy what Saidiya Hartman calls the 'position of the unthought'. (p. 30)

Sharpe takes 'the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness)' to inform this turn towards the 'Trans\*Atlantic' (pp. 17–18).

Neimanis' 2012 article 'Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water', is an antecedent to *Bodies of Water*, and acknowledges another watery body of critical thought, as she notes that:

By venturing to feminism's ecotones, and leaping in, we can discover that feminism dives far deeper than human sexual difference, and outswims any attempts to limit it thus. Here is gestation, here is proliferation, here is danger, here is risk. Here is an unknowable future, always already folded into our watery flesh. Here is hydrofeminism.<sup>38</sup>

Neimanis introduces the point that will form the basis of her argument in *Bodies of Water*, as she argues that 'to drink a glass of water is to ingest the ghosts of bodies that haunt that water', which necessitates our acknowledgement and dependence on each other and the whole water cycle.<sup>39</sup>

In more recent critical discourse, John Ryan notes what he calls the 'terracentrism' of eco-poetics, and seeks to counter:

The privileging of the terrestrial in our daily lives — and to embrace hydrocentrism, or, even, what might be called rivercentrism [...] signifying a river-focused worldview as well as a physical identification with rivers as bodies in themselves.<sup>40</sup>

Ryan notes the 'strong terracentric bias' during the relatively 'brief history' of eco-poetics, and explains that 'key studies such as Scott Bryson's (2005) *The west side of any mountain* makes only passing allusions to rivers and other water bodies [...] while Lynn Keller's (2017) *Recomposing eco-poetics* privileges the role of terrestrial organisms' (p. 488). Ryan argues that

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<sup>38</sup> Astrida Neimanis, 'Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water', in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. by Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 85–100 (p. 96).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> John Charles Ryan, 'Hydro-poetics: The Rewor(l)ding of Rivers', *River Research and Applications*, 38.3 (2022), 486–493 (p. 487). All further references to this work are to this edition.



ecopoetics, as defined by these key studies and other foundational literatures, 'asserts the value of the Earth while paying less attention to the biosphere's hydrological systems and, more specifically, its precious — and precarious freshwater ecologies' (p. 488).

Hydrocriticism, as set out in the 2019 *ELN* issue, seems to focus broadly on oceans (with the exception of Allison Nowak Shelton's article 'Learning from Rivers: Toward a Relational View of the Anthropocene'), while Ryan calls for a central focus on rivers in 'hydropoetics' which 'resists an outlook that asserts human dominance over rivers. From a hydropoetic point of view, rivers are fellow beings — intelligent communicators — who command dialogue and respect' (p. 488). While these and other subfields rightly turn the focus of ecopoetics and ecology onto the aquatic, there is little consideration, other than Neimanis' foundational works, of water as a whole, unbounded from a certain identity as ocean or river, cognizant instead of water as a ubiquitous, flowing entity which is at once both ocean and river, cloud and puddle, mist and bottled commodity.

This thesis aims to take Neimanis' concept of 'bodies of water' as a starting point to consider our relationship with water which is always becoming, and which takes our identity with it as much as we are formed by its ever-presence within us. I explore how water flows on and through the riverbed, the ocean's depths, and carries itself through clouds and pipes, pooling in underground caverns and bursting through dams as much as it slips through human bodies and powers our actions and thoughts. Alongside this exploration of water, I consider how the land around it is occupied and affected, merging the focus of ecopoetry and ecocriticism with that of hydropoetics and hydrocriticism to create a fuller picture of water as it passes through our human lives and places and how it saturates the poetic expression of human identity. Through reading Graham and Oswald's water poetry, I examine how water shapes our identity and existence, and how the sudden and unpredictable destabilisation of water cycles threatens these fragile notions of selfhood.

#### IV. 'The water drinks my mind': Chapter Summaries

The first chapter will outline the feminist basis of the thesis, beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. I explore the notion of becoming what one is, how female identity is forged through relation to expectations and received gender roles. The foundational statement of de Beauvoir's book, 'He is the Absolute. She is the Other', will be shown as the basis of this Othering of women, which ties into ecofeminism as women and nature are grouped into the Other under man's authority.<sup>41</sup> I will consider de Beauvoir's assertion that 'superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills' (p. 74), and how this has shaped society, particularly in relation to ongoing US gun control and abortion debates. Jorie Graham's early work, including the poem 'Concerning the Right to Life' will then be explored with these concepts and tensions in mind. Whilst the case may be made that de Beauvoir's theories and philosophies are somewhat outdated in the contemporary critical landscape, I return to second-wave feminism in this first chapter in order to understand how these issues first intersected with ecocritical concerns, and how the history of patriarchal oppression can be linked with the history of natural exploitation, how the Othering of woman and nature go hand in hand.

I then explore Hélène Cixous' ideas around women and language, how woman must 'write herself' to break out of the patriarchy which has controlled her even down to the language which she uses to determine herself.<sup>42</sup> This language used to determine selfhood leads on to Judith Butler, and their concepts of gender as performativity, a 'repeated stylisation of the body'.<sup>43</sup> These debates around gender, identity, and the formation of reality through language will then be explored through the lens of Alice Oswald's poem 'Narcissus', which stands in strong opposition to Ted Hughes' heavily gendered 'Sunstuck Foxglove'. Oswald here introduces the

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<sup>41</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), p. 6. All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>42</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875–893 (p. 875). All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 45. All further references to this work are to this edition.

idea of a being not wholly human or wholly natural, but somewhere between the two, with aspects of both informing and creating consciousness. I then consider gender in Graham's work, and how identifiers of individual, gendered identity are largely absent, but at points used in order to first acknowledge and then cast off the gender roles that seem arbitrary and incomplete in an eroding world.

Chapter Two delves further into the imagination of identity, considering how the act of naming shapes and transforms our consciousness. Carol J. Adams' radical ecofeminist book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* will introduce this idea of how a name can erase or dictate an identity through a consideration of how the animal is erased in meat production in favour of its edible counterpart. Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn's *The Anthropology of Names and Naming* will then be used to understand these ideas in a human context, considering how names as identifiers set us within a societal matrix, teaching us our histories and how we should behave. I explore how Graham grapples with names, and how the erasure of identity quickly follows the absence or confiscation of a name in 'Guantánamo' and 'Positive Feedback Loop', in which the question 'who is one when one calls oneself| one?' circles around without answer, and the name becomes the place 'where the dead put their arms around you'.<sup>44</sup> History embedded within identity is also found in Oswald's poem 'Dunt: A poem for a dried up river', in which a historical figure attempts to summon herself and her identity out of a river which no longer flows, and Oswald explores how her identity shifts and crumbles with this realisation of erasure. Graham goes back to the creation of identity in the Genesis story in 'Day Off', and traces the dominion of humanity over nature to the present or future moment in which manmade climate change threatens extinction of the planet. Oswald's 'Severed Head Floating Downriver', explored alongside Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, considers what happens to the body and to

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<sup>44</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Positive Feedback Loop', in *Sea Change* (New York: Ecco, 2008), p. 42, ll. 19–20.

consciousness after death, when name and identity are washed away and ‘the water drinks my mind’.<sup>45</sup>

Chapter Three focuses on the idea of embodiment, using Astrida Neimanis’ concept of humans as ‘bodies of water’ and how this forces us to understand ourselves as watery beings, part of the ecosystems and water cycles around us. Luce Irigaray’s *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* will be used alongside Neimanis’ ideas to explore the notion that the boundary between humanity and the natural world is artificial. Oswald’s ‘A Short Story of Falling’ explores this concept, as she considers herself as part of the water cycle, not master over it but merely another ‘body’ through which water flows. Graham’s sense of embodiment is more urgent, as in ‘Sea Change’ the place of the individual is thrown into question, as the rising water forces humanity to consider that the ‘sea change’ is not merely *out there* but also *within us*.

Oswald’s sense of embodiment is tied to her ideas of place and dwelling, and as a British poet writing about nature one cannot escape the connection or comparison to the Romantic poets. I consider how Oswald’s work reacts against traditional Romantic notions of embodiment in relation to nature, and how she favours poets connected to the land rather than attempting mastery over it. John Clare’s poetic reaction against enclosure, which curtailed a freer interaction between human and nature in favour of enforcing the human hierarchy between rich and poor, is answered by Oswald’s poems, which explore how nature grows over humanity’s boundaries and retakes land which we seek to own. Enclosure’s seizure of common lands into private ownership, depriving the poor of their rights to access and small-scale agriculture in favour of larger, land-owning interests, marked the beginning of the shift from perceiving nature as something communal to the capitalist mindset of nature as a resource to be exploited, resulting in the present climate catastrophe. Comparing these two contexts, therefore, is important in showing the progression away from traditional, pastoral perspectives of nature to

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<sup>45</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘Severed Head Floating Downriver’, in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 9, l. 36.

closer, real, lived experiences from within nature such as Clare's, and how current ecopoetry such as Oswald's follows on from this close relation to the natural world.

Oswald answers Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' with her own musings from the same bridge which focus not on the manmade splendour, but instead on the water slipping by. Oswald's reaction against Romanticism, first explored in this chapter, will reappear in more depth at the end of the thesis, as I return to consider Oswald's place in British nature poetry.

Chapter Four will focus on voice, exploring how Oswald's *Dart* creates and moulds one voice into another to echo the way in which water passes through each character in the continual cycle of life, death, and recreation. I consider this quasi-epic poem in relation to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and how both use mythical figures to frame their poems. For Eliot, Tiresias, as a blind prophet with experience of both genders, observes the scene dispassionately, apathetically removed from that which he witnesses. Proteus, at the end of Oswald's poem, instead observes the way in which water is ever-changing, and joins the fluvial cast through which water flows and makes the story, despite his mythical identity. I compare Jan Coe (in Oswald's poem) and Phlebas (in Eliot's), and how their deaths affect the poems, how Eliot uses this 'death by water' as a warning, and how Oswald makes it a part of the history of the place as Jan Coe continues to narrate the river after his death.

Chapter Five considers American understandings of place and how Graham fits within the legacy of transcendentalism. I consider the label of 'American poet', and what this means in terms of identity and ownership, particularly with Graham's international identity (explored in 'I Was Taught Three'). The chapter then considers the American sense of place, how this is altered and manipulated by colonialism, the vastness of nature, and the human (male) assumption of power over the natural world. I explore how Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman encounter, understand, and engage with nature and water, and how Graham's poetry

fits into or reacts against this legacy of American writing alongside American nationalism, using Lorine Niedecker as a more recent example of dwelling within nature. Through her use of water, I show how Graham embraces the ecological view of interconnectedness of humanity and water, and how this identity as another body of water interacts with and challenges her wider national identity.

The final chapter considers how Oswald reacts against the Romantic legacy of her national identity. Picking up ideas introduced in Chapter Three, Chapter Six will consider Oswald's own thoughts on Romanticism as expressed in her 'Introduction: A Dew's Harp' to *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, and her essay 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise'. Both consider the act of gardening and how this relation to the earth is not the lofty, detached appreciation of nature by the Romantic eye, but instead an earthy connection to something which exists both outside and within us. I take examples from *The Thunder Mutters* alongside *Gigantic Cinema: A Weather Anthology*, Oswald's anthology with Paul Keegan, to understand where Oswald places herself in relation to other 'nature poets', and what she extracts and also casts off from these predecessors. This chapter considers William Wordsworth, John Clare, D. H. Lawrence, and Ted Hughes as vital poets through which Oswald creates her own nature poetry narrative, and I consider how Oswald's sense of place and identity as a poet writing about nature is shaped by or against these voices. Through water, Oswald accepts the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world, and so casts off any poetic influence which seeks to reinforce this artificial boundary between the two.

## Chapter One: 'That invisible self whose absence inhabits mirrors' — Feminism and Language

### I. 'He is the Absolute. She is the Other.'

In the foundational feminist text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that:

If I want to define myself, I first have to say, 'I am a woman'; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious. (p. 5)

This sets up her argument throughout the text as she builds an image of a constructed society in which 'he is the Absolute. She is the Other.' (p. 6). According to de Beauvoir, the power dynamics of male-female relations have been engineered in such a way that the basic truth of female existence has become this Otherness from man, who is the default, and thereby dominates. This is common in many societies, de Beauvoir observes, as 'no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself' (p. 6). Woman's existence is relational, fragile, and dependent upon this male stability in such a construct, and de Beauvoir asserts that woman 'is far more deeply divided against herself than is a man' (p. 53), allowing a rift within the female self in which this 'otherness' can be located.

De Beauvoir accepts that 'woman *is* her body as man *is* his, but her body is something other than her' (p. 41), which suggests a reason for these altered power dynamics as female autonomy is shared with this 'something other' within her. Man, according to de Beauvoir's view of society, has created himself as an absolute, whole being, able to control himself and his desires, capable of self-definition and declaration, whereas he positions woman as 'a womb, an ovary; she is female; this word is enough to define her' (p. 21). De Beauvoir notes this definition of woman as something placed upon her because of the functions of her body, the ovaries and womb which will bring new life, rather than her own selfhood. In such a world, woman is defined by this Otherness within her, the ability of childbirth, whereas man is defined by his ability to exist in entirety without reliance upon another. De Beauvoir states that man 'is a being who is not given,

who makes himself what he is' (p. 45), a complete, enclosed system. Woman's worst curse, according to de Beauvoir, is:

[...] her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but in risking his life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills. (p. 74)

Man's dominance stems from this ability to create a fixed state, the death of an animal or another man, whereas woman is relegated to the perpetual state of becoming, of begetting life rather than ending it, and is therefore enclosed within this corporeal identity given to her.

De Beauvoir argues that the fundamental fact of this constructed woman is her incompleteness, as although woman 'is a human being before becoming a woman' (p. 308), this 'becoming' dominates female existence:

Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared with man in her becoming; that is, her *possibilities* have to be defined: what skews the issues so much is that she is being reduced to what she was, to what she is today, while the question concerns her capacities [...]. (p. 45)

De Beauvoir suggests that in this built society of learned behaviours, the process of being a woman is in constant change, whereas a man is a fixed identity towards which women strive. De Beauvoir refers to Aristotle's definition of women: "the female is female by virtue of a certain *lack of qualities*" (p. 5), and Saint Thomas' depiction of woman as "incomplete man", an "incidental being" (p. 5) to further this picture of man creating his dominance by using language in which woman is deeply inferior, incomplete, and therefore subject to masculine control. This constant flux is the locus of Otherness, as woman's changeable existence is always imperfect, always lacking some masculine completeness which would bring with it this autonomous, whole sense of self. This 'becoming' in woman in such a constructed, given identity gives room for Otherness to take root, challenging the self's control of the mind.

De Beauvoir states that 'it is in women that the whole of foreign Nature is concentrated' (p. 79), arguing that the Otherness in woman which this unbalanced society has created is akin to the



unknown in nature. Nature is vast and unaccountable, with its changing seasons and forces beyond human comprehension. Nature, like woman, is always becoming, never fixed or whole, existing in a state of 'possibility' rather than certainty. De Beauvoir explains that 'the Other can be embodied in the sea and the mountain just as well as in the woman; they provide man with the same passive and unexpected resistance that allows him to accomplish himself' (p. 176). It is possible, then, to see how a dichotomy may be formed between man and nature in this constructed society, where women are merely part of the unknown, part of nature, both of whom are 'a prey to possess' (p. 176) for the man as an absolute being. Historically, this natural, close-to-the-ground image of woman has been perpetuated as male dominated societies build this image of women as Other, changeable as the seasons, and therefore lacking something which would allow them to be in control of their selves in order to preserve this masculine power. 'In the past all history was made by males' (p. 10), de Beauvoir states, suggesting that these gender roles are learned behaviours, passed down through history, written by 'males' to ensure their continued control of society. 'Women's entire history has been written by men' (p. 148), she continues, exemplifying the self-perpetuating cycle of oppression as men continue to hold power over women through defining and expressing history on their own terms, excluding woman from the language of fact.

Language, then, plays a huge part in this subjugation of women, as it is through language that the self is made and expressed, history is written, and common facts are established and shared. De Beauvoir stresses the fabrication of the female state of being as she states that woman's body is:

Not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society; biology alone cannot provide an answer to the question that concerns us: why is woman the *Other*? (p. 48)

This female inferiority is not interior, but instead is constructed through language, 'what humanity has made of the human female' (p. 48) through expressing and defining it in language which moulds our perceptions of reality. Even when in the form of idols, de Beauvoir suggests

that woman is 'defined through notions created by the male consciousness. All of the idols invented by man, however terrifying he may have made them, are in fact dependent upon him, and this is why he is able to destroy them' (p. 82). Society, then, according to Beauvoir, has constructed the woman through masculine language, in relation to and dependent upon the man, and has excluded her from equality with him. The woman is relegated to a silent body, without her own language or autonomy, a locus for the Other and for man's domination.

Although de Beauvoir's arguments may seem outdated, these concepts are still very much alive and debated in contemporary politics, particularly and very influentially in the US. Two of the most divisive issues in US domestic policy are gun control, 'man rais[ing] himself above the animal' or what he believes himself to be superior to, and abortion, restrictions placed upon 'the sex that gives birth', chiefly by men in positions of power. Even within the languages of these two states of being, man is active, he raises himself above, whereas woman 'gives' birth, and even that passive choice is debated in abortion politics today: the figure of woman is constructed, debated, and perpetuated by male voices.

## **II. 'The sex that gives birth'**

I will now look in detail at these two aspects of political debate in order to highlight how female identity is forged, moulded, and controlled by our current society, and how this Othering of woman perpetuates the hierarchies of man above woman which de Beauvoir observes. According to Dorothy McBride Stetson, 'political leaders have considered and made policy on every aspect of abortion', and this debate over the autonomy of an individual 'has been called the major conflict of the post-war era in the United States'.<sup>1</sup> However:

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy McBride Stetson, *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements, and the Democratic State: A Comparative Study of State Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 247. All further references to this work are to this edition.

Despite the fact that abortions are performed only on women and never on men, policy-makers have often framed it in other terms — doctor's rights, foetal rights, law enforcement, morality, religion, progressivism, family planning, eugenics — rather than discussing women's privacy, choice, health, autonomy, or sexuality. (p. 3)

Woman's choice to 'give life', the very act which de Beauvoir argues curses her and excludes her from the fulfilment of male existence, is taken from her by a predominantly male governing body, which chooses to focus not on the individual but on the institutions and other individuals surrounding her. Man is absolute and exists without reference to any other member of the community in this warrior society which de Beauvoir observes and which is echoed in contemporary US society, whereas woman must exist alongside the 'something other' within her which makes her dependent upon the male structures of power around her.

The central court case used as a landmark in the abortion debate was the Roe vs. Wade case in 1973, which ruled that a pregnant woman's liberty to abort her child was protected under the constitution. The defendants in the case, according to McBride Stetson, 'portrayed women, as mothers, to be passive carriers of another human life. Scientific evidence was called upon to demonstrate that the foetus was in charge of the pregnancy, not the mother' (p. 252). Despite the ruling, which gave women the autonomy to choose what happened to their bodies, the other side of the debate adhered to these embedded stereotypes of women as the child bearers of society, rather than individuals in their own right. The emphasis on women as 'passive carriers of another human life' suggests the long standing truth in de Beauvoir's observation that this birth ability becomes a curse for women, as their autonomy as individuals is taken from them. The defence of the foetus being 'in charge of the pregnancy' further impedes female autonomy, privileging an unborn child with no concept of the world ahead of them or the moral, religious, health, or legal structures within it above the needs of the mother.

The challengers to this case pointed out that whilst men and women may carry equal responsibility in sexual intercourse and conceiving a child, 'the women endure the entire burden [of childbirth] [...] which women must bear alone' (p. 253). Making abortion illegal, for these

challengers, 'made women into unwilling incubators or forced them to give up their children, drawing analogies to breeders' (p. 253). This defence indicates the truth of de Beauvoir's argument, wherein the constructed society relies on women as vessels for childbirth, even against their will, secondary to the life within them.

Another landmark in the abortion debate was the Hyde Amendment of 1976, in which federal medical funds were to be used to pay for abortions of pregnancies caused by rape or incest, or which endangered the life of the mother. Proponents of this amendment argued that women were seen as 'mothers whose function was to give themselves to their children before and after birth' (quoted in McBride Stetson, p. 256). 'For nine months the mother provides nourishment and shelter, and birth is no substantial change, it is merely a change of address' (p. 256), read the congressional record. The female body, as observed by de Beauvoir, 'is something other than her' in these debates, scrutinised by predominantly male legislators, subject to their power, and objectified in terms of its usefulness to the perpetuation of human life rather than as an independent, autonomous being. The challengers to this amendment saw women seeking abortions as malicious women: 'the mother, who should be the natural protector of her unborn child, becomes its adversary' (quoted in McBride Stetson, p. 256). Again, such an argument exemplifies the male ruling on what a woman 'should' be, the 'natural protector' of life rather than the warrior who goes out to destroy it, as de Beauvoir observes.

Indeed, McBride Stetson records that:

Women — individuals or in groups and networks — were not admitted to the policy process in Congress when the decision [the Hyde Amendment] was made. The only two women who participated in the debate were Representatives Bella Abzug and Patricia Schroeder, but, with the tiny representation of women in the Congress, they were clearly outnumbered. (p. 257)

The exclusion of women from this debate demonstrates the extent of patriarchal rule in such a society, wherein the male leaders exercise their power over the female body without reference

to or giving voice to those whom this will impact, ensuring that ‘women’s entire history has been written by men’, and excluding women from the language of their own identities.

Later reiterations of this debate included the 2003 Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, which ruled that physicians who performed a partial-birth abortion would be fined or imprisoned. McBride Stetson asserts that:

Depictions of the [abortion] procedure reduced women to their somewhat romanticised body parts: womb, cervix, ‘birth canal’. There was little attention to whole women. The procedure became the issue, described by proponents as inhuman, gruesome, horrible, violating everything good to the human community. It is killing, homicide, infanticide, a procedure designed to produce a dead child. (p. 261)

Again the objectification of women as the vessels for childbirth was the focus of the proceedings, and ‘there was little attention to whole women’. This echoes de Beauvoir’s suggestion that such a society creates women as ‘a womb, an ovary; she is female; this word is enough to define her’. Through the exclusion of women from their own bodies and indeed from discussions and decisions thereof, US society perpetuates this view of men as dominant, absolute, and women as secondary, objects for the propagation of human life rather than individuals in their own right.

Graham addresses the subject of abortion politics in relation to the woman in ‘Concerning the Right to Life’ in her collection *Materialism*, published in 1993. The poem begins with a masculinised image of a rose:

tall as a man  
on its senseless stem,  
thorns like equal-signs all the way up [...].<sup>2</sup>

Repurposing this traditionally feminised image, Graham suggests the ‘senseless’, arbitrary gendering of a rose as female, and instead paints it as a weaponised figure, full of ‘thorns’ and ‘rough muscle’ (l. 14), alienated from its usual depiction. Cynthia Hogue agrees, as she argues

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<sup>2</sup> Jorie Graham, ‘Concerning the Right to Life’ in *Materialism* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1993), p. 14, ll. 6–8. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

that 'through this deft regendering of a traditional symbol of transient feminine beauty in the lyric, Graham implies that the rose, like the figure of Woman, has been a masculine thing all along'.<sup>3</sup> Graham's rose commands the scene:

each tip looking as if the air were cut

open right there by its  
idea (ll. 9–11).

The stanza break 'cut| |open' enforces this masculine dominance through the poem's form, and the juxtaposition of such brutal imagery with the fragility of a rose performs the illogical dominance of masculine voices in abortion debates.

Graham engages both sides of the debate as the right to choose and the right to life are complicated into questions of individual or collective ownership of the self and the female body:

What is it, the spot inside Mary [...]  
[...]  
through which the crowd can cross

and *take possession*  
*of the earth*— (ll. 131–139).

The foetus is objectified, 'the punched-out spot of| blood which is *not her*' (ll. 131–132), the emphasis on '*not her*' suggesting the female character's desperation to be separate from this 'red idea' (l. 134) inside her, to own her selfhood. However, this 'spot' allows the nameless, collective 'crowd' to '*take possession*', using biblical language which is ingrained in US culture to demand their right to protect the foetus over the woman's right to retain autonomy over her body. This loaded language observes how purportedly Christian values have been used by certain churches and pressure groups to justify taking ownership of the body away from women.

The female speaker and the poem are situated between both sides of the debate:

[...] some

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<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Hogue, 'The Speaking Subject In/Me: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity in the Poetry of Jorie Graham', in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. by Thomas Gardner (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 238–256 (pp. 238–39).

voices screaming *right to life*, some others screaming  
*choice choice*— (ll. 74–76).

However, later in the poem, which flashes forward to a mother forced to serve her child, '*there is no choice*' (l. 125). Thomas Gardiner states that 'Perhaps there are realms where "*there is no choice*" — Graham allows those tensions to "roil" or complicate the "immaculate" terms she wants to use in her own speech', suggesting that the choices of language and form used by poets are unavoidably loaded.<sup>4</sup> 'The poem makes form's choices contested ground', Gardiner continues, 'nothing is settled, other than the sense that now, when words are chosen, despite the sheer fragility of language, perhaps something will have been "displaced"', observing how Graham presents the complications of the debate which spiral ever further away from the binary of right and wrong.<sup>5</sup>

Hogue asserts that the woman 'is neither *merely* a vessel bearing precious content, without value in and of herself, nor guilt-free (as the allusions to Lady Macbeth imply)', observing the ravelling concepts of 'truth' and 'self' in the poem.<sup>6</sup> The 'self' continually fluctuates between 'I', the personal, and 'her', the perceived, as Graham considers both sides of the debate. The importance of core US values is examined, as the foetus is 'truth held *self-|evident*—' (ll. 134–135), alluding to Jefferson's Declaration of Independence in which 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness'.<sup>7</sup> The 'right to life', is the contention of the poem, as Graham observes that both child and mother have a right to live, and are caught between the conflicting truths of the crowd.

In my introduction, I explored how toxic chemicals, gestated in water, passed on to aquatic mammals, and concentrated in food supplies can re-enter human bodies and how these toxins

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Gardner, '*from Jorie Graham's Incandescence*', in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. by Thomas Gardner (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 113–146 (p. 141).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Hogue, p. 239.

<sup>7</sup> *The Declaration of Independence* (Bedford: Applewood Books, 1996), p. 3.

are then passed on to the next generation through lactation. As we discuss the manipulation of reproductive rights through history because of this underlying construction of women and nature as something Other and subservient to men, it is important also to consider the racial and classed politics of water which further separate and segregate groups or individuals from the authoritative 'sex that kills'. Neimanis points to the practice of wet nursing, quoting Florence Williams, who asserts that 'in certain contexts, wet nurses are "transformed into virtual dairy cows"' (*Bodies of Water*, p. 32).

When one considers the fluid aspect of reproduction alongside de Beauvoir's claim, it is important to consider the 'racialized reproductive politics' (p. 32), which Neimanis explores in *Bodies of Water*:

Toni Morrison taught us that breast milk is yet another matter to be usurped from black women, while long histories of slavery, economic disadvantage, and reproductive classism reveal that breast milk flows through materialism of nation-building, imperialism, and colonization. (p. 32)

Emily West notes that 'wet-nursing is a complex and contingent process that has commonly involved women in unequal power relationships in a variety of different regimes whereby wealthier women use women from lower down the social scale as wet nurses'.<sup>8</sup> Breast milk (and the water that it contains) is thus instrumental in the classed, political hierarchies in which the poor feed and sustain the rich, therefore ensuring the perpetuation of their generational oppression as fluid flows from one life into the next, carrying the burden of human oppression with it.

West's article focuses on women in the antebellum South, and she explains that 'as a form of exploitation specific to slave mothers, enforced wet-nursing constituted a distinct aspect of enslaved women's commodification' (p. 37). West argues that 'wet-nursing is a uniquely gendered kind of exploitation, and under slavery it represented the point at which the

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<sup>8</sup> Emily West and R. J. Knight, 'Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, 83.1 (2017), 37–68 (p. 38). All further references to this work are to this edition.



exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers literally intersected' (p. 37). The sex that gives birth, in this instance, is further divided by race and societal power, as the black, female body is used as a commodity, exploited by the white slaveholder in order to perpetuate the generational enslavement of black people under white control. The dehumanisation of such women as animalistic vessels for child-rearing speaks to the horrors of colonisation and the atrocities of the artificial divide between humans, played out through the forced flow of fluid from one body into the other. This also echoes through de Beauvoir's observations of a society in which women are defined by their ability to give birth and raise children.

### III. 'The one that kills'

On the other side of de Beauvoir's argument is 'the one that kills', the man who raises himself 'above the animal' with his power to end life. 'We live in a "gun culture", a "gunfighter nation". Firearms have shaped this society, for better, and sometimes for worse', assert Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster.<sup>9</sup> 'In the popular imagination, these firearms have always been, and belonged, in male hands', they continue, setting out de Beauvoir's suggestion that to be male is to hold the power and right to kill, in contrast to women, who must stay home and passively produce children.<sup>10</sup> 'It [the gun] has become the symbol par excellence of masculinity: of power, force, aggressiveness, decisiveness, deadly accuracy, cold rationality. These are not things generally believed to be available to, let alone desirable for, women', they continue, confirming this argument.<sup>11</sup> The issue of gun control has, similarly to abortion, been a constant concern in US politics for years, and is also controlled and discussed by men in positions of authority who hold the power to allow or disallow individuals the right to own a killing weapon. Jennifer Carlson suggests that 'both sides [of the gun control debate] reproduce gender binaries (men

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster, *Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

are competent and strong; women are dependent and weak').<sup>12</sup> This view is upheld by Susie McKellar, who states that 'gun ownership amongst women is not considered an American birthright as it is for men'.<sup>13</sup> The debate rests, then, on this notion of women as somehow lesser than men, dependent on them and their masculine weapons for survival, a perception of reality built upon these gender assumptions created through language.

Hélène Cixous, in her article 'The Laugh of the Medusa', writes about this masculine language and the entrapment of the female therein. Writing in 1975 as part of the following generation of feminists to de Beauvoir, Cixous urges women to write to reclaim language as a tool for self-definition. 'I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked writing*', Cixous states, and 'until now [...] writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural — hence political, typically masculine economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously' (p. 879). Cixous argues that language is the battleground of female oppression, where men assert their dominance and define woman as something Other and inferior to the 'absolute', masculine default. Writing, for Cixous, is an 'economy', a politically charged ground which must be fought and paid for, which exemplifies the delicacy, fragility, and power of language to oppress, define, and subjugate.

Woman has never *her* turn to speak — this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (p. 879)

Cixous highlights here the importance of language to define and shape reality. By denying woman a voice, the male dominated society takes from her this ground of language on which to affect change, to step out of her status as inferior, thereby assuring continual power over her.

Reacting against this masculine domination, Cixous declares that:

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer D. Carlson, 'From Gun Politics to Self-Defense Politics: A Feminist Critique of the Great Gun Debate', *Violence Against Women*, 20.3 (2014), 369–377 (p. 371).

<sup>13</sup> Susie McKellar, 'Guns: the "last frontier on the road to equality"?', in *The Gendered Object*, ed. by Pat Kirkham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 70–79 (p. 75).

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [...]. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement. (p. 875)

Cixous here emphasises the corporeal aspect to writing, asserting that to reclaim language is to 'put herself into the text', a forceful, active movement of both mind and body. 'Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time' (p. 880), she explains, as through denying woman the freedom of her own body, as society has done for centuries by the suppression of female desire, the masculine-led society censors female expression through language. Thus women are refused the ability to define themselves, and are reduced to their corporeal functions as they benefit society. Cixous acknowledges the role of language in shaping reality, and suggests that by inhabiting language, woman can reclaim identity and autonomy, as she continues, 'writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it' (p. 876). By taking up this language previously forbidden her, 'by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display' (p. 880). For Cixous, language and body are inextricable, emphasising her point that mastery of language allows the female to redefine herself both in language and corporeally through recreating the reality which has previously been placed upon her. Language is the instrument, for Cixous, by which women can rise up and overthrow both corporeal and mental oppression, being as it is a gateway between the conceptual and the physical.

Cixous reclaims the Othering of women, as she orders them to 'write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth' (p. 880). Instead of treating the unknown within women as the locus for mistrust and Otherness, or accepting the creation of 'the uncanny stranger' in women, Cixous views the unconscious as a 'spring' of possibilities. 'There is hidden and always ready in women the source; the locus for the other' (p. 881), she states, and yet does not see this as something to fear or to repress, but instead asserts that 'women should break out of the snare of silence' (p. 881), that this Other

should be recognised and allowed to resurface. This Otherness, in fact, becomes for Cixous the defining feature of 'a feminine practice of writing', which 'can never be theorised, enclosed, coded' (p. 883). The unknown Otherness of the female broadens her possibilities in writing to become something other than the firm structures of a male governed society:

It will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system [...] it will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (p. 883)

By taking language, the tool of self-definition, the locus of power, and re-establishing it as a female domain, Cixous seeks to redefine society and the hierarchy of male-female relations therein. Rising up from this Othered state, armed with language, women lie outside masculine control, as the language which would be used to oppress them now *belongs* to the female. Cixous takes the ground of oppression, the body to which woman has been relegated, and uses it as a catalyst for change: 'women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through' (p. 886).

Judith Butler, writing after Cixous, agrees with this limitation of the self within language, and opens this out in their exploration of gender as a construct in *Gender Trouble*. 'For this "I" that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language' (p. xxvi), they state, suggesting that the identity of 'I' is partially controlled by the language in which it is situated. Butler asserts that:

I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this 'I' possible. This is the bind of self-expression, as I understand it. What it means is that you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you. (p. xxvi)

Butler here echoes the power of self-expression which Cixous indicates. The representation of the self, according to Butler, is caught up in language, as one cannot present this self-expression

without language. In the ongoing gender debate, the language of the self is of paramount importance, as one is defined by the pronouns which express this gender identity.

Butler's main focus in *Gender Trouble* is on the establishment, perpetuation, and ever-changing nature of gender, partly constructed through language. 'Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time' (p. 22) they argue, suggesting a fluidity and changeability of gender which is never a fixed whole, and which lies outside the capabilities of language which seeks to comprehensively define. This view seems more inclusive than the constructed reality which de Beauvoir diagnoses, in which 'He is the Absolute. She is the Other.'. Instead of the idea of man as an absolute, fixed reality from which woman deviates and becomes this fluid, unknowable Other, Butler posits that these genders are 'never fully what [they are] at any given juncture in time'.

Butler's debate concerns both the interiority and corporeality of individuals, broadening the concept of gender from the physical into every aspect of identity, in contrast to traditional notions of gender. 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (p. 45), Butler continues, reinforcing this changeability of gender within the body. Gender, for Butler, is a performance, the 'repeated stylization' of a physical form. This acknowledges the physicality of individuals, but gives said individuals the autonomy of self-expression, and allows for change and evolution of gender as these repeated acts reinforce the permanent deferral of totality. Butler continues to argue that the body 'is itself a construction, as are the myriad "bodies" that constitute the domain of gendered subjects' (p. 12). The expression of the self, according to this view, is the repeated, perpetual construction of both body and identity within it, using language to mirror the evolution of the human form, which continues to become rather than remaining fixed.

This more progressive view of the existence and equality of Otherness within different genders is not shared by patriarchal societies, however, and Val Plumwood agrees with de Beauvoir's concept, as she explains that 'in patriarchal thought, men represent reason and rightfully control the world as well as the dangerous emotionality, irrationality, and reproductivity of women, who are "closer to nature"'.<sup>14</sup> Creating the male/female=nature binary in this way, this constructed society allows man to dominate both women and nature, as the two are combined under his control as less stable, 'irrational' beings. As summarised by Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, 'woman is symbolised by her body, Man is symbolised by his mind', which allows man, made whole by his reason and the command of his mind, to take control.<sup>15</sup> The objectification of women as bodies suggests a lack of autonomy, that women are ruled not by their mind and the reason which controls it but by subconscious bodily desires and urges, the 'something other' within, bringing them 'close to nature', which is subject to the changing seasons and weather. Here again the female is denied language, silenced into connection with the natural world and thereby subjugation under male language and male-constructed ideas of female identity.

Kate Soper continues this line of thought, as she asserts that this practice of relating woman to nature takes nature's power away from it alongside female subjugation: 'If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalisation, the downgrading of nature has equally been perpetuated through its representation as "female"'.<sup>16</sup> Soper observes this feminisation of nature as a way of conceiving of nature as 'spatial territory', which transfers the body politics of the female onto the natural world, as both become 'territory' to be conquered and owned.<sup>17</sup> Nature, like the female, 'is both the generative source, but also the

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<sup>14</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, 'Introduction', in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, ed. by Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 1–18 (p. 12).

<sup>16</sup> Kate Soper, 'Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature', in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 139–143 (p. 141).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

potential spouse [...] if necessary forced to submit to intercourse', Soper continues.<sup>18</sup> Both women and nature give life, but this is also the focus of man's domination.

Ariel Salleh reacts against this binary of man against women and nature, as she states that 'it is nonsense to assume that women are any closer to nature than men'.<sup>19</sup> Salleh argues that the difference between male and female labour, by which she means for women 'reproductive labour and such patriarchally assigned work roles as cooking and cleaning', and for men 'mining or engineering' is that masculine work 'comes to be mediated by a language of domination that ideologically reinforces masculine identity as powerful, aggressive, and separate over and above nature'.<sup>20</sup> Again, language is manipulated in order to privilege male work above female, a way to portray man as the absolute and women as that which he controls, the Other. Women's work 'situates her along with nature itself. She is seen, and accordingly sees herself, as somehow part of it'.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. 'I own my| leaving'

Graham and Oswald, as female poets who emerged towards the end of second-wave feminism and have continued writing through to the present day, engage with and complicate these debates. Oswald, in her poem 'Narcissus', creates a character who refuses to fall on either side of the artificial gender binary, evading a whole, independent, rational self, and instead inhabiting male, female, and natural selves before revealing the present state 'here crumpled [...] at the root of all nothings'.<sup>22</sup> Graham also complicates the concept of a female self in her poem 'Futures'. She questions the availability of personhood in a collapsing world, as the 'I' of her

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<sup>18</sup> Soper, p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> Ariel Salleh, 'The Ecofeminism/Deep Ecology Debate: A Reply to Patriarchal Reason', *Environmental Ethics*, 14 (1992), 195–216 (p. 208).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Narcissus', in *Weeds and Wildflowers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 26, ll. 14–15. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

poem is immediately fragmented and ambiguous, allowing the speaker to interact with and understand the deteriorating world, to 'own my| leaving' in contrast to the evasive man in the poem who merely ignores the catastrophe around him.<sup>23</sup> Both poets use language to address and express the climate crisis and to break away from the false humanity-versus-nature binary. Instead they engage with nature from within, sometimes inhabiting the received notions of femalehood in order to do this, and speak from this place of fragmentation about the deterioration of the natural world and the inescapable symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature. Through owning language in poetry, they construct places and people who are part of nature, not set apart from it, which allows them to engage dynamically with the climate crisis and offer its reality, rather than a pretence of wholeness.

'Narcissus' is taken from Oswald's collection *Weeds and Wildflowers*, a collaboration with Jessica Greenman, which is a collection of poems and etchings. In her introduction to the collection, Alice Oswald describes the collaboration as 'two separate books, a book of etchings and a book of poems, shuffled together. What connects them both is their contention that flowers are recognisably ourselves elsewhere'.<sup>24</sup> This statement confirms Oswald's eco-poetic stance that the world is not split into a binary between humanity and nature, but that the two coexist as one being. The self in Oswald's writing is both human and natural, as shown in 'Narcissus', and the exercise of writing the natural is merely a relocation of the human self within its natural component.

My hope is that the experience of reading and looking at the book will be a slightly unsettling pleasure, like walking through a garden at night when the plants come right up to the edges of their names and then beyond them. (Introduction)

Oswald acknowledges here the uncanny experience of recognising the self elsewhere. This also acknowledges the chasm between human language and the natural world, as the language

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<sup>23</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Futures', in *Sea Change* (New York: Ecco, 2008), p. 15, ll. 29–30. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Introduction', in *Weeds and Wildflowers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 1. All further references to this introduction are to this edition.



which Butler posits as such an important part of identity, which governs the availability of the human self, is not as integral to the natural world. Oswald imagines the personae of flowers which 'come right up to the edges of their names and beyond them', which, when read alongside the poems of her collection, suggests an expansion beyond the limits of language, and gender within that language, into an existence of self and nature beyond the effable landscape. Oswald notes that 'It is not [...] a reliable guide to wild flowers, though it may be a reliable record of someone's wild or wayside selves' (Introduction), complicating the concept of a flower as a known, discrete object. Instead of compiling a book that holds the information which humanity knows about wildflowers and seeking to reduce the flowers to this existence within human confines of knowledge, Oswald instead offers a conceptual approach to understanding nature from within, rather than observing it from afar. She also includes the epigraph 'the map of spring must be forever redrawn', suggesting this continued remaking of the self which is clear in 'Narcissus' as the self remains not one thing but multiple within one ever-changing being. This approach defies patriarchal control, as by creating selves which are at once male, female, and natural, Oswald combines the absolute, the Other, and the unknowable vastness of nature into one unfathomable being, continually 'redrawn' and remade, a new kind of identity which seeks to acknowledge 'ourselves elsewhere'.

Oswald is often compared with Ted Hughes, since both take the natural world as their main subject matter, and Oswald writes in 'echoing response' to Hughes' work.<sup>25</sup> Both can be read in terms of an engagement with the patriarchal tradition of writing women as flowers, though to very different ends, in their poems 'Sunstruck Foxglove' (from Hughes' collection *Flowers and Insects*) and 'Narcissus'. It is clear when comparing the two that their explorations of gender are vastly different, as Hughes seeks to create poems which adhere to the received gender

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'The Gifted Poet who easily holds her own with Ted Hughes', *The Sunday Times*, 14th August 2016. See also Alice Oswald, 'Introduction', in *A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Selected Poems*, selected by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), in which she observes Hughes' animal poems in which he 'embod[ies] animals, not just describ[ing] them'.

structures of man as absolute and women as submissive Other, whereas Oswald opens this out into the more ecopoetic concept of human and nature as one being, irrespective of gender hierarchies. Hughes' poem assumes a fixed understanding of gender as a set stylisation of individuals — the female is delicate, fragile, sexually attractive when young, hot, and passive, and the male is strong, dominant, and sees the control of women as the proof of his masculinity. Hughes' conceit of the flower as a young girl allows him to perpetuate this misogynistic view of gender, but does not explore Butler's concept of gender as an ever-changing complexity since both characters are confined to these inherited, fixed roles.

Hughes' poem 'Sunstruck Foxglove' uses language to confine and restrict the female, as it presents the trope of a girl anthropomorphised as a flower, subject to the masculine dominance of the voice of the poem. As a male poet projecting femininity onto nature, Hughes does not deal in this self-expression to which Butler refers, but by silencing the female in his poem he restricts her from access to her own identity through language. By using the second person throughout the poem, and gendering him so strongly as male, Hughes reinforces the firm boundary between male and female, as the flower is decidedly female and this masculine observer retains control over her.

Hughes echoes the patriarchal tradition of poets such as Edmund Waller, writing a similar poem to Waller's 'Go, Lovely Rose', in which the woman Waller objectifies is neither addressed nor given voice. Waller instead addresses the 'lovely rose', comparing the woman with it and using this link to make the rose a messenger to the desired woman: 'Bid her come forth, | Suffer herself to be desired'.<sup>26</sup> Waller's poem focuses on the fragile beauty of both woman and rose, and commands that the woman submit to being the object of his desire whilst her beauty and by extension her value lasts. Both Hughes and Waller exemplify a common theme in traditional Western poetry of denying agency to the female voice and diminishing the female into the

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<sup>26</sup> Edmund Waller, 'Go, Lovely Rose', in *The Poems of Edmund Waller*, ed. by G. Thorn Drury (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893), p. 128, ll. 13–14.

image of a fragile flower. Both men emphasise the physicality of the female character, focusing on the delicate transience of feminine beauty as demonstrated by the likeness to a flower, as both females are voiceless, and only appear to exist within the parameters of the male speaker.

Hughes' poem denies its subject a voice, instead addressing 'you', in an uncomfortable depiction of the domination of a foxglove, through the metaphor of a young girl.<sup>27</sup> By taking the agency of 'I' from the girl, Hughes controls her availability, keeping her 'outside the language that structures' her, and thus under the control of the addressed male ('you'). Hughes creates a power hierarchy through this oppressive language which subjugates the female and gives the male power. This is established from the first line, 'As you bend to touch' (l. 1), which forms the power hierarchy in the poem, as 'you' actively bends down to her level as the first and dominant character of the poem, whereas she passively 'waits for you in the hedge' (l. 3). The aggressive gendering of the reader as male is sustained through the poem, which gives the impression of a man describing his conquest to another man without either the consent or voice of the female in evidence.

Hughes reduces this female character to a passive object, both through this exclusive language and through the conceit of the foxglove, as at every stage of the poem she has no agency, simply waiting to be dominated by 'you'. 'Her loose dress falls open' (l. 4), the poem continues, reinforcing her passive state as the inanimate dress takes the active role, and the line is end-stopped to emphasise the lack of resistance to this exposure. This passivity is set up in the title of the poem, 'Sunstruck Foxglove', suggesting that the girl or flower has been struck by a power beyond her control into a damaged, vulnerable state. Even at the most simple level, the girl is not autonomous, as 'her eyes closing' (l. 7) is passive and is merely an embedded clause within a longer sentence. This is contrasted with 'You close your eyes' (l. 12) later in the poem, which clearly establishes 'you' as the autonomous subject of a full sentence. The female figure is

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<sup>27</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Sunstruck Foxglove', in *Flowers and Insects: Some Birds and a Pair of Spiders* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 44, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

entirely dependent on the speaker, who creates the male fantasy of her as a passive, unresisting object.

Further to this passivity, the girl is presented as barely conscious from the beginning of the poem:

Flushed, freckled with earth-fever,  
Swollen lips parted [...]  
A lolling armful (ll. 6–8).

This description suggests an illness which takes the girl's autonomy from her. This image of 'a lolling armful' confirms the weakness of Hughes' poem, as while it aptly describes the action of holding a girl, one cannot have an 'armful' of a single foxglove. The sexualisation of the female image comes with this fragile health, as though ripe to be picked as a flower and taken advantage of as a girl. This exemplifies the misogynistic trope of young girls as flowers, hot and full of transient beauty which must be enjoyed while it lasts, and once enjoyed, or plucked, the girl is diminished, both in crumpled beauty and in life as a picked flower will soon die.

The girl is dehumanised through this conceit, allowing Hughes' speaker to focus on the aesthetic appeal and tangible fragility of the girl and by extension the flower which she represents, rather than the concept of a girl as a thinking, feeling individual. Referring to her in the derogatory term 'the gypsy girl' (l. 2) further suggests her vulnerability and perceived lack of value. The voice of the poem questions whether she is even capable of individual expression, as he asks 'Can the foxes talk?' (l. 13), suggesting his observation of her as a silent, animalistic object. This dehumanisation observes the misogynistic tradition of a male writer objectifying a female subject into something less than human, there to satisfy the male desire rather than as her own self, 'not as she is but how she fills his dream'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'In An Artist's Studio', in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. by Betty Flowers (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 796, l. 14.

The use of a foxglove, a poisonous plant, as the focus of the poem suggests something dangerous, in contrast to the inviting exterior, furthering the misogynistic trope of the female figure as a temptress who leads good men astray. The dehumanisation continues later in the poem as 'You glimpse the reptile under-speckle| Of her sunburned breasts' (ll. 10–11). This reptilian imagery echoes Hughes' commentary on Coleridge's poetry in his essay 'The Snake in the Oak', in which Hughes details Coleridge's poem 'Christabel'. In the poem, a female character, Geraldine, hypnotises and rapes another helpless woman, the 'soul of Coleridge's Christian self' according to Hughes, and then reveals her own reptilian breasts.<sup>29</sup> 'Like a Cleopatra/Cressida, from every "joint and motive" of her paradoxical being she calls his Christian Self to surrender to her kind of love, the beauty of her truth and the fact of her lordship', Hughes explains, positing Geraldine as the temptress who leads Coleridge's Christian self (personified into Christabel, a blameless woman) astray.<sup>30</sup> For Coleridge, the female figure is both temptress and blameless soul, as Christabel embodies Christian values, but by degrading Geraldine into a reptile, he also suggests the female as the locus of evil. This reptilian woman also echoes the Christian creation story, in which the first woman is tempted by a snake, and thus the creation story is used as a basis for these misogynistic tropes. Combining the tempter with the tempted by referring to a reptilian woman, then, suggests this fusion of woman and nature, which man must fight against lest she/they lead him astray. Hughes also engages both temptress and tempted as the girl/foxglove is simply there to be dominated by the blameless male presence, and her passivity and 'loose dress' suggest familiarity with this domination, but the danger of the poisonous foxglove and her reptilian likeness reveal her as this temptress figure.

At the end of the poem, Hughes urges 'you' to:

Remember your mother's  
Long, dark dugs.

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<sup>29</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Snake in the Oak', in *Winter Pollen*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 440.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 440–441.

Her silky body a soft oven  
For loaves of pollen. (ll. 17–20)

Returning to this foetal state, Hughes widens the poem's imagery from an individual girl to the female gender as a whole. The objectification of the mother figure is clear, as she is reduced to her 'long, dark dug's', adding to the concept of the female as something 'dark', unknowable and misleading. She is firmly placed in the corporeal, 'her silky body a soft oven', which reduces the female to her function as a vessel for childbirth, 'for loaves of pollen'. This directive ends the poem, and so the reader is left with the overwhelming sense of the speaker's objectification of women, and their singular function of facilitators of male power. The use of this archaic word, 'dugs', along with 'flushed' earlier in the poem, alludes to T. S. Eliot's 'The Fire Sermon' in *The Waste Land*, which also depicts the scene of a man taking advantage of a woman:

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.<sup>31</sup>

The speaker here is 'I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives| Old man with wrinkled female breasts' (ll. 218–219): both genders intertwined in one being. The poem uses the myth of Tiresias, a man turned into a woman and back again, blinded, and given the gift of prophecy by the gods as the narrator, which allows him to understand the perspective of both the male and female characters. Eliot continues on the Ovidian tradition of male writers drawing on mythical stories which confer on men a spurious authority on female sexual experience. Although Hughes' poem takes no such myth as its foundation, it possesses this male authority over female sexuality which silences the woman and glorifies the male perspective.

Hughes' poem is little more than an exercise in exploring this trope of women likened to flowers, as his reflection on gender casts out the individual from her self-expression by denying her a voice, and the availability of her existence is presented solely through the language of her

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<sup>31</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p. 36, ll. 239–242. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

oppressor. Hughes' poem offers a dark realisation of the notion that language can restrict and confine an individual, as the girl he creates in the poem is completely cut off from her own identity and remains at the mercy of a predatory male.

Oswald also uses the trope of anthropomorphosis of human onto flower in her poem 'Narcissus'. Instead of adopting the flawed, misogynistic tone of Hughes' poem, however, Oswald explores gender through the use of this conceit. Oswald's character is deliberately not gendered, and gender pronouns are withheld throughout the poem as the character embodies neither male nor female but a fluid self. This recalls Butler's assertion that 'gender is the repeated stylisation of the body', which 'is itself a construction'. The poem begins in such a way, 'once I was half flower, half self' (l. 1), introducing this unfixed state. The lack of capitalisation of the first letter aptly identifies the fractured nature of the self which is sustained through the poem, as Oswald challenges the 'availability of persons in language' through ignoring the set language rules to portray a narrator who at once inhabits at least two identities.

Throughout Oswald's poem, the self remains in this unfixed state and uses this uncertainty as a platform for the exploration of gender and humanity in contrast to and as part of the natural world. Butler observes the work of anthropologists Marilyn Stathern and Carol MacCormack, who argue that nature is regularly figured as female:

[...] in need of subordination by a culture that is invariably figured as male, active, and abstract. As in the existential dialect of misogyny, this is yet another instance in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject. (quoted in Butler, p. 50)

Oswald considers the human and the natural in one ambiguously gendered existence, refusing to adhere to the trope of women as nature beings, but also not ignoring the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. Gender in Hughes' poem is used for a purpose, and the boundaries of man and woman are clearly defined within the poem, whereas Oswald's subject transcends these barriers as Oswald creates a fractured self which is man, woman, and flower, and never

wholly defined by any of these identities. 'Narcissus' is unpredictable, and throws the image of the self open to interpretation by activating the expectation of an established story but not fulfilling the expectations implied by its use.

Oswald uses the title of the poem to evoke the ancient Greek myth of a man who spurns a female admirer, too obsessed with his own looks, and drives her to shrink into a mere echo. He is then punished for this by Nemesis, the god of revenge, who creates the image of his younger, beautiful self in a pool of water, which he sees and falls in love with, not realising it is his intangible, past self. Narcissus then spends the rest of his life staring into the pool, unable to claim the beautiful image, and wastes away into a flower. The expectation suggested by this title is that the voice of the poem will remain masculine, that it will hold the traditionally misogynistic tone which Hughes' poem exemplifies and Stathern and MacCormack observe of a male asserting his dominance over nature and the feminine. Oswald challenges this assumption, however, as a female poet embodying this 'male' persona, and presents an ambiguously gendered character whose 'totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time'. The myth itself is about homosexual, autoerotic attraction, in which heterosexual attraction is spurned, which, whilst common in Greek mythology, is uncommon in traditional male Western poetry such as Waller or Hughes, which constructs the male pursuit of a woman. Oswald's title creates the assumption of a male character, but the first line 'once I was half flower, half self' introduces instead a fractured identity which, in contrast to Hughes' poem, focuses on the 'self' rather than the inherited gender of the subject. This avoidance of assumed gender rejects the notion of the strong, stable male figure, which is reinforced through the poem as gender remains ambiguous and flexible, as does the corporeality of the subject. The 'I' of the poem is established before its immediate complication, as 'half flower' comes before 'half self'. The corporeality of the poem is challenged in this first line, as the frame upon which identity, the 'repeated stylisation' occurs, is split between human and flower.



Later in the poem, Oswald introduces another aspect to this gender trouble, as the speaker continues 'I was neither one thing nor another,| a waterflame, a variable man-woman of the verges' (ll. 10–11). The 'I' which Oswald presents refuses to be confined or defined by language, instead juxtaposing opposites within one body, recalling Butler's assertion of gender as an ever-becoming state which evades completion. The voice chooses to define itself through negatives, 'neither one thing nor another', then moves to oxymorons, 'a waterflame', 'man-woman', reinforcing this changeable identity.

Oswald's character echoes the passivity of Hughes' girl at times, but instead of using this passivity to enforce gender roles, Oswald uses it as a creative tool to explore the conflict between human and nature within one dwindling being. Oswald describes the natural self as 'that invisible flower that is always inwardly| groping up through us, a kind of outswelling weakness' (ll. 3–4), suggesting the domination of the flower over the human self at this point. The human in these lines is the passive identity, the frame around which the flower builds its own identity despite its invisibility, and yet the 'outswelling weakness' suggests that this dominance is not entire, introducing a dependency of the two selves upon one another. The flower cannot exist of its own accord, and nor can the human, the two parts are continually attempting to become a whole through the poem but never quite succeed. Oswald opens this out into the ambiguous 'us', suggesting simultaneously a condition of all humanity and a duality of this collection of selves in one person.

The repetition of 'once I was' through the poem suggests the passivity of the self which must submit to the inevitable changes brought about by passing time. Despite this chronologic linearity, which is addressed as the poem largely remains in the past tense, this phrase is repeated, as the voice characteristically circles back to this attempt at self-definition, but through the description merely observes this inevitability of change. The speaker slips in and out of past tense, beginning with the past 'once I was', then describing the self 'who inhabits', the

flower 'that is always [...] groping', 'outswelling', before returning to 'yes once I was' (l. 5). The voice seems to cling to this self-definition, 'once I was' whilst describing an ongoing state, unable to claim an absolute form.

The speaker assumes a passive role, 'always staring at rivers, always | nodding and leaning to one side' (ll. 7–8), to define themselves, using the repetition of 'always' and the present participles to reinforce this continual existence despite the past tense. This self-definition refers to the 'I' a few lines before, but does not reiterate this, instead keeping distance from it to emphasise the space between the self and 'I'. This is refreshed at the end of this line, however, as 'I came gloating up' (l. 8) challenges this passive state. The intransitive verb 'gloating' is used in an unusually active way, in contrast to the passivity of the previous lines, to exemplify the transitive nature of the self. This active voice is sustained with a caveat, 'for a while I was' (l. 9), which is repeated, as the speaker explores the depths of their identity, but overshadows this with the past tense and the knowledge of the present state described at the end of the poem. The human aspect is dominant at one point, as 'for a while I was half skin half breath' (l. 9), which seems to ignore the natural, floral part of the self, but even this dominant self-assertion lacks completion, as the human self remains mere discrete components of an intangible whole. This is further diminished in the following line, 'for a while I was neither one thing nor another' (l. 10), continuing the instability of the voice of the poem. Oswald uses passive and active roles throughout the poem to emphasise the complexity of the self and the ever-changing nature of identity. Instead of capturing a character in one role for one objective, as Hughes does, Oswald uses gender and identity to open out the notion of the self into many possibilities simultaneously.

The end of the poem reveals the cause of the instability of the self through the poem, as 'before my strength went down down into darkness | for the best of the year and lies here crumpled' (ll. 13–14) finally comes to the present tense which the speaker inhabits. This present tense still

seems to be an absence, however, as the poem tracks the deterioration of the self into this 'darkness', 'crumpled| in a clot of sleep at the root of all nothings' (ll. 14–15). The only absolute, it would seem, is absence of absolutes as the poem retraces identity back to 'the root of all', only to find 'nothings'. Even this end, however, is open to interpretation, as despite the poem being focussed around two halves never being whole, pieces of the singular deteriorating through time, the poem ends with this plural. The speaker builds to this moment of death, but then paradoxically opens out nothing into the possibility of plurality.

The interiority of this complex, shifting identity in Oswald's poem is emphasised throughout, as this battle 'is always inwardly' (l. 3) present. This is established in the first line, as 'half self' focuses the poem on the interior being rather than the exterior appearance. Instead of focusing solely on the corporeal as Hughes does, Oswald also captures the internal fragility and instability of identity. The description of the flower follows the description of the human half of the self, who is described as 'that invisible self whose absence inhabits mirrors' (l. 2). The two halves follow the same pattern, 'that invisible self', which reinforces the idea that they are both part of a deteriorating, assumedly once-whole self, not physically seen as separate, but different nonetheless. The human half is clearly dwindling, as in the myth, as the active part of this human identity is its absence from mirrors, which in turn offer no vessel for the self, being as they are mere reflections of the corporeal. The cyclicity of the poem and the stream-of-consciousness style suggest this fractured, complex identity which attempts self-expression through repeated self-definition, but within the language of this self-expression exposes the deterioration thereof, as the poem ends with a 'crumpled' self. The self distances itself from 'I', as 'my strength' is the subject of the last few lines, emphasising the reliance not solely upon the human self but upon the natural intertwined with the human. Oswald, instead of observing time as the inevitable passing of beauty into death, pushes back against linearity and shows how her character circles back through time to continual self-creation and reflection, changing with the natural seasons.

Graham's poem 'Futures' also addresses selfhood from a point of destruction, and the 'root of all nothings' which ends Oswald's poem coincides with the beginning of Graham's, in which 'I own you says my mind. Own what, own| whom' (ll. 1–2) quickly alerts the reader to this deeply fragmented speaker who is attempting to find a self within the rapidly collapsing natural world.<sup>32</sup> This deterioration turns later in the poem into 'I own my| leaving' (ll. 29–30), which posits the female speaker as best equipped to deal with the climate crisis because of her history of subjugation and Otherness, contrasted with man who merely ignores the situation.

Salleh suggests that 'although men and women both wear historically manufactured identities, in times of ecological devastation, the feminine one is clearly the more wholesome human attitude'.<sup>33</sup> Salleh agrees with de Beauvoir and many other feminist philosophers who have diagnosed these gender roles as mere 'manufactured identities', passed down through generations, and suggests that the feminine condition is more suited to adapt to ecological collapse, a view expressed in Graham's poem. This fractured, Othered female is able, according to Salleh, to become a part of nature to which she has for centuries been likened, whereas the fiction of an absolute, stable man rejects this notion of 'devastation' and collapse.

Graham explores these ideas of learned gender roles, female autonomy, and Otherness through the lens of the climate crisis, where the human and the natural are inextricably linked and the destruction of nature instigates the unravelling of the mind. Graham begins 'Midwinter. Dead of. I own you says my mind. Own what, own| whom' (ll. 1–2), which introduces the duality of 'I' and uncertainty of identity. Graham introduces the female voice 'deeply divided against herself', playing into received gender roles, as 'the mind', normally a fixed, whole identity, is split into 'I' and 'you', and a conflict of autonomy is introduced. This is further complicated by 'Own what, own| whom', which opens out this possibility of ownership to other masters, and questions the very notion of being, as 'what' and 'whom' are clearly not one fixed reality. Graham seems to

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<sup>32</sup> Here I assume that the 'I' of Graham's poem is the lyric 'I', the voice of the poet.

<sup>33</sup> Salleh, pp. 208–209.

suggest that if one wants to define oneself, one first has to say 'I am', a state of being which remains problematic and fragile throughout the poem. Graham's question, instead of how to define 'woman', is how to claim an 'I' from these pieces of self which are not only scattered through the body but also through the natural world as humanity and nature rely upon each other. The fragments of the natural world, 'Midwinter. Dead of', are answered by this fragmentation of the psyche, and 'Own what, own| whom' become the main questions of the poem. The scene is set in the 'dead' of winter, but the rest of the poem, which details the effects of climate change, suggests that this death may no longer be temporary as the cycle of seasons through death to life is disrupted. Out of this scene comes the complicated, split identity of the poem's voice, which is entangled with this natural world and so both 'futures' are held in question. This question of being comes at the same time as the destruction of the earth, which further complicates the notion of 'I am', as nature, which physically makes up human identity through our dependency on water, sunlight, and food, is collapsing, and so cannot provide a stable foundation for existence.

In the face of this collapsing environment, Graham questions the concept of woman as 'not a fixed reality but a becoming', as the climate crisis and destruction of both nature and the mind leave no room for 'becoming', and instead Graham's speaker says 'I own my| leaving'. The state of being in Graham's poem becomes a process of divesting, and the fragmentation of the female mind from the beginning of the poem instigates this 'leaving' from the very locus of identity and selfhood. Again the internal conflict is shown, as 'my' and 'self' are separated, and 'I own' is repeated, the second of which is also split across a line, creating further distance between self and ownership thereof, as that which 'I own' is delayed. Graham suggests that this fractured Otherness is more equipped to deal with the climate crisis than the stoical masculine approach, since being unfixed and far from whole allows the female to coexist with nature, to own the state of leaving as well as that of becoming. One could also understand 'I own' to be an admission of human guilt, observing the climate crisis and taking responsibility for the mutual

destruction caused which is manifesting itself in the fragmentation of the human psyche. As a woman, the narrator is better equipped to comprehend and feel the weight of this responsibility, as man historically blames human faults on the Other within woman.

This reversal of gender roles is made more apparent when the male figure enters the poem, as his approach is to ignore the climate crisis and attempt to assert dominance over the situation to no avail:

someone walking by whistling a  
little tune, that's  
life, he says, smiling, there, that was life (ll. 26–28).

The voice of the poem is not gendered until juxtaposed with this explicitly male 'he', upholding the gender roles which de Beauvoir observes, as their different approaches figure them as male and female. This man is the one who attempts to define 'life', along with its time frame, passing by the identity crisis within which the female is trapped, and attempting to regain control over the threatened end to existence. His response begins to Other the speaker, as on the surface he presents himself as a whole, in contrast to her fragmented being. He is confident in his existence, 'walking by whistling a| little tune' as if nothing is wrong, and his speech is undistinguished from his actions, as though his masculinity transcends the need to explain or separate speech and action, 'that's| life he says, smiling'. This lack of punctuation could also be observed as a comment on this approach to the climate disaster, as though his attempts to regain control are fruitless, not even acknowledged as sound by the irrevocable destruction around him. His actions, 'walking by whistling a| little tune', 'smiling', and his simplistic view of the world, 'there, that was life' paint him ironically as akin to the trivial female character which de Beauvoir and Cixous attempt to dispel.<sup>34</sup> It is the fragmented woman, then, in Graham's

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<sup>34</sup> The 'tune' which the man hums could also be interpreted as Frank Sinatra's song 'That's Life', in which the singer observes the changing seasons of existence and offers multiple identities: 'I've been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate| A poet, a pawn and a king', but the male singer also offers resolution to this: 'But I know I'm gonna change that tune'. Masculine dominance is highlighted here as a prominent male hero, Frank Sinatra, acknowledges the fragmentary nature of human existence but also acknowledges his superiority over it, as the many identities he claims are restricted to one part of the song, and followed by his ability

context, who has authority as she experiences the earth's destruction from within her mind, acknowledges and accepts the destruction around her, and owns her leaving.

Graham steps outside the perimeters of socially constructed gender, urging the reader to understand that the climate crisis and the destruction which it brings are universal. Immediately after the male figure attempts to dismiss the situation, 'the heart branches with its| wild arteries' (ll. 28–29). 'The heart' is universally human, rather than male or female, as Graham observes these 'wild arteries', the unravelling of the corporeal self in all humans, regardless of their self-perceived identity. Whatever authority the male figure assumes he possesses through his stoicism is implicitly held up to ridicule, as his self-definition is juxtaposed with this reality of destruction and the human body betrays the truth of this collapse. Later 'someone's swinging from a rope, his rope' (l. 32) places the responsibility of this death upon the unnamed man, suggesting another flaw in his ignorance of the climate disaster. The ambiguity of 'someone' could suggest an exterior manifestation of the man's Otherness which he ignores in order to present himself as whole, but just as he cannot ignore the climate crisis, this inevitable Otherness becomes a weight and a death which he cannot overcome. This ambiguity also observes the communal identity of humanity in nature, as the individual is not important, but the death is symbolic of the inevitable future of all. Man's assumption of his fixed identity and control of himself and nature is shown to be damaging, as his apathetic attitude brings about death.

This debate of ownership and the state of being is complicated:

[...] the body is owned by the hungry—one is waiting  
one's turn—one wants to own one's  
turn (ll. 44–46).

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to overcome them and reclaim his absolute self. Frank Sinatra, *That's Life (Remastered 2008)*, online video recording, YouTube, 12 December 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnIPtaPxXfc>> [Accessed 28 February 2022]. The possible reference to this song further trivialises the real climate crisis from the male perspective, as he seems to dismiss the mutual destruction of humanity and nature as just a season of life, ignoring the very real prospect that the seasons have been disrupted and the changing of the tune is no longer possible from within such a dystopia.

This adds a further competitor for the ownership of the self. Graham opens out the traditional role of the female as a 'body', 'a womb', to all humanity, as 'one' is gender neutral. The passive tone, 'the body is owned by' is reminiscent of these ideas of the passive female giving up control to another master, but 'the hungry' turns this around, relying on the primal need to survive rather than the power dynamics between male and female. Human identity is irrevocably tied to this physical hunger which can no longer be satiated because of the climate crisis which causes crops to fail and water to become undrinkable, and all other concerns are replaced with this futile need to survive. Instead of being the vehicle for the perpetuation of human life, the woman becomes the locus of emptiness in Graham's dystopia, as she states 'I own my| leaving', rather than providing the 'becoming' in which to nurture human life. The universal human presence is reduced to this primal hunger rather than divided into stable man and dependent woman.

Even against this most potent of desires, however, another aspect of identity still attempts to draw out the conflict, as 'one wants to own one's| turn' suggests that within the reductive identity which hunger forces upon the individual, there is still the need to possess something of the self, to control this urge. De Beauvoir implies that the 'something other than her' in women is the womb, and the capacity to bear children and sustain life, whereas Graham suggests that this Otherness is part of the mutual destruction of humanity and the earth, that it is the universal greed which forces rational thinking out of our identities and makes us want to 'own' what we cannot control. Graham suggests that this urge to 'own', even when there is nothing left to own, is the essence of humanity and also our downfall, as it leads us to ignore or further intensify the climate crisis despite our own destruction therein.

The title of the poem is suitably ambiguous, and calls to mind not only 'futures' in its most obvious sense, but also the financial understanding of 'futures' as contracts in which things are bought and sold at a predetermined future date. The origins of such contracts lie in agriculture,



as farmers anticipated their crop for the year and attempted to sell it, using the natural world around them to support themselves. The evocation of this practice of buying and selling in the uncertainty of the future is loaded in this poem, however, as Graham observes and explores the way in which the climate crisis negates the certainty of a future, and describes the human greed of wanting to own something that does not belong to them and will be destroyed along with them.

Nature's destruction unravels the very foundation and fabric of being for both itself and humanity, questioning ways of existing which have brought this crisis upon both simultaneously. Graham's message is not that humanity and nature are mutually exclusive, but that there is a symbiotic relationship between the two, where human actions are resonant within nature and the planet's destruction means the destruction of the mind within itself. This focus on the interconnectedness of humanity and nature marks Graham's work as eco-poetic, engaging with the vast Otherness of nature through the Othered, unknowable eyes of the human 'divided against herself' in answer to the climate crisis.

From de Beauvoir's perspective, the two fictions of gender — man as 'absolute', woman/nature as Other — seem irrevocable, but Graham complicates this to emphasise her notion that human and nature are not a binary, but interconnected. The distinction between man and woman has provided the history of woman's subjectivity, from which the poem responds, but challenges the negativity of this Otherness and fragmented self as it becomes the more realistic way to react to the universal climate crisis. The woman is able to identify with the climate in its destruction, whereas the 'fixed' identity of the man simply ignores the crisis even as it happens inside him too.

Graham highlights this interconnectedness of human and nature as the interior conflict of ownership is cast into the exterior. In answer to 'Own what, own| whom', the speaker observes the natural world in which she exists, as 'I look up. Own the looking at us| say the cuttlefish

branchings, lichen-black, moist' (ll. 2–3). The natural world becomes an intermediary for this discussion of self, setting up the symbiotic relationship between the two as it offers its own definition of the woman's identity. To the exterior, natural world, 'you' owns the individual, since the mind, the 'I' of the poem, is unseen, and sight, 'the looking at us', is the relational point between humanity and nature. The double meaning of 'own', to possess and to take responsibility for, is also clear here as the cuttlefish urge the human presence to 'own the looking at us' and understand the environmental impact of humanity being part of nature. The cuttlefish have 'branchings', similar to the human heart, which 'branches', tying the two together to further reinforce this connection. The self cannot avoid the symbiosis with nature, then, as identity partly lies outside the body, and relies upon the interaction with the natural world to claim itself. As though in answer to Cixous' call to redefine the female in language, Graham rethinks the subjectivity of woman, writing her supposed chaotic, fragmented being as more in line with a 'leaving' world than that of man.

## Chapter Two: 'Who is one when one calls oneself| one?'

Carol J. Adams, in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, argues that 'Through butchering, animals become absent referents', referring to the absence of 'animals in name and body' in the term 'meat'.<sup>1</sup> This is an extreme, and yet very real and ubiquitous example of how language, and specifically the concept of the name, is used to identify, define, and locate an individual, but also how this becomes a way to possess, distil, and diminish this identity. Attaching a name to something or someone holds with it the power to define and confine that individual, as we have seen in the previous chapter in the case of the woman, and Adams here argues that categorising animals as 'meat' is a way to degrade and simplify the individual animal into an end product.

Adams argues that this practice is enabled by the use of language:

Animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them. Our culture further mystifies the term 'meat' with gastronomic language, so we do not conjure dead, butchered animals, but cuisine. Language thus contributes even further to animals' absences. [...] The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the process of naming here excludes the individual animal from their live existence, and contains them within this product, part of a 'cuisine' rather than the reality of 'dead bodies'. The way in which language is used to name and thus define identity is useful in contemplating how our perceptions of the natural world are shaped by language. Graham's poem 'Deep Water Trawling' exemplifies this, as the specific jargon of the fishing trade is used ironically as 'justification' of climate destruction, which the context of the rest of the poem reveals as unjustifiable.

The focus on the irony of economy in the poem is clear, as the near-prose style fills the page, and yet the fragmented pieces of information are held together with dashes and arrows, and often do not seem to follow on from each other. This stylistic choice reflects the fractured

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<sup>1</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

economy that underpins the topic which Graham addresses, as ‘discards can reach 90% of the catch’.<sup>3</sup> The irony of using a huge net to bring in a large catch is realised when ninety percent of it is ‘bycatch—hitting the wrong target [...] for which there is no market’ (ll. 23–24). Speaking as though through the voice of one involved in this fishing trade, Graham exemplifies how the ‘absent referent’ is used to detach the living fish from its identity as such, and instead, by naming ‘bycatch’ and ‘discards’ rather than fish, the voice justifies the wrongful capture and slaughter through reframing this as part of the process. Suggesting that ‘there is no market’ for such fish reveals the seemingly mindless futility of this practice of deep water trawling, and also further diminishes the value of the fish, as their lives, which are taken as a by-product of fishing for something else, are not economically viable.

Graham then observes the fish outside this identity as ‘bycatch’, using the poem’s form as a net and the fragmented information as the individuals caught up within it. The economisation of life is noted:

[...] deep water fish grow very slowly—very—  
so have long life expectancy—late reproductive age—are particularly thus  
vulnerable— (ll. 20–22).

The fragmentary style of the poem condenses these lives into a small space, cutting short the ‘long life expectancy’, mirroring the deep sea trawlers’ indiscriminate catch. This forced economy in the form then allows for these lives to be reduced to their ‘reproductive age’, fulfilling Adams’ notion of ‘the absent referent’. The repetition of ‘very’ to describe how slowly the fish grow stands at odds with their treatment, emphasising the devastation which this type of fishing causes.

This reduction of life to its sellable parts is included in the speaker’s existence, as ‘we die| of exhaustion or suffocation—the synthetic materials last forever’ (ll. 28–29). It is unclear here whether the speaker is human or a fish, which emphasises the dependency and proximity

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<sup>3</sup> Jorie Graham, ‘Deep Water Trawling’, in *Fast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 6, l. 13. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

between them. Setting 'we die' at the end of a line and this collection of statements at the end of the section ties this extinction to the speaker. Instead of the false binary between humanity and nature, Graham recognises the reality of the mortality of both individual aspects of nature and humanity against 'the synthetic materials' which will outlast both and are also part of the problem. As the poem develops, then, the fate of the fish becomes inextricable from our human fate, as we become our own 'bycatch'.

In *The Anthropology of Names and Naming*, Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn set out the importance of the act of naming, and how this act fits an individual into their society. They explore:

[...] the capacity of names to fix and to detach. The potential for the name to become identical with the person creates the simultaneous potential to fix them as individuals and as members of recognized social groups. It is their detachability that renders names a powerful political tool for establishing or erasing formal identity, and gives them commodity-like value.<sup>4</sup>

Graham, in her collections *Sea Change* and *Fast*, asserts the need for a collective sense of identity, one rooted in the ecopoetic synthesis of humanity and nature. Graham's speakers usually avoid naming themselves, and instead are forced by this crisis into a fractured sense of selfhood, which unites under 'we' and 'us'. Naming holds power to fit an individual into this collective, but also provides older generations with the power to replay their own lives and mistakes, perpetuating the individuality which contributed to this catastrophe. Oswald's approach is less urgent, but in her collections *Woods etc.* and *Falling Awake* she also contemplates the act of naming and whether or not human language can ever fruitfully be stretched over the natural world. Both poets use the medium of water to explore these questions of identity through the name, as its ever-changing nature stands in opposition to the perceived firmness of a 'proper' name.

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<sup>4</sup> Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn, "'Entangled in Histories": An Introduction to the Anthropology of Names and Naming', in *The Anthropology of Names and Naming*, ed. by Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1–30 (p. 4).

Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn observe the crucial link between name and human identity:

That identities can be stolen, traded, suspended, and even erased through the name reveals the profound political power located in the capacity to name; it illustrates the property-like potential in names to transact social value; and it brings into view the powerful connection between name and self-identity.<sup>5</sup>

A name as a commodity, as a way to take control of an individual or a group of people is explored in Graham's poem 'Guantánamo', in which this 'powerful connection between name and self-identity' is severed by authority figures in order to maintain control over the prisoners. Graham observes that a collective identity, in which individual identity exists only with reference to the whole, is the only way to survive in such a nightmarish environment. The prisoners use this enforced fragmentation of identity to reclaim their autonomy, as 'you' and 'I', the power imbalance of the beginning of the poem, is replaced with 'we' and 'our'.<sup>6</sup> Guantánamo Bay detention camp, to which the title refers, is a prison isolated on an island and seemingly subject to its own laws and practices, which has been criticised widely and often for its use of torture and indefinite detention without trial, violating basic human rights. This name remains the only name in the poem, as the individual identities of the prisoners are stripped away and replaced by this place-name and their incarceration within.

This treatment of prisoners as less than human is observed through the 'property-like' transaction of their names, as the authority of the poem forces individual identity from the subjects:

[...] give me your  
name, give it, I will take it, I will re-  
classify it, I will withhold you from you (ll. 38–40).

The power hierarchy is established through this retraction of a name, as 'I' and 'me' dominate the lines, and thus perform the subjugation of 'you'. The line break between 'your' and 'name' distances the individual from their sense of self, their name which would afford them self

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<sup>5</sup> Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Guantánamo', in *Sea Change* (New York: Ecco, 2008), p. 10, ll. 9, 2, 46, 47. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

governance. The refusal of 'I' to give a name also demonstrates the power in withholding this information, as without a known identity, authority cannot be held accountable for these crimes and protects themselves through this anonymity. The 'profound political power' of naming as a 'social value' is clear here as names are taken away and withheld in order to sustain this power hierarchy in an artificial environment built around it.

Sarah Howe suggests that the poem 'is ever alert to the shifting play of accountability that attaches to pronouns',<sup>7</sup> which is clear through this fixation on 'your' at the beginning of the poem, as the artificial identity of the prisoner(s) is constructed through this accountability rather than through their name:

Your  
keep, your eyes your trigger  
finger your spine your reasoning (ll. 5–7).

The meaning of 'your' begins to unravel through such repetition, but this also forces the individual to acknowledge this 'accountability' for their crimes and even their existence. Language is used to torment here, as the multiple meanings of 'keep' as a way to sustain oneself, a way to possess something, and a castle (perhaps prison), hold both autonomy and the lack thereof simultaneously. The description flits between the conceptual and the physical, 'your eyes' and 'your spine' claiming physical control over the individual while 'your| keep', 'your trigger| finger', and 'your reasoning' ensure that the individual's mental existence is also limited to this externally imposed identity. Later in the poem this evolves:

[...] your  
eyes, [...]  
your eyes, your cell, your keep, your hold,  
after all it is yours, yes, what you have taken in (ll. 24–27).

Repeating these phrases forces this constructed, exterior identity onto and into the individual, creating a new, pliable existence under the tormentors' control. That which is 'yours' is also

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Howe, 'To Image the Future: Jorie Graham's *Sea Change*', *PN Review*, 35, no. 3 (2009), 22–25 (p. 24).

constricted to 'cell', 'keep', and 'hold', becoming more the physical confines of a prison cell, or even the cellular level of their physical existence, rather than the consideration of the subject as a human governed by a mind. Even 'your eyes' remains focused on the exterior, what can be seen, rather than a mind which can process and understand this information.

Simone Weil states that 'a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it [...] a closed space of partial truth [...] The only way into truth is by one's own annihilation'.<sup>8</sup> By 'withhold[ing] you from you', and constructing a new identity of 'your' crimes and responsibilities, the tormentor in the poem encloses the subject in this prison of language alongside the physical prison, dictating their individual identity as something other than their own, and forcing this annihilation upon them.

Language as a prison, subject to the 'partial truth' of what those who use it choose to construct, is apparent through the poem, as 'words it seemed were everything and then| the legal team will declare them exempt' (ll. 32–33). Graham notes here how language, such as a defence case, dictates this prison, as the change in 'words' from 'everything' to 'exempt' marks the difference between freedom and incarceration. Karen Greenberg explains that 'torture was to be banned from the premises [of Guantánamo Bay] [...] but only as a word'.<sup>9</sup> The space between reality and that which describes it is altered in this artificial environment in which authority is free to shape reality as they please, and use language to cover up or soften their presentation of torture.

The poem continues to follow Weil's pronouncement, as 'the only way into truth is by one's own annihilation' comes about as the voice of the poem escapes from 'you' and 'I':

this stillness of ours. We are trying not to be noticed. We are in stillness as if it were an  
other life we could slip into. In our skins  
we dazzle with nonexistence. (ll. 46–48)

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<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, 'Human Personality', in *Selected Essays 1934–1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings*, trans. by Richard Rees (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1962), pp. 9–34 (pp. 26–27).

<sup>9</sup> Karen Greenberg, 'Impunity and Immunity: The Bush Administration Enters the Confessional', *Tom Dispatch* (December 8, 2006) <<https://tomdispatch.com/greenberg-in-a-confessing-state-of-mind>> [Accessed 27 January 2021].



The prisoners, or multiple identities of one prisoner, become united and autonomous within this fragmentation of their existence into a collective 'nonexistence'. By repeating the same structure as before — the repetition of 'I will' becomes the repeated 'we are' — the inmates reform the language which has been used to oppress them, approaching it as a collective through their shared experience.

Graham's poem 'Positive Feedback Loop' centres around the unanswered, unanswerable question 'Who is one when one calls oneself| one?', which seeps through the collection as Graham questions the stability of an individual identity in the face of complete climate collapse.<sup>10</sup> The 'Positive Feedback Loop' of the title, denoting the process of an initial change amplified through cyclical events, opens out from 'I' to 'you' to 'one' (ll. 1, 16, 19), spiralling out along with the destruction of the natural world. The individualism which we attempt to live by, Graham suggests, aids the destruction of both nature and the individual. Matthew Griffiths argues that this plurality is constant throughout *Sea Change*:

[...] 'chorusing in us' or 'Who is one when one calls oneself| one? An orchestra dies down' (Positive Feedback Loop) and 'The dead gods [...] turn the page for| us. The score does not acknowledge| the turner of| pages' (Belief System), figure the self as one of many in a concerted musical effort. Like the orchestra, humanity can create an harmonious, if transitory and imaginative, world. The extension of the musical image across separate poems enacts that context of mutual and multiple creation. It takes the effort of a collective, however [...] to create this fictive harmony.<sup>11</sup>

Through this extended musical metaphor, Graham explains this need for collective identity, as the individual cannot create the orchestral, large-scale change in behaviour individually. Griffiths continues:

When we revert to the conception of ourselves as individuals, the orchestral effect goes unrecognised: the individualism of 'calling oneself one' [...] means the music 'dies down'. Having shown individualism to be implicated in environmental change, [...] Graham

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<sup>10</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Positive Feedback Loop', in *Sea Change* (New York: Ecco, 2008), p. 42, ll. 19–20. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew J. R. Griffiths, 'Sea Change: Modernist Poetics and Climate Change', in *The New Poetics of Climate Change: Modernist Aesthetics for a Warming World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 160–174 (p. 169).

intimates that we aggravate that change when we behave as individuals, rather than engaging with it through an orchestral understanding of human behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

The effects of this individualism are evident, as we have seen, in 'Futures', in which 'someone walking by whistling a| little tune' observes how the mask of individuality prevents humanity from engaging with the climate crisis. The implicit complacency within this tune, 'that's life', and the dismissive attempt to control life and its timeframe portray the limit of the 'tune' made with one individualistic person. In 'Positive Feedback Loop', the 'orchestra' (l. 20) is also replaced with a 'tune' (l. 21) after 'one' tries to imagine individuality. Ignoring the climate crisis or clinging to the archaic notions of humanity in power over nature does not help to stop the destruction of the earth, and produces only an insignificant 'little tune' rather than the harmonious music of an orchestra.

The very concept of attempting to define 'one' without reference to the rest of the 'orchestra' is flawed, as the line in 'Positive Feedback Loop' becomes an echo chamber for this unanswerable question. 'One' becomes almost meaningless, performing its own inadequacy alone, reinforcing the need for this collective identity. The use of 'one' omits a name, a gender, or the individual 'I' of the start of the poem, and such usage seems archaic to the contemporary reader, as this universalist, impersonal first person pronoun is outdated in an individualistic world. Here again Graham's speaker touches upon Adams' 'absent referent': instead of personalising the individual, she creates a 'one', bypassing the connotations which 'I' or a name would bring to the question, and therefore observes how 'one' is not as important as the concept of working as a collective human entity. Later in the poem, the speaker portrays how this individual identity cannot be used to gain control — 'my spouse the future, here in my| earth, my parents' house' (ll. 25–26), which seems insubstantial after:

[...] you know not what

you

are entering, a time

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<sup>12</sup> Griffiths, p. 169.

beyond belief. Who is one when one calls oneself one? (ll. 16–20).

The possessive is made redundant, as the ‘one’ which would possess the spouse, the earth, the house, is called into question, and the future, earth, and past (the parents) cannot be possessed by an individual alone. Repeating ‘my’ in the same way as ‘one’ continues to question and dilute the importance of an individual identity in the face of a global problem. Graham again withholds gender pronouns, referring to ‘one’ and ‘my spouse’. The constructions of gender as part of an individual identity, Graham suggests by this omission, are secondary concerns to the wider problem of climate change which destroys male and female alike and must be faced with a collective identity.

Much of Graham’s poetry is focused on the incongruence between words and that which they attempt to encapsulate, questioning the importance of a name or gender identification, a piece of language given to an object or concept, and whether that name can ever truly be representative of it. Repeating ‘one’ and ‘my’ in such a way observes the incongruence of language and identity, as who one ‘is’ is separated from what one ‘calls’ oneself, and referring to ‘my spouse the future’ does not guarantee the existence of that future.

Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn address these implications of naming when they assert that:

Because others usually name us, the act of naming has the potential to implicate infants in relations through which they become inserted into and, ultimately will act upon, a social matrix. Individual lives thus become entangled — through the name — in the life histories of others.<sup>13</sup>

This is addressed in Graham’s poem, as she asks:

ever  
[...] can you  
enter the strange thing, the name that is yours, that  
“is” you —  
the place where the dead put their arms around you (ll. 31–34).

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<sup>13</sup> Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn, p. 3.

The process of naming places the individual into a group, the 'social matrix' which is provided by the past, and others who dictate by the name what the individual will be — male, female, et cetera. Graham questions the validity of this process, however, with the rhetorical, unanswerable question 'can you ever| enter', a name given to you by others. While naming is a step towards collective identity, the identifications of the past are no longer viable in the present of the poem. The act of naming individualises, but brings the individual into a collective identity not of their choosing, dictated by the generation before. This is particularly under question in the current climate crisis, in which the 'new Age of Extinction is| now' (ll. 14–15). Graham here calls for new modes of collective identity to combat this extinction.

This sinister representation of a name as 'the place where the dead put their arms around you' confirms the problem of basing identity in the past. Naming becomes a positive feedback loop, re-enacting 'the life histories of others' in the present identity, but this becomes increasingly unsustainable. The troubling implications of the rhetorical question 'who is one when one calls oneself| one' are compounded here, and the detachment of the former is echoed in the latter, as 'the name that is yours' separates 'your' from 'name'. The quotation marks around 'is' suggest that the concept of a name as a basis for identity is flawed, and call into question whether language and naming can fully represent that which they describe. Graham urges us to 'Forget| everything' (ll. 1–2) that has gone before and instead 'start listening' (l. 2) to the climate catastrophe happening 'now', urging us to take our places in the orchestra of collective identity, rather than clinging to past notions of existence.

The speaker omits any sense of 'I' after the question of whether a name can ever be 'yours', and the rest of the poem enacts this collective identity, referring to 'we' and 'you' as the only way to exist in the ever-deteriorating climate situation. Instead of the speaker, 'the silence-that-precedes' (l. 1) is the named entity in the poem, although what this silence precedes is kept from us, demonstrating the unknowable future which the climate destruction brings about. The

repetition of 'the silence that precedes', which assumes a corporeality as it 'says' 'the new Age of Extinction is| now', suggests that this anticipation before the total collapse is more real than any human structure which attempts to assert control, such as the act of naming. The identity of the speaker, which is kept ambiguous so as to apply to all of us, is based in the present, 'I am' (l. 1), rather than rooted by name in a past which has denied the symbiosis of nature and humanity.

Oswald's poem 'Dunt: A poem for a dried-up river' also enacts this positive feedback loop of deteriorating identity from within the natural world. Oswald commonly uses myth as a foundation for her poetry, and here the 'Roman water nymph' is used as an allegory for the human condition, as the myths of the past are starved in the present reality of climate collapse, which cannot uphold the traditional human existence loaded with the belief of supremacy over nature.<sup>14</sup> Oswald uses the traditional gender stereotype of woman being akin and alike to nature, and works from within this to understand the wider implications of humanity's connection with a deteriorating natural world, as the lines 'a Roman water nymph made of bone| tries to summon a river out of limestone' (ll. 2–3) echo through the poem.

Instead of a name, the nymph is referred to as 'Roman', the curator of an English river, displaced from her land or renamed as such by alien forces, and thus evokes the concept of syncretism.

Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart define syncretism as:

[...] the synthesis of different religious forms. It is a contentious and contested term which has undergone many historical transformations in meaning. Some see it as a disparaging, ethnocentric label for religious traditions (such as independent African churches), which are deemed 'impure' or 'inauthentic' because they are permeated by local ideas and practices. Yet in other contexts religious synthesis may have positive connotations as a form of resistance to cultural dominance, as a link with a lost history, or as a means of establishing a national identity in a multicultural state.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Dunt: A Poem for a Dried-Up River', in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 31, l. 2. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>15</sup> Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, 'Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism', in *Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. by Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart (London: Routledge, 1994), abstract.

The nymph and the river are subject to syncretism, the nymph either by her displacement from Rome into an English river, or appropriated by Roman invasions into the Roman pantheon, and the river by being assigned a name which attempts to force it into a discrete existence at odds with its nature as an ever-changing entity.

Oswald describes the Roman imagination of nymphs as ‘an effort, driven by absolute need, to make contact with something inscrutable’, worshipping the river as they depended upon it for survival, and recognising this ‘inscrutable’ aspect of nature as something to elevate it above humanity.<sup>16</sup> This past reverence for the natural world and the deification thereof has been lost, however, as humans began instead to worship individualism or their supposed control over nature. Instead of ‘establishing a national identity in a multicultural state’, then, the nymph is ‘a link with a lost history’, drawn into a present which cannot sustain her power over a river which has disappeared.

The last stanza performs this erasure, becoming more a collection of nouns and adjectives than a flowing sentence:

little loose end short hand unrepresented  
beautiful disused rout to the sea  
fish path with nearly no fish in (ll. 82–84).

Oswald performs the shrinking of language along with that which it describes, by making reference to the Old English poetic practice of kenning. In *Beowulf*, the sea is referred to as a ‘whale road’, which Oswald here translates into ‘fish path’, shrinking this grand kenning into its diminished place in the modern world.<sup>17</sup> By using this ancient descriptive technique but moulding it to fit her subject, Oswald recognises both the rich history of the nymph, and also how the language used to describe her situation necessarily shrinks her as she belongs to a bygone time and so can only summon up a ‘fish path with nearly no fish in’.

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<sup>16</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘A Smiling Shrunken Goddess’, *1843 Magazine*, 16 January 2013. All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>17</sup> *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), p. 3, l. 10.

The poem's form performs this deterioration of identity as the nymph's refrain is repeated until it becomes meaningless, and her disappearance echoes through the deterioration of sentence structure. The nymph is 'the last known speaker of her language' (l. 10), who speaks 'in a largely unintelligible monotone' (l. 15), unable to enter into the present through language. Her identity is borrowed from the past in which water and the natural world were necessarily revered, and yet now she has been rendered inarticulate as humanity recognises the suffering of the natural world but refuses to understand its language, still attempting to cling to the false binary which sets humanity above nature. The poem performs the displacement of the past by what Oswald terms 'bigger, more abstract forces' ('A Smiling Shrunken Goddess') as the changing climate destroys the nymph's habitat and throws her existence into question as the river perishes. Language cannot resurrect the river, and by the end of the poem has deteriorated along with it, reinforcing the inextricably symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature.

Oswald describes the process of syncretism, as she states that:

A nymph is a shrunken goddess, a local land-spirit displaced by bigger, more abstract forces. This one took her form from Greece, her refinement from Rome, her material from Britain and was probably made by a Gloucestershire craftsman, working for a Roman, trying to give him power over a Gloucestershire river — perhaps the Churn, which flows through Cirencester, or the Dunt, which flows into the Churn. ('A Smiling Shrunken Goddess')

The nymph's existence as a physical object is formed from this false binary between humanity and nature, a craftsman 'trying to give him [a Roman] power over a Gloucestershire river', and this foundation in an outdated, unsustainable past is echoed in the poem as her description shifts between 'nymph', 'woman', and 'old woman' (ll. 2, 42, 61). This performs the positive feedback loop of deteriorating identity as the river remains dry and the female presence within it unravels from deity to human, subject to age and decay, unable to summon the water which she depends upon for both existence and identity as a goddess. This fluctuation between imaginary nymph and real woman opens up a paradoxical, liminal space between the existence of a once-flowing river and the reality of the dried-up river bed as the past myths are drawn into

the present and find themselves unsustainable there. By worshipping and giving the river a name, humanity has begun the destruction of it by syncretism into a language which cannot accommodate it.

The absence of the nymph's and river's names outside the title is understandable, then, as her individuality is subsumed by the collective identity of female and river, both 'dried-up' and beyond the reach of a name in a world which no longer recognises the need to be part of or to revere nature. Even the name of the river in the title seems arbitrary, as Oswald's description of 'the Dunt, which flows into the Churn' observes that there is no fixed point at which this change takes place, and therefore that the river cannot be measured or thought of as something discrete. The nymph attempts to summon 'a river', but as one river flows into the next, as part of an infinite water cycle, her task becomes impossible. This way of thinking about the natural world in the restraints of human language or names cannot sustain the reality, as naming one part of the river ignores its relation to the collective identity from which water is inextricable. 'Dunt: A Poem for a Dried-Up River' draws into question the validity of affixing the term 'river' or even continuing to refer to it by name when it has 'dried-up', as flowing water is absent from the poem, and instead 'dry' (l. 1), 'limestone' (l. 3), 'bone' (l. 2), and 'small' (l. 1) are emphasised throughout. Oswald describes the Dunt as 'a runnel no deeper than my boots, a mere glint in a field, mostly lost in nettles' ('A Smiling Shrunken Goddess'), becoming the 'inscrutable', forgotten relic of a past which is no longer sustained by the present climate. The name of the river becomes 'the place where the dead put their arms around you', and the poem exists in this paradoxical space between a named river and the absence of that river, as Oswald observes that individuality and language cannot affect lasting environmental change.

The old belief in river nymphs as beings who bring prosperity or blessings has faded away, and perhaps in modern times would be considered as an irrational belief, as the collective belief in science and reason takes over from folklore and magic. Westernised humanity now collectively



believes in individualism and the power of language to define and dictate identity: I give you my name as an identification of who I am, where I fit into the island matrix of other individuals, and the communal belief in something upon which we all depend for identity or survival is lost. This way of identifying the self as an individual among other individuals, isolated from a central, communal identity which venerates life-giving, eternal nature provides the conditions for a climate collapse. Because this faith in language to define and categorise is not thought of as a belief, it remains unexamined: we accept the paradox of language defining itself, and the cycle of individualism perpetuates. By breaking down language and syntax in poetry which considers the natural world in its current state of deterioration, however, Oswald and Graham make us aware of the power which we ascribe to language and the processes by which we allow language to provide meaning and truth. Both Graham and Oswald deal with subjectivity that is under pressure, on the brink of becoming inarticulate, making the point that individual identities rooted in the past are unsustainable in the current climate crisis. Through this fragile personhood, both urge their readers to consider their responsibility as part of both nature and humanity as a whole.

In an interview with Sarah Howe, Graham addresses this tension between individual and collective identity:

The truly anxious question, it seems to me, concerns how singular we are, or remain, or should remain, in relation to our communal predicament — our communal creation of this nightmare. There is no place to step out of it. We are totally interlinked in ways far less beautiful or spiritually advanced than we had imagined. This question underpins every other question. [...] Now we are all in each other's hands, and all in the disaster.<sup>18</sup>

Although Graham is talking here about the inspiration for her collection *Fast*, these sentiments are also true of *Sea Change*, as this collective identity and 'communal predicament' of climate change are unavoidable, a notion which Graham upholds through the collection by referring to 'we' and 'us' in the continual decline of individual identity alongside the natural world.

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<sup>18</sup> Sarah Howe, "'Cryo": Interview', *Prac Crit*, 8 (2017) <<http://www.praccrit.com/poems/cryo/>> [Accessed 7 February 2022].

Graham's sense of individuality in 'Day Off' again remains tied to a collective identity, as the 'I' referred to seems interchangeable with the plural 'you' and 'we'. At the end of the poem the 'I' becomes a kind of hypothetical representation of humanity, as Graham echoes the creation story:

[...] wherein I grab onto the immaterial and christen it  
thus and thus &  
something over our shoulder says it is good, yes, go on, go on, and we did.<sup>19</sup>

Through this interchanging of singular and plural and the speaker's ambiguity, Graham widens the responsibility of this creation story and the subsequent treatment of nature as secondary to humanity to implicate all of humanity, relating Adam's actions to the continued assumption of human power over nature.

Instead of following the traditional biblical story of one man naming the creatures of the earth under divine authority, the first instance of him asserting his superiority over both the natural world and the female, Graham presents a collective, non-gendered identity which 'grab[s] onto the immaterial and christen[s] it'. This behaviour is reminiscent of a child, not knowing the significance of a name or an action, but determined to exert power over something. Adele Reinhartz argues that the creation story could be interpreted as similarly un-gendered:

The first story [the account of the creation of humanity in Genesis 1.26–31] portrays humankind as double-gendered; the male and the female, the plural and the singular, are bound up together in this one being created in the image of God.<sup>20</sup>

Several theologians have corroborated this view, such as Phyllis Trible, who argues that the human created in the first chapter of Genesis is not a man but an 'earth creature', as:

[...] apart from this reference to nostrils, no physical features are specified for the earth creature in this first episode. More important, this creature is not identified sexually. [...] In other words, the earth creature is not the male; it is not 'the first man'. [...] Instead, the

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<sup>19</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Day Off', in *Sea Change* (New York: Ecco, 2008), p. 41, ll. 59–61. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>20</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Why Ask My Name?: Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 144.

earth creature here is precisely and only the human being, so far sexually undifferentiated.<sup>21</sup>

The lack of name or gender in Graham's poem emphasises this collective identity over a singular one, as the arbitrary distinctions of male or female are less important than the collective human response to this 'day of| days' (ll. 56–57).

The divine authority is also diminished, as 'something over our shoulders says it is good' continues this metaphor of a child at play rather than the divinely blessed establishment of a hierarchy which places humanity over nature. Naming the 'immaterial' in this version of the creation story further suggests that this ritual of naming, the way in which humanity assumed and continues to assume power over the natural world, is arbitrary. Alice Te Punga Somerville observes that 'Oceans cannot be named, and yet we name them. We produce oceans through names', furthering the idea that our perception of nature, 'the immaterial' and that which we 'christen' has no bearing on the reality of the natural world.<sup>22</sup>

Graham describes the coming extinction as a time 'where all you have named is finally shunted aside' (l. 57), and the 'so-called definitions' (l. 58) are revealed as inadequate as a basis for identity. The original creation myth is hinted at, 'the whole material man-|ifestation' (ll. 57–58) of definitions, but the line break in the middle of the word strips 'man' of his ability to 'manifest', further suggesting that this power of naming and the fallacies of gender hierarchies implicated in the original creation story are baseless. This way of existing as individuals with power over the natural world is fragmentary, Graham observes, as the 'communal predicament' of the climate crisis pays no attention to gender labels or fallacies of human superiority. Through this recreation of the first act of naming in the present moment of destruction, Graham urges the reader to understand the implications of individual acts in the wider existence of the world, as well as the damage caused when humans maintain this artificial hierarchy over nature.

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<sup>21</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Te Punga Somerville, 'Where Oceans Come From', *Comparative Literature*, 69 (2017), 25–31 (p. 30).

The urgency of this crisis is clear as the whole of human history is elided into the present anticipation of the end:

[...] behind us it is approaching at  
last the day of  
days, where all you have named is finally shunted aside (ll. 55–57).

The elision of time presents the idea that human existence is not or should not be considered as the benchmark for natural existence, and that the current threat of extinction of all life is more important than the whole relatively short existence of humanity. The poem is narrated from a present looking towards 'The future without| days' (ll. 1–2), suggesting that the past is also intangible as the poem happens 'now' (l. 27), and remains in the present tense throughout until 'we did' (l. 61) at the end of the poem, observing the act of naming which instigated this downfall into extinction. The human attempt to exert control upon time, naming it with days, years, and even centuries, 'the trellis of minutes' (l. 31) which relate to our own existence rather than the planet as a whole, creates an illusion of power over the past, present, and future which the threat of extinction forces us to recalculate. The 'cadaver beginning to show through the skin of the day' (l. 1) forces us to understand our mortality and the coming extinction of the planet as this mortality is imposed upon the 'day' too.

Humanity exists always on a balance, 'Always breathing-in this pre-life, exhaling this post' (l. 13), as the single comma between 'pre-life' and 'post' accentuates. The poem must exist in this fleeting present, however, as the future is uncertain, 'without| days' and the past is unchangeable. The speaker chooses to name this fragility rather than to own their individual name, as this expression of mortality is more adequate to describe their identity as part of humanity, 'totally interlinked', than an individual name. Graham observes 'my increasingly desperate sense of myself as a member of a species — a species deeply implicated in the extinction of other species [...] My increasingly thin sense of my "singular individuality"', which is

here reflected as this thin sense of singular identity is dissected.<sup>23</sup> Human existence is compared to a scar, 'a seam, this trail. Something is being| repaired' (ll. 20–21), which reinforces the imagery of balance between one thing and another, existing in the delicate scar tissue of the present. The word 'scar' is not used, and yet it is understood, as our 'trail' of individual actions weakens the whole. 'It is some| bride, this flesh barely hanging| on' (ll. 21–23), Graham continues, suggestive of the process of debriding a wound, removing the damaged tissue from it just as extinction removes the damaged human and natural existence from the planet.

The concept of naming is at the forefront of this delicate existence. The speaker says 'Write your name again to register' (l. 21), which, surrounded by this imagery of decay and destruction, seems to have no impact. Clinging to this 'singular individuality' in the midst of the extinction both of ourselves and of other species is shown to be futile, and yet the 'trail' of being 'your self' (ll. 20, 17) leaves its mark on the planet, and contributes to 'the communal creation of this nightmare'. Instead of this name, however, this section of the poem repeats 'you' and 'your' until it begins to lose meaning, and separates 'your' from 'self': 'through you. Leaving no trail but self.' (l. 15) and 'you travel it. Your self' (l. 17). By separating the individual from their selfhood, the speaker can present this arbitrariness of naming but also suggest that 'your self' should not be an exclusive being but should instead exist in reference to and as part of a collective self. The immaterial nature of individual existence is clear as the speaker notes:

[...] For all  
the fuss of *being* how little  
you disturb. (ll. 17–19)

Leonard Ashley suggests that names provide individuals with 'scripts for their lives, expressions of the beliefs and expectations of their parents, clues to where they fit into society and what their duties are', and yet Graham's poem omits such a script, suggesting the dissonance

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<sup>23</sup> Howe, "Cryo": Interview'.

between language, specifically the name, and that which it seeks to codify.<sup>24</sup> This reflects the 'immaterial' christening of nature, as a name cannot represent an individual, and humanity cannot claim power through language over a dying world.

Oswald's poem 'Severed Head Floating Downriver' explores the interconnectedness of all things, and submerges human identity into the natural world in order to explore this symbiosis. Through using a mythical story, Oswald is able to stretch the confines of existence and understand this connection between all things outside the binary between life and death. Oswald's character, the severed head of Orpheus, floats down the river forgetting his earthly self and everything attached to that existence, 'forgetting who I am' and becoming part of the water around him.<sup>25</sup> This 'forgetting', which is so central to Oswald's poem, is added into the contextual epigraph of the poem, as though part of the common knowledge of the myth, which draws attention to the malleability through language of truths which we believe to be self-evident. The mask that we create through language, an interpretation of the world we see before us, is shown to be subjective, as Oswald creates a context for her poem assumed to be a shared truth, but then the speaker of her poem forgets the names of flowers, flies, and even his beloved. The natural world does not cease to exist because Orpheus forgets the names ascribed to it, showing that the language enforced upon nature through human naming does not become a basis for its existence.

The name as a 'clue' as to where an individual may 'fit into society' no longer offers anything to Eurydice, as she appears only in Orpheus' mind, forgotten along with everything else. Her name begins the poem, and yet stands alone, followed by silence, and is not incorporated into a sentence, emphasising this forgetting which strips him even of his lover's identity in death. Her name is the only one mentioned in the body of the poem, as the severed head drifts away from

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<sup>24</sup> Leonard Ashley, *What's in a Name?: Everything You Wanted to Know* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1996), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Severed Head Floating Downriver', in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 6, l. 15. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

his human existence and the construction of identity therein. This format is echoed later in the poem, as the head describes ‘the name of a fly or flower                      already forgetting who they are’ (l. 6). The split between the name and its object, or in this case the place of a name, as the head has already forgotten their actual names, observes the arbitrariness of language and the connotations which come with it.

The revelation of a name as an inadequate basis for identity in death is explored in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, in which he also imagines a continued existence after death, and states that:

True, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,  
to use no longer customs scarcely acquired,  
not to interpret roses, and other things  
that promise so much, in terms of a human future;  
to be no longer all that one used to be  
in endlessly anxious hands, and to lay aside  
even one’s proper name like a broken toy.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of a name as something ‘proper’, which fits an individual into the ‘matrix’ of society, is cast aside in death, as a name attributed to a living being, or even the concept of language itself, can no longer provide a basis for identity in death. The idea of this name as a ‘toy’ also touches upon this concept of naming as an arbitrary way in which humanity seeks to obtain power over that which it names, as in this perfect state it holds no significance. Rilke continues:

And so I repress myself, and swallow the call-note  
of depth-dark sobbing.  
[...]  
[...] we don’t feel very securely at home  
in this interpreted world [...].<sup>27</sup>

The sentient natural world around the speaker understands the futility of imposing an abstract reality, through language, on a world which cannot be constricted into such an identity. In death, Rilke’s subjects return to the natural world, unencumbered by the confines of language and

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<sup>26</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘The First Elegy’, in *Duino Elegies*, trans. by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (London: The Hogarth Press, 1952), p. 29, ll. 68–74.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25, ll. 8–13.

remembering their place within the natural cycle of life and death as interconnected parts of an eternal whole. Oswald echoes this idea, as Orpheus' head is content in death to float down a river, filling up with water, forgetting the particulars of human interpretations of the world and instead reconnecting with it. The water in Oswald's poem seems aware of this need to reclaim the head, as it actively seeks to envelop its charge and the poem keeps returning to the water flowing through and into the head. The absence of language in this natural world to which the head has returned, the 'speechless reeds' (l. 13) seems comforting, in contrast to the language which the human part of him tries and fails to cling to, echoing the sentiment that 'we don't feel very securely at home | in this interpreted world'.

Both poems explore the unravelling of the Genesis creation story, as names given at the beginning of life in order to bestow meaning and purpose onto individuals or to place parts of nature into a human matrix are meaningless in death. Rilke's poem 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.', in which Eurydice's identity fades until she can no longer remember Orpheus' name, is an important antecedent for Oswald's poem. Both Oswald and Rilke's characters dissolve back into the 'earth creature' of Genesis, reverting back past the human imposed structures of naming and the consequences thereof. Rilke's Eurydice walks with 'steps impeded', 'unsure', 'within herself, great with expectation', '[she] wasn't to be touched; her sex was closed', which compounds this concept of a constricting identity as the dead woman, despite walking towards life, fades further away from her identity.<sup>28</sup> Rilke continues:

She was no more the woman of flaxen hair  
who sometimes resonated in the poet's songs,  
no more the odour and island of the wide bed,  
and that man's possession no more.

She was already loosened like long hair  
And surrendered like fallen rain  
And meted out like a hundred-fold supply.

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<sup>28</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.', in *The Essential Rilke*, trans. by Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 23, ll. 58–60, 69.



Already she was root.<sup>29</sup>

Repeating the past tense of her identity, 'she was', 'already', and 'no more', along with a plethora of adjectives like 'loosened', 'surrendered', 'meted out', and 'closed', portrays this fading of identity which culminates in the single line 'Already she was root'. Rilke observes how Eurydice has become part of the natural world in death, just as Oswald's portrayal of the character suffers a similar fate, 'the grass coming up through her feet' (l. 3). Both cease to be identified by their human names: Rilke's Eurydice 'no more the woman of flaxen hair' in and defined through the poet's songs, and Oswald's left suspended at the beginning of the poem as the poem's focus shifts to the head. The language to which humanity clings so rigidly to define, through a name, what an individual may be is here cast aside as these individuals in death find their way back to the limitless natural world.

Oswald portrays life's inevitable self-destructiveness as the flowers which Orpheus passes and forgets 'grow | till their bodies break their necks' (ll. 7–8). Instead of death as an end, Oswald posits life as an unsustainable way of existing, and observes how everything, living or dead, is interconnected. This is echoed later in the poem, as 'the grey spirits of stones lie around uncertain of their limits' (l. 10) and 'matter is eating my mind' (l. 11). The natural world is aware of this interconnectivity of all things, and can 'see clearly' that one being cannot exist independently of the world around it, and will inevitably return to it.

Water performs this ever-changing identity, dissolving the individual human identity and flowing ever-onwards, as the head describes how 'the water wears my mask' (l. 16), how in death his consciousness has joined this symbiotic identity of all things, 'no more myself but a colander' (l. 27). That which would provide limits, the mind which encloses the consciousness in language, ebbs away, as 'not I not I | the water drinks my mind' (ll. 35–36). Orpheus denies his human individuality to become part of the river, and his speaker physically distances himself from 'I' on

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<sup>29</sup> Rilke, 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.', ll. 75–82.

the page. The power dynamic is switched, as instead of the human drinking water in order to stay alive, the water drinks away the human identity, freeing consciousness from this physical prison:

my voice being water  
which holds me together and also carries me away  
until the facts forget themselves (ll. 45–47).

As the reeds in the water are characterised as ‘speechless’ (l. 13) elsewhere in the poem, Orpheus now too is without identity, as the ‘broken plaything’ of a ‘proper name’ is again split from the individual and his voice is water. The passive ‘facts forget themselves’ distances language and all human confines from the presence that has now become part of water.

Oswald’s poem is full of forgetting, but also full of a new kind of remembering. The presence in the poem forgets everything that gave him sorrow and defined him as an individual human as this identity is dissolved by the water around him until he becomes a nameless ‘severed head’. The head remembers its interconnectedness with the natural world as the water around it carries it along and fills it with the old identity it came from before human identity eclipsed its place within nature. Oswald reaches this point of perfect symbiosis with nature through exploring mythical stories in light of this eco-poetic notion, akin to Graham’s fragmented speakers who experience the dissolution of their identities in the wake of the climate crisis because they are so inextricably linked to the natural world. The desperation of Graham’s climate change poetry is less apparent in Oswald’s poem, as life and death seem interchangeable, interconnected just like everything else. In death, both Rilke and Oswald find a way to cease the pretence that humanity is separate from the natural world, and their mythical figures retake their place as part of this natural world. Graham urges this realisation in life, however, spurred on by the threat of extinction which erases this ability to become one with the natural world as that too will be annihilated by the changing climate.

In an earlier poem 'Wood Not Yet Out', Oswald presents nature's own language which it uses 'thinking I'm gone', a language which operates outside the confines of physical existence or human-imposed meaning.<sup>30</sup> Oswald's speaker explains:

[...] I love  
to stand among the last trees listening down  
to the releasing branches where I've been —  
the rain, thinking I've gone, crackles the air  
and calls by name the leaves that aren't yet there (ll. 10–14).

The sonnet form necessitates brevity, and yet by not adhering to the usual distinctions set out by Petrarchan or Shakespearean rhyme schemes (although the poem is split into octave and sestet by the one full stop of the poem), Oswald remains aware of the 'syllables untranscribable' from within the human perspective. The near-rhyming couplets suggest a symbiosis, a call and answer which is reflected in the last two lines in which water, 'the rain', calls leaves 'that aren't yet out' into being, whilst maintaining this awareness of a lack of human control.

This flowing structure, coupled with the end of the poem which holds promise in 'yet' and the lack of punctuation, suggests that the poem's subject continues outside the poem, no longer confinable in the rigid human structure of language as the 'name' which rain uses to call forth the leaves is beyond our understanding. The title of the poem rejuvenates the cliché 'not yet out of the woods', making the object of this cliché the subject and thus loading the danger of the phrase onto the woods themselves. Not being able 'to see the wood for the trees' also springs to mind, and both phrases draw attention to the language that we use figuratively in a mindless way. Oswald reignites the meaning of the words to reflect the ineffable sounds and experience of being alone in the woods.

There is something biblical about this calling by name, which echoes Isaiah, where God proclaims 'I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be

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<sup>30</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Wood Not Yet Out', in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 9, l. 13. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you'.<sup>31</sup> Reversing this, so that the river itself holds the divine power of naming and will not be overwhelmed by the human presence within it, adds to the intangible power of the natural world. Its language holds the power to call into being that which has not 'yet' existed, rather than just clumsily labelling that which is before us, as the inadequate human languages do.

Oswald explains that 'poetry is beyond words. Poetry is only there to frame the silence. There is silence between each verse and silence at the end'.<sup>32</sup> The 'silence' here is the unknowable language of nature which speaks only when the human presence is absent, or cannot decipher its meaning. The sonnet form of the poem holds this silence of potential, cyclical life, the language of nature, and allows its content to run through this structure like the rain which ends the poem, observing how human language cannot fully encompass the natural world's mysteries. Oswald continues: 'I love etc and dot dot dot. I feel the universe is constructed with an etc.'.<sup>33</sup> The poem enacts this construction through the ineffable power of water, which gives life to that around it.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, introd. and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Isaiah 43. 1–2. All further references to *The Bible: Authorised King James Version* are to this edition.

<sup>32</sup> Kate Kellaway, 'Into the Woods', *Observer*, 19 June 2005, Poetry  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/19/poetry.features>> [Accessed 7 February 2022].

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

### Chapter Three: 'Bodies of water' — The 'aqueous origins' of Human Embodiment

#### I. 'Where is the limit between self and other? [...] Never where it might be expected'

What does it mean to be a physical being that is necessarily part of a collective identity? What does it mean to be a 'watery body'? If water is placeless and we are made up of water, how does that affect our sense of identity? How do poems enact this conflict between singular physicality and collectivism? Astrida Neimanis argues that 'For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves. Indeed, bodies of water undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human' (p. 2), echoing the ecopoetic interconnectedness between all things. Neimanis argues that humans are not only 'bodies', but 'bodies of water' (p. 1), subject to change and fluctuation, always taking in and expelling that which keeps us alive. 'As bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation' (p. 2), she continues, considering the erroneous concept of 'borders' between entities in such an untenable, borderless state.

Luce Irigaray, in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, asks 'Where is the limit between self and other? Where is the world? [...] Never where it might be expected'.<sup>1</sup> Both Neimanis and Irigaray draw attention to the limitlessness of human embodiment, especially when submerged in, or even merely aware of our watery ancestry. This 'limit between self and other', commonly perceived as true by those who do not see the interconnectedness of nature and humanity, and who instead see humans as discrete, independent beings, is blurred when one considers the ever-moving exchange of fluids within us and the implications which this holds for existence. Our embodiment as physical beings relies upon and is largely made up of an unknown, an Other, which is constantly moving through and in us, becoming Other, and thus necessarily questions our individuality.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 17. All further references to this work are to this edition.

This becoming, the loosening of selfhood into a continuous flow or ambiguous 'body' of water links us not only with each other, blurring the boundaries of selfhood, but also through time, as Neimanis observes:

Water extends embodiment in time — body, to body, to body. Water in this sense is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies. Our own embodiment, as already noted, is never really autonomous. Nor is it autochthonous, nor autopoietic: we require other bodies of other waters (that in turn require other bodies and other waters) to bathe us into being. (p. 3)

This symbiosis of not only human and nature, but human and other human, of the continuation of embodiment after death in other shapes and forms, plays into this concept of a universal form or self, echoed by the transcendentalists and continued today through ecopoetics. This communal and ever-recreating self of human and nature, fused together through the flow of water, is necessarily timeless, as Neimanis states that:

If we were to trace a genealogy of our own gestation, it would have no definitive starting point, no clear beginning of beginnings. The waters that gestate one body have come from other bodies, gestated by earlier waters, gestated by waters that precede those. Aqueous origins are diffuse and multiple. (p. 84)

Neimanis cements Graham's concept of collective identity, as she observes the 'diffuse and multiple' origins which cannot be traced back to a single point, and adds that:

We are created in water, we gestate in water, we are born into an atmosphere of the same water although more diffuse, we take in water, we harbour it, it sustains and protects us, it leaves us [...] we are always, to some extent, in it. (p. 86)

Neimanis posits water as the omnipotent force within this symbiotic relationship, as we 'harbour' it, until 'it leaves us', underlining the human dependence on water for survival, and the inextricability of the human being from water.

Oswald, in her poem 'A Short Story of Falling', observes how the interconnectedness of beings cycles through nature and human life, beyond the confines of time or mortality and instead allows for the continual flow from one thing to the next, 'body to body to body'. The poem opens her 2016 collection *Falling Awake*, and seems to embody this title as it 'awakens' this realisation of symbiosis between water and humanity, as through the flowing of water all things

are given life. When introducing this poem at a reading for the Griffin Poetry Prize, Oswald stated that ‘What I love about water is that it spends its whole time falling, it’s always apparently trying to find the lowest place possible, and when it finds the lowest place possible, it lies there wide awake’.<sup>2</sup> Water’s immortality continually mimics the human lifecycle of birth and life, but omits death, lying ‘awake’, ready to ‘leak and seethe’ into some new form. The ‘short story’ set out in this title is necessarily so, as Oswald recognises the inadequacy of language to capture this ongoing flow of beings into other beings. The poem is set out in couplets, enacting this transmission of life, and circles back around to its beginning with the repeated rhyme of ‘rain| again’, suggesting that the start point was merely an arbitrary marker, and that the poem’s subject keeps on falling long after the words can depict its meaning.<sup>3</sup> This is reinforced by the absence of punctuation through the poem, as water flows unencumbered through the poem’s form, and continues on after it without hesitation, ‘the story of the falling rain| that rises to the light and falls again’ (ll. 19–20).

Neimanis’ ‘aqueous origins’ which ‘gestate’ the human presence are clear in the poem, as it begins with the story of ‘falling rain’ (l. 1), necessarily using the participle to accentuate water’s continual flow. The human voice of the poem is brief, a mere point of comparison for ‘a seed-head smaller than my thumbnail’ (l. 8), or held in the hypothetical, ‘if only I a passerby could pass| as clear as water through a plume of grass’ (ll. 9–10). Oswald observes that humanity is no longer, nor truly ever was, the focus of this story of existence, and instead acknowledges water’s life-giving power. The internal rhyme of ‘I a passerby’ both observes this lyrical cyclicity of life, but also accentuates this ‘passerby’ attitude which runs throughout Oswald’s poetry — the individual ‘I’ of her poems is mortal, a passerby in a wider story, and yet still manages to be a part of and to observe this ‘falling’. Delaying the human presence in the poem performs this

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Oswald, *Poet Alice Oswald Reads from Falling Awake*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 July 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4rKwW5tgXk>> [Accessed 23 April 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘A Short Story of Falling’, in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 1, ll. 1–2. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

ambiguity of origin: the poem begins and ends with water which flows into and out of the human speaker but is not confined within them.

This brevity of individual existence within a wider collective is also apparent in nature, as the 'flower' (l. 5) 'from the ground flows green and momentary' (l. 6), and is described as 'a tiny tributary' (l. 5), continually likened and linked inextricably to water within this mortal, 'momentary' life. The active, present tense of water's movement through the poem is indicative of this ever-moving presence which 'falls' through the poem, as 'the limit between self and other' is constantly stretched and broken as one body flows into another.

Oswald takes on a Blakean tone towards the end of the poem, observing how water:

[...] leaks along

drawn under gravity towards my tongue  
to cool and fill the pipe-work of this song (ll. 16–18).

This echoes Blake's 'Introduction' to his *Songs of Innocence*, in which the speaker:

[...] pluck'd a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,  
And I stain'd the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs.<sup>4</sup>

Blake places the 'I' at the beginning of each line, actively bending nature to his will as he 'stain'd the water clear' in his decisive, past tense creation out of nature. Instead of taking this active, dominant role above nature, and using its tools to create art, Oswald's speaker is the vessel, the 'hollow reed' which is filled with water in order that she might write her small account of water, which will go on flowing through and giving life long after the poem and her own life end.

Maribel Mas, an artist who has produced intricate line drawings to accompany Oswald's collection, describes how she uses "Burmester" curves, wooden templates developed at the end

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<sup>4</sup> William Blake, 'Introduction', in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, ed. by Philip Smith (Mineola: Dover Thrift Editions, 1992), p. 3, ll. 16–19. All further references to this poem are to this edition.



of the nineteenth century for technical drawings in industrial design and architecture' to capture the airiness and freedom of Oswald's work.<sup>5</sup> Using such tools, Mas notes:

I can't control the final outcome, I just keep going, supporting the drawing as it grows and observing whether or not it develops its own presence. The decision of when to stop depends on the boundaries of the paper. A drawing can only expand within these physical limits, but it can also grow inside them, into its own depth.<sup>6</sup>

This mirrors Oswald's poem, which is underpinned by this lack of control, the human merely a body through which water flows. 'The decision of when to stop' is made by human limitations, but the lack of punctuation and symmetry drawn through the poem by form defy this human mortality and continue on through, out of, and into the aqueous, borderless existence.

Many other poems in Oswald's collection follow on from this first 'Introduction', further acknowledging the inadequacy of our language to fully capture how water flows through life, and foregrounding the eternal watery presence before the mortal human encounter with it. 'A Rushed Account of the Dew' and 'A Drink from Cranmere Pool' necessarily offer only snapshots of this endless 'story' of water. The latter poem continues to observe the interconnectedness of humanity and water, as it begins with 'Amphibious vagueness| neither pool nor land', continuing the *in media res* opening which resists a fixed beginning.<sup>7</sup> The 'limit between self and other' is again questioned as this 'vagueness' flows with the water through the poem, and again is renewed at the end:

where you can taste  
almost  
not water exactly (ll. 18–20).

Water evades definition, either in language or in permanent embodiment in humanity, and the boundary between the two are necessarily blurred:

I followed the advice of water

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<sup>5</sup> Maribel Mas, 'About the Engravings', ed. by David Burnett <<http://www.maribelmas.com/a-short-story-of-falling-by-alice-oswald/>> [Accessed 23 April 2021].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Alice Oswald, 'A Drink from Cranmere Pool', in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 28, ll. 1–2. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

knelt and put my mouth  
to a socket in the grass  
as if to an outlet of my own  
unveiled stoneliness  
and sleepless flight (ll. 7–12).

Water again assumes the position of omnipotent, ever-flowing entity, a deific figure to humanity but also necessarily intertwined with us. Water's god-like presence is accentuated when Oswald states that 'tired of my voice' (l. 6), the speaker 'knelt and put my mouth' to the water in a subservient gesture which acknowledges our dependence on water for survival. The induction of water into the speaker's body 'unveil[s]' part of her identity, reminding her of her interconnectedness with the rest of nature, her 'stoneliness| and sleepless flight' as again she 'seeps' into the wider collective identity as water from the ground fuels her 'flight'.

Graham's 'Sea Change' uses a chaos point in nature, 'stronger wind than anyone expected' (l. 1), to emphasise how humanity depends upon water as a source of embodiment and identity, but also how nature immediately overpowers our attempts to control and categorise it: 'the recording| of such' (ll. 1–2). Foregrounding such a loaded phrase as the title of the poem also evokes the Shakespearean parallels between *The Tempest* and Graham's poem. The play also begins with 'a tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard', exerting nature's power over humanity as the storm displaces the characters out of the known and familiar into the unknown, in which they encounter magic and 'un-natural' beings and experiences.<sup>8</sup> Graham, in answer to this, uses displacement by extreme weather conditions (the result of climate change) to delve into the human psyche, a similarly unknown place. As the play continues, it becomes clear that this storm was the work of Prospero, a magician who becomes a pseudo playwright figure within the play, manipulating the characters and their location in order to serve his own purpose. The authority of Graham's speaker, however, begins to dwindle as the poem unfolds and the

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<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 1223, stage directions.

catastrophe widens. Embodiment is complicated in the poem, as ‘everything at once undoing| itself’ (ll. 10–11) denies any stability of selfhood, physical or interior, as the chaotic climate is:

[...] blurring the feeling of  
the state of  
being. (ll. 22–24)

These extra levels of ‘being’ suggest the distance between human perceptions of selfhood and the reality thereof, as our being is ‘never really autonomous’. This is emphasised by the line break which isolates ‘being’ away from the feeling of it, which echoes the isolation of ‘itself’ from its ‘undoing’. Turning the subject(s) in the poem from the individual to ‘it’, ‘the body’, and the anonymity of ‘everything’ corrects the individualistic notion of being into the necessarily collective one, as the climate crisis forces individuals to undo themselves. This also aligns the human presence in the poem with the aqueous one, as water, the ‘it’ of the poem, takes over human autonomy. Making reference to ‘the body’ also calls into question the notion of ‘a’ body, as the boundaries of one entity are necessarily porous in such a climate. The poem performs the concept of humans as ‘bodies of water’, as individualism is lost to the upwelling of water through, into, and out of us.

Sarah Howe recognises how ‘caught in the swell of these surging and receding lines, the speaker’s mind itself becomes liquid’, noting how Graham performs these aqueous origins even at the level of form, as the lines wash across the page as though directed by the sea.<sup>9</sup> Later in the poem, Graham describes ‘the body of the ocean which rises every instant into| me’ (ll. 42–43), displacing ‘body’ from human to ocean and then blurring the distinction between the two as they dissolve into one. Graham switches back momentarily to a single existence as if to inhabit this moment of dispersal, emphasising the passivity of ‘into| me’ as water’s power overwhelms the human. Graham urges the reader to consider the power of the natural world, and the

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Howe, ‘To Image the Future: Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change*’, *PN Review*, 35, no. 3 (2009), 22–25 (p. 23).

severity of the impact which human actions have not just on it, but also upon humanity as our actions come back, in the shape of (un)natural disasters, to haunt us.

This individual experience is expanded into multiple identities which the water brings with it: 'this indrifting of us| into us' (ll. 46–47). Graham repeats 'us' through this section to reiterate the collective identity which is now inescapable. This 'intermingling of us lacks in-| telligence' (ll. 48–49), however, and 'makes| reverberation, syllables untranscribable' (ll. 49–50), which observes again how language and by extension humanity is inadequate to mark or observe the enormity of nature's power and longevity. For all our attempts at collectivism, our language cannot fathom or stop this collapse of existence around us by attempting to fit it into words. Howe suggests that 'the line breaks at prefixes such as "un-" and "in-" [...] suggest how easily a word like "in-| dispensable" may pivot into its opposite'.<sup>10</sup> By breaking up these words into root and prefix, Graham questions the sturdiness of being, usually portrayed through language, as language itself is being broken up in such a climate. By questioning the foundations of physical embodiment in such a way, Graham draws attention to the severity of the climate crisis, which erases this certainty of individual existing without reference to the rest of the world, and instead throws the individual into a fragmented, collective existence.

## **II. 'The matter at the end of the rake'**

The awareness of, but departure from Romantic notions of nature is evident throughout Oswald's work, and she addresses this in her 'Introduction: A Dew's Harp' to her anthology *The Thunder Mutters*. She describes the poems within as 'restless poems, poems that keep filling up with fresh looks; in particular those that follow the structure of oral poetry, which tends to be accretive rather than syntactic', and states that 'no prospects, pastorals, or nostalgic poems are

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<sup>10</sup> Howe, p. 23.

in here, no poem that mistakes the matter at the end of the rake for a mere conceit'.<sup>11</sup> Earlier in this introduction, Oswald describes the process of raking up leaves, how:

Raking, like any outdoor work, is a more mobile, more many-sided way of knowing a place than looking. When you rake leaves for a couple of hours, you can hear right into the non-human world, it's as if you and the trees had found a meeting point in the sound of the rake. (p. ix)

Oswald favours this 'half-human, half-animal state in which most of us spend our lives', poems and poets who describe the physical, tangible aspects of nature, the 'encounter between a human and his context', or the point 'where the human has crossed over, and disintegrated into the non-human' (p. ix). Oswald posits this as an alternative to Romantic poems which have 'the knack of enervating nature' (p. x), which she describes as 'an obstacle to ecology which can only be countered by a kind of porousness or sorcery that brings living things unmediated into the text' (p. x). The emphasis of the poems which Oswald has collated is on nature, rather than the human within nature, and on this symbiotic, interconnected relationship between the two. Much like in a lot of her own poetry, in Oswald's anthology nature is heard before the human speaker, who necessarily understands that their own perceptions and even existence within nature are a mere breath in relation to its vast immortality. Oswald's polemical stance rejects Romantic notions of nature whilst not specifically referring to any generation of Romantics or any single Romantic writer, but instead pointedly uses the title from a 'peasant poet', John Clare, whose standing perhaps qualifies him as one who 'connects the earth to our hands' (p. ix).

Infinite definitions and classifications of Romanticism may be offered, but broadly speaking, the movement offered a return to nature, a scrutiny of the natural world closer than anything that had been attempted before. Some, like John Keats, filled their poetry with classical allusion and myth, hoping to convey the mysteries of the natural world and elevate it above the mundane confines of human understanding. Others, most notably William Wordsworth, claimed that

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<sup>11</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Introduction: A Dew's Harp', in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), pp. ix-x (p. x). All further references to this introduction are to this edition.

poetry of this nature must use the language of 'man speaking to men', rather than the elevated, literary language often a hallmark of poetry at that time, suggesting perhaps this closeness to the earth which Oswald prefers.<sup>12</sup>

Donald G. Marshall argues that Wordsworth's language was 'derived from the ordinary language of men, particularly rural men, whose lives preserved the great rhythms of pastoral and agricultural life', which marks Wordsworth's endeavour as similar to that which Oswald praises in her anthology.<sup>13</sup> The derivation of much of Wordsworth's poetry from these rural lives, which were 'recorded in and mediated by the Bible, anonymous folk poetry, and related literary forms', underpinned the innovation of his work away from a vision of poetry as something only for the educated, high classes, and instead found value in the 'rhythms of pastoral and agricultural life' which were often overlooked.<sup>14</sup>

While Wordsworth may not have favoured Oswald's preferred state of 'disintegration' of the human into nature, this move towards understanding nature from close by, using the language of those who live and work upon it, marks his work as radical and innovative for its time. Gene Ruoff suggests that his dramatic poems 'explore the signficatory potential of human speech, finding that in its roughest dress it is adequate for the expression of deep and permanent emotions'.<sup>15</sup> By inhabiting and using these agricultural, folk voices, Wordsworth meets nature through the eyes and speech of those who work with and on it and whose lives depend upon it.

Mary Jacobus highlights Wordsworth's innovation, as she notes that 'more than any other, he had — in Coleridge's phrase — to create the taste by which he was enjoyed, forcing his readers

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<sup>12</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Donald G. Marshall, 'Preface', in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, Geoffrey H. Hartman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. vii.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gene W. Ruoff, 'Wordsworth on Language: Toward a Radical Poetics for English Romanticism', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 3.4 (1972), 204–211 (p. 210).

to undergo the process of redefinition which is central to his poetry'.<sup>16</sup> Instead of writing poetry which adhered to the accepted literary canon, Wordsworth attempted a return to, and a redefinition of, the 'natural', an approach echoed in much ecopoetry which seeks a departure from traditional, problematic perceptions and representations of nature. 'Optimistically', Jacobus continues, 'Wordsworth believed that he could revitalize poetry itself — breaking down the barriers between literature and life', as 'language became his central weapon against literary convention' (p. 9). Much of Wordsworth's work was 'an experiment [...] to see how far the public taste would endure poetry written in a more natural and simple style than had hitherto been attempted' (quoted in Jacobus, p. 9). I will return to Oswald's interactions with and perspective on the Romantics in my final chapter.

Despite this shift towards a redefinition of nature, Wordsworth often still emulated the traditions and religious focus of his time. Clare's poetry focuses on 'listening in, finding what's already there' (p. ix), rather than projecting human attributes onto the natural world, such as Wordsworth's gothic cliffs of *The Prelude* or mastering nature as Blake in his 'Introduction' may claim to do.<sup>17</sup> Eric Miller observes that 'Clare's model for poetic endeavour may be to supply lyrics for pre-existent music. Ideally, poetry derives its form from the indigenous resonances of

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 2. All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>17</sup> See the 1850 *Prelude*, in which Wordsworth recollects his experience of stealing a little boat as a child, and how his guilt and fear manifests in the 'huge Cliff, | As if with voluntary power instinct' (ll. 406–407). The cliff 'Upreared its head [...] | And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff | Rose up between me and the stars' (ll. 9–10). Wordsworth describes how the cliff 'With measured motion, like a living thing | Strode after me' (ll. 11–12). The repeated use of human metaphors to describe the cliff emphasises the Romantic tendency to project these human attributes and the subconscious processing of human experiences onto the natural world. Blake's 'Introduction' follows the process of making 'a rural pen' (l. 17) from a 'pluck'd [...] hollow reed' (l. 16) with which he 'stain'd the water clear' (l. 18) in order to write 'my happy songs' (l. 19). Nature in the poem is figured as the instrument through which Blake's poetry can be manifested. See William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); William Blake, 'Introduction', in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, ed. by Philip Smith (Mineola: Dover Thrift Editions, 1992).

its theme'.<sup>18</sup> Clare is famous for his unwavering connection to the land despite the Enclosure Acts between 1809 and 1820 which barred him from it by law.

John Barrell explains the effects of the Enclosure of Helpston (Clare's parish) in great detail.

'Until the beginning of the nineteenth century', Barrell notes:

The land in the parish lay in open field; that is to say, the land was divided into three large fields, in turn divided into furlongs, themselves made up of the 'lands' which were the basic unit of land-tenure in parishes farmed on the open-field system. A 'land' was a long piece of ground, ploughed into a ridge, running the whole length of a furlong — often about 200 yards — and anything between ten or twenty times longer than it was wide.<sup>19</sup>

The Act of Parliament which passed the Enclosure of Helpston in 1809, and the final Award published in 1820, vastly altered the topography of the parish. Barrell adds that:

It is apparent, too, from Clare's writing, that a very considerable number of footpaths through the old arable fields were 'discontinued' at the enclosure, but it is not possible to determine the precise course of these: the fields, for all their numerous divisions into furlongs each with its individual name, [...] were to the commissioners the blank, empty spaces they appeared to be on Earl Fitzwilliam's map; thus the commissioners do not explain in the Award what features of the old topography they have eradicated, but only the features they have allowed to stand, or introduced themselves into the landscape. (p. 108)

Barrell describes how long drains were dug to drain a stream which ran through Long Meadow, and how Green Dyke 'was stopped at source' (p. 108), among other springs and streams which were rerouted or stopped in order to redraw the topography of the parish. Barrell draws attention to 'the most obvious effect' of this enclosure, which 'must have been on the old arable fields and common grazing-land' (p. 109). He explains that:

In some enclosures of open-field land by Act of Parliament, a great deal of the work of enclosing had already been done by the farmers themselves, [...] the Act was merely to confirm their work [...]. In Helpston, on the other hand, four fifths of the land was still open at the time of the enclosure; and the new pattern of the fields — square-shaped and straight-hedged — was laid over almost the whole of the parish like a grid. The openness

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<sup>18</sup> Eric Miller, 'Enclosure and Taxonomy in John Clare', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 40 (2000), 635–657 (p. 641).

<sup>19</sup> John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 98. All further references to this work are to this edition.



and the old uniformity of the fields disappeared together, to be replaced by a very different uniformity. (p. 109)

It is clear from this detailed account that the parish of Helpston, in which Clare and his country-people lived, worked, and cultivated their identity, was vastly altered by the Enclosure Acts. The lack of detail and attention paid in the Award to less prominent features of the landscape (such as footpaths) that were destroyed by Enclosure further marks the division between rich and poor, and how the Acts served the interests of the landowning classes at the expense of the country-people who had a closer relationship with the land upon which they depended for survival. Despite these radical changes and enclosures of previously common land, Clare saw nature as a free, boundless existence which dismissed these imposed artificial lines and claims of ownership.

Clare writes in a letter about the experience of reading Keats, who:

[...] keeps up a constant allusion or illusion to the Grecian mythology and there I cannot follow — yet when he speaks woods Dryads and Fawns are sure to follow and the brook looks alone without her naiads to his mind yet the frequency of such classical accompaniment makes it wearisome to the reader where behind every rose bush he looks for a Venus under every laurel a thrumming Apollo [...] as it is the case with other inhabitants of great cities he often described nature as she appeared to his fancies and not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes.<sup>20</sup>

Keats, for Clare, is the poet of 'allusion or illusion' to other things, to highbrow, educated, 'great city' thinking, whereas Clare himself, far removed from this way of thinking, is able instead to understand nature from within itself, rather than as a mouthpiece for human expression. Miller comments on Clare's label 'the Northamptonshire Peasant', explaining that 'not only did Clare thus receive from the start both a topographical and a social gloss, but he also promised to address the human community indis severably from its environment'.<sup>21</sup> Clare's descriptions of nature are not abstract, but grounded in a physical reality in which he would often embed himself (regardless of new ownership) in order to write his poems. This notion of humanity as

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<sup>20</sup> John Clare, *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. by John William Tibble and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> Miller, p. 635.

'indisseverable' from the environment sounds like a precursor of Oswald's eco-poetics, as Clare's relation to the natural world from within it refuses to mistake 'the matter at the end of the rake for a mere conceit'. John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton remark that Clare's very 'initiation into literature involve[d] a literal and metaphorical trespass' as he climbed over walls to read and write poetry, and enacted 'a three-fold trespass on the time, culture, and land of his social superiors' by doing so.<sup>22</sup> Quite simply, as Miller puts it, 'Clare composed pastoral as a countryman', as one who knew the land not by names imposed on it by a language which could not hope to comprehend it, but by his own *experience* of it.<sup>23</sup> Human and natural embodiment are therefore inextricable for Clare, as reflected in the last line of his 'Nigh Leopards Hill': 'Life lives by changing places', which emphasises this continual shift of life onwards, resisting human boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

In his poem 'The Moors', Clare describes the impact of the Enclosure Acts from this perspective of one accustomed to and inextricably entwined within nature. Miller observes that 'the moors afford a prospect of continuous time and space', making them an apt case study for the effects of this cessation of 'continuous space' on those who live in it, and the arbitrariness of human imposition of boundaries upon the land itself.<sup>25</sup> Miller explores this theory:

The moors represent *uncut* ground — ground not plowed into those 'classes' and 'orders' that the masters of language, natural history, and society impose. It is a landscape of coalescence, of 'meeting', yet of expansion, of 'stretching'.<sup>26</sup>

Clare's poem focuses on how the 'meeting' of humanity and nature, of sky and land, the 'unbounded freedom' of the 'prospect of the following eye' has been replaced as 'fence now

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<sup>22</sup> John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, 'John Clare: The Trespasser', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Hugh Haughton, Adam Philips, and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 87–129 (p. 88).

<sup>23</sup> Miller, p. 642.

<sup>24</sup> John Clare, 'Nigh Leopards Hill', in *The Later Poems of John Clare*, vol. 1, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 38, l. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, p. 644.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

meets fence in owners' little bounds'.<sup>27</sup> The vast contrast between language such as 'unbounded freedom' and 'little bounds' makes Clare's outrage clear. 'Unlike prescriptive enclosure', Miller continues, 'the moors with their footpaths encourage errancy', and in so doing bring humanity closer to this ecological connection with nature.<sup>28</sup> Clare both admires and understands this 'uncut ground' of the moors about which he writes, and emphasises the disconnect between these 'fences' and the unstoppable force of nature which does not recognise human authority, much less its boundaries.

In a past tense heavy with the resignation of the present, the speaker describes how 'unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene' (l. 7) and 'Its only bondage was the circling sky' (l. 10). Clare's emphasis is on organic nature, the 'circle' rather than the harsh square lines imposed by preconceived, human-centric notions of order and utility upon this land. Clare alludes here to the circling of seasons, reflected in the movements of birds circling overhead, and the passing of life on through death as nature continues on and out of individual life-spans. The freedom of the natural world is 'unbounded', in stark contrast to the 'fence' which 'crept' (l. 8) and 'hide[s] the prospect of the following eye', echoing the greed of those who exclude others from their habitat.

This 'following eye' characterises Clare's interaction with nature which Oswald so admires, as the human 'follows' nature, 'listening in, finding what's already there' and berates those who try to 'cut' into the wilderness and claim it as their own. Miller agrees, observing how 'Before enclosure, the eye "follows" the prospect; it does not engineer what it sees. It consults the genius of the place. The moors are primordial, observation consequent', which cements this

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<sup>27</sup> John Clare, 'The Mores', in *John Clare: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Merryn Williams and Raymond Williams (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 90, ll. 5–9, l. 47. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, p. 646.

view of Clare as a poet aware of his place within nature as a 'follower' rather than an 'engineer'.<sup>29</sup>

The finality of the prohibition of 'countrymen' from their country is clear in the speaker's resignation:

Now this sweet vision of my boyish hours  
Free as spring clouds and wild as summer flowers  
Is faded all — a hope that blossomed free,  
And hath been once, no more shall ever be (ll. 15–18).

Throughout the poem, these statements which compare boyish roaming with the forced cessation of wandering come bluntly: 'Mulberry-bushes where the boy would run | To fill his hands with fruit are grubbed and done' (ll. 41–42), and 'These paths are stopt —' (l. 65). Clare juxtaposes nature's cyclical immortality with his loss to emphasise the absurdity of this division, as nature will outlive enclosure, but Clare himself and his fellow 'peasant' people must live with the hope which 'no more shall ever be' (l. 18) of experiencing the natural world unencumbered by boundary or law. The close rhyme scheme emphasises this loss, as 'free' (l. 17) is answered by 'no more shall ever be', 'run' with 'done', echoing the immediacy and finality of lands being partitioned off out of common reach. The contrast between the length of the description of these boyhood pursuits and the brevity of this cessation of freedom also emphasises the cruelty and inadequacy of imposing such limits on the natural world. The harsh cut off after 'stopt' performs the sudden interposition of fences and walls which unnaturally portioned off the wilderness.

Clare does not disguise the culprit of this atrocity, as he states that 'Inclosure came and trampled on the grave | Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave' (ll. 19–20). Again the rhyme here of 'grave' and 'slave' strongly emphasises Clare's judgement of the injustice here, and the strong language — 'trampled' and 'slave' — speaks of unnatural, dystopic environments far

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<sup>29</sup> Miller, p. 645.

removed from the beauty of the previously 'unbounded' moors. The diminutive 'little' is repeated throughout the observation of enclosure:

Fence now meets fence in owners' little bounds  
Of field and meadow large as garden grounds  
In little parcels little minds to please  
With men and flocks imprisoned ill at ease (ll. 47–50).

Later 'Each little tyrant with his little sign | Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine' (ll. 67–68). The disdain and scorn of these new 'owners' is unmistakable. Clare displays nature's disregard of such boundaries, however, as 'of field and meadow large' (l. 48) escapes these 'little bounds' onto the next line. The language used to 'claim[...] earth' goes against the divine, and Clare uses this strong imagery to portray the extent of this wrong, as the ruling classes and their boundaries 'claim' to dim the work of the heavens.

The contrast between nature and this artificial enclosure is clear, even within its physical manifestation:

And on the tree with ivy overhung  
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung  
As tho' the very birds should learn to know  
When they go there they must no further go (ll. 91–94).

Clare chooses images of unbound, free parts of nature — ivy which grows over everything and birds who know no county or even country line — and directly contrasts them with the unnatural imposition of 'hated', 'vulgar' signs and fences which are also 'hung'. The repetition of 'go' reinforces the absurdity of asserting a limit on nature, which knows nothing but the urge to 'go', to live and 'overh[a]ng' the world in which it multiplies.

The peasant speaker and his countrymen unite with the natural world against those who seek to enclose the land towards the end of the poem:

Thus with the poor [...]  
[...]  
And birds and trees and flowers without a name

All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came (ll. 95–98).

Nature here resists the 'name', both out of its countless multitudes of 'birds and trees and flowers', but also because of Clare's comprehension of the fact that such natural things do not know or heed the name imposed on them by humanity, and likewise are not aware of the boundaries set out by the Enclosure Acts. This retakes the 'nameless' powerlessness of the peasant classes, as by uniting with 'birds and trees and flowers without a name', those without power are subsumed into nature's unstoppable power to grow past and through human boundaries.

An appreciation of the fact that nature pays no heed to human boundaries is echoed in Oswald's poem 'April', in which Oswald too explores nature's unstoppable ability to 'go' and grow regardless of any human impositions. Oswald's speaker recognises nature's power alongside our connection with it, as by the end of the poem, the unnamed 'we' 'float in the fair blow of springtime, | kingfishers, each astonishing the other'.<sup>30</sup> The boundary between human and non-human is broken down in the poem, as Oswald recognises the interdependence of humanity and nature, and the continual flow of one into the other.

The speaker describes how:

[...] I know a road  
the curve throws it one way and another;  
somebody slipped the gears and bucketed slowly  
into the hawthorns and his car took root  
and in its bonnet now, amazing flowers  
appear and fade and quiddify the month (ll. 5–10).

This same sense of knowing the natural world not by the names ascribed to it but by what it is, 'a road' which is thrown 'one way and another', by its own un-flattened 'curve' defies human order and leads to the assumed death of a driver, as 'his car took root'. Oswald here reminds us of nature's indomitable power, as the car is overrun with flowers, a cohesion of the deathly and divinely beautiful. The division between humanity and nature, here manifested in the man-made

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<sup>30</sup> Miller, p. 647.

car, is negated by nature's ability to grow round and through the bonnet, reclaiming the space. The flowers that so consume this trespasser are described as 'amazing', and 'appear and fade and quiddify the month', which expresses, with the almost-word 'quiddify', how this natural occurrence escapes language, as ironically the 'quiddity' of the flowers cannot be put into language.

The anonymity of 'somebody' ensures that the poem's focus does not shift to this human disaster, but instead remains on nature's continual flow through human or natural bodies. Some 'body', an individual human, is inconsequential in the wider scope of nature, and even the united 'we' (l. 12) later in the poem is miniscule within 'the river's excess and the sun's' (l. 17).

The narrator describes:

[...] us on bicycles — it was so fast  
wheeling and turning we were lifted falling,  
our blue-sky jackets filling up like vowels... (ll. 11–13).

The repeated present participles show this progression out of human control into 'falling', cementing the knowledge of nature's power, particularly in relation to humanity's weakness. The repeated sounds along with the description of their jackets 'filling up like vowels' add to the sense of the ineffable, as language cannot cover or contain this transcendental experience. Even the speaker, who 'know[s]' the road, falls victim to its un-masterable 'curve'. Oswald's down-to-earth depiction of a road unbound from its human name, which is deadly but also the site of new life, is far removed from Romantic perceptions of nature as a tool to possess and inspire the poetic mind.

The sense of beginning-less, timeless nature is upheld in Oswald's poem, as human and nature coincide and coexist. The poem begins in the present, 'it takes| the litterings of weeds and clocks them round' (ll. 2–3), albeit a more hypothetical, generalised present, and then slips into the past, 'somebody slipped the gears', then back to 'now, amazing flowers', and then back to the past, 'it was so fast' before ending again in 'now we float' (l. 14). The poem seems to exist at

both points in time, in the 'now' of the bikes flying off the road and the 'now' of the metamorphic speaker as a kingfisher, taking 'the crack| between the river's excess and the sun's' (ll. 16–17). The 'I' of the poem exists as part of these 'excess[es]' of nature, as human, animal, and nature, reflecting the way in which life passes on endlessly and without beginning, the human fitting into the planet's wider ecosystem.

Throughout the poem, this interconnectedness between humanity and nature is clear as Oswald observes earlier that 'you can't| step twice in the same foot' (ll. 4–5). Paraphrasing the famous Heraclitus quote, 'no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man', Oswald here takes one step further. The ever-changing nature of river and human are so dependent upon each other that the identity of the human, the 'foot' becomes that of water, continually Other and elsewhere.

Poetry is the medium through which poets such as Clare 'put [...] our inner worlds in contact with the outer world — a deep, slow process that used to be the remit of the rake' (p. x), as Oswald explains. Both Oswald and Clare approach nature from within it, Clare as a 'peasant' man of the land, and Oswald as a gardener, who has worked with the land for years. Through this connection, both poets explore the embodiment of human in nature, or vice versa, and our place within the ecosystem which sustains us.

Oswald directly addresses Wordsworth's famous poem in her sonnet 'Another Westminster Bridge' in which the focus is not, as in Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' on the Romantic poet's gaze over the city as it presents itself to him, but instead on the 'lovely inattentive water' which is 'already elsewhere', unattached to the human presence which happens to observe it.<sup>31</sup> Oswald begins with water 'discarding the gaze of many a bored street walker' (l. 2), which emphasises water's apathy towards human perception, as we

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<sup>31</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Another Westminster Bridge', in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 38, l. 1, l. 7. All further references to this poem are to this edition.



are afforded only a 'glimpse' of water which is not there to serve this 'gaze' but is instead 'inattentive' to the human presence, and is indeed 'already elsewhere'. Water does not stay in the confines of the river, and instead 'trespasses into strip-lit offices| through tiny windows into tiny thoughts and authorities' (ll. 3–4), as Oswald recognises the omnipresence of water in human life as our 'weather' and 'breath' (l. 6).

Stephen Grace considers the effectiveness of the sonnet form for Oswald's eco-poetic focus, noting how:

The poem's horizon is always receding before us, and never quite comes in to view, much as the aesthetic frame of the sonnet is blurred and smudged by Oswald's irregular lineation, tendency toward enjambment, and understated, mobile half rhymes. In doing so the poem implies a different way of conceptualising and representing the environment, which is no longer orderly and permanent, but rather imagined as dynamic and changeable, and modelled along the fluid lines of water.<sup>32</sup>

Grace here captures how Oswald uses poetry to observe its own inadequacy in describing the wholeness of the world around it, as again the water trickles through the poem, giving life as it goes, but is not upheld by human endeavour. Water's fluidity and ever-changing elusiveness permeate the poem's structure through these choices of 'irregular lineation', 'enjambment', and 'mobile half rhymes', but are never held by them. Oswald's choice of rhyme scheme — loose couplets — is reminiscent of Clare's preferred rhyme, but often Oswald uses more assonance or sibilance in her rhymes to bring the river into all the reader's senses whilst not confining it within human language.

Line fragments like 'and the soft beseeching tapping of typewriters' (l. 5) and 'under the teetering structures of administration' (l. 10) describe the human attempt at order and power, but are set on their own lines, ineffective at changing the water's course and lacklustre in their power in comparison to its omnipotence. These lines also have the sibilance of the rest of the

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen William Grace, 'Forms of Memory: The Sonnet in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry' (doctoral thesis, University of York, 2019), p. 156.

poem, portraying how water has ultimate authority everywhere, even in supposedly human spaces.

In comparison to Wordsworth's poem, which adheres to the rhyme structures and syllabic restraints of a traditional sonnet, Oswald's poem presents this 'horizon [...] always receding before us, and never quite [...] [in] view'. Wordsworth presents the view from a bridge which draws in the majesty of the man-made world:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning, silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky.<sup>33</sup>

The 'beauty' of the natural world is hemmed in by human perception, as the glint of sunlight is reflected from these man-made structures and portrayed through structured, measured lines which follow a rhyme scheme and reach a resounding conclusion about the beauty of 'the City' when light falls across it. Wordsworth's punctuation gives a sense of closure, of a finished poem which captures his experience of standing on the bridge and looking out over 'All that mighty heart [...] lying still' (l. 14). Oswald's ending, in contrast, leaves the reader with a sense of something unfinished, as 'count five, then wander swiftly| away over the stone wing-bone of the city' (ll. 13–14) resists the conclusive element of the sonnet form. Human structures begin to echo the natural world, and Oswald hints at the upheaval of human notions of embodiment through this image. The imposition of human structures (the bridge) upon the natural world, although established, famous, and seemingly eternal to our minds, are likewise a mere 'breath-width instant' in the planet's life, and may easily be reclaimed by nature as the 'wingbone' suggests the (seemingly impossible) flight of stone.

Grace observes how 'of course, the poem cannot literally go on forever, but the relative arbitrariness of its stopping-point gestures beyond itself and towards a wider world. This is a

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<sup>33</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', in *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*, ed. by Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 150, ll. 4–7. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

departure, but also a new beginning', which this anticipated flight of stone portrays.<sup>34</sup> Oswald's speaker suggests that the reader 'wander swiftly| away' into an unknown life which echoes water's cyclicity, flowing on through places and moments into other bodies of water.

Oswald's 'Sea Poem' examines water 'in the eyes of water', stripping away the lyric 'I' in favour of this natural perspective.<sup>35</sup> Adrienne Rich, in 'Women and Honour: Some Notes on Lying', asserts that 'There is no "the truth", "a truth" — truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity'.<sup>36</sup> Although Rich's subject is admittedly somewhat abstracted from our subject of ecopoetry, these concepts of the fallibility of absolute truth are expressed in Oswald's poem, as 'after the rain stops you can hear the sea| washing rid of the world's increasing complexity' (ll. 6–7). Through this revelation, Oswald offers a way out of received perspectives, making nature's view primary, and reducing the human perception of water to a mere reference point in order to explore the natural world from within.

Aspects of the human perception of nature creep back into the poem, as each stanza contemplates water's reality through how it is sensed. The first stanza creates water through 'the eyes of water' (l. 1), focusing on the visual, and the second 'the sound of water' (l. 5), the third 'the depth of water' (l. 11), and the fourth 'the strength of water' (l. 13). The fifth stanza refuses the completion of this structure, beginning instead with 'water deep in its own world' (l. 17). Oswald allows water the fluidity of multiple identities, negating 'a truth' in favour of many, and through the repetition of the genitive 'of water', she maintains nature's control over this contemplation of identity even when presented through the recognisable senses. Water 'deep in its own world' suggests a departure from our established reality, leaning towards a more fluid, free reality brought to the surface in contemplation.

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<sup>34</sup> Grace, p. 157.

<sup>35</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Sea Poem', in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 3, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>36</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Women and Honour: Some Notes on Lying', in Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), pp. 30–40 (p. 32).

Oswald's creation continually refuses to be absolute, as the poem offers up answers but never definitively, and continually folds back upon itself, mirroring the sea's movement. This is evident in the first stanza, as water is described as 'a wave, a winged form| splitting up into sharp glances' (ll. 3–4). This first descriptor condenses water into one relatively small entity, 'a wave', which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, limiting water to this single performance of rise and fall rather than the cyclical crash and recoil of the sea on the shore. This is followed by the possibility of flight, however, 'a winged form', and the ambiguity of 'form' evades firm self-definition. The rhythm of 'a wave, a winged form', with the caesural pause between, allows the water to identify itself through physical form and audible sound repetition rather than these contending definitions restricted by human language. Repeating the 'w' sound, and then immediately juxtaposing this with the sibilance of 'splitting up into sharp glances' resists the singular 'wave' and instead performs the continual pulse of waves on the shore. Contradicting the sense of language with form and sound in this way shows the lack of an absolute truth, and gives space to the 'increasing complexity' of the sea's multiple identities.

The water moves from its own evasive, fluctuating presentation of identity to 'washing rid of the world's increasing complexity', simplifying reality to a palimpsest of sand, 'making it perfect again out of perfect sand' (l. 8). By recreating the world according to its own 'perfect' perception, water performs the cyclical eternity of water which continues to redefine and reshape outside our human comprehension. The repeated words, 'perfect again', 'perfect sand', and 'water in the eyes of water' also uphold this continual cycle of water as it moves through the landscape, continually rewriting creation. The final question is posed and answered: 'what is the beauty of water| sky is its beauty' (ll. 23–24). At first this seems to conflict Rich's idea of no single 'truth' by defining water's beauty as one thing, and yet water's beauty lies in its reflection in the sky, the boundless, omnipresent entity that is part of the sea through the water cycle. Even in this seemingly definitive answer, there is again the ambiguity and cyclicity of the rest of

the poem, which the absence of a full stop at the end continues, suggesting that the poem and the mystery of water could continue far beyond this arbitrary end.

Graham's poem 'Underworld' begins in Oswald's palimpsest moment, 'After great rain. Gradually you are revealing yourself to me'.<sup>37</sup> The cessation of rain for Oswald brings out the only human reference in the poem, and in Graham's poem this natural occurrence of rain acts as the exposure needed to reveal the true identity of 'you'. The cleansing of the physical world thus creates space for humanity and nature to recreate themselves as one coexisting form through which water flows. This palimpsest of creation allows this symbiotic relationship to return to basics, sight and sound being the focus. Graham builds up the identity of the speaker through the physical change of the landscape, continuing to cultivate the idea that nature and humanity share the same fate. 'Great beaches come into existence' (l. 3), the poem continues, suggesting that this revelation of rain has shifted the world in such a way that it has begun to recreate the previously accepted reality. The landscape is rewritten:

[...] even the dunes go under, it takes a long while but then  
they are gone  
altogether, ocean takes the place (ll. 6–8).

Placing the emphatic 'they are gone' on one line, reinforced by 'altogether' allows the severity of this change to manifest itself in the poem, as the rewritten landscape begins to be swallowed again by the sea, which performs the ocean's power to dominate the fragility of human reality.

Both poets seem to object to the traditional, Christian reality in which God creates nature and instructs man to name it and become master of it, which sees humanity as exceptional and nature as a human possession, or the Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' outlook in which human needs are prioritised above those of nature and/or animals. Both poets instead foreground the human dependence upon the natural, as nature subverts this creation story by renaming and recreating reality according to its own perception and concept of identity. Using a flood as the

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<sup>37</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Underworld', in *Sea Change* (New York: Ecco, 2008), p. 12, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

catalyst for this undoing of a false absolute truth echoes the biblical narrative, and yet the human does not reclaim ownership over the natural world as the rain clears, but instead is rewritten as part of the aqueous world.

### III. 'This beautiful| Uncountry of an Estuary'

Neimanis explores Jamie Linton's definition of 'modern water' which is 'the dominant or natural way of knowing or relating to water', asserting water as deterritorialized and 'placeless'.<sup>38</sup> This perspective adheres to the ideas already set out in this chapter concerning the continual movement of water, placeless both in the sense of not belonging to any specific country or people, but also in the sense that it is everywhere, and the same water which falls down a waterfall also sustains the individual human. Irigaray notes that 'everything is constantly moving and remains eternally in flux' (p. 37), in reference to the sea, the ultimate placeless, ineffable 'location' of water. Water cannot be separated from itself, divided up into states or owned by any language or people, and our place as 'bodies of water' blurs our own sense of borders and boundaries as we depend upon and are made up of this placeless element.

Oswald draws attention to this deterritorialized, placeless water in her poem 'In a Tidal Valley', in which she refers to 'this beautiful| Uncountry of an Estuary'.<sup>39</sup> The poem describes the 'very hard to define' (l. 21) duality of water as part of all things, before acknowledging the human embodiment in water, in which 'I too am living' (l. 28), suggesting that the assumed fixed boundaries between human and Other are a fallacy. The description 'tidal' sets out this temporary, ever-changing nature of the sea and of estuaries in contrast to the place-laden 'in', which suggests a fixed state. Throughout the poem, Oswald introduces stasis and counters it with flux, setting up both the binary between land and water alongside water flowing through

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<sup>38</sup> Jamie Linton, *What is Water?: The History of a Modern Abstraction* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), pp. 14, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Alice Oswald, 'In a Tidal Valley', in *Spacecraft Voyager 1: New and Selected Poems* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2007), p. 139, ll. 3–4. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

land and blurring the boundaries between the two. By using the non-word 'uncountry', Oswald draws attention both to the inadequacy of language in comprehending water's placeless existence, as well as water's ability to 'un-country', to reclaim that which has been set firm within our perceptions of place. The power of water to cut through land regardless of boundaries set out by humans or any other landmark, to carry along with it any earth or stone which it finds there, and to smooth down sharp rocks or erode cliffs, breaks down the barriers between countries and provinces, as parts of one are carried along and deposited in another, or to the sea, which is full of this 'uncountry' and resists human territorialisation.

The poem is set in four line stanzas, suggesting control and order and the cyclical movement of water up and down the beach from estuary to sea with the tides. The erratic half-rhymes which appear sporadically throughout, along with the lack of capitalisation at the beginning of lines or punctuation at the end of lines, however, suggest that the water flows through this perceived structure and order, ignoring these boundaries. Though a body of water advances and recedes up and down the beach, it is not the same water (and not the same beach), just as the structure of the poem suggests a semblance of order which the poem's content flows on through. Oswald captures water 'eternally in flux', and by adding in the human self she recognises our part in this cycle of water not as an outsider but as another body (made up) of water.

Water continues to be placeless as Oswald uses imagery which contradicts and overturns itself, such as 'the house of the sea | can be set up quickly and taken down in an hour' (ll. 7–8), which contrasts the fixed 'house' with a temporary state. The sense of constant flux is present in all things, as the 'swans pitching' (l. 5), the 'flooded and stranded weeds' (l. 9), the 'crabs' (l. 13), and the 'mudswarms ranging up and down' (l. 14) go about their lives always attached to the river, and are described in the present tense to echo this temporary, flexible state. Water presents a duality through the poem, as the 'sometimes lit sometimes not' (l. 1) of the stone in

the first line echoes through to the sea which ‘can be set up quickly and taken down in an hour’, and the weeds:

[...] whose workplace  
is both barren mud-site and a speeded up garden  
full of lake-offerings and slabs of light (ll. 9–11).

The weeds are matched by the ‘mudswarms’ who ‘are very alert and worn out’ (l. 15), seeming opposites juxtaposed to express how water flows through all things regardless of any attempts to separate and categorise these things. This duality culminates in the ‘mighty angels of purgatory| who come solar-powered into darkness’ (ll. 22–23), which likens the natural world to ‘purgatory’, the ultimate duality of being in which both extremes of good and evil coexist in equal balance, having transcended the mortal plane. Water is likened to this other-worldly state, possessing the qualities of ‘mighty angels’ which escape language, and also to ‘a huge repeating mechanism| banging and banging the jetty’ (ll. 19–20), suggesting unstoppable power. Even here Oswald uses a simile, as water remains an ineffable ‘something’ which resists conclusive definition. Oswald uses the prefix ‘un’ throughout the poem to draw attention to this lack of language, as the moon is ‘unsolid unstillness’ (l. 26) which echoes the ‘uncountry’ of the estuary, both intangible, unfathomable entities outside human control.

Paul Shepard argues that ‘because we learn to talk at the same time we learn to think, our language, for example, encourages us to see ourselves — or a plant or animal — as an isolated sack, a thing, a contained self’.<sup>40</sup> Water’s evasion of solidity and definition in the poem makes this clear, as Oswald uses language to portray its own inadequacy, juxtaposing opposites and creating words to emphasise how water moves through and resists this ‘isolated’, ‘contained’ definition. Place is denoted by language — we measure out a space and call it England, distinct from Scotland, creating an unnatural boundary in the natural world — so it follows that water, as placeless, is also outside the borders of language. Shepard continues:

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Shepard, ‘Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint’, in *The Subversive Science: Essays Toward an Ecology of Man*, ed. by Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), pp. 1–10 (p. 2).



Ecological thinking, on the other hand, requires a kind of vision across boundaries. The epidermis of the skin is ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soul, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration. It reveals the self ennobled and extended rather than threatened as part of the landscape and the ecosystem, because the beauty and complexity of nature are continuous with ourselves.<sup>41</sup>

This eco-poetic notion of 'nature [...] continuous with ourselves' flows through Oswald's work, as the last line of this poem brings in the human presence, describing 'this endless wavering in whose engine | I too am living' (ll. 27–28). The present tense of 'living' echoes that of 'wavering', performing this coexistence. Neimanis explains that 'to figure ourselves as bodies of water not only rejects a human separation from Nature "out there"; it also torques many of our accepted cartographies of space, time, and species' (p. 4). By accepting that 'I too am living' among those creatures whose lives depend on the estuary, in 'this endless wavering [...] machine' of water, Oswald draws attention to the human embodiment in water, completely inextricable from nature, and also to the capacity of water to continue on, as a 'machine', beyond the individual.

This human embodiment as part of a placeless 'uncountry' necessarily poses questions about the 'boundaries' of the human self. Shepard explains that:

On one aspect the self is an arrangement of organs, feelings, and thoughts — a 'me' — surrounded by a hard body boundary: skin, clothes, and insular habits. This idea needs no defence. It is conferred on us by the whole history of our civilization.<sup>42</sup>

Our language, which dictates our thoughts, separates the world before us into discrete, isolated 'things'. Ourselves as human bodies are no exception, and yet eco-poetics seeks to challenge this long held assumption of individualism and insularity, the 'hard boundary' between human and non-human, suggesting instead that we are 'constantly drawing on and influencing the surroundings, whose skin and behaviour are soft zones contacting the world instead of excluding it'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Shepard, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Estuaries have been present in Oswald's work since her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, in which the poem 'Estuary Sonnet' also explores the placeless nature of water and those creatures, including the 'I' of the poem, which again 'live[s] by water'.<sup>44</sup> The estuary presents an intermediary place of change, which augments the subject of the poem, as water is already ever-changing and 'never still' (l. 14). As the place in which one boundary flows into the sea, the estuary is also where these conflicts between individualism and collectivism come to a head, as water flows through and makes an 'uncountry' of what it dissects. As an earlier poem, 'Estuary Sonnet' voices the ideas which are expressed and developed in Oswald's later work, as the long poem *Dart* also explores those who 'live by water', and her later poem *Nobody* explores the mythical history of Odysseus' travel back to his homeland, immersed in tempestuous water.

Neimanis argues that:

We humans can only be fully immersed in water as a temporary gesture [...] we are riven through with this otherness, and it is enfolded in us and as us as well — but it *is underived from us*. We humans are not the origin of this relationality. (p. 145)

The human presence in Oswald's poem remains in its discrete form: 'I walk by and see the water' (l. 1), and 'then as far as I have time to wander, | I wander back' (ll. 5–6). This human concept of measured time haunts the first two stanzas and attempts to distance the speaker from the observed water. Water's Otherness, however, seeps through this imposed boundary and defies human concepts of time and self-contained identity, as it simultaneously wets the speaker's feet whilst lifting 'huge boats' (l. 4) in the harbour and being home to 'a heron's foot | lofting the water which is now a mud-flat' (ll. 6–7). Water in the poem is timeless, embodying 'the moment where these worlds collide, | the river's cord unravelled by the tide' (ll. 9–10), at once grounded in a mud-flat and swelling to fit the harbour. The poem's brevity acknowledges that the individual human is only 'temporary', and yet also describes the simultaneous immersion of both human and nature as 'my feet are wet' is mirrored in 'a heron's foot | lofting

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<sup>44</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Estuary Sonnet', in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 22, l. 14. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

the water'. The interconnectedness of all things through water is apparent even in this brief snapshot of time.

The poem ends with the juxtaposition of water as 'never still' and the full stop, full rhyme, which suggests dissonance between human structure or imposition of limits and unstoppable, unbounded nature. Oswald makes allusion to *The Waste Land* as her speaker states that:

I will show you nothing — neither high  
nor low nor salt nor fresh — only the skill  
of tiny creatures like the human eye  
to live by water which is never still. (ll. 11–14)

This echoes Eliot's speaker, who claims that:

I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (ll. 27–30)

The fragmentation of voice and speaker is undeniable throughout both Eliot and Oswald's work, but instead of Eliot's images of ruined empires, dry, futureless bones, dust as the harbinger of death and ending, and the evocation of 'nothing' at the beginning of the first three sections, Oswald throws humanity a lifeline in the form of water. Oswald too begins by depicting her 'nothing' in negative terms — 'neither high | nor low nor salt nor fresh', but instead of ending as Eliot does with the pessimism of oblivion and 'dust', Oswald ends with water 'which is never still', and the image of humanity which 'live[s] by water', and is therefore implicated in this immortality in some part. The traditional rhyming couplet which concludes a Shakespearean sonnet instead comes in the middle of Oswald's poem, and ends with an ambiguous ' . . .' (l. 10), which returns to the ineffable nature of water as 'underived from us' and our language, and resists the finality of the sonnet form as water flows on past our ability to define it.

Margaret Somerville argues that 'the human body is the first and most immediate cultural location of water', making the important distinction of 'cultural' locations of water, rather than slipping into the human-centric perception of the world and of water as beginning within this

human embodiment.<sup>45</sup> How we first encounter water is through being born into it, made up of it, but this is of course not the beginning of water's embodiment, and nor will it be the end. Neimanis considers this notion, arguing that:

As watery milieus for other bodies, we are always gathering the debts of the myriad watery bodies that are the condition of our possibility. Eventually, we all give ourselves up to another wet body. We all become with, or simply just become, other bodies of water. (p. 39)

Both critics capture the temporary nature of individual human embodiment in water. Somerville's 'first' location awaits subsequent locations, and Neimanis expresses these 'debts' of water which we exchange as we become 'other bodies of water'. Necessarily, then, the boundaries between 'human' and 'non-human' are blurred, as even the seemingly solid boundaries of skin and flesh are porous borders through which water flows. Irigaray observes that 'you are now immersed and re-enveloped in something that erases all boundaries. Carried away by the waves. Drowning in the flood. Tragic castaway in unrestrained turmoil' (p. 36), which acknowledges that we are part of and made up of the same element which drowns, floods, and gives life to land and to people.

Shepard asserts that the task of ecology is to 'renew [...] a balanced view where now there is man-centred-ness', to lead an:

[...] exploration and openness across an inner boundary — an ego boundary — an appreciative understanding of the animal in ourselves which our heritage of Platonism, Christian morbidity, duality, and mechanism have long held repellent and degrading.<sup>46</sup>

This 'heritage' of tradition perpetuates the artificial separation of human and nature, whereas ecology seeks to undo this. In short, according to Shepard, 'we must affirm that the world is a being, a part of our own body', and that therefore our fate is inextricable from that of nature.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Margaret Somerville, *Water in a Dry Land: Place-Learning Through Art and Story* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> Shepard, pp. 2–3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Shepard continues to explain that ‘internal complexity, as the mind of a primate, is an extension of natural complexity, measured by the variety of plants and animals and the variety of nerve cells — organic extensions of each other’.<sup>48</sup> Shepard concludes his introduction by stating that ‘there is only one ecology, not a human ecology on one hand and another for the subhuman’, emphasising the need to consider human embodiment as an amalgamation of nature and humanity rather than separate from or superior to nature.<sup>49</sup>

Graham’s poem ‘All’, from her new collection *Runaway*, accentuates this relationship between water and humanity, as the placelessness and ever-moving state of water is described and experienced through human senses, despite the realisation that ‘we do not| understand it’.<sup>50</sup> Graham balances the awareness of this communal identity with the realisation that the ‘you’ of the poem is dwarfed by water’s immortality, echoing Oswald’s recognition that although ‘I too am living’ in water, water is an immortal ‘machine’ and our embodiment within it is confined to a ‘temporary gesture’.

The poem’s title, ‘All’, seems to stand in answer to the last poem of Graham’s previous collection *Fast*, in which she describes the experience of watching ‘Mother’s Hands Drawing Me’. This poem follows a deeply personal relationship between a dying mother and her child, and the effort required to draw the speaker is described as:

[...] all is being spent, the feeling  
that all—all that we need or have—  
would be spent for this next thing,  
this capture, actually loud though  
all you can hear is the small  
scratching.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Shepard, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Jorie Graham, ‘All’, in *Runaway* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020), p. 4, ll. 30–31. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>51</sup> Jorie Graham, ‘Mother’s Hands Drawing Me’, in *Fast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 83, ll. 120–125.

The repetition of 'all' here emphasises the effort which it takes to draw in such a state, and captures also the inevitably unfulfilled desire to produce something lasting by which to remember this fragile moment of togetherness.

Graham echoes this 'all' of her previous collection and evokes John Donne's poem 'Lovers' Infiniteness' in her epigraph to 'All': 'Or if then thou gavest me all,| All was but all'. Donne's poem is an address between lovers, a tender resignation to the fact that 'Dear, I shall never have thee all', because the love between them continues to expand:

He that hath all can have no more;  
And since my love doth every day admit  
New growth, thou shouldst have new rewards in store; [...].<sup>52</sup>

Love's infinity runs through the poem, and comes to an end as the speaker suggests:

But we will have a way more liberal,  
Than changing hearts, to join them; so we shall  
Be one, and one another's all. (ll. 31–33)

By repeating 'all' through the poem, Donne draws attention to the failure of language to capture or truly express the depth of love, which makes a mockery of human attempts at absolute states of being. Love, like water, resists and overflows definition and boundaries.

Graham uses Donne's lines 'Or if then thou gavest me all,| All was but all, which thou hadst then' (ll. 12–13), replacing the comma after 'all was but all' with a full stop, and omitting 'which thou hadst then'. This stops Graham's epigraph in the midst of the attempt at totality, instead echoing 'Mother's Hands Drawing Me', and in so doing creates a space in which to pause and take in the immediacy and seeming endlessness of a single moment.

'All' begins in this moment — 'After the rain stops you can hear the rained-on' (l. 1), and continues to describe the intimate details of the natural world after rain, a quiet moment of lull before time continues. The intimate relationship depicted is broadened to include the

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<sup>52</sup> John Donne, 'Lovers' Infiniteness', in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 11, ll. 11, 24–26. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

relationship between 'you', whether the singular reader or the inclusive 'one', and the natural world, the 'rained-on' in which we are immersed. Donne's and Graham's previous intimate relationships in which two parties attempt but ultimately fail to exchange absolute states of being, 'all', remain in the reader's mind as the poem builds to its climax:

we have to consider the *while* it seems  
to say or I seem to say or  
something else seems to we are not  
nothing. (ll. 45–48)

The 'I' of the poem flows into 'we' and the ambiguous instability of 'something', echoing how collective identity as part of the natural world resists absolute, definite identity. Graham also uses a fixed stanza structure, but eschews rhyme and observes water flowing through this human boundary to emphasise the powerlessness of the human speaker in relation to the natural world.

Graham begins with a sense of ending, 'After the rain stops', and yet throughout the poem the sense of unending is constantly in focus, as even the second half of this first line, 'you can hear the rained-on' suggests a continuation, moving on from this finished state of stopped rain into some new body of water. Later in the poem, the sound of water after rain is described as 'the sound of ending which does not end' (l. 27), which contradicts itself and in so doing proclaims the inability of language to encompass this element which overpowers all our 'accepted cartographies of space, time, and species'. Through the speaker's projection of this experience onto the readers' senses, 'you hear oscillation, outflowing, slips.| The tipping-down of the branches' (ll. 2–3), which are all set in the present participle to denote the unending constancy of water.

In the third stanza, 'After the rain stops' (l. 10) is repeated, negating the timid sense of ending and closure set up in the first line and instead suggesting subsequent rainfall as merely part of the water cycle. The past tense of 'the| washed world' (ll. 10–11) in this third stanza is lessened by the long, drawn out line, which ends with the present tense 'beginning again| of the buds' (ll.

11–12), turning this one observed moment of ending rainfall into the continual movement of water through the seasons. Using human senses to record and observe this experience, Graham explores the way in which individual human existence is dwarfed by water's omnipresence, but also how we are inextricable from it, as 'we are not | nothing'.

Human time is contrasted with the timeless, placelessness of water, as the speaker begins to ask rhetorical questions which cannot be answered:

[...] what does that sound sound like  
deep in its own time where it roots us out

completed, till it is done. But it is not done. (ll. 15–17)

The absence of an answer to this question mirrors the absence of a human presence 'deep in its [water's] own time' (l. 16), as we cannot fathom or control water's depths or omnipotence. The juxtaposition of 'not done' with the end-stopped line epitomises this clash between our perception of time, informed by the brevity of the human life-span, and the timelessness of water which continues past this brevity. The human voice in the poem has to correct itself, as it moves to a close, 'till it is done', but then is faced with the reality of water which resists this closure. Graham's water flows out of our control, which is reflected in her unusual sentence structure:

Is not a finished thing. Is a making  
of itself into more of itself, oozing and pressed  
full force out of the not-having-been

into this momentary being (ll. 22–25).

These sentences lack a subject, which highlights how water overwhelms the human senses as 'the rain' (l. 21) from the beginning of this stanza floods through the following sentences.

The last acknowledgement that 'we are not | nothing' upholds Graham's eco-poetic assertion of human ethical responsibility towards the natural world inextricable from our own. Neimanis asserts that 'always aswim in these explorations [of human embodiment in water] is a call to



consider our ethical responsibility towards the many other bodies of water we are becoming all the time' (p. 4), a responsibility which is clear in Graham's eco-poetry. As watery bodies, that which embodies us becomes the unknowable, and how we shape the world around us dictates how this future unfurls. Shepard argues that ecological thought 'must find room in "our" world for all plants and animals, even for their otherness and their opposition', which draws attention to this fallacy of human domination of nature which outlives us in every way.<sup>53</sup> 'Our' world is in itself a contradiction, as the dominant force of this world in which we live is water, which cannot be controlled or confined by human boundaries.

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<sup>53</sup> Shepard, p. 2.

## Chapter Four: 'A songline from the source to the sea' — The Voice of 'the river's mutterings' in

### Alice Oswald's *Dart*

Oswald's first long poem, *Dart*, uses a multitude of voices, 'the language of people who live and work on the Dart' to create 'a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea'.<sup>1</sup>

Through this polyphonic cohesion, Oswald sustains the eco-poetic reality of humanity and nature intertwined, showing the interdependence of both upon each other. Oswald has been criticised for this realism of voice by Charles Bennett, who suggests that:

All too often, sections of these pages remain prosaic. Oswald's desire to interface with so many voices in order to create a multi-tongued voice of the river means that the whole suffers as a result of its parts. There are some fine passages, but the desire of Oswald to stay true to her material (and to retain the authentic utterance of those she interviewed over the course of two years assembling material for the poem), creates an overwhelming sense that these voices are simply being quoted: that in honouring individual veracity she has sacrificed a larger truth of genuine poetic utterance. The voice which is absent is the voice we most need to hear: Oswald's own.<sup>2</sup>

Bennett misses the point of the poem, which is not focussed on individual human identity, but the multiplicity of identity within the river which flows around and through the humans with whom it comes into contact. The 'whole' cannot be separated from 'its parts', as the river and the humans are both made up of each other, blended inextricably together in an exploration of collective identity. Indeed, Oswald indicates in the introduction to the poem that 'these [voices] do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions' (Introduction), underlining the idea that nothing is 'fixed' in the poem, necessarily so, as water cannot be 'fixed' or tied to a 'real' definition, but instead flows through and around our human concepts of reality. The 'prosaic' passages represent the characters speaking, winding the open form of those parts of the poem around their expression and flowing through the reader's mindscape. Oswald does not *create* 'a multi-tongued voice of the river', but instead observes its people, 'linking their voices into a

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), Introduction note. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Bennett, 'Current Literature 2002. I. New Writing: Poetry', *English Studies*, 85:3 (2004), 230–240, (p. 231).

sound-map of the river'. Bennett focuses too much on the human aspect of the poem, ignoring Oswald's direction that 'All voices should be read as the river's mutterings' (Introduction).

Oswald is not writing to convey her own voice to the reader, but instead as a mouthpiece to what is already there, the water which is working through the landscape and moulding those around the river through the centuries. Marvin Reimann suggests that by 'denying humankind's predominant role' as the speaker and focus of poetry, '*Dart* rather suggests a kind of ontological humility that is founded on an equality in which the anthropocentric and the ecocentric reconcile in an environmental perspective'.<sup>3</sup> The anthropocentricity of traditional nature poetry coincides with the draining of natural resources and the mindset of nature as humanity's playground. Instead of this anthropocentric view, Oswald draws attention to the interdependence of humanity and nature, creating a poem which listens to and is guided by the river, rather than explaining the human reaction to or experience of it.

Bennett wrongly classifies the poem as 'pastoral because it is filled with voices. Oswald peoples the poem with a cast of fluvial characters — some of whom enter into dialog with each other. In essence, this is a Pastoral framework'.<sup>4</sup> This inaccuracy stems from his earlier assertion that 'Poetry of this kind must look backwards in order to be understood', and then goes on to cite Andrew Motion, Ted Hughes, James Thompson, and William Wordsworth as potential influences and presences within the poem.<sup>5</sup> The label of pastoral is misplaced here, and Bennett wrongly praises *Dart* for being based on a 'simple but effective' idea.<sup>6</sup> The poem does not present what William Empson characterises as the pastoral, the 'process of putting the complex into the simple', a mode which constructs simplicity for dubious purposes.<sup>7</sup> Instead, Oswald explores the

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<sup>3</sup> Marvin Reimann, "'This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy": The River's Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald's *Dart*', *Transnational Literature*, 10:2 (2018), 1–15, (p. 4).

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral: A Study of the Pastoral Form in Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 25.

reality of those who depend upon the river for daily survival, not leaving out details of real life such as the 'worker at Buckfast Woollen Mills' (Note, p. 18), who describes:

[...] how the wool comes in,  
greasy with blue paint, shitty and sweaty with droppings  
dangling off it (ll. 563–565).

This scene captures the reality of living and working on or by the river, as the space and line break between 'droppings| dangling off it' performs this real, unpleasant image, and the sibilance of 'greasy [...] shitty and sweaty' draws an onomatopoeic landscape of real human and natural existence, coinciding and coexisting through the river's life-giving presence.

Empson describes old pastoral:

[...] which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, [...] to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way).<sup>8</sup>

Instead of translating her findings into 'learned and fashionable language', Oswald portrays the subjects of her poetry as they are: complex, part of the landscape around them, but not idealised through this. Roger Sales accuses the pastoral of this negative simplification by use of 'the five Rs': 'refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem, and reconstruction'.<sup>9</sup> This view suggests that such poetry reconstructed what it found in nature and farming life in order to simplify this reality, as the higher classes sought refuge from the urban landscapes in rural idylls. Terry Gifford describes 'the most serious accusation' of pastoral in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as something that 'created a false ideology that served to endorse a comfortable status quo for the landowning classes'.<sup>10</sup> In light of this accusation, 'a farm worker might say that a novel was a pastoral if it celebrated a landscape as though no-one actually sweated to

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<sup>8</sup> Empson, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Sales, *English Literature in History 1780–1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. 8.

maintain it on a low income'.<sup>11</sup> Sale continues to argue that this form came to be used as a way to prevent the questioning of power hierarchies which kept rich and poor apart, a way to simplify and categorise the lives and livelihoods of the labourers in the country, far away from the ruling classes. Instead of the beautification of rural life for such nefarious purposes, Oswald presents the reality as she finds it, weaving together the voices 'of the Dart'. Working-class voices are present in amongst more abstract, unidentifiable voices and myths, suggesting an appreciation and consideration of all voices coming together to create this 'sound-map'.

The water abstractor narrates how:

You don't know what goes into water. Tiny particles of acids and salts. Cryptosporidium smaller than a fleck of talcom [sic] powder which squashes and elongates and bursts in the warmth of the gut. Everything is measured twice and we have stand-bys and shut offs. This is what keeps you and me alive, this is the real work of the river (ll. 725–730).

Passages such as this, which are presented as prose, are no doubt those which Bennett reads as negatively 'prosaic'. The shift even in this small passage between the jargon of working life and the importance of the river, however, from 'stand-bys and shut offs' to 'what keeps you and me alive', 'the real work of the river' captures simultaneously the work and idiom of the water abstractor, but also the movement of water through them into the next part of the poem, never stilled by the human voice which is possessed by it at any one time. Whilst poets such as those which Bennett cites may have similar thematic components to Oswald's work, and may even have inspired or informed *Dart*, her ecopoetry is far from the simplification of nature and rural life, preferring instead to catalogue 'the real work of the river'.

Bennett's misreading exemplifies how Oswald departs from the accepted, traditional way of writing and reading poetry, and instead urges the reader to approach the poem in a new way. Oswald's work is a kind of translation, and as Laura Marris suggests, 'The lines and the rhythms

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<sup>11</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, p. 2.

of their [the characters'] speech have the syntax of the river in them — they stretch the boundaries of English sentences as they reach toward the speech of the Dart', observing and exploring the natural connection of the river with its people.<sup>12</sup> Instead of focusing on the human presence in the poem, Oswald offers this 'translation' of what she refers to in the poem as 'pidgin-river' (l. 467), a language of water working through humans to sustain both, with both inextricable from each other. Marris explains that:

Like the water abstractor, Alice Oswald has made herself the custodian of a wild and dangerous force, but unlike him, she doesn't have to tame it. She 'abstracts' the river into poetry without sanitizing it, focusing instead on the humility that belongs in any human attempt to control or predict natural forces.<sup>13</sup>

The inherent unknown of water resists the solidity of being put into language, how we 'tame' that which we experience and 'sanitize' the world around us. Oswald instead acknowledges water's unpredictability, its danger to human life and its ability to flow through and past our individual lives. 'Like other good translations, the language of these voices does not obscure the original source it seeks to fashion into English', Marris argues, and instead 'the poet is a human translator of inhuman patterns of sound, pushing language toward its onomatopoeic origins'.<sup>14</sup> Sound becomes shared ground between humanity and nature, as the sound of water echoes through the human lives which it powers. Oswald remains aware, however, of this 'inhuman' capability of water to drown, damage, and take life from us as much as it is given.

David Wheatley aptly argues that:

Oswald shows that poetry need not choose between Hughesian deep myth and Larkinesque social realism. *Dart* frequently combines the two, moving in the same sentence from religious invocation to marketing jabber ('may He pull you out at Littlehempston, at the pumphouse, which is my patch, the world's largest operational Sirofloc plant'). She shows, post-New Generation, that wry ironies and streetwise demotic

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<sup>12</sup> Laura Marris, 'Review: *Dart*', *The Common*, (1 June 2015) <<https://www.thecommononline.org/review-dart>> [Accessed 21 January 2021].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

do not exhaust the available range of tonal and thematic possibilities. She offers, in a word, what too much contemporary poetry forbids itself: ambition.<sup>15</sup>

Instead of confining what is clearly a poem which resists such binary definition to such a restrictive label, Wheatley recognises the multiplicity of the poem, which spans many styles and movements, combining different or even at times juxtaposing forms, content, and modes to present a collective, dynamic, and live poem. Oswald creates a new form and way of writing poetry which allows her to capture the essence of her subject without confining it within inadequate boundaries. Marris suggests that:

If you put your finger in the river to pin-point something, the water ripples around the spot. Even the roles of the speakers (naturalist, river nymph, poacher, fisherman) are noted in the margins as they shift, creating small eddies where the larger course of the poem turns.<sup>16</sup>

The poem's subject, by its very nature, resists definition or the confines of language, and the fluidity of the poem's form, as 'a songline from the source to the sea', evades any identification as a traditional poetic form.

Published in 2002, *Dart* attracted a great deal of critical attention and cemented Oswald as one of today's leading British poets. The length of this poem and its ambitious scope, flitting between 'prosaic' and mystical, more poetic voices suggest comparison with other long poems which explore and complicate the intersection between humanity and the natural world, and also between consciousness and language. *Dart* is Oswald's first book published with Faber and Faber, the publishing company which T. S. Eliot helped to curate in its early stages of existence. The comparison with Eliot's *The Waste Land* is inescapable, (arguably true of any long poem after Eliot, written in this polyphonic style), and indeed *Dart* won the T. S. Eliot prize in 2002. Instead of producing 'an effort to focus an inclusive human consciousness', as F. R. Leavis characterises in Eliot's poem, Oswald subverts the expected relationship of humanity and nature, exploring the river through human voices, rather than human consciousness through

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<sup>15</sup> David Wheatley, "This Is Proteus, whoever that is", *Guardian*, 13 July 2002, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Marris, 'Review: *Dart*'.

their interaction with the river.<sup>17</sup> The result is a realisation of water's omnipotence and our increasing dependence upon it for survival, and how a river can shape and own the identities of humans who live and work around it.

Both Eliot and Oswald are remarkable for the way that their long poems demand a different way of reading and understanding poetry. Eliot's initial readers were critical because the poem did not fit with the established ways of writing and reading poetry, and instead flitted between registers, languages, allusions, tones, and subject matter in a sometimes opaque manner. Eliot departed from poetic norms and produced a poem which intertwined many different voices, situations, classes, languages, cultures, and times in order to create a Modernist epic which reflected the desolation and fragmentation of the time. Oswald similarly produced, in *Dart*, an amalgamation of voices to create an epic poem which reflects her time, using different interactions with the river Dart — 'recording conversations with people who know the river' (Introduction) — to express the symbiosis between water and humanity as an unavoidable fact of existence in a rapidly changing climate.

Eliot uses water imagery, or lack thereof, in *The Waste Land* to exemplify the aridity of Modern life. The Thames is described as a polluted mass, which 'sweats| Oil and tar' (ll. 266–267), ironically described elsewhere as 'sweet', as Eliot uses Spenser's line 'Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song' (l. 176) to highlight the contrast between the present waste land of 1920s London and the reminiscent beauty of Elizabethan London. Raymond Southall observes that 'the seediness of the river, even if one misses the coy glance at contraceptives, is that of the life and interests of the working-class women in the pub and of the typist'.<sup>18</sup> Instead of the glorified, idyllic scenes with which the Thames has long been associated, such as Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', which also refers to the river that

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<sup>17</sup> F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Southall, 'The Poetry and Culture of T. S. Eliot', *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture*, 1 (1983), 146–162, (p. 149).



'glideth at his own sweet will', Eliot uses it as an expression of the waste and destruction of Modern society.<sup>19</sup> Pollution floats along with the pointless, 'low' lives of the working class in Eliot's pointedly snobbish depiction of them.

In Part Five, the aridity motif is expanded:

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 (ll. 331–336).

The repetition of the lack of 'water' juxtaposed with 'rock', the long, unbroken sentences, and the repeated conditional 'if' which is not fulfilled, suggest this longing for something which cannot be gained, and highlight this aridity. Leavis suggests that:

Drouth becomes (among other things) a thirst for the waters of faith and healing [...] But the thunder is 'dry sterile thunder without rain'; there is no resurrection or renewal; and after the opening passage the verse loses all buoyancy and takes on a dragging, persistent movement as of hopeless exhaustion.<sup>20</sup>

The 'hopeless exhaustion' of Eliot's poem continues through this section, as:

If there were water  
And no rock  
If there were rock  
And also water  
And water  
A spring  
A pool among the rock  
If there were the sound of water only  
Not the cicada  
And dry grass singing  
But sound of water over a rock  
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
Drip drop drip drop drop drop  
But there is no water (ll. 346–358).

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<sup>19</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', in *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*, ed. by Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 150, l. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Leavis, pp. 98–99.

Again, the aridity is built up through the continued repetition of 'water', and the 'if' begins what seems to be a new thought, but as it continues it becomes another lamentation for the lack of water. The lack of punctuation enacts this desperation for water as the lines spill on, and the continued reference to a 'spring' and a 'pool' attempt to manifest water through language. The conditional which provides this imagination of water is finally answered in the resigned tone of the last line, 'but there is no water', right after the narrator has descended from language into the onomatopoeic sounds of the water which they so long for. Even within this sound image, however, the interaction of 'drip' and 'drop' leads to the same monotony of the arid reality, as 'drop drop drop' ends this fantasy with the thirst for water but the reality of nothing to quench it. Leavis acknowledges the 'hopelessness' of *The Waste Land* when he argues that 'the thunder brings no rain to revive the waste land, and the poem ends where it began'.<sup>21</sup> The fragmentation and persistence of this empty nothingness without hope is evocative of the Modernist conditions which Eliot attempts to capture.

Eliot and Oswald both use a mythical figure of authority to shape their poems, using the stories of these myths to add to their own narratives, and the voices of these figures to shed light on current experiences of being. Eliot asserts in the accompanying notes to *The Waste Land* that 'Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character", is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest' (Note 218, p. 46). Tiresias is at the literal and figurative centre of Eliot's poem, appearing in the middle of the third section, and Eliot explains that 'what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem' (Note 218, p. 47). Adding further irony, Eliot uses this figure of unified man and woman in the midst of a poem populated by isolated, fragmented characters. Tiresias is described in an assertive, imperious manner, and his self-definition spans several lines: 'I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, | Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see' (ll. 218–219). Eliot chooses his central 'character' as this mythical figure with the knowledge of both female and male pleasure, who surveys the

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<sup>21</sup> Leavis, p. 103.

scene of a hopeless, passionless interaction between two working-class people. Asserting that Tiresias is the most important character of the poem, and placing his entrance in this scene with the interactions between humans, Eliot sets out the primary focus of his poem as the human experience of suffering, observed, ironically, by a blind man who knows the suffering of male and female humanity. Leavis agrees, as he states that:

If Mr Eliot's readers have a right to a grievance, it is that he has not given this note [218] more salience; for it provides the clue to *The Waste Land*. It indicates plainly enough what the poem is: an effort to focus an inclusive human consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

The scene that Tiresias witnesses is determinedly 'unpoetic'. The woman is referred to through her profession, 'the typist', and the man as:

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire. (ll. 231–234)

The professions of these two characters seem to be included as a way to label and dismiss them as a certain 'low' type of person. The description of the man as 'carbuncular' and 'one of the low' shows the evident distaste of the narrator, and sets the 'low' tone of the encounter between these two people. Southall suggests that Eliot:

Brings together three snob attitudes to produce the impression of the young man: that of the bourgeois looking down on the lower orders: that of the old established bourgeois looking down on the *nouveaux riches*: and that of the southerner looking down on the northerner.<sup>23</sup>

Eliot's mounting distaste for mass culture is clear through this depiction of a 'seedy' scene, observed by Tiresias who is tainted by age, (the 'wrinkled dugs' a distasteful way of presenting his physique) and yet presides, at a distance, over this scene, perhaps as the embodiment of this 'old established bourgeois'. Southall observes that the typist, 'passively accepting her role as an

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<sup>22</sup> Leavis, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Southall, p. 149.

object of male gratification', has no sense of importance or meaning, reinforcing Eliot's snobbish portrayal of these characters.<sup>24</sup>

The woman's activities are described with obvious distaste before the man arrives:

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
[...]  
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (ll. 222–227)

The inclusion of such details as the food 'in tins', the divan which is also her bed, and the fact that she is clearing breakfast at teatime suggests faults of her character which are added to as the scene with the young man unfolds. When he does arrive, the interaction between them borders on rape, as 'His vanity requires no response, | And makes a welcome of indifference' (ll. 241–242). After the encounter, Eliot portrays the woman's response as decidedly vapid and incongruous with the potential assault she has just experienced:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'. (ll. 249–252)

The simplistic reaction to a problematic scene suggests that the 'half-formed thought' is the default way of being for working-class people.<sup>25</sup> Southall agrees, as he asserts that Eliot 'represents them [the working-class characters] as mindless, passive automata, going through the motions of social life like mechanical dolls'.<sup>26</sup> The typist's function, as one of a mass of nameless, unimportant, working-class people, is to disappear, to inhabit her seedy life and go about her automated existence.

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<sup>24</sup> Southall, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> In the pub scene at the end of *A Game of Chess*, the narrator explains that 'that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon, | And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot —' (ll. 165–166), which, in the context of their conversation about abortion, suggests Eliot's portrayal of the vile lives of the working class. Eliot depicts these 'low' people as akin to 'hot' meat, going about their vulgar lives and interacting in uncivilised ways.

<sup>26</sup> Southall, p. 161.

Eliot explains in his notes that ‘just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias’ (Note 218, pp. 46–47). The use of a mythical figure, usually steeped in mystery and kept at a distance from humanity to observe this most intimate scene, brings the abstract, mythical presence into the real, lived world of Eliot’s subjects. As the river connects the voices in Oswald’s *Dart*, so Eliot claims Tiresias as the unifying force of the poem, where ‘the two sexes meet’ and human experience is depicted.

Oswald chooses a sea-god, Proteus, as the mythological figure in her poem. Although there is no claim that Proteus is ‘the most important personage’ in Oswald’s poem, the two figures are an interesting point of comparison. Oswald, writing in a time in which ecopoets consider the relationship between nature and humanity integral to the continued existence of both, writes a poem which includes a sea-god who appears in the form of a man, but who is known for his shifting shape. His identity as a sea-god, who knows all the realms under the sea, gives him superhuman qualities, and yet his inclusion in this ‘sound-map’ of the river ties him to the human identities through which the water flows. Oswald pulls this deity into the human/natural flow of water into other bodies of water, not distinct or at a distance from them but part of the scene.

Proteus is a mythical figure from Homer’s *Odyssey*, who is first introduced in Book Four, when Menelaus tells Telemachus of his travels. Menelaus meets Proteus’ daughter, the goddess Eidothea, who explains that ‘An ancient sea-god comes often to this place — he is unerring and he is deathless — Proteus of Egypt, a vassal of Poseidon who knows the sea throughout all its depths’.<sup>27</sup> Oswald ends *Dart* with the voice of this ‘deathless’ sea-god known for his changing shape, immortality, and knowledge of the sea, suggesting the continuation of the river outside the ‘human’ voices which populate the poem.

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<sup>27</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Walter Shewring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 43–44. All further references to this work are to this edition.

In *The Odyssey*, Eidothea explains how, to get the answer to Menelaus' question of how he will cross the 'teeming ocean' back to his homeland, he must 'ambush and capture' the sea-god, 'then he will tell you of your return' (p. 44). She describes Proteus' daily routine, and how Menelaus may best deceive and overpower him by holding him down, at which point 'he will seek to foil you by taking the shape of every creature that moves on earth, and of water and of portentous fire' (p. 44). Proteus is a figure of aquatic power which the male hero, already established as a figure of masculine dominance through his kingship and the ten-year war he instigated because of his wife's capture, must overpower. The sea-god who knows all the realms of the sea also knows the intricacies of human existence, and what has become of Menelaus' homeland. This mythical character, then, is depicted as an all-knowing confluence of humanity and water as he appears as a humanoid (albeit a deity) and holds power over the sea. The conquering of this sea-god by a man who seeks to conquer the natural world and return home to restore the balance of his power is traditional in literature.

Oswald, by using this figure as the end of this poem of many voices, avoids this human domination of the sea. Instead of furthering the plot by supplying vital information, Oswald's Proteus refers to 'my many selves' (l. 1495) who drift off on the elusive ending of '...' (l. 1495), not overpowered or replaced by any human voice. His continued existence away from this domination by human hands for human ends, and his prominent position at the end of the poem suggest a respect for and importance placed upon an imagined, aquatic being, representative of the consideration of the natural world as equal to humanity.

In *The Odyssey*, Eidothea hollows out four flayed seals so that Menelaus and his men may hide in them and trick Proteus in order to capture him and glean from him the information they need. In his recollection of this story, Menelaus explains how 'our lying there [under the seal carcasses] might have been intolerable, for the hideous stench of the briny creatures distressed us monstrously; who would choose a sea-calf for bedfellow?' (p. 45). The natural world is hunted

and killed, and its resources are 'intolerable' and 'hideous' to the men who seek to overpower it. Oswald's figure does not lack these real elements of the watery world, as the narrator describes 'the musky fishy genital smell' (l. 1482) of the caves in which he dwells, but the human revulsion at this natural smell is not present, the narration merely moves on past this detail.

Proteus takes many forms to avoid Menelaus' questioning, as he recounts that 'he became in turn a bearded lion, a snake, a panther, a monstrous boar; then running water, then a towering and leafy tree' (*Odyssey*, p. 45). The men, as instructed, 'kept our hold, unflinching and undismayed, and in the end this master of dreaded secrets began to tire' (p. 45). The confluence of humanity and nature is overcome by the persistence of masculine will to assert dominance, which furthers Homer's narrative.<sup>28</sup> Oswald's imagined Proteus figure, described as 'anonymous, water's soliloquy' (l. 1492), is beyond human domination because he is partly made up of human voices. A soliloquy is a single voice, so this final figure is the culmination of all of the voices which have come before, the symbol of the river flowing onwards with and through these different identities, and Proteus as a shape-shifter becomes the ultimate vessel for this water/human amalgamation. Instead of the desperate loneliness and apathy in Eliot's poem, Oswald's mythical narrator is in amongst the natural scene, and 'my name disappears and the sea slides in to| replace it' (ll. 1479–1480). Proteus is part of the waves which flow into the cave, so much so that his deific identity is washed away and he becomes 'anonymous' (l. 1492), 'Proteus,| whoever

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<sup>28</sup> Virgil also introduces the character of Proteus the shape-shifter in Book IV of *The Georgics* with the story of Aristaeus, who 'When his bees by disease and famine were lost, as the legend tells, |[...] cried with a great and bitter cry' (Book 4, ll. 318–320). His mother Cyrene advises him in a similar way to capture Proteus and demand his information, describing how 'all things are known to the Seer,| Things that are now, that have been, things swiftly drawing near' (Book 4, ll. 392–393), 'whose monster ocean-kine| And seals misshapen he pastures beneath the swirling brine' (Book 4, ll. 394–5). Cyrene explains how 'He first must be seized, must be bound, my son, till to thee he make known| The cause of the curse on thy bees, and a prosperous issue have shown. | For, except enforced, will he give no counsels' (Book 4, ll. 396–398), which continues this tradition of man forcing nature to answer his questions so that he can overpower it as a resource for his own gain. See Virgil, *The Georgics*, trans. by Arthur S. Way (London: Macmillan, 1912). Interestingly, in both Homer and Virgil's accounts it is a female character, Eidothea and Cyrene respectively, who gives the man knowledge of Proteus' habits and how to overcome him. The figure of the woman as temptress who leads men astray is evident here. Oswald, as a woman, may fill this role of a woman providing the knowledge of how to trap and harvest information from the natural world, and yet, as Bennett argues, her voice is absent, and at last we understand Proteus through his own voice, not captured and tortured into submission but instead part of the 'sound-map' of the river.

that is' (ll. 1493–1494), 'all names, all voices' (l. 1493), cementing this identity as the culmination of all that has come before. The significance of an individual name and identity is given up in order to become this confluence of identity through the poem and out beyond it too.

The end of the poem is aswim in this multiplication and ever-flowing reality of water mixed with humanity:

[the seals] with their dog-soft  
eyes, asking  
who's this moving in the dark? Me.  
This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy,  
  
all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,  
whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,  
driving my many selves from cave to cave (ll. 1489–1495).

This question echoes that which begins the poem, 'Who's this moving alive over the moor?' (l. 1). The rest of the poem serves as an answer to this question, as the water sweeps different identities up into one continual existence, 'all names, all voices' held together by this ever-changing, protean body of water.

The river repeats its question in this opening passage, as 'The Dart, lying low in darkness calls out Who is it?| trying to summon itself by speaking...' (ll. 17–18) continues the unstable, undefined voice of the river. The repeated sounds, 'lying low', 'darkness calls', and 'summon itself by speaking' emphasise this attempt at physical manifestation as water draws together to continue the water cycle. The lack of speech marks suggest that water is everywhere, that this speech is not confined to human structures and expectations of one speaker, but instead occurs through the omnipresence of rain, as the damp ground through which the man at the beginning of the poem walks asks the question simultaneously with the rain. Tom Bristow recognises how Oswald's river 'is trying to find itself, to realise its voice and identity. Like a language that is very much alive it shifts and starts, consumes and appropriates sources and energies and never



remains fixed or static'.<sup>29</sup> Through beginning with these repeated questions, Oswald mirrors the 'shifts and starts' of the river at its source, never 'fixed or static', but continually shaping and reshaping the environment and language in which it finds itself.

Beginning with water in this way, outside the poem's structure of identification from the margin notes, and instead establishing the river as the eponymous character of the long poem, Oswald highlights the omnipresence and timelessness of water. Bristow comments that '*Dart* privileges the nonhuman environment as a narrative backbone', and the first human voice we meet epitomises this dependence, as his age and 'difficulty' (l. 2) place him at nature's mercy.<sup>30</sup>

Bristow continues:

It is highly significant that the river is read as one huge soundscape where the complete involvement of the human in place refuses asymmetrical hegemonic systems of thought and the economies of human/nature, self/other binaries.<sup>31</sup>

Instead of presenting human and nature/water, Oswald begins a poem that inextricably intertwines the three, dissolving these binaries and realising the symbiosis of human and natural through the build up and interaction of the different voices in her poem. The beginning of the poem marks the beginning of an individual human's interaction with this body of water, but the water itself remains beginning-less, despite existing at the source of the river. The reference to 'swamp spaces' (l. 6) and 'rain' (l.8) hint at the continued mystery of water, and suggest that though this place may be named the source of the river, the water itself is ever-changing and indefinable. 'The Dart, lying low in the darkness calls out Who is it?| trying to summon itself by speaking' suggests that the river is both present, the voice asking 'who is it', but also 'trying to summon itself' from a lack of embodiment. Water resists the human definition and discrete identification of existence or non-existence, physical embodiment or lack thereof, and instead inhabits both states simultaneously.

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Bristow, 'Contracted to an Eye-quiet World: Sonic Census or Poetics of Place in Alice Oswald', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo American Literary Relations*, 10.2 (2006), 167–185 (p. 173).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

This voice of the source is aware of its own power as it observes 'an old man seeking and finding a difficulty' (l. 2). There is no 'I' in which to manifest the river, and yet the voice asks:

[...] if it rains, if it thunders suddenly  
where will he shelter looking round  
and all that lies to hand is his own bones? (ll. 8–10).

The margin notes inform us that the source lies 'seven miles from the nearest road' (Note, p. 1), which, coupled with this 'difficulty', adds a sense of danger to the poem. Even in this undefined, scattered state, water is aware of its omnipotence and of the fragile human form with which it interacts. The 'huge rain-coloured wilderness' (l. 13) is the overwhelming force of the poem, as the individual man is dwarfed by the environment in which he stands. Beginning the poem by establishing the voice of the river, omnipotent and outside human confines of physicality or definition, water's voice echoes through the poem as human voices join it and fade away into one another, leaving the immortal, continual flow of water.

The man answers in a similarly disjointed, stream-of-consciousness manner, almost echoing the voice of the river as he explains:

[...] I've taken to the moors. I've done all the walks, the Two  
Moors Way, the Tors, this long winding line the Dart

this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound (ll. 20–22).

He describes himself in reference to the natural world — 'fifty years a mountaineer' (l. 19), and later 'all I know is walking [...] What I love is one foot in front of another' (ll. 33, 39). By evoking this persona at the beginning of the poem to begin to answer the river's question, Oswald emphasises how humanity is dependent upon water as it flows through us and we build our lives around it. As he expresses his connection to the river, it weaves itself through his speech, as 'this long winding line the Dart' holds elements of both his conversational tone and the more mystical, self-definition of the Dart which follows: 'this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound'. 'Dart' is capitalised, in line with 'Moors Way' and 'Tors', but the 'long winding line' strays into the more figurative, onomatopoeic language of the river to come.

The two voices begin to merge and become indistinguishable, as the man's description leaks into the water's perception of him:

cow-bones, tin-stones, turf-cuts.  
listen to the horrible keep-time of a man walking,  
rustling and jingling his keys  
at the centre of his own noise,  
clomping the silence in pieces and I

I don't know, all I know is walking. (ll. 28–33).

The first line here seems to be continued from the walker's explanation of his walking habits. As the passage continues, however, the man becomes a reflection in water, and the juxtaposition of water's 'I' with the man's 'I' emphasises this confluence of man and water. Water's way of describing things in the poem is to juxtapose words outside their usual places in language, bringing them together to make words and phrases which phonetically describe their surroundings — 'keep-time', 'clomping the silence'. Rowan Middleton suggests that:

*Dart* is notable for its numerous evocations of characters' physical connection with a local environment. This can be partly explained by the fact that the Dart flows through a predominantly rural area close to the sea, where many people are still engaged in what might be termed 'outdoor work'.<sup>32</sup>

The different voices which present themselves through Oswald's poem further this 'rural' setting, offering snapshots of people who have a 'physical connection with a local environment', such as this first man of the poem who has lived by and through the natural world. The river's voice often uses neologisms, portmanteaus, or juxtaposes unusual words to reflect how many rural communities eschew traditional language terms for things which they encounter in their daily lives and instead give them their own names, brought from their own experiences and interactions with nature. The walker respects the natural world and reflects his powerlessness within it as he describes how 'I go slipping between Black Ridge and White| Horse Hill into a bowl of the moor where echoes can't get out' (ll. 40–41). The onomatopoeic 'slipping', and the enjambment which seems to dismiss the human names for these places both observe how the

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<sup>32</sup> Rowan Middleton, 'Connection, Disconnection, and The Self in Alice Oswald's *Dart*', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 19 (2015), 157–169 (p. 158).

speaker is aware of his trespass across this place in which water is the dominant authority, and dictates how he moves through the moor.

Water continues to unite humanity and nature as it flits between embodying the voices of the walker and that of a bird. The former is overtaken suddenly by:

a  
lark  
spinning  
around  
one  
note  
splitting  
and  
mending  
it (ll. 43–52).

This breaks up the poem on the page and mirrors the flitting movement of the bird which catches the walker's eye. The sudden rearrangement of human language as the lines suddenly break after each word suggests this confluence of all parts of the natural world, fed by the same life force which gives voice to them.

After the lark's interlude, the river seems to take over the human voice, as 'I find you in the reeds' (l. 53) instigates a kind of genealogy of the river:

one step-width water  
of linked stones  
trills in the stones  
glides in the trills  
eels in the glides  
in each eel a fingerwidth of sea (ll. 55–60).

This passage is full of sound, as 'w', 'l', 's', and 't' sounds are interlinked to reflect how different parts of water flow into each other to form the first part of the river. The words seem to exist outside their meanings, as 'linked stones' resists sense, but fits with the onomatopoeic 'sound-map' of water recreating itself as a body or river. Through manipulating language, Oswald

performs water's self-creation outside our confines of sense and meaning, using sound to rewrite language according to the river's physicality.

Bristow suggests that:

At any one time in *Dart*, three voices can be located across the background, middle ground and foreground; these are the voice of the river-in-itself, the poet-narrator, and the river-character. These voices intermingle and roll into each other, twisting and turning, never totally eclipsing the others, yet mutating with the thread and shape of the influential and accumulating voices of neighbours.<sup>33</sup>

Through continually changing from one voice to another, defining the passage as the walker's perspective but flitting through the voices of lark and water, Oswald emphasises the interconnectedness between all three, as the human in the poem cannot exist for a moment without the water that surrounds and sustains him, and which also gives the lark its 'note'. The collective identity of humanity as part of and dependent upon nature, as seen in Oswald's other poems, is clear here as each voice flows into and out of the others, 'mutating with the thread and shape' of the poem. The ambiguity and ever-changing voice reflects the poem's ever-moving focus, as instead of the traditional angle of humanity taming nature, Oswald presents the fluctuation of human and natural identity as one with each other, made somehow immortal through the flowing of water past and through each 'body'.

Ben Smith argues that:

If Oswald's poetics suggests that, through physical interaction with our environment, we can perhaps come to understand the 'jabber of pidgin-river', she is careful to point out the dangers of striving too hard for this understanding. The characters in *Dart* whose voices are closest to the river's are those, like Jan Coe, who are dead.<sup>34</sup>

Oswald elaborates on the alteration of human identity through closeness and interaction with the river through these dead characters whose voices remain, kept alive in some sense through its perpetual flow. The first of these, Jan Coe, invites comparison with Eliot's 'Death By Water'

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<sup>33</sup> Bristow, p. 174.

<sup>34</sup> Ben Smith, 'Singing at the Right Pace: The Songlines of Alice Oswald and Thomas A. Clark', *PN Review*, 205 (2012), 47–49 (p. 48).

section of *The Waste Land*, as both follow men drowned in the river and the societal reaction to and consideration of these deaths. Oswald uses similar language to Eliot, as Jan Coo is identified by 'the wearing action of water on bone' (l. 101), which is reminiscent of Eliot's Phlebas, who met a similar fate as 'A current under sea | Picked his bones in whispers' (*The Waste Land*, ll. 315–316).

Eliot begins this section by naming its subject, 'Phlebas the Phoenician' (l. 312), which suggests a character closely linked to a figure in classical literature, such as Tiresias in the preceding section. And yet, as Russell Murphy points out:

The reader reaching for his Bulfinch or Hamilton in the hope of securing a satisfactory signification for Phlebas beyond what is revealed in Eliot's text will find no safe harbour, despite the poet's injunction that we 'consider' this all but anonymous role model.<sup>35</sup>

This name is repeated at the crux of this short section, as the narrator urges us to 'Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you' (l. 321). To 'consider' this man, then, the reader must look at the short passage in more detail. Instead of a mythical or classical figure, Phlebas is a universal man, an example of an ordinary life which comes to an end, and a warning to others, a 'role model' for human mortality.

Paul Lewis observes that 'many of the characters in *The Waste Land* appear only as names in passing [...] the catalogues of names call attention to the desperate emptiness of the characters'.<sup>36</sup> The 'desperate emptiness' of the nameless 'typist' and her 'young man carbuncular' in the previous scene is clear, as they are presented as props who exemplify the emptiness and vapid life of Modern men and women. One may assume that Phlebas is introduced in the first section of *The Waste Land*, in which Madame Sosostris picks 'the drowned Phoenician Sailor' (l. 47) from her pack of cards. 'The Phoenician Sailor' also appears in Eliot's explanatory notes when considering the most important 'character' of the poem, Tiresias.

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<sup>35</sup> Russell Murphy, 'Phlebas in Glastonbury: A Phoenician Sailor in the Tin Trade', *Yeats Eliot Review*, 31 (2016), 39–44 (p. 40).

<sup>36</sup> Paul Lewis, 'Life by Water: Characterisation and Salvation in *The Waste Land*', *Mosaic*, 11 (1978), 81–90 (p. 89).

Despite several references to Phlebas before and in his section and in close proximity to the central figure (both in the notes and in the poem itself), we are given very little information with which to 'consider' him, which ironically makes him one of the characters filled with 'desperate emptiness'. The exploration of his forgetting of identity and the stripping away of his humanity, however, which ends in this plea to 'consider Phlebas', suggest that this is not simply another face in the crowd of characters, but a more mysterious character for the consideration of 'you who turn the wheel' (l. 320).

Oswald introduces the character 'Jan Coo' (l. 92) early on in *Dart*, and uses a name which is explained in the margins of the poem to mean 'So-and-So of the Woods' (Note, p. 4). Instead of evoking something akin to classical mythology or literature, and elevating and mystifying the character and his experiences through this as Eliot does, Oswald uses an earthy name which places the character firmly in his surroundings, despite his human death. Ironically, the name Jan Coo can be researched, and the myth surrounding the Dart which Oswald takes as inspiration for this passage details how the river chooses its annual victim and calls their name, urging them closer until they drown. Jan Coo, a farmhand, is one such victim brought to life in Oswald's poem, whose name ties him to the land which sustained him in life and the locality of the river which carries on his identity after death. The repetition of this name through the passage evokes this eerie myth, adding to the 'sound-map' with a voice which seemingly echoes from the river itself.

The places associated with these two characters are also pivotal in telling their stories. Phlebas is described as 'the Phoenician', which ties him to a place which no longer exists, now mostly modern-day Lebanon. Phoenicia was a trade centre, suggesting that this character was a world traveller, and the rest of the section does not give a location in which he drowns, which corroborates this supposition. Phlebas dies at sea, 'entering the whirlpool' (l. 318), which adds to his placeless identity, important later as the reader, 'Gentile or Jew' (l. 319), is urged to

'consider' his fate. Creating a character who is not tied to any particular country or region, who is a traveller by trade and dies in the vast, unknowable, 'un-country' of the sea, adds to the 'ubi sunt' quality of this part of the poem. The message that the reader receives, 'Gentile or Jew', is that this man, Phlebas, could be any one of us.

Jan Coo, however, is firmly rooted in the landscape which he 'haunts' (Note, p. 4). His name, as mentioned, establishes him as part of the woods around the river, and to explain 'who I am' (l. 96), he says that 'I] come from the little heap of stones up by Postbridge' (ll. 96–97). He is so well-incorporated into the landscape and the river which now sustain his existence that the reader is unsure whether this is still a human voice, as the river too could come from 'a little heap of stones'. The human identity in Oswald's poem has morphed into a confluence of man and river, cementing what, in life, tied Jan Coo to this place, and what, in death, gives him a continued existence. Whilst a name like 'Postbridge' is quintessentially British, it is also specific to the Dart, as there is indeed a Postbridge through which the Dart flows. Jan Coo's identity is perpetuated as 'the groom of the Dart' (l. 114), and the margin notes which introduce him tell us that 'he haunts the Dart'. Jan Coo is thus presented as unquestionably 'of the Dart', tied by both human associations and the water's mysterious preservation to this locality.

Middleton aptly points out that this description allows him 'to be seen both as "husband" to the river as well as a "groom" in the sense of someone who takes care of horses, or in this case, the river'.<sup>37</sup> The image of this drowned man as a husband of the river sets up the intimacy between them, as instead of physically separate beings, man and river are now one, much the same as the symbolism used in Western wedding ceremonies. The identity of a 'groom', one who takes care of animals, emphasises the symbiosis of this eternal relationship: just as the river affords Jan Coo a continued life after death, so, as part of the river, he works to sustain it, transferring his former identity as a farmhand into this new fluvial identity.

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<sup>37</sup> Middleton, p. 166.



This is clear later in the poem, as the 'water abstractor' evokes the spirit of Jan Coo to help him with his tasks on the river. A conversation is set up between the two, but this is done without speech marks or demarcation of separate voices, which continues this sense of an intermingling of identity through the presence of the river:

Jan Coo! Jan Coo!  
have you any idea what goes into water?

I have verified the calibration records  
[...]  
have you in so doing dealt with the black inert matter?

in my own way. I have removed the finest particles  
[...]  
have you created for us a feeling of relative  
invulnerability?

I do my best. I walk under the rapid gravity filters, under the  
clarifier with the weight of all the water for the Torbay area  
going over me, it's a lot for one man to carry on his shoulders. (ll. 745–763)

Jan Coo's calm responses in contrast to the water abstractor's urgency accentuate Jan Coo's immortal presence in the river, and the reassurance which he provides seems far removed from a reckless, young farmhand as seen in the previous section. The call and response of this passage is suggestive of the relationship between humanity and nature, as the man asks of nature what is to be done to fix it into his ordered perception of the river. The at-one-point-human voice which answers him complicates this binary and observes the interconnected nature of humanity and the water, as both inhabit and depend upon each other. Despite this symbiotic relationship, the human anxiety which answers the inescapable danger of water is preserved, as the repeated questions of the water abstractor, and the vulnerability of 'it's a lot for one man to carry on his shoulders', along with 'I do my best' in answer to the creation of 'a feeling of relative| invulnerability' suggest that water is still the dominant power in the relationship, and that no human presence can succeed in taming water to their own will. The qualifier of 'relative', as to be relatively invulnerable is not to be invulnerable, and the facade of 'created for us' suggest this

irrevocable awareness of water's ability to take life, which is reinforced by the conversation between a mortal man and a man who died by drowning, kept 'alive' only through his preservation in water.

Both Phlebas and Jan Coe are doubly situated in the human world and in water. Both are held after death in the minds of the living, as we are urged to 'consider' Phlebas, and Jan Coe is put to work as an inspector of the river. The human drive towards materiality is forgotten by Phlebas, who 'forgot [...] the profit and loss' of his human existence, whereas Jan Coe continues to exist as part of this human system of water abstraction and treatment. Phlebas becomes a more abstract body, 'entering the whirlpool' of existence or the lack thereof outside the confines of human comprehension. Jan Coe is also tied to human pursuits but brings with him this consideration of an existence as something more than the human world. This is evident when he manipulates the jargon-filled conversation surrounding 'the calibration records' into a consideration of the weight of water, and the responsibility of his position as a presence within water, ambiguously neither fully alive nor fully dead. Through this situation as part of both human and aqueous worlds, Eliot presents a character who is far from what he once was, who epitomises the shift from life to death in order to warn those still alive of what they will become. Jan Coe, however, inhabits both worlds to portray how water and humanity are intertwined as human mortality is complicated and answered by the immortality of the water cycle.

The concept of this identity being inextricably tied to the river is a complex one when we consider the previously discussed inadequacy of defining a river as one discrete being given the continual flow of water from one body into the next. The water in the river Dart is not constant, the individual molecules flow on and through the riverbed, giving life and moving ever-onwards to other watery existences. Even so, the voice of Jan Coe, upheld by this placeless water, manages to remain part of the landscape which shaped his mortal identity. He describes in Oswald's poem how:

[...] I'm  
trying to talk myself round to leaving this place,  
but there's roots growing round my mouth, my foot's  
in a rusted tin (ll. 102–105).

His name, 'of the woods' (Note, p. 4), and this tethering of his remains by 'roots' and a 'rusted tin', give weight to this ability to remain tied to a specific place rather than flow onwards with the water of the river. Instead of becoming entirely water, Jan Coo combines the earthy, rooted human identity with the submersion in water, and thus becomes a landmark of the Dart, part of the folklore surrounding it. His story is an extreme version of all the stories in *Dart*, as human and water coalesce but neither entirely loses their identity and both are instead sustained by this confluence. Jan Coo, then, represents how humans mould their identities around a river by the evolution of myths and folklore, making it 'their' river, despite the constantly changing, flowing water within its banks.

The many different occupations, identities, myths, and lives which are used to create this 'sound-map' of the river are testaments to this notion that rivers can impact and come to shape human identity. Smith points out that:

The river lends itself to the theme of transformation because it is a border that can be crossed [...] this is a place of fluidity and change; [...] a movement that provides Oswald's 'songline' with both its content and its form.<sup>38</sup>

Oswald mixes the everyday, seemingly mundane activities of a 'dairy worker' (Note, p. 29) with this mystical voice of the 'dreamer' (Note, p. 27), alongside the stubborn continued existence of Jan Coo, who exclaims 'I'm soaked, fuck these numb hands' (l. 95), which seems at odds with the more poetic, lyrical voice of the dreamer. This 'transformation' between voices is key to the identities of the people who surround and are part of the river, as Jan Coo, instead of ending as a drowned man, is given renewed life by the shift of his identity into this fluid state. His death,

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, p. 49.

according to Smith, is just another example of 'selfhood being altered by the landscape, of the way that subject, voice, and environment intermingle' in the river.<sup>39</sup>

Eliot uses the sea, an ambiguous vastness, and an unidentifiable wanderer, to profess his warning to all humanity, as the sea gives this anonymity. Oswald's subject of the river Dart lends itself to this more local, personal approach, recording the 'river's mutterings' through those who live and die around it. The sea is too vast, too unknowable, and too intangible for such treatment. For Eliot, the sea is a tool of destruction, as 'A current under sea | Picked his bones in whispers'. Eliot uses the placeless sea as a catalyst for destruction, the merciless engine which turns a man 'once handsome and tall as you' into nothingness. Eliot uses the sea to show the passing away of identity, as 'he passed the stages of his age and youth' (l. 317) and human identity is stripped down and away by the waves. Oswald, on the other hand, uses the story of a drowned man as a way to perpetuate and solidify the reliance of the people around the river upon it, as when they die in this way their identity is preserved as part of their landscape.

Phlebas' fate is set in past tense through 'Death By Water', narrated from the third person perspective as he is no longer able to speak for himself. The fact that 'he passed the stages of his age and youth' seems almost to undo his life, as the water does such a thorough job of undoing him. The only hint at present tense in the poem is the present participle, 'Entering the whirlpool', which suggests the perpetuity of the sea and its power in contrast to the frail mortality of human life. The lasting moment of Phlebas' identity is this 'entering' into nothingness, a 'whirlpool' which strips individuality from him.

Lewis sees this stripping of individual identity from Phlebas as a positive moment in the poem, however, as 'Phlebas is the first of Eliot's characters who achieves spiritual renewal through an

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<sup>39</sup> Smith, p. 48.

extinction of personality and an escape from time'.<sup>40</sup> The individual stresses and burdens of human life are lifted from Phlebas, according to Lewis, as:

The things which Phlebas forgets are the very things which Eliot's earlier and unsaved characters were unable to forget. In forgetting the cries of gulls and the sea's swell, Phlebas forgets the sensory realities which divide his world up into discrete units, the hundred visions of a minute. In forgetting 'the profit and loss', Phlebas goes beyond the financial considerations which must have distracted him from profounder meditation and the self-conscious Prufrockian tendency to consider endlessly the implications of each thought and act.<sup>41</sup>

In forgetting how to be an individual as part of a society, plugged into the endless monotony of cycles such as 'profit and loss', and the 'cry of gulls', reminiscent of the omnipresence of human misery and pain so blatant in Eliot's London, Phlebas is freed from the baseness and monotony of other characters in *The Waste Land*. Lewis argues this through the use of 'passed', which 'suggests both *reviewed* and *transcended*, [...] that Phlebas saw his old life flash before him and that he passed beyond his interest in that life'.<sup>42</sup> Lewis explains that:

In *The Waste Land*, the sterility of the modern world is seen as a result of the prevalence of purely physical lust devoid of feeling or passion. This inhuman, emotionless sexuality becomes the point of focus in the section directly preceding 'Death By Water'. In this context, the destruction of the body should not be seen to imply the destruction of the total man. On the contrary, we are forced to infer that Phlebas is, in the poet's view, well rid of his body; and that, freed from the temptations of the flesh, he can enter into a new life.<sup>43</sup>

This reading seems overstated, given the continued past tense of the poem, and the lasting emphasis of Phlebas, 'who was once' and yet is no more. The end-stopped 'you.' (l. 321) shifts the focus of the section and Phlebas does not return in the following section of the poem. Whilst he may be freed from his human life, and the vestigial presence of 'Full Fathom Five' suggests the sea as an agent of transformation as well as destruction, there is no evidence to suggest that Phlebas himself is perpetuated in any way within his watery grave. In fact, this section hangs on his past tense as the universal reader is urged to consider his fate and can infer that they are to

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<sup>40</sup> Lewis, p. 82.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

make the most of their fleeting mortality. Ending on 'you' shifts the reader's consideration from this dead man to their own brief lives, as 'forgot', which begins the second line, is realised. Lewis suggests that:

Critics who argue that Phlebas is completely annihilated fail to see that it makes very little sense to speak of a mind that has ceased thinking altogether as forgetting or remembering. Forgetting is just as much an organic mental process as remembering. And we must suppose that in order to forget these things Phlebas lives on in some way after his death.<sup>44</sup>

This misses the crucial aspect of the section, the past tense of 'forgot'. Through this disintegration in the sea, the ability of the living man to remember is stripped away, and we get a sense of this misery of the Modern man seeping away as the water undoes his sense of self. Everything which Phlebas does in the poem is past tense (except 'entering the whirlpool'): 'a fortnight dead' (l. 312), 'forgot' (l. 313), 'rose', 'fell' (l. 316), 'passed' (l. 317), and 'was once' (l. 321). He takes on the passive role, moved by the water surrounding him, but even what is done to him is presented in the past tense: 'sea | Picked his bones'. Through this passive rise and fall of his body, the reader understands the forgetting to be not of his own volition, but rather a side-effect of his body being picked apart and dissolved into the ocean, a stark image of mortality. Eliot's narrator is necessarily third person, which shows Phlebas' past tense, the cessation of his life in death.

Oswald's Jan Coo, however, narrates his own story as one of the voices which make up the 'sound-map' of the river. His margin introduction sets him firmly in the present, 'he haunts the Dart', despite his obvious death. He narrates his story as though still alive, as 'I | come from', and:

[...] you can tell it's  
me  
because of the wearing action of water on bone (ll. 99–101).

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<sup>44</sup> Lewis, p. 83.

Whilst narrating a similar stripping of the body to Eliot's Phlebas, Oswald here portrays a character still at the centre of his own consciousness. This reinforces Smith's assertion that the drowning of this character and the Tin Miners later are 'just further examples of selfhood being altered by the landscape'. Jan Coo becomes embodied by the river, his present-tense voice preserved by water's immortality, seemingly alongside the remains of his human body.

The only third-person narration in Jan Coo's account is that of his death, which complicates the timeline of the story. An unnamed and unexplained speaker explains that:

[...] one night he sneaks away downriver,  
told us he could hear voices woood  
we know what voices means, Jan Coo Jan Coo (ll. 106–108).

This account of Jan Coo's death is told mostly in present tense, as though a continual event akin to the flow of water through the riverbed, as many legends which claim still to occur are told. The repetition of 'Jan Coo' at the end of this line evokes the deathly call of the Dart according to this myth. The voices of the people surrounding the Dart mingle with its eerie cry, all of which are brought together in Jan Coo's continued existence in the flowing water. Hints of the perceived finality of human death are seen as he 'told' the narrator he could hear voices, and the abrupt 'Next morning it came home to us he was drowned' (l. 110). The human reaction to this death is one of past tense, as one might expect, and Jan Coo's death serves as a warning that safety is found in community rather than individual endeavour: 'He should never have swum on his own' (l. 111). The danger of the Dart is apparent in the sudden way that it takes life, echoed in the switch of tense and blunt delivery of the line. This finality is undone by the present tense of Jan Coo's previous narration; his death is only revealed as past tense when he suggests leaving the river.

Despite their account of his death, the narrator also continues to present Jan Coo as a very real, present-tense existence: 'Now he's so thin you can see the light| through his skin, you can see the filth in his midriff' (ll. 112–113). Instead of an almost anonymous figure cast into the abyss

like Eliot's Phlebas, Oswald's drowned man retains some mythical form or corporeality within the river. The form that this body takes is ambiguous enough that, like the 'little heap of stones', it could be seen as either the drowned man or the river, or more likely both. The transparency of water is likened to the 'thin' skin of a wasted body, but this does not restrict the man:

[...] I've seen him  
taking the shape of the sky, a bird, a blade,  
a fallen leaf, a stone — may he lie long  
in the inexplicable knot of the river's body (ll. 114–117).

The 'body' of man and river are intertwined, as the 'midriff' of the previous stanza is answered with the 'river's body' which ends this section (as much as any section in *Dart* can be said to have 'ended'). Even in the pronouncement of what we assume is his epitaph, 'may he lie long', Jan Coe is still present tense. His ability to transfigure himself into 'the shape of the sky, a bird, a blade', and even the past tense of 'a fallen leaf' (l. 116) both cements the notion of water as a uniting presence which flows through all things, giving life as it goes, and also adds weight to Smith's assertion that the river is a place of transformation and change.

Time, in Eliot's 'Death By Water', is set in a binary — we are in the present, looking back on what once was, and we are to take heed of the death and dissolving of Phlebas' body. Oswald's Jan Coe, however, complicates the chronology of human life and challenges our absolutes of time, as he speaks from beyond death, and seems almost to relive his drowning from within this altered identity as part of the river. The river is not bound by physical human restraints, nor, somehow, does it adhere to our structures of passing time, but instead exists in past and present simultaneously.



## Chapter Five: 'I dig my hands into the absolute. The surface | breaks' — Jorie Graham's

### American Sense of Place

#### I. 'I Was Taught Three'

To consider the concept of 'bodies of water', one necessarily has to consider the place in which such bodies are situated, however fleetingly. As Lawrence Buell states, 'There never was an is without a where'.<sup>1</sup> Any body of water inevitably comes into contact with some boundary, be it linguistic, physical, or a mixture of the two, which then deems it in human terms as belonging to that place — an English river, US waters. This label of identity comes with a myriad of historical and political contexts, drawing the natural world into human ways of categorising and relating to existence. In our understanding, once a 'body of water' becomes 'English' or belonging to any other nationality or community, it is no longer only a physical location, but is imbued with these human notions of control through naming and our sense of possession, creating communal ground: 'our river'. Yi-Fu Tuan considers the integral difference between 'space' and 'place' in his study 'Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective', in which he argues that 'Place, however, has more substance than the word location suggests: it is a unique entity [...] it has a history and meaning'.<sup>2</sup> By assigning these labels of place and ownership to bodies of water, humanity implicates them in this politics of 'history and meaning' which 'place' implies.

Our concepts of ownership over land, of carving out countries, provinces, states, or even towns, cities, and villages are of course flawed — the natural world has no notion of being 'English' or otherwise, and grows over these imposed boundaries regardless. The same can be said of water. The individual molecules which make up the Dart, for instance, are never static and have previously been part of the Mississippi, the Nile, and every other body of water regardless of whether or not humanity has prescribed to it a name and accordingly a sense of place. Even

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective', in *Philosophy in Geography*, ed. by Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 387–427 (p. 387).

when we in some part acknowledge this placelessness and perpetual movement of water, instead of acknowledging it as such, we ascribe to it a multitude of place — ‘international waters’, ‘the Pacific Ocean’. Even when one group of humans cannot claim sole ownership over a place or body of water, we make it of all places rather than of none: ‘international’ rather than ‘anational’. The need to own, possess, and control water as we attempt to do with land translates our anthropocentric assumptions to the water which flows around these arbitrary boundaries.

Working from within this anthropocentric framework, however, it is necessary to consider both poets in terms of the places to which they are in part linked, and how the narratives of nation, city, or community to which they belong have shaped their poetry and in particular their ecofeminist poetics of water. David Borthwick asserts that:

Place offers a solace and grounding for many ecopoets, a site for digging in, gaining insights from which to see a wider connection to a shared world. Others take a more global view, wrestling with wider perspectives and other kinds of connection, [...] the knowledge we cannot ignore: that the local is the global, too.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter will focus on the American legacy of transcendentalism out of and at times against which Graham writes, whilst the next will answer it with Oswald’s British sense of place and how this impacts her poetry. I consider the extent to which both poets ‘dig in’ to ‘see a wider connection to a shared world’, and how the ‘local’ and ‘global’ interact, engage with, and are challenged by water’s placelessness.

On the surface, Jorie Graham can appear to be an American writer. Her work is written in English, she considers American politics in her writing, and most scholarly criticism will refer to her as an ‘American poet’. However, a quick glance at her biography complicates this label, as one finds an international aspect to her and her writing, both through her subject matter — the destabilisation of place through climate change — and through her international background.

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<sup>3</sup> David Borthwick, ‘Introduction’, in *Entanglements: New Ecopoetry*, ed. by David Knowles and Sharon Blackie (Isle of Lewis: Two Ravens Press, 2012), p. xv–xxii (p. xix).

Born in New York, Graham was raised in Rome, and moved to Paris to study Philosophy at the Sorbonne, where she participated in student protests before leaving the university. She finished her studies as a film student in New York and then went on to complete an MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, at which she also then taught, and is currently Boylston Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric at Harvard University.

The concept of being 'American' is in itself complicated by a multitude of place. The United States of America, as we consider it today, is a relatively new place label for the land upon which it exists. Most US citizens can trace their family history back to other countries with relatively few generations, as the 'New World' was populated with people from all over Europe and further afield. Jorie Graham's divided identity may be considered typical in this regard, but unlike most Americans, this divided identity is not only part of her ancestral history but is also her own lived experience of moving from one country to the next at pivotal moments in the formation of her identity.

Graham's early poem 'I Was Taught Three' interacts with the idea of place both in content and physical organisation on the page in order to explore the multitude of identity colliding in one entity, mapped onto the image of a tree. Instead of the traditional poetic structure of a title separate from the poem itself, acting as a summation and perspective from which to read it, Graham's title is also the first line of the poem, leading into 'names for the tree facing my window'.<sup>4</sup> The traditional gap between title and subject is bridged, beginning the poem with a sort of triplet, out of place with the regular couplets which proceed through the poem. These couplets themselves are odd, given the focus of the poem on these three strands of identity, and come to a climax in the one line which ends the poem, 'a name among them' (l. 29), which further pares identity down to 'a name' rather than three or two. Traditionally, when organised into couplets, one would expect a poem to rhyme, and so the absence of rhyme here

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<sup>4</sup> Jorie Graham, 'I Was Taught Three', in *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974–1994* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 6, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

emphasises the disconnect between appearance and reality, place boundary and individual identity, and the point of the poem which is to explore these differing strands of identity from within a single being. The way in which the idea of place is formed is then disrupted, as the assumptions we make about the form of the poem are challenged by its content, which introduces these three perspectives on one tree. As in Graham's poem 'Reading Plato', the poem's content flows through its traditional structure, casting off our assumptions and instead demanding to be read in a different way. This international approach, and the disrupted sense of place, recurs throughout Graham's work.

These three perspectives or strands of identity presented in the poem mirror the different stages of Graham's formation of identity. At first we are presented with the Italian:

*Castagno* took itself to heart, its pods  
like urchins clung to where they landed  
claiming every bit of shadow  
at the hem. (ll. 4–7)

These expectations of order and coupling which we assume of the poem are challenged, as this exploration of Italian identity spans across three couplets. The language used is reminiscent of a childhood state — 'pods' and 'urchins' who 'clung to where they landed' reflect the idea of an American-born child trying to find identity in Rome, and 'claiming' the protective 'shadow' of parents, 'the hem' which children take as their guide to their place in the world.

The French identity is then explored:

[...] *Chassagne*, on windier days,  
nervous in taffeta gowns,  
whispering, on the verge of being  
anarchic, though well bred. (ll. 7–10)

The consolidation and refinement of identity is seen here as this strand of identity spans only two couplets, and Graham reflects her university experience through this perspective of the

tree. The instability of 'windier', 'nervous', 'on the verge', and 'taffeta' (a fabric which is two colours simultaneously, depending on which way the light hits it, and so reflects this reformation or duality of identity) mirrors the formation of adult identity commonly associated with university. This is reinforced by the description of the tree's movement as 'anarchic, though well bred', a nod to Graham's 'anarchic' participation in protests alongside her identity as a student at this time.

The American identity presented is even more concise:

And then *chestnut*, whipped pale and clean  
by all the inner reservoirs

called upon to do their even share of work. (ll. 11–13)

Again the multitude of self is reflected in the tree, as terms such as 'work' and 'called upon' hold more adult, responsible tones than the French and Italian words for the chestnut tree. Despite this more refined, assured identity, the American strand still spans two couplets, suggesting that although this aspect of identity is sturdier than what has come before, the international basis of Graham's identity and her links to more than one physical place are still important.

The projection of human identity onto the tree is confirmed as the poem continues:

[...] this  
was all first person, and I  
  
was the stem, holding within myself the whole  
bouquet of three, (ll. 17–20).

This 'bouquet' of identity is at odds with the expectation of singular identity of both tree and person, exemplified by the use of this word which has been adopted into English but has French origins. The uncertainty of trying to find 'a name among' these differing and connected identities is rooted in the tree which takes on different national or linguistic characteristics with the changing weather or climate. The vulnerability of the last line, uncoupled, trying to find 'a name' among multitudes, but not offering this solution, portrays the impossibility of this singularity

within a more complex, nuanced identity of an international woman in conversation with and inextricable from the equally, if not more complicated, natural world. All three strands of identity are established and coexist within the image of the tree, which reflects the way in which these three national identities coexist within one woman. This multitude of identity in one being is an important foundation for Graham's later eco-poetics, in which the concept of multiple identities, being both human and part of the natural world, is crucial. This poem is a perfect example of the 'history and meaning' which humans ascribe through place labels to the natural world, as the tree remains in one space, but embodies these different perspectives of nationality as the changing weather acts upon it, and the human speaker imposes these different strands of her identity upon it.

Within this exploration of her own identity mapped onto that of the tree, Graham acknowledges nature's indifference towards these human perceptions of identity and naming of places. The poem asks 'What is the idea|| that governs blossoming?' (l. 22–23) and gives two possible answers at odds with each other:

[...] The human tree  
clothed with its nouns, or this one  
  
just outside my window promising more firmly  
than can be  
  
that it will reach my sill eventually, the leaves  
silent as suppressed desires (ll. 23–28).

Whilst considering and exploring these different strands of her identity, and how our perceptions and labels of place can be seen to imbue places with our histories and memories, Graham is also aware that our names for ourselves and for places, the identities which we ascribe to nature, do not change the physical being of either it or ourselves. The tree has no notion of being Italian, French, or American, or that Graham's speaker has ascribed to it these different strands of identity. The clothing of nature with our 'nouns' holds no importance or

sense of identity for the natural world, which disregards these man-made borders, 'promising [...] that it will reach my sill eventually'.

Along with Graham's divided nationality comes the eco-poetic consciousness of universality in much of her work, as she addresses the sense of a communal, universal identity rather than that of one nation or person. Graham's poetry begins to write against the legacies and traditions of transcendentalism and these embedded, American ideas of place and nation as she looks towards the rapidly disappearing future of the planet. Graham is both embedded within these American concepts of place and ownership thereof, but also, particularly in her later work, more and more aware of the importance of a global sense of identity in the face of a global climate catastrophe. Katie Peterson asserts that Graham's poetry 'often moves, sometimes wildly, from the local to the global', which is clear as her work progresses from observations of the surroundings, her own biography, for instance, to a more worldwide perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Buell considers the famous patriotic song 'America the Beautiful' as a focal point of American identity, which explores many aspects of the American relation to nature. Buell explains that the opening lines of the hymn came to poet-scholar Katharine Lee Bates 'in an epiphany inspired by the view from the top of Pike's Peak during her first Western journey', in which all the wonders of America seemed stretched out before her.<sup>6</sup> The poem was published in 1895, and Samuel A. Ward wrote the accompanying hymn tune.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Katie Peterson, 'An Extra Life: Jorie Graham's *From the New World*', *Boston Review*, (20 May 2015) <<https://bostonreview.net/articles/katie-peterson-jorie-graham-from-the-new-world-selected/>> [Accessed 7 February 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Grant White outlines early attempts to put forth the song as the national anthem as a less militaristic and more uniting option than 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. He explains that the committee sought a song which would 'pervade and penetrate, and cheer the land like sunlight', and would encapsulate 'the national heart-beat set to music'. See Richard Grant White, *National Hymns: How they are Written and How They Are Not Written — A Lyric and National Study for the Times* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861), pp. 70, 75. Despite its failure to replace the national anthem, the hymn has subsequently been performed at significant events in the US, most recently as part of President Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021, in which Jennifer Lopez performed it alongside Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land'. 'America the Beautiful' has also been performed at many sporting events (alongside the national anthem), and Ray Charles' rendition was traditionally played in Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Buell describes the song as ‘the single most iconic work of environmental literature in US settler culture history’, and quotes these lines from it:

O beautiful for spacious skies  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!  
America! America!  
God shed his grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea!<sup>8</sup>

Buell argues that his ‘conditioning as an Americanist [is] to read it as a mindless paean to west-ward expansion’, which is evident in the evocation of God who ‘shed his grace’ on the land and ‘crown[ed]’ the ‘brotherhood’ to rule over the ‘shining sea’, asserting this patriarchal, ‘American’ domination over the land as divinely appointed and approved.<sup>9</sup> Buell observes:

[...] the poem’s felony of reducing all America to a beautiful landscape painting — ignoring the legacy of conquest, ignoring the throes of industrial revolution that new historicist literary studies and revisionist ethnic, immigration, and labour history all lay bare.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout early American literature, there is a definite sense of this ‘paean to west-ward expansion’, as the ‘new world’ was ‘discovered’ and explored. Nature is often simplified to this beautiful, pure expression of resource and divinely-provided paradise for the colonising forces. As Buell observes, however, this image of a perfect, unspoiled, untouched land which offers the beauty of nature to man for his domination and cultivation ignores the deeper weight of colonisation and conquest with which American history is loaded. This conceptualisation of nature as a beautiful, God-given resource is passed down through American literature which reflects this sense of national identity. Adam Rosen-Carole addresses these issues:

The American nation-state is founded on the all-but-forgotten bodies and worlds of indigenous peoples and is continually secured by a narrative constellation that reduces

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<sup>8</sup> Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



the decimation of people(s) to a clearing of space on which a sovereign nation could be constructed or within which it could evolve.<sup>11</sup>

Rosen-Carole continues to explain the re-imagination of American land as 'nature reborn as resource', an opportunity for European colonisers to expand their prospects by using the vast and bountiful American lands, along with the indigenous peoples already inhabiting it:

When convenient, the New World was interpreted as not only peripheral but politically and morally beyond the pale of the human. Bodies 'found' there were, for the most part, equated with the territorial expanse or with animals roaming therein; indigenous people(s) and the lands with which they lived were divested of cultural, moral, and political significance. In short, 'Europe was hungry for raw material, and America was abundant forests, rivers, land'.<sup>12</sup>

The equation of indigenous peoples with the land allowed colonisers to destroy and exploit both in equal measure, clearing space for the nation-state which would be set up on their terms and serve their purposes. This dominating attitude, which considers nature and 'bodies' as space ready to be conquered, gave birth to this American idealism of place as pure and untouched, or, as Buell puts it, 'nature has long been reckoned a crucial ingredient of the American national ego'.<sup>13</sup> This re-imagining of place as ready for colonisation affected how the land was approached, as Buell argues that 'how we image a thing, true or false, affects our conduct toward it, the conduct of nations as well as persons'.<sup>14</sup> The re-imagination of nature alongside indigenous peoples was seen as a necessary shift in order to serve the colonising perspective.

This imagining of 'nature as resource' is prevalent in much early American literature, as colonisers and the generations after them began to expand out into the land and claim it as their own. Reacting against this, transcendental literature sought to present a new way to 'image' nature as part of a whole 'universal being', which encompassed humanity alongside the natural world. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay 'Nature', states that:

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<sup>11</sup> Adam Rosen-Carole, 'Of the Map, Beneath our Feet: Cartographic Amnesia and the National Body', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 37 (2012), 133–150 (p. 133).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134, pp. 138–139.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life — no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst still reminiscent of this ‘paeon to west-ward expansion’ found in early American literature in his claim to be ‘part or parcel of God’ and that ‘I see all’, Emerson here acknowledges the interaction and exchange between humanity and nature. Engulfed in nature in this way, ‘my head bathed by the blithe air’, the absolute importance of the individual ‘vanishes’, and Emerson becomes ‘a transparent eyeball’, ‘nothing’. This step away from considering nature as another aspect to be conquered and dominated into a realisation of our inherent connection with and dependence upon nature is the foundation of contemporary eco-poetics.

Water is integral to these discussions of place, ownership, and repossession or reimagination of the land, as the lakes, rivers, and seas surrounding and running through the American landscape were and are seen as great resources for humanity to utilise. In its vastness and unknowable depths, the sea continues to provide both a life source and a scope for the imagination, and literature continues to return to these unknowns in an attempt to consider the place of humanity within such a vast expanse of intangible power. The continual flow of rivers on through the landscape similarly challenges our perceptions of place as something fixed, and disrupts the concept of owning a space when a river continually erodes and displaces the ground through which it runs. Despite this lack of control, humanity continues to claim ownership of water through assigning names to rivers and oceans, lakes and ponds, and brings along with this the ‘history and meaning’ of human contexts onto these ever-shifting bodies of water.

This chapter will focus on three writers writing at a similar time in ways that came to be classified under the term ‘transcendentalist’, around this American expansion into place and the emergence and development of identity through this new relation to nature. This will then

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Nature’, in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 2003), pp. 35–82, (p. 39). All further references to this essay are to this edition.

inform Graham's perception and treatment of place and water in her much later, largely 'American' poetics. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman wrote many seminal environmental texts in the mid-1800s which challenged the perceived approach to nature and particularly water. They became the forefathers of a movement which considered nature as not just a resource for humanity to own and use, but also part of our being and integral to our existence. In these works we can see the seeds of later environmental writing, and how poets such as Graham have been shaped by those who came before, but also diverge from these ideas and build upon them in new ways.

## II. 'The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.'

In his poem 'Each and All', Emerson presents this state of being in which 'Nothing is fair or good alone' and explores how abstracting one part of nature out of its surroundings into human contexts drains it of this beauty.<sup>16</sup> Emerson describes in the poem how he brought home a sparrow who sings a 'note from heaven', but 'it pleases not now, | For I did not bring home the river and sky' (ll. 13–17). Later he similarly observes that 'the delicate shells lay on the shore' (l. 19), and that:

I wiped away the weeds and foam,  
I fetched my sea-born treasures home;  
But the poor, unsightly, noisome things  
Had left their beauty on the shore (ll. 24–27).

Both of these extractions show how the use of nature as 'resource' is damaging, and that apart from their cohesive whole, the individual parts of nature suffer. At the end of the poem, the speaker instead goes into nature in order to appreciate its beauty:

[...] beneath my feet  
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,  
Running over the club-moss burrs;

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<sup>16</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Each and All', in *Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1899), p. 8, l. 12. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

I inhaled the violet's breath;  
Around me stood the oaks and firs;  
Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground;  
Over me soared the eternal sky, (ll. 40–46).

The images of man and nature in close proximity, as the speaker 'inhaled' nature's 'breath', and 'around me stood', 'beneath my feet' present an image of the human voice entirely surrounded by and in the midst of the natural world. The speaker is one with the beautiful aspects which he so desires, appreciating them from within rather than abstracting parts from the whole. Emerson champions the idea of universality between humanity and nature: instead of displacing nature, he displaces himself out of his human contexts into the natural world in order to fully experience the beauty therein.

This perspective, whilst challenging the received perception of nature as a resource and vast, beautiful expanse to be inhabited, holds with it a lasting echo of the uneven power dynamics between humanity and nature against which ecopoetics writes. Buell notes that 'for Emerson, physical nature was "a fixed point" by which humankind might measure "our departure" or slippage from harmonious self-existence', which is evident as Emerson constantly returns to the self: 'around me', 'over me', 'beneath my feet'.<sup>17</sup> The importance of this individual, autonomous being at leisure to commune with nature is integral to both Emerson and the transcendentalists more widely. Nature, however much it is held in awe by such writers, remains a tool for the expansion and expression of the self, the 'fixed point' to which Buell refers, by which to measure this self and the development thereof. The sky may be 'eternal', but it is tethered 'over me', a measurement of the limits or possibilities of the transcendental self, rather than acknowledging the way in which nature is constantly moving, evolving, and replenishing itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 143.

Bonnie Costello notes how Emerson retains this autonomy as she argues that ‘a centred, hierarchical order determines Emerson’s sight lines’ in the poem.<sup>18</sup> Although Emerson offers this sympathetic view of nature which is to be preserved as a cohesive whole rather than repurposed to serve human desires, as the poem comes to a close and ‘I yielded myself to the perfect whole’ (l. 51), one can see how Costello’s argument is justified. Emerson’s speaker retains this autonomy and detached sense of self, the ‘I’ held back and deployed at will when the ‘perfect whole’ has been documented and perceived through human eyes. Costello continues to argue that ‘Each and All’ ‘addresses the reader as a Napoleonic type, “thee from the hill-top looking down”, at a great distance from the “red-cloaked clown” who labors, unconscious, in the field below’ (p. 5). Emerson here in part retains the detachment and sense of Othering crucial to the colonising mindset, which Othered the indigenous peoples who depended upon the land for survival, allowing the autonomous, white, male coloniser to establish his perception of order upon the land and its inhabitants. Costello notes the crux of the poem:

In ‘yielding’ himself to the whole which he has earlier failed to possess piece by piece, the poet has made himself at once the centre of it (the ‘I’ and ‘me’ structuring object relations), and coextensive with it. (p. 6)

Everything which we perceive in the poem is necessarily presented through the human speaker, but this anthropocentric viewpoint retains the damaging re-imagining of nature as domitable and existing in order to fulfil human development of identity, the ‘fixed point’ of pure perfection against which to measure the human self. ‘Emerson orders the features of nature in relation to himself, then “yields” himself to the very order his subjectivity has created, as if that order were divinely given’ (p. 5), Costello continues, observing the concept of manifest destiny, wherein the divinely appointed explorer of the natural world as seen in ‘America the Beautiful’, exerts, consciously or unconsciously, his own power over nature. The landscape, then, is ‘accomplished’ by human perception and manipulation of subjectivity, and the ‘artist-observer, the controlling

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<sup>18</sup> Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 5. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

presence surveying the terrain, becomes invisible' (p. 5), as the emphasis of the poem rests on the 'perfect whole' to which the individual has yielded himself. These parameters remain, however, set out and fulfilled by the human presence in the poem, and only when nature has served its purpose by performing this notion that 'nothing is fair or good alone' (l. 12) can it become the centre of the poem. Despite this flawed presentation, however, the 'coextensive' aspect of Emerson's nature writing is clear throughout his work and in this poem, as nature and humanity come together as coexisting, co-dependent entities who exist as part of this Universal Soul together. 'All are needed by each one' (l. 11) is the surviving tone of the poem.

Costello then compares Emerson's poem to Graham's 'The Visible World', which she describes as 'a particularly striking contrast to Emerson's unifying, framing, and abstracting process, his mosaic arrangements of parts into a whole' (p. 6). Whilst Emerson was writing in a time of expansion and cohesion, possibility, and celebration of land, Graham's context is vastly different, as climate change shrinks our horizons and the promise of land or even a future, and her work reflects this. Despite these differing contexts, Graham's identity as an American writer is evident in the poem, as 'The Visible World' begins 'I dig my hands into the absolute', foregrounding the self as though desperate not to let it fade.<sup>19</sup> According to Costello, 'Graham has come down from Emerson's "hill top"', from the detached observation of nature's 'sight lines' and instead 'she presents a figure kneeling in a "black green glade"' (p. 7). Whilst it is true that Graham's narrator is much closer to the landscape, 'kneeling' rather than standing atop it, these national roots are also present in the poem.

Costello suggests that:

[Graham's] looking is not the lofty, bodiless activity we associate with landscapes of the nineteenth century, but the work of hands, a manipulation of fecund reality, that phenomenon of spores, roots, and bacteria as well as sky. (p. 7)

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<sup>19</sup> Jorie Graham, 'The Visible World', in *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974–1994* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 194, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

The key difference between Emerson and Graham is the absence of a 'perfect whole' in Graham's poem. Emerson ends with this picture of perfection, the purity and cohesive nature of humanity in conversation with and part of the natural world, whereas Graham begins with this immersion, but immediately 'The surface| breaks' (ll. 1–2). Graham's sense of place is not one that is still and ready to be observed or used as a development of human identity, but one alive in its own right, cluttered with real detail, and ignorant of any human attempt to control or categorise it. Place is observed rather than codified by the human explorer, and instead of perceiving the natural world through these human contexts, Graham's narrator instead explores from the outside, retaining a sense of her own smallness next to the vast, untameable natural world. In the absence of an assured future, the desperation of the human speaker in Graham's poem is clear, as the desire to hold, to possess, and to be part of the 'absolute' pervades the poem, alongside the realisation of the futility of such an attempt, as any assertion of human control 'breaks' the 'surface' of the whole.

There is something quintessentially American in Graham's writing, however, as the 'I' of her poem to some extent does dominate the scene, which is reminiscent of Emerson's speaker. Colonisation erased, in the mind of the new inhabitants at least, the history of the place, and the draw of the 'New World' was as a place in which to begin again, as Toni Morrison puts it: 'One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed'.<sup>20</sup> Instead of nature writing imbued with centuries of literature which came before, the tradition of American writing seems to be, ironically, unencumbered by tradition, to 'dig my hands into the absolute' without hesitation or consideration of who or what has come before. The forcefulness and self-assurance in Emerson and the transcendentalists around that time is echoed here in the American speaker uncluttered by engagement with what has come before, and instead wholly focussed on the 'absolute' before her. The direct

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<sup>20</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 35.

engagement with the land stems from the founding myths of America, the ideas of manifest destiny and freedom upon which the 'New World' was based.

The assurance of self, the 'I' which has an inherent claim to the earth, is typical of American literature, as seen in the poem when the speaker states that 'If I press, pick-in with fingers, pluck, | I can unfold the loam' (ll. 4–5). The onomatopoeic alliteration of 'press, pick-in [...] pluck' emphasises this imposition of humanity onto the natural world, while the usually gentle word 'unfold' gives the speaker an almost god-like ability to manipulate the ground. Whilst, as Costello observes, Graham does not beautify nature or stand at a distance, but is instead 'kneeling' before it, she in part retains this American sense of manifest destiny, the expectation that the land should yield itself to her exploration. Everything in the poem is guided by this desire to expand the self: 'If I press', 'in my hands' (l. 9), 'If I look' (l. 19), 'if I | break it apart' (ll. 19–20), which is similar to Emerson's continued return to 'me' and 'I'. Even the poem's title contains this anthropocentric focus, the world as 'visible', able to be seen by our eyes, rather than existing in its own right. Graham's American roots shape her relation to place in her early work, as seen in 'The Visible World', in which she in part displays this new, 'history-less', assured interaction with the world set before her.

Whilst this transcendentalist legacy can be detected in Graham's poem, she builds upon and departs from these ideas in some aspects. Graham's poem introduces the idea of '*Erasure*', which then becomes the focal point of the poem:

[...] If I look carefully, there in my hand, if I  
break it apart without  
crumbling  
[...]  
*Erasure*' (ll. 19–25).

This suggests a departure from the 'perfect whole' which Emerson seeks to protect. This erasure is preceded by 'the greasy silks of clay crushing the pinerot| in . . .' (ll. 23–24), and as the speaker trails off into the ineffable we understand this concept of deterioration and the taking away of





As the sense of place in the poem unfolds, the form follows it, as the line break in the middle of the word 'un-|hinge' performs the departure of language from its traditional form, the unhinging of the poem from its 'plot'. The use of the portmanteau 'upthrown' heightens this displacement, emphasising the reversal of order as the soil is 'thrown up' from its place. Costello notes that 'we separate things out as objects from the mud, the each from the all, and desire to hold the visible world, to see it clearly with the mind. Matter brought to light has a numinous glow, but crumbles' (p. 7). Through the immersive, explorative human speaker of the poem, the soil and the 'objects from the mud' become visible, but also begin to be implicated in the poem's 'Erasure'. Costello links this to the poetic process, as through this unhinging of place from plot, 'Graham begins to compare her own acts of composition and erasure with organic revolutions of generation and decay' (p. 7). The human compulsion to 'dig' into the natural world, to abstract parts of it to inspect, leads to this 'erasure' of place, the crumbling of parts back into the whole. Unlike the individual human speaker, however, this erasure of parts of nature simply leads them back into the 'generation and decay' of natural cycles.

This kneeling, immersive narration necessarily leads to an exploration of the human self in relation to nature. As Emerson's consideration of the parts and extraction of parts from nature enlightens his own sense of self, so Graham's immersion and unfolding of the 'loam' leads to this 'disentangled' (l. 43) self alongside the disturbed ground. Graham's speaker urges the reader to 'decivilize it' and 'un-|hinge' the natural world from the human 'plot', the confinement of place to human borders. Instead of being loam which is carefully curated into 'sight lines' and aesthetically pleasing boundaries in human terms, Graham at one point uses nature to identify her speaker:

[...] If I touch the slender new rootings they show me  
how large I  
am (ll. 53–55).

Emerson's 'whole' nature is absent, and instead the speaker admits 'I can't say what it is then' (l. 46). 'The poem is a making and unmaking, frame upon frame, which attempts to keep up with

(not fix) the visible world' (p. 8), Costello aptly summarises, and thus captures this key difference. Graham presents 'a tentative sketch of being [...] a verb-centred, not a noun-centred art — not an art of landscape but one of landscaping' (p. 7).

Graham is both in dialogue with these American notions of owning land, of property, nation, and national identity (and refers to 'this patch| of soil, my property' (ll. 27–28)), but is also aware of the fragility and meaninglessness of the 'visible world' as conceived of through language and human-imposed boundaries. Through this immersive inspection of the 'loam', Graham observes the ways in which the natural world begins to reclaim, to 'decivilize', and 'un-| hinge', and instead of fitting into the 'plot' set out for it, begins to 'show' us our own identity.

At the end of the poem, nature's indifference to the entanglement of place in language is renewed, as 'my hands are living in myriad manifestations| of light. . . . [...] I put the seed in. The beam moves on' (ll. 84–96). The lasting image of the poem is of humanity immersed in nature, the action of putting the seed into the earth, ensuring the perpetuation of nature. Instead of establishing a hierarchy or retaining Emerson's autonomous self through this foundation-like act, however, Graham ends with the 'mov[ing] on' of nature from what is 'visible', tangible, and understandable by human perception, to the ineffable mystery of boundlessness.

Graham's early work writes out of but also against these ideas of nation and place set out by those who came before her. Whilst her poem shows an awareness of this American desire to be a part of and involved in nature, leading the 'paean to west-ward expansion', she is also aware of the boundlessness of the natural world in relation to the individual human presence within it. The vast, unconquerable nature which colonisers sought to portion off is here observed but acknowledged as intangible, shaping and reshaping the human presence rather than being subdued by it. This mindset is more akin to Buell's foundational views of ecocriticism, in which:

The places themselves are not stable, free-standing entities but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside. Places have histories; place is not just a

noun but also a verb, a verb of action; and this action is always happening around us, because of us, despite us.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of place as 'my property', which loads place with human politics of identity and history, is intertwined in Graham's poetry with this acknowledgement that the natural world exists outside what is 'visible'. Nature flows through human boundaries (set out in the form of the poem, or even the boundaries of explaining a world within the confines of a poem) and outside our understanding, into the 'invisible', despite any human action or assertiveness which momentarily interrupts or immerses itself into 'the absolute'.

### III. 'Walden is a perfect forest mirror [...] Sky water. It needs no fence.'

Thoreau's *Walden* is similarly poised at the intersection between the nation-building attitude of American conquest and expansion and the environmental, transcendental consideration of the natural world as something outside and beyond human control. Buell asserts that Thoreau is 'the patron saint of American environmental writing', and this is clear when one considers his lasting legacy in conceptions of nature in subsequent literature and his contributions to the American perspective on place and human identity situated within the boundless expanse of nature.<sup>22</sup>

Like many writers of this time, and indeed of following times, Thoreau is not free from consideration of the natural world, at least in part, as a resource for human endeavour. In *Walden*, Thoreau describes how:

Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without

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<sup>21</sup> Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 115.

borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise.<sup>23</sup>

Thoreau's narrator captures the central paradox of transcendentalism when he begrudgingly borrows an axe with which to build his house, but claims later that 'I returned it sharper than I received it' (p. 26). Transcendentalists such as Thoreau strived towards self-reliance, and yet this belief was held in tension with the concept of the Universal Being, in which each is implicated in the wider all. Such a concept should logically lead to some form of spiritual communism, and yet Thoreau's narrator retains his individualism, remaining, at least in part, master over the natural world and himself. The assertion of authority over the natural world is clear, as 'I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods' in order to 'cut down some tall arrowy white pines' shows the simple intent of man to carve out *his* space within nature.

The American concept of freedom of self and property is also seen in *Walden*, as Thoreau continues: 'I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself' (p. 85). This process of making one's own dwelling is inherently American in the way that the speaker carves out, with his own energy and assurance of purpose, his own isolated 'world' over which he rules, which he has 'all to myself'. The American Dream is characterised by the belief that if an individual works hard enough then anything can be achieved, and that freedom and the possession of a plot of land 'all to myself' are the main things towards which all Americans strive. Such concepts can be seen in Thoreau's foundational American text.

There is a conflicting sense throughout the book of this absolute authority of the American man alongside a realisation that nature and the universe as a whole are 'wider than our views of it' (p. 207). Thoreau's speaker asserts that 'wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly' (p. 53), and later 'This is my lake country. These, with Concord River, are my water privileges; and night and day, year in year out, they grind such grist as I carry

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<sup>23</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, ed. by Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1995), p. 26. All further references to this work are to this edition.

to them' (p. 128). On one hand, Thoreau displays his subservience to the natural world as he acknowledges the 'privileges' bestowed upon him by a higher power, but he also lays claim to the land and the water by asserting that it 'radiate[s]' from him, and through the continued use of the possessive: 'my lake country', 'my water privileges', and 'they grind such grist as I carry to them'. It is clear from this last part that Thoreau does not consider himself above nature, but rather immersed within it, ensuring the continuation of such 'water privileges' by the work of his own hand. The passage seems self-contradictory, however, as the grandeur of 'this is my lake country' and the 'privileges' and ownership of parts of nature are juxtaposed with this earthy depiction of physical effort. This is immediately complicated further, as Thoreau quotes William Cowper when he says that 'I am monarch of all I *survey*, My right there is none to dispute' (p. 54), which again highlights Thoreau's assurance of his 'right' to own and cultivate a piece of land, contrary to the 'privilege' bestowed upon him earlier by nature.

Thoreau later claims that 'the universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us' (p. 63), which, whilst retaining this sense of nature answering to 'our conceptions', suggests also that the universe is in control, laying the 'track' for us, rather than solely obedient to our desires and commands. This idea is emphasised and expanded upon when Thoreau claims that:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit, — not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. (p. 199)

Thoreau here acknowledges that nature is more than what our sciences and histories of it can perceive, and is instead 'a living earth', 'living poetry like the leaves of a tree' which remains indifferent to the 'parasitic' existence of human life upon and within it.

Emerson, Thoreau, and the transcendentalist movement more widely, whilst aware and somewhat part of these ideas of control and domination of nature, were also aware and writing

towards a different consideration of the natural world as something outside human comprehension. Whilst somewhat inevitably a product of the expansionist thought of their time, they were also radical in their consideration of nature as part of and simultaneously vastly beyond the human landscape. Thoreau's description of Walden Pond reflects this awe at nature's autonomy and boundlessness:

Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer. Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gliding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh. (pp. 122–123)

This apparent awe in the presence of indomitable nature, and particularly water, is closer to the ecocritical conceptualisation of nature as outside human control, which 'needs no fence', nor recognises the construct of human authority in any such fence. Thoreau here offers a sense of water's placelessness in terms of the history, memory, and political, human contexts which come along with the place labels that we ascribe to things when he observes that 'nations come and go without defiling it'.

Thoreau speaks against the arbitrary ownership of land and nature by human hands in his exclamations against the act of naming places in nature, particularly bodies of water, after those who pay to 'own' them:

*Flint's Pond!* Such is the poverty of our nomenclature. What right had the unclean and stupid farmer, whose farm abutted on this sky water, whose shores he has ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? (p. 127).

Thoreau presents the pond as 'sky water', following on from his awe of water as such in the earlier passage, and thus imbues it with this placelessness akin to Emerson's 'eternal sky'. This description sets the water apart from humanity, outside human control in contrast to the arbitrary name imposed upon it by other human voices which seek to own and possess it ('Flint's Pond'). This outrage at an 'unclean and stupid farmer' for his claim to the land is on the one hand rather hypocritical, given Thoreau's assumption of ownership and right to the land upon

which he stumbles, and echoes Emerson's snobbery against the 'red-cloaked clown' who 'little thinks' of greater things. On the other hand, Thoreau presents a radical idea of nature, particularly water, as something unencumbered by human names, identities, and power hierarchies. He develops this assertion later:

I go not there to see him nor to hear of him; who never *saw* it, who never bathed in it, who never loved it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it, nor thanked God that he had made it. Rather let it be named from the fishes that swim in it, the wild fowl or quadrupeds which frequent it, the wild flowers which grow by its shores, or some wild man or child the thread of whose history is interwoven with its own; not from him who could show no title to it but the deed which a like-minded neighbour or legislature gave him, — him who thought only of its money value; whose presence perchance cursed all the shore; who exhausted the land around it, and would fain have exhausted the waters within it. (pp. 127–128)

This expression of nature's existence outside possession is presented in conflicting terms, as 'I go there not to see him nor to hear of him' is set out as the justification for this argument. Thoreau places these ideas of nature's ownerless existence within the parameters of his assumption of knowledge about the absolute truth of nature's being. This aside, however, his reasoning is radical for its time in the way that it seeks the communion of humanity and nature through those who truly *know* the lands and water, and who should therefore be its guardians. He even suggests that the place should be identified through its non-human inhabitants, 'the fishes that swim in it, the wild fowl and quadrupeds who frequent it', rather than its human namesake. Instead of nature as resource, owned by 'him who thought only of its money value', Thoreau calls for a more universalist, immersive notion of ownership. Instead of the colonialist erasure of history and consideration of nature as a new, pure, fresh expanse of clean-slate potential, Thoreau calls for a more sensitive and nuanced approach to nature which is inherently conscious of the existing history of the surrounding life of the pond.

This reaction against human ownership of land can also be seen in Emerson's 'Nature', in which he states that:



The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. (p. 38)

Emerson here exemplifies the same tension between this suggestion that only 'the poet' has an absolute grasp of the integral truth of the natural world, and this assertion that 'none of them owns the landscape', that no human force can claim ownership of the landscape. Though both Emerson and Thoreau retain this assurance of their 'right to survey', and set the poet or the wanderer above others as he who 'can integrate all the parts' into a perfect whole, this 'landscape' remains its own. Emerson and Thoreau present a consideration of nature not just as human 'resource', but also as a perpetually unknown entity which resists the classification of human borders or boundaries, and survives all our reclassifications of place throughout history.

Humanity's place within this natural order is complicated throughout *Walden* as an American text, very aware of the expansionism out of which it is written, but also conscious of nature's own claim to place. Instead of a 'paean to west-ward expansion', Thoreau presents a paean to nature and the expansiveness of self which comes from being immersed within it, whilst remaining sensitive to the damage of human possessiveness over nature. In short, he advises us to 'enjoy the land, but own it not' (p. 135). Akin to the claim of ownership of the pond by those whose 'history is interwoven with its own', Thoreau explores the concept of those who live and work within nature as those most able to commune with it:

Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favourable mood of observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation. She is not afraid to exhibit herself to them. (p. 136)

The 'expectation' with which we approach the natural world, these contexts of history, meaning, memory, and the sense of identity wrapped up in the notion of a 'place', are presented as a barrier to understanding or becoming one with nature. Contrary to Emerson's claim that 'the poet' alone can comprehend that elusive 'property in the horizon', Thoreau asserts that living

and working with the land and being dependent upon it for survival — those who are ‘in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves’ — is the key to fully ‘observ[ing]’ nature. Thoreau’s poet brings with him too much of the ‘expectation’ of human perceptions of nature, which clouds his view and subsequently his relation to nature.

Thoreau is also keenly aware of our human need for nature outside our impositions of order upon it, as he asserts that ‘we need the tonic of wildness, — to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge’ (p. 205). This ‘tonic of wildness’ is contrary to the American expansionist consideration of nature as a space to be tamed and fit to human purposes. Instead, Thoreau here respects nature as whole because of this wildness, not in spite of it, and suggests that nature may even be a way to tame or cure humanity. This view is still arguably a way to view ‘nature as [a] resource’ for the betterment of humanity, and echoes Emerson’s ‘fixed point’, by which, as characterised by Buell, humankind might measure ‘our departure’.<sup>24</sup> However, this depiction of nature as something outside human control, upon which humanity is dependent for life, is a step away from the traditional American perspective.

Graham’s poem ‘Recovered From the Storm’ presents in some ways a similar depiction of the natural world and particularly the power of water within it as something decidedly outside human control. The poem describes the destruction caused by a storm and its aftermath, and the complete desolation and erasure of human order and place by water’s powerful re-inhabitation of a space. The poem begins ‘I went out afterwards to see’, as instead of the traditional American reimagination of place as a canvas upon which to build a life, Graham’s poem acknowledges water’s relentless power which forces humanity into the ‘afterwards’, reshaping our perceptions of place and place-based identity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> Jorie Graham, ‘Recovered from the Storm’, in *The Errancy* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1997), p. 107, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

The land which Thoreau describes and lives upon is largely peaceful, ready to be built upon and to serve the exploration of the human self. Graham's landscape, in contrast, has been reclaimed by the full force of the natural world, and we see none of the tranquil, quiet bodies of water which Thoreau describes and is in awe of, but instead the 'branches thrown down in the middle of things' (l. 7). Instead of the transcendentalists' 'perfect whole', Graham's nature fragments itself alongside its destruction of human order, leaving an absence of wholeness. The devastation caused by the storm forces the observer to understand their own insignificance in relation to the water which dominates this space and beyond.

Nature is presented 'in the middle of things':

And drowned heads of things strewn wildly through  
our singular, tender, green,  
clarifications... (ll. 10–12).

The poem presents a reversal of our concepts of place as the natural world reclaims the 'civilised' world and dismantles the human 'clarifications' of place and control. The waters are 'memorizing' (l. 2) rather than memorised as nature reclaims its active role in the relationship with humanity. Our perceptions of place and identity derived from it are 'torn from some too-thin origin' (l. 9), as nature reasserts its power over place.

The hopelessness of human action in the wake of the storm is clear, as Graham's narrator asks 'Am I supposed to put them back together' (l. 13), followed by a long list of destroyed objects and parts of nature, such as 'the trellis cracked from the weight of the freefall?' (l. 17). Nature is the driving force, 'these branches shoved deep into my silky glance' (l. 15), and the active branches are contrasted with the gentle 'silky glance' of the helpless speaker. Nature remains outside our control and our expectations of its existence, as alongside the destruction of human structures, these many broken parts of nature — the 'branches', 'these maples' outtakes' (l. 16) — show that the storm has no notion of protecting individual trees or branches, and the destruction does not discriminate between man-made and natural objects. The helplessness of

the human speaker in the wake of this destruction shows the depth of it, as the repeated '—?' (ll. 13–26) creates a space between the description of a ruined object and the realisation of the impossibility of reclaiming or rebuilding it after the storm.

The individual aspects of nature which have been so displaced by the storm are presented in human terms as the 'limbs' (l. 14) of trees and their 'joints' (l. 14) are 'streaked over the lawn' (l. 16). By likening aspects of the natural world to humanity, Graham shows both the interconnectedness of humanity and nature but also the nature's relentlessness which destroys parts of its own 'body' in storms and its power to disembody the human presence before it so easily. The vastness of nature is clear, as these parts of trees and pieces of nature are used to reclaim the place inhabited by humanity. Graham describes:

[...] the boxelder standing like an overburdened juggler —  
so laden now he cannot remember  
the sugary spinnings, the bright fingering of... (ll. 18–20).

The trailing off of language is indicative of the shortcomings of human comprehension and language in such a situation. The attempt to liken the storm's aftermath to a 'juggler' is inevitably cut short as the speaker realises the ineffable reality before her which overflows our definitions or imaginings.

The speaker's resignation is clear:

So this is the wingbeat of the underneathly, ticking —  
this iridescent brokenness, this wet stunted nothingness —  
busy with its hollows — browsing abstractly with its catastrophic wingtips  
the tops of our world, ripping pleatings of molecule,  
unjoining the slantings, the slippery wrinklings we don't even grasp (ll. 25–29).

The narrator struggles to find the words to describe the scene, and instead uses new forms of familiar words, 'underneathly', 'unjoining', 'slantings', and 'wrinklings' to try to move towards an understanding of that which 'we don't even grasp'. The 'catastrophic' 'nothingness' of nature's 'iridescent brokenness' goes beyond our conceptions of these words and their meaning, abstracting the natural world from our language. The storm has overpowered humanity in such a

way that our existing communication is not viable, and so these new forms of explaining reality reflect the need to reimagine the world outside our confines of order and stability.

Humanity's smallness in the wake of such devastation is particularly clear at the end of the poem, when 'I pick up and drag one large limb from the path' (l. 42) shows the attempt to begin reclaiming our sense of place and identity after this destruction. This action seems futile, as nature has shown its incredible and undeniable force seemingly at random, and the rest of the poem details the extent of this disaster so vastly. The concepts of place that we ascribe to an area which is occupied by humans is seen in the poem as only temporary, as nature may reclaim its place at any time through this unstoppable force. Instead of Thoreau's concept of nature as a universe waiting to be inhabited and used to create the perfect idyll for the wandering mind, Graham presents instead the reality of an exponentially more extreme climate which reclaims our places with unstoppable force and no warning.

#### **IV. 'The pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide'**

Walt Whitman's influence on American poetry, and particularly as part of this foundation of transcendental poetry which encounters and considers nature, cannot be denied. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman wrote at a pivotal point in American history in which Max Oelschlaeger notes:

A shift transpired from viewing wild nature as merely a valuable resource [...] an obstacle [...] toward a conception of wilderness as an end in its own right and an endangered species in need of preservation.<sup>26</sup>

Whitman's celebration of the Universal Soul through its communion with the water which continually sustains it is clear throughout his poetry.

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<sup>26</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 4.

Lines from Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' appear on the Fulton Ferry Landing in Brooklyn to commemorate the famous poem in which Whitman, situated between two land masses upon the water, addresses future Americans who will doubtless take this same journey, and imagines the connection which this passage through and over water will provide for them, as 'Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,| Others will watch the run of the flood-tide'.<sup>27</sup> Within this poem, Whitman portrays both post-colonial autonomy, authority, and self-aggrandisement, the latter of course for which his poetry is famous, and also an acknowledgement and exploration of the futurity and continual flow of water alongside the connection between present and future Americans as they cross the river. Whitman uses this timelessness of water to bridge the seemingly-impassable gap between present and future. This radical democratic impulse in Whitman's work, alongside the self-aggrandisement and surety of place amidst the natural world, make Whitman an identifiably American writer of the time in which he writes, whose legacy in part survives within Graham's work as an identifiably American writer of her own time.

Whitman's speaker acts as a mystic figure, given divine authority by a higher power through an experience of the transcendental beyond to impart this wisdom to those assembled before him both physically and through time. Necessarily influenced by European traditions and religions as one of the first poets settling in the 'New World', Whitman's poetic voice is influenced by the grand style of the King James Version Bible, and throughout this and other poems Whitman uses phrases and rhetorical techniques such as syntactical parallelism to elevate his subject matter and speaker into this position of divine, transcendental authority. Through a close study of 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' and later 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life', I hope to examine to what extent Whitman's perception and symbolism of the natural world is informed or underwritten

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<sup>27</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', in *The Works of Walt Whitman*, ed. by Stephen Matterson (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), p. 147, ll. 13–14. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

by spiritual experience, and then to consider what aspects of this approach to nature survive through to Graham's poetry.

Whitman notes that 'My own favourite loafing places have always been the rivers, the wharves, the boats — I like sailors, stevedores. I have never lived away from a big river'.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere he also notes that 'I have always had a passion for ferries; to me they afford inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems', and praises 'communion with the waters, the air, the exquisite *chiaroscuro* — the sky and stars, that speak no word, nothing to the intellect, yet so eloquent, so communicative to the soul'.<sup>29</sup> From these personal notes one can observe how Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' took root, as the setting of a ferry, a vessel poised between two land masses and dependent on something ever-fluid and flowing, creates the conditions in which Whitman's fluid sense of self may thrive, and may reach out to countless others, unmoored from the confines of solidity to which one may be tied on land. The state of rest, the 'loafing' to which he refers, also provides the conditions for this spiritual act of communion with that beyond, 'the soul', from which Whitman receives his authority to speak over present and future Americans.

Whitman's speaker is, as in Emerson and Thoreau, assumed as the central focal point of the poem and of this exploration of water. The poem begins 'Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!' (l. 1), which positions the water in relation to the human presence which 'sees' and validates it through human terms, 'face to face'. The speaker continues to position aspects of the vast landscape in relation to himself, 'Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high— I see you also face to face' (l. 2), which sets up the water and the skies almost as compass points, with the human perception as the central point from out of which all else takes form. The repeated phrase 'face to face' is taken from 1 Corinthians in which Paul notes that 'now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am

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<sup>28</sup> Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), II (1908), p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. by Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), I: *Specimen Days*, pp. 16, 183.

known' (I Corinthians 13.12). Paul is referring here to the meeting of God and human, in the trans-corporeal shift of the soul into the afterlife, in which human understandings of God, now seen 'darkly' will become clear. Whitman uses this same language to refer to the meeting between water and his speaker, positioning himself as the mystic figure in communion with the natural world who experiences this transcendental communion with nature, and thus imbuing the speaker with divine authority to speak such proclamations.

Using this divinely inspired language positions Whitman's speaker as a prophet of the natural world, who transcends the human inability of clear sight, and instead is able to 'see clearly' that which gives him authority to speak over future generations: 'A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them, | Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide' (ll. 18–19). Jimmie Killingsworth suggests that 'with the long lines of the verses suggesting a chest-expanding confidence full of spirit-breath, [Whitman] looks directly into the challenge of the ancient sign of mortality, the setting sun'.<sup>30</sup> Through positioning himself as the centre of this landscape, and challenging this mortality of days ending by speaking forwards into the future, Whitman steps out of the individual perception of reality into contact with the Universal Being.

The future passengers are also situated in relation to the speaker, as he addresses 'you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence' (l. 5), who 'are more to me, and more in my | meditations, than you might suppose' (ll. 5–6). The repetition of 'to me' throughout the first section of the poem, which builds this scene and the importance of the speaker, plainly makes these connections between self and water, self and others on board, and through the shared act of crossing this body of water the connection between past and future is also established. Whitman here characteristically assumes knowledge of those to come through this position as

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<sup>30</sup> Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Eco-poetics* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 128.



the prophet of the natural world, aggrandising the self as an omniscient, all-knowing eye to those who are more 'than [they] might suppose' to him.

Through this assertion and assumption of connection, Whitman nurtures the transcendental Universal Being, which both acknowledges the brevity of individual existence, 'myself disintegrated' (l. 7), but also widens the potential of this existence as part of a wider, continual whole, 'every one disintegrated yet part of| the scheme' (ll. 7–8). Through this shared experience and shared space of crossing, past and future generations step outside our linear understanding of time and can exist simultaneously in the speaker's imagination. Paul A. Orlov notes that:

The 'flood-tide below' that the poet sees 'face to face' in the opening line is not only the river, which will itself flow through the poem timelessly, but also time itself, the surface upon which the poem's quintessential 'crossing' takes place.<sup>31</sup>

This emphasises the importance of time through the poem, and the link between the flowing of water and of time, which move together through the poem as Whitman's speaker attempts to join himself to this continual flow onwards.

Killingsworth suggests that:

Rather than saying that the poem implies a transcendence of time, it might be better to call it a rejection of temporal limits or a denial of history. In this sense, the poem allows for the kind of spatially situated view of experience that modern environmentalists and nature mystics long for in their concepts of conservation and protection, a view of place elevated above the imposition of a transcendent concept of human progress that values development and human evolution over the sanctity of the land.<sup>32</sup>

Whitman uses the timeless, unmarked, ageless water as his source of authority to speak over future generations in the hope of applying these qualities to his own universal identity, connected to a wider, un-tethered whole. Whitman is unmoored from history and the 'concept of human progress' and instead utilises the space between land, upheld by this timeless water,

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<sup>31</sup> Paul A. Orlov, 'On Time and Form in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 2 (1984), 12–21 (p. 12).

<sup>32</sup> Killingsworth, p. 129.

to engage with a being outside our perception and understanding which will continue on and has existed long before humanity. The paradox of this mysticism is, however, that the mystic, or here Whitman's speaker, claims to speak of timelessness, of experiences and concepts which lie outside our mortal understandings of time, but must do so from his set point in time, situated in the physical constraints of the man on the ferry considering the future of this 'crossing'. Whitman attempts to translate this timelessness into a human framework of understanding and in doing so must detach himself from 'temporal limits' and instead work from within this watery identity.

This timelessness and the connection across the ages are introduced as, in section three, Whitman asserts that 'It avails not, time nor place — distance avails not, | I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence' (ll. 20–21). There follows a sequence of 'Just as you' statements which are answered with 'I was', which subvert the present tense of Whitman's speaker, and instead bring the present tense to these addressed future generations. While Whitman maintains control over his imagined future addressees, by prioritising their present above his own he moves towards an understanding of the Universal Being which expands out of his individual experience and instead takes the imagined future as the absolute truth.

This abstraction of the human from our perceptions of time is brought about by the contemplation of that around them:

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was  
hurried (ll. 22–25).

As both present and future gaze into the river (or are imagined so to do), their identities as part of the crowd become liquid, and expand out from the physical crowd to the spiritual crowd which spans generations and times as the 'swift current' bears them on out of stagnation and

stationary existence into the continual ebb tide and flow tide which moves through the poem. Through using this sequential form, which mirrors the syntactical parallelism of the creation account found in Genesis, Whitman mirrors the 'pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide' (l. 19), and so connects the continuity of the addressed generations with this eternally flowing water. Orlov notes that Whitman's use of past tense 'linked to his own distinct position as an "I", puts the poet in danger of losing his hold upon our sense of involvement, of failing to make our present and his own seem the same moment', which is a danger of such a self-aggrandised and egocentric voice.<sup>33</sup> However, for Orlov, this temporal shift between Whitman's present and our own as the poem develops means that:

We cease to be so conscious of the past and return to a focus upon what seem statements of present scenes. [This shift] simultaneously accomplish[es] the task of making Whitman's present and ours seem the same moment, and vivify[ing] our shared perceptions.<sup>34</sup>

Through this manipulation of time, Whitman seeks to enter into this universal identity which exists beyond his own timeframe and become one with our present moment, regardless of when that may be.

Through this assumption of universality and affinity with those to come, however, it could be argued that Whitman erases the possibility of difference of experience and identity, and assumes a certain importance of his own identity which must be preserved through this connection. In assuming and asserting that 'These and all else were to me the same as they are to you' (l. 49), Whitman uses the privilege of his race, gender, and class to assert his dominance over the future present, erasing all other experience of identity and place in an assumption that 'Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them' (l. 52). Whitman writes of and considers water as a transcendental wonder of the universe which reveals itself to him in order to further and expand this sense of self out past human understandings of time, place, and mortality into the eternal. Other experiences of water are

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<sup>33</sup> Orlov, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

vastly different: a locus of fear, used to displace people from their homeland, or as a desperate way out of persecution aboard a slave ship. This erasure of different experiences is of course not limited to Whitman or even to the three transcendentalist writers explored in this chapter. The cultural erasure of anything outside the white, male, relatively wealthy perception of identity and existence has defined literature and culture for centuries, and continues to do so.

This assumption that 'these and all else were to me the same as they are to you', seems also to erase the reality of water, which is constantly moving and reshaping the land through which it moves, never remaining 'the same' but always moving onwards and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> Instead of upholding the continual flow of the 'flood-tide' and 'ebb-tide' which run through the poem, Whitman through this assertion begins to stagnate the scene, moving away from the reality of an ever-changing, ever-evolving landscape which is governed by and wholly dependent upon water.

Despite this focus on the human connection outside time through water, and on the individual as part of this interconnected whole, Whitman also acknowledges the way in which this body is dependent upon water, and continues to use the framework of a mystic, transcendental experience with a higher power as he explores this concept. The speaker asserts that:

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,  
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,  
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body (ll.  
62–64).

Whitman notes here the shared human condition of being 'held in solution', as the continual ebb and flow of the river surrounds and permeates the musings of the poet and his construction or exploration of the self. Instead of relying entirely upon this continual flow of water on and through the body, however, Whitman characteristically maintains a constant state of self-governance as he asserts that 'I too had receiv'd identity by my body'.

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<sup>35</sup> Testament to this fact is shown in the building of Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, which made it impossible for the future Americans Whitman imagines to experience this same image with him from the ferry.

This connection and knowledge of a fluid self 'held in solution', which stretches on through the centuries, becomes an asset to his mystic identity as Whitman claims that 'I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born' (l. 88), echoing Psalm 139 in which the Psalmist says of God:

For thou has possessed my reins: thou has covered me in my mother's womb.

[...]

My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.

Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.  
(Psalm 139.13–16)

Whitman's speaker is unavoidably attached to and in constant dialogue with the water around him, which allows his connection with those of the future. The prepositions repeat the flowing sense of water continually connecting people and places and times to one another, such as: 'What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?| Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?' (ll. 96–97), where 'into' is repeated to emphasise the 'fusing' of 'ties' between people. Whitman figures himself as tied to the water through this fluid identity as part of a whole in order to escape his mortality and be 'with you', and yet retains his own autonomy through this reliance upon 'the body' to create and nurture his identity.

Graham, writing as an American poet after Whitman, offers similar ways of engaging with nature and humanity from this prophetic, mystic viewpoint, given authority by this transcendental experience to speak to something outside our perception or understanding. Her poem 'The Wake Off the Ferry' echoes Whitman's setting of being unmoored from solid land, physically dependent upon the water which upholds the human presence upon it. Graham's speaker is much less certain of her place within this setting, however, as the poem explores the difference

between water's continual 'rebecom[ing]' as it reforms to 'close| back up' after the ferry, and the broken human relationship which she gestures to aboard the ferry.<sup>36</sup>

Whitman's way of using the scene before him to explore the human story upon it, spanning across time, is characteristic of his Victorian-era mindset. Graham subverts this, however, as the human presence in the poem is pulled apart and complicated by the water's presence, and it becomes impossible to see which is driving the poem. The short lines with no punctuation cut the sense of phrases away from each other, pulling other words into contact to create connections which are not immediately obvious. Placing the end of 'never again| exactly the| same' (ll. 13–15) next to 'when I| love| | you' (ll. 15–17) exaggerates the distance between 'love' and 'you', and seems to translate the 'never again exactly the same' of water's reforming onto the brokenness and frailty of the human love which does not quite reach across the stanza break. This is then echoed:

you as you  
me never again  
are we (ll. 17–19)

This both cements the failure of relationship and splits 'you as you' and 'me' into two separate entities which no longer 'are we', as the beginning of the question 'are we the ones| we love' (ll. 19–20) also rounds off this breakdown of connection between the two characters. Through disrupting language in this way, Graham reflects water's absolute power over the humans on board the ferry whose attempts to understand or make sense of that which upholds them are continually overturned.

This clipped, brief structure also gives the poem a hesitancy which suggests guilt at the poetic trope of using the natural world as a canvas or symbol for human existence, as is and has often been done in poetry. Instead of asking this of the water, Graham instead interrupts the human relationship with water's presence which flows round the 'disturbance' (l. 6) to 'rebecome' at

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<sup>36</sup> Jorie Graham, 'The Wake Off the Ferry', in *Runaway* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020), p. 81, ll. 25, 23–24. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

the end. These two words, the longest in the poem, create a sense of something at work outside the hesitancy of the speaker, as if telling the story of the water outside our human qualifications and symbols. Through this 'rebecom[ing]', the sea becomes something other than a symbol of the relationship between the two humans in the poem, as they go from 'we' (l. 3) at the beginning of the poem to 'you' and 'I', but the water continues on as 'itself' (l. 26). Through this 'disturbance' of both the physical water by the ferry, which easily closes back up after the ferry has passed, and the human speaker who is disturbed by this water which continually challenges the sense and flow of speech, Graham notes the failure of using the sea as a symbol or tool of self-aggrandisement. Instead, Graham suggests that it stands outside our comprehension, as 'itself', referring to the sea, stands alone at the end of the poem, unconnected to the human attempt 'to see' (l. 22).

Graham acknowledges that water is continually becoming and reforming, as 'the| disturbance of| our having| gone' (ll. 5–8) is 'close[d] up| again but|| never again| exactly the| same' (ll. 11–15). Water's power to re-establish and reform itself transcends human perception in the poem:

[...] I look  
  
as far as I  
can see to see  
it close  
back up (ll. 20–24)

These lines are reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's last line 'I could not see to see —' in 'I heard a fly buzz — when I died —', which narrates the point at which death overcomes the senses and the speaker's perception of the room is suddenly beyond her reach.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in Graham's poem the speaker narrates how water goes on past the limits of her perception, which is complemented by the line breaks which continually disrupt speech. The echo chamber of the

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<sup>37</sup> Emily Dickinson, '465', in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1960), p. 224, l. 16.

repeated 'I' and 'see to see' suggests that this looking to see does not grant the speaker understanding of the water, which is reinforced by the title of the poem, as 'The Wake Off the Ferry' situates the human on the ferry and the wake as 'off', unmoored from our manmade constructions.

Although Graham's title is instantly evocative of Whitman's poem, and her subject similarly 'held in solution', instead of bringing the human into sharp focus, and using the water to facilitate a wider existence as part of a universal whole as Whitman does, Graham's poem questions this practice. The human presence is continually vague and unsure, broken up by the brevity of lines which reflect the small waves which 'rebecome' the sea as the ferry travels through it. Graham subverts Whitman's model of the water as something with which to engage with eternity and instead acknowledges her own fragility, poised above an entity which so easily 'rebecome[s]| itself', even in the 'wake' of 'disturbance' and human destruction.

Whitman's 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life' is an example of how he uses the scene before him as a symbol for the deeper human emotions and stories which are unfolded through this contemplation of the sea, but also acknowledges that the sea's vastness resists such treatment. As Huck Gutman aptly summarises, the poem 'is about fathers, the shore, the failure of poetry, personal inadequacy, and profound uncertainty', as Whitman projects his own existential dread onto the oceanic vastness before him.<sup>38</sup> The sea reacts with a physical, dangerous reminder of his relative insignificance and its power beyond his imagination of it as a symbol for his own emotions.

The conflict between the characteristic self-absorption of Whitman's earlier poems and the older, wiser realisation of nature's own autonomy in this one is clear from the beginning of the

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<sup>38</sup> Huck Gutman, 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life', in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. by J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), page numbers not given.



poem. Whitman creates a seascape, using the sounds of the ocean to evoke the shoreline upon which he walks:

As I walk'd where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok,  
Where they rustle up hoarse and sibilant,  
Where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways [...].<sup>39</sup>

In both content and sound the poem performs the ebb and flow of the sea, as Whitman's aqueous voice trickles down the page and the sibilance echoes the crashing of waves upon the shore. Christine Gerhardt suggests that 'the repeated "As I" of the first three lines emphasises the initial focus on the self-absorbed speaker, whose mystifying notion of ebbing "with the ocean of life" evokes sea and shore as external images of his own thoughts'.<sup>40</sup> The beginning of the poem assumes this traditional human centrality, as the reader's vision follows the speaker who is in control and dictates the movement of the poem, the 'electric self' (l. 7) who commands the reader's attention. As the description of the shore and its inhabitants continues, however, this certainty of self becomes less confident, and the 'hoarse and sibilant' voice of the ocean begins to take over the poem. Gerhardt suggests that 'the poet's self-absorption is punctuated by the place, by a force that "trails in the lines underfoot"' as Whitman's speaker begins to notice 'the details of the shore's rough materiality; and the sea becomes a central driving force [...] while the speaker does little more than react'.<sup>41</sup> As such, the poem performs the inevitable 'ebb' of the speaker into death, but also builds up a picture of the natural world's unshakeable power so that when the speaker submits himself to the waves and becomes one with the ocean, the 'flow' of life which he assures himself will return seems possible.

Jeffrey Yang suggests that 'Whitman viewed the sea as both cradle and grave', which is evident in the continual conflict in the poem between the speaker as an older man close to death, whose

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<sup>39</sup> Walt Whitman, 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life', in *The Works of Walt Whitman*, ed. by Stephen Matterson (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), p. 191, ll. 3–5. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>40</sup> Christine Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p. 126.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

life has begun to 'ebb' away, and a child, dependent on the 'fierce old mother' of the sea who 'endlessly cries for her castaways'.<sup>42</sup> This anthropomorphosis of the sea into a mother figure, albeit a wild, untameable one, underpins the poem and the existential contemplation therein, as Whitman considers both the 'cradle' and 'grave' before him and his place as an individual who is born, dies, and will be reborn through the endless cycles of this universality. Instead of a positive, affirming proclamation of futurity and connection between here and now and that to come, such as that in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', this poem is a more reserved, personal contemplation of the self and the oceanic vastness thereof, the 'real Me' which 'all my arrogant poems' (l. 28) cannot reach in the face of the ocean, whose depths are similarly intangible. The isolation and loss evoked by the realisation that 'I have not once had the least idea who or what I am' (l. 27) allows for this conflict between self and the power of nature to overwhelm the poem and its speaker, and leads to the ultimate submission of the self into the waves at the end of the poem.

Gerhardt explores the characterisation of the sea as first 'fierce old mother', and later the shore as 'my father' (l. 40), as she states that:

The speaker's conflict with his overpowering nature-parents suggests the struggles involved in recognizing not only nature's autonomy but also its possible dominance. On the one hand, the exuberant poet who is rebuked by nature because he 'was assuming so much' admits that he has 'not once had the least idea' about himself or 'the least thing' around him. On the other hand, the familial constellation implies the 'child's' resistance, his urge to overcome the parental constraints; even as the speaker shows remorse at his futile attempts to speak about nature he also feels 'oppressed' and in spite of his self-doubts he urges the sea 'deny not me'.<sup>43</sup>

Through this conflict between Whitman's self and the imagined 'mother' of the waves, one can see the maturity of Whitman's vision of nature materialise from a facilitator of his universality to an acknowledgement of its overwhelming vastness and 'dominance' over the individual human.

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<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey Yang, 'Introduction: Apologia for the Sea', in *The Sea is a Continual Miracle: Sea Poems and Other Writings by Walt Whitman*, ed. by Jeffrey Yang (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2017), pp. xvii–xxxvi (p. xxxv).

<sup>43</sup> Gerhardt, p. 127.

The sea strips away the certainty of the self and of human understanding or comprehension, as 'I wended the shores I know' (l. 2) turns later into 'As I wend to the shores I know not' (l. 18), and Whitman's speaker transcends his human form into the unknown through this communion with the sea.

Nature's power becomes militant towards the helpless speaker in the poem, as:

I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can,  
Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon me and sting me  
Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all. (ll. 32–34)

The natural world 'sting[s]' and 'take[s] advantage' of the speaker, as though reacting against the former assurance of self and assumption of human power over the natural world. Describing the sea as a 'mother' adds to the speaker's desperation, as though the emblem of a universal existence, the sea itself, denies responsibility over the speaker: 'Nature here in sight of the sea' persecutes him as reprimand for his past carelessness and assumptions. Gerhardt suggests that:

By providing nature not only with agency but also with authority, a subjecthood that resists control, Whitman imaginatively turns the sea and shore into subjects who strain against being conceptually grasped and thus contained.<sup>44</sup>

Though this walk along the shore is Whitman's canvas for the expression of the smallness of the self amidst the mystery of the universe, as he explores this cavernous expanse before him it becomes clear that the sea resists such symbolic use and thus becomes an object of fear as it asserts its power over the human. The shore is 'a dynamic place', according to Gerhardt, which 'momentarily de-emphasis[es] the speaker's physical and linguistic agency', allowing Whitman to develop an association with the sea which then evolves into the more modern ecocritical ways of understanding it.<sup>45</sup> By claiming the ocean as 'mother' and 'father', however, Whitman ties himself to the sea, asserting that 'You oceans both, I close with you' (l. 35) as a way to preserve himself within the universal as he surrenders himself to the power of the ocean.

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<sup>44</sup> Gerhardt, p. 128.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

There are echoes within the poem of this mystic character, as Whitman's speaker asserts that 'I [...] Was seiz'd by the spirit that trails underfoot, | The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the land of the globe' (ll. 6–9). Although the speaker acknowledges in the passive 'was seized' that the ocean and its alluring, unknowable vastness has control over the human interloper, there is a definite sense of being set apart, that the speaker has been chosen as a vessel for capturing and translating this transcendental experience of 'the sediment that stands for all the water and all the land of the globe' to the reader. Whitman's desolate self dissolves into the water around him, and with this takes up his mystic, Universal Being identity as part of all, nothing at all but also everything from within that nothingness, a prophet of the ocean as it speaks to the desperation of his own life ebbing away.

Through embracing his individual, human death, Whitman's speaker is set free into the endlessness of the ocean, assured by the cycles of ebb and flow which govern the natural world. 'Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return,)' (l. 51) he instructs himself, and the final stanza of the poem is delivered from beyond death, '(See, from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last [...])' (l. 59). This posthumous address performs Whitman's place as part of this Universal Soul, tied to the everlasting endlessness of nature, and exaggerates the relief in the release of his soul from its decaying human form into full communion with the ocean. Whitman uses the archaic literary term for the sea, 'ooze', to emphasise this union. The sea and Whitman's speaker are united into 'we', as he addresses 'You up there walking or sitting, | Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet' (ll. 70–71). Gerhardt suggests that 'Whitman succeeds in both imagining the impossible, namely, our becoming one with the world even as this implies a loss of self, and capturing the very impossibility of such a move as a viable speaking position'.<sup>46</sup> The fragmentary voice of the rest of the poem enables this conclusion, as the desperation, doubt, and resignation of the speaker to the ebbing away of life allow him to submit himself without reservation to the power of the waves before him. Gerhardt notes that:

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<sup>46</sup> Gerhardt, p. 129.

Instead of suggesting death as the inevitable end of human life which materially reconnects the body with the natural environment as it decomposes with the leaves around it, [Whitman] points to death as a present-poetic rather than narrative-possibility of being in nature. When the poet continues to speak after conjuring up his own decomposition, he does not leave it behind but carries its presence into the continuation of the poem and of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole. Death here is not a state at the end of a linear narrative, but a presence that connects the poet's body to the natural environment even as he seals his irrevocable distance from it in speaking the words that constitute his poem.<sup>47</sup>

Complicating our assumptions and expectations of linear, mortal time in this way, Whitman presents individual death as a way into full communion with the Universal Soul, and unwinds the desolate, uncertain narrator of the beginning of the poem. Instead of an inevitable end, death is pictured as a solution to human frailty, a way to connect 'I' to 'you', creating the everlasting 'we' which speaks on after the death of the individual. This trajectory of the poem also questions the self-aggrandisement of Whitman's other poems, as the submission of the self entirely into nature's motherly arms suggests an admission of his own sub-dominance to the ocean. Gerhardt suggests that 'at the cultural moment when modern environmentalism emerged, Whitman's figure of the dead poet articulating living speech embodies the necessity of an utterly humble, self-effacing' speaker who is aware of his own infancy next to the vast power of the ocean.<sup>48</sup> As the poem develops, therefore, Oelschlaeger's observation of 'a shift [...] from viewing wild nature as merely a valuable resource [...] an obstacle [...] toward a conception of wilderness as an end in its own right and an endangered species in need of preservation' becomes clear, as Whitman begins to understand his shift from assumed master of nature to his position as a supplicant who must surrender himself entirely to become part of the endless futurity of the ocean.

Graham's 'Ebbtide' again immediately evokes Whitman's poem through the title, and again uses this evocation to challenge our assumptions of the poem and of the established way of relating to the natural world. Graham's speaker records her observations as she walks along the shore,

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<sup>47</sup> Gerhardt, p. 129.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

noticing creatures and sand and interacting with both but not necessarily bringing these experiences into a wider understanding of herself or of a Universal Being. Instead, Graham focuses on the limits of human perception, and through this pared down, record-style narration, the poem comments on this traditional practice of assigning meaning to the natural world as a flawed way of interacting with it. Willard Spiegelman acknowledges this when he suggests that ‘in *Never*, it is the poet herself who wrestles not only with acts of perception but also with activities of control and the determination of destiny’.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the poem, this wrestling with ‘the act of perception’ is clear, as Graham’s speaker moves from one observation to the next, ceaselessly onwards towards the climax of the poem in which the ‘control and the determination of destiny’ seem to play out before her eyes. It is through this absolute focus on perception above comprehension or the symbolic function of what she observes that Graham’s speaker begins to question her own ‘determination of destiny’, as that which she has experienced and perceived becomes irrevocably past. Edward Byrne notes that this collection ‘particularly suggests new ways of viewing and understanding today’s natural world: Graham perceives the landscape with a sense of immediacy and urgency’, which is clear in ‘Ebbtide’ as the speaker builds up the pace of the poem towards the end, acknowledging the absence of futurity.<sup>50</sup>

Evoking Whitman’s mysticism, Graham begins with a similar positioning of the speaker:

I am a frequency, current flies through. One has  
to ride  
the spine.<sup>51</sup>

The poem begins as though in the same tone as Whitman’s proclamations of authority in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’, as a vessel through which the universal may speak. However, with the

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<sup>49</sup> Willard Spiegelman, ‘Review: Repetition and Singularity’, *The Kenyon Review*, 25 (2003), 149–168 (p. 168).

<sup>50</sup> Edward Byrne, ‘Review: Jorie Graham *Never*’, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, 5 (2004) <<https://www.valpo.edu/vpr/byrnereviewgraham.html>> [Accessed 7 February 2022].

<sup>51</sup> Jorie Graham, ‘Ebbtide’, in *Never* (New York: Ecco, 2002), p. 36, ll. 1–3. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

admission of passivity, 'current flies through', Graham's voice is more akin to the older voice of 'As I Ebb'd', which acknowledges the lack of human control in the face of such oceanic vastness. Using the anonymity of 'one', Graham suggests a departure from the aggrandisement of Whitman's speaker and suggests instead the existence of 'other| frequencies' (ll. 4–5) which exist alongside her but are not claimed as part of her. Through this, Graham suggests a communality of sorts, but these 'other[s]' are equally passive in their reception of the 'current' and neither the speaker nor these others have ultimate authority over this scene.

Instead of a single divinely inspired mystic given ultimate authority to speak these prophecies to present and future generations, Graham is more focussed on the act of perception, the limits of the individual in observing that which they ordinarily assume knowledge over. The identity as a 'frequency' rather than a prophet reinforces this, as it sets up the speaker as something through which energy moves or is transferred, but only at specific times and in certain places. These 'other| frequencies' to which she refers may have their own visions and prophecies, but these are not revealed to the speaker, who remains merely a vessel through which energy may pass.

This is also explored later in the poem, as Graham notes how 'I'm squatting so I hear| sand sucking water in' (ll. 53–54), which solidifies the notion that human perception is situational, dependent on where the eye is placed at any given time, and these sights and sounds are only available to the speaker because of her position at that precise moment. Graham's speaker must move along the shoreline to see these different realms of creatures and habitats, and may only observe and record them as they are revealed to her through this contortion of her body. The omniscience and omnipresence which gives Whitman's speaker his grandeur in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' is replaced by the paring down of humanity to its core parts in Graham's poem: the 'spine' which conducts energy for a time but will inevitably become 'the spine of the picked-clean story' (l. 83), as Graham foretells at the end of the poem. Graham's position as a mystic or prophet in the poem is necessarily brief, as she acknowledges at the end that 'One feels one has

in custody| what one cannot care for for long' (ll. 75–76). Through this admission, Graham marks the futurity of that which she perceives, whilst admitting the brevity of the human eye, which will die and become sightless, a reversal of Whitman's futurity of the self looking out over the ageless water in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'.

As Graham's poem unfolds, the 'I', this 'frequency', is made more and more contingent on the surrounding natural world, acknowledging that the perception of 'I' or the eye of the speaker is limited by the physicality of one human being wandering along the shore, as 'my| gaze can barely reach shore-break' (ll. 64–65) suggests a limit to this vision. The speaker explains that:

Making one's way one sees the changes.  
What took place before one  
looked. (ll. 10–12)

This positions the mystic self within the frame of an individual human who has knowledge only of an individual lifetime, and has no claim to a Universal Soul which brings knowledge of the past along with it.

Whitman's 'As I Ebb'd' addresses the 'ebb' of the individual towards death, but finds within this morose contemplation a way through to universality, as the sea is offered as a way to pluralise the self into the eternal 'we'. Graham's poem instead suggests an irrevocable decline of 'something' into nothing, as the speaker warns 'Something feels like it's not| coming back.' (ll. 35–36). The repetition of 'one' throughout the poem cements this isolation, as it emphasises the singularity of the speaker, alone and not tied to any certainty in the future. Writing as Graham does on the brink of climate collapse, as the oceans rise and become more unstable, the communion between sea and humanity which Whitman envisions seems thrown into doubt, alongside this confidence in future generations who might look out on the same scene.

The observation of the 'tubefish' at the beginning of the poem helps to solidify this isolation of the self and the speaker's underlying preoccupation with her inevitable death:

The single tubefish, dead, long as a snake, half-snout,



rolled over and over as the waves pick up, return, return  
less often, go away. For a while he is incandescent  
white, then blue, deep green, then white again, until he's  
left, half-turned,  
eyes sandy till one wave, come back  
this far as if in error, cleans him off. (ll. 16–22)

The tubefish is introduced as though a character of some significance, whose death, we assume, will provide the canvas for some proclamation of human emotion, a 'memento mori' which inspires the speaker to 'carpe diem'. This is almost tantalisingly offered as 'for a while he is incandescent' genders the fish and so brings him into contact with our human sensitivity, and the grandeur of 'incandescent' makes the reader anticipate some symbolic emphasis to come. The enjambment of 'incandescent| white, then blue' instantly rejects this expectation and instead continues to describe in a very factual, record-like manner the changing colours of the fish's corpse as it is moved by the natural fluctuations of the shore. The individual death presented here is merely another observable feature, as 'dead' begins the physical description of the fish alongside 'long as a snake, half-snout'. This unemotional observation makes it hard even to feel pity for the creature as it is thrown around by the waves, or 'left, half-turned' until a wave 'as if in error, cleans him off'. Even the motion of the waves is presented as random, a far cry from Whitman's 'fierce old mother' who 'endlessly cries for her castaways'. The dispassionate treatment of this dead fish, which is quickly left without resolution or contemplation as the poem moves on to another observation, sets the tone for the rest of the poem, which continues to record, in a factual manner, that which the speaker perceives along the shoreline. Byrne suggests that:

Conscious of the historical significance of time at the end of the twentieth century, and arriving at an increasing awareness of personal mortality, Jorie Graham's poetry in *Never* examines with a sense of urgency one woman's concern for the past century's natural and unnatural causes for erosion of the environment, as well as the present threats to a landscape she believes must be preserved and protected before it is too late,

and she peers forward toward the elevated level of danger she perceives the world faces ahead.<sup>52</sup>

As readers we may read significance into the scene of the dead fish being mercilessly pushed around and disfigured by the waves and the sand as a harbinger of our own destruction and the insignificance of our mortal bodies after death, this 'increasing awareness of personal mortality'. This significance is not offered by the poem or its speaker, however, who continues on past this sight towards her own similar future, 'the spine of the picked-clean story' without comment. This fragmentary way of observing the natural world around her reflects the 'erosion' which erases history and connection, and is itself a kind of time in the poem as this realisation that there will be a 'too late', that something will not return, makes the piecemeal, snapshot tone of the poem necessary.

Throughout the poem, this sense that 'something' is lost is reflected in the way that each observation of the items on the shoreline is presented as a fragment never pulled into a wider proclamation or sense of significance. The speaker addresses this at the beginning of the poem, with the contemplation 'How often and how hard are answerings' (l. 5), which is performed through the poem, as 'answerings' continue to evade the speaker and each observation merely surrenders itself to the next. The language of the poem is broken up as the poem continues as fragments of sentences replace full ones. The linear continuation of time follows this as things begin to merge into different times, such as 'two vultures feeding on a pelican. Later, claws and beak| float in the brack' (ll. 33–34). The two states of recent death and 'picked-clean', itemised 'claws and beak' are juxtaposed as though part of the same observed image. Time speeds up as the erosion of the landscape, the 'unnatural causes' of human destruction of the environment distort the land physically and temporally, and this sense of order and structure is lost forever.

This fragmentation in the poem suggests the breakdown of rules and order which humanity has come to expect of the natural world, or of our ways of imagining it. Attempting to use the

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<sup>52</sup> Byrne, 'Review: *Never*'.

natural world as a symbol for the human is revealed as inadequate, as the vague 'something' is widened into 'Too much is| asked. Nothing is coming back the way it was.' (ll. 76–77). The repeated phrase here, framed by the more urgent 'too much' and 'nothing' suggests the irrevocable change to the scene which looks towards the inevitable destruction of the natural world and the human along with it. Here at last is a kind of 'answering' in the poem, but instead of the hopeful tone of Whitman's poem, this answering is an admission that the fragmentation and loss of this 'something' is irrevocable.

This forward motion past that which the speaker observes without prolonged contemplation suggests an urgency in the poem which is condensed at the poem's end, as a series of short sentences cut off the last:

[...] This hand, this  
sugar-stalk. The cane-fields in the back of us,  
the length of tubefish back there too. And  
if I write my name. And how mist rounds the headland  
till the sea  
is gone. (ll. 67–72)

The speaker offers a kind of answering as the 'tubefish' reappears, and yet is referred to in a fragmented sentence which offers no new information or contemplation, but merely recalls the fish and the speaker's observation of it. The forward motion resists this 'answering' or conversation between past and present, and instead continues to build the pace through the poem. The human observation of that which exists on the shoreline is cut off as soon as the eye moves on, and Graham shows the limits of perception through this.

The significance of the individual human, the 'name' by which the speaker marks her identity, is left in a fragmented sentence, immediately eclipsed by 'mist' which creates the illusion that 'the sea| is gone'. Again, this limit of perception looks forward to the inevitable end of this scene, as the individuality of the speaker is lost amidst the sense of time running out. The autonomy and significance of this speaker is questioned through the poem, leading on from the opening claim

that 'I am a frequency'. As the speaker investigates the sand, she explores this fragility of individual existence:

I take a stick and run it through  
the corridor of wilderness.  
It fills a bit with water the first time. Is self-erased.  
The second time it does not fill. It leaves a  
mark where  
my stick ran. I make  
another (cursive) mark. How easily it bends to cursive, snakes towards  
thought. (ll. 55–61)

This human interaction with the sand may portray the transience of individual mortality alongside the lasting effects of humanity upon the natural world. The individual is 'self-erased', as their inevitable death leaves little mark upon the world. As this individual mark is repeated, however, something is 'not coming back': the alteration does not right itself, 'it does not fill. It leaves a | mark'. The sand is easily manipulated by 'thought' and 'cursive', as Graham suggests that human actions and approaches to the natural world, though they may seem individual, when joined together have a real bearing on the physical appearance of the shore.

The last line of the poem cements this irrevocable change and decay, as the speaker is transported, perhaps, into a future time, looking back on her own journey along the shoreline:

I can see through the trees,  
through the cane grove, palm grove, out far enough into  
the clearing where  
the spine of the picked-clean story shines. (ll. 80–83)

As in Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', Graham here condenses present and future into one perception, using her identity as a 'frequency' to elucidate this future scene which imprints itself onto the present. The poem ends on a positive note of perception, as the speaker can see 'far enough' to observe something of significance. However, this strength of perception is framed by the effort which it takes to see, and the barriers which impede this perception. Instead of the jubilant celebration of life and futurity which Whitman finds in such an identity, however, Graham's experience of this prophetic vision is of watching her own death, 'the spine of the

picked-clean story', which picks up the 'spine' at the beginning of the poem in a more deathly version here. Instead of a celebration of universality, Graham's vision of the future is one of erosion and decay, of destruction and the end of this limited human perception.

#### **V. 'And the place | was water'**

We have explored how Graham's sense of place and identity as an American poet has been shaped by the transcendental legacy and influence of such traditional nature writing, and also how she diverges from these traditions and writes out of the current context of destruction and fragmentation of the self towards a more eco-poetic consideration of existence. I will now consider the poetry of Lorine Niedecker, who provides what has come to be seen as an eco-poetic approach to the natural world in which she was situated and out of which she wrote her poetry (Niedecker herself predated eco-poetry by that name), rather than adopting the universal, transcendentalist voice. Niedecker wrote from within the constant flux and reclamation of nature, living alongside seasonal flooding and disruption of human life by natural occurrences in south Wisconsin.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes 'three very specific poetic traditions (folk, surrealist, and objectivist)' in which Niedecker wrote 'as a political radical, a person making a left critique of American culture and society'.<sup>53</sup> DuPlessis draws attention to 'the resistances Niedecker makes in her poetry', which 'involve her critical discomfort with gender norms, class assumptions, and Americanist ideology as she lives out her intense marginality to a dominant culture of materialism, bellicosity, bigness/bestness, and fame as it developed in the post-war period' (p. 97). DuPlessis groups Niedecker with the 'virtually invisible' Objectivist cohort which 'do not participate in the current period style' (p. 98), and 'were making a radical political critique of

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<sup>53</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre, and Resistances', *The Kenyon Review*, 14.2 (1992), 96–116 (p. 97). All further references to this work are to this edition.

Modernism just as it was coming into cultural hegemony' (p. 98). Niedecker's move away from Modernism just as it reached its peak exemplifies her desire to express her water-filled life as it was, in a form and style which best suited and expressed that which it sought to represent. This way of privileging the natural world in poetry, and manipulating language to best represent it rather than the other way around, is echoed in Graham's work. The long, wave-like lines which make Graham's *Sea Change* poetry so distinctive reflect the water that flows through it; the blockish, prose-style poetry of *Fast*, punctuated with arrows, moves towards the desperate urgency of the climate crisis; and the short, cut-off lines of earlier poetry (such as 'Reading Plato') also privilege the organisation of the natural world over our own understandings and expectations of language.

Niedecker's poetry has a clear sense of the power of water, and presents the absence of human control over this, writing as she did from life formed on flood plains and continually reformed through seasonal flooding. As such, Niedecker is an example of a poet aware both of her American identity but also her dependency on water which shapes and defines her life and poetry, a link between the transcendental consideration of nature and Graham's eco-poetic voice(s) in a time of fractured identity.

In 'Paeon to Place', Niedecker acknowledges our conceptions of place as arbitrary descriptors of parts of nature which are continually flowing through and into one another. The poem's exact moment of beginning is deliberately ambiguous, as the unexplained 'And the place| was water' stands as a kind of epigraph, but is not cited as such.<sup>54</sup> The 'in media res' opening acknowledges water's continual flux which does not begin when we seek to define it, but is always already happening and changing around us. Niedecker herself summarises these ideas in a letter to Gail Roub in 1967, in which she stated that 'early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and

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<sup>54</sup> Lorine Niedecker, 'Paeon to Place', in *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders: An Anthology*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1993), p. 63, ll. 1–2. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

said, “I am what I am because of all this — I am what is around me — those woods have made me”.<sup>55</sup> This notion of ‘I am what is around me’ suggests a shift of the self out of the centre of perception, in acknowledgement of the vastness and dependency of humanity on the natural world. Instead of Thoreau’s notion of making a dwelling in the woods in order to become part of the natural world, Niedecker acknowledges that ‘those woods have made me’, and sees the dependence of humanity upon nature not as a resource but as an inextricable part of us as we are a part of it.

This sentiment pervades Niedecker’s work, tied to the flood-plain land but unswervingly aware that her place on water, and water itself, is not fixed. The perpetual awareness of nature and particularly water’s ability to permeate a human dwelling or community and reclaim the land makes Niedecker’s work different from that of the transcendentalists, who chose to inhabit nature in order to seek its beauty but also sought to retain some mastery over it. Niedecker’s poetry is more aligned with Graham’s sense in ‘Recovered from the Storm’ that nature is not a perfect whole but instead an unknowable vastness of power and indomitable force by which we live but over which we have no control.

Niedecker’s work is often characterised by identifying labels of class and gender, and ‘Paeon to Place’ is aware of this, as she notes how her father:

[...] seined for carp to be sold  
that their daughter  
might go high

on land  
to learn (ll. 21–25).

Instead of being confined to local significance only by the description of her as a regional poet, however, Niedecker presents universal truths and experiences out of her close relationship to the region in which she lived. Michael Davidson explains that ‘her impatience at being called a

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘Lorine Niedecker’s “Paeon to Place” and its Fusion Poetics’, *Contemporary Literature*, 46 (2005), 393–421 (p. 393).

regional poet is understandable, given the term's association with minor genres and (often gendered) provinciality', and instead, he asserts that 'Niedecker lived (as she admitted) on the periphery of the literary world and used that vantage to observe what others took to be the centre'.<sup>56</sup> Instead of playing into the traditions of classed, gendered poetry, in which she was 'consigned to a pastoral limbo from which she was unable to escape her role as "bumpkin-savant"', Niedecker uses this partial abstraction from the literary world to subvert the expectations of the human relationship with nature.<sup>57</sup> Her dependence on her environment is made clear to her by her upbringing in a harsh environment, and this is reflected in her poetry as the sublime beauty of nature is answered by the hard labour of creating and sustaining an existence on such an unforgiving and ever-changing landscape.

Niedecker urges herself to 'throw *things* | to the flood' (ll. 181–182), casting off these material markers of place and ownership of land to truly exist as part of water which 'flood[s]' through these artificial boundaries. Davidson remarks that this ability is 'a product of a specific social background whose class stratification takes on geological features'.<sup>58</sup> Akin to the farmer who is overlooked in pastoral poetry, who works on and sweats into the land, Niedecker's poetry is free of the elevation of traditional nature poetry, which abstracts itself and 'look[s] down' upon the natural world. Niedecker presents a life and body of poetry which is wholly surrendered to the ebb and flow of water, and deeply aware of her own insignificance and fragility in relation to water's undeniable power.

The poem's form reflects the meandering of water, as the content trickles through the lines which physically flow down the page, a characteristic shared by much of Graham's later work. Again, this foregrounds the power of water over human comprehension, as the image of water is

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Davidson, 'Life by Water: Lorine Niedecker and Critical Regionalism', in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. by Elizabeth Willis (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2008), pp. 3–20 (pp. 3–4).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.



created even before the poem is read. This is coupled with the fricative words used, 'Fish| fowl| flood' (ll. 3–5), which suggest the sound of moving water.

These lines 'Fish| fowl| flood' allude to W. B. Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium', in which 'Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long| Whatever is begotten, born, and dies'.<sup>59</sup> The end of Yeats' poem reads 'Once out of nature I shall never take| My bodily form from any natural thing'.<sup>60</sup> Niedecker's poem argues that there is no 'out of nature' and no way to abstract 'my bodily form' from the 'natural thing', as her life and work were continually submerged in this watery dwelling, dependent upon the water around her for life and always at its mercy. Instead of looking forwards to a time of domination, self-actualisation, and autonomy, Niedecker looks back to her formation within nature:

I grew in green  
slide and slant  
of shore and shade (ll. 93–95).

Yeats' poem seeks the transcendental and the sublime, and in contrast Niedecker stays close to the earth and builds her identity from the sounds around her, the 'slide and slant' of the water as it moves through the landscape and the lives of those around it. This building of identity through relation and closeness to water is clear as she describes 'you with sea water running| in your veins sit down in water' (ll. 173–174), and echoes Emerson's claim in 'all one in the end —| water' (ll. 186–187). Instead of reaching this utopian, perfect whole through human endeavour or a controlled interaction with nature, however, Niedecker observes how water shapes us into this whole by its continual movement. The 'sea water' which runs through our veins allows us to reach this point of cohesiveness, and not the decisive, male relation to nature which seeks to retain autonomy over the self. The human presence in Niedecker's poem is:

[...] born  
in swale and swamp and sworn  
to water (ll. 10–12).

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<sup>59</sup> William Butler Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', in *Yeats: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Alexander Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 104, ll. 5–6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 25–26.

There are no pretensions to the autonomy of self or self-reliance often found in older American writing, but instead a dependence upon the power of water.

Davidson notes how Niedecker's 'most common metaphor for the linkage of place and person is "floating", a term that describes the unstable character of material conditions and reflective positions taken toward those conditions'.<sup>61</sup> It is clear throughout the poem that Niedecker's relation to place is very much aware of the 'floating' nature of humanity on the continual shift and regeneration of water. Whilst this descriptor suggests the state of being unmoored, it also brings with it the sense of being upheld and sustained by the water around her. Mary Pinard observes that:

Her [Niedecker's] lifelong landscape was a narrow flood plain. The nearly constant presence in her life of flooding — whether anticipated, occurring, or remembered — created a complex and ever-changing landscape, or perhaps more precisely, a *waterscape*, which required imagination, time, and physical labour to maintain.<sup>62</sup>

This 'waterscape', and the required labour needed to survive and live on it is clear as Niedecker's father 'netted | loneliness' (ll. 76–77), and:

Effort lay in us  
before religions  
at pond bottom (ll. 148–150).

This relation to the natural world which relies on acknowledging the indisputable might of water alongside human 'effort' is somehow inherent in this community, predating 'religions', and as part of them as humanity's 'pond bottom' evolutionary ancestors. Echoes of Thoreau's 'water privileges' which 'grind such grist as I carry to them' remain here, and yet Niedecker is constantly aware of her dependence upon this 'narrow flood plain', the 'waterscape' and the *communal* labour required to maintain such a life rather than her individual right or importance within this landscape.

Unlike Graham's devastation after the storm, Niedecker observes:

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<sup>61</sup> Davidson, pp. 5–6.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Pinard, 'Niedecker's Grammar of Flooding', in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. by Elizabeth Willis (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2008), pp. 21–30 (p. 21).

she

who knew how to clean up  
after floods (ll. 156–158).

Instead of perpetuating constructions of place through retelling history, and building up human identity around an arbitrary place boundary, Niedecker's community use their 'imagination, time, and physical labour' to define themselves through and out of the water around them, not as masters over it but dwellers 'floating' on its surface.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains that 'this is a poem of praise, thanksgiving for one's material and spiritual vulnerability', and this celebration of vulnerability is undeniable through the poem, as 'Water endows us| with buckled floors' (ll. 160–161).<sup>63</sup> The 'verbal proposal of opposites' which DuPlessis observes resonates with this way of living in and as part of water, 'floating' on it and submitting to its power over humanity.<sup>64</sup> The way that water 'endows' the human presence with 'buckled floors', which would commonly be considered a negative consequence of flooding, captures this 'proposal of opposites', which DuPlessis suggests 'makes the poem both able to absorb conflictual feeling and to be somewhat unresolved, resting unprecipitated or posed between the alternatives'.<sup>65</sup> This is clear from the beginning, as Niedecker states that 'the place', a singular descriptor, 'was water' (ll. 1–2), a past tense existence, while the rest of the poem upholds this reality of water as a constantly shifting presence which has no concept of fixed place. The 'unresolved' resting between alternatives is a departure from older American writing, which holds with it a sense of decisive autonomy, a surety of place and human (male) power within that place. Niedecker, in a more ecocritically aware context, writes instead from this ambiguity and uncertainty, producing a celebration of water which is unpredictable and indomitable. DuPlessis considers the tradition of 'paean' as a celebration which lifts things or

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<sup>63</sup> DuPlessis, 'Lorine Niedecker's "Paean to Place" and its Fusion Poetics', p. 405.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

situations “up” into transcendence’, and how Niedecker’s poem offers a challenge to this tradition.<sup>66</sup> DuPlessis argues that:

‘all things move toward| the light’, she says, in an encapsulation of Darwinian evolution up from mud and slime [...] with a notable, large exception: ‘All things move toward| the light| except those| that freely work down[...]’. Those things and people that ‘work down’ to mud, to water, to the bottom, to the ‘sloughs and sluices’, include Niedecker’s speaker herself. Thus sinking and praising are deliberately linked as a choice of free will.<sup>67</sup>

The transcendentalist sublimity found by being in nature is absent from Niedecker’s poetry, replaced by an honest, realistic account of life on water in which the human is subject to water’s power:

River rising — flood  
Now melt and leave home  
Return — broom wet  
naturally wet (ll. 147–150).

Niedecker prioritises the river’s movements and describes the human consequence and movement around these ‘rising’ tides. Instead of presenting a tameable wild in which humanity chooses to embed themselves, Niedecker’s poetry is working downwards, towards the ‘sloughs and sluices’ (l. 204), ‘sinking and praising’ as she goes, as being part of the flood plain necessarily links humanity and nature in an inextricable bond.

Buell suggests a gendered aspect to this relation to nature, as he states that ‘American men have historically written somewhat differently about nature than have American women’.<sup>68</sup> Buell points out that historically, American male representations of nature:

[...] contain misogynist and racist elements (such as the disparagement of settlement culture as feminine, the euphemization of slavery in nostalgic plantation and frontiersman tales, the manipulation of romantic scenery in the service of a gospel of expansionism).<sup>69</sup>

Whilst this ‘gospel of expansionism’ is by no means true of all past American male literature, nor contained merely to literature written by men, this is in part supported by the literature

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<sup>66</sup> DuPlessis, ‘Lorine Niedecker’s “Paeon to Place” and its Fusion Poetics’, p. 405.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 405–406.

<sup>68</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

surrounding colonisation and that which came after it. The nation-building mindset was founded on the belief of white male supremacy, that any white man could find a place for himself within this 'New World' (regardless of whichever non-white inhabitants were already there), a place which he deserved to own and make his property, which he would then defend and populate. The 'manipulation' of the natural world, most often characterised as female, brings with it these hierarchies of human existence as the white man viewed himself above the indigenous peoples, feminised nature, and women, and consequently as master over all three.

Niedecker challenges these gender assumptions and perceptions of land and the place labels which we assign to them. DuPlessis notes how:

De Beauvoir considered that women were generally mired in what she termed immanence (the material world), while men, in contrast, could more directly experience transcendence; she urges women to make the existential leap into choice and deliberate life that allows for their transcendence, too. This involves a rejection of any aspect of female life (like pregnancy) that, for de Beauvoir, keeps women mired. A more dated, though fervent, formulation is hard to imagine; women were to transcend the ideological binary in gender that they faced by identifying more fully with the side of upward mobility and power, not by changing the conditions of the female side or by valuing those terms. This taxing, fascinating ideology of female nontranscendence, part of general cultural assumptions, is addressed in various ways by woman writers [...]. In Niedecker's case, such a manner of thinking stirs her to a situated anti-sublime, a female and classed affirmation. De Beauvoir rejected women who could not make the existential choice of transcendence. Niedecker asserts a materialist picture of care, balance, and dynamic tensions, in a both/both strategy that might be characterized as a materialist sublime.<sup>70</sup>

Instead of the female 'upward mobility and power' which de Beauvoir calls women towards, Niedecker's female narrator works down into the mud, 'to ocean's black depths' (l. 144) in order to explore 'the unknown' (l. 146). Instead of attempting the American, largely male, dominating attitude towards nature seen in early American literature and to some extent also present in transcendentalist literature, Niedecker presents the realities of the 'effort' of living within nature, and her complete surrender to the ineffable power of water around her, with no claim to a 'perfect whole'. Neimanis notes that 'a posthuman feminism reminds us that the waters that

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<sup>70</sup> DuPlessis, 'Lorine Niedecker's "Paeon to Place" and its Fusion Poetics', p. 411.

we comprise are both intensely local and wildly global: I am here, and now, and at least three billion years old, and already becoming something else' (p. 39). Niedecker's continual immersion within water brings with it this coexistence of opposites — the transitory nature of the water which defines us as present, unfathomably ancient, but also already 'becoming something else', and the tension between local and global existence which this brings with it. Being immersed in and sustained by such opposites which resist our notions of fixed place resists the 'association with minor genres and (often gendered) provinciality', as Niedecker's focus is necessarily widened by her dependence upon global water.

Niedecker casts off material ways of identifying the self in favour of this relation to nature as the foundation of her identity. There is a distinct sense of the 'anti-sublime' in descriptions of 'slime | song' (ll. 91–92), 'mud' (l. 6), 'swale', and 'swamp' which emphasise this closeness to nature and a life built around and upon it. The place labels used adhere to Thoreau's rejection of nature in human terms, and instead 'Mud Lake' is named after the earth which surrounds the water, rather than any human claim to its ownership. Instead of looking up, as Thoreau does, to the 'sky water' in order to define a place, Niedecker looks down into this 'Mud Lake', grounding herself in the reality of her surroundings. Whilst the poem's title acknowledges the human concept of 'place', that which is celebrated through the poem is not a specific, named, and bounded place, but one continually moving with the water, and the ability of such communities to inhabit this state of movement alongside water.

The transcendentalist, universal speaker of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman — one voice claiming to define the human appreciation of nature — is replaced by Niedecker's specific, intentional speaker who inhabits her place, gender, and class in order to portray the reality of this existence. Instead of escaping from the city out into the 'tonic of wildness', Niedecker presents a life forged on this wildness, which does not romanticise the natural world around it but instead learns how to live there through centuries of living communally with nature and with

others. As such, Niedecker's is a political environmental poetry which refuses to ignore 'the red-cloaked clown' who is overlooked in transcendentalist literature, instead writing from a different perspective, inhabiting the female, working-class voice shaped by that which she writes about.

Niedecker uses the ostensibly autobiographical 'I' throughout the poem to consider her own relation to the place in which she dwells in a wider, global context of humanity's relationship with the world around us. Graham also uses this biographical speaker in many of her poems, but as the focus of her work shifts largely to a consideration of the climate catastrophe, this assertion of a whole self becomes less and less certain. The speaker of Graham's later work begins to address the ambiguous and potentially plural 'you', implicating her reader in the destruction of the world around the speaker, as our relation to place on a global scale is impacted by the shrinking of inhabitable land. The 'I' of Graham's earlier poems is sometimes abstracted altogether in her later work, or used to inhabit the perspective of the non-human, which develops the ecocritical acknowledgement of the interlinking of humanity and the natural world. This shift away from an assured 'I' also emphasises the slipping away of this whole, autonomous self alongside its certainty of place and belonging in the wake of such a global crisis which threatens the continued existence of both self and place. The lyric self, traditionally assumed as a vantage point from which to contemplate nature, is deconstructed in Graham's poetry as the realisation of our connection with nature means that there is no way to abstract the self from what it observes, and the destruction of the natural world implicates the human too.

One such example of this is 'From the Transience', in which Graham explores how 'I' and 'you' become unstable concepts and ever-more-fragile ways to assert a sense of place or reality in such an apocalyptic 'necroscape'.<sup>71</sup> With the deterioration of such seemingly stable concepts comes the unravelling of our perceptions of time and even humanity, as the end of the poem

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<sup>71</sup> Jorie Graham, 'From the Transience', in *Runaway* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020), p. 23, l. 43. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

reveals the speaker as a 'machine', looking back on the naivety of past human consciousness which assumed mastery over nature and so contributed to the 'necroscape' which she now inhabits. Instead of the assured sense of self presented by transcendentalist literature, which immerses itself in the natural world in order to better understand 'all' from 'each', Graham's narrator presents this relationship between humanity and nature from a fragmented sense of self, acknowledging the damaging impact of asserting such fallacies of a 'perfect whole' in a rapidly disappearing world.

The shrinking of the inhabitable land around the speaker brings with it the abstraction of 'I' from the self, as Graham's speaker struggles to hold on to a whole sense of reality when everything around her is unstable and dying. The poem begins as though in the middle of a conversation, 'May I help you. No. In the mirror? No.' (l. 1), which seems to establish two voices, but it remains deliberately ambiguous as to whether this is a conversation between two different people or between facets of the self trying to make sense of this transient, post-human existence. The different voices are forced together later in the poem: 'you/me. Our boundaries now in the epic see-through, how they elude | wholeness, let in illusion, pastness' (ll. 5–6), which asserts that the distinction between 'you' and 'me' is now arbitrary. The 'boundaries' of selfhood are seemingly washed away in the 'now', as history is referred to as 'pastness', a near-word which suggests that the past is in some way ineffable or so alien that it resists known language. Graham here presents a more extreme version of Niedecker's complete reliance upon place to form identity, as the 'you/me. Our' of the poem is forged through and dependent upon the 'necroscape' before them. Graham's context of a climate breakdown forces this fragmentation of place and self along with it, as she acknowledges the impact of human actions on the natural world and the interconnection between us.

The reason for the blurring of 'you/me' is hinted at as the narrator observes the shrinking of place around her: 'Look there is desert where there was grassland' (l. 3). The absence of water in



the poem is marked, as 'dust and ash' (l. 44) replace the fertile 'grassland' which we need to survive. This observation stands as though in answer to a history of perceiving 'nature as a resource', as the fertile grassland shrinks to desert and at the end, 'Even as a machine I recall| the dust and ash which everyone assured everyone else was just a small digression' (ll. 43–44). The speaker reveals herself as part of a post-human reality, reflecting on this individualistic existence, the assurance of 'just a small digression', which leads to the extinction of humanity. Graham's ecological focus is again clear, as the desertification of the land around us is reflected in the 'see-through' self or disjointed collection of parts of self, which 'elude| wholeness, let in illusion'. The deterioration of the natural world into a landscape of death, 'dust', and 'ash' brings with it the destruction of the self and of our supposedly stable concepts and ways to understand reality. Instead of Niedecker's water which floods through and sustains the communities built around it, Graham presents the 'dust and ash' which now permeate the speaker and all of humanity, similarly overwhelming and defining the human within it.

The speaker attempts to cling to language as a way to salvage control over reality, which remains futile:

No you say, no world, swamp, reeds, grassy shapes,  
beginning of endings, no you say staring right back at event— it keeps

turning—no that will not be the shape I am/it is/ again—it just *was*— the *shape* it was  
was never the shape it was—sharpness is melding into blur—used to be the sublime—  
used to be present tense—seat of the now-dissolved *now*. (ll. 7–11)

'You' repeats 'no' so much that it loses meaning, and the 'blur' of the 'now-dissolved' is unhindered by this human denial. The undefined 'you' attempts to reassert control over the 'now-dissolved' by calling out our names for aspects of physical place: 'world, swamp, reeds, grassy shapes'. This list begins in the general, 'world', and then zooms in to the local, 'swamp, reeds', as though attempting to contextualise what is in front of her in relation to the rest of the world. The 'grassy shapes' seem to un-focus this attempt at clarity, however, and instead acknowledge the futility of attempting to speak 'sharpness' onto a 'blur'. The construction of

language as a representation of reality also begins to deteriorate, as ‘no you say staring right back at event—it keeps|| turning’ resists grammatical sense, and ‘it’ continues past our assertion of ‘no’.

Our assertions of place are presented through the ambiguous ‘shape’, but nature does not acknowledge our names for it, as ‘the *shape* it was| was never the shape it was’. As the collapse of nature ‘keeps|| turning’ despite our futile intervention through language, the speaker begins to realise that our names for things and our perceptions of place, our arbitrary boundaries and ideas of stability, are useless attempts to prop up a ‘now-dissolved *now*’. The past tense of ‘dissolved’ confirms this, and the italicisation of ‘*now*’ suggests an alien quality to our perception of time alongside everything else. In contrast to Niedecker’s narrator, who has adapted her life to live on the flood-plains and within nature as it flows through and around her sense of place, Graham presents a future ‘from the transience’ in which nothing is stable, and humanity cannot live alongside or within nature because our apathy towards the climate catastrophe has shrunk this possibility into a ‘necroscape’.

The destruction of place leads to the further deterioration of the self: ‘My self, my one *one-| self* isn’t working for me’ (ll. 11–12). The italicisation of certain words throughout the poem loads these terms with Otherness, as the speaker attempts to define or understand them, but inevitably fails to do so. The line split between ‘*one*’ and ‘*self*’ confirms the alienation of the self from consciousness, and referring to ‘oneself’ rather than ‘myself’ cements this fragmentation. The double meaning of ‘isn’t working for me’, which could mean that the self is no longer suited to the narrator, or that it has passed out of her control, and is now ‘working’ for someone or something else, adds to the ambiguity of the poem, increasing the level of doubt and uncertainty brought about by the destruction of the natural world. This concept of the reduction of autonomy is repeated at the end of the poem, as the narrator says:

[...] Dear fission,

my self isn't working for me. It's involved with arithmetic. It's trying to correct itself so  
that  
it fits, to slice itself, dismember, un-remember, cut off, sew on, recall until it can be

counted on, or in, or up, or down. It says some right fit must be found— restored resolved  
bought-up doomed-to—it must be worn more artlessly the new thing they will call  
the self (ll. 34–39).

Addressing this realisation to 'fission', the division of something into parts, acknowledges the splitting of self, as the physical space between 'my' and 'self' also suggests. The speaker attempts to call forth parts of the self to bring them back to a whole being, as she attempted to do with nature earlier in the poem, but this act of language remains futile. The plethora of definitions of this measurement of the self, which is 'trying to correct itself so that | it fits, to slice itself, dismember, un-remember, cut off, sew on, recall' ironically reduces meaning, and is so long that it does not 'fit' into the line. Attempts to 'correct' the self are undone as soon as they are articulated, as 'slice' is answered by 'sew on', 'un-remember' by 'recall'. The desperate attempt to name the self into being leads only to more fragmentation, as the self is confused as to its goal: 'until it can be | | counted on, or in, or up, or down'. The speaker even tries to expand the self out into the future, 'the new thing they will call | the self—', but this merely leaves 'the self' even more disconnected from the 'now-dissolved *now*'. Earlier in the poem, we are told that the self, the amalgamation of 'you/me', 'elude[s] | wholeness', and so this attempt to recreate or fit the self into something controllable and whole is doomed from the beginning. The already disconnected 'my self' becomes the detached 'the self', as consciousness is abstracted into the theoretical since we can no longer understand ourselves as whole and individual in the wake of such destruction. As the inhabitable world turns to 'dust' and 'ash', our perceptions of place and our relationship to the land upon which we build our concepts of self are disrupted, and the poem captures the deterioration of the human into shards of consciousness, the 'machine' which must now adapt to the 'necroscape' which replaces nature.

The very concept of claiming an 'I' from the wreckage is called into question earlier in the poem, as 'I flaps its empty sleeves' (l. 12) suggests that this self-definition no longer holds any importance in such a shrinking world. Again, the italicisation of 'I' alienates it from the rest of the sentence, and questions the validity of this self-expression as a lens through which to consider reality. This inability to express the self blurs with the animal, as our concepts of reality are dissolved and reshaped:

[...] I

dreams of being a girl, a man, of wearing hooves, of being just sweat and whinnying,  
I smears itself with hope fear disorder opinion (ll. 13–15).

The 'boundaries' between 'you/me', which were questioned at the beginning of the poem, are widened even further, as 'girl', 'man', 'wearing hooves', 'sweat', and 'whinnying' are all potential aspects of the self which continue to 'elude | wholeness', to cast off our perceptions of what it means to exist in such a world. Again, our constructed concepts of reality are elided into meaninglessness, as 'hope fear disorder opinion' are not separated by punctuation or explanation, but merely pushed together as if trying to fill the hole out of which the self is leaking.

The concept of place is challenged as the speaker again begins a conversation with the ambiguous 'you':

[...] ....May I touch the place that is you. No.  
would you have had a place once. Yes. Is there a present tense now. No. What is  
there? *Touch it*. This place where we share this mind. It will be our first and our last.  
Our first and last *what?* Our first and last (ll. 21–24).

The almost robotic answers confirm the deterioration of the human into the machine at the end of the poem, but Graham here acknowledges the idea that the sense of self is linked to the sense of place as she tries to 'touch the place that is you [...] this place where we share this mind'. The fragmentation of the self is realised further, as we learn that there is no longer 'a present tense' in which the self can have 'a place'. The denial of the request to 'touch the place

that is you' reinforces the reality of the destruction of both the world around us and the sense of self which is so reliant upon the natural world.

This part of the poem answers Graham's poem 'Self Portrait: May I Touch You', in her previous collection *Fast*, which continually poses this question, adding in different aspects of 'you', the constructions of self which we attribute to existence:

May I touch your  
name. Your  
capital.<sup>72</sup>

Later she asks 'can I touch your apparition, your attitude, | multitude' (ll. 25–26). Physical touch, entering into a space which is 'yours', whether by possessing a 'name' or an 'attitude', is suggested as a way to confirm and embody existence, to clarify and contextualise the individual in relation to the Other. However, through 'Self Portrait', the 'you' that the speaker wishes to touch remains ethereal: a name cannot be touched, nor an attitude. This intangible form of selfhood is explored through the poem:

[...] may I touch it—your phantom, your place-  
holder, undelivered, always in the birth canal, undiscovered— your personal claim on  
the future (ll. 31–33).

The individual's 'personal claim on | the future' is presented as insubstantial, coming after this unmaking of self, 'undelivered' into physical existence from the 'birth canal', 'undiscovered'. Graham asserts that there is no 'personal claim' to the 'future', because the future is not certain.

There is no answer to this recurring question in 'Self Portrait', perhaps because it is merely an echo-chamber of 'self', a 'self portrait' of doubt, attempting to materialise itself and being unable to claim an embodied 'future' from the ghostly 'phantom' of existence. In 'From the Transience', however, this same question is posed and immediately answered: 'May I touch the place that is you. No', suggesting that as the climate catastrophe unfolds, these ideas of place and identity which we construct become less and less viable.

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<sup>72</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Self Portrait: May I Touch You', in *Fast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 48, ll. 1–3. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

'From the Transience' also answers 'Ashes', the first poem in *Fast*. In 'Ashes', the seeds of this 'necroscape' are sown: 'everything transitioning—unfolding—emptying' and 'I think| I am falling. I remember the earth' begins to unravel our fixed sense of place and the human within it.<sup>73</sup> In this earlier poem, Graham's speaker attempts to form her identity from her immersion in the natural world, as she 'Asked the plants to give me my small identity' (l. 1). The stream-of-consciousness structure of the poem and the instability of 'I' throughout suggest that this quest for identity remains unfulfilled, as 'Loam sits| quietly, beneath me, waiting to make of us what it can' (ll. 7–8). Traditional nature poetry assumes the benevolence of nature which exists to sustain life, both natural and human, and even the reliance upon it to 'give me my small identity' assumes that nature exists to aid self-definition, but these assumptions are thrown off, and instead nature awaits the death of the human, 'to make of us what it can'. 'From the Transience' is written from this post-human reality, where there is no longer any nature from which to claim 'my small identity', and so the human consciousness continues to deteriorate. We are assured towards the end of 'Ashes' that 'A universe *can* die' (l. 20), a premonition which is answered in 'From the Transience' as the voice of the machine speaks from the dusty waste land of the 'necroscape'.

Graham's poetry continually explores our human sense of place, the arbitrary boundaries which we attempt to assert both around ourselves and upon the natural world, and disassembles these through the continued failure of the self to claim an 'I' from the 'ashes'. Instead of the transcendentalist assertion of autonomy, Graham presents fragmented pieces of uncertain selfhood which attempt to fit themselves back into a whole, but remain apart because of the destruction of the natural world.

Thoreau asserts that 'the life in us is like the water in the river' (p. 215), which is a step closer to what we may now term the ecocritical consideration of water as part of and inextricably linked

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<sup>73</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Ashes', in *Fast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 3, ll. 3–4. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

to human existence. The key difference between this early environmental writing and contemporary poetry about the natural world is the realisation, found in Graham and Oswald's work, that the life in us *is* the water in the river, rather than merely alike to it. When this water is taken away from the natural world and from us, as shown in 'From the Transience' and Graham's other apocalyptic poems, the self cannot sustain itself, and our concepts of 'I' are challenged and dissolved alongside our flimsy concepts of place or supposed ownership of the land around us. This acknowledgement of the human dependence upon water informs Graham's sense of place and identity, as both concepts are inextricable from and challenged by the ever-moving water cycle which flows through and beyond humanity.

Graham's sense of place, whilst at times rooted in this American strand of nationality, begins to branch out from the traditional segregation of humanity and nature. Graham's work is more akin to the relation to nature found in Niedecker's flood-plain writing, acknowledging the power of water alongside our dependence upon it, rather than clinging to the autonomous whole, assured sense of self often found in transcendental American literature. Graham takes this one step further, however, as our sense of the self as whole is questioned as water is withheld from us and the natural world deteriorates.

## Chapter Six: 'Claiming a place on the earth | only to cancel' — Alice Oswald's British Sense of Place

### I. 'visionary dreariness'

One could assume that Alice Oswald, as a British poet writing about nature, follows on from a very well-established canon of Romantic writers or is inspired by those who wrote with Romantic notions of the human relation to nature in mind after this period. Oswald, however, as already explored in this thesis, has written against this traditional Romantic relation of the self to nature in her 'Introduction: A Dew's Harp' to *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, an anthology of poems about the natural world and our relationship to it which sidesteps the famous poems we may expect to find in such a collection. Oswald includes lesser-known or even anonymous works, poems which 'lie somewhere along this line of encounter between a human and his context', rather than 'poems which mistake the matter at the end of the rake for a mere conceit' (p. x).

In her early essay on gardening, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', Oswald explores these ideas expressed more briefly in her 'Introduction: A Dew's Harp' about how gardening allows the poet to better understand and interact with the natural world, which for Oswald is not a 'mere conceit', provided for self-exploration or epiphany as often seen in the Egotistical Sublime of Romantic poetry, but instead a real presence. Oswald explains that:

It's certainly true that when you're digging you become bodily implicated in the ground's world, thought and earth continually passing through each other. You smell it, you feel its strength under your boot, you move alongside it for maybe eight hours and your spade's language (it speaks in short lines of trochees and dactyls: sscrunch turn slot slot) creeps and changes at the same pace as the soil. You can't help being critical of any account of mud that is based on mere glimpsing.<sup>1</sup>

Oswald rejects the aspects of Romanticism which concern themselves with this 'glimpsing', walking through nature and taking in only that which glorifies or enlightens one's own

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', in *A Green Thought in a Green Shade: Poetry in the Garden*, ed. by Sarah Maguire (London: The Poetry Society, 2000), pp. 35–48 (p. 40). All further references to this work are to this edition.



contemplation of existence and ignoring the real 'nature' of nature. Oswald writes poetry out of a lesser-known perspective on nature which concerns itself with the 'spade's language': the intimate exploration of nature which is achieved through this long immersion within it.

Oswald also addresses the label 'nature poet' in her essay:

'Nature is a world pervaded by externality, in which all things are outside each other in space and time'. I can't quite remember who said this, but it's a good footnote to that misleading expression a 'nature poet'. If the phrase must be used, then a nature poet is someone concerned with things being outside each other. How should extrinsic forms, man and earth for example, come into contact? (pp. 39–40).

Oswald's poetry is focused on this 'contact' between two equal forces rather than assuming humanity's dominance and elevation above the natural world, as has historically been the basis for such poetry. This relation to nature as something 'outside', an 'extrinsic form', is an early realisation of Oswald's ecopoetic writing in which human existence is dependent upon the natural world, but aware of our lack of control. Oswald develops these ideas through her writing, as instead of 'things being outside each other', her later realisation, particularly through a closeness and focus on water, is that the 'outside', the 'things' of nature, become part of each individual human, as the flow of water through us contributes to the symbiotic, cyclical relationship between humanity and the natural world.

To this end, what some may deem the quintessential British 'nature poets', such as John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, are absent from *The Thunder Mutters*. In their place are poets such as John Clare, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, and Ted Hughes, whose included poems share these ideas of nature not as 'conceit' for humanity to ponder and through which to achieve enlightenment, but as a living, breathing entity which exists 'outside' of our confines of thought and perception.

In another anthology edited by Oswald and Paul Keegan, *Gigantic Cinema: A Weather Anthology*, Oswald is similarly reluctant to include these well-known Romantic voices. Only two short extracts from Coleridge's notebooks and letters are included, alongside a journal entry from

Dorothy Wordsworth. The only Romantic poetry to represent these afore-named Romantic giants is two short excerpts from Wordsworth's *Two-Part Prelude*, which, given the length of the 1805 version, and the wealth of revisions and republications of *The Prelude*, speaks volumes about Oswald's opinion of such canonical works of nature writing.

These two extracts emphasise the parts of Romanticism which Oswald does value in her own consideration of writing about nature. The first describes the 'unconscious intercourse' between humanity and the 'eternal Beauty' of nature, and acknowledges that humanity does not control this 'intercourse' but is merely part of it for a time, in contrast to the 'eternal' nature which surrounds us.<sup>2</sup>

The second extract captures a moment in which the poet notices 'a girl who bore a pitcher on her head' labouring with or in spite of the weather around her, which portrays the natural scene so often extracted from pastoral poetry of those who work with and on the land going about their everyday activities.<sup>3</sup> Such episodes can be found in John Clare's poetry, which Oswald greatly admires and includes in her nature anthologies, and are the basis of Oswald's *Dart*, as already explored in this thesis. Oswald asserts that 'Work, physical work, is a much more accurate form of perception', and that she:

enjoy[s] a view of the natural world that's participatory — that you don't look at it with your eye, you look at it with your ear and with your body. You're walking through it and you're working in it. [...] for me it's very important that the relationship with the natural world is not restricted to one sense but fully engaged and physical.<sup>4</sup>

The work of the people who live on the land, 'working in it', 'fully engaged and physical' is of utmost importance to Oswald, and so this episode in which the girl 'seemed with difficult steps to force her way| Against the blowing wind' (ll. 6–7) earns its place in the anthology as poetry

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<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Two Part Prelude: excerpt', in *Gigantic Cinema: A Weather Anthology*, ed. by Alice Oswald and Paul Keegan (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), p. 22, ll. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Two Part Prelude: excerpt', in *Gigantic Cinema: A Weather Anthology*, ed. by Alice Oswald and Paul Keegan (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), p. 156, l. 5. All further references to this except are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Presiding Spirits: Alice Oswald on Sophocles', *Magma Poetry*, 26 (2002) <<https://magma-poetry.com/presiding-spirits-alice-oswald-on-sophocles/>> [Accessed 7 February 2022].

which acknowledges nature's power over both observing poet and farm labourer. Instead of restricting the experience of the natural world to the wandering, philosophical eye, Wordsworth here points towards a more physical, continual relation to the land which speaks to Oswald's relation to it. Wordsworth's poetry contains many other such instances of this, so Oswald's extremely selective representation of his work in this anthology may seem eccentric. However, by including a lesser-known extract from *The Prelude*, Oswald retains her focus on weather poetry rather than the fame attached to such poems.

This everyday activity is heightened by the weather in which it is observed, as Wordsworth notes:

[...] It was in truth  
An ordinary sight, but I should need  
Colours and words that are unknown to man  
To paint the visionary dreariness  
Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,  
Did at that time invest the naked pool,  
The beacon on the lonely eminence,  
The woman and her garments vexed and tossed  
By the strong wind. (ll. 7–15)

Working on and with the land, the 'ordinary sight' is instead portrayed as 'visionary dreariness', an aspect of Romanticism which Oswald carries into her work. This paradox of 'visionary dreariness' captures both the immediacy of this vision, how the wind acting on the garments in that moment creates something almost ethereal, and the effort and time which 'dreariness' suggests, both of the labourer and of the weather itself, both ever-changing and yet continual as they keep revisiting the same place. A. W. Thomson suggests that this phrase is one 'of particular authority, in which each word invades the other', much like the eco-poetic vision of Oswald's anthology which emphasises experiences with the landscape in which humanity and the natural world intersect and interact, 'thought and earth continually passing through each other'.<sup>5</sup> Thomson also suggests that 'the vision is of something so alien that the distinctions between

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<sup>5</sup> A. W. Thomson, 'Wordsworth's Spots of Time', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 1 (1970), 23–30 (p. 25).

human and non-human almost disappear', acknowledging that the weather and the 'visionary' way in which it alters an 'ordinary sight' remain outside human control and question our categorisation of 'human and non-human'.<sup>6</sup>

The paradox of weather and time fixed in one instant, the former so transient and the latter a long, endless process of change, is recognised as Wordsworth claims the need for 'colours and words that are unknown to man' to properly do justice to the scene in front of him. The need for something unknown and intangible to accurately paint the usually dismissed 'ordinary sight' echoes also through Oswald's poetry. *Dart* in particular recognises and explores the paradox of 'visionary dreariness' as Oswald considers the 'dreariness' of communities which have lived and worked on the Dart for centuries, but also sees the 'visionary' in these 'ordinary sight[s]' electrified by the paradoxically transient and everlasting presence of water which runs through and sustains all. Oswald takes this concept a step further in *Dart*, as the poet or speaker figure is effaced and replaced by 'the language of the people who live and work on the Dart' (Introduction Note) or at times the Dart itself.

By including these extracts which draw not on Romantic poetry, which is rooted in the Egotistical Sublime, but instead on the 'real work' of those who live within the natural world and the 'unconscious intercourse' of humanity and nature, Oswald positions her anthology and her own work out of and predominantly against the Romantic tradition of nature writing, whilst also noting some aspects which are more akin to her eco-poetic focus.

In her 'Preface' to *Gigantic Cinema*, Oswald explains the odd format of the anthology which omits titles and authors from poems and excerpts:

[...] so that extracts may be exposed to each other — one excerpt summoning up the weather of the next — with no distinction between prose and poetry, or between poems with authors and without authors, or between fiction and report. There are almost no dates on the page, since weather occupies what Wallace Stevens called 'the area between

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<sup>6</sup> Thomson, p. 25.

is and was'. We'd like you to read this book with no hat, no coat, no preconceptions, encountering each voice abruptly, as an exclamation brought on by weather.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of drawing upon the fame and longevity of canonical texts, Oswald and Keegan allow the poems to speak towards the natural world unyoked from our 'preconceptions', the 'hat' and 'coat' of literary tradition and human perception. Oswald suggests through this assertion a relation to the natural world based not on what has come before, what has already been written, but on a contemplation of that which is there now, the 'abrupt[...] exclamation brought on by weather' which transcends our perception of time or importance ascribed to an individual human perspective.

Oswald explores the concept of weather as she asks:

After all, what is not weather? [...] If you restrict weather to the air, then you miss out on Maetherlink's phototropic flowers or Mandelstam's pebble, or the stone tortoises of Victor Segalen. If you relate it to light, then you forget the blindness of John Hull, stuck at the musical centre of a rainstorm. It is tempting to call anything weather when it is beyond human control, [...] In the end, working with the hunch that weather might be nothing smaller than undated Time, we have included dreams, ghosts, birds, volcanoes, nuclear explosions, moods, echoes, souls, luck, smoke... and a good deal more. (pp. x–xi)

The power of the natural world and the ever-changing, untranslatable way in which weather and time act upon it is acknowledged in this relation to weather and the impact which it has on the natural world as something akin to 'undated Time'. Our perceptions of nature will always be of an instant (relative to its immortality), and our recording of such in literature will inevitably and necessarily be confined to this transient, momentary 'glimpse' of the natural world as it appears to one individual at a certain point in time. Instead of including poems that embrace the sovereignty of the individual within this inevitably unfinished perception of nature, which may attempt to 'date time' and confine it to human understandings, Oswald and Keegan sought out texts that embrace that which is 'beyond human control', which hold an understanding or awareness that the natural world is not static and solid but full of 'moods, echoes, souls, luck,

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<sup>7</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Preface', in *Gigantic Cinema: A Weather Anthology*, ed. by Alice Oswald and Paul Keegan (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), pp. ix–xiii (p. ix). All further references to this preface are to this edition.

smoke... and a good deal more'. The poems and excerpts in *Gigantic Cinema* are aware of their own snapshot existences, but also claim no authority over that which is present in their poems, which is also a cornerstone of Oswald's own poetry. Oswald explains that:

Our ruling idea was to have no ideas: to dispense with writing 'about' weather, writing that knows what it's talking about. Instead we have preferred writing that is 'like' weather, that has the sovereignty of sheer event. As if the weather were to write itself [...] Weather as a name for the shock and luck of encountering language or reacting to the elements, weather as an affliction of thought or a gift of idea, weather as impossible excess or interruption or distraction or simple outsideness — all these visions of a force beyond our control are wonderfully liberating, and we want the anthology to capture these irresponsibilities. (pp. xii–xiii)

Oswald focuses on the 'outsideness' of nature 'beyond our control' as something 'wonderfully liberating', rather than something which instils fear and awe into the Romantic imagination. The emphasis in this anthology of weather literature tracks the recurring paradox in Oswald's work of the natural world as simultaneously both eternally of an instant, 'sheer event', but also inextricably tied to endless 'undated Time', and the 'impossible excess' of both which is so far beyond human comprehension. Oswald claims that:

This anthology will not add to the image of Nature as a suffering solid. Instead it attends to patterns and forces, things that are invisible, ephemeral, sudden, catastrophic, seasonal and endless: air's manifold appearances. Gilbert White took it for granted that 'the weather of a district is undoubtedly part of its natural history'. The anthology takes seriously such a thought, and its scale is small. It privileges the perceivable, the particular, the local over the global, the 'now' of raindrops. Even so, this weather constantly frames the human figure as tiny, besieged, exposed. Not only can we never leave the performance, but often it turns on us, like God goading his audience from inside the whirlwind: 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest?' The height of the weather is a measure of man. (p. xiii)

Instead of measuring nature up against the perceived glory of mankind as some traditional Romantic texts may do, such poetry seeks to embrace the eco-poetic notion that 'weather is a measure of man', and that the human remains 'tiny, besieged, exposed' in relation to 'endless' nature. As Oswald notes, 'weather interrupts thinking and shares inconsequence with it [...] You can no more prevent thought than you can prevent rain, and the words we think in are part of

this squallishness' (p. xiii). Nature's power is acknowledged here, but instead of the awe and sublimity which Romantic poetry loads upon it, Oswald keeps in mind the 'inconsequence' and 'squallishness' of nature, which is ever-changing and interruptive. This consideration of 'squallish' rain and thought as connected is more akin to Oswald's later relation to humanity as something inextricable from the natural world, rather than two things entirely 'outside' of each other.

Wordsworth's poem 'The Simplon Pass', which does not appear in either of Oswald's anthologies but is an example of Romantic nature poetry which is often anthologised, presents several aspects of Romanticism against which Oswald writes.<sup>8</sup> Instead of the self-effacement often found in contemporary ecopoetry, such as that already discussed in *Dart*, Wordsworth's speaker imagines the natural world as a unified presence which surrounds the individual and sustains his vision of immanence and of God present in creation.

It is this human presence within nature which reveals its coherence and unity, as everything which the speaker describes is fitted into the human perception of it:

Brook and road  
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy Pass,  
And with them did we journey several hours  
At a slow step.<sup>9</sup>

This suggests that 'brook and road' are synonymous with each other and with the speaker, and that they both adhere to the 'slow step' of the human traveller and journey with him, despite the flow of the brook and the static road. The movement of the traveller through the landscape seems to inject each aspect of it with life, as the road begins to move and the brook slows to the speaker's speed. These depictions, alongside 'The stationary blasts of waterfalls' (l. 6), highlight

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Simplon Pass' appears in an anthology edited by Ted Hughes entitled *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember*, which seeks to do the opposite of *Gigantic Cinema*. Hughes compiles a collection of poems and claims their importance through their status as poems long well-known and deemed necessary to learn 'by heart' in order 'to remember' them.

<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Simplon Pass', in *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 111, ll. 1–4. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

Wordsworth's focus on a portrayal of the natural world as it appears to present itself to the travellers, rather than the reality of an ever-changing and continual existence which is not altered by or dependent upon human immersion within it. This focus on human perception continues through the poem:

The rocks that muttered close upon our ears  
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside  
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
And giddy prospect of the raving stream, (ll. 10–13).

Nature is presented in relation to human actions: the rocks 'muttered', the crags 'spake', the 'sight| And giddy prospect' of the stream are personified as they reflect the speaker's immanence. Whilst at first glance the poem seems to focus on what Max Wildi terms the 'mysterious sublimity and power' of the natural world, the portrayal of these aspects in human terms shifts the focus away from the reality of nature and onto the speaker's perception and experience of it as it serves this vision of immanence.<sup>10</sup> Wildi notes that Wordsworth captures:

[...] the sense of tremendous heights impending and of utter desolation, of awe and at the same time of exultation, of physical fear and vertigo on looking down into the breath-taking chasms, alternating with the ecstatic bliss of the pure heights.<sup>11</sup>

This emphasises the human experience within nature, 'the *sense* of tremendous heights *impending*': everything as it impacts the human mind.

This immanence is justified by the overt Christian imagery throughout the poem, 'as if a voice were in' nature speaking directly to the human observer, just as God's voice speaks to humanity through elements of nature in the Bible. This vision of God's presence in creation builds throughout the poem:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—  
Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity,  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (ll. 15–20)

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<sup>10</sup> Max Wildi, 'Wordsworth and the Simplon Pass, II', *English Studies*, 43 (1962), 359–377 (p. 369).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



The speaker's perception of the natural world broadens into more conceptual, universal concepts; 'darkness' and 'light' come together to create 'symbols of Eternity' and to illuminate the speaker's comprehension of these concepts. The previously detached aspects of nature are brought together into 'one mind', 'the same face, blossoms upon one tree', as nature is quietened into this image of perfection, a unified presence in which the speaker is fully immersed and reaches towards God. According to Wildi, 'the stress in all this is on the non-human creation, on the alpine gorge. There is no spiritualising of mountains', and yet the way in which Wordsworth presents the mountains, the brooks, and the waterfalls stresses the human creation of an image of nature, 'the conceit' which Oswald mentions, over the ever-changing reality of the landscape.<sup>12</sup>

At one point, however, Wordsworth does come close to the paradoxical unity of weather and time, the 'now' and the 'undated' towards which Oswald and Keegan's anthology reaches, as he describes 'The immeasurable height | Of woods decaying, never to be decayed' (ll. 4–5). Oswald focuses on 'immeasurable' nature which lies outside our control or classification through quantifiable labels of height or breadth. Wordsworth captures here the continuity of nature outside our classifications as 'decaying, never to be decayed' presents a paradox where life and death collide, where the individual dissolves into the eternal cycles of birth, life, and death to be at once 'decaying' and transcending death.

Oswald's early poem 'River' is less sure of the individual human's definitive place in nature as set out in Wordsworth's poem, and instead acknowledges the fallibility of human senses which we use to perceive and quantify that around us:

put your ear to the river you hear trees  
put your ear to the trees you hear the widening  
numerical workings of the river<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Wildi, p. 372.

<sup>13</sup> Alice Oswald, 'River', in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 41, ll. 3–5. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

This approach both acknowledges how the river and trees support each other's existence and are caught in an eternal cycle of life, but also how the human perception of both the river and the trees is not reliable in depicting this reality. Mary Pinard, reading Oswald's 'Introduction' to *The Thunder Mutters*, notes the importance for Oswald of 'the human ear itself: that portal opening at once to the outside world and to an inside one', and later notes the ear's 'critical role as converter of signals'.<sup>14</sup> Pinard asserts that for Oswald the ear 'facilitates a meeting place for and potential connection between the human and the non-human world, found then through *listening*'.<sup>15</sup> The ways in which the natural world alters the human world, how it vibrates the 'inner-scape of canals, windows, drums, tubes, and nerves before reaching the brain' creates our perception of that around us, and in turn sculpts our relation to the natural world.<sup>16</sup> In Oswald's poem, however, this interaction between ear and nature is distorted, and our listening is revealed as fallible as one hears trees in the river and river in the trees. The 'widening| numerical workings' of nature lie perpetually outside our comprehension, and the river of the poem flows through and out of the human perception of it.

Oswald presents an image of nature which remains unchanged by our flawed perception of it. The 'tiny inkling of a river' (l. 1) which begins the poem is unhindered by this human attempt to 'hear' it, and has no notion of being categorised as 'right down the length of Devon' (l. 6). This description as a way to confine the river within human boundaries is placed in an unrhymed couplet with its natural counterpart: 'under a milky square of light that keeps quite still' (l. 7), suggesting the incompatibility of these two definitions alongside their inability to fully define water. The latter suggests a definition of the river which is intensely localised to that captured in 'a milky square of light that keeps quite still', as though confined to a human field of vision, which is again at odds with the flowing water of the river. Neither description affects the river's

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Pinard, 'Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 10 (2009), 17–32 (pp. 17, 18).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

course, as 'the river slows down and goes on' (l. 8) is then placed on its own line, but not separated by punctuation from the rest of the poem as water flows through human attempts to name and define it. The ambiguity of 'goes on' suggests that the water surpasses 'the length of Devon' and the confines of 'under a square of light that keeps quite still', and continues past our concepts of place and time, as 'slows down and goes on' evokes nature's 'undated Time'. In an interview with Madeleine Bunting, Oswald asserts that the river by which they walk 'might seem like the river Harbourne but it's really a weird abstract alien stuff called water', and explains that 'I exert incredible amounts of energy in trying to see things from their own point of view rather than the human point of view', which upholds the ecocentric focus of her poetry as seen in 'River'.<sup>17</sup>

The speaker is effaced from the poem by its end, and the river is not hindered by 'storm trash clustered on its branches' (l. 9) but instead continually moves on, 'carries the moon carries the sun but keeps nothing' (l. 15). Instead of elevating the human into a position of immanence or epiphany as Romantic poetry may seek to in such a setting, Oswald extracts the arbitrary human presence altogether and instead focuses on 'the earth's eye | looking through the earth's bones' (ll. 13–14). The temporary and fallible human perception of nature is replaced by nature's own expansion as the water 'carries the moon carries the sun' in its reflection but 'keeps nothing'. Oswald returns in this last line to the central paradox of nature which is both of an instant and everlasting, as the surface of the river reflects the universal but also retains its momentary existence as it keeps flowing on and ripples break the reflection of the sun and moon.

The Romantic sense of nature which surrounds and unfolds before the human presence is absent from Oswald's poem, which presents a river unaware of our descriptions and perceptions of it, that keeps flowing through and past us regardless. The title of the poem anticipates this, as instead of titling the poem as Wordsworth does with the human place name attributed to it,

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<sup>17</sup> Madeleine Bunting, 'Alice Oswald on the Devonshire landscape: "There's a terror in beauty"', *Guardian*, 13th July 2012, Landscape and Literature section, no page numbers given.

Oswald widens her focus to an unnamed 'River', and thus encapsulates the collision of local and global water which permeates her work.

## II. 'walking without legs — lost to his knees | As through the rawky creeping smoke he wades'

Pinard notes Oswald's inclusion in *The Thunder Mutters* of 'those who "play" the Dew's harp', who 'gain access, ideally unmediated, to living and non-living matter in nature, and for Oswald as editor, there is perhaps no qualifying standard more significant for poems than this to merit their inclusion in her anthology'.<sup>18</sup> The anthology begins with one such poem, the title poem 'The thunder mutters louder and more loud' by John Clare, which also appears in *Gigantic Cinema* as a poem fully reliant and focused upon weather and nature. Pinard suggests that this inclusion of Clare's poetry in *The Thunder Mutters* is:

[...] not only because of his many skills and obvious proclivity for sound, but also because he is an example of a working poet: Clare, as an agricultural labourer from a young age and later as a gardener, knew his subject(s) first hand. From Oswald's perspective as a gardener-poet, actual contact with earth through work is necessary for gaining access, engagement, and knowledge about it and its world.<sup>19</sup>

Clare focuses on the oncoming storm in 'The thunder mutters louder and more loud', which Pinard calls 'the main character',<sup>20</sup> and the 'hay folks' hastening about their work in order to avoid the torrential downpour are secondary to this growing noise of nature which echoes through the disrupted rhythm of the poem.<sup>21</sup> The enjambment and lack of punctuation save one hyphen in the fifth line reflect the ominous 'mutter' of thunder and the unstoppable rain, 'The drops so large wet all thro' in an hour' (l. 6) which halt human work as 'the hay folks cower' (l. 8) beneath haystacks and a 'waggon' (l. 9). Pinard suggests that this also 'amplifies the lack of boundaries that the storm highlights between the hay folks and the motion of their tools', as this

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<sup>18</sup> Pinard, pp. 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> John Clare, 'The thunder mutters louder and more loud', in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 3, l. 2. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

‘dreariness’ of continual, repetitive work allows the hay folks to ‘become bodily implicated in the ground’s world’ as Oswald suggests, a part of it as it sustains them and they work to maintain it.<sup>22</sup>

Pinard concludes that ‘the acoustical densities of Clare’s poem [...] fetter and unfetter the sonic energies implicit in this woodland soundscape and serve to prepare readers for an anthology of sonic immersion’,<sup>23</sup> which is clear as the anthology continues and Clare’s poem shifts into Hardy’s ‘We Field-Women’, an account of how ‘The wet washed through us — splash, splash, splash’.<sup>24</sup> Through all weathers the ‘Field-women’ and the ‘hay folks’ persevere, working on and with the land but not above or masters of it, and instead entirely ‘washed through’ by the elements and defined through this relation to the natural world. The focus of both poems remains upon these ‘sonic energies’ of nature, how weather — a storm, rain, or snow — completely alters the landscape and retains control over all that exists upon it, regardless of human perception.

In *Gigantic Cinema*, Oswald includes another Clare poem which emphasises how weather and landscape continue on regardless of the human presence within them. ‘Mist in the Meadows’ (although this title is of course omitted from Oswald and Keegan’s anthology) details how:

Mist in the hollows reaks and curdles up  
Like fallen clouds that spread — and things retire  
Less seen and less<sup>25</sup>

Instead of beginning with the human presence ready to experience this ethereal mist, Clare’s poem begins with the fading of human perception, as ‘The evening oer the meadow seems to stoop| More distant lessens the diminished spire’ (ll. 1–2). The misting of the landscape

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<sup>22</sup> Pinard, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Hardy, ‘We Field-Women’, in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 4, l. 5.

<sup>25</sup> John Clare, ‘Mist in the Meadows’, in *Gigantic Cinema: A Weather Anthology*, ed. by Alice Oswald and Paul Keegan (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), p. 197, ll. 3–5. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

obscures human civilisation, reflected in the multitude of words that suggest a shrinking of perception: 'more distant lessens the diminished spire'. This line suggests an almost supernatural alteration of the assumed power dynamic of human spires dwarfing nature.

The human presence in Clare's poem is part of but also lost to this unstoppable weather. Clare's human focus is again on those who work with the land, as he notes 'the shepherd passes near' (l. 5) as the poem's first human presence. The shepherd is 'walking without legs — lost to his knees | As through the rawky creeping smoke he wades' (ll. 7–8). This emphasises that the shepherd knows the landscape so thoroughly that he needs no vision to navigate it, but also acknowledges that the mist completely alters the landscape, nature with agency that swallows human vision into its impenetrable instant of cloud. The interaction between landscape and human is more fluid than one may find in Wordsworth's 'The Simplon Pass'. Instead of privileging human perception, describing the natural world as it appears to the seemingly infallible human eye, Clare's relation to the landscape is more fluid as the double meaning of 'lost to his knees' notes both the all-consuming reach of the mist but also how it overpowers the senses, as though the weather has really robbed the shepherd of his legs and alienated him from himself.

Wordsworth's 'The Simplon Pass' embodies the Egotistical Sublime, how man immerses himself into nature to better understand himself and his place within the abstract concepts of 'eternity' and God's creation. Clare's 'Mist in the Meadows' is instead present in the 'sheer event' of the 'ordinary sight' which Oswald seeks, as those who encounter the changing landscape every day, working with and on it, continue through this mesmerising mist, 'walking without legs', losing themselves to the momentary but overpowering 'event' of weather. The solid markers of human presence, the 'spire' and the 'arches', are effaced as 'Now half way up the arches disappear' (l. 9) until 'trees loose all but tops' (l. 11). Weather takes over the landscape completely as human

efforts at solidity and perpetual existence through the building of grand spires and arches are eclipsed by this momentary mist.

The human and the natural meet at the end of Clare's poem, as 'I meet the fields' (l. 11) is answered by 'the village meets the eye' (l. 14) after 'the indistinctness passes by | The shepherd all his length is seen again' (ll. 12–13). The chiasmic coupling of 'I meet the fields' and 'the village meets the eye' suggests an equal footing between the observer and the observed. The shepherd is passively 'seen again', which is deliberately ambiguous as neither nature nor the human observer holds authority over vision and the shepherd belongs to both equally. Clare presents nature as it is, not impeded or changed by human perception but instead all-consuming and ever-changing, and the rural life which exists upon this landscape changes with these storms and mists.

Oswald's 'Psalm to Sing in a Canoe' explores how humanity interacts with nature but is not in control and remains reliant upon water for survival, much like the characters in Clare's poetry. Oswald's poem imitates the form of a religious song of praise to God, reflecting the undercurrent of Christianity in British history and poetry. In the Psalms, the psalmist often begins with an evocation to God, a call of celebration for an almighty God whose omnipotence surpasses all, including nature, and often praises His creation. Oswald's poem extracts God from the psalm, and instead upholds the river as the focal-point of worship, which is emphasised through the elevated tone, imitating this human address to God. Through using a traditional form of poetry, whose themes are often reflected in British poetry, but shifting the focus from religious praise to the natural world and our dependence upon it, Oswald writes out of the traditions of British nature poetry towards an eco-poetic sense of place.

The river immediately escapes the confines of language, as the poem begins ‘evening river that scarcely are’, which challenges the expected singular form of ‘river’ with the plural ‘are’.<sup>26</sup> Oswald expresses the multitudes of rivers as the water immediately exists outside our assumptions, ‘unfinished’ (l. 6), and through this odd use of language expresses how her language, the language in which we ‘sing’ to something which transcends human understanding or power, is inadequate to describe water. Imitating a communal Psalm with the use of ‘we’ (ll. 11, 13, 20, 22) also reflects the realisation of connection between humanity and nature, as the speaker is not abstracted from her fellow humans but reliant upon them for survival alongside the water which upholds their canoe. The continued use of ‘we’ also suggests a wider perception of humanity’s relation to water which is not simply individual and therefore easily dismissible, but shared and believed, as though a religion, by many.

The human presence within water is immediately presented as vulnerable: ‘us four in a plywood canoe’ (l. 2). Instead of presenting the speaker as dominating the river by being held above it and using the canoe as a barrier, Oswald recognises this fragile human presence, the ‘semi-resilient’ (l. 3) canoe next to the ineffable power of water. Sean O’Brien notes the ‘effort to address time, mortality, and the way that consciousness itself seems to have rendered us homeless in the world’ in *Woods etc.*, and in this poem in particular.<sup>27</sup> By abstracting the human presence out of our ‘world’ and into this ‘homeless’ state closer to the ever-flowing water, Oswald notes the fragility of ‘mortality’ and our perceptions of time linked to it, in relation to water’s eternal movement.

The speaker submits to the water’s power, as she petitions ‘may we stay out long enough to lay our oars on our knees and| still slide on in the rush with which clouds are swished together’ (ll. 11–12). This echoes the river itself, as the assonance of ‘our oars on our knees’ and the sibilance

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<sup>26</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘Psalm to Sing in a Canoe’, in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 40, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>27</sup> Sean O’Brien, ‘*Woods etc.* by Alice Oswald’, *Independent*, 5th October 2013, Reviews section, no page numbers given.



of 'still slide on in the rush with which clouds are swished' evokes the sound of a canoe gliding through water of its own accord rather than the beating pulse of rowing with human strength. Oswald uses these sounds to bridge the gap between the human and the natural world, as she explains in 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise' that 'the eye is an instrument tuned to surfaces, but the ear tells you about volume, depth, content [...] The ear hears into, not just at what surrounds it' (p. 37). By approaching the river around her in this aural way, through the religious form of a Psalm which retains this focus on the power of water, Oswald performs this listening, active relationship with nature, 'hear[ing] into' it rather than remaining detached through the 'surface' reach of perception alone.<sup>28</sup>

The presentation of the river as outside and uncontained by language begins to seep into the speaker, who uses nonsense words to describe the flow of water: 'may your tum-ti-ti-tum bear our canoe into its vision at the misty' (l. 8). This remains abstracted as a single line and expresses intent to travel *to* somewhere, but this destination remains ambiguous and unfixed, 'its vision at the misty', as the adjective 'misty' stands in for a noun and the destination. This both acknowledges that mist and weather overpower human perception, as the sentence and with it our comprehension end with 'misty', and also reflects the speaker's desire to become part of or wholly reliant upon water, as the sentence structure and lack of grammatical sense imitate how water evades language. The Psalms contain the underlying desire of reaching a fixed destination, the Christian belief of abiding with God in heaven after death. Oswald reflects this human desire towards a destination, but reveals through this ambiguity and vagueness that water, the object of the poem, resists such finality as the river continues through the river banks into the sea and other bodies of water.

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<sup>28</sup> These ideas are also expressed in Oswald's interview with Bunting, in which Oswald notes that she has 'done quite a lot of work trying to get away from the eyes and into the ears', and Bunting asserts that 'sounds offers more depth and resonance than our eyes can offer'. See Bunting, 'Alice Oswald on the Devonshire Landscape: "There's a terror in beauty"'

Reflecting the poem's psalm-like qualities, this petition to become part of the river and share its unfixed destination, or lack thereof, is repeated as the speaker asks 'may we come to the exact place and say so instantly, among a| flash of flowers and the green shell song trees etcetera' (ll. 13–14). Our perceptions of place are challenged, as 'the exact place' remains paradoxically vague, 'among a| flash of flowers' rather than an identifiable, fixed, singular place. This continues the plurality of water expressed at the beginning of the poem, as the assumed 'place' to which the water flows, which the poem reveals as a fallacy, is multiple. The sense of language tails off into note-like ideas, as 'the green shell song trees etcetera' suggests language's inadequacy to describe this impossible end-point of the river, and instead describes the banks of the river through their sounds and colours. Ending this description with 'etcetera', which is not end-stopped, further emphasises how water overflows our perceptions. Oswald notes that language is made up of 'words [that] are the sound recordings of whatever you see or smell or taste', and that her 'ideal has always been to create a sound world'.<sup>29</sup> Through using language to reflect the sounds of the river and the banks rather than adhering to the strict sense of language and grammar, Oswald's poem shifts the focus out of human perspectives of nature into a more active engagement with the reality of water and the natural world.

The crux of the poem comes in the plea 'may we come to know that the length of water is not quite the| same as the passing of time' (ll. 20–21), which acknowledges that water lies outside human control and challenges our concepts of time and fixed place. By the end of the poem, the speaker fully acknowledges the human inability to understand or comprehend water:

may we make do with one glimpse each,  
one eye one arm one bone  
in our plywood canoe (ll. 22–24).

The speaker is brought back from a contemplation of 'larval heaven, o finite quantity of freedom' (l. 15), which begins to abstract the poem from its surroundings into more Romantic

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<sup>29</sup> Bunting, 'Alice Oswald on the Devonshire landscape: "There's a terror in beauty"'.

notions of 'eternity' and into 'finite quantit[ies]' of things we may understand, back to the reality, the 'now' of the poem and the senses which interact with and move towards water.

### III. '*I am not the measure of creation. | This is beyond me, this fish.*'

D. H. Lawrence, whose poem 'Fish' is also included in *The Thunder Mutters*, writes against the traditional Romantic relation to nature. Lawrence, in *Phoenix II*, accuses Wordsworth in 'Peter Bell' of gathering aspects of nature, here a primrose, 'into his own bosom and ma[king] it part of his own nature'.<sup>30</sup> Lawrence claims that this relation of the self to nature is 'an impertinence on William's part', and that Wordsworth, in so doing, 'ousts the primrose from its own individuality. He doesn't allow it to call its soul its own. It must be identical with *his* soul' (p. 448). Lawrence suggests that:

A primrose has its own peculiar primrosy identity, and all the oversouling in the world won't melt it into a Williamish oneness. Neither will the yokel's remarking 'Nay, boy, that's nothing. It's only a primrose!' turn the primrose into nothing. The primrose will neither be assimilated nor annihilated. (p. 448)

Lawrence argues against the Egotistical Sublime and towards a relation to nature which asserts its perpetuity and autonomy above our perceptions or imagination of it. Christopher Pollnitz aptly summarises Lawrence's argument in his assertion that 'Whereas the poet achieves resolution and independence in Wordsworth's work, all that the stock doves, daisies, and hares can aspire to be, in the economy of his poetry, are images of gladness and despondency'.<sup>31</sup> Rather than assimilating nature into the self and reducing it to these 'stock' images, Lawrence notes the intangible, unknowable aspects of nature which keep it far out of the reach of human power or comprehension.

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<sup>30</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II* (London: Heinemann, 1936), p. 447. All further references to this work are to this edition.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Pollnitz, "'I didn't know his God": The Epistemology of "Fish"', *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, 15 (1982), 1–50 (p. 5).

Lawrence criticises 'anthropomorphism, that allows nothing to call its soul its own, save anthropos: and only a special brand, even of him!' (p. 449), as he positions himself closer to the ecocentric vision of nature which stands outside humanity's perception of it. Pollnitz summarises Lawrence's argument: 'by resorting to non-human nature for images, generations of poets had allowed themselves to lapse into assumptions about the natural and the human which were self-conforming and self-consoling', rather than observing and writing about the incomprehensible vastness of nature which lies outside human perception.<sup>32</sup> Such criticism of Romanticism is similar to that expressed in *The Thunder Mutters*, as Oswald too resents the 'assimilation' and 'annihilation' of nature into the poet, and anthologises those poems which work against assumptions of human power over nature, instead observing and interacting with nature in 'the half-human, half-animal state in which most of us spend our lives' ('A Dew's Harp', p. ix).

The 'peculiar primrosy identity' of Lawrence's 'Fish' is preserved through the poem, although the human attempt to detach the fish from its 'element' and force it into the human realm results in the fish's death, as the 'red-gold mirror-eye stares and dies' when the fish is brought onto land.<sup>33</sup> Lawrence's focus throughout the poem is on the human inability to enter into and exist within the fish's 'element', and this death brings with it the realisation that the fish, despite its mastery over water, also cannot survive in our element. The meeting between these two beings is necessarily complex, and Lawrence tests and explores these parallel realms through the religious framework commonly used in nature poetry. The speaker repeatedly asserts that:

[...] *I am not the measure of creation.*  
*This is beyond me, this fish.*  
*His God stands outside my God.* (ll. 140–142)

This introduces the religious and existential doubt which is key to Lawrence's understanding of the natural world as something wider than his perception or understanding of it, and wider than

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<sup>32</sup> Pollnitz, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'Fish', in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 51, ll. 161, 145. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

human understandings of existence, God, creation, and the relationship or assumed hierarchy between them.

Lawrence explores the intangible 'subaqueous' (l. 6) existence of the fish by moulding the poem's language around this ever-moving, continual being which evades human comprehension or categorisation. The use of aquatic words in short succession suggests a kind of trying-on of language which is revealed as inadequate to fully describe this presence:

Aqueous, subaqueous,  
Submerged  
And wave-thrilled. (ll. 6–8)

The fish is of water, 'aqueous', but simultaneously beyond or under it, 'subaqueous,| Submerged' but can 'never emerge' (l. 13), and so Lawrence sets out the separation between his existence and that of the fish, as the two cannot collide without the death of one. Though the human may see the fish from the river bank, the repetition of 'sub-' reinforces this distance as what the speaker can see is only surface.

Lawrence complicates the separation between fish and speaker as he loads the fish with human constructions and assumptions of gender, only to observe how these terms are inadequate to represent the fish. The fish begins as a genderless 'you', as the speaker marvels at its timelessness and how it is unaffected by the Flood:

Whether the waters rise and cover the earth  
Or whether the waters wilt in the hollow places,  
All one to you. (ll. 3–5)

Through this depiction and the ambiguity of 'you' and 'fish' which could be plural or singular, the speaker elevates the fish past human comprehension towards a deity, echoing the biblical imagery of God as multiple entities in one being outside our understanding. Lawrence tests the boundaries of the entrenched Christian beliefs of his nation, describing the fish as:

Born before God was love,  
Or life knew loving.  
Beautifully beforehand with it all. (ll. 79–81)

Instead of following the Christian creation story in which God creates water and land, and then populates the waters with fish and the land with people to rule over the fish and the animals, Lawrence claims that the fish predates our human understanding of God as love. This widens the speaker's concept of reality from the assumed absolute truth of humanity's perception to the possibility that nature predates our version of reality and our understanding of 'love' and 'God', suggesting an authority contrary to that given by God to Man.

This deific, 'beforehand' presence is diminished, however, when the speaker asks 'Who is it ejects his sperm to the naked flood?' (l. 32), as the reference to ejaculation dissipates the God-like quality of the fish by tethering it to earthly, (male) human methods of reproduction which the Christian God transcends. The contrast between the poetic, philosophical language of the beginning of the poem, which abstracts the fish from our constructs of gender, and this heavily gendered, rather un-poetic subject matter emphasises the tension between the fish as something outside our comprehension and the need to categorise and define that which we encounter in human terms.

The water around the fish is then heavily gendered as female, referred to as the 'wave-mother' (l. 33), becoming a surrogate which carries the fish's sperm, and also the fish's own mother, as the fish 'swims enwombed' (l. 34). Lawrence imagines the male fish in a position of dominance, and the water in the subdominant, passive role, 'the element under one, like a lover' (l. 69), and so attempts to fit the fish and water into the traditional human gender roles of dominant male and passive female. Lawrence presents the fish as both adult, reproductive male and foetus dependent upon the 'womb' of the waters; two states of being inside one (possibly plural) being, existing simultaneously. This gendering does not work, however, as the water is biologically incapable of being female or gestating a foetus, and the perception of the fish as both God-like and fully male in a human, reproductive sense, alongside the 'enwombed' foetus is paradoxical. The gender binary set up by the masculinisation of the fish has no natural female counterpart,

and so as the speaker attempts to fit water into the submissive, subdominant role, the fallacies and inadequacies of this binary in attempting to understand existence outside human concepts are exposed. Lawrence therefore observes how our need to define and assimilate nature into our own concepts of being, to 'make it part of [our] own nature' introduces a myriad of contradictions, paradoxes, and tensions which then retain the distance between the fish and the human, as the speaker realises that 'I didn't know him' (l. 109) and has no way to fit 'him' into human concepts of existence.

Lawrence explores the tension between conflicting individual and collective identities in one being, as the isolation of the fish is upheld through the poem, despite the closeness of other fish:

They drive in shoals.  
But soundless, and out of contact.  
[...]  
Not one touch.  
Many suspended together, forever apart,  
Each one alone with the waters, upon one wave with the rest. (ll. 84–89)

This notion is repeated towards the end of the poem, as the speaker describes:

[...] their pre-world loneliness,  
[...]  
They move in other circles.  
Outsiders.  
Water-wayfarers.  
Things of one element.  
Aqueous,  
Each by itself. (ll. 155–163)

The fish resists categorisation as one of many, whilst simultaneously existing as one in a 'shoal'. This doubling of identity is continued throughout the poem as the fish is referred to as 'each one' but also 'they', as the reverential 'you' from the beginning of the poem moulds itself into a more communal (but still apart) consideration of fish. This dualistic identity further separates human and fish, as our need to categorise a being as singular or plural, part of a 'shoal' or alone, is questioned and challenged, and remains unresolved. The only clear separation between the singular and the plural aspects of the fish comes as he is plucked from his element and forced

into the human one, making him irrevocably singular as the 'water-suave contour dims' and he dies. Pollnitz suggests that the fish 'remains inaccessibly other' from the human speaker, and that:

As a symbol, it comes to represent a rudimentary mode of consciousness to which human life may have to revert in the interval before the dawning of a new individual or a new age. The 'water-wayfarers' invoked in the coda have a vitality which has enabled them to survive and even, like the Seafarer of the Anglo-Saxon poem, to revel in survival beyond the social, supportive contact of their peers. This stripped but hardy vitality of the outsider, this willingness to adventure beyond the limits of what a man is taken to be, is seen by Lawrence as the virtue needed for survival in the evening light of the idealist-Christian age.<sup>34</sup>

The speaker notes that 'I said to my heart, *who are these?*| And my heart couldn't own them' (ll. 98–99), which becomes the crux of the poem as the 'inaccessibly other' fish lies outside human ownership or understanding. This sentiment is repeated through the poem, as Lawrence reflects upon the perfect self-sufficiency of the fish; despite many attempts to understand and categorise the fish it remains 'beyond me' (l. 126), master of its own world regardless of the observing human.

Lawrence acknowledges a wider scope of creation than humanity and human perception of nature as he asserts the existence of an aqueous deity also beyond humanity:

I didn't know his God.  
I didn't know his God.  
Which is perhaps the last admission that life has to wring  
out of us. (ll. 113–116)

The Christian God as a unified, omnipotent being is questioned as the encounter between a human and another entity which is so entirely different and outside our comprehension destabilises the assumed, accepted notions of creation and hierarchies of power therein. The speaker is forced 'beyond the limits of what a man is taken to be' into the position of an 'outsider' as the 'evening light of the idealist-Christian age' seeps through the poem and he comes to understand that '*I am not the measure of creation*'.

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<sup>34</sup> Pollnitz, pp. 43–44.



The observation of the natural, aqueous world which operates so differently from the human one forces the speaker to acknowledge the fallacy of anthropocentrism:

I saw, dimly,  
Once a big pike rush,  
And small fish fly like splinters.  
And I said to my heart, *there are limits*  
*To you, my heart;*  
*And to the one God.*  
*Fish are beyond me.* (ll. 117–123)

Lawrence here imitates 1 Corinthians: 'now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13.12). The biblical account of something seen and known dimly is presented as a temporary state, as union with God will provide a 'face to face' encounter which will allow the speaker to 'know fully'. For Lawrence, however, the now past encounter in which he 'saw dimly' is the limit to his understanding of the aqueous realm, as the 'one God' of human understanding seems unable, for the speaker at least, to reach into the mysterious 'subaqueous' realms. Lawrence's speaker is caught in the 'limits' of his understanding and comprehension which cannot be overcome even by physically bringing the unknowable into 'face to face' contact, as this only brings the death of the fish.

Lawrence's seemingly subconscious attempt to anthropomorphise the fish is acknowledged and rethought. One remembered pike is strongly set in human terms with a 'grey-striped suit', a 'slouch', and the simile 'like a lout on a[...] pavement':

A slim young pike, with smart fins  
And grey-striped suit, a young cub of a pike  
Slouching along away below, half out of sight,  
Like a lout on an obscure pavement... (ll. 100–103).

Imagining the fish as comically human paints him at first as 'somebody in the know!' (l. 104), but then Lawrence notes the irrepressible otherness of the fish, 'the motionless deadly motion,| That unnatural barrel body, that long ghoul nose' (ll. 106–107). Such a description stands at odds with the image of the fish as a businessman or 'lout', and instead paints him as supernatural, a

'ghoul' and 'motionless deadly' creature with an 'unnatural barrel' shape rather than recognisably human. This realisation adds to the overwhelming doubt as Lawrence describes how, after acknowledging the fallacy of anthropomorphism, 'I left off hailing him. || I had made a mistake' (ll. 108–109). It is unclear whether this 'mistake' refers to the comically extreme anthropomorphising of the fish in the previous stanza, or to the whole beginning of the poem which simultaneously imagines the fish as both deific and (unsuccessfully) fitted into human constructions of gender. Whether either or partly both, Lawrence shows the inadequacy of anthropomorphosis to define or comprehend the natural world.

Lawrence recognises the consequences of human assimilation of nature into our world, as the regal colours 'gold-and-green lacquer' and 'red-gold mirror-eye' are not beyond our ability to kill. As the speaker fishes the fish from his world into the human one in an attempt to better understand the fish:

[...] the gold-and-green lacquer-mucus comes off  
in my hand,  
And the red-gold mirror-eye stares and dies, (ll. 143–145).

The fish is reduced to its sensory attraction, which Pollnitz refers to as the 'brilliant shell of visual sense-impressions, enhancing his aesthetic appreciation rather than the object itself', in contrast to the mysterious creature at the beginning of the poem.<sup>35</sup> This death emphasises the lack of power which humanity has over the fish despite our ability to kill the individual: the lacquer-mucus 'comes off', separated from 'in my hand', and the eye 'stares and dies', still in the active role despite the entirely human cause. The fish, in all its regal, fading splendour, remains the poem's focus rather than the act of killing, which traditionally asserts male, human power over nature.

Whilst this death is presented as a fault of human attempts to control and understand the natural world, the fish retains a level of intangibility, and dies:

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<sup>35</sup> Pollnitz, p. 34.

[...] not before I have had to know  
He was born in front of my sunrise,  
Before my day.

He outstarts me. (ll. 147–150)

These lines cement the image of the fish as that which ‘outstarts’ our chronology, maintaining the mysterious image of the fish outside our comprehension and ideas of linear, fixed time. This indefinable existence is contrasted with the ugly description of the speaker as ‘I, a many-fingered horror of daylight to him, | Have made him die’ (ll. 151–152). The speaker’s guilt is clear, as the reduction of the human into a ‘many-fingered horror of daylight’ emphasises the aspects of humanity which differ from the aqueous realm. The speaker is limited to this ‘horror of daylight’ which cannot grasp or comprehend the fish without extricating it from its life-giving element, and so the separation between fish and human portrays the physical impossibility of Wordsworthian anthropomorphosis or assimilation of the natural into the human.

Oswald’s ‘Seabird’s Blessing’ immerses the human voice in the birds which the poem follows, but does not seek to ‘assimilate’ or ‘annihilate’ them into the human sense of self. Instead, by merging the two and altering the poem’s language to reflect both human and bird in one being, Oswald explores the possibility of humanity and nature symbiotically connected through our shared desire for the universe to ‘count us not as nothing’.<sup>36</sup>

Oswald uses familiar, idiomatic language and puns but warps these in order to indicate the otherness of the birds which she embodies. The speaker prays:

Holy ghost of heaven,  
blow us clear of the world,  
give us the utmost of the air  
to heave on and to hold. (ll. 17–20)

This plays with the traditional line in a Christian marriage vow, ‘to have and to hold’, suggesting the birds’ petition for a kind of marriage between them and the air as the dependence upon the

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<sup>36</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘Seabird’s Blessing’, in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 4, l. 24. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

air to uphold and support them is taken in a literal sense rather than the metaphorical human understanding of the phrase. The human imagining of 'heaven' is also twisted by the birds' desire to 'heave on' the air, focusing on the physical, earthly 'now' rather than the more abstract concept of heaven. In so doing, Oswald questions how we construct our experience of existence as the phrases and institutions upon which we rely are modified in the birds' vernacular to fit their drive for continued existence.

Oswald's avoidance of gender in the poem distances it from traditional Romantic nature poems and largely male-dominated nature writing after them. Instead of perpetuating the gendering of the Christian God as male, Oswald refers to the gender-neutral 'God the featherer' (l. 9), 'Christ' (l. 13), and the 'Holy ghost' (l. 17). Oswald refers to God in terms of creation, how the birds are 'feathered' rather than 'fathered', which undermines the religious paradigm which she uses as a frame for the poem. Instead of fitting the natural world into the patriarchal religious beliefs of God as an almighty Father who creates and gives creation to Man in the hierarchy of being, Oswald portrays a creator who merely creates, feathers the birds and exists outside these loaded religious, gendered, familial terms. Oswald refers to 'Christ', but does not follow this with its usual gendered counterpart 'the Son', and instead focuses on the prayer of:

[...] a creature like a spirit  
up from its perverse body  
without weight or limit. (ll. 14–16)

Instead of tethering the poem and the characters within to human understandings of existence, limited by traditional gender roles informed by patriarchal religion, Oswald focuses on the birds' physicality and how birds transcend the 'perverse body' through flying seemingly 'without weight or limit' away from the poem's religious framework.

The tension between the singular 'seabird' of the title and the immediate pluralising of this in the first line, 'We are crowds of seabirds' (l. 1), also questions the superiority of the individual in existing as part of a whole, which continues through the poem as the speaker refers only to 'we'

and 'us' (l. 5) rather than 'I'. The bird's identity as a 'seabird' in the title and its reliance upon and desire for mastery of 'air', alongside the plural 'we' allow the birds to remain placeless. The birds are continually moving, flying, and being, not tethered to any human limit of place or singularity, but instead ask 'Holy ghost of heaven, | blow us clear of the world' (ll. 17–18).

The poem's rhyme scheme, which begins with a strong rhyme of 'angles' with 'tangles' (ll. 2, 4), unravels somewhat as 'one' is rhymed with 'wing-bone' (ll. 6, 8), 'fall' with 'eyeball' (ll. 10, 12), 'spirit' with 'limit' (ll. 14, 16), 'world' with 'hold' (ll. 18, 20), and 'nothing' (l. 23) with itself. Oswald's poem, at first glance, seems to fit the 'seabird' into human understandings of it, as the fixed stanza length, rhyme scheme, and religious paradigms predict a certain level of understanding of the subject through these human ways of comprehending and categorising existence. The immediate contradiction of singular to plural, the unravelling of the rhyme scheme, the lack of a punctuated end, and the departure from these religious paradigms, however, show how the bird(s) cannot be restricted by these human concepts of existence and identity, and instead show how the natural world exists 'without weight or limit'. Rhyme trickling through the poem and the poem's shape reflect the flight of the birds, and the repetition of 'Pray for us' (ll. 5, 21) and repeated lines are suggestive of the flight patterns and repeated sounds which birds make, maintaining the focus not on the human perception of the birds but on the birds themselves.

For Lawrence, religious doubt and the questioning of the human place or significance within nature is a consequence of his encounter with the fish, but Oswald's poem 'Owl' seems to be written after this moment of epiphany or realisation of doubt, as the internal turmoil which pervades Lawrence's poem is absent. Instead, guided by the owl's presence as 'an owl's call opened the darkness', Oswald's speaker is led back to this moment of epiphany:

[...] immediately, I was in the woods again,  
poised, seeing my eyes seen,

hearing my listening heard<sup>37</sup>

Oswald focuses on the interconnected existence of one who is 'seen' and 'heard' by other beings as the human presence is one part of a wider whole of sound and sight. The positive feedback loop created by this seeing of sight and hearing of listening creates a communal space between nature and humanity. Instead of choosing as her subject an animal which exists entirely outside our ways of being as Lawrence does in 'Fish', Oswald again depicts a bird who shares our element, and so allows this communion between nature and human to take place. In 'Owl', however, despite both human and owl being of air, the owl's flight and mysterious ability to conduct its surroundings, the human observer, and the poem retains some of the separation between nature and humanity of which Lawrence is so aware.

Jack Thacker suggests that 'there is no protective canopy or roof in Oswald's poems, no barrier that separates the listener from the outdoors. Instead, her poems work to expose the listener to the elements through the use of gaps and hesitations'.<sup>38</sup> The owl's movements and sounds direct the poem and the speaker, leaving 'gaps and hesitations' in the middle of sentences and ending without punctuation, mirroring the unpredictable bird that immediately and completely captivates the speaker and the poem's focus before flying off into 'elsewhere'. The poem begins 'at the joint of dawn' (l. 1) with the owl's 'call' which 'opens the darkness'. The noise of the owl is enough to guide the poem, even though it begins 'miles away, more than a world beyond this room' (l. 3), which emphasises the bird's power in relation to the speaker, who is directed by this call from darkness into light despite not being the intended recipient. Joanne Dixon asserts that 'when the owl calls, we hear what is hidden from our sight', emphasising Oswald's shifted focus

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<sup>37</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Owl', in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 6, ll. 2, 4–6. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>38</sup> Jack Thacker, 'The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile: Alice Oswald's Acoustic Arrangements', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 44 (2015), 103–118 (p. 116).

out of our sights into the audible; out of the quantifiable into the un-definable and intangible natural world, guided by the acknowledgement of existence beyond our perception.<sup>39</sup>

The speaker is subordinate and secondary to the owl's presence, as the traditional chain of being is subverted and the owl is the one who has a passage 'straight through to God' (l. 9), and is able to dictate and direct our experience of existence, as at its call 'immediately I was in the woods again'. The poem ends as the owl flies off out of the limits of our perception, into the ambiguity of 'out', 'an owl's elsewhere' which 'swelled and questioned' (l. 12). This questioning remains outside our comprehension, along with the owl's exact destination, as the creature flies free of our control.

Through the recollection brought on by the owl's call, Oswald's speaker describes the sensation of being in a liminal state:

[...] seeing my eyes seen,  
hearing my listening heard

under a huge tree improvised by fear (ll. 5–7)

It is ambiguous whether the tree or the speaker is the one 'improvised by fear', which furthers Oswald's meeting of humanity and nature through the intermediary of the owl's call, as both become indistinguishable from the other. This line is reminiscent of Wordsworth's famous claim in *The Prelude* to be 'foster'd alike by beauty and by fear'.<sup>40</sup> The human imposition of subjective 'beauty' is absent from Oswald's poem, and the claim of being 'foster'd', the egotistical assumption that the fear and beauty continually return to care for and nurture the Romantic imagination, is replaced by an 'improvisation' of fear, which retains Oswald's 'now of raindrops'. This improvisation of fear also adds to the idea that the human presence in the poem is without

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<sup>39</sup> Joanne Dixon, 'Brightness and Unfixity: Reframing Epiphany in Oswald's *Woods etc.*', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 7 (2019), 1–21 (pp. 11–12).

<sup>40</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book 1, l. 309.

control, as her presence and/or her perception (of herself or of the tree) are rushed and unplanned, echoing Lawrence's realisation that *'I am not the measure of creation'*.

Oswald claims no authority or ownership over the 'woods' to which she is transported; she asserts no human name over them, but instead retains their ambiguity and boundlessness by referring only to 'the woods' which surround and envelop her completely. Her presence there is presented through this lack of control: 'poised, seeing my eyes seen, | hearing my listening heard'. Instead of assuming a right to the land or authority over it, Oswald's speaker observes her place in nature in this ever-widening complexity of existence, as the three-branched 'seeing' and 'hearing' suggest multiple selves and other beings with which the speaker communicates. The presence of 'fear' and the alertness of 'poised' suggest an animalistic instinct that acknowledges the possibility of a predator or attack, reinforcing the lack of human control.

Dixon suggests a reframing of epiphany in Oswald's poem as instead of the Romantic egotistical epiphany through nature, 'the darkness opens up to suggest the coming of light, an epiphany of brightness, not one of fixed understanding'.<sup>41</sup> The owl is an instrument of natural processes, the 'joint' of night into day, rather than a vehicle to further human 'understanding'. Oswald's narrator respects this unknowable Otherness which she cannot penetrate, and instead allows herself to drift along with this coming light, not loading this transition with human constructs of meaning but instead focusing on the physical existence of light, tree, sound, and vision and how she fits into this endless, widening world. Dixon asserts that:

This doubling effect of seeing and hearing herself creates a hypersensitive experience of consciousness, using synaesthesia to expand the limits of the epiphanic moment and to show the mind becoming aware of its own processes.<sup>42</sup>

Instead of becoming aware of understanding or using the natural world and its movements to aid this reach towards absolute and infallible knowledge, Oswald is content to 'experience [...] consciousness', and be led towards 'the mind becoming aware of its own processes' through

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<sup>41</sup> Dixon, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



observing the perpetual cycle of nature from night to day, and the authority of nature's creatures who seem to aid this daily cycle. Dixon concludes that 'the poem suggests that epiphany can be read as an ongoing process, one that fluctuates between certainty and uncertainty', and it is within this duality of 'certainty and uncertainty' that Oswald's speaker rests, close to the creatures of the natural world without being dominant over them.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to Lawrence's approach in 'Fish', the end of Oswald's poem does not carry with it the finality of the death of a natural creature and accompanying horror of the human killer, but instead is focused on the liveliness of the owl as it directs the poem. As the owl moves 'out' of the poem, this fluctuation between certainty and uncertainty moves with it, 'like you might lean and strike | two matches in the wind' (ll. 13–14). The poem ends without punctuation and leaves the reader with this image of 'wind' and the unexplained oddity of striking 'two matches' into it, reflecting how the human cannot fully know or engage with the owl who remains 'more than a world beyond' our comprehension. Despite this, the poem and the effect of the owl's call and movements upon the human speaker are testament to the connection between them. Lawrence's lasting impression is that '*This is beyond me*' and that 'I [...] | Have made him die', as the physical interaction between the human and the aqueous creature brings this finality and Lawrence's speaker is limited by his lack of understanding of that 'beyond' him. Oswald in part echoes this distance between nature and humanity, as the owl remains 'elsewhere', and yet the interaction between the two is creative rather than destructive, and the effects brought about by the owl's presence illuminate this relationship between humanity and nature.

#### **IV. 'half-of-the-air, | half-of-the-darkness'**

It seems inevitable that any discussion of Oswald's relation to the British landscape of nature poetry should lead to a consideration of Ted Hughes, whose influence on Oswald has been much

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<sup>43</sup> Dixon, p. 13.

noted and scrutinised throughout her career, as already discussed in this thesis. Laura Blomvall suggests that ‘when Carol Hughes sent an otter skin to Oswald after Hughes’ death, she perhaps implicitly legitimised this literary heritage’, and suggests that Oswald’s poem ‘Otter Out and In’ ‘both owes something to Hughes’ poem “An Otter” and anticipates the style and themes of *Dart*’.<sup>44</sup> This Hughesian legacy is seen in Oswald’s description of the otter in her poem as ‘half-of-the-air, | half-of-the-darkness’,<sup>45</sup> which echoes Hughes’ initial description of his otter as ‘four-legged yet water-gifted’.<sup>46</sup> Both descriptions acknowledge the duality of the otter as both of water and of air, a liminal creature who easily transforms from our realm into the unknowable aqueous world. Oswald departs from Hughes’ anthropomorphosis, however, as her otter, instead of becoming the object of a hunt and imagined in human terms, disappears with ‘a duck-flip into darkness’ (l. 13) out of our reach. Oswald instead likens her otter to other amphibious creatures (the ‘duck’), which remain outside human comprehension or control, despite our coexistence with them through the connection of water. The focus on the power of the river which controls and flows through the poem ‘anticipates the style and themes of *Dart*’, as these voices of otter and human depend upon and are transformed by the river, but do not overpower it, as water continues on after both otter and human ‘disappear in darkness...’ (l. 20).

Hughes is conspicuously absent from *Gigantic Cinema*, save for one poem, ‘Wind’, in which the distance between humanity and nature is reintroduced to observe the fierce power of the wind. Oswald, in her introduction to *A Ted Hughes Bestiary*, claims that ‘my focus is not really on Hughes as “animal poet” or “eco-poet” [...] I’m more interested in presenting his work dramatically as a pursuit or flight’, which suggests that the connotations which such labels may

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<sup>44</sup> Laura Blomvall, ‘The Influence of Ted Hughes: The Case of Alice Oswald’, in *Ted Hughes: Nature and Culture*, ed. by Neil Roberts, Mark Wormald, and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 215–230 (p. 217).

<sup>45</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘Otter Out and In’, in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 29, ll. 11–12. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

<sup>46</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘An Otter’, in *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 79, l. 3. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

bring to Hughes work may struggle to find a footing.<sup>47</sup> Many of Hughes' poems about animals or the landscape around them are focused more on this 'pursuit or flight' aspect rather than establishing and exploring a more ecopoetic approach to nature alongside humanity. Often, as in 'An Otter', Hughes portrays the relationship between humanity and animals in this predatory framework which situates the male animal above his surroundings, 'a king' (l. 17), and yet subdominant to the human, male hunter, who reduces the otter to 'this long pelt over the back of a chair' (l. 40) despite his divine beginnings.

Blomvall chronicles the fluctuating connection between Oswald and Hughes' poetry, as 'despite the influence of Hughes on her earliest published poetry, Oswald has attempted at various stages in her career to distance herself from the tradition of poetry Hughes represents'.<sup>48</sup> Blomvall remarks that 'after 2005, and before the publication of *A Ted Hughes Bestiary*, Oswald stopped referencing Hughes or tried to move critical conversation of her work to other poetic influences'.<sup>49</sup> Blomvall suggests that this shift was not due to a dislike of or disconnect with Hughes' poetry, however, noting that '[Oswald] is not uncomfortable about Hughes influencing her, as much as she is about having his and her own work reduced to a narrow narrative of the development of Anglophone nature poetry'.<sup>50</sup>

It is easy to see how Oswald could slip into this 'narrow narrative' of 'Anglophone' nature poetry, with her emphasis on water, her Homeric conjurations (also common to Romantic poetry), and her long poems *Dart*, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, *Memorial*, and *Nobody*, which evoke Eliot and Hughes in their ambition and polyphonic magnitude. However, Hughes' conspicuous absence (other than 'Wind') from *Gigantic Cinema*, and Oswald's remarks in the BBC interview 'Poetry for Beginners', suggest a marked, unavoidable distance between her work

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<sup>47</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Introduction', in *A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Selected Poems*, selected by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), no page numbers given.

<sup>48</sup> Blomvall, p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

and Hughes' which follows Oswald's departure from more traditional or gendered nature writing. Oswald remarks that:

Ted Hughes taught people to approach their poems as if stalking an animal — utterly patient and focused and swift. My own practice is different — something I've developed over twenty years and now do automatically whenever I sit down to write. It's a primitive kind of echo-location.<sup>51</sup>

Whilst Oswald here acknowledges Hughes' poetic and analytic legacy, she is clear that 'my own practice is different', and that her process of creating and approaching poetry is more to do with the sounds and the interplay of different voices than with 'stalking an animal'. However, one may argue that this 'echo-location' analogy is akin to her assessment of Hughes' more predatory approach, as both depict a form of hunting. Perhaps the difference here is Oswald's focus on sound and interaction between objects or beings — although her poems still 'hunt', the emphasis on the aural and the echo is crucial to Oswald's poetic voice, suggesting a more interactive form of expression between poet and subject. Hughes, in contrast, sees the poem (according to Oswald, at least), as silent prey; the poet's task is a quiet, 'focused and swift' hunt with little interaction between poet and subject as the human remains in control of his subject.

Hughes' animal poetry outside Oswald's anthologies often upholds Lawrence's separation between the natural world and the human one, as Hughes describes the animal in its habitat in great detail, but once it crosses the threshold into human contexts the animal becomes lifeless and prop-like, no longer itself but an object in human hands. This is evident in 'An Otter', in which the subject is revered at the beginning of the poem as something beyond this world, much like Lawrence's fish: 'four-legged yet water-gifted', who 'Brings the legend of himself| From before wars or burials' (ll. 6–7), and 'Gallops along land he no longer belongs to;| Re-enters the water by melting' (ll. 9–10). This image of the otter presents complete autonomy, master of both land and water, but tied to neither. The physical form is strong enough to

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<sup>51</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Poetry for Beginners', *BBC Get Writing*  
<<http://web.archive.org/web/20080211213547/http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/getwriting/module18p>>  
[Accessed 16 September 2021].

'gallop', and yet the otter 'melt[s]' back into the water with ease, challenging our assumptions of its corporeal form. Despite being only one individual, the otter brings the 'legend of himself', adding a timelessness to his image which exists before the human rituals which will bring about his death later in the poem.

Herbert Lomas claims that 'as with Lawrence, the studied observation is serving the analogical. The otter is theriomorphic [...], like Lawrence's snake — an exile from an egocentric tainted world that hunts him out of existence and reduces him' to the pelt on the chair.<sup>52</sup> As the poem continues, these deific descriptions of the otter give way to more human characteristics, as though just by watching the otter's movement through the landscape, the human observer, consciously or subconsciously, loads the natural creature with our own understanding of existence and in part claims it for their own. Hughes describes the otter as belonging to 'neither water nor land. Seeking| Some world lost when he first dived, that he cannot come at since' (ll. 11–12), suggesting the otter as an Adamic figure, re-enacting the Fall of man in the Christian creation myth. This description builds on the nation-less aspect of the otter: as Adam is cast out of Eden because of his sin, so the otter seeks that which 'he cannot come at since', and is humanised in this singular purpose of life, to get back to an intangible paradisiacal form. The humanisation of the otter in this way brings him down from the perfect image of a 'legend' entirely self-reliant and unattached to human concepts of origin or religion, and instead contains him within a frail, flawed, human context of sin and penitence.

The otter is understood through our human perceptions of power and gender, 'a king', and his vulnerability is presented by warping this position into one of subservience and danger: 'in hiding' (l. 17). Lomas suggests that 'though Hughes' poetry centres on animals, they are heavily anthropomorphised, are in fact excruciatingly lifelike masks'.<sup>53</sup> By attempting to understand the otter's predicament in human terms such as these, Hughes confines this 'theriomorphic' being

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<sup>52</sup> Herbert Lomas, 'The Poetry of Ted Hughes', *The Hudson Review*, 40 (1987), 409–426 (p. 411).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

to our concepts of reality, foreshadowing the dominance of the human at the end of the poem who transforms this once powerful creature into 'this long pelt over the back of a chair'. Lomas suggests that Hughes anthropomorphises his subject because, for Hughes, 'only human beings can imagine death and thus glory in it or worry about it'.<sup>54</sup> The otter, to evoke sympathy in the reader, must therefore be set in human terms to fully capture the desperation and terror of the hunt. Hughes seeks to 'assimilate' the natural creature into his own consciousness or understanding of human consciousness, replacing nature's supposed lack of intellect with human thoughts and concepts, contrary to eco-poetic arguments which would write against this anthropomorphosis of animal into human.

Gifford asserts that:

Hughes would not say, with Lawrence, 'I did not know his God'. On the contrary, Hughes' poems are inspired by the conviction that he *does* know the God of the [animal] [...] not in the sense of being able to define, but of being intimately acquainted with. For him the animal is not merely an analogue or emblem of the inner self but a part, with that self, of an indivisible whole.<sup>55</sup>

Gifford suggests that Hughes positions himself as part of this 'indivisible whole', as human and animal intersect through the inevitability of individual death to share a communal sense of fear and vulnerability. Instead of the eco-poetic approach which comes after Hughes, this 'indivisible whole' refers to Hughes' shamanic, mystical relation to the natural world which acknowledges the importance of both the human and the animal to each other, but maintains this hierarchy of the (male) human over the animal and natural world. One may argue, however, that Hughes' method of 'knowing' the animal kingdom, as seen in 'An Otter', is more akin to anthropomorphosis, as the otter is brought down from the deific terms of the first stanza into human imaginings of existence. The 'intimate acquaintance with' the natural world is set in human terms, as first the observer and then the hunt retain authority over the otter.

Despite this vulnerability, the otter is presented as a good hunter who:

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<sup>54</sup> Lomas, p. 414.

<sup>55</sup> Terry Gifford, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 63.

[...] will lick  
The fishbone bare. And can take stolen hold

On a bitch otter [...] (ll. 35–37).

Although his position as 'king' and autonomous, dominant male may be in danger because of the hunt to come, and his place in the hierarchies of prey and predator is fixed, the otter is still dominant over the female of his species and still exerts his power over the fish on which he survives. The otter, despite his previous frailty, is here presented as virile, a 'Big trout muscle' (l. 34) whose 'heart beats thick' (l. 33), full of life in contrast to the end of the poem in which he is reduced to 'this long pelt over the back of the chair'. The female presence is absent from the poem apart from this evidence of strong masculinity in the otter's ability to 'take stolen hold' of her. By choosing to write about the mating habits of otters, which are particularly violent, Hughes here ensures that his subject's behaviour reinforces conservative gender politics which see women and nature as subservient to the will of man, to be conquered and 'stolen'.

Despite the heavily gendered and anthropomorphised image of the otter, as the hunt approaches he becomes more and more objectified, as Hughes emphasises both the life-force of the otter and the closing gap between him and death which will reduce it to 'nothing at all' (l. 39); a dead 'pelt' in a human home. His body, instead of the mystery of the beginning of the poem, in which he was 'neither fish nor beast' (l. 2), is pared down to its hunt-worthy aspects as he 'keeps fat in the limpid integument' (l. 32), a 'muscle' with a 'heart' and 'blood' (l. 35). Yvonne Reddick asserts that 'when Hughes writes that the otter [is reduced to 'this long pelt over the back of a chair'], he criticises hunting for annihilating animal life', which is clear in the contrast between the emphasis on the otter's life, built up through the poem as both deific and regal in its likeness to humanity, and his death, which comes abruptly to end the poem, turning this virile, exuberant creature into a seemingly inconsequential decoration.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Yvonne Reddick, 'Henry Williamson and Ted Hughes: Politics, Nationhood, and Nature Writing', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 62 (2013), 353–374 (p. 366).

The humanisation of the otter in Hughes' poem is absent from Oswald's 'Otter Out and In', as instead of hunting the otter, the human presence is controlled by the river which drives the poem and commands the scene. The 'us' of the poem is brought 'running from the field' (l. 5) as the 'Collision of opposites which pulls the river' (l. 1) 'throws and cleaves us into shadows| arm in arm and apart upon the water' (ll. 6–7). The ambiguity of language here, the double meaning of 'cleave' as both bringing together and severing, and the alliteration but conflicting meaning of 'arm in arm and apart' reflect the 'collision of opposites' which governs this natural scene, of which humans are a mere part. Instead of being subject to our assumptions of existence and our own importance within this existence, Oswald's scene exists in this natural paradox of togetherness apart, as both the otter and the human are altered by the flowing water which both unites and separates. These continual paradoxes through the poem question the capacity of language to grasp the reality of water, which embodies these paradoxes and exists beyond our notions of order or boundaries of being.

The gendering of the human speaker (or indeed the creature) so often found in Hughes' poems, which upholds the gender hierarchies and power dynamics of humanity through projecting them onto the natural world, is muted in Oswald's poem. The reader may assume that the speaker is the voice of the female poet, but there are no pronouns or indications of gender in the limited human presence in the poem. The speaker remains part of 'we' throughout, suggesting that the individual human perception of the scene is secondary to the wider existence of nature: the water and its transformation of that around it, which intertwines 'I' into 'we'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> This 'we' is broadened out by the end of the poem, as 'we came so strangely| out of the darkness to this world| of watersounds colliding slowly' (ll. 17–19) suggests an ambiguous collection of sentient nature evolved from our ancestral sea creatures which came 'out of the darkness to this world'. If interpreted in this sense, a question may be raised as to whether Oswald is entitled to claim, through human terms, a 'we' out of millennia of evolution and millions of species, or whether such treatment may be yet another form of erasure of the natural world, as the human assumes likeness with the natural. As 'Otter Out and In' appears in Oswald's earliest collection, it may be argued that these eco-poetic ideas were still in formation, and that more eco-poetic expressions of unity with the natural world without erasure can be found in her later work.



The otter is referred to as 'him' (l. 10), but this gendering seems largely arbitrary, as it is first described as 'the otter' (l. 2) which is pulled and plucked by the river. It is only in the third stanza that the otter becomes gendered, as 'sometimes we see him| swimming above the fish' (ll. 10–11) suggests a playful element to the scene (from a human perspective at least) rather than an assertion of authority or dominance. The female presence in the poem is ambiguous, as Oswald refers to the 'collision of opposites' which 'lays and breeds the river, high and low,| through Dipper Mill in her absorbing beauty' (ll. 3–4). It is unclear whether this 'absorbing beauty' is referring to the place 'Dipper Mill', the river, or the 'collision of opposites'. Through this ambiguity, any gender connotations brought about by the use of 'her' are muddied into non-existence, and the water and poem continue on past this ambiguity.

Oswald's otter becomes for a moment the focal point of the river, as the speaker asserts that 'The whole river transforms upon an otter' (l. 9). This grandeur is short lived, however, as it is framed by water's power which 'flexes the otter in and out of the water' (l. 8), and 'Now and gone, sometimes we see him| swimming' (ll. 10–11). The interplay between water and natural creatures is clear, as the continual flow of the water affords this moment of absolute power before all once again 'transforms', and the juxtaposition of 'now and gone' remains the poem's focus.

Whilst the speaker is assumed to be human, part of the 'us' brought 'running from the field', this presence is not invasive, and by the end of the poem 'us' joins the otter in the water's manipulation of the scene:

[...] There are times  
when water's attentiveness  
is tight enough to walk on  
  
and we came so strangely  
out of the darkness to this world  
of watersounds colliding slowly,  
out and in and disappear in darkness . . . (ll. 14–20).

Even before the human speaker approaches the water, there is a connection between them as 'running' evokes connotations of water despite describing the human action here. The water's power, like the owl's call, is able to command the human from far away. The poem focuses on this ability of water to transform that around it rather than the majesty and power of an individual being. Through the cyclical use of language: 'out and in' and 'in darkness', previously used to describe the otter but now repeated in reference to the human, Oswald blurs the boundary between human and natural, and instead focuses on how water is capable of bringing these different beings together through its life-giving, boundless presence. Oswald thus departs from the tradition of considering the human relation to nature and the hierarchies of power which often placed humanity above nature, and instead moves into a more ecopoetic consideration of and focus on water and how it draws both the human and the natural together in a continual cycle of 'out and in'.

Hughes' poems appear throughout *The Thunder Mutters* at various points along Oswald's 'line of encounter between a human and his context' ('A Dew's Harp', p. ix). In one such poem, 'Snow and Snow', Hughes uses human constructs of traditional gender roles to express the different aspects of 'snow' as two heavily gendered identities which exist independently from one another and are contrasted through the poem: 'sometimes a she, a soft one', and then 'sometimes the snow is a he, a sly one'.<sup>58</sup> Whilst this approach notes how a natural phenomenon can be vastly different at different points in time, the separation between these different states as male *or* female, and the suggested unequal power dynamics between them, seems to stray away from the view of nature as a holistic, continual whole, multiple and constantly in flux, and instead labours to fix it into a binary understanding through loaded human terms. Such an inclusion goes against the central ideas of ecofeminism and Oswald's poetry, making it an odd inclusion in this anthology.

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<sup>58</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Snow and Snow', in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 149, ll. 1, 7. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

The feminised snow is presented as soft and delicate, and is immediately sexualised: 'Her kiss on your cheek, her finger on your sleeve' (l. 2), and later 'she nestles| The sky with her warm, and the earth with her softness' (ll. 13–14). The feminine snow is presented as traditionally female: delicate, gentle, and essentially powerless, subordinate to the male speaker and the addressed (one may assume male) reader. She is presented at the end of the poem as a bride, fulfilling the gender stereotype, and 'everything in the rubbish-heaped world| Is a bridesmaid at her miracle' (ll. 25–26) creates a contrast between unsightly, ugly, and undesirable things and the pure, untouched 'chapel of| her sparkle' (ll. 27–28). The female snow is presented as the ideal woman: pure, chaste yet somehow suggestively sexual, far removed from the 'rubbish' and 'dunghills' to the 'chapel' of religious purity.

The masculine snow, by contrast, reinforces his stereotypical gender role by possessing 'his muffled armies' (l. 19). The male snow is assertive and takes up space, as:

[...] we wake and every road is blockaded  
Every hill taken and every farm occupied  
And the white glare of his tents is on the ceiling. (ll. 20–22)

The unmistakable war imagery here paints the image of snow as a man who controls and conquers the land before him. The snow is pictured not as part of the natural world but akin to the human presence which seeks to 'occupy' and 'take' that around him. The speaker is dominated by this image of masculine conquest, as 'all that dull blue day and on into the gloaming| We have to watch more coming' (ll. 23–24) suggests no end to the male snow's power to coerce and conquer the natural and human worlds.

At the beginning of the poem, in contrast to the 'soft' female snow, male snow is presented as 'a sly one' who 'signs the dry stone with a damp spot' (l. 8) as 'A little longer he clings to the grass-blade tip| Getting his grip' (ll. 11–12). Even in this image of a lesser man, one who 'weakly' signs in 'damp' and is described as 'Traacherous-beggarly' (l. 10), the male retains a threatening air as this underhand behaviour is merely a set up for the imagery of war and conquest later in the

poem. Despite his 'sly' dealings, the male snow 'get[s] his grip' on the world, whereas the female presence merely 'kiss[es]' and touches, but leaves no trace. The male snow is presented both as traditionally masculine and also at times 'waifish' (l. 9), and yet the female snow is one-dimensional.

Such aggressive gendering reinforces the traditional fallacy of nature writing which seeks to elevate man above woman and nature. By picturing male snow in human terms as a 'he' who conquers all, Hughes again confines the power of the natural world within human contexts instead of acknowledging, as many other poems in the anthology seek to, that nature's power lies outside our grasp. The absence of this aggressive gendering in Oswald's poetry emphasises her departure from traditional British nature writing such as this.

In contrast to Hughes' treatment of gender in 'Snow and Snow', Oswald's poem 'Fox' offers a more nuanced and intricate debate surrounding the human construction of gender and how this is inadequate to comprehend the natural world. Oswald presents the figure of a fox who is gendered as a stereotypically feminine woman, 'a fox in her fox-fur', which is juxtaposed throughout with the traditionally masculine traits which the fox also embodies, as she comes, 'a woman with a man's voice', who 'barked at my house', to protect her children.<sup>59</sup> Through this 'collision of opposites', and by initially positioning the fox within these human constructions of gender, Oswald emphasises how we tend to read the world in human terms, whilst noting the incongruity of imposing these terms upon a creature who has no notion of them. As this incongruity is explored, Oswald's speaker moves towards a deeper understanding between herself and the fox as both inhabit the borders of consciousness together through this protective instinct, finding commonalities which transcend the artificially-imposed barrier between animal and human.

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<sup>59</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Fox', in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 5, ll. 5, 15, 8. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

The fox is presented first through sound: 'I heard a cough | as if a thief was there' (ll. 1–2), which situates the fox as an intruder who disrupts the narrator's 'sleep' (l. 3), interposing the animal into the human environment in human terms. As the fox is set in the ambiguous, general term 'fox', rather than named as a vixen, and begins with this intrusion, the reader may assume that the fox is masculine. As the visual joins the audible, however, any assumption of the 'thief' as masculine is cast aside as Oswald presents the fox in a decidedly female manner:

a fox in her fox-fur  
stepping across  
the grass in her black gloves (ll. 5–7)

The fox is described as she immediately appears, again in human terms, wearing 'fox-fur' and 'black gloves', rather than acknowledging these as physical features of a fox's body. The image presented is a traditional, outdated vision of femininity, as 'fox-fur' and 'black gloves' chiefly belong to a bygone age of high fashion, which adds a further incongruity to the fox's presence there. This image evokes a performance of femininity which does not necessarily fit with what lies underneath, as the poem also goes on to do. Oswald immediately contrasts this stereotypically feminine image with the description of the fox 'bark[ing] at my house', but continues to use the gender-neutral term 'fox', rather than specifying vixen or dog/tod, which allows these two differing identities to coincide within one body, despite her main identity as 'her'.

The continual fluctuation between these dual identities, juxtaposed through the intersection of sound and vision, challenges the validity of human perception, as through sound the fox is gendered as masculine, 'with a man's voice', while sight contradicts this as female, 'a woman', 'in her fox-fur'. Through this exploration of doubt in human senses, Oswald expresses the way in which human concepts of reality are fragile and easily manipulated, and then uses this doubt to reach towards a deeper communion between female fox and speaker:

[...] she came  
[...]

as if to say: it's midnight  
and my life  
is laid beneath my children  
like gold leaf (ll. 14–20)

The lack of speech marks here elides the human and the animal into one voice, suggesting that this desperation to lay one's life 'beneath my children' bridges the divide between human and animal. Any other identity as either male or female (lady in traditional evening dress or man's commanding voice) is set aside as the human speaker acknowledges this shared motivation for 'trespass[ing]' (l. 14) over the human-imposed boundary between the natural and the human.

Readers aware of Oswald's connection with Hughes may find the influence of Hughes' famous 'The Thought-Fox' in Oswald's poem, and indeed Oswald's words do conjure up these similarities on first glance. Hughes' 'midnight moment's forest'<sup>60</sup> appears in Oswald's fox's imagined speech: 'it's midnight', and Hughes' realisation that 'something else is alive' (l. 2) drives Oswald's poem as the speaker recognises this other presence in what she assumes to be her environment. The delicacy of Hughes' fox, which 'delicately as the dark snow | [...] touches twig, leaf' (ll. 9–10) and 'Sets neat prints into the snow' (l. 13), contrasted with the 'body that is bold to come' (l. 16), maps almost directly onto Oswald's fox 'in her fox-fur | stepping across | the grass' who also comes 'hungrily asking | in the heart's thick accent' (ll. 11–12). Hughes' contrast between this delicate image of a fox and the 'sudden sharp hot stink of fox' (l. 21) is also very present in Oswald's poem, as the 'cough' and 'bark[...]' of the fox stand at odds with the image of a delicate woman.

Whilst Hughes and Oswald both present a midnight intruder in the form of a fox, Hughes' poem ends by turning this natural image into an image of poetry and the art of writing and 'print[ing]' (l. 24) what 'enters the dark hole of the head' (l. 22). The fox is a tool for Hughes to express what 'I imagine' (l. 1), and the poem reveals itself as a conceit built around this image even from the

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<sup>60</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Thought-Fox', in *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 21, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

title, 'The Thought-Fox' which positions the fox as part of the imagination. Hughes' poem ends with the absent self, as 'The page is printed' (l. 24) seemingly without the speaker, who is annihilated as the 'thought-fox' takes over. Hughes suggests in the poem that imagination and the act of writing a poem is something akin to a fox, which intrudes into the mind, outside human control, and leaves its unmistakable 'stink' there. Oswald's poem instead describes a simple moment of connection between humanity and nature, ending on a sense of communion with the fox rather than the erasure of the self, as fox and human speak together. Oswald's sense of self is not destroyed by the fox's presence through the poem, and because of this she does not demand that the fox turn into a mere symbol for imagination or the art of crafting a poem. This retained human self is not a tool of self-aggrandisement, but instead a way to respect the coexistence of humanity and nature and through this to draw connections between the two, as both human and fox retain their selfhood. One can read Oswald's fox as a symbol of imagination, but the poem is framed in such a way that the reality of a fox and of this encounter between fox and human also stand alone outside this conceit, and the poem works around the assumption of human importance to understand nature and human together in one space.

Hughes' poem 'Wodwo' is also included in *The Thunder Mutters*, and is similar to Oswald's 'Seabird's Blessing' in that the speaker 'disintegrate[s] into the non human' ('A Dew's Harp', p. ix) and speaks from the mouth of an unknown and unknowable creature. In *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes states that he thought of his poems as the animals within them, and that he wanted them to have 'a vivid life of their own'.<sup>61</sup> The free verse form and light punctuation in 'Wodwo' reflect the unhindered, free way in which the creature moves through its surroundings, inhabiting this 'life of [its] own', albeit an imagined one.

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<sup>61</sup> Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 15.

Hughes takes his title from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which a 'wodwo' is a mysterious creature which has often been translated as 'wild troll' or 'wild human', but whose origins are unknown. The epigraph of Hughes' collection by the same name is as follows:

Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and wyth wolves als,  
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,  
Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,  
And etaynez, þat hym aneledede of þe heze felle.<sup>62</sup>

This word 'wodwos' (the plural is used in this epigraph) seems to be left over from a previous form of language, kept in existence by its inclusion in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but unknown by those who read it, and understood only by the context in which it is found, as a foe against which Sir Gawain perseveres. As contemporary readers, then, the concept of a Wodwo is at an even further remove, as a word left over from a language long gone, preserved in a language now largely alien to ours. Hughes uses this ambiguity and mystery to his advantage, as he constructs the Wodwo, attempting in the poem to inhabit a consciousness that predates human consciousness. Hughes creates and moulds this fictional character as the Wodwo explores and discovers its surroundings, planting the seeds of what will become the Christian story of creation and our ideas of chains and hierarchies of being in order, perhaps, to contextualise human existence within the wider natural world which predates our understandings.

The seeds of these ideas and human concepts are implicit in the creature's questions, which prioritise self-knowledge attained from an assessment of its place in the power hierarchies which the creature perceives (or creates). The poem begins with the question 'What am I?' and develops this self-exploration through the poem:

[...] Do these weeds  
know me and name me to each other have they  
seen me before, do I fit in their world?<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Epigraph to *Wodwo*', in *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 146.



The assumption of importance, that the weeds would name, discuss, remember, and fit the Wodwo into their power hierarchies, is akin to humanity assuming its importance and dominance over nature by asserting these power dynamics over our surroundings.

The Wodwo continues 'I seem to have been given the freedom | of this place what am I then?' (ll. 14–15). The passivity of 'have been given' suggests that a higher power exists which has bequeathed this world and power over it to the Wodwo. Here we see the germination of the Christian creation story in which God gives humanity 'the freedom | of this place' and sets them above their animal and natural counterparts as seemingly superior beings. This contemplation of power is quickly followed by 'But what shall I be called am I the first | have I an owner' (ll. 19–20), which again evokes the creation story in which God presents humanity with animals to name them, and thus to assign importance and to validate their existence within human terms, establishing the chain of being. The Wodwo attempts to fit itself into this chain, looking for this validation from higher up: 'have I an owner', and the passive 'what shall I be called', and lower: 'am I the first', which suggests that later creatures fall under the Wodwo's control as it establishes its own perception of reality as the dominant one.

The species-wide egotism to come, which causes this disconnect between humanity and nature, as we historically perceive ourselves as above that around us, is glimpsed as the creature establishes itself as such:

[...] I seem  
separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped  
out of nothing casually (ll. 10–12).

This continues through the poem, as later the creature muses 'I suppose I am the exact centre' (l. 25). This separation of self from its surroundings embodies the long moment of the split between consciousness and nature as the Wodwo displays what will become human

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<sup>63</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Wodwo', in *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. by Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 121, ll. 1, 8–10. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

characteristics of egocentrism, self-aggrandisement, and detachment from the 'root' of our existence.

Janne Stigen Drangsholt suggests that 'the world in "Wodwo" at times appears similar to the precreatio ex nihilo state, which is also referred to in Genesis as "without form, and void" [...] It is a landscape that is mindless, elemental, and barren'.<sup>64</sup> The Wodwo's stream-of-consciousness monologue, which encounters no other voice, reflects this 'precreatio ex nihilo state', as Hughes explores the creation of consciousness and identity out of a relation to the natural world and an unhindered perception and interpretation of what the creature finds there. Gifford suggests that 'it is indeed his relation with nature that the Wodwo questions, is disturbed by, seeks to take identity from', but one may argue that this is more out of necessity than an appreciation of the importance of nature, as the creature is 'dropped | out of nothing' (ll. 11–12) into this 'landscape that is mindless, elemental, and barren'.<sup>65</sup>

Hughes' early poem 'The Man Seeking Experience Enquires His Way of a Drop of Water', written before the establishment of ecopoetry as such, anticipates the ecopoetic criticism of imprinting the self onto nature, an approach which is shown by the end of the poem to be an obviously inexact way of relating to the natural world. The poem imagines the voice of a pompous, grandiose speaker in the first stanzas, set in speech marks, who celebrates 'This droplet [which] has travelled far and studied hard', and that 'Now clings on the cream paint of our kitchen wall'.<sup>66</sup> This speaker asks:

'Venerable elder! Let us learn of you.  
Read us a lesson, a plain lesson how  
Experience has worn or made you anew,

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<sup>64</sup> Janne Stigen Drangsholt, 'Imagination Alters Everything: Ted Hughes and Place', in *Ted Hughes: Nature and Culture*, ed. by Neil Roberts, Mark Wormald, and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 125–139 (p. 128).

<sup>65</sup> Terry Gifford, 'Ted Hughes' Greening and the Environmental Humanities', in *Ted Hughes: Nature and Culture*, ed. by Neil Roberts, Mark Wormald, and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 3–20 (p. 9).

<sup>66</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Man Seeking Experience Enquires His Way of a Drop of Water', in *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 34, ll. 6, 7. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

That on this humble kitchen wall hang now,  
O dew that condensed of the breath of the Word  
On the mirror of the syllable of the Word.' (ll. 19–24)

This speaker attempts, in very humanised terms of grandeur and importance, to elevate the water droplet into an almost deific presence, but in doing so shows the ridiculousness of this notion, as the over-emphasised manner reveals the incongruity of human accolades with the simplicity of water's movement onwards through all things. As the poem draws to a close, these speech marks are dropped, and another speaker reflects on the futility of this pronouncement of venerability imposed upon a drop of water. The second describes how the first speaker 'Listened for himself to speak for the drop's self' (l. 28), and yet 'This droplet was clear simple water still. | It no more responded than the hour-old child' (ll. 29–30). The aggrandisement of the beginning of the poem is reduced by this lack of reaction, as the water remains unchanged by greatness thrust upon it by the first speaker who simply seeks to reflect himself back in this creation of grandeur. Hughes explores how figuring nature in human terms or even reflecting humanity onto nature is inadequate to represent nature's reality, and mocks this human arrogance by presenting it through the voice of a pretentious character who is easily dismissed. This way of considering nature as beyond and unchanged by our perception of its value is an important antecedent to eco-poetry, and particularly to Oswald's eco-poetics which also seeks to cast off this aggrandisement of nature/the reflection of the self within nature in favour of presenting nature as it is.

Oswald's 'A Rushed Account of the Dew' similarly addresses the relationship between human and water, as the human speaker marvels at the ability of dew to 'descend | out of the dawn's mind', to 'fasten the known to the unknown', and 'to be brief | | to be almost actual'.<sup>67</sup> The certainty of the human speaker which begins the poem is undone as the speaker observes the dew which is beyond even our mystical ability to 'blink | to break the spell of daylight' (ll. 1–2),

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<sup>67</sup> Alice Oswald, 'A Rushed Account of the Dew', in *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 13, ll. 9–10, 11, 14–15. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

and therefore becomes the object of intangible desire. Oswald's poem seems to pick up after the end of Hughes' poem, which ends with 'into the mesh of sense, out of the dark,| Blundered the world-shouldering monstrous "I"' (ll. 35–36). This 'monstrous "I"' asserts itself as the dominant force at the beginning of Oswald's poem, only to realise its own shortcomings in relation to the dew which lies beyond our comprehension or power.

The image of the dew as temporary and provisional, 'almost actual' despite this intangible power so far outside human ability, also echoes Hughes' 'Wodwo' as it inhabits the dead-ends and self-corrections of a natural being forging a 'precreatio ex nihilo' existence, as the dew 'fasten[s] the known to the unknown| [...] and then unfasten[s]', and claims 'a place on the earth| only to cancel' (ll. 17–18). In this state of constant self-correction and self-recreation, however, Oswald marks the distinction between water and humanity, as this ability to be continually other than what one is remains outside our capability, as 'the present is beyond me' (l. 6).

Oswald builds up the power of the 'blink' which begins the poem as she reflects on 'what a sliding screen between worlds| is a blink' (ll. 3–4), which elevates the human presence into something almost mystical. This seems at first to echo Hughes' shamanic portrayal of the self in nature, as someone who is able to be both human and natural, to remain in control but also to 'break the spell of daylight' as the connection with the natural world allows her to call forth the day. As the poem continues, however, Oswald reveals the flaws which bar the human speaker from that which they so admire in the dew, as:

I who can hear the last three seconds in my head  
but the present is beyond me  
listen (ll. 5–7)

The admission that 'the present is beyond me' evokes the voice of Lawrence's speaker, who mourns the realisation that '*This is beyond me*', and in so doing admits the gap between human understandings of time and nature as an ongoing loop of dew, daylight, evaporation, back to dew, and so on. Time is the preoccupation of the poem's speaker, who exists 'in this tiny

moment of reflexion' (l. 8), using the archaic spelling of 'reflexion' to acknowledge that 'the present is beyond me', and how she is trapped within 'the last three seconds in my head'. The present is under the authority of water, as the dew falls and 'claim[s] a place on the earth', and yet the human is stuck in the past, in the self-reflection and desire for comprehension which bars her from water's immediacy and fluidity.

The end of the poem cements the intangibility of water's brevity from the human perspective, as Oswald observes:

oh pristine example  
of claiming a place on the earth  
only to cancel (ll. 16–18)

The 'claiming' of 'a place on the earth' is a distinctly human desire, as our perceptions of the importance of place tie us to this way of identifying ourselves in relation to the natural world. The ability of water to claim this place 'only to cancel' lies beyond our capabilities, however, as water is continually changing and morphing into a new identity, whereas the 'I' of the poem remains in its unshakeable position at the beginning of the line. The water flows on past the end of the poem, unhindered by any final punctuation, as the 'rushed account' is necessarily brief as our perception of the dawn's dew is momentary and can only be surface-level.

Robert Barker asserts that:

Almost all the poems of *Falling Awake* are entirely without punctuation [...]. Grave and lithe, the poems have a distinctive clarity of phrase, line, and shape, as if they came out of a trance of waking attention. The poet has walked far into time and listened there and taken the measure of falling things and translated what she has heard into a book of changes to be recited at dawn and dusk. At the end of 'A Rushed Account of the Dew' [...] the speaker voices an old mystery that can never quite be seen or held.<sup>68</sup>

The lack of punctuation in the poem and its arrangement on the page which evokes the trickling movement of the dewdrop emphasise this 'rushed account', and the brevity of water which keeps on becoming elsewhere. Akin to Hughes' 'old mystery that can never quite be seen or

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Barker, 'Gravity and Grace', *Boston Review*, 11 January 2017, Arts in Society section <<https://bostonreview.net/articles/robert-baker-gravity-and-grace/>> [Accessed 23 November 2021].

held' in 'Wodwo', Oswald here reflects the passing of time which brings with it the flowing of water onwards out of our categorisation or perception of it. The 'tiny moment' of the poem is all that the speaker may offer, as 'to be brief' and 'to be almost actual' describes water's fluid essence, but stands outside the confines of the poem or human expression.

Oswald, whilst aware of her Romantic predecessors and their notions of nature as something contained within their perceptions of it, writes largely against this, instead establishing her own poetry about nature which follows ecopoetic ideas of humanity as part of and not in control of the natural world. Through her water poems, Oswald observes water's driving force through landscape and time, and how the humans and the animals around it are equalised as they rely upon this source of life and become its vessels in the eternal cycle of water onwards into other 'bodies of water'.

Oswald's anthologies of poetry about nature and weather reflect her desire to rethink nature poetry not along traditional Romantic lines of thought, in which the individual human is the centre and commander of the scene, but instead upon the 'real work', the 'visionary dreariness' of nature and humanity colliding through time. Oswald presents nature as much as possible in its own terms, using sound to bridge the gap between language and representation, and utilising voices which elide nature and humanity into the same being to speak from the mouths of both at once. Human perception is often presented as flawed and easily deceived by sound or vision, and so Oswald prefers to focus on the natural, as the instincts of animals and the push and pull of water, which is everywhere, are more reliable ways to understand and explore the natural world. Oswald often situates the human characters or speakers of her poems in or near water, but instead of being in control or poised to receive some elevating wisdom from this position as Romantic poets may have done, Oswald's humans remain in this precarious, vulnerable state from which they observe water's power and unshakable drive onwards, regardless of our perceptions of it.

Oswald situates herself in a new, different kind of poetry about nature, which is nonetheless aware of that which has come before. Clare's (and to some extent Wordsworth's) focus on thunder or weather and labouring with the earth, Lawrence's distinction between aqueous and human realms and the danger of attempting to assimilate or annihilate the natural into the human, and Hughes' relation to nature up close, sometimes presented from its own voice, are all incorporated into and built upon in Oswald's poetry. Her approach seeks to equalise human and animal into similar and dependent beings that exist as parts of a wider whole which is ever-changing and unpredictable, and in turn relies upon our bodies and our care to thrive. As a contemporary poet writing in the midst of a climate collapse and the changing landscape of human identity which this instigates, Oswald brings this nature focus into her poetry from those who wrote before her, but leaves out that in earlier poetry which is no longer sustainable in an increasingly fluid, unstable world.

### **Conclusion: 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'**

This thesis has explored the poetry of Jorie Graham and Alice Oswald through the lens of ecofeminist poetry, considering how these concepts of selfhood brought forth by foundational feminist philosophies and ecocriticism have shaped their work and specifically their relation to water. Beginning with feminist ideas of identity creation and naming as a locus of societal identity, I considered how language fits an individual into wider concepts of being, and how ecopoetry and particularly ecofeminist poetry focuses on 'bodies of water' and our place within the continuous water cycle. I explored how human notions of place encounter water's placelessness and how water shapes and fills Graham and Oswald's poetic voices to challenge these ideas of ownership. I analysed how both poets encounter identity in light of their acknowledgement of our acceleration towards extinction, and how their work focuses on the relationship between humanity and nature in order to understand the reality of our interconnectedness and responsibility to that around us.

The confluence of these ideas led to the final two chapters which considered the intersection of place and identity and how both poets write out of their national traditions of nature writing, but also diverge from these traditions as they offer distinct responses to the environmental crisis. By comparing Graham's poetry with transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, I considered how the universality of this movement was partially echoed in Graham's call to a communal sense of identity, but that the voice of the individual, mystic/prophet figure speaking for all *mankind* is complicated and deconstructed as Graham acknowledges the impossibility of plucking an 'I' from the rapidly fragmenting, shared identity of humanity and nature. I explored Niedecker's 'Paeon to Place' as the link between these transcendental ideas and Graham's ecopoetics, as Niedecker's intentional, placed, gendered, and classed poetry of water and her account of living on and in the seasonally disrupted land marked a return from the transcendentalist erasure of Other experience back to the earth and water, the reality of living



with and as part of nature. Graham's poetry approaches the natural world with the respect for nature found also in transcendentalist literature, but casts off the more religious, colonialist assumptions of self-importance and preservation in favour of understanding the real, inextricable relationship between nature/water and humanity as both are subject to the climate crisis.

Oswald's reaction to Romantic notions of embodiment within nature was the background for my discussion of Oswald's preference for nature poetry which seeks to find nature as it is, rather than to shape it around human consciousness. I observed how she builds on aspects of the largely male tradition of nature writers which came before her, but also forges her own way of writing outside this canonical tradition. The unquestioned certainty of the Romantic speaker as the centre of their experience of nature is replaced in Oswald's poetry with voices whose perceptions of that around them are easily deceived, or by a shared voice which inhabits both nature and human, reflecting our shared existence as bodies through which water flows. The human in Oswald's poetry is often vulnerable or at the mercy of the natural or animal worlds, which reacts against the traditional, often Romantic notion of man observing nature from his place as master over it, and instead acknowledges our relative powerlessness in the face of nature's — particularly water's — power.

Through this exploration, it has become clear that water is crucial to these ecocritical debates around the symbiotic relationship between nature and humanity. Both poets, by foregrounding water as the focus of their poems, show our complete dependence on the aqueous world, alongside our inability to entirely control it.

Graham focuses on the fragmentation of the self in the wake of an ever-shrinking inhabitable place for humanity in the world, and the inability of continuing to exist as one individual identity when this fragmentation draws us into an inevitable 'we' who must face extinction together. The urgency of this poetry of climate collapse is clear through the form of Graham's later poems,

which spread out on the page and split lines in the middle of words, or collapse into a block of near-prose phrases and words connected by dashes.

Oswald also focuses on the limits of language, despite her more traditional approach to poetic form. By speaking from inside nature, through characters interwoven with animals or water, or who remain mysterious or anonymous, Oswald seeks to break down this imposed barrier between the human and the non-human and to consider our existence as part of this undeniable whole. Through her long poem *Dart*, Oswald observes the flowing of identity along the river's path, how humanity has depended on this ever-flowing, ever-changing confluence of life to shape communal identity.

Both poets are continually aware of our dependence upon and inextricable existence within the natural world. Though they express these concepts of identity, gender, existence, and nature in different ways through different voices, it remains clear that Graham and Oswald's focus on water is the driving force which illuminates their ecofeminist poetry. Both poets observe the flowing of water — and therefore life — past, into, and through the human and the animal along the natural water course, and explore how this confluence shapes our language, our concepts of being, and our very existence on the planet as 'bodies of water'.

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