# Organic Forms: Poetry, Ecology, Food

By

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## Introduction / Organic Forms and Organic Farms

The title of this dissertation, *Organic Forms*, puns on two terms: the "organic farms" that are becoming an ever-more prominent part of transnational movements for environmentally sustainable local communities, and the apparently outdated concept of "organic form" that played a key role in poetry and literary criticism from the British Romantics to the American New Critics. By dusting off the marginalized concept of organic form in poetry, I hope to show the cultural capacities of the shared metaphor that allows for this pun—that of the poem or the farm as an organism.

Though they share a metaphor, the discourses of organic farming and literary organic form have for the most part developed separately, meeting only at certain key points, as in the work of the farmer and poet Wendell Berry. In literary criticism and theory, organic form often signifies holism, autonomy, and closure. But I argue that organic metaphors do not simply register nostalgia for a holistic nature, as many critics suppose. Instead, a wide range of poets and advocates of sustainable agriculture use organic metaphors to imagine how people can make farms and forms in collaboration with diverse more-than-human agents. Organic metaphors prompt attention to the interchange with the environment that is the necessary other side of an organism's provisional closure and autonomy—whether that interchange connects poet, poem, and audience, or farm, ecosystem, and human community. Poets and advocates of sustainable farming use organic figures to understand how we can participate in systems that are larger than we are without trying to control them. Such collaborative making and participation involves valuing the pleasures of embodied, sensuous life, but also entails vulnerability to loss and mortality. Organic metaphors have thus helped to forge an emerging ecological aesthetics in which the pleasures of the senses are inseparable from ethical humility. This humility comes not only from accepting the mortal embodiment we share with the other life forms we depend on, but also from participating willingly in systems larger than ourselves.

In this dissertation, I aim not to define a certain type of poetic form as "organic," but to explore the ways in which diverse poetics that rely on organic metaphors and rhetorics of "life" intersect, conflict, take off in different directions, close down formal possibilities or proliferate them, and disable experimentation or enable it. While I do not believe that one kind of poetic form can be more "organic" than another, I do believe that some kinds of *poetics* are more lively—more generative, more fruitful—than others. In bringing mainstream poets like Berry together with experimental poets like Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, I argue that attention to organic form undermines the divide between mainstream and experimental poetry, a divide that critics have often overemphasized. By examining how shared formal tropes can result in poems whose shapes vary widely, I suggest that metaphors are tools for thought which reveal connections among poetries that look quite different on the page. In each chapter, I show how advocates of sustainable agriculture converge with poets in using organic metaphors to think and *feel* through ecological interconnectedness.

This introduction not only reviews the literature on organic form and on organic farming, but also begins to make the argument I have just outlined. I aim to show that organic metaphors are not always about nostalgic reconnection with an authentic nature, but instead may envision making—the making of a farm, a poem, or a community—as an act of collaboration with more-than-human agents and as participation in ecological processes that we cannot control. In the first section of the introduction, I survey the history of organic form in poetry and literary theory, attending especially to the fraught politics that have contributed to its current marginalization. I then turn to recent critiques by ecocritics Timothy Morton and Ursula Heise, both because they connect literary organic form with organic farming and because their otherwise very different arguments converge in misconstruing the importance of organic metaphors to ecological thought. In the second section, I offer a brief history of organic farming, focusing on its discourses and the work of a few of its key

proponents. I show how, in writings by advocates of sustainable agriculture from Sir Albert Howard to Will Allen, organic farms are not "natural," but made—constructed deliberately in collaboration with what Howard calls "minute agents." Finally, in the third section, I argue that organic metaphors have, in fact, laid the groundwork for the signal intellectual moves of a wide range of thinkers in the environmental humanities. While critics like Morton and Heise sideline organic metaphors, in doing so they miss the important conceptual role that such metaphors—and the literary and popular discourses that helped articulate them—have played in the history of ecological thought, and especially of the pragmatically optimistic wing of environmentalism that has empowered key insights in the environmental humanities.

**Organic Metaphors in Poetry, Literary Theory, and Ecocriticism**

If "organic" usually expresses approbation when used in reference to food today, the term has long functioned more pejoratively in the academy, especially in literary studies. According to the standard caricature, organic figures take their force from a sense of rootedness and naturalness that risk nativism, nationalism, conservatism, or even fascism. As my review of the literature on organic form in poetry and the organic farming movement will show, these risks are real. At the same time, I hope to demonstrate that organic metaphors are powerful and politically multivalent, and therefore deserve serious attention rather than simple rejection.

But first, a word about terms. In this dissertation, I will most often refer to "organic form" when discussing the discourse of literary organic form, or to "organic metaphors" when discussing tropes used by poets or advocates of sustainable agriculture. Sometimes I use the term "the organic" to name a concept that emerges from the discourses of both literary organic form and the local, organic farming movement. Because I find the terms "organicism" and "organicist" cumbersome, I avoid them whenever possible. Organicism signifies a system of thought, in any field, in which the

object of study is understood via the metaphor of an organism; the Gaia hypothesis, for example, which represents the earth itself as an organism, is organicist in this sense. I therefore reserve "organicism" and "organicist" to refer specifically to systematic ideologies rather than simply to discourses that involve organic metaphors. In practice, these terms appear most often when I paraphrase critics who use them.

Although this dissertation urges a critical reconsideration of organic form and organic metaphors, there is good reason for caution about the politics of organic form and organic farming. These have been associated with the concept of an organic society, which risks naturalizing social and political forms and justifying the status quo. In his definition of "organic" in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams argues that in conservative social thought from the nineteenth century on, "an organic society was one that has been 'grown' rather than 'made.'" At first this played out in "criticism of revolutionary societies or proposals as *artificial* and against the 'natural order' of things," and later it came to distinguish "between primarily agricultural and primarily industrial societies" (228). Williams notes that "organic" is used to refer to farming and to art and literature at the end of the entry (229), but he also implies that literary thought was integral to the development of the term. He contends that "the Romantic movement" and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in particular distinguished between "organic" and "mechanical," which were once synonyms, in response to "the new significance of machines in the Industrial Revolution" (228; see also 202). Thus the literary organic form of Coleridge and William Wordsworth developed in tandem with Edmund Burke's idea of society as a living organism in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. While Burke used an organic metaphor to decry the rationalism of the French Revolution, which threatened to divide up social relations in new ways and dispense with conventions so old they had come to seem natural, he used the word

"organic" itself in a different sense from later conservative social critics, as Williams notes.[1] Burke borrows the word "organic" from vitalist natural history and uses it to characterize the disorganized people and energies that he feared the French revolution would unleash. For Burke's inheritors, however, "organic" came instead to describe the ideal society, where traditional institutions that have built up over time constitute living systems.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century concepts of an organic society sometimes call upon the older idea of the body politic; they therefore not only claim that a society has the autonomy and coherence of an organism, but also imply hierarchical organization and fascist functionalism. Each part exists only in and through the whole and to serve the whole. Herbert Spencer's evolutionary social organicism, for example, literalized the traditional metaphor of the body politic, linking organic metaphors with social Darwinism.[2] In the twentieth century, the organic takes on even more disturbing tones in some quarters; for example, the early organic farming movement in the UK in the 1930s and 40s was associated with right-wing politics and with a quasi-fascistic concept of society as an organism.

Moreover, organic form has also been considered *literarily* conservative.[3] Organic metaphors

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[1] Williams quotes Burke calling the French "the organic moleculae of a disbanded people" and notes that this has the sense of "*atomistic*" (228). In using "organic" in this sense, Burke was borrowing from Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, an eighteenth-century natural historian who theorized that organisms are made up of "organic particles" with vitalist power (Gigante 14-15).

[2] In "The Social Organism" (1860), for example, Spencer argues that society is like an organism because its structures diversify and gain complexity as it becomes larger. He contends that "society is a growth and not a manufacture" (198) and compares telegraph wires to nerves, trade to blood, and even the House of Parliament to a brain! (232, 220, 229). Spencer's organicism involves a teleological understanding of biological and social evolution: he compares the "lowest races" to microscopic organisms and European societies to so-called higher animals (207).

[3] The entry on "Organicism" in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* neatly demonstrates the tendency to fuse the conservative social and literary uses of "organic": "It is said that even though organicism may reflect the human attempt to bring order to an otherwise chaotic existence, it also parallels the undesirable values of totalitarian systems of government or repressive cultural conventions" (869).

for language and literature are at least as old as Plato and Aristotle,[4] but literary organic form takes on its modern contours in the Romantic era. In the Anglo-American tradition, Samuel Taylor Coleridge has been most influential: he defined organic form as form that emerges from within and develops in tandem with content. Coleridge, writing before disciplinary divisions had become entrenched, thought through organic form across what we now consider the disparate fields of biology, poetry, politics, and religion. That is, he was using organic metaphors to understand not just poems, but also social forms and organisms themselves.[5]

In his lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge offers the most clear and succinct formulation of the distinction between "mechanic" and "organic" form that runs throughout his work. "The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material" ("Shakespeare's Judgment" 462). Not only does the form bear no necessary relation to the content, but the shaping force acts on the material from the outside, as Coleridge emphasizes through his comparison of mechanic form to sculpting or pottery, "as when to a mass of wet clay we give it whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened." In contrast, "the organic form . . . is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such is the form" (462). Here, form and content are inextricable, as in a plant, and the shaping force acts from within. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge elaborates his concept of organic versus

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[4] Plato's claim that "logos is a zoon" is at the center of Derrida's well-known argument, in "Plato's Pharmacy," about logocentrism in Western philosophy (79). Aristotle's famous dictum that plots should have a beginning, a middle, and an end involves an organic metaphor: "it is necessary to construct the plot . . . concerning a single action that is whole and complete (having a beginning, middle, and end) so that, like a single integrated organism, it achieves the pleasure natural to it" (*Poetics* XXIII.2-6). In a commentary on the *Poetics*, O. B. Hardison, Jr., points out that Aristotle "is not referring to the sort of organicism that sees each part of a literary work as expressive of the whole in the same way that each cell of a plant or animal is a microcosm of the whole" (Aristotle 261). While Romantic poets rely on plant metaphors, Aristotle's animal metaphors instead emphasize a work's proper order, proportion, and scale.

[5] For an example of the latter, see his *Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* (written in 1816, first published in 1848), more often known simply as *Theory of Life*.

mechanic form by distinguishing imagination from fancy. While fancy is a mechanical ability to assemble borrowed parts into a fictitious picture, imagination organically fuses opposites, approaching divinity in its capacity to create the new and to dissolve the Cartesian subject-object divide. Coleridge calls imagination "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (*Biographia Literaria* 167), thus providing the theoretical justification for what John Keats calls William Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" (Keats 894).

An ambiguity that still haunts the poetics and politics of organic form is already in play in Coleridge's work. It emerges from the tension between growth and will or consciousness: how does the unconscious, of-its-own-accord growth implied by the organic metaphor square with the poet's conscious creative act, or with all the plans and decisions that construct societies? To reconcile the organism's unconscious process of growth with the poet's conscious agency, Coleridge had to make some theoretical backflips, arguing that we must *choose* to be what the organic metaphor implies that we naturally are.[6] Coleridge's rhetorical move reveals a problematic tendency of organic metaphors in general: the purportedly descriptive metaphoric vehicle can soon end up prescribing the form of its tenor. Organic metaphors can make willed acts seem natural or prescribe acts by claiming that they are natural—i.e., you *ought* to do something because it is natural for you to do that thing.[7] By the same logic, organic metaphors can naturalize the political or social status quo: things *should* be the way they already are. Converting "is" into "ought" in this way is politically risky, but this capacity to pivot from will to growth also gives organic metaphors their power. This ambiguity does not have to

[6] Here I am referring to a passage in *The Stateman's Manual* that I analyze in more detail in chapter two.

[7] The best example of this that I can think of is a parodic one in Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*: when the young protagonist, Pompilia, goes to the Archbishop and asks to be placed in a nunnery so that she can avoid her much older husband's sexual advances, the Archbishop compares Pompilia to a fig and argues that she should submit to her husband because it is natural for a bird to eat a fig and a fig cannot refuse to be eaten (Book VII, lines 816-840). For an analysis of Browning's resistance to Coleridge's organic form in the poem, see my article, "Browning's Critique of Organic Form in *The Ring and the Book*" in the Fall 2014 issue of *Victorian Poetry*.

end in conservative or traditionalist political prescription, but, in the work of writers from the last half of the twentieth century, can instead encourage us to participate consciously and carefully in ecological processes that we cannot control and that include our own mortality.

This tension between growth and will also results in a specifically literary ambiguity: is it the mind of the poet or the poem itself that grows and fulfills its form as a plant does? On one hand, seeing the poet through the metaphor of the plant's flourishing leads to the Romantic cult of the individual genius with its denigration of craft and its privileging of a solipsistic, lyric "I." On the other hand, seeing the poem as a plant implies that it is grown rather than made; the poet as intentional agent, as well as the poem as a rhetorical act aimed at an audience, are left out. Mid-twentieth-century American New Critics pivoted from the first to the second in reworking Coleridge's organic form into a doctrine about the autonomy of poetic language that supported their interpretive practice of close reading for paradox, irony, and ambiguity. In *The Well-Wrought Urn*, for example, Cleanth Brooks uses the metaphor of the poem as a plant to insist that literary criticism should properly focus on the poem itself.[8] The New Critics promoted what James Breslin has called a "rigidified" modernism, a modernism whose hero and guide was T. S. Eliot. Even as the New Critical hold on ways of reading in the academy was being consolidated, M. H. Abrams published his seminal study, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), with its major insight that the approach to poetry that New Critics and Eliotic modernists advocated was "genetically" linked to the Romantic criticism they pretended to reject. Abrams' lasting contribution has been his insight that Romantic views of poetry made a ghostly return in modernist theories that disavowed them: for Abrams, the modernist claim that the poem is a "heterocosm," or world unto itself, was simply the other side of the coin of

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[8] In the first chapter, I analyze New Critical organic form in more depth, along with Muriel Rukeyser's and Charles Olson's critiques of it.

the Romantic, expressive theory of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion."[9] The link between them was the organic metaphor, which can lead in either an expressive or heterocosmic direction depending on whether it is applied to the poet or to the poem.[10] The metaphor of a plant growing from within into its own proper form becomes, for Abrams, a major key into the preoccupations of literary criticism from the Romantic period to the time of his writing.

In "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," Paul de Man deconstructed New Critical organic form, arguing that the New Critics, in seeing the poem as a natural object, obscure both the intentionality of the act of writing and the role of time in the act of interpretation.[11] Citing W. K. Wimsatt's "intentional fallacy," de Man argues that, for the New Critics, "the language of literature is of the same order, ontologically speaking, as a natural object" (24). This assertion "reifies the literary entity" and neglects the fact that a poem is made to be read (26, 23-24). De Man traces this tendency to treat "literary texts as if they were natural objects" to the organic metaphor that the New Critics inherited from Coleridge via I. A. Richards (27). But de Man notes the paradox that, as he puts it elsewhere, "the American New Critics arrived at a description of literary language as a

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[9] Elaborating a similar distinction, W. K. Wimsatt argues that the principles of organic form "blend a measure of poetic structuralism, or objective doctrine concerning poetic form, with a measure of geneticism or psychological doctrine concerning the author's consciousness or unconsciousness" (68). Wimsatt dismisses this latter component as the "intentional" or "genetic" fallacy, contending that only the finished poem is whole and unified and that the idea that a poet should compose as a plant grows emphasizes a spontaneity that the poem, as a contrived, artificial object, does not have. In minimizing this "genetic" aspect of the metaphor, Wimsatt falls in line with the New Criticism's revival of Coleridge's organic form.

[10] On one hand, Abrams argues that the Romantic theory of poetry as the unmediated or even unconscious expression of the genius-poet emerges from the organic metaphor: "the momentous historical shift from the view that the making of a work of art is a supremely purposeful activity to the view that its coming-into-being is, basically, a spontaneous process independent of intention, precept, or even consciousness, was the natural concomitant of an organic aesthetics" (187). On the other hand, he shows how the concept of the poem as a heterocosm, or "an object-in-itself, a self-contained universe of discourse," develops from "the displacement, as creative principle, of both Jehovah, Demiurge, and Prometheus by an indwelling Soul of Nature," as a result of which "the real and poetic worlds alike become self-originating, autonomous, and self-propelling, and both tend to *grow* out into their organic forms" (272, 282). Thus Abrams exposes the New Criticism's Romantic roots: though the concept of the poem as heterocosm "at the heart of much of the 'new criticism'" is "often presented in explicit opposition to the cognate thesis that a poem is the expression of personality," they both in fact emerge from the Romantic metaphor of the poem as an organism (272).

[11] "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism" was written in 1954 and later included in the revised second edition of *Blindness and Insight* (1983).

language of irony and ambiguity despite the fact that they remained committed to a Coleridgian notion of organic form" (104). He explains this in terms of the "ambivalence" between intentionality and "the organic analogy," or what I have called the tension between will and growth. While de Man contends that both Coleridge and Abrams are aware of this tension and nevertheless see "poetic imagination" as "intentional,"[12] he argues that in the New Critics this tension instead results in a "curious discrepancy between their theoretical assumptions and their practical results" (28). The New Critics "pragmatically entered into the hermeneutic circle of interpretation, mistaking it for the organic circularity of natural processes" (29), but when they interpreted poems, they found paradox, irony, and ambiguity that push against and ultimately "explode" the organic analogy (28). The New Critics, of course, did not think that their interpretations subverted their premises, so they ended up not only reifying poems, but also attempting an impossible totalization of the act of interpretation itself.[13]

De Man's critique of organic form plays a key role in his well-known turn away from the earlier dominance of symbol (metaphor that believes in itself) and toward allegory (metaphor that announces, or denounces, itself) (see, e.g., 191). His arguments have contributed to the critical consensus that dismisses organic form as literarily retrograde. Chicago School critic Murray Krieger suggests how organicism's drive toward literary totality came to be seen as politically retrograde as well: "Analogizing (as many have come to do) the text to a body politic, one could see a unifying principle as not only totalizing but also totalitarian, so that the text as a closed system becomes a

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[12] De Man cites the same passage from *The Statesman's Manual* that I referred to above, but he reads it as an acknowledgement that "poetic imagination" is intentional rather than natural (28), not as a problematic conversion of natural description into political prescription.

[13] De Man argues that the act of interpretation always takes place in time and cannot be totalized (32). "Poetry is the foreknowledge of criticism" in that the critical act "simply tries to reach the text itself," making more explicit what we already know in part from a first reading of the poem (31, 30). Thus literary form itself is a temporal process: "The idea of totality suggests closed forms that strive for ordered and consistent systems and have an almost irresistible tendency to transform themselves into objective structures. Yet, the temporal factor, so persistently forgotten, should remind us that the form is never anything but a process on the way to its completion" (31).

closed society and hence repressive" (4). While such prominent critics as Helen Vendler, as well as some ecocritics like John Elder, still deploy Romantic or New Critical concepts of organic form, the dominant opinion in literary criticism rejects organicism for its social and linguistic politics.[14]

In contrast, Krieger and Jacques Derrida both contend that the putatively closed organic form in fact undermines the ideological fiction of its own closure. Responding to de Man in *A Reopening of Closure: Organicism Against Itself* (1989), Krieger acknowledges that organicism "takes itself as metaphor seriously—which is to say literally" (5), but contends that organic forms in fact open their own closure by staging it against "the ever-opening character of language" (27). Revising Cleanth Brooks, Krieger claims that "the well wrought urn should rather be thought of as the well cracked urn, its substance flowing through it until one cannot tell what is inside from what is outside" (29). However, Jacques Derrida, in a reading of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," depicts this urn, the traditional sign of the closed poem in which "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," as not cracked, but constitutively open.[15] While Benjamin depicts the ideal, universal language as a shattered amphora, the fragments of which are actual languages, Derrida writes that "the amphora is one with itself though opening itself to the outside—and this openness opens the unity, renders it possible, and forbids it totality" (122). Derrida's and Krieger's analyses are important to this project because they suggest some of the modes by which closed forms give rise to, or flow in and out of, open forms.

Although de Man's assessment of organic form remains the dominant one in literary studies,

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[14] In a recent review of Tomas Transtromer in *The New Republic*, Vendler endorses a New Critical version of organic form that definitely heads in the heterocosmic direction, writing, "the poet creates a new and unique reality, non-existent until his words bring it into being."

[15] "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty*"* is, of course, the closing line of John Keats' "The Well-Wrought Urn." As the preoccupations of Brooks, Krieger, Benjamin, and Derrida show, the urn is a key figure through which aesthetic and organic forms have been imagined. The same is true in poetry itself: besides Keats' urn, there are, for example, Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" (76), Marianne Moore's "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish" (83), and H.D.'s "alabaster jar" in *The Flowering of the Rod*, the third book of *Trilogy* (159, 172).

recently a few critics have attempted to redeem at least Romantic versions of it from critical rejection. While Denise Gigante, in *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (2009), emphasizes the vitalist power that shaped organicism in science and literature during the Romantic period, David Fairer, in *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (2009), historicizes an early concept of "the organic" that he argues is different from Coleridge's later, German-influenced idealist organicism.[16] Both Fairer and Gigante seek to show that organic form cannot be equated with organic unity or holism because it in fact emphasizes change—but for Fairer, this change is historicist, empirical continuity, while for Gigante it is dynamic, vitalist power.[17] Fairer argues that "the organic" is not equivalent to an "organic*ism* that privileges the holistic" and that comes out of the "'vitalist analogy' of creativity" (10), but Gigante frankly advocates vitalist analogy as a way of reading Romantic poems. Gigante makes the more polemical argument: she takes on de Man's elevation of allegory over symbol (33-35), champions formalism (40), and advocates analogy as a method for literary criticism (45-46). Arguing that, for the Romantics, "life was a version of power, and power was life" (2), Gigante leans in to the vitalist aspects of organic form to refute its condemnation as politically retrograde.[18] Gigante argues that vitalist living forms "retain their capacity to rise up from their prescribed place

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[16] Fairer links the organic to empiricist continuity and historicism as against both idealism and deconstruction. While idealist organic form should be rejected for its conservatism, Fairer argues that to dismiss the Coleridge circle's concerns for history and continuity as conservative is too simple. During the revolutionary 1790s, Coleridge and his friends were thinking through the meaning of continuity, history, and identity at a time of radical disruptions, and the organic that they formulated was not a closed, atemporal unity, but attention to the process of change over time.

[17] They are also both less invested in tracing the convergence of the Romantic and deconstructivist projects than other recent scholars, such as Katherine Wheeler and Charles I. Armstrong. In *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (2003), Armstrong argues that literary critics should reconsider organicism and positions his own work as both a "deconstruction" and a "reconstruction" of it (2). Armstrong pursues an avowed critical theory of organicism through German idealism, British Romanticism, and deconstruction.

[18] Gigante notes that "the problem with Romantic organicism as it is traditionally understood on the idealist model is that it leaves out the dynamics of power underwriting unexpected forms of both nature and art" (6). This is why she focuses on failed or formless poems—those that emerge from a vitalist conception of organic form but do not achieve closure. This is also why she reads these poems in the context of an account of vitalist natural history in the Romantic period: "once life was viewed vitalistically as power, science and aesthetics confronted the same formal problems" (3).

in a system and assert their own Polypennatur" (their polyp-nature, their ability to regenerate) and thus "resist . . . abstract principles of classification and prescribed patterns of organization" (29). Here the autonomy and regenerative capacities that vitalism emphasizes pull against the hierarchical, totalizing tendencies of organic form.

Gigante's work presents an opportunity to distinguish more carefully between vitalism and organicism. While vitalism involves the notion that some kind of vital force or energy distinguishes life from non-life, organicism is usually more concerned with form and the relationship between parts and whole—or, in later incarnations, with systems and their structure. Much of the energy in the new materialism arguably comes from a revised and (pardon the pun) revitalized vitalism. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, for example, political theorist Jane Bennett develops what she calls a vital materialism to emphasize the agency of non-human creatures and inanimate objects. It is somewhat odd that Gigante uses vitalism to subvert the problematic politics of organic form, given that vitalist politics are usually considered even worse. Donna Jones, for example, has shown how Henri Bergson's *élan vital*—which influenced modernist poets such as Eliot significantly—is intertwined with racist ideologies.

The history of organic form in ecocriticism varies somewhat from its trajectory in literary criticism more broadly. Early ecocritics sometimes articulated ecologically inflected versions of literary organic form. John Elder's work, in particular, showed how literary forms mimic processes of decay as well as growth. More recently, ecocriticism as a field has turned away from its early focus on American nature writing and toward transnational issues of environmental justice as well as genres and texts that are not environmentalist or obviously about nature. As prominent ecocritics have sought to make the field more theoretically sophisticated—rather than resistant to theory, as much early ecocriticism was—they have done so, in part, by criticizing and rejecting literary organic form, organicist versions of ecology, and even organic farming. These critical moves risk reinforcing

the common academic conviction that mainstream literary and popular discourses are politically and theoretically naïve and always-already co-opted. I argue, on the contrary, that literary and popular discourses of the organic have much to teach us.

An acerbic critique of the organic is key to Dana Phillips' important 2003 book, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*. In his polemical analysis of ecocriticism, nature writing, and ecology itself, Phillips portrays early ecocritics as conservative and nostalgic, trying to escape from poststructuralist theory back into critical credulity about representation. He argues that ecocritics do not know enough about the science of ecology, often believing in organicist or holistic models that ecologists were beginning to discredit in the 1930s. Phillips also contends that ecology itself is not yet a unified science, and that in its initial impulse, its focus on a scale larger than that of the individual organism, and the idealization of equilibrium and balance still prominent in popular versions of it, ecology runs counter to evolutionary biology.[19]

Phillips links ecology's organicist past with ecocritics' nostalgia for literary organic form. Ecocritics, he contends, have "seized upon ecology" to buttress their arguments "because they have thought that ecology offers scope for the vibrant depiction of a natural world conceived of organically. The latter is something that literature used to offer, until theory had its way with it—or so it is said" (51). Phillips depicts ecocritics as engaged in an especially naïve effort to bring literary organic form in through the back door. Ecocritics who see literature as a "model for understanding nature" and the best texts as "transparent windows on the world" are "trying to revive the idea that great literature is organic, without saying plainly that this is what they are trying to do and without recognizing that, except for diehard aesthetes, the organic concept of literature was directed more toward a method of reading than toward a view of the ontological status of literary texts" (140). Phillips thus accuses ecocritics not only of having an inaccurate, organicist understanding of ecology,

[19] See especially Phillips' second chapter, "Ecology Then and Now" (42-82).

but also of believing that works of literature, by imitating natural processes, show themselves to have the "ontological status" of nature.[20] Phillips thus falls in with, and advances, de Man's critique of organic form, treating metaphor and symbol harshly. He argues that ecocritics allow analogy, "in which the differences between terms are preserved and clearly understood," to slide into metaphor, "an obfuscating equation in which the differences between terms have disappeared completely," and finally into symbol, in which "the emotional appeal of the vehicle . . . displace[s] the tenor almost entirely" (76). While analogies in which distinctions are maintained have guided the science of ecology, Phillips argues that they are irresponsible and of little use by the time they become symbols: "all this can happen even when the original analogy is a dry one that would seem to have very little symbolic promise—as when the ecosystem concept, with its borrowings from cybernetics, is taken to imply a mysterious interconnection of one and all" (76).

Phillips' book has helped to push ecocriticism in productive new directions, challenging the field to become more theoretically and scientifically sophisticated. His suspicion about the organic persists in more recent work by two prominent ecocritics, Timothy Morton and Ursula Heise, who, in the course of making quite divergent arguments, criticize organic tropes and link them to the organic farming movement. While Morton draws on deconstruction to emphasize the "dark" and "queer" aspects of ecological thought and to develop what he calls "object-oriented ontology," Heise argues for an eco-cosmopolitanism that grapples with the global scale of environmental crisis and eschews what she considers the comforting delusions of localism. As I argue in the third section of this introduction, lacunae in their claims show how dismissing the organic risks misleading us about both the history and the capacities of organic metaphors and the local, organic farming movement. The problem is not simply that Morton and Heise risk misrepresenting the role of

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[20] Phillips' examples include the 1978 essay in which William Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism" (141-142) and John Elder's *Imagining the Earth* (152-159).

organic metaphors in ecological thinking, but also that they minimize the role that literary and popular discourses have played and continue to play in shaping environmentalist thought and practices.

In *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Timothy Morton argues that thinking about what he calls "the mesh"—that is, "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things" (28)—in fact moves us away from concepts like "nature" and even the "environment." He thus extends the arguments he made in *Ecology Without Nature* (2009) in a more accessible, conversational idiom. While Phillips criticized early ecocritics for resisting theory, Morton's signal move is to connect ecological thought more integrally with postmodernism and deconstruction, using concepts like "queer ecology" and "dark ecology" to argue that that ecological interconnectedness itself unsettles normative, stable notions of the subject ("Guest Column: Queer Ecology," *ET* 59).[21]

Morton offers a fairly standard critique of "the touchy-feely, ultimately authoritarian organicism upon which claims of interconnectedness are usually built" (*ET* 23). He defines organicism as "an aesthetic image of a 'natural' fit between form and content and between parts and the whole" (23), and insists that his concept of "the mesh" "isn't 'organic,' in the sense of form fitting function" (30).[22] He also separates the mesh from holism, defining that term with a tag line frequently used to define organic form: "Holism maintains that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. 'Nature' tends to be holistic. Unlike Nature, what the ecological thought is thinking isn't more than the sum of its parts . . . the mesh isn't bigger than the sum of its parts" (35).[23] In fact,

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[21] Phillips' linkage of evolutionary biology and deconstruction also continues in Morton, though in a more quixotic form as Morton puts Richard Dawkins' neo-Darwinism and Emmanuel Levinas' ethics into conversation with each other—a strange conversation indeed, though a fascinating one.

[22] Morton's argument here is based on his reading of Darwin—that evolution is not about adaptation and does not aim to "fit" (30).

[23] Morton makes this claim more explicitly in his *PMLA* guest column on "Queer Ecology": "Organicism is holistic and substantialist, visualizing carbon-based life-forms (organic in another sense) as the essence of livingness" (277). Morton also contends that organicist concepts of nature help make it masculine and homophobic: "For about two hundred

Morton specifically aimed to avoid resonance with organic figures and communications technology when choosing the term "the mesh":

> Most words I considered to describe interdependence were compromised by references to the Internet—like "network." Either that, or they were compromised by vitalism, the belief in a living substance. "Web" is a little bit too vitalist and a little bit Internet-ish for my taste, so it loses on both counts. "Mesh" is short, shorter in particular than "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things." (28).[24]

As Morton indicates, the dominant terms for ecological interconnectedness that he is trying to avoid—network and web—evoke both the Internet and organic metaphors. But, as we will see, this is no accident, either historically or conceptually.[25]

While Morton criticizes and distances himself from vitalism and organicism, he also links organic food and farming with the old-school environmentalism he is trying to transform. He uses "buying organic" as a shorthand caricature for this environmentalism in presenting an insight that is key to my own argument:

> Environmentalism and postmodernism appear to be opposites. One is "artificial," the other

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years, the heavy lifting for homophobic Nature has been organicism, which we've explored in its roles as a bearer of ideas of holism and squishiness. Organicism polices the sprawling, tangled, queer mesh by naturalizing sexual difference" (*ET* 84). In "Queer Ecology," Morton ties this homophobic Nature to the idea of the body itself as a "closed form" (274) and to erroneous claims about the naturalness of heterosexuality and binary gender systems (276, 278). Though Morton implies that organicism necessarily involves binary gender norms, I do not think that they are essential to organic form.

[24] "Mesh" seems an odd choice in many ways, especially since the word often denotes something basically flat and two-dimensional, whether made of wire or fabric. But Morton likes the way it evokes "'a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled . . . a snare'" (28) because that's how he sees environmental threats: as a trap for thought as well as for living beings, a snare that will turn us all into deconstructionists.

[25] In fact, Morton himself mentions one route by which organic form helped foster ecological thought in his "Queer Ecology" guest column, where he summarizes his case against the organic: "Organicism is not ecological. In organic form the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Many environmentalisms—even systems theories—are organicist: world fits mind, and mind fits world. The teleology implicit in this chiasmus is hostile to inassimilable difference. Interdependence implies differences that cannot be totalized" (278). Those organicist systems theories are, on the contrary, key to the development of the ecological thought Morton champions; as we will see, organic metaphors aimed at holism in fact foster attention to the kind of open-ended interconnectedness that undoes closure.

> "natural." One is about human products, the other about nonhuman being. One involves buying organic, the other implies celebrating artifice. One likes integration and authenticity; the other likes disintegration and pastiche. Yet postmodernism and environmentalism are really two sides of the same historical moment. (102-103)

This idea, which Morton explains in a section titled "The Cultural Logic of Early Environmentalism" in a play on Frederic Jameson, is a compelling one. Morton suggests that "perhaps postmodern art and philosophy were the heavy digging for the emerging ecological constellation" (104). As he does at more length in *Ecology without Nature*, here Morton argues that postmodern art is environmentalist in that it points to its "ambience," its environment, what surrounds us in the moment of viewing or performance (103). His examples include Brian Eno and house music, John Cage's *4'33"* of silence, postmodern installations by artists like Dan Flavin and Comora Tolliver, experimental films by Stan Brakhage, and *Bladerunner*, as well as earlier literary works like *Frankenstein* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Morton rejects usual forms of "nature writing," contending that "ecological elegies" and "happy-happy-joy-joy eco-sincerity" are both irrelevant and on the way out (104-105).

This dissertation picks up on Morton's suggestion, but I argue that the "heavy digging" that postmodernism has done for ecological thought happened *through* organic metaphors, not in spite of them. Whether we take "heavy digging" as an agricultural or architectural pun, Morton's odd figure gets it more right than his explicit argument.[26] Digging is work with the world, work that reshapes and transforms it. While Morton sets "organic" and "artifice" up as opposites in the paragraph above, the *making* of organic farms and forms has been important both to advocates of sustainable agriculture and to postmodern poets, as I will show. Morton aims to jettison environmentalism's

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[26] Morton has even been proposing that agriculture itself is the problem, and said something quite frightening at the end of a recent talk about how perhaps the "pharmaceutical industry" could solve the problem of food production! ("Dark Ecology").

usual conceptual and canonical freight, contending that postmodern attention to ambience enables us to think in a way that's truly ecological and leaves behind Nature and the organic.[27] But organic metaphors in fact enable both ecological thought and postmodern poetry, connecting them and crossing between them.[28]

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), Ursula Heise's main target is not the organic, but the rhetoric of the local in American environmentalist discourses and ecocriticism. Heise argues that environmentalism and ecocriticism need to move from an emphasis on "sense of place" to a "sense of planet" (55-56), or from local essentialism to an eco-cosmopolitanism that incorporates insights from cultural theory and geography about the always-hybrid formation of the subject and the social production of space (42-43, 45-46). While Heise focuses on the rhetoric of the local, organic figures show up at key junctures in her argument. For example, the "Blue Planet" photographs of the whole earth from outer space are central to the story she tells about the emergence of an environmental imagination of the global (22-23).[29]

If Heise sets up her ecocosmopolitanism as a departure from such holistic images of the planet, she also links the environmentalist sense of place that she criticizes with the organic farming movement. The organic farming movement shows up primarily in the figure of Wendell Berry,

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[27] In *Ecology without Nature*, however, Morton discusses what he calls the "new organicism," or experimental art that uses algorithms to create forms that mimic natural ones.

[28] There's been much debate about how the term "postmodern" should be applied to poetry, which I will not summarize here. The poets I study in this dissertation are all postmodern if the term is taken as a period designation. If "postmodern" is taken to mean experimental or in the modernist tradition, some of the poets I look at fit the bill and others do not. (Charles Olson, whose work I analyze in the first chapter, coined the term postmodern; Wendell Berry has sharply criticized some of the literary and cultural trends associated with postmodernism.) But part of my argument is that these divides need not be so heavily policed.

[29] These holistic images, Heise argues, became linked to two environmental allegories about global connectedness in the 1960s and 70s—a utopian one that saw the earth as unified, balanced, and harmonious, as in James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, and an apocalyptic one that saw the earth as fragile and threatened (24-26). While those "representations relied on summarizing the abstract complexity of global systems in relatively simple and concrete images that foregrounded synthesis, holism, and connectedness" (63), Heise advocates a more nuanced attention to global dynamics and contestation.

whose advocacy for local farming, food, and communities Heise cites several times in the chapter (31, 37-38, 48). Heise points out that Berry's attempt at self-sufficient farming, as well as similar projects by Gary Snyder and Scott Russell Sanders, are enabled by "social and financial privilege" (48, 31). While she calls these projects "valuable thought experiments," her primary practical objection to them is that they are not available to all (54).

Moreover, Berry is central to the key argumentative move Heise makes to undercut environmentalism's rhetoric of place. She claims that his advocacy of local rootedness derives its "persuasive power" from its participation in a "long discursive tradition" about American mobility (49, 48). Heise sketches this tradition from de Tocqueville to *On the Road* and claims that "in this context, Berry's . . . indictments of American nomadism come to lose some of their specifically environmentalist inflection and reveal themselves to be deeply rooted in a cultural rather than an ecological logic." In claiming that "the insistence on a sense of place" derives its force from this discourse about American mobility rather than from environmentalism *per se* (49), Heise presumes she has found the ghost in this machine. Heise thus reduces advocacy of the local—specifically in the context of the organic farming movement and attempts to "realign culture with place . . . by, for example, buying locally grown produce" (53-54)—to nostalgic efforts to reconnect to an authentic nature.

In addition to criticizing whole earth images and the local, organic farming movement, Heise also implicitly critiques literary organic form. She analyzes and promotes a "database aesthetic" that she calls the "post-postmodernist avatar of modernist collage" (67), which itself attempted to "redefin[e] the parts of an aesthetic work in their relation to the whole as something other than simple subordination" (64). The idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts was central to Romantic organic form, and modernist collage is often understood as disrupting an organic relationship between parts and whole. Heise's primary example of the "post-postmodernist"

database aesthetic she advocates is Google Earth, which turns "the Blue Planet image into a searchable and zoomable database . . . [that] signals and sums up some of the crucial transformations that have taken place in the imagination of the global since the 1960s" (67).[30] Heise thus frames this database aesthetic, with its ability to zoom in and out between the local and the global and imagine complexly across scales, as the antithesis of literary organic form.[31]

Heise's own analysis, however, belies her attempt to construct that dichotomy. She points out that "the trope of the network" has been important in the "search for new forms"; while the network can refer to "ecology, economics, politics, or culture," it is primarily linked with the Internet and other communications media, which connect people with "global processes and spaces." Then Heise notes, "Yet in a curious twist, technological connectedness also quite frequently becomes a metaphor by means of which ecological connectedness can be represented, inverting more conventional tropes that figured human communities and systems of exchange as organic. Informational networks . . . become themselves allegorical, concrete instantiations of an organic connectedness that eludes the grasp of the senses" (65). This twist is not just curious: as I hope to show, it is not only that network tropes come to function as organic metaphors, but also that organic metaphors themselves empowered a complex thinking of networks (and even the development of the Internet, one could argue).

Phillips, Morton, and Heise, in their rush to reject the organic for its retrograde politics, all

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[30] This book was published in 2008, and Heise's high praise for Google Earth—and even its radical potential—indicates just how much its political connotations have changed since then.

[31] However, in a talk titled "Surrealism in the Jungle: Avantgarde and Ecocriticism" (2011), Heise has also argued that in Latin American surrealism, organic form is not about balance and containment as in the European tradition, but instead is variable and "adaptive." Against Peter Bürger, she contends that the avant garde did not do away with organic form, but is instead a record of changing ideas about organic form. Her driving question is, "In what ways is the generation of the work itself predicated on what the poet thinks nature does?" and she argues that culturally-informed and changing conceptions of nature inflect aesthetic form. Her argument clearly coincides with my conclusion that organic metaphors can result in many divergent poetic forms. However, she valorizes avant garde examples of "adaptive" form, implying that they more accurately reflect ecological truths than Romantic, European organic form does ("Surrealism").

miss or misconstrue the crucial historical and conceptual significance of organic metaphors for ecological thought. Perhaps even more importantly, in doing so they dismiss literary and popular discourses that have been crucial in imagining how we might create social forms that are ecologically sustainable. As I will show in the last section of this introduction, organic figures, including the holistic image of the Blue Planet that Heise makes central to her argument, are not the nostalgic opposite of a complex thinking of ecological interconnectedness, but in fact enable that ecological thinking. Ecological thought, ecological affect, and environmentalist practices have emerged from literary and popular discourses that, though easy to dismiss as naïve, in fact have much to teach scholars.

**Making Organic Farms from Sir Albert Howard to Will Allen**

The organic farming movement, precisely because of the metaphors that guided it, helped to develop both ecological thought and eco-cosmopolitanism, though Morton puts the former and Heise puts the latter in opposition to organic metaphors and the popular and literary discourses that have relied on them. Organic metaphors did not just paint an ideal picture of holistic, self-sufficient farms, but also prompted attention to the complex interactions among bacteria, fungi, and earthworms in the soil. Early organic farming advocate Sir Albert Howard, following Charles Darwin, called these "small agencies" that have big effects on crops, livestock, and people. In this section, I sketch a brief history of the organic farming movement, focusing especially on its vexed politics. I then show how organic metaphors, despite their bad reputation, have in fact contributed to a pragmatic understanding of organic farms as not natural, but made. From Sir Albert Howard to contemporary urban farmer Will Allen, advocates of sustainable agriculture have been constructing farms that collaborate with "small agencies" and attempt to imitate ecological processes. I end the section by arguing that the local, organic food movement is neither necessarily conservative nor

wholly co-opted, and that its political and even economic contradictions constitute an opportunity.

The history of organic farming is, in part, the story of a term that migrates from the margins to the mainstream. At first, the term "organic" described a farm, not food, and certainly not a particular tomato or carrot. The metaphor of the farm as an organism empowered the practices of a fringe movement that began in the 1930s in the UK, and in other forms in Germany and France at about the same time, and remained marginal in Europe and the US through the 1960s.[32] The organic farming movement became allied with early environmentalism after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, and the term "organic" has now become a powerful green consumerist marketing tool and a product label that entails certification standards in more than thirty-four countries or regions.[33] This change of fortunes cannot just be characterized as an example of a movement selling out to capitalism, however. Though there has been much co-optation, it has been accompanied by a broadening and deepening of the anti-corporate movement committed to promoting locally and organically grown food. Because agribusinesses often use the organic label to market produce shipped thousands of miles, those active in that movement now often call it the local food movement, the slow food movement (which Carlo Petrini started in Italy in 1986 in opposition to globalized fast food), or simply the food movement. Or, as the title of Will Allen's 2012 book has it, the good food revolution.

I focus here on the local, organic farming movement, and, as such, I do not use organic certification standards to define organic farming. As Michael Pollan and others have noted, there are

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[32] Joan Thirsk, in *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day*, calls the early organic farming movement's opposition to artificial fertilizers a "minority argument" and characterizes early advocates of organic methods in the UK as farmers whose "idealist dreams seemed outlandish in the 1950s and 1960s" (224).

[33] The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) estimates that there are "hundreds of organic standards" around the world, both private and regulated by governments. IFOAM officially endorses forty-eight of these standards as organic (applications for nine others were pending at the time of this writing). Those standards operate in more than thirty-four countries and include US and EU organic regulations (IFOAM).

many large industrial farms, agribusinesses, and food processors who have gotten in on the organic certification game, but whose practices are not sustainable or in keeping with the spirit of the food movement. Conversely, there are many small farmers who use organic methods but do not go through the organic certification process because it is costly and they can communicate their values and practices to their customers directly.

Green consumerist marketing, organic certification standards, and the labeling of food products or individual pieces of produce as "organic" all tend to imply that "organic" refers to some quality inherent in the food itself: it is organic because it was grown without the use of pesticides, herbicides, or chemical fertilizers. In this context, "organic" comes to signify a mysterious, almost vitalist essence. But the metaphor of the farm as an organism that runs through the work of key thinkers in the food movement is about *form* rather than substance or essence. In his 1980 essay "Solving for Pattern," Wendell Berry argues that "an organic farm, properly speaking, is not one that uses certain methods and substances and avoids others; it is a farm whose structure is formed in imitation of the structure of a natural system; it has the integrity, the independence, and the benign dependence of an organism" (*GL* 143-144).[34] A form that enables both a degree of autonomy and structured openings to the larger world characterizes the organism as well.[35]

While organic farming is more associated with the left than the right in the US today—a

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[34] Michael Pollan also shows how the metaphor of a farm as an organism plays out on actual farms: "the organic ideal is so exacting—a sustainable system modeled on nature that requires not only no synthetic chemicals but also no purchased inputs of any kind, and that returns as much to the soil as it removes—that it is mostly honored in the breach" (160). This "closed loop" ideal envisions the organic farm as one that thrives on its own wastes, which provide on-farm sources of soil fertility. Pollan recognizes both how compelling this ideal has been for the organic farming movement and its necessary provisionality; farms cannot, of course, be completely self-sufficient—they are part of a larger ecology and economy. In this insight and others, Berry preceded Pollan by many years. For more on Berry, see the third chapter.

[35] Henri Lefebvre articulates this view: though a closure "establish[es] the living being as a 'distinct body,'" this closure is "quite relative . . . Traffic back and forth, so far from stopping, tends to increase and become more differentiated, embracing both energy exchange (alimentation, respiration, excretion) and information exchange (the sensory apparatus). The whole history of life has been characterized by an incessant diversification and intensification of the interaction between inside and outside" (176). Organisms are not so much closed forms as forms with complexly structured openings to the outside.

lingering effect of its 1960s and 70s counterculture streak—its politics are still ambivalent. That political ambivalence is of two types: the suspicion, on the one hand, that the organic food movement is ultimately conservative, and the fact, on the other, that not only the "certified organic" label but also the local food movement are easy to co-opt for profit. The allegations of the organic farming movement's conservative or right wing tendencies derive, in part, from its pre-1945 history in the UK and Europe. In *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's 'Green Party'* (1985), Anna Bramwell touches on the Nazis' ambivalent relationship with organic farming via a biography of Darré, Hitler's Minister of Agriculture from 1933 to his dismissal—in part for promoting organic farming—in 1942. Darré was an advocate for "Nordic peasants" whose policies included radical land tenure and the setting of agricultural prices; he came to embrace organic farming because it was small-scale, anti-capitalist, and promoted self-sufficiency (175, 177).[36] As Philip Conford has shown in *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (2001), the organic farming movement in the UK in the 1930s and 40s was also entwined with right-wing politics. Not only was Rolf Gardiner's "Kinship in Husbandry" right-leaning,[37] but even the Soil Association, which remains the major organization promoting organic farming in the UK today, had leaders with varying right-wing sympathies in the 1940s and 50s.[38]

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[36] When Darré undertook a campaign to convert the top Nazi leadership to organic farming, he was relieved of his post because the Nazis condemned bio-dynamic organic farming and the Anthroposophy movement that gave rise to it as "oriental" in origin (177-180). Bramwell argues that Darré's ecological concerns prefigure the environmental movement and that his ideas should not be dismissed simply because of his association with Naziism; she calls him the "guardian of a radical, centrist, republican critique which pre-dated National Socialism, and still lives on" (12). Despite her effort to vindicate Darré's agrarianism, however, the very title of Bramwell's book may simply serve to smear environmentalism with a Nazi brush. Bramwell notes that while "blood and soil" has become a shorthand for Nazi ideology full stop, Darré coined it to refer specifically to peasants and their tie to the land they farmed (54-55). Heise argues that a focus on the local can lead to a politics of exclusion based on race or class, noting that "the most extreme" example is the Nazi "rhetoric of Germans' natural connectedness to 'blood and soil'" (47).

[37] Rolf Gardiner, an admirer of Darré (Bramwell 179) founded the group, which included major figures in the early organic farming movement, like Lord Northbourne, H.J. Massingham, and Philip Mairet (Conford 151, 247).

[38] For example, Jorian Jenks, the Soil Association's secretary from 1946 to 1963, was a member of the British Union of Fascists (Conford 146-147). Today the Soil Association is a respected and officially apolitical organization, though organic farming still has more conservative and aristocratic connotations in the UK than in the US.

The accusations of conservatism respond not just to the organic farming movement's early history, however, but also to the new agrarianism, which is an ecological recasting of Thomas Jefferson's vision of yeoman farmers developed by contemporary American thinkers like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson.[39] In *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (2004), Julie Guthman argues that the organic farming movement's agrarian vision of the small family farm, with its conservative "defense of private property" (12), has obscured the way in which organic farming turned from a movement to an industry in California in the 1980s and 90s. While many distinguish between what Michael Pollan calls "industrial organic" and local organic food (*Omnivore* 159), Guthman's analysis of the processes by which organic farming becomes industrial is the most trenchant. Crucially, Guthman shows how organic farms became agribusinesses and how the existing systems of distribution, marketing, and land valuation changed the ecological and social commitments of organic farmers in California from within. Beyond Guthman's specific argument is a more general skepticism toward the organic food movement or, indeed, lifestyle movements in general, because they are open to capitalist co-optation. Such a critique might allege that ecological lifestyle movements cannot contest capitalism because they play its game, and so end up only naturalizing capital itself.

While I will address this critique in more detail at the end of this section, let me just say for now that advocates of organic food and farming have changed their terms and adjusted their arguments in response to, and in anticipation of, capitalist co-optation of the organic label: many now insist that food should be locally as well as organically grown and that we should know our farmers and buy from them directly.[40] They argue that there are important environmental, economic,

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[39] In *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (2003), Kimberly K. Smith shows how Berry brings together agrarianism and environmentalism, which were not always linked (7).

[40] Berry, especially, was already making this argument in the mid-1990s, before the adoption of organic certification standards in the US (see, for example, *Another Turn of the Crank* 5-7).

and social differences between eating fresh, organically grown food from local small farmers and buying certified organic produce shipped from California, Mexico, or South America. In other words, the local, organic food movement has shifted as the potency of its initial terms has been undermined by capitalist appropriation. While certified organic food represents a still-burgeoning niche market, the food movement exceeds that market.

Not only did the number of farms in the US actually rise between 2002 and 2007—for the first time since 1935—but the numbers of farmers' markets, community gardens, and urban farms have also shot up in recent years.[41] The market for certified organic food has grown rapidly—according to the USDA's Economic Research Service, organic food sales increased from $11 billion in 2004 to $27 billion in 2012—and, at the same time, direct-to-consumer food sales and local food sales have also increased.[42] As local and organic food have become more widely available, they have begun to figure more prominently in national discourse, as in Michelle Obama's planting of a kitchen vegetable garden outside the White House in 2009 or Michael Pollan's 2008 *New York Times* article in the run-up to Obama's election, "Farmer in Chief." Memoirs about farming and food have also proliferated in recent years; they include not only Pollan's best-selling *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, but also Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007), Novella Carpenter's *Farm City* (2010),

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[41] The Agricultural Census of 2007 showed that the total number of farms in the US rose 4% between 2002 and 2007, for the first time since a brief increase during the Depression (Plumer). Otherwise, the number of farms has been declining, often quite precipitously, since the 1920s (Plumer): "From the 1940s through the 1980s, the number of American farms dropped from over 6 million to approximately 2 million" (Beeman and Pritchard 167). The USDA reports dramatic growth in the numbers of farmers markets nationwide: its National Farmers Market Directory jumped from less than two thousand markets in 1994 to over eight thousand in 2013 (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service). Since 2009, both Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign against childhood obesity and the USDA's People's Gardens campaign have focused on fostering school and community gardens. A 2013 Congressional Research Service report on local food systems notes that there are no nationwide data on urban farms in the US, though there have been studies of urban farming and gardening in specific cities or regions (Johnson et al. 12-14).

[42] In 2009, the USDA reported that direct-to-consumer food marketing had increased dramatically from 1997 to 2007: direct-to-consumer food sales increased by 104.7% nationwide, while total agricultural sales went up 47.6% (Diamond and Soto). Moreover, a 2011 report by the USDA's Economic Research Service found that, if you include local food sold through intermediaries like restaurants and grocery stores, local food sales were $4.8 billion in 2008, about four times higher than direct-to-consumer food sales alone (Low and Vogel).

and Kristin Kimball's *The Dirty Life* (2010) among many others. As all this cultural and economic activity suggests, there is change afoot: people are not only buying more organic and locally grown food, but growing their own. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements through which people invest in a farm by paying in advance for a season's worth of produce are also on the rise.[43]

But it was not always thus. In its early days, the organic farming movement was quite marginal and scientists and leaders in industrial agriculture dismissed it as quackery in no uncertain terms (Belasco 113-122, 158). Organic farming movements that began to coalesce in the UK and Europe in the 1930s drew on earlier work about the relationship among the biological health of soil, crops, livestock, and people.[44] Sir Albert Howard, whom Conford calls "the single most important figure" in Britain's early organic farming movement ("Introduction" 11), was a soil scientist who came to contest the use of artificial fertilizers, arguing that the chemical understanding of soil fertility developed by Justus von Liebig in 1840 dangerously simplified the complex biological processes at work in soil.[45] Soil fertility, Howard argued, was the result not just of NPK—the nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus that chemical fertilizers contain—but of healthy microbial life, the bacteria, fungi, and earthworms that interact complexly with each other and with the roots of plants. In the 1910s and 20s, at his imperial post as a soil scientist in India and later at his own institute

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[43] According to the 2013 Congressional Research Service report on local food systems, there were 1,400 CSAs in the US in 2010, up from 400 in 2001. At the same time, the "USDA estimates that 12,549 farms marketed products through a CSA in 2007" (Johnson et al. 18).

[44] In the Anglo-American organic farming tradition, for example, Robert McCarrison and G. T. Wrench are often cited, by everyone from Lady Eve Balfour to Michael Pollan. McCarrison, a medical scientist who studied the Hunzas in India, argued that their remarkable health resulted from their diet and ways of farming (Conford *Origins* 51). McCarrison experimented on rats to show that "the Western diet" is the cause of chronic ills like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. G. T. Wrench wrote an influential book, *The Wheel of Health* (1938), based on McCarrison's work (Conford 240). In Germany, bio-dynamic farming grew out of the thought of Rudolf Steiner, a mystic who broke with Theosophy to found Anthroposophy and gave lectures on agriculture in 1924, the year before his death (Conford 65-80, 237). I focus here on the Anglo-American organic farming tradition rather than on biodynamics.

[45] See Conford on Liebig (*Origins* 17-18, "Introduction" 4). Conford also emphasizes the role of the American soil scientist, Selman Waksman, who published a book titled *Humus: Origin, Chemical Composition, and Importance in Nature* in 1936 (Conford "Introduction" 4, 17).

there, Howard developed what he called the Indore method of composting—turning vegetable wastes and manure into humus—based on traditional Chinese practices that F. H. King had described in *Farmers of Forty Centuries, or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan* (1911). Howard argued that the health of the soil affects the health of crops, livestock, and people, and held that farmers should maintain and enhance the fertility of their soil through techniques like composting, crop rotation, and growing cover crops rather than relying on chemical fertilizers.

Howard held an imperial post and the parts of his books that recount a global history of agriculture reflect that imperialist perspective: he assumes people developed progressively from primitive to civilized, for example, and he praises Chinese and Indian agricultural methods in Orientalist terms (*The Soil and Health* 33, 38-39).[46] But Howard was nevertheless willing to question his own disciplinary assumptions and to observe and try out the traditional agricultural practices of those among whom he worked in India. According to Wendell Berry, Howard's story "is the story of a fragmentary intelligence seeking both its own wholeness and that of the world. . . . He unspecialized his vision, in other words, so as to see the necessary unity of the concerns of agriculture" (*The Unsettling of America* 46).[47] Howard's globally-connected, imperial position allowed him to formulate agricultural practices that bring together elements of all those he observed, combining principles of small-scale, diversified farming that he saw in India with Chinese composting practices. When his work ran up against the disciplinary divisions governing the imperial research station where he was posted, Howard left in 1924 to found his own institute (*SH* 7). In the 1930s, he turned to public advocacy for these agricultural methods, communicating with like-minded people around the world. His first and most well-known book, *An Agricultural Testament*, came out in 1940. *Farming and Gardening for Health and Disease* was published in the UK in 1945, and republished

[46] From now on, Howard's *The Soil and Health* will be cited in the text as *SH*.

[47] From now on, Berry's *The Unsettling of America* will be cited in the text as *UA*.

in the US under the title *The Soil and Health* in 1947, the year that Howard died. But by that point industrial agriculture was really taking off. In the early twentieth century, Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch had developed a way to fix nitrogen on an industrial scale; by the late 1940s, the companies that had used the Haber-Bosch process to produce munitions during the world wars were looking for new markets for their ability to fix nitrogen, and the use of chemical fertilizers grew by leaps and bounds. Though Howard himself was a respected scientist and was knighted in 1934, his campaign for sustainable agriculture found itself on the wrong side of an emerging global capitalism.

The early organic farming movement in the UK drew on work by respectable scientists like Howard, but was also a conservative and even right-wing attempt to preserve the English countryside. Lord Northbourne, a member of this movement, coined the term "organic farm" in his 1940 book, *Look to the Land* (156), arguing that "the farm itself must have a biological completeness; it must be a living entity, it must be a unit which has within itself a balanced organic life" (86-87).[48] Lady Eve Balfour, a key popularizer of the organic farming movement, published *The Living Soil* in 1943 and was instrumental in founding the Soil Association in 1945.[49] Conford shows how complex the politics of the early organic farming movement were; the movement was entangled not only with the radical right, but also with guild socialism and social credit (*Origins* 146-163). The *New English Weekly* (*NEW*) promoted both organic farming and social credit; its editor, Philip Mairet, was active in the organic farming movement.  Here Conford notes a fascinating link between literary history and the history of organic farming that warrants further investigation: T. S. Eliot was part of the

[48] Northbourne goes on to argue that, because "real fertility" can only be built up gradually, organic farming is antithetical to "specialization" and the "changes of system" that profit-seeking prompts. He advocates "mixed" or diversified farming that does not rely on "imported fertility" (87). Howard himself never used the term "organic farm," which was coined the same year that *An Agricultural Testament* was published—but, as we will see, he often used organic metaphors.

[49] On the founding of the Soil Association, see Conford (*Origins* 88-89). *The Living Soil* made a case for organic agriculture, drawing on the work of Howard and others, and quickly went through multiple editions.

Chandos group that edited the *NEW*, and he dedicated *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* to Mairet (194-195). In addition, Conford notes that one of Eliot's colleagues at Faber and Faber, Richard de la Mare, editor of the agriculture and gardening list, supported organic farming; Faber and Faber published many books by organic farming advocates from the 1930s through the 60s (88, 133).

Though the organic farming movement came to the US a little later, historians Randall Beeman and James Pritchard show how efforts to develop a sustainable or "permanent" agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century were key to the transition from conservation as practiced by Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot to modern environmentalism, with its emphasis on ecological interdependence.[50] Especially in the 1930s, in the context of the Dust Bowl, there was rash of what Beeman and Pritchard call "soil jeremiads," warnings about soil erosion and exhaustion in the US and around the world (11-18).[51] In response, everyone from Rexford Tugwell, a socialist progressive technocrat, to Louis Bromfield, a novelist who wrote nostalgic memoirs about his family's Ohio farm, encouraged alternative methods (Beeman and Pritchard 26-27, 55). Critiques of conventional agriculture received a lot of attention: Edward Faulkner's *Plowman's Folly* (1943), which excoriated the moldboard plow and advocated the incorporation of raw organic matter into the soil, was a best-seller, and Beeman and Pritchard note that in the 1930s and 40s, "agricultural leaders and commentators were national personalities" (68). But such critiques did not seem to slow the rapid increase in the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, especially after World War II.[52] Though the organic farming movement was only one of the movements for permanent agriculture that Beeman

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[50] For this argument, see especially Beeman and Pritchard (6, 22, 67, 82). An early example of the discourse of "permanent" agriculture, later cited by Howard and other advocates of organic farming, is F. H. King's *Farmers of Forty Centuries, or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan* (1911). F. H. King was a Professor of Agriculture at UW-Madison and Chief of the Division of Soil Management at the USDA.

[51] These "soil jeremiads" included Paul B. Sears' *Deserts on the March* (1935), G. V. Jacks and R. O. Whyte's *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion* (1939), and Pare Lorentz's film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1937).

[52] Beeman and Pritchard note, for example, that "production of manufactured fertilizer skyrocketed from 800,000 tons in 1946-47 to 17 million tons in 1947-48" (78).

and Pritchard trace, they note its role in shaping the kind of ecological thought associated with modern environmentalism: "Essentially, the organic farming philosophy sought to see the topsoil and crops from the viewpoint of ecological interrelatedness, which would allow the organic farmer to emulate the natural growing conditions and fertility creation of nature" (49).

J. I. Rodale and his son, Robert, through their publishing empire, played a key role in popularizing and marketing organic food and farming in the US. J. I. Rodale began publishing *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine in 1942 and promoted organic farming through books like *Pay Dirt* (1945) and *The Organic Front* (1948) as well. Rodale paired Howard's ideas as with some rather quixotic notions of his own; Warren Belasco calls him "much-maligned but indefatigable" (16) and notes that he was "routinely dismissed as a quack by the medical and agricultural establishments" (71). Rodale had more financial success with his health magazine, *Prevention*, than he did with *Organic Gardening* (71). In fact, the Rodale publishing empire—led by his son Robert from 1960 to 1990 (71)—pioneered some of the key techniques of green consumerism.[53]

The 1960s counterculture also played a key role in the development of the organic farming movement, as Belasco has shown in *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (1989). Beginning in the 1930s, leftist back-to-the-landers like Ralph Borsodi and Helen and Scott Nearing provided early models for the communal farming ventures of the 1960s and 70s. As Belasco tells the story, counterculture political activists discovered older, more conservative organic farming and health food movements in the late 1960s and infused those movements with a new political valence (16). For example, the circulation of Rodale's *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine jumped after 1969 and the magazine changed in response to its new audience (72).[54]

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[53] Andrew Case shows this in his dissertation, "Looking for Organic America: J. I. Rodale, the Rodale Press, and the Popular Culture of Environmentalism."

[54] Belasco notes that readership of *Organic Gardening and Farming* increased by 40% from 1970 to 1971, to 700,000 (72).

The counterculture brought together and catalyzed previously scattered efforts into a pragmatic strain of environmentalism. As historian Andrew Kirk has shown in *Counterculture Green: The* Whole Earth Catalog *and American Environmentalism* (2007), these environmentalists sought to foster what we now call sustainable technologies and cultural practices, rather than focusing on wilderness preservation, as the mainstream environmental movement did (6). Stewart Brand, counterculture guru and founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, started the catalog in 1968 to connect people who were attempting self-sufficiency or back-to-the-land projects with the tools they would need to do so (52-53). *Whole Earth* helped to publicize Wendell Berry's writings (143); Berry contributed to the catalog and even helped edit it in 1970 (111-113). Via *Whole Earth*, then, organic farming was connected with the appropriate technology movement, which advocated small-scale, environmentally sustainable technology that could enable individual agency and independence from corporate and governmental systems (64, 90-91). While Guthman represents the new agrarianism as a conservative discourse whose politics were in tension with the counterculture element of the organic farming movement (10-11), Kirk's work shows how much organic farmers, new agrarians, and counterculture appropriate technologists had in common, perhaps especially early on, before Berry fell out with Brand over his promotion of space colonies in the 1970s (Kirk 173-176).[55]

The discourse of toxicity and pollution that has impelled modern environmentalism since the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) also changed the organic food movement. As Matthew Reed argues in *Rebels for the Soil* (2010), the organic farming movement's dominant concern shifted from soil fertility and its effects on plant, animal, and human health to protecting people and the environment from dangerous pesticides and herbicides in the 1970s (Reed 24). Though Reed is correct that today the marketing of organic food and consumer motivations often focus on avoiding

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[55] Crucially, Kirk argues, contra Guthman and Belasco, that the counterculture was never against commerce and questions the assumption that the counterculture was necessarily anti-capitalist.

toxicity, the earlier concern with the health and fertility of the soil—and the necessity to return organic matter to it through compost and decay—has remained important to the organic farming movement and particularly to prominent farmers and thinkers such as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Will Allen.[56] I should note that while Berry, Jackson, and Allen all advocate organic farming methods and insist on organic metaphors, none tie themselves to the certified organic label.

Moreover, Wendell Berry and Michael Pollan—perhaps the two writers who have been most significant in shaping and then popularizing the local, organic food movement—are quite conscious of the social and literary history of the term "organic." Berry, for example, argues that the small-scale, sustainable farm should "accommodate diversity within unity," thus invoking and revising one of Coleridge's key principles of organic form, "unity in multeity."[57] In *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), a book that played a major role in making the local, organic farming movement more prominent in national discourse, Pollan astutely analyzes the metaphors that empower organic farming. He refers to the concept of an "organic society" developed by nineteenth-century critics of the industrial revolution and, citing Belasco, argues that the counterculture "married" this "broader" definition of the organic with the "narrower" one of organic farming as promoted by J. I. Rodale's *Organic Gardening* magazine from the 1940s on (142). This historical sketch, while light on details, demonstrates the mix of right and left, conservative and progressive, at work in the organic.

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[56] Berry is certainly the most well-known and influential of these; through his poetry, fiction, and especially his essays, he has inspired farmers, gardeners, and eaters and laid out a prescient program for the food movement since the 1970s. I will discuss Will Allen's work at Growing Power in more detail below. Wes Jackson, founder of The Land Institute in Kansas, is a plant geneticist who has been trying to breed grains that can be grown in perennial polycultures rather than annual monocultures, which require large amounts of fossil fuel energy for fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery, cause soil erosion, and waste the sun's energy by leaving the ground bare for much of the year. Jackson is attempting to develop an agriculture that imitates a prairie ecosystem and can be grown without fertilizers and pesticides.

[57] In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry argues that industrial agriculture "has substituted a dull, tight uniformity" for "the principle of unity that depends upon diversity" (180). Citing traditional Andean farming practices, where wild and quasi-domestic varieties of potatoes grow on the wild margins of the fields, Berry claims that "The remedy is to accommodate the margin within the form, to allow the wilderness or nature to thrive in domesticity, to accommodate diversity within unity" (179).

In fact, Pollan's work itself reveals the mix of conservative and progressive rhetorics at play in the local, organic food movement. For example, *In Defense of Food*, Pollan's 2009 follow-up to the success of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), makes an argument that resonates quite strikingly with Edmund Burke's reasoning in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Pollan argues that scientistic, rationalist attempts to re-engineer the way we grow, process, prepare, and eat food have endangered our health and spurred lucrative diet fads that do not solve the problem. As a solution, he recommends returning to food traditions—to any kind of traditional diet, or to an approximation of traditional diets encompassed in his adage, "eat food, not too much, mostly plants." (By "food," Pollan means real food: fresh, not processed.) This basic argument—that rationalist revamping of traditional social and cultural institutions is a dangerous kind of experimentation with unforeseeable consequences—is the same one Burke makes against the revolutionary restructuring of social relations. I point this out not to paint Pollan as a Burkean conservative—Burke, after all, was defending monarchy and aristocracy!—but on the contrary to suggest that scholars need to grapple with, not dismiss, this resistance to capitalist, rationalist progress in the name of tradition.[58]

Moreover, Pollan and Burke both appeal to organic wholes, which, they argue, are more stable, more pragmatic, and safer than the dangerously fragmented institutions and practices that rationalist plans produce. Pollan argues that "Culture"—"which, at least when it comes to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother" (3)[59]—should guide us in food choices rather than the "bad science" of "nutritionism" (61). He uses organic figures to contrast nutritionist and cultural approaches to food: while nutrionism treats foods as "essentially the sum of their nutrient parts" (28), so that "any qualitative distinction between whole foods and processed foods is apt to

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[58] Along these lines, Katey Castellano has traced the Romantic conservatism of Burke, Wordsworth, and Berry, arguing that it is both ecological and anti-capitalist.

[59] Pollan notes that, for most of us now, our grandmothers or great-grandmothers would be better food guides than our mothers, who probably grew up on casseroles made with Campbell's cream soups and are just as confused as we are.

disappear" (32), in fact, "the whole of a dietary pattern is evidently greater than the sum of its parts" (178). Pollan contends that "reductionist science" ignores "the fact that the whole may well be more than, or maybe just different from, the sum of its parts" (62), while "in the eye of the cook or the gardener or the farmer who grew it, . . . food reveals itself for what it is: no mere *thing* but a web of relationships among a great many living beings" (200). Pollan suggests that reductionist science obscures the way we and the plants and animals we eat are part of ecological systems. Pollan ties this ecological thinking to cultural tradition. Traditional diets—from which Pollan excludes the meat-heavy "Western diet" that causes chronic illnesses like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease—are pragmatic because they have worked for years and years (65). They are safer and more stable than nutritionist innovation: we may not understand *why* they work, but we know that they do.

Edmund Burke made a strikingly similar argument against revolutionary, rationalist remaking of social institutions: he contends that practical wisdom gained through experience—i.e., tradition—is a better guide than abstract principles and Enlightenment rationalism (153). Burke's organic figures distinguish revolutionary, rationalist disorder from traditional wholeness and stability. Burke sets up a contrast between the state overthrown by revolution, for which he uses vitalist metaphors, and the well-constituted state, which he imagines as a body politic made of interrelated parts that form a stable, cohesive whole. Using images drawn from Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, Burke represents the revolutionary state as a chaos of fragmented social elements through which naked power courses (147-153, 248, 286).[60] He dignifies only the well-organized state with the name "body politic," and he uses figurative language drawn from bodies, architecture, and inheritance law to argue that society requires a form as intricate as that of an organism and more permanent (119-122). Burke juxtaposes architectural and organic metaphors to picture society as both made and grown—created through

[60] The word "organic" appears only once in Burke's *Reflections*, and then in the phrase "organic moleculae," a metaphor for the "disbanded" fragments of society that, after revolution, are no longer in their traditional, hierarchical order (106).

choice and agency, but also inherited from the past and accreted over time.[61]

However, it is one thing to advocate traditional social and political institutions and quite another to advocate a traditional diet rich in vegetables and leafy greens! In fact, that is just the point: we cannot simply dismiss Pollan's traditionalism out of hand. He and others in the local, organic food movement are asking hard questions about the limits of rationalist progress; they are suggesting that, even if Enlightenment rationalism gave us good things like democracy, we perhaps should not have let the latest developments in agricultural and nutritional science, let alone the corporations that often fund and drive those sciences, remake what and how we eat. Organic farming's continued political ambivalence—and especially this traditionalist anti-capitalism—is not a danger, but an opportunity to communicate across partisan divides and unsettle entrenched and immobilizing political categories in the US.[62]

Rather than endorsing a dogmatic traditionalism or a naive naturalness, organic metaphors paradoxically encourage us to be deliberate about the forms we make. Wendell Berry cautions that "we must not forget that those human solutions that we may call organic are not natural. We are talking about organic *artifacts*, organic only by imitation or analogy" (*The Gift of Good Land* 145).[63] For Berry, organic farms and forms are made things, and we therefore should think carefully about how we make, unmake, or remake them. While the dominant narratives of technoscientific progress

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[61] Here is a remarkable image in this vein, which fuses Burke's organic and architectural metaphors for society: "Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at once time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete" (120).

[62] Or as Bill McKibben puts it, "It's not at all clear whether a farmers' market, or a local neighborhood crime watch, or a community-owned windmill is a liberal or conservative project. It's some of both. Mostly it's some of neither—our politics, like our highways, were built for an era of endless growth. Karl Marx as much as Adam Smith thought we'd end up in a material paradise; Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev sparred over whose system would produce better kitchen appliances" (146-147).

assume that the latest tool must be the best, Berry instead urges us to be cautious as we consider new technologies, weighing their ecological and social costs and their unforeseeable risks against their benefits (*What Are People For?* 171-172).[64] The approach to agricultural and dietary tradition that Berry and Pollan share does not treat traditions as sacrosanct, but rather as a pragmatic guide to what has worked, one open to wise innovation. For Pollan and Berry, organic metaphors and re-imagined tradition both function as guides in constructing ecologically sustainable and socially just ways of growing, distributing, and preparing food. Both resist capitalist faith in technological progress and the boosterism of the new.

In understanding organic farms as constructed in imitation of nature, Berry is following Sir Albert Howard, who argued that farms should imitate the functioning of ecosystems. The analogue Howard turned to was that of the forest, which "manures itself" as fungi, bacteria, and earthworms convert fallen leaves, dead organisms, waste, and other decaying organic matter into humus on the forest floor (*An Agricultural Testament* 2). After describing how forests capture rainfall and obtain minerals from the subsoil (2-3), Howard sums up the principles of "Nature's farming":

> Mother earth never attempts to farm without live stock; she always raises mixed crops; great pains are taken to preserve the soil and to prevent erosion; the mixed vegetable and animal wastes are converted into humus; there is no waste; the processes of growth and the processes of decay balance one another; ample provision is made to maintain large reserves of fertility; the greatest care is taken to store the rainfall; both plants and animals are left to protect themselves against disease. (4)

Farmers, Howard argued, should imitate these principles by growing diverse crops, planting cover crops to protect the soil from erosion, and returning organic matter to the soil through composting

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[63] From now on, Berry's *The Gift of Good Land* will be cited in the text as *GL*.

[64] From now on, Berry's *What Are People For?* will be cited in the text as *WPF*.

animal and vegetable wastes. Howard's conventional "mother earth" rhetoric obscures just how ecological his thought is: for Howard, composting and organic farming mean human cultural collaboration with "minute animal and vegetable agents"—i.e., the fungi and bacteria in the soil. Howard describes some of the complex ways in which these "agents" in the soil nourish plants and trees (*AT* 22-31, *SH* 17-32). Indeed, from the 1930s forward, advocates of organic farming from Balfour to Rodale to Pollan often insist that soil is literally alive by virtue of all the microorganisms that make it up.

While Howard articulated the principle that farms and composting systems should be constructed to imitate and collaborate with ecological processes, farmers and advocates of organic farming since are still following up on that principle in practice. Ecosystemic metaphors have shaped the compact farming practices that Will Allen is developing at Growing Power, his urban farm and teaching center in Milwaukee. In *The Good Food Revolution*, Allen and his co-writer, Charles Wilson, use such metaphors especially when explaining Growing Power's aquaponics system. Allen began raising fish in a small three-barrel aquaponics system in the 1990s; rather than mechanical filtration, the system "used compost, snails, and vegetable matter to clean" the fish tank's water and thus "replicated the processes of the natural world" (193). He wanted to find a way to scale this system up without using too much energy, and eventually developed a partially in-ground fish tank that ran the length of one of his greenhouses with two planting beds above it that cleaned the water. These "beds were constructed to mimic the ecosystem of a small river or stream . . . By the time the water spilled back into the fish tank, it had traveled nearly two hundred feet and passed through the roots and soil of several hundred plants" (195-196). This aquaponics system is organic in more than one sense: it does not use pesticides or fertilizer, it imitates ecological processes, and its form is "'closed loop,' where the fish's waste [is] converted into life and energy and the water [is] recycled" (194). At the same time, it is highly artificial—that is, it was constructed. As with Growing Power's other

urban farming systems, that construction is deliberate, principled, and taught; Allen and those who work and teach at Growing Power are not under any illusions that these forms of sustainable urban farming are natural.[65]

Allen also calls this "closed-loop" quality "consistent with the spirit of my compost operation" (194). As I've already mentioned, Growing Power is composting Milwaukee's waste on a large scale. Growing Power picks up 400,000 pounds of waste from restaurants, breweries, stores, and institutions every week, saving those businesses or organizations the fee they would otherwise pay for it to be hauled to the landfill (187). But Allen's composting system doesn't only prevent waste from decomposing anaerobically in landfills, where it would release methane, a greenhouse gas. It is also beginning to fulfill the dreams that local, organic farming advocates have long had about using what Howard called "town wastes" to grow food. According to Allen, "A broad vision was taking shape in my head of a new urban ecology, where a city's waste could connect to its food-producing stream and where small facilities like my own could be not only food stands but also food producers" (187). This "urban ecology" seems far from a traditionalist Jeffersonian vision of independent yeoman farmers, but it represents the full flowering of the organic farming movement, with its new agrarian ethos, rather than a transcendence of it.

Sir Albert Howard and Will Allen, in their social and cultural distance from each other, chart how far the organic farming movement has come. While Howard was not enmeshed with right-wing politics to the extent that some members of the early organic farming movement in the UK were, the aristocratic soil scientist and servant of the British Empire encapsulates some of the values and

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[65] Belasco notes that many in the counterculture assumed otherwise when they started farming in the late 1960s: "By the end of the first summer, it was clear that going organic did not mean simply letting nature do its own thing—a fact to which any long-term subscriber to *Organic Gardening* could attest but which, given the information vacuum in which so many hip youths operated, had to be discovered by doing" (83).

prejudices that informed that early movement.[66] Will Allen, the African-American son of a sharecropper who is revolutionizing urban farming in Milwaukee and Chicago, perhaps demonstrates some of the most hopeful energy of today's food movement.

But there is also an odd inverse echo in their relationship to power. Howard was a well-respected scientist with an imperial post, who left that post to pursue his research more freely and adopted heretical views that meant long decades of marginalization for his work. In other words, Howard gradually exiled himself from his role as servant to and emissary of the British Empire to a marginal position as a critic of industrial agriculture. Will Allen, after years of building Growing Power into an urban farm and community organization, has lately received quite a bit of recognition and funding: Allen won a MacArthur "genius" grant in 2008, and in 2011, Walmart gave Growing Power a million-dollar grant. Allen received quite a bit of criticism for accepting the grant from Walmart, but defends his decision to work with regional Walmart executives as a pragmatic one that will increase the availability of local food and help Growing Power extend its programs (224-225).

As should be clear by now, today organic food plays both sides of the divide between local and global. On one hand, industrial organic farming is a big business in which corporations exact a price premium for produce shipped thousands of miles, often from the global south to the global north. On the other hand, the local, organic food movement in the US has succeeded in setting up a variety of small-scale, direct-to-consumer markets. But if large-scale corporate organic food is intertwined with global economic and political disparities, the local, organic farming movement has always, perhaps ironically, been global.[67] Allison Carruth, a literary scholar who is bringing food

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[66] Belasco goes so far as to call Howard "progressive": "Like Tolstoy and Gandhi, Howard admired the peasantry not as a reactionary resisting democratization but as a populist seeking ways for a colonial society to develop without relying on western technology or social organization" (70).

[67] Matthew Reed, in *Rebels for the Soil*, argues that the organic food and farming movement is global and has always been global (11), but does not thoroughly problematize the imperial elements of that history (11, 29).

studies and ecocriticism together, has argued that we need to think about scale in more nuanced ways; rather than insisting that big is bad and small is good, we need to think about different kinds of global networks and their relationships to power. Her examples are seed vaults versus seed networks: while seed vaults archive large numbers of seeds in bunker-like facilities—with the aim of saving these varieties from extinction through lack of cultivation or environmental disaster, but also with corporate and governmental funding—seed networks are decentralized organizations that facilitate seed exchange among people who preserve varieties by planting and growing them ("Slow Food and Seed Networks").

Carruth's distinction gives us ways to think about Howard's work as well as Allen's. While Howard's career was intertwined with and enabled by imperial global power, by the end of his life he had articulated a critique of industrial agriculture that put his work at odds with the ascendant corporate global power of agribusiness and rendered it marginal for decades. Allen, after many years building a local organization, has received some national acclaim and funding from corporate entities. At the same time, such funding has enabled Growing Power to extend the reach of its urban farming educational network, so that it can offer workshops and programs where people from around the globe can learn to implement compact urban farming methods in their own cities and towns. While some of the ways in which organic farming has been and still is intertwined with global (and local) power differentials are troubling, national and global networks also do, and have always done, much to facilitate local food infrastructures.

Thus, Heise mischaracterizes both the goal and the strategies of the local, organic food movement when she states that it aims at a "complete detachment" from global networks. "Deterritorialization," Heise explains, means that even people who live primarily in one place experience displacement because of the ways global products, corporations, and media cross-cut their lives (52):

> global connectedness makes an in-depth experience of place more difficult to attain for more people. . . . remaining in one place for many decades, taking care of a house or farm, intimately knowing the local environment, cultivating local relationships, being as self-sufficient as possible, resisting new technologies that do not improve human life spiritually as well as materially are options no longer available to many. . . . And while it is possible to 'reterritorialize' some of these dimensions by, for example, buying locally grown produce or supporting local artists, a more complete detachment from such networks is surely not within the average citizens' reach. (53-54)

But Berry and other advocates of local food systems are not arguing that a "complete detachment" from global networks is either possible or desirable. Berry, for example, has always communicated his ideas by publishing and seeking widespread distribution for his books and essays. Bill McKibben envisions a future in which we will all have to live more locally, but where the Internet will keep us globally connected and ward off small-town conservatism. And the argument Berry and others in the local food movement have been making for years is that small-scale, incremental changes matter. You don't have to go completely off the grid to make a difference. Cooking at home, planting a garden, or buying some of your food from local farmers all help construct more economically and ecologically sustainable local communities. While some advocates of local food adopt an absolutist rhetoric—Alice Waters, for example, represents institutional decisions to use local, organic ingredients as "all or nothing," and memoirs by Barbara Kingsolver, Gary Paul Nabhan, and others involve experiments in eating *only* local food for a year or more—such absolutes belie the pragmatic, everyday, necessarily imperfect character of our decisions about what to eat. Even those advocates of local food who engage in such absolute rhetoric support—and, in fact, thrive through—decentralized global networks of information exchange. For better or worse, the food movement is far from narrowly local.

In *Agrarian Dreams*, Guthman argues that the organic food movement has been too focused on form and scale—small farms versus big ones—rather than on the processes by which agriculture is industrialized (12, 176). Guthman shows how, because organic farming did not challenge the structure of property holding, land values, and food distribution in California, these processes have been repeated in the organic sector, so that organic regulations and these existing structures have collaborated in industrializing organic farming. Guthman's argument is compelling: she contends that agrarian populism has allowed organic farmers to consider themselves anti-corporate even as they are capitalist producers, and does not question the private property relations and systems of land valuation that, in her analysis, push farmers toward industrial practices (174-178). Her proposals involve more state intervention—regulation of pesticides, government support for organic farming research, subsidizing organic agriculture—and, crucially, attention to social justice and paying farm workers a living wage (179-184).

While Guthman exposes the way in which an "agrarian imaginary" about the small-scale family farm can ideologically obscure the relations of production, the thinking of form in the organic farming movement has nevertheless been key to its reimagination of ecological, social, and agricultural processes. The faith is that changes in form—re-formations—can change processes as well. Guthman's warning—that the food movement hasn't changed the way cheap labor and food prices for premium crops are factored in to the value of land—is right on point. But her contention that only the state has the power to change things makes the fight a conventional political one about large structures—the kind of debate that many find dispiriting and disempowering because it's so difficult and long term. Central to the organic farming movement since its counterculture days has been a pragmatic conviction that we have to start where we are. This pragmatism pushes against grand critiques that too often leave scholars and intellectuals cynical and disempowered, but with the all-too-comforting assurance that their analysis is correct.

In *Eaarth* (2010), Bill McKibben finds hope in the local, organic farming movement, arguing that it is cultivating the kind of cultural transformation that could both mitigate climate change and steer us through the horrors of a warming world (136-143, 159-182). As long as we have a capitalist system, capitalism will necessarily condition and shape the forms that organic farming takes. But people in the food movement are developing forms, like CSAs or Allen's nonprofit organization, that can allow for different systems of food production and distribution to take hold. These forms create institutional structures that can resist capitalist logics within a capitalist system. Even Guthman sees promise in "new institutional forms like Community Supported Agriculture." Such subscription schemes not only change the eaters' relationship to their food, but also encourage diversified farming and better labor practices, especially when the farmers own the land or otherwise do not face the financial pressures of land values (184-185): "the transformative agronomic methods, the *reworking of nature* that occurs on such farms, are clearly driven by the decommodification of food *and* land, which opens up an economic space where social divisions can be eroded" (185).

As Ken Meter, a consultant who helps regions and states design plans for fostering local, sustainable "food webs," has shown, communities are creating networks of producers and consumers that are neither purely private nor purely public, but bring local government, schools, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and farmers together to create food networks. These associations involve negotiations between producers, distributors, and consumers on price, and they make decisions based on values other than pure profit. In other words, these efforts amount to a kind of pragmatic anti-capitalism; they create a system that, within larger capitalist structures, attempts to institutionalize choices that embody other values. The "slow money" movement puts the food movement's anticapitalism in even starker relief. "Slow money," in a play on "slow food," suggests that people should think about investing in the same way some of us are coming to think

about our food choices—about the environmental, social, and ethical implications of those choices, rather than only about getting the highest return (McKibben 135-136). We should invest in a local small business or farmer whose practices we respect and goals we support, rather than in mutual funds. If we expect a slower and smaller return on that investment, we have the pleasure of knowing that our money is going to an enterprise we support rather than to Wall Street or to faceless corporations whose labor and environmental practices we cannot know.

If the local, organic food movement cannot insulate itself from capitalism or prevent co-optation, its very concept introduces anti-capitalist values into economic choices. In choosing to buy and eat local, organic food, the buyer makes a choice that is not purely that of the rational, autonomous consumer. Factors besides price come into play: taste, ethics, environmentalist values, a desire to support farmers and producers in the community. Kate Soper has defended such ecological lifestyle movements, arguing that though Marxists usually dismiss them, they can create change.[68]

**Pleasure and Vulnerability; or, the Garden in the Environmental Humanities Machine**

I am not simply arguing that literary scholars, and ecocritics in particular, should reconsider the organic farming movement and organic form in poetry, though that would be a good start. My larger claim is that organic metaphors in popular and literary discourse have, in fact, helped enable the signal conceptual moves in the environmental humanities over the last couple of decades. Those moves involve breaking down the binary pair of "nature" and "culture"—not only or always by deconstructing nature as an ideological repository for authenticity, but crucially by studying the concrete ways in which non-human nature and human culture shape each other. So historian William Cronon, in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," argues not simply that our conception of wilderness as untouched is historically inaccurate, but also that it

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[68] See her article, "Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory, and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning."

has kept environmentalists focused on preserving rare and beautiful spots and made it easier to ignore how we use and misuse the everyday places where we live. Donna Haraway's concept of "natureculture" similarly seeks to acknowledge the role nature plays, even though it is never a pure role and cannot be separated from that of culture. There is a double move at work here: (1) an insistence—contra deconstruction and caricatures of deconstruction—that non-human nature does materially affect human cultures and that those effects are important, and (2) an attempt to complicate the older tendency to treat nature as a background or reserve, separate from history and reliably unchanging.

Quite a range of scholarly interventions have helped us rethink nature and the interactions between nature and culture. The scholars whose work is collected in the volume Cronon edited, *Uncommon Ground*, make interventions in this vein.[69] Even Timothy Morton's argument participates in this broad move. Morton contends that we should stop using the terms "nature" and "the environment" because they obscure the radically destabilizing implications of ecological thought—that all living and non-living beings are interconnected and that we cannot put nature or the environment somewhere over there, separate from human culture and the liberal subject (*ET* 42, 51, 60). The new materialism can also be seen as part of this environmental humanities move, as Stephanie Foote has noted. New materialists, with their vitalist vocabulary and insistence on the agency of material objects as well as nonhuman creatures, underscore the fact that ecological interconnectedness is starting to come alive even for scholars who do not consider themselves primarily ecocritics or environmental humanists.

Michael Pollan is an interesting case here, because he translates key insights from the environmental humanities for a popular audience—in fact, near the beginning of one of his early

[69] These scholars include Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, historian Richard White, and literary critic Robert Pogue Harrison.

books, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (1991), Pollan acknowledges that William Cronon's work shaped his thinking (6). Since *Second Nature*, Pollan has been interested in places where nature and culture intersect most insistently in our everyday lives—like architecture, farming, and now, with his latest book, cooking.[70] In *A Place of My Own* (1997), an investigation of architecture through the story of how he built his writing cabin, Pollan discusses deconstructivism in architecture in terms that also, implicitly, reflect on deconstruction in literature. Pollan argues that architecture is like gardening in that it brings together nature and culture—some aspects of it are dictated by nature (a pitched roof leaks a lot less than a flat one), while others are purely cultural (ornament). He objects to deconstructivists' reduction of all aspects of architecture to a sign system, which he argues neglects the experience of living in buildings. In the preface to the 2008 edition, Pollan asks, "Are our buildings the pure products of culture, like poems, or are they more like adaptations, akin to a pattern of camouflage in an animal?" (xii). Throughout the book, Pollan calls poems "the pure products of culture," and thus seems to envisage a spectrum of cultural activities that are more or less imbricated with nature, from literature on one end to architecture and gardening on the other.[71] I note this Pollan's work seems a telling translation of the values of the environmental humanities into a popular idiom: reservations about deconstruction and the reduction of matter to signs, skepticism about technoscientific progress, and attention to the complex and surprising ways in which human cultural making and non-human nature are thoroughly intertwined with each other. Since *The Botany of Desire* (2001) and especially *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), Pollan's writerly identity has become thoroughly linked with the local, organic food movement.

It is no accident that Pollan's interest in intersections between nature and culture has led him

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[70] *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* was published in 2013.

[71] This sounds like an echo of William Carlos Williams' "To Elsie"—which opens "The pure products of America / go crazy"—but it might be coincidental.

to focus on food and farming; indeed, the organic farming movement has been investigating the collaborations between nature and culture that constitute agriculture for many years. From Sir Albert Howard to Will Allen, organic farming advocates have thought through such collaborations and sought to foster sustainable ones in agriculture. Organic farming can be seen as part of a tradition of environmentalist thought, from George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864) to the *Whole Earth Catalog*, that has focused on developing cultural practices that are ecologically sustainable rather than on wilderness preservation.[72] As Kirk shows, the *Whole Earth Catalog* initially sought to give counterculture back-to-the-landers "access to tools" and also contributed to the appropriate technology movement. Before green marketing went prime-time in the 1990s and 2000s, appropriate technology was marginal in relation to mainstream environmentalism. But organic farming advocates, in developing alternative agricultural methods, had been working in the same arena for years. In fact, both Stewart Brand and Wendell Berry, despite their differences and their falling out, are part of this same broad camp. Though Berry condemns as hubris Brand's declaration that "we are as gods and might as well get good at it," both question the dominant faith in scientific and technological progress. In Berry's terms, Brand fails to understand that the paradox is fundamental: we cannot "get good" at being gods because we *aren't* gods, we are within the world and cannot attain to a godlike perspective on it. But the second part of Brand's statement tempers the first by admitting that we *aren't* good at it—something that those who wield corporate and governmental power are hardly beginning to admit now, even when confronted with overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Despite their differences, Brand and Berry share the pragmatism that has always characterized this minority strain of environmentalism and the organic farming movement.

If the environmental humanities draw strength from their activist heritage, as Stephanie Foote

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[72] Cindi Katz has argued that Marsh, a contemporary of Emerson whose thought and whose conception of nature has received far less attention than Emerson's, deserves more recognition for developing a kind of conservation that acknowledges the ways in which human activity and human history have always shaped the natural world.

has argued, then environmental humanists should pay particular attention to the part of that heritage concerned with precisely the collaborations between nature and culture that they analyze. As we have seen, however, prominent ecocritics have recently dismissed popular and literary discourses that use organic metaphors and promote organic farming. But thinking through organic form has, in fact, enabled the complex ecological thought—across scales and on the global level as well as locally—that these critics value.

In choosing "the mesh" as his term for ecological interconnectedness, and rejecting terms like "network" and "web" because both smack too much of the Internet and vitalism (28), Timothy Morton fails to grapple with the way that organic metaphors have enabled the kind of ecological thought he advocates. While Morton seems to assume that the organic dissolves into a nostalgic longing for naturalness, advocates for organic farming, as we have seen, have long treated organic metaphors as a guide in constructing agricultural systems. Moreover, the association of ecological terms like "network" and "web" with the Internet is no accident. As historical scholarship on the *Whole Earth Catalog* by Fred Turner and Andrew Kirk has shown, the organic figures and images of the earth from space that empowered the *Whole Earth Catalog's* pragmatic environmentalism are intertwined with the development of the Internet. Organic metaphors have empowered ecological, systems-based thinking and the development of communications systems in specific historical ways.

Ursula Heise similarly understates the way in which organic metaphors have enabled thinking across scales. While Heise acknowledges that environmentalism's allegorical visions of the global and its emphasis on a sense of place are "often, implicitly or explicitly, assumed to complement each other"—as in the slogan, "think globally, act locally"—she argues that "they are also quite frequently at odds" (50). For Heise, environmentalism's focus on a sense of place conflicts with the complex ecocosmopolitan attention to dynamic global contestation that she advocates. She represents her focus on a "database aesthetic" like that of Google Earth, which enables a planetary perspective that

can zoom in and out, as a departure from both environmentalism's problematic focus on a sense of place, exemplified by Wendell Berry, and from the allegorical representations of the whole earth that emerged in the 1960s and 70s (67). But in setting up these oppositions, Heise not only neglects the way that organic ecological thinking and the development of the Internet were historically intertwined, but also understates the way in which organic figures—whether in the images of the whole earth on the cover of Brand's catalog or in Berry's influential essays—have prompted and enabled thinking across scales.[73] Howard and Berry are concerned exactly with the imbrication of organisms and organic forms in ecological flows that cut across scales—with how, for example, solar energy is captured biologically and can be maintained and conserved through cycles of decay and growth. In fact, organic farming advocates were arguably concerned with what we now call the "microbiome" decades before anyone else.[74]

Dana Phillips' challenge to ecocriticism has undoubtedly informed Morton and Heise's suspicion of the organic, but in taking ecocritics to task for not knowing enough about the science of ecology, Phillips misunderstands the role of organic metaphors in ecological thought. Phillips argues that "not all of the workings of the natural world are organic, and most of them are far from obvious. The truth, as I hope to demonstrate, is that the history of ecology has been one of discovering how much unlike an organism and just how nonobvious the natural world can be" (51). Howard, Berry, and others do understand ecological systems through organic metaphors, but those

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[73] In fact, Kirk shows how Stewart Brand's campaign for a photograph of the whole earth prompted NASA to take the whole earth photos that appeared on the covers of *Whole Earth* and *Life* in 1968 (40-41). Brand started his campaign in 1966, made buttons that said, "Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?," and sent them to NASA officials among others (41).

[74] The concept of the "microbiome," that we are surrounded by and, in fact, filled with micro-organisms on whose health and diversity our health depends, has been filtering through the academy in recent years and made it to mainstream media with Pollan's *New York Times Magazine* article, "Some of My Best Friends Are Germs," on May 15, 2013. While advocates of organic farming did not, of course, know how central a role micro-organisms play in human beings—our bodies are in fact made up of more non-human cells that human ones—they nevertheless argued that the bacteria and fungi in the soil are essential to its fertility, and thus departed from the hygenic, anti-bacterial discourses that have been dominant for a long time.

organic metaphors are not intended to be scientifically accurate—they are, instead, guides to practice. In Berry's terms, organic metaphors help us imagine systems that we can never fully understand, no matter how good science gets and how useful its insights are. Organic metaphors are aimed, in other words, at the cultivation of attitudes necessary in developing practices that collaborate with "small agencies," such as humility, attention to pattern, and a cautious approach to new technologies.

The problem in Phillips' assertion is a broader one, however. Phillips is, of course, right that ecocritics should not trade on the scientific cachet of ecology without knowing enough about ecology as a science. But, as Phillips himself points out, ecology is a "point of view" as well as a science: for Phillips, this is a liability rather than an asset. Ecology has been called the "subversive science," and as Phillips shows, the field has been vexed from the beginning both by the anti-Darwinism of its founders and by the politicized environmental movements that became linked with it. But in trying to hold writers and critics to the latest and most scientifically viable subfields of the science of ecology, Phillips belies the power of ecology as a broader discourse that takes political, literary, and cultural forms as well. Both the science of ecology and the environmental humanities draw their strength from environmentalism and from ecology as a "point of view"—this is not without problems, but also gives ecology—as a broad, varied set of academic, political, and popular discourses—its force. Environmentalist thought has long thrived at the nexus of academic and popular conversations: think of Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson. That productive cross-fertilization continues today in the work of writers from Pollan to David Abram. Ecological thinking, expressed in idioms from political activism to phenomenology to deconstructionist literary theory to back-to-the-land memoir, runs counter to capitalist theories of value and individualism in multifaceted and complex ways.

Phillips' suspicion of ecology as a "point of view" leads him to excoriate the early ecocritic

John Elder for his reading of a poem by Mary Oliver about the recycling of nutrients. For Phillips, it all seems like a critical sleight of hand: Elder, in using the phrase "recycling of life through an ecosystem," fudges the ecological details of nutrient exchange, merging them with the aesthetic and thus obscuring them—after all, Phillips declares, "nutrients . . . cannot be said to have lives of their own" (157-158). Jane Bennett, I think, might disagree. While Howard would agree that nutrients themselves may not be alive, his work shows that the lives and activities of microorganisms make all the difference in whether and how nutrients reach a plant's roots. While Phillips has nothing but disdain for Elder and Oliver, his book ends with praise for A. R. Ammons' poem *Garbage* and his attention to "consumption, consummation, and recycling, whether of garbage or of poems" (244). But, I would argue, this is simply Elder and Oliver's recycling of nutrients in a more sophisticated guise: as we will see in chapter three, Ammons' poem cannot be so easily separated from that of mainstream nature poets like Oliver and Berry.

This brings me to the core of my proposal: the environmental humanities, and ecocriticism within it, has to turn away from suspicion as its major critical mode and embrace the pragmatic optimism that has been essential to environmentalist making and doing. Such a move would acknowledge that criticism is always creative: the critic makes as much as she unmakes, she inevitably builds as she deconstructs. This move would prompt caution and deliberation: what does our critique create? what are we proposing, implicitly or explicitly, through our analysis? It would also encourage humility: what can we learn from popular discourses that are easy to dismiss? what do persistent metaphors, easy to criticize or take apart, have to teach us? This pragmatic approach involves looking for tools in unlikely places. It is not naively optimistic, but willing to try—optimistic only to the extent that it is not cynical. Such a move in ecocriticism would involve not only a turn away from environmentalism's declensionist and apocalyptic narratives, but would also resist the impulse to, like Morton, throw out nature, the organic, and agriculture itself. Rather than

letting our critique of concepts like the organic and the local blind us to the political multivalence of all kinds of environmental activism, we should instead look for the possibilities for positive social, ecological, and economic change in these movements and discourses as well as for their potential dangers. By pointing out these possibilities, criticism can help us see, re-value, and empower diverse small-scale efforts toward a different kind of food system and a more sustainable society.

While this critical move collaborates with turns against suspicious reading emerging out of queer theory and literary studies of affect, it also emerges from the poetry I study here. In *Radical Affections* (2010), Miriam Nichols calls for renewed attention to projectivist poetics as part of a turn away from suspicious reading. I find that what Nichols calls "participatory" poetics emerge across varied poetic schools—in the work of projectivist poets like Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, but also in work by poets like Berry, Lorine Niedecker, and Muriel Rukeyser. The poems and essays on poetics I study here encourage us to participate in systems that are larger than we are and that we cannot control. Such participation involves collaboration with other agencies and opens us up to both pleasure and vulnerability. In the hands of these poets, organic metaphors prompt not just ecological thought but also ecological affect, a feeling through embodied interconnectedness. For Olson, this does not mean a focus on deep interior emotion, but on the senses and our contact with the world at "the skin, the meeting edge of man and external reality . . . where all that matters does happen" (161). Feeling through interconnectedness involves not only renewed attention to embodied, sensuous pleasures, but also radical vulnerability and a willingness to face loss and accept mortality.

Apropos of compost poetics, the poet Linda Russo has asked, "What's the worm in the poem? Is it the word?"[75] Are words "small agencies" with which the poet collaborates? Olson's poetics

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[75] Russo asked this question after a panel on compost poetics at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment's 2013 conference, at which I presented a version of the third chapter of this dissertation.

would seem to support this proposition: he speaks of the "the *push* of the line under hand at the moment" (243). Olson envisions the human being, not as a subject, but as an object among objects. If the poet adopts this attitude, "if he stays inside himself . . . he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share." As in the agricultural collaboration with earthworms and microorganisms that Howard advocated, here too "humilitas" is key: for Olson, the poet should not "sprawl" in his "relation to nature," but should listen to and collaborate with bodies and objects as well as words (247).

Perhaps the pun, the double- or multi-meaning word, gives us a way to conceive of words as agents with which the poet collaborates. A poem from Lorine Niedecker's 1945 "New Goose" manuscript not only demonstrates how a masterful poet can interact and play with multivalent words, but also gives a sense of how the poetry I examine here prompts an openness to both pleasure and vulnerability. Here the poem is in its entirety—like most of Niedecker's poems, this one is untitled:

> She was a mourner too. Now she's gone
> to the earth's core,
> with organ notes, buried by church that buries the live
> intoning: That torture called by men delight
> touches her no more.
> So calm she looked, half-smiling: Heaven?
> No, restore
> my matter, never free from motion,
> to the soil's roar. (111)

Niedecker wrote this poem after her mother's death; she recognizes that her mother, in life, was "a mourner," as Niedecker herself is now. The poem captures both the embodied pleasure, or "delight," that the mother has lost and her acute aversion to the vulnerability involved in delight, which renders it a "torture" to be escaped. The poem turns on a few key puns. "Church buries the live" in the sense that it stifles the living with its doctrines, which declare "delight" a "torture," but the church also literally buries the body's "matter," which, as the closing lines of the poem show, is

also "live." While the phrase "Now she's gone / to the earth's core" seems almost a platitude about the deceased resting in the earth, by the end of the poem, Niedecker has put this supposed stillness in motion. The "core" / "no more" / "restore" / "roar" rhymes enact this turn: her mother's body will neither escape to a heaven that transcends change nor be restored to a peaceful earth, but will instead become part of the "soil's roar."

This promise that "motion" and change will continue after death via the material decomposition of the body is a hopeful one for Niedecker. We are part of systems that are larger than we are, and even death will unsettle our desire for stillness. The soil is not inert, but a process of change so fierce and ceaseless that it *roars*. In later long poems like "Lake Superior," Niedecker follows minerals as they cycle through living things and ultimately wash down to the sea. The "soil's roar" is local—specific to a place in its character and process, its timbre and pitch—but it is also part of global systems and currents.

This dissertation shows how twentieth-century poets have used organic metaphors and figures to develop ecological ways of thinking, feeling, and making that have much in common with—and, in some cases, historically intersect with—the discourses and practices of the local, organic farming movement. In doing so, I revise some of the usual critical wisdom about twentieth-century American poetry, especially the insistence on a sharp divide between the formal techniques, concerns, and suppositions about the subject that characterize mainstream versus linguistically experimental poetry. Poets as varied as Olson, Niedecker, and Berry—whose audiences, poetic forms, and cultural positions differ strikingly—nevertheless develop poetics that have much in common. They all not only revise and rework organic metaphors, but also develop an ethics—or what Joan Retallack calls a poethics, a poetics / ethics—based on shared ecological principles. I make this argument not to flatten out the differences among these poets, which are crucial, but because these unlikely poetic convergences shed light on what unites divergent twentieth-century

American poetries.

Attending to such convergences also revises one familiar critical story about postwar American poetry and the role of organic form within it. That story goes something like this: the mid-twentieth-century New Critics articulated what James Breslin has called a "rigidified" version of modernism; they defined organic form through the ideal of the short, closed lyric. This New Critical way of reading and writing poems, with its emphasis on perfection, closure, holism, and genius (both of the poet and of the close-reading critic), dominated the poetry scene in the mid-twentieth century US. However, it squashed formal experimentation, deflecting the avant-garde impulse of modernism and resulting in a return to traditional forms or in no-longer-innovative free verse. Various experimental poetic movements and schools, such as Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, New York School, and the Beats, rebelled against this New Critical hegemony in the postwar period; in 1960, Donald Allen's landmark anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, gathered the work of these poets, grouped by school and region. These poetic schools all departed from the impersonal detachment and formal closure favored by the dominant New Critical way of writing and reading, though in differing ways.[76] According to this critical story, these varied experiments disrupted the inherited, "closed" version of organic form, and then Language poetry and deconstruction articulated a complete rejection of it.[77] So experimentalism triumphs over politically retrograde poetics, at least in certain quarters.

Organic form is not the sole province of New Critics and Romantic poets, though the critical

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[76] While the New York School went for humor and quirky linguistic excess and the Beats and some San Francisco Renaissance poets for long bardic lines, Robert Creeley crafted poignant, formally spare short poems and Olson's "composition by field" made innovative use of page space.

[77] *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for instance, ties organicism to unity, notes that, "in the latter 20th c., some theorists have become skeptical about the desirability or even possibility of achieving unity," and then sets open forms in opposition to organic forms: "some modern poets compose works deliberately incorporating discontinuities, obscurities, irrelevancies, and inner contradictions . . . The reader is invited to abandon the constraints on reading imposed by the convention of organicism and enjoy other values: a sense of free play, active participation in the creation of a poem, release from the restrictions of linguistic and genre conventions" (869).

narrative I've just recounted presumes that it is. While critics do see Olson's influential, breath-based poetics as an instance of organic form, that tends not to complicate the Romantic and New Critical definitions of it that they rely on. Michael Davidson, for example, notes that "the new poetries of the 1950s and 1960s generated notational features based on organic or psychological models that could not be accommodated to traditional prosodic form" (14). But Davidson himself uses the term "organic" in a way that links it primarily with closure (6, 22), thereby reinforcing the usual dichotomy between organic form and experiment. However, I will show that a variety of organic form poetics in fact support formal and linguistic experimentation.

The first three chapters are each organized around an unlikely pair of poets who grapple with a particular facet or tendency of organic metaphors. I explore the poets' convergence with, or divergence from, the work of organic farming advocates who are wrestling with a similar facet of organic metaphors. In the first chapter, I look at energy and breath in the work of Charles Olson and Muriel Rukeyser, examining how their essays on poetics—though aimed at different audiences—echo each other, developing a strikingly similar way of thinking about both the poet's body and breath and the interaction among poet, poem, and audience. In paying attention both to embodiment and to interconnectedness, Olson and Rukeyser draw on early systems theory and converge with advocates of organic farming like Howard, Balfour, and Rodale who took seriously the interaction of microorganisms in the soil. The second chapter investigates Lorine Niedecker and Robert Duncan, contrasting Duncan's projectivist field poetics with what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has called Niedecker's fusion of surrealism, Objectivism and projectivism. I argue that their opposing poetic approaches—Niedecker's disciplined condensation versus Duncan's poetic spontaneity and valorization of emergent forms—both respond to the vexed issues of agency that organic metaphors entail. Niedecker and Duncan grapple with problems that Coleridge, Michel Foucault, back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing, and gardener and formalist poet May Sarton also faced. In chapter

three, I focus on compost tropes in Wendell Berry's work, analyzing how organic metaphors function in his poems and essays on poetry as well as in his essays on agriculture. In the final section of the chapter, I analyze A. R. Ammons' long poem *Garbage* as a point of comparison. The fourth chapter focuses on Ronald Johnson's poems and cookbooks, showing how his concrete poetics and his cookery share an emphasis on the senses and embodied pleasure. This chapter attends to the dissemination of organic form among a variety of experimental poets and the countercultural dissemination of organic farming, both going on at the same time in California.

**Chapter One / Energy and Breath: Muriel Rukeyser and Charles Olson**

This is a chapter of odd couples. Charles Olson and Muriel Rukeyser certainly are one, and either of them makes a strange pairing with early organic farming advocates like Sir Albert Howard, Lady Eve Balfour, or J. I. Rodale. Despite the undeniably important differences among these writers, their work shows how paying attention to the internal dynamics of organic form—whether that of a poem or that of a farm—breaks open organicist holism and forges an ethic based on ecological interconnectedness. As we have seen, critics of both organic form in poetry and of organic food and farming reject the organic as closed and local—an ostrich-head-in-the-sand totality that achieves unity at the expense of the global. However, Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* (1949) and Olson's essays on poetics examine relationships and processes that begin within the poem and ramify outside it, elaborating an ecological view of interconnectedness. These two very different American poets wrote their way out of the hegemonic, New Critical organicism, with its emphasis on the poem's autonomy and closure, precisely by paying attention to how organisms, and their own bodies, thrive through eating, breathing, excreting waste, and touching the world—that is, to the interconnections and interdependence that make provisional autonomy possible. Meanwhile, Howard, Balfour, and Rodale were tracing the relationships among bacteria, fungi, and earthworms in the soil and redefining health as a system of thriving, interconnected life-forms, rather than an individual human being's hygenic freedom from pathogens.

In the 1940s and 50s, all these figures were marginal and indeed marginalized away from each other—as far as I know, there is no evidence that these poets and advocates of organic farming read each other's work. Though Rukeyser and Olson met at least once, they occupied different edges of the poetry world.[1] After her early successes as a poet of the left in the 1930s, Rukeyser was

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[1]As Tom Clark notes in his biography of Olson, Kenneth Rexroth introduced Olson to Rukeyser (and Robert Duncan and other poets) in San Francisco in 1947. At the time, Rukeyser was living there and Olson was visiting on a grant-funded research trip (125).

increasingly sidelined with the rise of McCarthyism and the New Criticism; Olson, who didn't begin writing poetry until the 40s, was a rising star among experimental poets and would later come to be considered the major theorist of projectivist poetics associated with Black Mountain College and the San Francisco Renaissance. Though Howard was a respected scientist and both Howard and Balfour enjoyed class privilege in the UK, their arguments for organic farming fell on deaf ears as the use of chemical fertilizers increased dramatically after World War II. In the US, J. I. Rodale was known—in some ways justifiably—as a quack.

This chapter examines how these poets and writers, by revising organic metaphors in disparate fields, did what Timothy Morton calls the "heavy digging" for both postmodern poetry and environmentalism (*ET* 104). While Morton dismisses the organic as nostalgic and retrograde, it is in fact precisely through revisions of organic form that poetic closure opened up into postmodern experiment. As historians Randall Beeman and James Pritchard argue, the organic farming movement similarly contributed to the development of the modern environmentalist ethic of interdependence (22, 49).

Olson, who coined the term "post-modern" in 1952,[2] and Rukeyser, who is not often called a postmodernist, both start from Romantic versions of organic form, pay attention to the poet's own body, and explore what Rukeyser calls "process and relationship" and Olson calls "the kinetic." For both of them, dynamic, processual poetics were inseparable from politics and attempts to envision and instantiate democratic communities. While the New Critics used organic form to help them uncover the relations of tension, paradox, and irony in poems, for them the process of relation is contained and reified, held still in the finished poem. In Rukeyser and Olson, the relationships and

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[2] Olson coined the term in "The Present Is Prologue." At the end of that short essay, Olson declares himself "an archeologist of morning": "the writing and acts which I find bear on the present job are (I) from Homer back, not forward; and (II) from Melville on, particularly himself, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lawrence. These were the modern men who projected what we are and what we are in, who broke the spell. They put men forward into the post-modern, the post-humanist, the post-historic, the going live present, the 'Beautiful Thing'" (*CPO* 207).

processes reach outside the poem: both argue that the poem "transfers energy" from the poet to the reader.

Rukeyser and Olson are very rarely read together.[3] Olson worked in poetic communities with coterie dynamics, helping define an experimental tradition that sought its origin in the work of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, rather than in that of Eliot, the patron saint of the New Critics' version of modernism. Rukeyser, who began writing poetry earlier than Olson did, used modernist techniques for documentary, leftist, and feminist projects and wrote biographies and essays aimed at a broad audience.[4] While feminist recuperations of Rukeyser as a "foremother" in the 1980s and 90s paid most attention to her post-1960 poetry and praised the growing "clarity" of her work from *Waterlily Fire* (1962) and *The Speed of Darkness* (1968) on, recent scholarship on Rukeyser has focused overwhelmingly on "The Book of the Dead" (1938), her documentary long poem about miners dying of silicosis in West Virginia.[5] The result is that Rukeyser's work of the 1940s and 50s—which is in a less recognizably feminist idiom than her later work and lacks the political context of her earlier work—has not received as much critical attention as it warrants.[6] Though neither Rukeyser nor Olson has the reputation as a major American poet that each of them deserves, Olson's

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[3] This chapter was written before Peter Middleton's article, "Poetry, Physics, and the Scientific Attitude at Mid-Century," was published; in it, Middleton compares Olson's poetics with Rukeyser's and argues that both "were bids to enter poetry in the widespread competition . . . for a share of the epistemic authority accruing to the manifestly successful methods of inquiry in nuclear physics" (148). Jed Rasula is another exception; in *This Compost* (2003), he includes Rukeyser as part of a very broadly defined Black Mountain school of poets centered on Olson.

[4] Rukeyser was a few years younger than Olson—he was born in 1910, she in 1913—but she published her first book of poetry, *Theory of Flight*, in 1935, while Olson only turned to poetry in the mid-1940s, after his involvement in politics ended.

[5] Michael Davidson, Tim Dayton, and Michael Thurston, among many others, have written on Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead." For feminist work on Rukeyser, see Alicia Ostriker, Janet Kaufman, and Anne Herzog, as well as many of the articles and memoirs in *"How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?": The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*. Kate Daniels' article, "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics," gives an especially good history of the reception of Rukeyser's work and her political and poetic position.

[6] Articles by Raphael Allison and David Bergman, as well as the work of scholars such as Stephanie Heim and Eric Keenaghan, has fortunately begun to redress that. A panel on Rukeyser at the 2013 MLA convention and a symposium on Rukeyser at Eastern Michigan University in 2013 are evidence of growing critical interest in her work.

importance is recognized in some critical circles, while the full scope of Rukeyser's work has not been reckoned with.[7]

Despite their differences, Rukeyser and Olson's poetics coincide in remarkable and intriguing ways. Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* (1949) and Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950) were published at about the same time, but written for distinct audiences and in the context of quite different poetic communities. While Olson drafted "Projective Verse" in correspondence with Frances Boldereff and Robert Creeley and first published it in *Poetry New York* (*CPO* 423), Rukeyser originally presented the material in *The Life of Poetry* as "talks on poetry and communication, at Vassar College in 1940, at the California Labor School in 1945 and 1948, and at Columbia University in 1946; and in other lectures and broadcasts" (*LP* xii). While Olson developed and circulated his poetics in conversation with other experimental poets, Rukeyser spoke to students and, in *The Life of Poetry*, clearly aimed to reach a broad public. Olson tackled American conformity with an aggressive slang on its expected masculinity; he participated in masculinist thought, while insulating himself from some postwar norms by living at Black Mountain College and by surrounding himself with student followers. Rukeyser dealt perhaps more directly with the problems of conformity and oppression, arguing that the "fear of poetry" is an index to them.

However, Rukeyser and Olson articulate their poetics using remarkably similar terms and concepts. Perhaps most strikingly, both call the poem a transfer of energy from poet to reader (*LP* 173, *CPO* 240). In doing so, they both draw on and rework Ernest Fenollosa's contention that the sentence is a "transference of power" in his essay, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," which Pound edited and published in *Instigations* (1920). Rukeyser and Olson also both contend that the poet's breathing inflects the rhythms of a poem and even agree that spacing on the

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[7] Robert Von Hallberg, Charles Altieri, Michael Davidson, Alan Golding, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Miriam Nichols, among others, have all written important critical work on Olson.

page should reflect the breath. As I will show, these convergences come out of rewritings of organic form that share an emphasis on the senses, affect, and emotional honesty: those Romantic residues that the New Critics tried to purge reappear radically revised.

Rukeyser and Olson both transform Romantic sincerity by starting from the poet's own organism and acknowledging embodiment and ecological interconnectedness. Their re-conceptions of embodiment empower their remarkably similar claims about the role of breath and page space in poetic composition. Olson's pronouncements about this are well-known: at the beginning of "Projective Verse," he writes, "Verse now . . . if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" (*CPO* 239). Like Olson, but writing before he did, Rukeyser claims that the line is related to the breath of the poet and that space on the page can serve as a score for the breath. While Rukeyser holds that "the line in poetry—whether it be individual or traditional—is intimately bound with the poet's breathing" (*LP* 117), Olson contends, "the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (*CPO* 242). Both cite E. E. Cummings for his use of space on the page to score for the breath (*CPO* 245, *LP* 117), and both advocate extending the advantages of this system. Olson notes the irony that the typewriter, "due to its rigidity and its space precisions," gives the poet a means to record his own individual bodily rhythms: "For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work" (*CPO* 245). Rukeyser suggests a system of additional notation:

> Punctuation is biological. It is the physical indication of the body-rhythms which the reader is to acknowledge; and, as we know it, punctuation in poetry needs several inventions. Not least of all, we need a measured rest. Space on the page, as E. E. Cummings uses it, can provide

> roughly for a relationship in emphasis through the eye's discernment of pattern; but we need a system of pauses which will be related to the time-pattern of the poem. (*LP* 117)

Though Rukeyser later remarked that this system of additional notation did not work, and though the literalism of Olson's pronouncements about page space as a score for the breath has often been ridiculed, the similarity of these claims, in two poets so rarely read together, is notable.

While both Rukeyser and Olson move from a Romantic version of organic form to an ecological approach to process and relationship that transforms their views of the human, their embodied poetics are gendered quite differently. While Olson critiques "western" man's relationship to his own body in essays like "Human Universe" and "Proprioception," his embodied poet is always male.[8] Rukeyser, in contrast, attends to female embodiment and queer sensuality in poems like "Ajanta" and "Night Feeding." However, both attend to the poem as a process where the relations among internal elements ramify outward to involve and transform objects and people outside the poem. Both explore how the poem's communicative act—its transference of energy—opens out into a series of interconnected processes, including the processes of the poet as an organism. In Olson's words, this new poetics leads to a new "stance toward reality outside a poem," one that insists on seeing humans as organisms and as objects in a field of objects, neither more nor less than other "objects," or living and non-living beings (*CPO* 246).

Rukeyser's and Olson's reading and references overlap somewhat, in ways that certainly contributed to the similarities between their poetics, though these similarities cannot be reduced to shared influences. Both had engaged deeply with mid-nineteenth-century American writers who were part of what was then becoming known as the American renaissance; indeed, both were part of

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[8] Based not only on his infamous interactions with female students but also on the misogyny evident in some of his essays—"Human Universe," for example, ends with a Mayan myth about the moon who "is as difficult to understand as any bitch is" (*CPO* 166)—we can infer that Olson means the male pronoun that he always uses for the poet rather emphatically.

the invention of that literary-historical era, which F. O. Matthiessen, whom they both knew, named and explored most fully.[9] In addition to their overlapping work on writers of the American renaissance, Rukeyser and Olson had both absorbed D. H. Lawrence. Olson and Rukeyser also engaged with the work of thinkers from other fields who were concerned with organic form and attuned to process and relationship. Both, for example, had read D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, a tome that explores mathematically the formal properties of organisms and of the inorganic forms that they generate, like shells.[10] Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, with its "philosophy of organism," was a centrally important text for Olson, while Rukeyser cites Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics* in *The Life of Poetry*.

In the first section of this chapter, I analyze the New Critics' use of organic metaphors and then show how Rukeyser and Olson reject their version of organic form and develop a more ecological one that is attuned to dynamic interconnectedness. The second section argues that Rukeyser and Olson came to see the poem as a transfer of energy between poet and reader by revising Fenollosa to emphasize affect and honesty. In the third section, I examine the differing ways in which Sir Albert Howard, Lady Eve Balfour, and J. I. Rodale depict the soil as lively. Howard and Olson both represent acts of making as human cultural collaborations with non-human agents and contend that such acts entail vulnerability and require humility. Finally, the fourth section of the chapter investigates the embodied, ecological poetics that Rukeyser developed in the 1940s and 50s through her biography, *Willard Gibbs*, and the poems "Ajanta" and "Night Feeding."

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[9] In 1947, Olson published *Call Me Ishmael*, which grew out of his work on Melville at Wesleyan and then at Harvard. Olson managed to re-assemble Melville's library; he shared this work with Matthiessen, who mentions Olson in a footnote in *The American Renaissance*. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser both cites Matthiessen's book and names Matthiessen first in her acknowledgements (xii). Rukeyser discusses Whitman and Melville in some depth, as well as Dickinson and Emerson more briefly. She also wrote a poem, "F.O.M.," in response to Matthiessen's suicide.

[10] Rukeyser explicitly connects Thompson's work to her poetics, as I will explore in more detail below. In letters to Frances Boldereff, Olson mentions Thompson.

**From Closure to Interconnectedness, from New Critical Organic Form to Ecopoetics**

By paying attention to how relations within the poem ramify outside it, Rukeyser and Olson open organic form up into an ecopoetics—that is, into a formally innovative poetics, the kind of postmodernism that helped forge ecological thought. Starting from their own experiences of embodiment, Rukeyser and Olson take seriously the fact that organisms survive only through openness to and interchange with other beings—through eating, breathing, and excreting waste as well as through sociality. In other words, by taking the organic metaphor seriously—treating it as a homology motivated by the functional similarities among organisms, poems, and social groups, rather than a simple analogy[11]—Rukeyser and Olson break open the New Critical closure usually associated with organic form in poetry. They thus see the poem as a communicative act that can transform both poet and reader or audience.

Rukeyser and Olson believe the metaphor, but the New Critics took a more diffident stance: they position the organic metaphor as an analogy in order to distance themselves from the Romantic expressivity and affect linked with organic form. For the New Critics, the organism's self-enclosure and autonomy are its most significant features: in comparing a poem to an organism, they highlight the poem's autonomy and closure. W. K. Wimsatt, for example, argues for a "middle ground" organic form that avoids the two opposite poles of biological organic form, which takes the organic metaphor quite literally, and idealist, Kantian organic form, which is purged of the organism. This "middle ground" organic form, in treating the metaphor as a metaphor, puts embarrassing Romantic residues like the "genetic fallacy" and the consequent focus on the poet and his spontaneity at a distance. Similarly, Cleanth Brooks' essay, "The Poem as Organism: Modern Critical Procedure," foregrounds the metaphorical approach as such through the simile in its title. Brooks separates the

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[11] While analogous entities operate in similar ways for different reasons, homologous ones share a functional similarity that determines their structural similarity. Here I draw on Denise Gigante's definitions of homology and analogy in *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (44).

"modern," or New Critical, conception of organic form from the Romantic one that he condemns as too invested in the subjectivity of the poet. In doing so, he acknowledges the link between Romantic and modern criticism that M. H. Abrams would expose in *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

In a preface to their widely used teaching anthology *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Brooks and Robert Penn Warren use an organic metaphor for poetic form, ultimately mystifying poems as structures that cannot be tampered with. Brooks and Warren aim to cure students of old-fashioned banalities—that poems are beautiful because they are full of pretty things, for example, or because they hide a "fine sentiment" or moral truth—and to inculcate them in the values of New Critical close reading. They claim that poems are poems because of the relationship among the language, rhythm, images, ideas, and emotions in them. In a section called "Organic Nature of Poetry," they write that a poem is not "a group of mechanically combined elements . . . which are put together to make a poem as bricks are put together to make a wall" (18). They insist that the

> question . . . about any element in a poem is not whether it is in itself pleasing, or agreeable, or valuable, or 'poetical,' but whether it works with the other elements to create the effect intended by the poet. The relationship among elements in a poem is therefore all important, and it is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we should compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant. (18-19)

Brooks and Warren do emphasize relationship, but it is—and remains throughout the readings of canonical poems that they give—the relationship among elements in the poem. In reading a couple of Robert Burns' lines, they argue that even a slight revision—transposing the exclamation "O!"—alters the meaning of the poem by changing its movement (19-20). In general, poetic language comes off as something not to be played with. The reader comes away with reverence for great poems as they have been written, but without a sense that poems may be written. As Rukeyser

argues, this implies that poetry is to be valued and passed on, but "never to be used" (*LP* 7).

Even in a reading of W. B. Yeats' poem, "Among School Children," which highlights process, Brooks manages to convert an organic metaphor into a critical directive by parsing it as an explicit and rather clunky allegory. The poem's closing lines are primarily concerned with process and the indistinguishability of actor, acting, and act—or in Yeats' terms, dancer, dancing, and dance:

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance? (217)

In his classic critical work, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Brooks takes up this poem to insist that "the dance must be primary for us"—that is, the poem itself, its language, and its internal tensions must be of central concern for the critic. While Yeats' lines insist on the inseparability of dancer and dance, or of trunk and blossoms, Brooks takes apart the conceits of tree and dance to clear space for his technique of close reading: "Our staple study of literature consists in investigations of the root system (the study of literary sources) or in sniffing the blossoms (impressionism), or—not to neglect Yeats's alternative symbol—in questioning the quondam dancer, no longer a dancer, about her life history (the study of the poet's biography)" (191). Brooks here separates the poem itself from all that is connected to it, setting aside intertextuality, the poet, and the poem's effect on the reader or auditor. Despite his insistence that the dance must be central, Brooks represents poems not as processes in motion, but as patterns of resolved tensions.

In fact, Rukeyser's most pointed objection to the New Critics indicts their approach for reifying dynamic processes within the poem: "In poetry, the relations are not formed like crystals on a lattice of words, although the old criticism (which at the moment is being called, of course, the New Criticism) would have us believe it so" (*LP* 166). In representing the poem as an exchange of energy among poet, poem, and reader (or "witness" in Rukeyser's terms), Rukeyser and Olson contested New Critical poetic theories that valued poetic closure and the autonomy of poetic

language. While the New Criticism argued that poems achieve wholeness and closure through a balance of tensions, Rukeyser and Olson were interested in the communicative function of poetry—the changes its processes of composition and of reception effected in both poet and audience. Both Rukeyser and Olson revise Romantic organic form in this ecological direction by taking the metaphor seriously enough to play with it. Rukeyser unsettles organic metaphors so that a single analogy will not reify her view of the poem's process, while Olson pares organic metaphors back entirely, almost emptying his "field" composition of biological reference.

Rukeyser challenges the New Critics by calling their version of organic form mechanical: as we have seen, she accuses them of representing poems as "static mechanics" (*LP* 166). She objects most centrally to the way New Critical readings reify the processes within the poem, rather than seeing poetry as a dynamic art form: "the motion of the poem does not enter: the talk is in terms of the start, the image, the crystallization" (171). Rukeyser's own version of organic form emphasizes precisely the element of time. Citing D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, Rukeyser claims that "organic form is, mathematically, a function of time" (171). The poem itself takes place in time: it "moves through its sounds set in motion, and the reaction to these sounds, their rhymes and repetitions and contrast, has a demonstrable physical basis" (171). She is as concerned about the relations within a poem as the New Critics are, but she discusses them in different terms:

> These inter-dependences [within the poem] may be proved, if you will allow the term, in one or more ways: the music by which the syllables resolve may lead to a new theme, as in verbal music, or to a climax, a key-relationship which makes—for the moment—an equilibrium; the images may have established their own progression in such a way that they serve to mark the poem's development; the tensions and attractions between the poem's meanings may mark its growth, as they must if the poem is to achieve its form. (169)

By describing the relations in the poem with processual terms that underscore their movement in

time, Rukeyser shows how her approach differs from that of those who are "prepared to believe there was such a thing as Still Life" (174). Instead, she insists that "all things change in time; some are made of change itself, and the poem is of these. It is not an object; the poem is a process" (174).

But Rukeyser does not attribute a static view of the poem to the New Criticism alone. This is part of a larger problem: "accepting a science that was static and seeing the world about us according to the vision it afforded, we have tried to freeze everything, including living functions, and the motions of the imaginative arts" (173). While Rukeyser insists that the poet's process is similar to that of the scientist, she cautions poets against using scientific findings as models because adhering too closely to a single analogy can reify thought. Instead, Rukeyser argues that poets should take up the methods of science (162-163).[12]

Therefore, when Rukeyser uses organic metaphors, she often backs off and revises or disclaims them. When discussing the relationship of rhythm and form, for example, Rukeyser dramatizes such a backing off: "Our rhythms are more recognizably our selves than our forms. Sometimes in nature, form and rhythm are very close: the shape of a tree, for example, is the diagram of its relation to every force which has acted on it and in it; the 'shape' of our consciousness—but you see to what folly the use of models may lead" (175-176). She does the same thing in a slightly more subtle way when searching for an alternative to the "static mechanics" of the New Critics. She links the New Critical approach to Emerson's assertion that language is "fossil poetry," arguing that "to think of language as earth containing fossils immediately sets the mind, directs it to rigid consequences." Instead, she suggests that we see language "as a river in whose watercourse the old poetry and the old science are both continually as countless pebbles and stones and boulders rolled" (166-167). But the very next section begins with an assertion that displaces the

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[12] Rukeyser puts this rather obliquely: "When Baudelaire said that the imagination is 'the most scientific of the faculties, because it alone understands the universal analogy,' he set the trap and sprung it in one phrase. The trap is the use of the discoveries of science instead of the methods of science" (163).

river metaphor in turn: “Truth is, according to Gibbs, not a stream that flows from a source, but an agreement of components” (167).

By refusing to settle on any organic metaphors and continuously displacing them, Rukeyser insists that the poem’s transfer of energy is itself a changing process. After citing Fenollosa’s image of the verb as a lightning flash as a metaphor to define poetry as an exchange of energy, Rukeyser turns to Charles Pierce’s triadic semiotics to explore the relationship between poet, poem, and “witness” (173-175). The poem is not simply a lightning flash “between two terms,” but a relation among three (174). That is, Fenollosa’s lightning flash is what Pierce would call an “action of brute force” that “takes place between two subjects,” while semiosis is “a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant” (Pierce, qtd in *LP* 174). Here Rukeyser revises again: she transposes Pierce’s semiotic triad so that it involves, not just the interpretant of the sign, but the writer of that sign as well. Her triad of “the poet, the poem, and the audience” redefines semiotics to include the exchange between poet and reader through the poem (174). She also suggests the substitution of the term “witness” for “reader” or “audience” because it “includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence” and for its “overtone of responsibility” (175). The word “witness” signals that “work is being done on the self” of the reader as well as the writer (175).

Here Rukeyser owns up to the Romantic expressivity that the New Critics sought to avoid. While they occluded the role of emotion within an organic metaphor, as M. H. Abrams recognized, Rukeyser seeks to “prove” it by offering concrete descriptions of both poetic composition and exchange. For example, she describes the process of writing her poem, “Orpheus,” representing it as a series of surfacings with long, intermittent periods in which she was not working on the poem (181). The poem took its shape not just from her intention, but from thing she happened to see or read and from emotional growth that was only partly conscious. Rukeyser also recounts a classroom

experiment with "witnessing" a poem that emphasizes the communicative act rather than a written text. In a poetry workshop, she asked for a volunteer to compose a poem on the spot, in his head. She then sent him out into the hall with a piece of paper and told him to wait and, eventually, to write the poem down. While he was gone, the class discussed whether there was a poem and where it was. Then he came back in and read the poem, and she asked him to tear up the piece of paper on which he had written it: again the question was, where is the poem? (179-180). "The poem exists in the imagination of the poet and the group; but are there as many poems as there are witnesses? What is the role of the words on the paper?" (180).

To theorize these processes of composition and exchange, Rukeyser turns to Fenollosa, Pierce, and Thompson as we have seen, but also to Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics* in a section called "The Poem Seen As a System" (186) and to Willard Gibbs' contention that "truth is an accord that . . . makes the whole 'simpler than its parts'" (167). Rukeyser often uses the phrase "process and relationship" to designate dynamic, complexly interdependent phenomena and to denote systemic thinking across a wide range of fields. Rukeyser even cites "ecology" as an example of a discipline that studies "process and relationship:" "The science of ecology is only one example of an elaboration of the idea, so that the life of the land may be seen in terms of its tides of growth, the feeding of one group on another, the equilibrium reached, broken, and the drive toward another balance and renewal" (12-13). Even in this brief summary of an organicist version of ecology, Rukeyser's focus is not on static balance, but on the process of equilibrium breaking and re-forming.

In Rukeyser's poetics, questions of form are inseparable from anti-fascism and the emotional honesty of readers as well as poets. Rukeyser sometimes turns to the familiar idiom of Romantic organic form to counter New Critical detachment. She writes, for example: "many readers think of form in poetry as a framework. It is not that. The form and music of fine poems are organic, they are not frames" (30). She speaks, in terms that echo Coleridge's, of the "true level" of "form and

content . . . where one is a function of the other" (39). But she also turns such organic figures to political purposes: "There has been a great deal of talk about security in this century. Growth is the security of organic life. The security of the imagination lies in calling, all our lives, for more liberty, more rebellion, more belief" (30). She speaks of form as "achieved" in life as well as art, and claims that, "Faith is found here, not in a destiny raiding and parcelling out knowledge and the earth, but in a people who, person by person, believes itself. Do you accept your own gestures and symbols? Do you believe what you yourself say? When you act, do you believe what you are doing?" (39). Rukeyser's direct address to the reader distinguishes her poetics from both literary criticism and Olson's essays, which were aimed at a small group of avant-garde poets.

Rukeyser reshapes organic form into an ecopoetics not only by citing ecology in *The Life of Poetry*, but also by insisting that relationships internal to the poem reach outside it and affect the internal workings—the feelings, the consciousness—of poet and witnesses. Rukeyser takes the organic metaphor seriously enough to realize that neither organisms nor poems are autonomous wholes. This insight is ecological because it recognizes that interconnections do not end at the skin—bacteria that live inside us, for example, are part of a wider ecology that not only connects us but crosses through us. Similarly, Rukeyser points out that poems link the poet with unknown witnesses, but also that a poem's images connect up with meanings and memories in the witness's life, requiring work on the self.

Olson also advocates emotional honesty and work on the self, though he starts from the physiological, the body and the senses, rather than psychological interiority. Because of his critique of "subjectivism" and the Western concept of the subject, Olson was not comfortable explicitly embracing Romantic expressivity or using conventional idioms of belief and sincerity as Rukeyser does. As Miriam Nichols argues in *Radical Affections*, Olson's projectivist poetics both challenge traditional accounts of subjectivity and offer a complex approach to experience, affect, and the

senses.

Though Olson reworks Romantic organic form, he suppresses explicit reference to organic metaphors as he does so. In his influential 1950 essay "Projective Verse," Olson revises Romantic organic form, proclaiming that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (*CPO* 240). A look at Coleridge's classic definition of organic form reveals the submerged organic metaphor in Olson's essay. In his lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge distinguishes "organic" form from "mechanic" form: while mechanic form is imposed from outside, organic form emerges from within. Coleridge calls mechanic form "predetermined" and compares it to sculpting or pottery to emphasize that the form bears no necessary relation to the content and that the shaping force acts on the material from outside. In contrast, Coleridge writes that "the organic form . . . is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such is the form" (462). Here, form and content are inextricable, as in a plant, and the shaping force acts from within. Though Olson does not explicitly compare the poem to an organism, he does represent the poem as directing its own development. He writes, for example, that the poet "can go by no track than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself" (240).

Even in the most prominent organic figure in "Projective Verse"—the "field" of Olson's "composition by field"—Olson suppresses the organic metaphor by reducing the field's natural reference almost to the vanishing point: unlike Robert Duncan, Olson does not represent this field as an actual meadow, but as an unspecified openness. The field is simply the poet's act of "putting himself in the open" and making himself vulnerable by not relying on traditional metrical forms (240, 239). Olson's field is schematic—it's a way of thinking through the parts of a poem in their relationships to each other—but it is also a microcosm of such complex interconnectedness in the world. Olson writes:

> every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and . . . these elements are to be seen creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world. (243)

Later in this essay, Olson calls human beings and other living creatures "objects" (247). So, in the passage just quoted, when Olson names the elements of the poem "objects of reality," he is comparing the relations within the poem to the relations among creatures in the natural world. Olson's composition by field thus envisions the poem as ecosystem.

In opening up organic form into an ecopoetics, Olson emphasizes what Rukeyser highlighted and the New Critics neglected: namely, that interaction and openness to the outside that are as necessary to an organism's survival as closure. In the essay "The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II," which was written in 1958 but only recently published, Olson evokes both organic form and what Timothy Morton calls "ambience," the surroundings or environment: "the poem carries in itself the evidence of what it isn't, as well as what it is" (26). Olson compares poetry to painting and says that he is "talking about the painting of the painting, how do you paint it, when the frame is not the limiting factor it once was. How do you write the poem when you do not want the poem to stay in – even though it has to, to be itself" (27). Here Olson suggests that the poem has a kind of necessary closure—it has to "stay in" "to be itself"—that at the same time points outside of itself, at all that is not the poem. An organism is also necessarily closed—it has to be bounded and autonomous to some extent to be distinguished from its environment—but it must also open up to and interact with what is outside of it to survive. In "Human Universe," Olson also stresses the importance of interaction at the surface, writing that "the skin itself, the meeting edge of man and external reality, is where all that matters does happen"

and "that man and external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one" (161). Olson's ecological revision of organic form was crucial to other poets. Robert Duncan, for example, was actually writing the poems in *The Opening of the Field*—which play with a more avowedly Romantic organic form—while listening to Olson's "Special View of History" lectures on Whitehead's "philosophy of organism" in San Francisco.

While Olson's work opened up the conservative poetics of organic form, his years at Black Mountain College bear on the politics of the organic. Black Mountain was a small, experimental college in North Carolina founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice and other defectors from Rollins College that attracted faculty such as Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage. Olson served as the rector of Black Mountain College from 1951 to its dissolution in 1956 (Clark 211, 259-260). Though those at Black Mountain always promoted the growth of the individual and did not celebrate any kind of nationalist rootedness, the college's effort to integrate daily life, intellectual and artistic work, and the labor of farming and building could be seen as an attempt at organic community. In his history of Black Mountain, Martin Duberman shows that the college, under Olson's leadership, came to its full flowering as an experimental school of the arts even as it was falling apart as an institution (335). Olson presided over the collapse of farming at the school (363-366), deteriorating buildings, dwindling enrollment, and financial troubles, even as he also started the *Black Mountain Review* and fostered the experimental dance, theater, and poetry that came out of Black Mountain in the early 1950s. Olson's emphasis on individuality in community exploded Black Mountain College from inside: Duberman writes that in the early 1950s, "especially since Olson insisted that everyone work from 'inside out' . . . experience [was] fragmented, individualized, [and] 'Black Mountain' produce[d] as many different kinds of experience as the number of people there" (335). So Olson opened up the form of this organic community as well. And it is this transformed organic community—this chosen community of individuals—that shows up in the *Maximus* poems,

relocated in Gloucester. After all, Olson's "polis / is eyes" where, as he writes, "there are only / eyes in all heads / to be looked out of" (30, 33).

**The Poem as a Transfer of Energy**

Olson's poetics coincide with Rukeyser's in part because they both revise a statement by Ernest Fenollosa, the historian of Japanese art now well known for his Orientalism and for overestimating the extent to which Chinese ideograms pictographically represent their referents.[13] Both Rukeyser and Olson call the poem a "transfer of energy" from poet to reader and both cite Fenollosa in doing so (*LP* 173, *CPO* 244). In "The Chinese Written Character as Medium for Poetry," which Ezra Pound edited and included in his *Instigations* (1920), Fenollosa compares the sentence to a lightning flash and defines it as a "*transference of power*" from subject to object via the verb (366). While Rukeyser and Olson both borrow the language of a transfer or exchange of energy from Fenollosa, they also revise it in quite similar ways. Picking up on a slippage in Fenollosa's own figures, Rukeyser and Olson transform his syntactic exchange of energy into a communicative act that transfers energy from poet to reader.[14] They also extend Fenollosa's concern with interconnectedness, putting affect back at the center of the poetic process.

In "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," Fenollosa gave impetus to modernist and postmodernist poets through his reading of Chinese characters as pictures of action. For Fenollosa, Chinese written characters, as pared-down visual representations of processes or things, are more natural than spoken language, which "depends upon sheer convention" (362-363). Attention to Chinese characters can restore luminous concreteness to poetry in English because

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[13] For more on Fenollosa's affect on modernist and postmodern poetics, see Josephine Nock-Hee Park, Robert Kern, and Jonathan Stalling.

[14] While Sherman Paul has noted Olson's "application to the poem of Fenollosa's account of the sentence" (41), to my knowledge critics have not noticed that Rukeyser revised Fenollosa in a strikingly similar way.

their picture quality cuts through logic and classification (380-381). Fenollosa's work—especially in Pound's reframing of it—implies that attention to the Chinese written character can break the English language and English poetry out of the "tyranny of medieval logic" (380). To show this, Fenollosa insists that Chinese characters are closer to nature than written words in phonetic languages because they depict actions and processes, and contends that the sentence form is natural. Both invocations of nature join in his claims about metaphor: that language accretes through metaphor, and that metaphor itself is natural. In effect, he makes the accretion of language through metaphor both a natural and a historical process—and one that Chinese characters render visible. In doing so, he emphasizes that the layers of metaphor from which language grows "are possible only because they follow objective lines of relations in nature herself" (377).[15] For Fenollosa, all metaphors derive from homologies, from structural echoes that indicate similarity of function among natural and cultural processes: "Metaphor, [poetry's] chief device, is at once the substance of nature and of language" (378).

Fenollosa claims that Chinese characters are "vivid shorthand pictures of actions and processes in nature" and gives the Chinese characters for "man sees horse" as an example (363, 376). In Chinese, Fenollosa contends, even the nouns have the quality of verbs: things are depicted as processes. In this case, "legs belong to all three characters: they are *alive*." The sentence thus has "the quality of a continuous moving picture . . . In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling

[15] Fenollosa writes: "The whole delicate substance of speech is built upon substrata of metaphor. Abstract terms, pressed by etymology, reveal their ancient roots still embedded in direct action. But the primitive metaphors do not spring from arbitrary *subjective* processes. They are possible only because they follow objective lines of relations in nature herself. Relations are more real and important than the things which they relate. The forces which produce the branch-angles of an oak lay potent in the acorn. Similar lines of resistance, half-curbing the out-pressing vitalities, govern the branching of rivers and of nations. Thus a nerve, a wire, a roadway, and a clearing-house are only varying channels which communication forces for itself. This is more than analogy, it is identity of structure. Nature furnishes her own clues. Had the world not been full of homologies, sympathies, and identities, thought would have been starved and language chained to the obvious. There would have been no bridge whereby to cross from the minor truth of the seen to the major truth of the unseen. Not more than a few hundred roots out of our large vocabularies could have dealt directly with physical processes. These we can fairly well identify in primitive Sanskrit. They are, almost without exception, vivid verbs. The wealth of European speech grew, following slowly the intricate maze of nature's suggestions and affinities. Metaphor was piled on metaphor in quasi-geological strata" (377).

mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate" (363). But Fenollosa also argues that the sentence—both in Chinese and in English, indeed in any undeclined language—splits up the process of a man looking at a horse into units whose order is natural and causal (362, 367). This sets up for his more general claim that the sentence as a linguistic structure enacts a transference of force from subject to object via the verb. He presents this diagram:

| term from which | transference of force | term to which (367) |
|---|---|---|

This sequence is behind Fenollosa's claim that the sentence form is natural: because it reflects "the temporal order in causation," it "was forced upon primitive men by nature herself" (366). In the passage that both Rukeyser and Olson take up and revise, Fenollosa compares the sentence's transference of power from subject to object with the transference of force characteristic of other processes:

> All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the *transference of power*. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning. It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth. No unit of natural process can be less than this. All natural processes are, in their units, as much as this. Light, heat, gravity, chemical affinity, human will, have this in common, that they redistribute force. (366)

It is not that the sentence imitates lightning, but that lightning and sentences both behave in the same way: "the type of sentence in nature is a flash of lighting"—this is a relation of homology rather than analogy. Fenollosa underscores that the sentence is not simply the junior partner in this comparison by insisting that "no unit of natural process" can be more or less than this.[16] In linking the sentence's transference of power specifically to human will, Fenollosa comes close to invoking

[16] This is in tension with some other parts of Fenollosa's essay, where he uses more conventional organic metaphors for language, for example speaking of the way in which, in Chinese, "we can see, not only the forms of sentences, but literally the parts of speech growing up, budding forth from one another" (371).

the sentence's communicative function. But here the terms between which the sentence transfers power are still the grammatical subject and object of the sentence.

While Olson and Rukeyser both borrow Fenollosa's terms, they also re-purpose those terms to claim that the sentence acts as a flash of lightning, not only from subject to object, but also from writer to reader. They thus make explicit a key point that remains unstated in Fenollosa's text. Fenollosa's metaphors, which center on light, lightning, luminosity, sight, and visibility, reflect implicitly on his own process of insight when reading Chinese. Besides his central lightning metaphor and the sentence "man sees horse" that he examines, Fenollosa also uses a word that means "to shine" and whose "ideograph is the sign of the sun together with the sign of the moon" as an example of the way such a word can be used as a verb, a noun, and an adjective in Chinese. He argues that the resultant verbal quality—"the cup sun-and-moons" for "the cup is bright"—cuts through the abstraction to which phonetic languages are prone (372-373). Near the end of the essay, Fenollosa writes that "in all poetry a word is like a sun, with its corona and chromosphere; words crowd upon words, and enwrap each other in their luminous envelopes until sentences become clear, continuous light-bands" (387). His final example of a Chinese sentence is "Sun Rises (in the) East," and he describes how each character in this sentence depicts the sun in juxtaposition with stylized representations of trees or the horizon (387-388).

What Fenollosa saw as the "picture quality" of written Chinese—and by implication, Fenollosa's own flashes of insight as he learned to apprehend the language—link the figures of light, lightning, brightness, and sight that impel his essay. It is this "picture quality" that Fenollosa believes can renew English by cutting through abstract and deadened usages, and this quality that makes both the historical development and the naturalness of language visible. Fenollosa argues that Chinese "has, through its very pictorial visibility, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue" (378): "There is little or nothing in a phonetic word

to exhibit the embryonic stages of its growth. It does not bear its metaphor on its face," but in Chinese, "etymology is constantly visible" and "a word, instead of growing gradually poorer and poorer as with us, becomes richer and still more rich from age to age, almost consciously luminous" (379). Fenollosa implies that Chinese characters perfectly unite his two figures for language: its historical development through the accumulated, "quasi-geological strata" of metaphor (377) and the lightning flash of syntax. The pictorial quality of Chinese characters makes the roots of words visible through the layers of accumulated metaphor. Both their history and their representational reference flash out from the characters.[17]

By reworking Fenollosa's image, Rukeyser and Olson represent the poem as a communicative act that transfers energy from the poet to the reader in a flash of insight. Rukeyser quotes Fenollosa on the sentence as lightning and glosses the passage this way, "Now we have the charge, flaming along the path from its reservoir to the receptive target. Even that is not enough to describe the movement of reaching a work of art" (LP 173). While Rukeyser silently revises Fenollosa, bringing out the way his essay points to the process of apprehending a poem, Olson more explicitly revises Fenollosa's terms, expanding them to include not just the subject and object, but the writer and reader. Referring to Hart Crane, Olson writes, "there is a loss in Crane of what Fenollosa is so right about, in syntax, the sentence as first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick, in this case, from Hart to me, in every case, from me to you, the VERB, between two nouns" (*CPO* 244). In calling the sentence the "first" act of nature, Olson underscores the way in which the sentence is the primary term in the metaphor, something he takes further in his own poetics. By interlacing "from Hart to me" and "from me to you" between the grammatical terms of Fenollosa's own essay, Olson both interprets that text and revises it, showing how the lightning-

[17] Fenollosa thus represents Chinese ideograms as exposing what Emerson saw as the historical structure of language, which he called "fossil poetry" because it accretes through metaphor.

flash of syntax communicates and turns the poem into a "passage of force . . . from me to you." Olson's pun on "Hart," moreover, suggests that writing a poem requires emotional honesty.

The importance of "heart" in Olson's poetics is an open secret in "Projective Verse." Though Olson did not want to embrace Romantic expressivity outright—after all, it contravenes both his rejection of the Western subject and his misogynist machismo—he sneaks in affect not only through his revision of Fenollosa, but also through his focus on the body and breath of the poet. He links the syllable and the line with sensory experience and bodily rhythms as well as with intellection and emotion when he writes that "the SYLLABLE" comes from "the HEAD, by way of the EAR" and "the LINE" comes from "the HEART, by way of the BREATH" (242). Near the end of the essay, Olson obliquely refers to the heart by invoking this earlier dictum. In the very last sentence, for example, Olson says that quote a "projective poet" will go "down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs" (249). This place, of course, is the heart.

While Rukeyser and Olson transform Fenollosa's syntactic transference of power into an act of communication between writer and reader, Fenollosa himself begins the move to process and relationship. Even while Fenollosa argues that the subject-verb-object sequence expresses a natural unit of process, he denies that the sentence can be defined as a complete thought: "The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes and passes into another. And though we may string never so many clauses into a single compound sentence, motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire. All processes in nature are inter-related; and thus there could be no complete sentence (according to this definition) save one which it would take all time to pronounce" (365). Fenollosa's concern for interconnectedness is essential to his contention that all metaphor, and hence the growth of language, follows the tracks of relationships among things in the world. But is it an accident that when he discusses interrelationship, Fenollosa turns to the modern metaphor of the

"exposed wire?"

Fenollosa's "exposed wire" image perhaps informs Olson and Rukeyser's move from his terms, "power" and "force," to their preferred term, "energy." Olson emphasizes the difficulty of transferring energy from the poet to the reader by interrupting his syntax: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (*CPO* 240). Rukeyser defines this "energy" a bit more, giving it a socio-political valence: "In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader. Human energy, which is consciousness, the capacity to produce change in existing conditions" (*LP* 173). For Rukeyser and Olson, the poem is not a closed form whose internal relations hold it in tension; it is not Brooks' well-wrought urn that might break if mishandled. Poems are, instead, processes that transform poet and "witness."

**Howard's "Minute Agents" and Olson's "Push"**

Participation in dynamic interconnectedness entails physiological and psychological vulnerability—exposure to mortality, loss, and lack of control—and thus requires humility. Both Albert Howard and Olson recognize this. Indeed, it is Olson's insistence on humility that keeps his poetics, concerned as they are with affect, from re-inscribing Romantic expressivism, and it is Howard's attention to death and decay as the necessary dark side of health and fertility that makes his version of organic farming resistant to commodification. Both Howard and Olson advocate humility because they see farming and writing poems as collaborative acts that involve many other agents. In this section, I will first set Howard's representation of the "small agencies" in the soil against the vitalist mystification of living soil in the writings of two key popularizers of organic farming, Lady Eve Balfour and J. I. Rodale. Then I will turn to Olson's "objectism," which envisions the poet as just one agent in the field of composition, one who must collaborate with the line's own

"push."

Howard represents composting and organic farming as human cultural collaboration with "minute animal and vegetable agents"—i.e., the fungi and bacteria in the soil. Howard details the complex ways in which these "agents" in the soil nourish plants and trees (*AT* 22-31, *SH* 17-32). Indeed, he anthropomorphizes micro-organisms to emphasize their agency:

> The soil is . . . full of live organisms. It is essential to conceive of it as something pulsating with life, not as a dead or inert mass. There could be no greater misconception than to regard the earth as dead: a handful of soil is teeming with life. The living fungi, bacteria, and protozoa, invisibly present in the soil complex, are known as the soil population. This population of millions and millions of minute existences, quite invisible to our eyes of course, pursue their own lives. They come into being, grow, work, and die: they sometimes fight each other, win victories, or perish: for they are divided into groups and families fitted to exist under all sorts of conditions. The state of a soil will change with the victories won or the losses sustained; and in one or other soil, or at one or other moment, different groups will predominate. (*SH* 23)

These "minute existences" are key to Howard's argument against the "NPK mentality" that sees crop fertility purely in terms of the nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium that plants take up from the soil (*SH* 55, 71-72). Justus von Liebig made this discovery by burning crops and analyzing the ash; Howard argued that "artificial fertilizers were born out of the abuse of Liebig's discoveries" (71). For Howard, "there was a kind of superb arrogance in the idea that we had only to put the ashes of a few plants in a test tube, analyse them, and scatter back into the soil equivalent quantities of dead minerals" (71). Howard contends that the *way* in which plants absorb minerals from the soil matters for crop, livestock, and human health. In other words, the soil is not simply a medium through which crops absorb chemicals, but a complex process: soil fertility therefore depends on the

health of micro-organisms. Howard describes, for example, the mycorrhizal association, a "partnership" between fungi and plants in which "fungous threads actually invade the cells of the root" and are eventually digested by them (24). Crucially, the fungi contain nitrogen in a form the plants can readily take up.

In speaking of fungi and bacteria as "minute agents," Howard follows Charles Darwin, who called earthworms "small agencies" in his late work, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits* (1881). Long before Jane Bennett used Darwin's earthworms, who "make history," as an example of how "nonhuman materialities" are "participants in a political ecology" (95-96, 108), Howard wrote the introduction to a 1945 Faber and Faber edition of this book under the title *Darwin on Humus and the Earthworm*. Howard argued that science had not fully assimilated Darwin's work on earthworms and that, because Darwin develops a biological rather than simply chemical understanding of the soil, his work "is the real foundation for the study of the principles underlying farming and gardening" (9). In *The Soil and Health*, Howard praises Darwin's book for pointing to "the extraordinary cumulative result of a physical turnover of soil particles by natural agents, particularly earthworms" and for "grasping the gearing together of the soil itself and of the creatures who inhabit it" (*SH* 70). Howard argues that Darwin "established once for all this principle of interlocked life" (*SH* 70).

In reframing Darwin on earthworms for the early organic farming movement, Howard also took up Darwin's humility. As Adam Phillips points out, Darwin's late work on earthworms, after the controversies over his theory of evolution, quietly celebrates contingent collaborations between earthworms and humans and shows our dependence on them. Darwin concludes that earthworms not only enable agriculture by increasing soil fertility, but that the humus they create is also essential

to other elements of human culture, like burial and archeology.[18] Howard explicitly advocates humility in our relation with all the "small agencies" in the soil:

> *It must never be forgotten that living organisms and not human beings are the agents which make compost.* These organisms exist everywhere. They prepare the ideal humus on the floor of the forest and they equally govern what goes on in the compost heap from start to finish. *The art of preparing compost amounts only to providing such conditions as will allow these agents to work with the greatest intensity, efficiency, and rapidity.* (*SH* 212, emphasis in original)[19]

Howard emphasizes the role of these "agents" in part to show that his methods are not a secret and anyone can make compost without special equipment of the kind that Howard's "muck and magic" imitators were patenting and marketing (212). But Howard's insistence that micro-organisms are the real agents in making compost also separates his thought from mainstream agricultural science. Howard's approach is a humble one; it involves attending to and collaborating with processes that take place of their own accord rather than pushing ecological limits through, for example, relatively newfound ability to manufacture nitrogen fertilizer.

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[18] Phillips writes: "It was to be part of Darwin's undogmatic shuffling of the hierarchies to see earthworms—traditionally associated with death and corruption and lowliness—as maintaining the earth, sustaining its fertility" (41-42). He also describes the contingent collaboration between earthworms and human culture that Darwin traced: "Worms worked incessantly; but from their point of view, so to speak, they were merely digesting their food in order to survive and reproduce. And this happened to be contingently beneficial, to archaeologists and to seedlings. They were inadvertently generous, not designed for altruism. Not intentionally collaborative; but the way they struggled for survival had spin-offs for other parts of nature. . . . The world is not designed for our benefit and yet it can be, in its own way, contingently hospitable" (56-57).

[19] If Howard's thought seems ecologically prescient, take a look at the opening of Lord Northbourne's *Look to the Land* (1940): "Besides being bound up with the lives of his fellow men, every man's life is bound up with the lives of innumerable non-human creatures which constitute his food, which provide him with clothing, shelter, material to work with, or pleasure; and to whose lives he in turn consciously or unconsciously contributes. Thus there is a very real economic and biological linkage, comprehensive and of infinite complexity, between all living creatures in the world. This linkage really constitutes the lives of those creatures. With the improvement in communications accompanying the progress of the mechanical age, this linkage has become more comprehensive, more rapid, and more direct than it ever was before between parts of the world physically remote from each other. This fact is clearly recognized as an important feature of the economic situation. But the economic aspect of things, being largely concerned with the production of food and raw materials from animals and plants, is clearly a function of biological states. Economics have been discussed *ad nauseam*. The biological state of the world has, in its broader aspects, received relatively little attention, though it conditions the economic state" (1-2). Though Northbourne's proposed solutions to economic and social ills veer to the right, his thinking here is strikingly ecological.

While Howard pays careful attention to the biological processes of the soil, other writers of the early organic farming movement go in a more vitalist and more easily commodified direction with their tropes of living soil. Howard's work was a shaping force in the early organic farming movement, and popularizers like Lady Eve Balfour and J. I. Rodale are clearly indebted to it; both insist that the soil is literally alive by virtue of all the micro-organisms that make it up (i.e., Rodale *Organic Front* 14). Rodale repeats some of Howard's points (22, 35, 57), but he also throws in a few quixotic contentions of his own, for example that sunflower seeds are particularly healthy because of their live germ. Rodale also claims that "pasteurization to a certain extent devitalizes milk as a food" (175). Though perhaps pasteurization does "devitalize" milk in that it kills beneficial bacteria as well as pathogens, such figurative uses of "life" and "vitality" end up sliding from Howard's careful thinking through of "the principle of interlocked life" to a generalized vitalism in which "natural" or "organic" or "live" foods are considered better than others for mystified, rather than actually mysterious, reasons. From there it is an easy step to the kind of green consumerism common today. The Rodales and many others have profited, not from challenging people to collaborate in fostering systemic ecological health, but by promising them that they can secure individual health and longevity by buying appropriately labeled products. Howard's humility requires quite different behavior.

Olson also advocates humility—perhaps ironically, given his personal reputation for arrogance—and urges poets to attend to "the *push* of the line under hand at the moment" (*CPO* 243). In other words, Olson represents poetic process as a collaboration with non-human agents, those "objects" in the field of the poem whose interactions echo those of objects in the world. Moreover, Olson envisions the human being, not as a subject, but as an object among other objects. If Olson slyly embraces affect in "Projective Verse," as we have seen, it is thus not the usual Romantic affect—Olson is not concerned with subjective depths but with interaction "at the skin,"

as he writes in "Human Universe." Projectivist poetics lead to what Olson calls a new "stance toward reality outside a poem," one in which humans see themselves as objects in a field of objects, neither more nor less than other beings (246).

Olson calls this stance "objectism," distinguishing it from both subjectivism and objectivism. If objectivism is about the way you *look* at the object—i.e., an objective perspective—objectism is about *being* an object. Olson defines objectism as "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature . . . and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages" (247). Reified subjectivity—which Olson calls "western man"—separates humans from other living beings in their experience of embodiment. Olson insists that "man" must recognize himself as an object in a world of objects, and recognize that this does not involve "derogation," in order to be "of use" (247). Olson sees people, poems, non-human animals, and other objects as what Bruno Latour would call "actants," and Olson's "objectism" thus resonates with Jane Bennett's vital materialism.

Olson ultimately implies that human beings can only make objects, or poems, to the extent that they see themselves as objects. He thus advocates "humilitas," arguing that

> the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads

> to dimensions larger than the man. (*CPO* 247)

Here we can recognize the "sprawl" of the Romantic poet who sings himself. In enjoining the poet to "stay inside himself," Olson seems to ask him to participate in larger forces without orchestrating them. Here, the artist, acting as an object "in the larger field of objects" (that is, in the world) recalls the objects in the field of the poem that Olson described earlier. It is only by recognizing himself as an object—subject to forces outside his control, acting in a field filled with other objects—that the poet can hear the "secrets objects share" and learn to *make* objects. This involves a radical ecological humility: it means giving up the subject's pretense to control and allowing the field of other objects and their interconnectedness to unsettle a stable sense of self. It also involves paying attention to one's own body and breath, to oneself as an "object." Olson notes that "breath is man's special qualification as an animal" (248). The poet must be aware of his own breath as he writes because only through awareness of himself as an "object" (or actant, or agent) can he make "shapes [that] will make their own way": that is, only by being alive to his own embodiment can a poet make live forms.

While Olson's insistence on speaking in terms of "objects" renders "Projective Verse" somewhat abstract and bloodless, Olson tellingly compares bodies to cultivated produce in the essay "Human Universe." Olson writes of the Mayans among whom he lived in the Yucatan in the late 1940s:

> they still carry their bodies with some of the savor and the flavor that the bodies of the Americans are as missing in as is their irrigated lettuce and their green-picked refrigerator-ripened fruit. For the truth is, that the management of external nature so that none of its virtu is lost, in vegetables or in art, is as much a delicate juggling of her content as is the same juggling by any one of us of our own. (*CPO* 159)

For Olson, Americans' bodies lack "savor and flavor" not because they are eating "irrigated lettuce"

and "green-picked refrigerator-ripened fruit," as Howard or Rodale might have argued, but because Americans' relationships to their bodies are flawed in the same ways as their agriculture and art. Olson represents farming, art, and embodied experience as acts of "delicate juggling" that must manage "external nature so that none of its virtu is lost." The word "virtu," which Olson borrows from Pound, denotes "the distinctive qualities inherent in a thing or person" (OED),[20] and of course puns on "virtue." Managing something so as not to lose its "virtu" thus means making sure it does not lose that which makes it itself. Olson also insists that we must conserve the virtu of our own bodies: "when men are not such jugglers, are not able to manage a means of expression the equal of their own or nature's intricacy, the flesh does choke" (*CPO* 159). The figure of choking is no accident. For Olson, the postwar US—with its conformist culture, growth in manufacturing, expansion of consumerism, and rapidly industrializing agriculture—had ill effects that were at once psychological and physiological. While Howard looked to the complex interconnectedness of "minute agents" in the soil to account for health and disease, Olson developed a poetics that rethinks the relationships between representation and embodiment, the poem's closure and the poet as organism.

**Rukeyser's Ecological Poetics**

While Olson's embodied poet is emphatically male and his poetics often entail misogyny, in Rukeyser's ecological poetics female embodiment and queer sensuality are fully experienced and acknowledged. Rukeyser articulated her poetics of "process and relationship" in *The Life of Poetry* (1949), but she was developing them throughout the 1940s in texts like *Willard Gibbs* (1942), a

[20] This is the Oxford English Dictionary's fourth and most recent definition of "virtu," whose earlier meanings include "a love of, or taste for, works of art or curios," the objects of art or curios themselves, and the phrases "man of virtu" and "article of virtu." The first two quotations given for the most recent definition are from Pound's *Cantos*. *Oxford English Dictionary Online,* accessed through UW Libraries, 8/4/11.

biography of the nineteenth-century scientist and father of thermodynamics, and the poem "Ajanta" (1944). As I have mentioned, Rukeyser's work in the 1940s and 50s has not received as much critical attention as either her 1930s documentary modernism or her more avowedly feminist poems of the 1960s and 70s. This neglect results in part from her critical marginalization at that time. What Rukeyser wrote about Octavio Paz aptly characterizes her own vexed political and poetic situation: "Paz is in that virtuous, fortunate, and wearying position of several poets in our time: he is attacked by both sides, by all sides. He participated in the activities of the *Surrealistes*; he was in Spain in 1937, on the side of the Republicans" (Paz 8).[21] If Rukeyser's combination of modernist techniques and leftist politics put her in a small and misunderstood camp of poets in the 1930s, her support for US entry into World War II and her poetic attention to female sensuality and embodiment left her even more isolated in the 1940s and 50s.

However, Rukeyser's poetry and prose of this middle period is essential to what Anne Herzog and Meg Schoerke have called her "relational poetics," which I argue also constitute an ecopoetics because of their attention to the ways in which cultural, social, and natural phenomena are interconnected. While I have shown how Rukeyser revises organic form and responds to the New Criticism in *The Life of Poetry*, in this last section I will focus on Rukeyser's approach to dynamic interconnectedness in *Willard Gibbs* and "Ajanta." Two critical attacks on Rukeyser's work in the 1940s, one from the left and one from the right, represent her concern with interconnectedness as an excessive and unruly femininity. But in "Ajanta," Rukeyser herself links ecological interconnectedness with the feminine and sensual excess, embracing these as positive, healing, and even transcendent values. She thus upends binaristic modes of thinking about the mind, the body, and gender in a way that we might consider not only feminist but also queer.

Rukeyser is not usually considered a San Francisco Renaissance or Black Mountain poet,

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[21] Rukeyser wrote this in a preface to her translation of Paz's *Sun Stone* (1963).

though, as I have shown, her poetics resonate quite strongly with Olson's. Rukeyser lived in San Francisco in the late 1940s, knew Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan, and met Olson through Rexroth (Clark 125).[22] But, as she noted, she was "pushing a baby carriage" at the time and thus not taken seriously as a poet. Given that Rukeyser was developing her poetics before Olson even turned to poetry, that parts of *The Life of Poetry* were written and given as talks and broadcasts throughout the 1940s, and that the book was published in 1949, the year before "Projective Verse," we might well wonder whether Olson was influenced by Rukeyser's poetics. I have not seen any evidence that he did so, beyond the striking similarity between their visions of poetry as a transfer of energy from poet to reader, but this question warrants archival investigation.

Like Olson, Rukeyser takes seriously the fact that organisms only survive through openness to and interchange with their environments. Revising organic metaphors helped Rukeyser understand culture, economics, politics, and psychology in ecological terms, as complexly interwoven processes that cannot be separated from each other or from their embodied materiality. In her biography of Willard Gibbs, Rukeyser sought to understand how broader cultural and social realities shaped the work of the scientist who quietly developed the third law of thermodynamics, and how his work in turn shaped our everyday material world through the wealth of practical innovation it spawned.[23] Gibbs wrote the theorems that express his discoveries in extremely condensed and generalized forms that are difficult to understand, but that have had a wealth of practical results.

Rukeyser's book is more than a biography: it is also an analysis of American culture and of what she later calls the "damages to the audience" and the "damages to the artist" (*LP* 44, 52).

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[22] In his selection of Olson's letters, Ralph Maud includes a short one that Olson wrote to Rukeyser in October of 1947, with good wishes for her and her new child, thanks for her recommendations of who to speak to in Hollywood, and news about his attempt to do a Moby-Dick movie (71-72).

[23] The third law of thermodynamics, which implies that the universe is running down to entropy, fascinated other twentieth-century writers, such as Robert Frost in "West-Running Brook" (see chapter two for an analysis of that poem) and Thomas Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*. But while entropy arguably comes to figure as fatalism in Frost and Pynchon, Rukeyser's tone in taking up Gibbs' work is remarkably pragmatic and positive.

Rukeyser argues that the difficulty of a scientific or intellectual work is not, in itself, a political failing and defends Gibbs from an historian of science, J. G. Crowther, who represented Gibbs' inability to reach a broader audience as such a failing. At the same time, Rukeyser was herself trying to make Gibbs' life and the meanings of his work available to a broader audience. But Gibbs' family and associates did not consider Rukeyser the right sort of biographer for him. Elsewhere Rukeyser recounts how Gibbs' student, E. B. Wilson, "wrote to a scientist . . . to say that he, Wilson, had looked into my origins, and for me to be writing about Gibbs, my ancestry being what it is, was as bad as for a Negro to be writing about a Southern gentleman" (*LP* 95). Out of such anti-Semitism, Gibbs' family actively thwarted Rukeyser's efforts to write and publish the biography.

Rukeyser insists that theoretical, abstract work cannot be dismissed as impractical. In fact, she shows that it is not a paradox that Gibbs' work was both inaccessible and incredibly rich in practical results; his work was not useful in spite of its compression, but precisely because theorems so compressed and generalized can be widely applied and used.

> Usefulness, to him, was completeness. When one of his students suggested that Gibbs's system could be restated in a form more widely useful, Gibbs replied : "What is the good of that? It is complete as it is."
>
> It is that point of view that makes the great imaginative genius, as against the person who over-simplifies continually and makes the excuse that he does it for the sake of use. The most useful *idea* is very likely to be the most complete idea; the compactness of Gibbs is for the sake of completeness, and to him, completeness and simplicity are the same thing. It is only a man like that who can say, "The whole is simpler than the sum of all its parts." (*WG* 302-303)

The passage that Rukeyser quotes from Gibbs relies on an organic metaphor; organic figures thus connect *Willard Gibbs* and the more explicit poetics Rukeyser articulates in *The Life of Poetry*. The

other key connection between the two works lies in Rukeyser's idea of the role and responsibility of the scientist or intellectual worker. Rukeyser contends that Gibbs' most important responsibility was doing the work itself, that the audience has a responsibility to come to that work, and that Gibbs' colleagues and students have a responsibility to disseminate it.

Rukeyser's defense of Gibbs implies a similar argument about poetic and artistic difficulty: that the audience has a responsibility to approach abstract art and modernist poetry and an obligation not to dismiss such work out of hand because it does not appear useful. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser makes this argument, rejecting the New Critics for implying that poetry is precious but "never to be used" (7) and even comparing poetry to a natural resource:

> If we have a resource that we are not using . . .
>
> If this were a crop, about which these things were said, there would be a research project.
>
> If it were a metal, the Un-American Activities Committee, and several other committees, would concern themselves. Our scientists would claim their right of experiment and inquiry. (*LP* 17, ellipses in original).

Poetry is as useful as a crop or a metal, but we are not using it; intellectuals should be interested and McCarthy-ites should be concerned about its subversive power.[24]

In her biography of Gibbs, Rukeyser not only attempts to account for the relationship between the scientist or artist and the audience, but also understands cultural and social realities in ecological terms, as part of a complex, dynamic process where attempts to put up walls or barriers—through racism, anti-Semitism, or snobbery, for example—necessarily fail. The biography opens with a chapter on the *Amistad* trial, an account that Robert Hayden drew on for his poem "Middle

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[24] As indeed they were: the FBI kept a file on Rukeyser, as well as on other leftist poets.

Passage."[25] Though the politics of race and the slave trade in the 1830s at first seem remote from Gibbs' work, there is a connection: Gibbs' father was a linguist whose apparently impractical study of ancient and arcane languages enabled him to find someone who could translate for the Africans who had washed up in Connecticut.

Two scathing critical attacks on Rukeyser that were published in the 1940s take issue with this kind of ecological thinking; both depict her concern for intertwined cultural, economic, and political processes as vague, feminine emotionalism. The similarity of these attacks is especially remarkable because they come from opposite political angles. In 1943, the editors of the *Partisan Review* published an article on Rukeyser titled "Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl," which accused her of abandoning her commitment to the left because her poem, *Wake Island*, supported US entry into World War II, and also, as David Bergman notes, faulted her for writing for a mass audience and designing posters for the Office of War Information. Five years later, in 1948, with the conservative New Criticism on the rise, Randall Jarrell wrote a review of *The Green Wave* that critiqued Rukeyser for her leftism, for seeing herself as a "public figure," and for what he called her "oracularly emotional" "rhetoric."

Both of these reviews object to Rukeyser's ambition in misogynist terms, representing her as a pin-up or poster girl whose attempt to speak across divisions and reach a wide audience is obscene. Jarrell writes that Rukeyser's "use of a Freudian or sexual imagery" for what he calls her "advertising-agency idealism" leads one to feel that "one is listening to the Common Woman of our century, a siren photographed in a sequin bathing suit, on rocks like boiled potatoes, for the week-end edition of *PM*, in order to bring sex to the deserving poor" (513). The editors of the *Partisan Review* accuse Rukeyser of bandwagoning, writing that "this young poetess was intent on being friends with everyone . . . indiscriminate friendship makes for promiscuity" (472). Like Jarrell, they

[25] For an analysis of Hayden's use of Rukeyser's chapter on the *Amistad* trial, see Eben Wood.

imply that Rukeyser's femininity is unruly and excessive, repeating three times that Rukeyser "plumps" for various causes and comparing the lines of her poetry to a "blimp." At they end of the review, they announce that "Any day now Miss Rukeyser may appear with a poster, interpreting the 4 freedoms to the American people . . . FREE VERSE / FREE LOVE / FREE LUNCH / FREE-FOR-ALL." The *Partisan Review* editors thus neatly tie together their sexual slander, their jokes about Rukeyser's weight, and their attack on her poetics.

Even more significantly, both reviews pick up on and reject Rukeyser's ecological approach to interconnectedness. Jarrell complains that in her poems "everything slides into everything else" and "everything is no more than the transition to everything else," and again that "the average poem in *The Green Wave* is all flesh and feeling and fantasy: as if reality were a pure blooming buzz, with the poet murmuring to the poem, 'Flow, flow!'" (512-513). Rukeyser's attention to process and relationship evidently grated against Jarrell's New Critical longing for crystallized tensions and ironic detachment. The editors of the *Partisan Review*, on the other hand, object to the way that Rukeyser, in her prose, draws connections across cultural, economic, and political processes and builds bridges across disciplinary and discursive divides. For example, they write that in her biography Gibbs appears "not only a great physicist but somehow a great poet and a great mystic in a confusion of the nature of art and the nature of science not heretofore unknown, but here rhapsodized in such terms as to deprive both science and art of all meaning" (472). In the face of misogynist attacks that dismissed her poetics as a symptom of feminine excess, Rukeyser began, remarkably, to write work that explores embodiment, sexuality, and the connections among culture, consciousness, and emotion in an even more frank way.

When Jarrell and the *Partisan Review* editors misrepresented Rukeyser's search for values as careerism, they missed the innovative power of her ecological approach to interconnectedness. The fact that these critics find her thinking through connections so threatening is, in fact, evidence that

her version of interconnectedness is not holistic or warm and fuzzy. Rather, Rukeyser shows that interconnectedness and the ceaseless, complex web of transformations it entails can be quite negative and destabilizing. Rukeyser's poem "Ajanta" elaborates an ecology of consciousness precisely by turning toward embodied, queer sensuality. The poem includes arguably lesbian imagery and upends gendered binaries.[26] "Ajanta," an ekphrasitic poem based on murals in the Ajanta caves of India, opens Rukeyser's 1944 volume *Beast in View*. It appeared after the *Partisan Review* attack, but oddly Jarrell notes that he admires the poem, though it seems a prime example of "everything sliding into everything else." In their recent readings of "Ajanta," Raphael Allison and David Bergman both see interconnectedness and transformation of consciousness as its key themes. While Allison argues that the poem reflects Rukeyser's engagement with pragmatism and expresses pluralist values, Bergman shows how the poem responds to Stella Kramrisch's 1937 essay on the Ajanta paintings. I will focus on an aspect of the poem that neither of these critics addresses, but which I think is inextricable from its ecological approach to consciousness: its sensuousness and sensuality.

Though the poem does not tell a realistic story, it does have a narrative arc: "Ajanta" recounts a descent to the underworld that initiates a sexual awakening and process of re-integration. Paradoxically, the narrator experiences a healing transcendence precisely by going deeper into earthliness, materiality, and embodiment. The poem opens like a hero or heroine narrative of descent:

> Came in my full youth to the midnight cave
> Nerves ringing; and this thing I did alone.
> Wanting my fulness and not a field of war,
> For the world considered annihilation . . . (*CPMR* 207)

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[26] Rukeyser herself had both male and female lovers. For example, she had a transformative affair with a German leftist, Otto Boch, during her brief time in Spain at the start of the Spanish Civil War; during the last decades of her life, she lived with her literary agent, Monica McCall. Though she never called herself a lesbian publicly, what Rukeyser quoted from the artist Käthe Kollwitz—in her biographical poem on Kollwitz in *The Speed of Darkness* (1968)—is often taken to speak for Rukeyser's own experience as well: "She said : 'As a matter of fact, / I believe / that bisexuality / is almost a necessary factor / in artistic production; at any rate, / the tinge of masculinity within me / helped me / in my work'" (*CPMR* 462).

In the second section, "The Cave," Rukeyser reworks phrases from Kramrisch's essay. As Kramrisch explains, the Ajanta murals do not create an illusion of depth; instead the figures appear to come forward from the walls. This painting technique, and the way the figures crowd into and fill out the space, makes interconnectedness visible in a way that it's not in our world:

> This is a stage, neither unreal nor real,
> Where the walls are the world . . .
> If you stretch your hand, you touch the slope of the world
> Reaching in interlaced gods, animals, and men.
> There is no background.   The figures hold their peace
> In a web of movement.    There is no frustration,
> Every gesture is taken, everything yields connections.
> The heavy sensual shoulders, the thighs, the blood-born flesh
> And earth turning into color, rocks into their crystals,
> Water to sound, fire to form; life flickers
> Uncounted into the supple arms of love. (*CPMR* 208)

Here, there is nothing obstructing connections: "gods, animals, and men" are frankly, sensuously "interlaced," and no "frustration" or hesitation blocks the ceaseless material and aesthetic transformations that turn earth into color and water into sound. The poem delights in the senses as well as in sexuality:

> Color-sheeted, seductive
> Foreboding eyelid lowered on the long eye,
> Fluid and vulnerable.    The spaces of the body
> Are suddenly limitless, and riding flesh
> Shapes constellations over the golden breast,
> Confusion of scents and illuminated touch—
> Monster touch, the throat printed with brightness,
> Wide outlined gesture where the bodies ride. (*CPMR* 208-209)

This passage is a good example of the unorthodox fluidity of sexuality here, a sensual synaesthetia that does not bind itself to normative forms.

This sexual awakening and vision of interconnectedness are themselves destabilizing; they threaten the subject who constitutes herself through difference. In the next two sections, "Les Tendresses Bestiales" and "Black Blood," Rukeyser uses seedy, illicit underworld images to explore how sex connects classes and people who try to hold themselves separate from each other. Rukeyser

writes, "everything flickers / Sexual and exquisite," and soon "a faceless whore" and "the checkered men" appear, and "The dice and the alcohol and the destruction / have drunk themselves and cast" (*CPMR* 209). In "Black Blood," with the mention of "murder" and "smoky laughter," the nightclub scenes turn even more surreal with the image of a "woman laced into a harp" and a "girl" running down the street "Singing Take me, yelling Take me Take / Hang me from the clapper of a bell / And you as hangman ring it sweet tonight" (*CPMR* 210). This slightly nightmarish, racialized scene is destabilizing. When we acknowledge interconnectedness, process, and ceaseless transformation, we can separate ourselves neither from suffering nor from those whom we consider "other." This perhaps explains why this poem is at once a descent to the underworld and an awakening and re-integration.

In the final section, "The Broken World," Rukeyser upends the gendered binaries that have traditionally linked embodiment, materiality, and femininity with deceitful representation and the misleading senses, while masculinity, transcendence, and light are aligned with truth.

> Came to Ajanta cave, the painted space of the breast,
> The real world where everything is complete,
> There are no shadows, the forms of incompleteness.
> . . . There is no source of distortion.
> In our world, a tree casts the shadow of a woman,
> A man the shadow of a phallus, a hand raised
> The shadow of the whip.
> Here everything is itself,
> Here all may stand
> On summer earth.
> Brightness has overtaken every light,
> And every myth netted itself in flesh.
> . . .
> In the shadowless cave
> The naked arm is raised. (*CPMR* 210-211)

As Allison points out, the Ajanta caves are Plato's cave in reverse (17-18). Plato's cave is a realm of shadows, but here the Ajanta caves are "shadowless" and filled with "brightness." The underworld of embodiment and femininity is "real" and "complete" and full of light, while the world above

ground is the realm of representation and shadows, where everything functions as a sign of something else. Rukeyser suggests that art and embodied sensuality offer the possibility of the "naked arm" and "myth netting itself in flesh"—that is, a re-integration of the divisions set up between mind and body, culture and nature, even if it is only temporary. While the inhabitants of Plato's cave walk out into the bright sunshine that represents the higher light of truth, Rukeyser's poem ends with the "shadow of the world" crawling into the cave and the speaker re-entering "the journey, and the struggles of the moon," the cycles of change in which we always participate.

In the 1950s, Rukeyser continued to explore culture, consciousness, and embodiment from a queer ecological perspective. The poem "Night Feeding," which appeared in *Body of Waking* (1958), is, I think, a particularly provocative and rich example of this.[27] In focusing on the sensuousness and even sensuality of breast feeding, Rukeyser queers an experience that is usually represented in heteronormative terms—and that wasn't represented much at all when she wrote the poem:

> Deeper than sleep but not so deep as death
> I lay there dreaming and my magic head
> remembered and forgot. On first cry I
> remembered and forgot and did believe.
> I knew love and I knew evil:
> woke to the burning song and the tree burning blind,
> despair of our days and the calm milk-giver who
> knows sleep, knows growth, the sex of fire and grass,
> renewal of all waters and the time of the stars
> and the black snake with gold bones.
>
> Black sleeps, gold burns: on second cry I woke
> fully and gave to feed and fed on feeding.
> Gold seed, green pain, my wizards in the earth
> walked through the house, black in the morning dark.
> Shadows grew in my veins, my bright belief,
> my head of dreams deeper than night and sleep.
> Voices of all black animals crying to drink,
> cries of all birth arise, simple as we,
> found in the leaves, in clouds and dark, in dream,
> deep as this hour, ready again to sleep. (*CPMR* 340)

[27] Rukeyser gave birth to her son, Bill Rukeyser, out of wedlock in 1947.

Rukeyser shows how mind and body, child and mother, dream and wakefulness, "animals" and "wizards" interweave in the experience of breast feeding. Rukeyser experiences both the intellectual "despair of our days" and her embodied role as "calm milk-giver" who "knows . . . the sex of fire and grass"; she figures her own participation in embodied, cyclical processes through the poem's "magic," surreal images and alliterative play with colors, light, and sensation. In the 1950s—before second wave feminism, before younger poets like Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton "discovered" Rukeyser as a "foremother"—Rukeyser was following through on the implications of her ecological poetics by exploring embodied experience, with both its unacknowledged delights and its necessary vulnerability.

Though the New Critics and early right-wing organic farming advocates in the UK adopted the organic metaphor precisely because of its emphasis on closure and autonomy, organisms are in fact neither closed nor autonomous—instead, they thrive through complexly structured interchanges with the outside. Howard recognized this and argued that relationships among "small agencies" in the soil are paramount in its health and that of the plants, animals, and people it nourishes. Howard's detailed attention to earthworms, fungi, micro-organisms, and roots does not mystify and thereby commodify "living soil" or "organic food" in the ways that some of his popularizers and followers would, but instead encourages ecological humility as a response to the complex interconnections on which we depend. Rukeyser and Olson also recognize that organisms (like poets, and poems) are not closed and autonomous, and so when they take up Romantic organic form, they rework it into an ecopoetics. While both focus on embodiment, the senses, and sensuality, their poetics are gendered quite differently. Olson advocates humility even while reinscribing sexist forms of oppression, and perhaps while failing to acknowledge his debt to Rukeyser's thought. Rukeyser, Olson, and Howard are unlikely partners in developing an ecological aesthetics and ethics that values the everyday pleasures of the senses, acknowledges our inescapable

vulnerability as mortal beings, and seeks to foster the humility we need to live in a sustainable way, mindful of our embodiment and our effects.

## Chapter Two / Field, Flood, and Condensery: Robert Duncan and Lorine Niedecker

This chapter takes up the work of Lorine Niedecker and Robert Duncan in order to approach a particularly stubborn and subtle problem implicit in organic metaphors and organic form. This problem is one of agency, the capacity for action that the metaphor implies or circumscribes, and it involves tensions between activity and passivity as well as between spontaneous and prescribed action. Both the strengths and the risks of organic metaphors are tied to their inherent ambiguity on the question of agency. On one hand, organisms seem to grow and develop spontaneously, of their own accord; on the other hand, they also seem to fulfill a proper, natural form prescribed in advance. This prevarication between emergence and an ordered series of stages allows those who use organic metaphors to equate naturalness with the prescribed or proper status quo, as we will see through analysis of an essay by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the first section of the chapter. The idea that the form of an organism is set and does not change is pre-Darwinian; Niedecker and Duncan each develop a post-Darwinian poetics that acknowledges how organic forms evolve over time.

However, for the individual organism, growth remains both emergent and disciplined; as it develops, the organism both fulfills spontaneous impulses and bows to shaping forces. Niedecker and Duncan understand their own poetic practices in similarly paradoxical terms. In many ways, Niedecker and Duncan figure the tension between discipline and emergence as two modes of agency: Niedecker's characteristic poetic practice is one of disciplined condensation, while Duncan composes spontaneously and emphasizes the importance of letting go. But in this chapter I will show how they both ultimately fuse emergence and discipline in a participatory poetics.

Their engagement with questions of agency prompts both Niedecker and Duncan to return to quintessential organic figures. From Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle to I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks, poets and critics in search of organic metaphors for poetic form turned primarily to trees and flowers. While Muriel Rukeyser and Charles Olson shifted their attention from such symbols to

the ecological dynamics of organic systems, Duncan and Niedecker both look to the tree, meadow, and river—in their symbolic and material dimensions—in order to understand poetic form and the process of composition. Duncan and Niedecker were roughly contemporary with Olson; while Duncan's response to Olson's poetics is better known than Niedecker's, both poets insist on putting an actual field back into Olson's schematic composition by field. Duncan, pushing back against Olson's disavowals, emphasizes the Romantic inheritance of postmodern poetics: while *The Opening of the Field* (1960) pays tribute to the sense of "permission" that Olson's essays granted, Duncan's field is both more vibrant and more ideal than Olson's. Niedecker revises Olson's field not by invoking literary history's Romantic meadow, but by carefully attending to specific places in the tradition of natural history.[1] The compositional fields and floods that Niedecker navigates are always also pragmatic and material—the fields grow food, the flood swamps the yard and ruins the floor. But this is not to say that either Niedecker or Duncan espouses a representationally naïve nature poetry in contrast to Olson's ecological theorizing. On the contrary, for Olson the poem's liveliness arguably comes from the poet's own body and breath, while for Niedecker and Duncan poetry is lively in that its forms imitate or enact the emergence of larger cosmic orders. Both Niedecker and Duncan also think in complex ways about how lively forms can contest dominant values.

I argue that Niedecker and Duncan articulate a countervailing politics of life in opposition to conventional biopolitics—or, as World War and atomic threat revealed it to be, conventional thanatopolitics.[2] Niedecker and Duncan redefine life in part by understanding death, and the relationship between life and death, differently. According to the conventional modern view, life and

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[1] Jonathan Skinner calls Niedecker "a poet of the field guide and of natural history," and connects the field guide with the Objectivist "field of historic and contemporary particulars" in his essay in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (2008). This collection of essays will subsequently be cited as *RV*.

[2] See Giorgio Agamben's work for an account of the way biopolitics as Michel Foucault defined it—the state management of the biological life of populations, along with the disciplinary techniques that act on individual bodies—turns into thanatopolitics, or a politics of death.

death—as well as animate creatures and inanimate matter—are starkly opposed and differ in kind. Moreover, both the logic of total war and the thermodynamic vision of the universe inevitably dissipating into entropy represent death as the ultimate victor. While the biopolitical state appeals to the threat of death to justify both war and its sovereign management, promotion, and protection of human life, thermodynamics implies a tragic metaphysics in which we living creatures are only holding out temporarily against impending, permanent darkness.[3] In contrast, Niedecker and Duncan see life and death as intimately, and formally, related—as phases that ceaselessly turn into each other and that, in their productive strife, generate forms. While Niedecker's later long poems trace concrete, physical interchanges between living creatures and inanimate matter, Duncan, in his prose, constructs a myth of the origins of life and poetry that connects the periodic rhythms of inanimate matter with the aperiodic rhythms of life. Similarly, Niedecker represents life as a rest or pause that matter takes as it travels. Thus, while the conventional modern view sees life and death as inherently opposed and accords death primacy because of its permanence, for Duncan and Niedecker, life and death, animacy and inanimacy, mutually transform and necessarily shape each other.[4]

While this summary could seem to suggest that Niedecker and Duncan return to Romantic vitalism as well as to organic figures, their poetics in fact destabilize vitalism. Niedecker denies that the animate is qualitatively different from the inanimate, writing that there's "nothing supra-rock" about life (*CW* 247). The metaphors that she chooses for her poetics are never exclusively organic, but blend the organic with the inorganic, the mechanical, or the industrial. Her work undoes the

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[3] Thermodynamics and the idea of entropy are important to mid-century American fiction as well as poetry: in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon dwells on the concept of "Maxwell's demon," which holds out the hope that information as an organizing force can resist the power of entropy.

[4] My reading of Duncan and Niedecker is thus in conversation with Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett articulates a "vital materialism" that attends to the ways in which nonhuman creatures and even inanimate matter act and have agency.

privilege of the organic by showing how living things are inextricable from the inorganic—water and rock—and from cultural products. In contrast, Duncan plays up the uniqueness of life, invoking organic metaphors almost as often as Coleridge does. In the books of his mature period, beginning with *The Opening of the Field* (1960), Duncan works through a series of organic figures: *Roots and Branches* (1964), *Bending the Bow* (1968), which invokes the warrior's bow and the poet's lyre, both made from a bent branch, and *Ground Work* (1984 and 1988).[5] But, contra Olson, Duncan constantly draws attention to the fictionality of such tropes—to the organic metaphor *as* metaphor. In "The Truth and Life of Myth," he writes, "we at once seek a meaningful life and dread *psychosis*, 'the principle of life'" (2), and, in that essay and others, he seizes on self-conscious myth-making—the paradox of believing a fiction—as a way to pursue poetic inspiration without yielding to the kind of belief in an occult truth that he saw in his Theosophical parents.

Both Niedecker and Duncan ultimately undermine the privileged status of organic life, insisting not just on systemic, ecological thinking, but on material interconnectedness and the anti-teleological evolution of forms. But they do so in very different ways. Duncan's work powerfully invokes the Romantic past that haunts modernism and postmodernism. At times, his work is expressive and excessive, playing up the organic figures of the tree or the meadow; on the other hand, he insists on the fictionality of such tropes. In his poetics, Duncan moves from a concern with form that is similar to Coleridge's, championing emergent forms that rebel against imposed, conventional orders, to a Darwinian conception of form according to which strife and order continually beget each other. Duncan develops his own syncretic idiom, which constantly moves among and fuses mythic, religious, psychoanalytic, and scientific discourses. Niedecker, in contrast, approaches the organic from the rationalist tradition of natural history; she is avowedly secular in her

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[5] For bending the bow as an organic figure, see Mark Andrew Johnson (99). For the way in which the book and the image of the bow connect and conflate poetry and war, see Nathaniel Mackey's "Gassire's Lute." Davidson and Mottram have also analyzed Duncan's use of organic figures (*Scales of the Marvelous* 58-59, 119-121).

use of the most unsettling and threatening element in that tradition, Darwinism.[6] In her later long poems, Niedecker re-inserts an anti-teleological, leveling organic at the heart of the projective. Here life has no secret; butterflies are just "quicker / than rock" (*CW* 247). The life or liveliness of the poem needs no vitalist mysterium; that liveliness is in the condensation of language, the concealed puns, the words themselves.[7] In playing Objectivism off against projectivism, Niedecker also plays a kind of natural historical objectivity off against a Romantic approach to life. The result is a radically revised organic form, a Darwinian organic form that insists life is not special and that cultural forms like the poem take place through "particular attention" (*CW* 105), attention to specificity, rather than through inspiration.

As the differences between them suggests, Duncan and Niedecker are, in spite of the commonalities I will trace here, a pair of opposites—or, to use Duncan's preferred term, contrasts.[8] They were not in direct dialogue and for each the primary, generative correspondences took place with other poets—Niedecker with Louis Zukofsky and Cid Corman, Duncan with H.D. and Denise Levertov. Yet Niedecker and Duncan certainly read each other's work, and Duncan's essay "Towards an Open Universe" was important to Niedecker at a key moment in the evolution of her poetics.[9] While Duncan participated in both the San Francisco Renaissance and Black Mountain

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[6] In a 1962 letter to Zukofsky, Niedecker tells a story about a conversation with one of her co-workers at the hospital: "Laundry girl in hospital. 'That's V. E. Morrise's son—he went to the University and became a scientist—he believes people are descended from monkeys, they teach such stuff up there.' I told her about stages of the baby in the womb corresponding to the history of the human race, tail on the baby, etc. and I thought she'd flip. I'll be tried for witchcraft if I don't watch out" (*Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky* 314).

[7] Kenneth Cox was the first critic to note that Niedecker's poems often turn on a concealed pun (*The Full Note, Lorine Niedecker* 32). (Subsequently cited as *FN*.) Donald Davie and Michael Davidson, among others, have shown how Niedecker attends to language.

[8] For Duncan, contrast means a loving strife of antagonists (recalling H.D.'s pun on "Eros," the god of love, and "Eris," the goddess of strife) rather than a pure, dichotomized opposition in which neither term can enter the other. His idea of contrast resonates strikingly with Rukeyser's idea of what she calls opposites, developed in *The Life of Poetry* through a reading of Melville's poem "Art" and explored in her later poem, "The Ballad of Orange and Grape."

[9] Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Jenny Penberthy have shown this in their essays in *RV*. DuPlessis notes that Niedecker adapts the line "'We live by the urgent wave / of the verse'" in "Paean to Place" from Duncan's essay (*RV* 170).

poetry scenes and was connected with experimental poets on both coasts, Niedecker has been depicted as isolated because she spent her life on Black Hawk Island—in fact a peninsula that juts out into the Rock River—near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.[10] Niedecker was a student of Emily Dickinson's work and critics have often compared her to Dickinson, unfortunately not only for the shared compression of their poems but also for their shared reputation as isolated "poetesses." But she was an avid reader of Thoreau as well:[11] Niedecker wrote only short poems for more than twenty years, but she was also a keen and philosophically sophisticated observer of the natural world. If Niedecker writes under the sign of Dickinson and Thoreau, Duncan writes under the sign of Whitman.[12] In other words, we have on the one hand condensation and attention to the natural world, and on the other bountiful excess, the proliferating *Leaves of Grass*.

Their poetic practices also differed markedly: while Niedecker carefully worked and reworked her poems, continually condensing and revising, Duncan wrote spontaneously and often did not revise at all. While both Niedecker and Duncan insist that poems can resist conventional biopolitics, they differ on *how* the poet enacts that resistance. For Niedecker, discipline itself can resist biopolitics: by arduously condensing language into a poem, the poet turns her disciplined practice against capitalist ends. Duncan, in contrast, finds resistance in spontaneity: for a poem to resist imposed orders, it must be an emergent order. In his view, the poem that arrives spontaneously enacts cosmic, emergent orders and thus resists the rationalist conventionality that attempts to impose its orders on poetic forms, human relationships, and political collectives. In other words, the

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[10] While Niedecker's work has long been minoritized as "regionalist," Michael Davidson argues that Niedecker's decision to respond to metropolitan politics and poetics from Wisconsin should be seen as a "critical regionalism" that seeks to counter the usual definitions of cultural centrality (*RV* 3-4).

[11] Niedecker kept her copies of both Dickinson and Thoreau in her "immortal cupboard" (*"Between Your House and Mine": The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960-1970* 33).

[12] Two of Duncan's essays about Whitman are included in *Fictive Certainties*. Duncan admired Whitman's continual revision and expansion of one book, and imitated it in his ongoing series "Passages."

*attitude* of the will in Duncan's work differs from that of the will in Niedecker's. As an anarchist, Duncan advocates individual agency, but his work also invokes a queer passivity—an openness to experience that does not vitiate the individual will, but encourages participation in larger orders.[13] While Niedecker sees poetic composition as a willed act of condensation, her engagement with Duncan's expansive projectivism encouraged her to let go a bit in her later long poems; here, she uses her practices of condensation to syncopate a flood of words. For Niedecker, the poet's will cannot be extricated from its material constraints, though it may be allowed to play on them. Though they come at it from quite different starting points—disciplined compression versus spontaneous emergence—both Niedecker and Duncan ultimately arrive at a participatory poetics, whereby the poet collaborates with the poetic tradition, inherited myth and lore, science, language, personal experience, and the senses to create poems.

Moreover, Niedecker and Duncan develop a countervailing politics of life via poetics: by thinking through the productive tension between poetic forms that are imposed on language and those that emerge from it, they redefine lively form and deadening convention. While Niedecker practices disciplined condensation and Duncan advocates open, emergent forms, it is precisely by engaging with the contrasting poetics—an aesthetic of limits, in Duncan's case, or projectivist open form, in Niedecker's—that they each arrive at the generative strife that impels their poetry. In *The H.D. Book*, Duncan represents modernist poets as an oppositional sect that both hides within and fights against the dominant culture. Through his readings of H.D., Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, Duncan develops his play principle, which talks back to Sigmund Freud's death drive, and his participatory poetics, in which the poet collaborates in the emergence of form by both actively

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[13] See Eric Keenaghan, in both his chapter on Duncan in *Queering Cold War Poetry* and "Life, War, and Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan's Poetic Action during the Vietnam War," for a fuller account of the relationship between anarchist individualism and queer passivity in Duncan. While I emphasize participation more than Keenaghan does, I am certainly indebted to his provocative analysis of will and vulnerability in Duncan.

creating it and passively remaining open to it. In later essays, Duncan's idea of the persecuted sect within and against the dominant culture transmutes into his Darwinian vision of "orders" or forms giving rise to each other through "strife." Niedecker's poems imply her politics: while her short, "folk" poems of the 1930s and 40s suggest that the discipline of writing poetry can take up the factory's disciplinary techniques and turn them against capitalism, her later long poems push back against capitalism's co-optation of Darwinian evolution. For both Niedecker and Duncan, politics are inseparable from poetics.

I will read Niedecker's poems alongside Duncan's essays and poems from the late 1950s through the 1960s, showing how both poets revise the relation between poetry and life in light of Darwin's redefinition of species, in resistance to the idea that the universe is inevitably winding down into entropy, and in opposition to conventional biopolitics. Niedecker and Duncan seem to occupy contrasting positions: Niedecker a disciplined poet who practices condensation, Duncan a spontaneous poet who calls forth emergent, open forms. They converge, however, in that they both set evolution within and against dissolution, tracing the ways in which lively forms resist the pull toward entropy, convention, and despair.

**Niedecker's Condensery and the Discipline of Form**

From mid-1930s to the late 1960s, Niedecker defined herself as a poet who wrote only short poems. Through the rigorous discipline of condensation, Niedecker whittled her poems down—or, as she put it in a letter to Clayton Eshelman when she was beginning to write longer poems, she "cut—cut—too many words" (qtd in Peters 227). Because these short poems often turn on concealed puns, draw attention to their artifice, and belie their own apparent closure, they are arguably anti-organic. Yet out of her concern with agriculture and food politics, Niedecker developed an agro-industrial metaphor for her poetic practice—the condensery—that sheds light on

the relationship between poetic discipline and the organic across her work.[14] In general, discipline and the organic have a paradoxical relationship: while organic figures risk using descriptions of nature to prescribe behavior, disciplinary techniques, in Michel Foucault's account, transform rules into natural progressions. In other words, discipline turns "ought" into "is," while the organic turns "is" into "ought." Both of these moves have troubling political implications: while disciplinary techniques help create and enforce norms, invocations of the organic often justify the status quo. I will look at how Niedecker negotiates this double bind, comparing her approach with that of poet May Sarton and back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing. Niedecker, Sarton, and the Nearings all led unconventional lives and worked to develop self-sufficient subjectivities. But while Sarton and the Nearings do so by naturalizing their habits of discipline, for Niedecker discipline instead resists biopolitics by creating habits and practices that cut against conventional norms.

Niedecker does not consider poetic discipline natural in part because she does not develop her poetics from an organic metaphor—unlike Rukeyser and Olson, who do work from organic metaphors, no matter how displaced, subverted, or obscured. Instead, the metaphors central to Niedecker's poetics fuse the organic and the inorganic or the organic and the mechanical. As Jeffery Peterson points out, Niedecker turns in her poems about water and gas pumps to a metaphor that is both organic and mechanical—she represents the pumps as lovable, demanding animate creatures who also figure the labor of poetic composition.[15] Critics have argued that Niedecker's long poems

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[14] Niedecker was well aware of agricultural policies and food politics, rural political movements, and the practicalities of growing, harvesting, processing, and selling food. Her father fished for and sold carp to the New York restaurant market (Peters 10); in the 1940s, Niedecker worked for *Hoard's Dairyman*, the national dairy industry journal based in Fort Atkinson (Peters 73, 99-100). The poems of Niedecker's "New Goose" period, from about 1936 to 1945, deal significantly with agricultural policy. For a reading of these poems in terms of food politics, see Allison Carruth's "War Rations and the Food Politics of Late Modernism" and *Global Appetites* and my "Towards an Ecopoetics of Food."

[15] Jeffery Peterson analyzes Niedecker's pump poems in the context of his argument that her work blurs divides between the organic and the mechanical, or nature and technology (*Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* 257). Subsequently cited as *LNWP*. Becky Peterson uses these poems to show how Niedecker represents relationships between humans and non-human objects as amative, rethinking romance and the subject/object divide in the context of poverty.

formally imitate water, rock, and even islands, but the fact that convincing cases can be made for all of these models indicates that they do not go very far in locating a guiding metaphor for Niedecker's poetics.[16] If water and rock are the most "natural" metaphors for form that appear in Niedecker's poems and letters, they are still not organic: they focus rather on inorganic elements that life depends on.

In fact, Niedecker's own most decisive metaphor for her practice—the condensery in the 1962 poem "Poet's work"—emphasizes the disciplined act of paring down and condensing language, her raw material, rather than using language to formally imitate a natural phenomenon.

*Poet's work*

Grandfather<br>
   advised me:<br>
      Learn a trade

I learned<br>
   to sit at desk<br>
      and condense

No layoff<br>
   from this<br>
      condensery (*CW* 194)

Niedecker's metaphor for poetic work is not only industrial, but also agro-industrial: a condensery is the part of a creamery that prepares condensed milk.[17] As Elizabeth Willis notes, "Jefferson County, Wisconsin," in which Niedecker lived, "was home to eighty-four creameries, many containing condenseries" (*RV* 224). Niedecker worked for the Wisconsin Federal Writers Project from 1938 to

[16] Michael Davidson argues that Niedecker's form in "Lake Superior" imitates the exchange of minerals between rock and organism (*RV* 13-14). Jonathan Skinner writes of Niedecker's "poetics of flow" (*RV* 42), and Douglas Crase argues that Niedecker's form in "Lake Superior" imitates the "evolutionary rearrangement of [Lake Superior's] minerals by lava, sea, glacier, and human industry" (*LNWP* 334). Jenny Penberthy argues that Niedecker used both rock and water as formal models (*RV* 74). While Elizabeth Robinson compares the triadic line of Niedecker's later poems to "islands" (*RV* 125), Mary Pinard argues that the same triadic line imitates water (*RV* 27). Pinard usefully shows how the tension between flooding and guarding against flood plays itself out in Niedecker's poetics.

[17] According to the *OED*, "condensery" is of US origin; the first citation is from an American dictionary in 1909.

1942; it produced the WPA guide, *Wisconsin* (1941).[18] According to this guidebook, Wisconsin in the mid-1930s produced "more fluid milk, more condensed and evaporated milk, and more cheese" than any other state (95). The guide also notes that while Wisconsin had led the nation in the "manufacture of dairy products" since World War I, "dairying is a local industry of small producing units" (73).

Niedecker's speaker doesn't name *what* she condenses at her desk; the raw material of the poet's condensery—language—has been condensed out of this poem. The condensery figure, however, compares the poet's raw materials to agricultural products: that is, it implicitly compares language to food, which results from the human cultivation of organic life.[19] As a metaphor for her poetics, the condensery brings together Niedecker's concerns in an especially telling way, one that her critics have not fully appreciated. The poetic condensery invokes Pound's emphasis on compression and Zukofsky's dictum that "condensation is more than half of composition" (*A Test of Poetry* 81), as many have noted, but also Niedecker's critique of capitalism; her investment in Fort Atkinson and the local; food politics, policies, and agricultural reform as a key part of her local context; and her vexed relationship, as both a working class woman and a poet, to those whom she called the "folk."

While Willis is right to note that the "condensery" "aptly references Niedecker's practice of producing highly concentrated poems intended for long-term consumption, asserting her intellectual activity as both mechanical and manual labor within the vocabulary of her local economy" (*RV* 224),

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[18] According to Niedecker's biographer, Margot Peters, Niedecker did not work on the guide, but instead wrote biographies that would later, unsigned, become part of the *Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography* (1960) (63). As part of the cohesive group of Federal Writers' Project workers in Madison, however, Niedecker would have been familiar with the *Wisconsin* guide's contents.

[19] Since agriculture is a site for both the disciplining of human workers and the management of nonhuman nature, it should be central to attempts to think through the way biopolitics acts on the environment. See Michael S. Carolan for an argument that industrial agribusinesses discipline plants and animals as well as farmers, and Mick Smith for a philosophical analysis of what he calls "ecological sovereignty."

the poem pivots on a key irony that sharply distinguishes the poet's condensery from the factory that produces condensed milk: the irony contained in the line "No layoff." The speaker can't be laid off from sitting at her desk and condensing lines of poetry—as she could from a job at the condensery down the street—but neither is she paid for it.[20] She has "learned a trade," but not in the sense her grandfather intended. He wanted her to acquire a skill and a discipline that would ensure her economic survival, but instead she has learned the self-discipline necessary to sit at a desk and write poetry, which she cannot eat and which does not buy her food.

The condensery metaphor allows Niedecker to think through the relationship between different forms of discipline. The poem sets the discipline that factory work imposes on workers against the self-discipline of the poet at her desk, but at the same time insists on a connection between the two. The speaker has "learned / to sit at desk," and this image suggests the quintessential figure of Foucauldian discipline: the worker, student, or prisoner who has been trained, by the mechanism of the Panopticon's one-way surveillance, to stay in one place, separated from all her peers, and work. This image could represent factory work at the condensery down the street just as well as it represents the poet's solitary work at home. It thus talks back to the grandfather's advice to "Learn a trade": presumably the grandfather means that the skilled worker's trade can insulate her from the layoffs to which unskilled workers are vulnerable. But the poem levels all kinds of manual, mechanical, and intellectual labor: all workers, no matter what their trade, craft, or skill, essentially "sit at desk," or stand in one place, and are each as vulnerable as the next to the vagaries of capitalism. After all, Niedecker herself was laid off from more than one desk job: she was fired from a job at the Fort Atkinson Public Library in 1930, in part because of the Depression's

[20] Willis implies that lay off from an actual condensery was unlikely: "The condensery was a site of concentrated collective activity where—whether due to its communal structure, its marginality, its constant work flow, or its crucial relation to everyday life—there was no chance of 'lay off'" (*RV* 224). However, it seems improbable that workers in any industry would have been immune from layoff in the depression, and the poem turns on this difference between the

onset, and her intellectual work for the Wisconsin Federal Writers' Project ended when the government stopped sponsoring such work programs for artists and writers (Peters 32, 68).

Niedecker implies that the poet, working at home for no pay and under no surveillance, borrows her self-discipline from the habits instilled by the factory's disciplinary practices. Thus the poem underscores the Foucauldian irony that the worker internalizes disciplinary practices: she works as if she is being watched even when she is not. But the poem also turns on the difference between the poet who "condenses" lines of poetry and the worker who condenses milk. The lines "No layoff / from this / condensery" convey that difference not only by marking the poet's labor as unpaid and unmonitored, but also by hinting at her independence. The speaker emphasizes the fact that she cannot be stopped from working, rather than the fact that she is not being paid. In a muted way, the speaker seems to be thumbing her nose: if her work is not recognized with compensation, it is also self-directed. The poem hints that pleasure or joy, if not liberation, lies in such independence, even if it comes at the impossible cost of a livelihood.[21]

"Poet's work" pivots on the hinge between capitalism's disciplinary power and the subject-creating power of self-discipline, habit, or practice—a hinge that also shows up in Foucault's work. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault reveals the Protestant work ethic, and modernity's veneration of discipline more broadly, as the outcome of specific techniques of power that act on bodies, rather than as a moral triumph of the individual will. Along these lines, he notes "the persistence in regarding [disciplinary practices] as the humble, but concrete form of every morality, whereas they

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dairy condensery and the poetic condensery. As Peters notes, "There was no layoff from *this* condensery—no employer could lay her off" (56).

[21] There is also a biographical dimension to my reading of "Poet's work." According to DuPlessis, Niedecker conceived of the Objectivist discipline of condensation in terms of restraining her own excess, terms that take on problematically gendered dimensions in her relationship with Zukofsky. In that sense, the self-discipline of the condensery circulates not only through capitalist disciplinary mechanisms, but also through the gendered power dynamics tied to Niedecker's feeling that she *should* restrain her surrealist or projectivist excess with Objectivist condensation. It is perhaps significant that Niedecker wrote this poem in 1962 (*CW* 424), after a twenty-five year commitment to writing only short poems and just before the mid-1960s shift in her poetics that precipitated her later long poems.

are a set of physico-political techniques" (223). For Niedecker, however, discipline and habit are neither natural nor virtuous: the speaker in her poem simply "learned / to sit at desk / and condense." Niedecker shows that the poetic act of making is inextricable from capitalism, but she does not dismiss it for that: condensing poems is still different from condensing milk and, she implies, more satisfying. Though Niedecker does not celebrate the poet's discipline as a moral victory, "Poet's work" does suggest that, in borrowing the factory's techniques, the poet can turn her disciplined habits against capitalist economics and conventional values.

Niedecker's transvaluing of discipline resonates with that of the back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing and the poet May Sarton, who also repurposed disciplinary practices for anti-capitalist, unconventional modes of life. While Sarton struggled against heterosexist gender norms that implied that her decision to live alone and focus on her writing was a selfish one, the Nearings aimed to create a self-sufficient life and enjoy their intellectual and artistic pursuits rather than accumulate wealth or consumer goods. Niedecker also took a pragmatic approach to making do with little: she lived for decades in a small cabin that did not have indoor plumbing until 1962, though the two rental houses that she inherited from her parents were fitted with such conveniences long before (Peters 157, 292). In a flood zone, Niedecker was an impoverished landlord;[22] after having to resign from *Hoard's Dairyman* in 1950 because of her deteriorating eyesight, she worked as a cleaning woman at the Fort Atkinson Hospital from 1957 to 1963 (Peters 100, 126, 181). In fact, Niedecker's working class status distinguishes her sharply from Sarton and the Nearings, who developed their unconventional lifestyles from much more economically and culturally privileged positions.[23] I will focus, however, on a different—though perhaps related—distinction between them: unlike

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[22] See, for example, her poem "Property is poverty" (*CW* 194-195).

[23] Scott Nearing, once an economics professor, was blacklisted and unable to find teaching positions because he was an outspoken Communist; his younger wife Helen came from a wealthy family and considered a career as a professional

Niedecker, Sarton and the Nearings naturalize their habits of discipline.

Helen and Scott Nearing, in *Living the Good Life* (1954), *Continuing the Good Life* (1979), and other books that informed the counterculture movement, describe how their project of self-sufficient living depended on a carefully disciplined organization of time and labor. When the Nearings, who were socialist intellectuals then living in New York City, moved to a farm in Vermont in 1932, they set out specifically to extricate themselves from the capitalist economy. They were vegetarians who lived on what they grew, built stone houses, and produced and traded maple syrup for the small amount of money and outside goods that they needed. In 1951, they moved to Maine, where they again built with stone and lived self-sufficiently, this time with blueberries for a cash crop. The Nearings acted as a bridge from the Old Left to the New Left: in both Vermont and Maine, they received a steady stream of visitors who worked on their farm and went on to spread their lifestyle. Their discipline in terms of both long-term projects and daily routine, however, sharply distinguishes them from at least the stereotypes about later hippie communes. They divided each day into four-hour blocks, a morning block and an afternoon block. Every day, one block would be devoted to "bread labor" and the other to "personally directed" work, whether intellectual, artistic, or leisure pursuits (*Living the Good Life* 43). The Nearings carefully planned both their cyclical work, like gardening, and long-term endeavors like building stone houses, walls, and garden terraces, developing a complex system of index cards and binders to record and organize these projects (35). They represent their discipline as profoundly freeing, both in terms of the time they were able to devote to their own intellectual work while still supporting themselves largely outside the capitalist economy, and in terms of the satisfaction of "bread labor" and self-sufficiency.

The Nearings not only critiqued and dropped out of capitalism through strictly disciplined

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violinist (see Helen Nearing's *Loving and Leaving the Good Life*). May Sarton also came from a well-off family; her father, George Sarton, was instrumental in founding the academic discipline of history of science.

work, but also figured their disciplinary practices in organic terms. They sought to integrate their long-term projects with their daily work of gardening, by, for example, picking up stones every time they came back to the farm from the field or some other task, piling them by type for years in advance of beginning actual building projects (30). These procedures—their way of integrating long-term projects with cyclical labor, and their way of organizing each day's work—became both so habitual and so efficient that they depict them as natural: "We aimed never to move stones, earth or any material more than once—directly to its final resting place. We had many projects going on at the same time, in various stages of completion. Thus, the finishing of these successive units was a by-product of the wastes from other projects. . . . In a very real sense the truck garden was not built, it grew, over a decade, as part of a general plan aimed toward a place for everything (including wastes), and everything in its place" (34-35).

When the Nearings insist that their garden's stone terracing was not built but "grew," they are insisting that habits of discipline can coalesce in a unified whole that operates naturally. Their figures here recall Foucault's argument that disciplinary practices take a multiplicity of people and turn them into a unity: in concrete terms, practices like surveillance and the partitioning of space impede workers' organized resistance and thus make possible the more efficient use of each "element" or individual in the factory (*Discipline and Punish* 219-220). Foucault's formulations echo one classic definition of organic unity—that it is a unity in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts: "the disciplines must increase the effect of utility proper to the multiplicities, so that each is made more useful than the simple sum of its elements" (220). In fact, the organic plays a double role in Foucault's analysis of disciplinary practices. While the end result of a well-disciplined factory is an organicist whole in which each human "part" is made as productive as possible, overseers refine disciplinary techniques precisely by attending to the workers' own "organic resistance." In other words, the body's resistance to discipline is transformed into knowledge that allows disciplinary

techniques to be tuned even more finely to bodily capacities.

Helen and Scott Nearing were not running a factory, but their disciplined habits, like disciplinary techniques in Foucault's account, create a smoothly functioning whole. The Nearings figure their practices of self-discipline both as overcoming natural tendencies toward lazy, haphazard living and as creating a life that is an organic whole, a life that allows them time for intellectual pursuits and that weaves daily labor together with long-term projects. In fact, in her book *Loving and Leaving the Good Life* (1992), written after Scott's death, Helen Nearing represents life as art and implies that discipline makes life beautiful and whole. To friends who asked how she, a musician and artist, could choose to spend her life with a pedantic communist like Scott,

> I always replied by saying that no art could compare with life, that Scott's art was in his living. . . . Artistry can also be in the honesty of one's lifestyle, in one's order, in one's character. . . . Scott was an artist in his neat and tidy, thriving vegetable gardens, in his straight wood and compost piles, in his brightly shining tools, in his meticulous notebooks, in his careful, legible script. I felt he made his very life a work of art. (70-71)

Here the comparison of life with art leads Nearing to speak of discipline in the kind of moral terms that Foucault sought to question. At the same time, her insistence that life can be art if it is lived in a certain way suggests that the organic as a fusion of life and art permeates the Nearings' back-to-the-land vision.

While the Nearings put disciplinary practices to anti-capitalist ends, May Sarton's formalist poetics celebrate discipline in organic terms that aim to create an unconventional, resistant subjectivity, though they do not critique capitalism. As a poet and novelist who supported herself by writing and had a long-term lesbian relationship as well as affairs with men and women, Sarton lived an unconventional life. In her later years, she embraced solitude, first in New Hampshire and then in Maine, and wrote journals that chart her attempt to combine writing, gardening, correspondence,

and personal relationships through routines that gave her time and space for her work. In the journal *Plant Dreaming Deep* (1968), Sarton glorifies discipline and habit—the division of the day into gardening, writing, and housework—albeit from the privileged position of one who chose to have a second home in a small New Hampshire town in the 1950s. She describes "how supportive a routine is, how the spirit moves around freely in it as it does in a plain New England church. Routine is not a prison, but the way into freedom from time. The apparently measured time has immeasurable space within it" (56-57). The New England church is a tellingly Puritan image, though here tied to organic figures for the relationship among place, life, and writing. Sarton writes, for example, that when she first saw the farm that she ended up buying, "The barn and its surroundings felt alive" (30). She represents her daily routine and participation in village life this way: "Here was a tangible reality outside myself, against which I could prove almost everything I have come to believe: the village, the house, the garden, the landscape all around have become for me one complex metaphor" (183-184). For Sarton, life itself becomes a metaphor that supports her disciplined habits and enables her to write poems in traditional metrical forms.

However, Sarton ran into the paradox that willed discipline must collaborate with vitalist inspiration to create a poem: though she disavows the role of will in shaping life and art, that disavowal belies itself. In her sharpest formulation of the relationship between life and poetry, Sarton refers to a friend she made in the town:

> I am, I think, more of a poet than I was before I knew him, if to be a poet means allowing life to flow through one rather than forcing it to a mold the will has shaped; if it means learning to let the day shape the work, not the work, the day, and so live toward essence as naturally as a bird or a flower (138).

Sarton's insistence on "allowing life to flow through one" and "liv[ing] toward essence" ends up sounding more like an act of will than she seems to intend, since it involves an effort to be natural.

She thus echoes Coleridge, who argues that we must choose to be what the organic metaphor implies that we naturally are. In *The Stateman's Manual* (1816), Coleridge gazes out on a "flowery meadow" and

> it seems as if the soul said to herself: from this state hast *thou* fallen! Such shouldst thou still become, thy Self all permeable to a holier power! . . . But what the plant *is*, by an act not its own and unconsciously—*that* must thou *make* thyself to *become*! (71, emphasis in original).

The insistent italics underscore Coleridge's rhetorical move from natural description ("what the plant *is*") to moral and political prescription (what you ought to "*make* [yourself] *become*"). Coleridge calls on grace to help out in this act of willed naturalness: you "must by prayer and by a watchful and unresisting spirit, *join* at least with the preventive and assisting grace to *make* thyself" as open as the flower naturally is (71). That, however, does not change the fact that Coleridge here enlists nature to back up a politicized command.[24] In doing so, he shows why organic metaphors can be such an effective rhetorical tool in arguments for political and social conservatism: they attempt to convert "is" into "ought." At the same time, Coleridge undercuts this conflation of nature and will precisely by underscoring it—he brings the device to the reader's attention even as he uses it. Sarton's "living toward essence" may present a subtler and therefore more pernicious naturalizing of will and discipline.

Sarton herself seems to have recognized this, because in later journals, she confesses that she made the struggle for self-discipline sound easier than it was. In *Journal of a Solitude* (1973) and especially in *Recovering* (1980), Sarton is more honest about the difficulties of living alone and

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[24] Soon this invocation becomes explicit social and political prescription, as Coleridge refers to revolutionary rationalism: "O!—if as the plant to the orient beam, we would but open out our minds to that holier light . . . ungenial, alien, and adverse to our very nature would appear the boastful wisdom which, beginning in France, gradually tampered with the taste and literature of all the most civilized nations of christendom, seducing the understanding from its natural allegiance, and therewith from all its own lawful claims, titles, and privileges" (73).

writing;[25] she admits that it is a struggle to attain discipline in a way that the Nearings never quite do. In these later journals, Sarton also transmutes her figures of organic growth, using them not to avow the natural ease of literary creation, but to represent the overcoming of pain and difficulty. For example, she writes, "Suffering often feels like failure, but it is actually the door into growth. And growth does not cease to be painful at any age" (*Solitude* 147). Later, she tells herself again, "To close the door on pain is to miss the chance for growth, isn't it? Nothing that happens to us, even the most terrible shock, is unusable, and everything has somehow to be built into the fabric of the personality, just as food has to be built in" (*Recovering* 13). Here Sarton acknowledges that the process of disciplined self-making is a painful one, rather than an effortless, natural unfolding. Sarton also positions a traditional subjectivity—a unified sense of self, a "soul" that grows over time to attain its most fulfilled form (*Recovering* 197)—as a necessity for persevering in an unconventional life. For Sarton, discipline promotes psychological growth, a process that is painful but necessary because it is both willed and natural.

Thus Sarton implies that discipline blurs the line between prescription and description, as organic discourses do, but from the opposite direction, as it were. While Coleridge's organic figures turn a characterization of nature into a mandate, disciplinary practices instead naturalize rules, transforming "ought" into "is." Foucault traces this slide from law to nature:

> The order that the disciplinary punishments must enforce is of a mixed nature: it is an 'artificial' order, explicitly laid down by a law, a programme, a set of regulations. But it is also an order defined by natural and observable processes: the duration of an apprenticeship, the time taken to perform an exercise, the level of aptitude refer to a regularity that is also a rule. . . . In a disciplinary regime punishment involves a double juridico-natural reference.

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[25] In *Journal of a Solitude*, Sarton writes, "One reason I felt impelled to keep this journal for a year was because I think that *Plant Dreaming Deep* has created the myth of a false Paradise" (176).

(*Discipline and Punish* 179)

Discipline sets up rules, but the practice of those rules creates a "natural" progress or process. If the organic can be dangerous because it introduces a rule under the guise of nature, disciplinary discourses instead establish a norm and enforce conformity. The norm is "a new form of 'law': a mixture of legality and nature, prescription and constitution" (304). Normality is produced through rules and justified through reference to nature: for norms to succeed in enforcing conformity, they must be considered natural.

While Sarton, the Nearings, and Niedecker all resist conforming to conventional norms, their ways of doing so differ. Sarton represents her disciplined attempts to overcome "psychic pain" (*Solitude* 34) and persist in her work as a paradoxically willed process of growth—one that will result in a whole, fulfilled self. The Nearings, similarly, believe that their disciplined habits can turn their lives—as well as their garden—into a beautiful organic whole. Niedecker, however, far from naturalizing discipline, shows that the poet's act of making cannot be separated from capitalist disciplinary practices. Niedecker turns the intellectual work of the poet into industrial work: her condensery does not romanticize agricultural or industrial labor and reckons with the possibility of layoff. At the same time, the condensery metaphor suggests that the poet's practice is always what Donna Haraway might call naturecultural.

In fact, Niedecker's pragmatic concern with the way in which agriculture and flood shape the poet's work informs her response to and revision of projectivist organic form in the late 1960s. But before I turn to Duncan's version of projectivism and then to Niedecker's long poems of the 60s, it is worth reading the poem that closes *New Goose* (1944), where Niedecker takes up the quintessential figures of Romantic organic form more directly than she does anywhere else. Niedecker plays on the topos of the book as tree and Whitman's "leaves," or pages of poetry as blades of grass, but her tree is *in* a book:

> The broad-leaved Arrow-head
> grows vivid and strong
> in my book, says: underneath
> the surface of the stream the leaves
> are narrow, long.
> I don't investigate,
> mark the page . . . I suppose
> if I sat down beside a frost
> and had no printed sign
> I'd be lost. Well, up
> from lying double in a book,
> go long like a tree
> and broad as the library. (*CW* 109)

"Arrow-head" is the name for *Sagittaria sagittifolia*, a tree that "has floating leaves shaped like an arrow-head" (*OED*). The speaker in the poem studies the picture of this tree that "grows vivid and strong" in a guidebook, and then chides herself for relying on such "printed signs." Niedecker not only reverses Whitman's "leaves of grass"—putting the tree on the page rather than comparing her poems to leaves—but also invokes his admonition in "Song of Myself," "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . . nor look through the eyes of the dead . . . . nor feed on the spectres in books" (16). It is unclear what "a frost" refers to, but the pun on "Well, up" seems to indicate both that it signifies frosted-over ground and that Niedecker here figures the experience of reading as a kind of frozen stillness from which the speaker thaws and "wells up" when she rises from the book.[26]

In fact, the metaphor of the tree comes alive in the image of the speaker standing "up / from lying double in a book" to "go long like a tree / and broad as the library." Here the tree itself seems to stand up from its representation on the page and "go long," but the primary image is of the speaker's body, stretching up from the still, cramped position of reading in a way that Niedecker figures with the height of a tree and the breadth of a library. Unlike Whitman, Niedecker does not

[26] "A frost" might play on Robert Frost's name, and suggest that unlabeled poems can be as hard to identify as unlabeled trees.

liken books and poems to trees or leaves, but rather compares the reader to both a tree and a library—that is, to a growing organism, but also to a cultural archive that grows by accumulation. In closing *New Goose*, then, Niedecker invites her reader to stand up and stretch—a movement that does not represent a turning away from specters in books and toward nature, but a stretching figured simultaneously as natural growth and as cultural or intellectual extension.

Niedecker perhaps also forecasts her own growth; two decades later, she will turn from the short, "New Goose" poems in which she critiqued capitalist politics and conventional thinking by punning on the interactions of nature and culture, to long poems that allow her to play out those interactions. While Niedecker's short poems are good at registering paradox and contradiction, her long poems are better able to follow matter as it travels through organic life and cultural technologies. But Niedecker does not abandon the poetic disciplines of her condensery: her hard-won insight is that lively forms emerge both despite and *through* practical, material constraints.

**Duncan's Meadow and Emergent Forms**

While Niedecker's poetics emphasized discipline and condensation, Duncan in contrast championed poetic forms that emerge in the process of composition against conventional forms imposed on materials. As Joseph Conte has noted, Duncan thus echoes Coleridge's classic definition of organic form, which "fulfills itself from within" while mechanic form molds the poem from without (51). Though Duncan's contrast between emergent forms and imposed forms is a contrast between vitality and deadening convention, he does not set up a simplistic opposition between life and death or animacy and inanimacy. Instead, he comes to see life and death, organic beings and inanimate matter, as different sorts of emergent order. Neither lacks pattern entirely; in fact, the rhythms of life transform into those of matter, and vice-versa. In his essays, Duncan pushes back against both the idea that the universe is sliding irrevocably toward entropy and against Sigmund

Freud's concept of the death drive. In *The H.D. Book*, Duncan also questions conventional thanatopolitics and envisions poets as participating in an embattled politics of life within and against the dominant society. Thus Duncan challenges the conventional conception of death as the inert victory of nonbeing and instead sees death and inorganic matter as another order from which the order of life emerges.

Duncan arrives at this revised understanding of death and matter through his participatory poetics. Participation involves both agency and vulnerability: the poet takes part in creation while remaining open to transformation through experience or through the works and words of others. In calling Duncan's poetics "participatory," I bring together Duncan's insistence on his status as a "derivative" poet who draws on the poems of others, his emphasis on play, and the importance of fictionality—make-believe, the "as if"—in his work. Duncan's concept of participation keeps him from sliding into an expressivist poetics, though emergent form could lead in that direction. For the Beats and for confessional poets, the move to open forms was a move toward personal expressivity, where the poem was supposed to be an authentic representation of first-hand experience.[27] Duncan resists this tendency, instead seeing the poetic tradition, inherited myth and knowledge, and fiction or pretending as central to the process of letting poetic forms emerge. In this section, I will show how Duncan articulates his concept of emergent form and his participatory poetics in the essays "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" and "Towards an Open Universe" as well as in *The H.D. Book*. Then I will analyze the poems "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" and "Poetry, A Natural Thing," from *The Opening of the Field,* to explore the ways in which participation and emergence undo divides between nature and culture.

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[27] Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell, for example, both gave up traditional metrics when they began exploring more personal or confessional material. Duncan's infamous attack on Robin Blaser is an attack on just this idea of authenticity as the expression of a personal experience; whether or not Blaser was guilty of such a poetics, the attack does reveal the extent to which Duncan wished to distance himself from the confessional tendencies of mainstream lyric (see Duncan,

In "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" (1961), Duncan follows Coleridge's critique of neoclassical poetics by contrasting the imposed, mechanical discipline of conventional poetic form with the vitality of emergent form. Some of Duncan's targets, such as Pope and Swift, are even the same, though he adds the New Critics as latter-day examples of those for whom poetic form "is significant in so far as it shows control" (*FC* 90-91). While Duncan's take on conventional form as both mechanical and imposed (91, 104) echoes Coleridge quite clearly, Duncan does not credit Coleridge with this idea, but instead notes in passing that "the crisis of Enlightenment" can be seen in Coleridge's own movement from the "inspiration" of his early poems to his later "rationalist obsession" (100). It is perhaps worth noting the irony that Duncan is presumably referring, here, to Coleridge's voluminous prose works that, beginning with *Biographia Literaria* (1817), re-iterate, in many fields, the distinction between organic and mechanic that drives Duncan's own argument. The Romantic thinker that Duncan does cite is Thomas Carlyle: both here and in "Towards an Open Universe," Duncan quotes the passage from "The Hero as Poet" in which Carlyle writes that "All deep things are Song" (*FC* 83, 92). Carlyle's vision of "the inner structure of Nature" as "perfect music"—a music that shows itself in "even the commonest speech"—is key to Duncan's sense that musical order emerges, of itself, in both language and the universe. In Carlyle and Duncan, then, Coleridge's organic form that "develops itself from within" takes on a more avowedly cosmic scale.

However, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" does not focus on how these orders emerge, but on rationalist attempts to control and thwart their emergence. Duncan contends that reason is a "tribal magic" invented to ward off unreason, syncretic religion, and the imagination, which threaten to upset our control of self and world (102). By imposing order, reason prevents us from participating in emergent orders that we cannot control, but that instead shape us. Even "today,"

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"Returning to *Les Chimères* of Gérard de Nerval"). Incidentally, M. H. Abrams shows how organic form was linked to an expressivist poetics in the Romantic period in *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

Duncan claims, the magic of reason holds at bay "the world of thought and feeling in which we may participate but not dominate, where we are used by things even as we use them" (91). Reason thus opposes knowledges, such as psychology and evolution, that threaten its certainties. It seeks to protect us from a world "where information and intelligence invade us, where what we know shapes us and we become creatures, not rulers, of what is" (101). At the same time, Duncan insists that there is a "vital phase of Rational Genius": in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "the inspiration of Reason" was a response to the threat posed by the Renaissance, syncretic religion, and contact with worlds beyond "Christendom" (98-99). In calling reason an inspired magic, Duncan not only challenges reason's alleged superiority to magic, but also refuses a simplistic opposition between deadening rationality and Romantic vitality. For Duncan, life is not only on the side of Romance and imagination; reason formerly had its "vital phase," but has taken over too many discursive domains.

Through a metaphor drawn from gardening, Duncan critiques imposed poetic disciplines. The "rationalist gardener's art" consists in "his control over nature"; according to this aesthetic, "beauty is perceived as the imposed order visible in the pruned hedge-row and the ultimate tree compelled into geometric globe or pyramid that gives a certainty of effect" (101). The rationalist garden thus belongs with "the minuet, the game of tennis, the heroic couplet, the concept of form as the imposing of rules and establishing of regularities, the theories of civilization, race, and progress," as part of the attempt "to rationalize the universe, to secure balance and class," and to maintain the political and cultural status quo (102). However, the rationalist garden puts reason's denial of vital, emergent orders on display more obviously than the heroic couplet does. The rationalist gardener's materials uniquely betray the emergent orders that all imposed forms seek to deny: the tree that he prunes into an unnatural "globe" or "pyramid" obviously grew of its own accord—the gardener did not make the tree himself, as the poet seems to make his heroic couplets.

Yet Duncan juxtaposes this rationalist gardener with the rationalist poet to undo exactly that distinction: for Duncan, imposing conventional orders on the material of language is analogous to pruning a tree into a globe. The rationalist "poet's art was one of control over the common speech, forcing natural metaphor from all hint of meaningful experience or intuition of the universe . . . and disciplining syntax and line away from the energies of the language itself into balanced phrases, regular meters and heroic couplets" (101).[28] It is not too much of a stretch to read this poetic discipline in Foucauldian terms, for in the next sentence, Duncan brings up the "manoeuvres and disciplines" of "military arts," contending that "men are drilled in order that there be an authority, removing them from immediate concern in the acts of killing and destruction involved" (101). In other words, discipline turns men into functional units who do not have agency in—or responsibility for, or qualms of conscience about—what they do. Duncan implies not only that language grows into its own emergent forms, as trees do, but also that poems can be disciplined into conventional shapes only at the risk of turning poetry against its own moral imperatives, as military discipline turns men against theirs.

While Duncan likens poems to trees, he sees communities of poets as a field whose ecology cannot be captured by rationalist classification. Duncan compares anthologists collecting poems to natural historians collecting and classifying dead specimens of plants. Duncan quotes Ernst Cassirer's critique of Linnaeus, emphasizing that the ecological interconnectedness of plants confounded Linnaeus' attempt to know them by "removing his specimens from the field in which they had their living significance" (103). Duncan argues that "anthologists of our day who strive to rise above schools and movements" are like Linneaus, ignoring connection and "life" in order to

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[28] Duncan's references to "natural metaphor" and to "the energies of language" also recall Fenollosa's conception of poetic form, underscoring and drawing out Fenollosa's sense that it is the naturalness of metaphor—its fidelity to experience—that give language its revelatory force. In this, Duncan picks up on and extends an aspect of Fenollosa (and, back of him, Emerson) that is not as important for Olson and Rukeyser.

collect the "best" poems as specimens removed from their field (103-104). This turns, paradoxically, into a defense of a particular anthology—one that played a significant role in the "anthology wars"—as Duncan takes issue with Cecil Hemley's critique of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (1960). Hemley "would group the 'best' of Allen's anthology with poets who never in their lives or thoughts were connected with Olson or Creeley or myself or Denise Levertov" (104). While Hemley "does not have a 'taste' for the work of Robert Creeley," Duncan declares, "I can have no recourse to taste. The work of Denise Levertov or Robert Creeley or Larry Eigner belongs not to my appreciations but to my immediate concerns in living" (104).

Perhaps even more important than the way Duncan positions ecological interconnectedness as a vitalist refutation of rationalist classification is his mobile use of "life" here. Duncan invokes an ecological sense of "life," though he never uses the word ecology, when he says that the "association" among the poets of Allen's anthology is "not arbitrary, but arise[s] as an inner need" (104). At the same time, he talks of the poets' "lives" in the more mundane sense of their personal lives and biographical connections. In insisting that the work of these poets is part of his "immediate concerns in living," Duncan moves to another sense again—of life as a quest to thrive by coming into knowledge. Duncan moves among varied senses of "life" not only in this essay, but in other essays and in *The H.D. Book*. Eric Keenaghan's critical approach recognizes this: his use of "life" to encompass vitalism, biography, life-writing, and biopolitics picks up on the mobility of "life" in Duncan's own work.[29]

Duncan's mobile use of "life" indicates that, for him, the vitality of open form poetics merges with an approach to daily living. This inseparability of life and poetry shows up in his response to Robert Frost's famous comparison of writing free verse to playing tennis with the net down:

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[29] Keenaghan articulates this approach both in the essay "Life, War, and Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan's Poetic Action during the Vietnam War" (2008) and in his presentation at the 2011 Modernist Studies Association conference, "A 'Companion of the Way': The Life-Politics of Pearson's Patronage of Duncan's *H.D. Book*."

> Frost is right in his sense that the meters and rimes of regulation verse have a counterpart in the rules, marked areas of the court (establishing bounds and out-of-bounds), and net of the tennis game. . . . But, for those who see life as something other than a tennis game, without bounds, and who seek in their sciences and arts to come into that life, into an imagination of that life, the thought comes that the counterpart of free verse may be free thought and free movement. (103)

Here, poetry has to be more than a tennis game because *life* is more than a tennis game. In linking free verse with free thought—earlier in the essay, he also links it with the "free association of living things," which he means both politically and ecologically (90)—Duncan seems to endorse a modernist defense of free verse that cuts against his own concern for order. But for Duncan, life's orders only emerge when one does not try to impose rational order by fiat or by will. Free verse and free thought are thus prerequisites for coming into the "melodies" or orders of life.

While "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" speaks against imposed order, the characterization of emergent orders takes precedence in "Towards an Open Universe" (1964), which is perhaps the most well known and influential of Duncan's essays. Duncan begins the essay with the story of his own birth and a passage from the poem "Apprehensions" that links it with "the birth of life itself in the primal waters" (76), reaching far back to set up the essay's lyrical evocation of the rhythms that pervade human lives and the life of poetry: "In the very beginnings of life, in the source of our cadences, with the first pulse of the blood in the egg then, the changes of night and day must have been there" (77). Rather than retelling classical myth, Duncan in this essay creates a syncretic myth about the way poetry emerges from these primordial rhythms.

Drawing on the biophysicist Edwin Schrodinger, Heraclitus, Carlyle, Olson, and his own poems, Duncan writes what we might call a myth including science. He tells a story about how poetic order emerges within the rhythms of the body and the planet. It is worth quoting a key early

passage in the essay at length because it is this evocation of rhythms that Niedecker and others found so provocative:

> We are, all the many expressions of living matter, grandchildren of Gaia, Earth and Uranus, the Heavens. Late born, for the moon and ocean came before. The sea was our first mother and the sun our father, so our sciences picture the chemistry of the living as beginning in the alembic of the primal sea quickened by the rays of the sun and even, beyond, by radiations of the cosmos at large. Tideflow under the sun and moon of the sea, systole and diastole of the heart, these rhythms lie deep in our experience and when we let them take over our speech there is a monotonous rapture of persistent regular stresses and waves of lines breaking rhyme after rhyme. There have been poets for whom this rise and fall, the mothering swell and ebb, was all. Amoebic intelligences, dwelling in the memorial of tidal voice, they arouse in our awake minds a spell, so that we let our awareness go in the urgent wave of the verse. The rhyming lines and the repeating meters persuade us. To evoke night and day or the ancient hypnosis of the sea is to evoke our powerful longing to fall back into periodic structure, into the inertia of uncomplicated matter. Each of us, hungry with life, rises from the cast of seed, having just this unique identity or experience created in the dance of chromosomes, and having in that identity a time; each lives and falls back at last into the chemistry of death. (77-78)

Duncan's sonorous invocations of a primordial scene echo through his references to periodic structure and chromosomes to create a myth out of scientific realism. I suspect that part of this essay's appeal for Niedecker in particular—reader of natural history and leftist atheist that she was—lies precisely in Duncan's ability to evoke a sense of mystery and of the mythic while staying in conversation with secular forms of scientific knowledge. Duncan's references to regular stresses and rhyme, here, are a reminder that, for him, the distinction between traditional meter and free verse

does not line up with the distinction between imposed and emergent forms.[30] But this is not a defense of traditional meter as natural *à la* psychobiologists like Frederick Turner: Duncan has a much more complex and nuanced view of the variety of forms that can emerge from biochemical and physiological rhythms.[31]

While poetry, in Duncan's syncretic myth, begins with the rhythms of the tides and the heart—that is, the rhythms of life—it also calls up a "longing" for death, for a return to matter. The rhythm of the sea is double-hinged here: it both informs the rhythm of the heart and gestures toward the repetitive patterns of inorganic matter. This sea is both the "mothering swell and ebb" and Whitman's sea that seethes, "Death, Death, Death,  Death, Death" in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (213). By contending that a "powerful longing to fall back into periodic structure" defines the living, Duncan also recalls Freud's concept of the death drive.[32] In Duncan's myth, the death drive corresponds to living beings' physical return to matter in "the chemistry of death": it is the psychological aspect of patterns that are also biochemical. Through the ambiguity of the sea's rhythm—its ability to evoke both life and death—Duncan complicates the opposition between life's rhythms and matter's "inertia" that he seems to set up here.

Duncan also frustrates a simple opposition between animacy and inanimacy by using counterintuitive pairs of terms to designate them. The first of these shows up in the passage quoted above, where Duncan refers to the "periodic structure" of matter. He borrows its counterpart—life

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[30] Duncan practiced both free verse and metrical forms, and he objected to the opposition between "closed" and "open" forms that Olson constructed. In an interview with Ekbert Faas, Duncan says, in reference to Olson, "If we have a field, how can we throw out closed forms? They are only forms within a field" (*Towards a New American Poetics* 61). Later he adds, "the open thing is really to contain any closed form . . . Even if we posit a closed form its readings aren't closed, and never have been. And when we have an open form we let the poem ride the vitality that language always has, and we ourselves adventure into that" (82-83).

[31] In *Natural Classicism*, Frederick Turner argues that metrical forms are natural because they mimic bodily rhythms and have an evolutionary function, and that therefore writing free verse is wrong. In appealing to nature to justify a particular convention, Turner exploits the tendency of organic metaphors to turn "is" into "ought."

[32] Freud describes the death drive not just as a longing for cessation, but also as a longing to return to inorganic matter, and sees life itself as simply a circuitous route to that goal (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 45-46).

as an "aperiodic structure" (*FC* 78)—from Edwin Schrodinger's *What Is Life?* Even more important is the other pair of terms Duncan uses: equilibrium and disequilibrium. Schrodinger defines life as that which "'evades the decay to equilibrium'" (qtd *FC* 78). In Duncan's words, life is a "disequilibrium" that resists the equilibrium of death. These terms seem to appeal to Duncan because they invoke paradoxes. Life is an aperiodic structure, a disequilibrium, that emerges from and holds out against the periodic structure of matter and the equilibrium of death.

Not only do these terms run counter to conventional ideas of living beings as balanced and harmonious and inanimate matter as chaotic, but they also transform the opposition between life as order and death as disorder into a contrast between two different kinds of order. By speaking of the periodic structure of matter and the equilibrium of death, Duncan insists that the inanimate has its own order—in fact, a more regular order than that of life. Life's disequilibrium is not disorder, but a more complex order: "this picture of an intricately articulated structure, a form that maintains a disequilibrium or lifetime—whatever it means to the biophysicist—to the poet means that life is by its nature orderly and that the poem might follow the primary processes of thought and feeling" (78). In the context of Duncan's invocation of tide and heartbeat, it seems that the "intricately articulated structure" of life, or of the poem, emerges from and stands out against the regularity of periodic structure.

Life as a disequilibrium that resists equilibrium recalls not only the death drive, but also the claim that the universe is running down to a state of entropy in which matter is uniformly disorganized and perfectly at rest. While Duncan does not name thermodynamics in "Towards an Open Universe," it appears in the opening paragraph of "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," which we can now see as a draft of the myth Duncan creates in the later essay:

> Phases of meaning in the soul may be like phases of the moon, and, though rationalists may contend against the imagination, all men may be one, for they have their source out of the

> same earth, mothered in one ocean and fathered in the light and heat of one sun that is not tranquil but rages between its energy that is a disorder seeking higher intensities and its fate or dream of perfection that is an order where all light, heat, being, movement, meaning and form, are consumed toward the cold. The which men have imagined in the laws of thermodynamics. (89)

Duncan emphasizes not the inevitability of the movement toward entropy, but instead pictures the sun as "rag[ing] between" energetic disorder and the order of death. Thermodynamics, however, tends not toward Duncan's vision of the endless, productive strife of contrasts, but toward an opposition between order and disorder in which entropy ultimately wins out. Nathaniel Mackey notes, "I recall [Duncan] once remarking in conversation that what he could not subscribe to in Marxism was the idea that there could be an end to a dialectic" (*Paracritical Hinge* 113). Because thermodynamics most definitely posits an end to a dialectic, Duncan does not even mention it in "Towards an Open Universe," where he opens up, in a celebratory and expansive way, the rhythms of contrariety that play in the space where inorganic matter, living beings, consciousness, and poems inform each other.

Through his vision of generative interplay between order and disorder, Duncan avoids vitalism and elaborates his participatory poetics. Duncan quotes Schrodinger's reference to the vitalist concept of life force: "'It is by avoiding the rapid decay into the inert state of 'equilibrium,' that an organism appears so enigmatic, . . . so much so, that from the earliest times of human thought some special nonphysical or supernatural force was claimed to be operative in the organism'" (qtd *FC* 82). Duncan remains as agnostic as Schrodinger about the "force" that "was claimed" to inform organic life, but quotes this passage to reinforce his point that "to be alive itself is a form . . . that exceeds clearly our conscious design" (82). For Duncan, the orders of life are themselves enigmatic and beyond our understanding: a vitalist life force is not needed to explain the mystery because it comes

from complex organization. The poet's role is not to intuit life's force, but to follow its orders. Duncan himself puns on order as organization and order as command in just this way: "In writing I do not organize words but follow my consciousness of—but it is also a desire that goes towards—orders in the play of forms" (82). The poet is not in control, putting the words in order, but instead follows their lively, emergent orders. Here Duncan specifies the poet's receptivity by correcting himself: it is not just that he passively "follows" his awareness of emerging orders, but also that he actively "desires" and "goes toward" them. This open yet collaborative stance is what I call Duncan's participatory poetics.

In outlining this participatory poetics, Duncan revises Olson's projectivism. When Duncan writes of going beyond "the seeming of style and subject matter to that most real where there is no form that is not content, no content that is not form" (81), he invokes Olson and Creeley's terms from "Projective Verse." But Duncan arrives at form that is "NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" by his own route. Attending to perception, sound, and thought is important to both, but the accent is different: for Olson it is on the "40 hours a day" labor of making sure that each perception moves, "instanter," on another (*CPO* 242, 240), while for Duncan it is on relinquishing control and opening up to emergent forms. Olson emphasizes aggressive pursuit, while Duncan underscores vulnerability. In the essay's clearest articulation of the way his poetics differ from Olson's, Duncan gestures toward Olson's central insight in "Human Universe":

> Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability, beyond what we can take for granted, at the borderline, the light finger-tip or thought-tip where impulse and novelty spring. (*FC* 87)

This "borderline" and "finger-tip" echo Olson's contention that "man's" most vital activity, his ability to perceive and select from chaos, happens not in the hidden depths but at "the skin itself," at

the meeting-point where people interact with their world (*CPO* 161). To support this, Olson cites the scientific finding that "the fingertips" are "knowing knots in their own rights, little brains" (160). But while Olson makes an ecological point based on this insight—"man and external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one" (161)—Duncan instead makes a psychological point. For him, the surface as a meeting-place between self and world means that we must "keep our exposure to what we do not know."

The difference in attitude between Olson's aggressive, masculine assertion and Duncan's passive, queer playfulness shows up again and again. It is especially marked in their exchange about "wisdom as such." In his response to Olson's essay, "Against Wisdom as Such," which argued that Duncan "court[ed]" religion in his poetry (*CPO* 261), Duncan poked fun at Olson's tough-guy penchant for "rigor" and "clarity":

> I like rigor and even clarity as a quality of a work—that is, as I like muddle and floating vagaries. It is the intensity of the conception that moves me. This intensity may be that it is all of a fervent marshmallow dandy lion fluff. (*FC* 65)

Niedecker found Duncan's campy "fervent marshmallow dandy lion fluff" a liberating alternative to masculinist rigor. In a letter to Zukofsky in 1955, having read this essay in the *Black Mountain Review*, she notes that "Duncan says he likes intensity even if it's an intense muddle" (*NCZ* 223).[33] This exchange about "wisdom" also makes it clear that "life" figures differently for Olson and Duncan: while "life," for Olson, designates the basic reality of a man's physical body—a matter-of-fact there-ness that serves as a warrant for whatever "truths" the poem might "come on" (*CPO* 261)—"life"

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[33] This passage clearly stuck with Niedecker because she quotes it years later, in a 1968 letter to Cid Corman: "I like rigor and even clarity as a quality of a work . . . as I like muddle and floating vagaries . . . cloudy art . . . It is the intensity that moves me" (*BYHM* 153). In this letter, Niedecker recounts her correspondence with Clayton Eshleman, which pitted her disciplined condensation against his tendency to, in her words, "set fire to page after page." She seems to quote Duncan's statement in this context because it's non-partisan about pared-down clarity versus sprawling muddle, contending that each can have its own intensity.

for Duncan instead serves as a term for valuing the imagination as such.[34]

Imaginative playfulness, therefore, is not only a rhetorical strategy for Duncan; in *The H.D. Book*, he elevates it into a psychological "principle." Contra Freud, with his reality principle of the Father and pleasure principle of the Mother, Duncan proposes "the Child" as a figure for "the principle of play or enacting what is" (562). Duncan implicitly pushes back against Freud's death drive, outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, when he writes, "Beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the reality principle, is the play principle seeking its passionate formal fulfillment" (566-567). Play involves both attention and pretending: "the play of the child is his very being where alone he is completely engrossed. It is the 'As If' world. And it is, where the child has survived in the life of the adult, the creative fiction of man's religion and arts" (565). For Duncan, play compels us more than reality, pleasure, or death.

Duncan's playful take on metaphor—the "'As If' world" and the characteristic "as if" that appears in so many of his poems—is essential to his revision of organic form. While Rukeyser and Olson believe in the organic metaphor so thoroughly that it becomes truth for them, Duncan holds organic metaphors in the suspense of fiction. In "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," Duncan writes that for neoclassical poets and New Critics, "metaphor must be fumigated or avoided," turned into a decoration or a device (*FC* 91). Olson, in "Projective Verse," makes a similar argument that figurative language should be avoided because it distracts from the thing itself, but he does not want metaphor as decoration either. Duncan, however, values metaphor for the same reasons New Critics find it threatening: it leads toward a "universe of psychic correspondences, toward a life where men and things were beginning to mix and cross boundaries of knowledge" (*FC* 91). Metaphor threatens to make disparate things one and thus to re-arrange or upset our perceptions and ways of

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[34] For more on the imagination and fictionality in Duncan, see my "For Imagination as Such: Fiction, Religion, and the Occult in Robert Duncan's Poetics."

experiencing. For Duncan, metaphor is a way in which poetry exposes us to what we do not know.

In "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," perhaps Duncan's most well-known poem and the one that inaugurates his mature work as the first poem in *The Opening of the Field*, the "as if" is crucial. As Davidson has noted, the poem conveys the sense of permission that Olson's composition by field gave to Duncan and other New American poets. But Duncan also transforms Olson's compositional field into an actual meadow—"the green solid meadow" as he puts it in "The Dance" (*OF* 8). The poem begins:

> *OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW*
>
> as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
> that is not mine, but is a made place
>
> that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
> an eternal pasture folded in all thought
> so that there is a hall therein
>
> that is a made place, created by light
> wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall. (*OF* 7)

The "as if" stages a series of contrasts: the meadow is both "made-up by the mind" (fictional or ideal) and a "made place" (constructed and actual); it is both "mine" and "not mine." Through the "as if," Duncan rewrites Olson's poetic field as both more actual and more ideal than it appears to be in Olson's essays. The words "meadow" and "pasture" insist that this field is not the schematic one of interrelated objects that Olson details in "Projective Verse," but is an actual place with "the grass / blowing east against the source of the sun / in an hour before the sun's going down" where children play "ring a round of roses." At the same time, this pasture is "eternal" and "folded in all thought," the meadow is "a scene made-up by the mind," and the grass blowing is "only a dream" (*OF* 7).

In pointing up both the field's natural actuality and its ideality, Duncan uncovers Romanticism latent in the organic form that drives Olson's poetics and New American poetics generally. The

mythic persons who appear in the poem—"the First Beloved" and "the Lady" or "Queen Under The Hill"—unite the actual and the ideal by combining specificity with numinous presence. Because the First Beloved's "flowers are flames lit to the Lady," the meadow's growth participates in a symbolic economy of devotional practices. In the next tercet, poetry itself becomes a devotional practice—or perhaps it is that poems themselves practice devotion:

> She it is Queen Under The Hill
> whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
> that is a field folded. (*OF* 7)

The "field folded" suggests a folded page, and "disturbance of words within words" evokes the way in which Duncan's poems work through puns, where the disparate meanings of a word disturb each other and create unsettling correspondences. While Niedecker's puns act as pivots that turn her poems back against themselves, Duncan's puns are proliferative, multiplying the sense of the poem.[35] But this "disturbance of words within words / that is a field folded" conveys the dynamic tensions at play in Olson's pages as well.

Beyond the poem's immediate historical context, though, the play of the given and the made in its opening lines also conveys the poet's experience of participation in literary tradition. This place "made-up by the mind" is yet "not mine, but is a made place": to enter the imagination is not to enter a place that is entirely one's own, but rather a place that was created by others. "Made place" and "hall" thus suggest that this meadow of the mind was built by people in the past: we inherit it from those who have lived before like any other piece of infrastructure. But the paradox turns again in the next lines, where this hall "is a made place, created by light / wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall." This "light" does not seem to be a human maker, and the hall no longer seems

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[35] In this poem, "ring a round of roses told" is such a pun. The children's game tells a story, but the roses are also tolled, like bells, in their singing of the rhyme. The roses are linguistic (think of Gertrude Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose") as well as cultivated and growing. If the garden is the place where nature and culture are most inextricably intertwined, roses are the quintessential meeting point not only for natural growth and human cultivation, but also for language and the literary creation of meaning.

historically constructed, but Platonic, given in advance. In the next line, even the speaker appears to be a shadow cast by this light: "Wherefrom fall all architectures I am."

Duncan's layered paradoxes convey how, phenomenologically, we come into both natural and cultural worlds as if they were given. The literary imagination that the poet inherits at first appears given rather than made, as indeed we are all born into what Hannah Arendt calls the "human artifice"—that is, the constructed world of culture and the built environment—and perceive it as given and "durable" (136-137). We come to know the historicity of the world—that is, the ways in which it was *made*—slowly, incompletely, and always in mythic terms, through narratives that can never capture change over time in its incredible detail. Social structures, economic systems, and even architecture all have the force of the given: they appear as conditions that cannot readily be changed but to which we must accommodate ourselves.

But while studying history helps us see human institutions as made and hence open to reform, history also undermines glib distinctions between the given and the made, or culture and nature. A meadow, for example, seems natural or given while a building is clearly made; historically, however, meadows have often been made by people. The fields we are most familiar with are agricultural, and agriculture itself is one of the most significant zones of indistinction between the given and the made. Even many fields that seem natural are to some extent human constructions: the prairies and oak savannahs that covered much of the Upper Midwest before US colonization, for example, were maintained by the fires Native Americans set to create open areas for hunting. The strong form of this argument is that the division between the given and the made is a matter of historical perspective: "nature" seems given simply because we do not have access to its complex genesis. As Timothy Morton puts it, nature is reified history (42). Since Darwin, scientists have been historicizing nature, but in popular and environmentalist conceptions, nature too often remains a timeless given, a latent primordial state waiting to return if humans stopped interfering with it.

Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, and Mick Smith all suggest—in quite different ways—that the decision to divide nature from culture conceptually is a crucial one for politics: separating a human world from a natural one helps constitute an arena for political action, in Arendt's terms, or sovereign power, according to Mick Smith's account of what he calls ecological sovereignty.

Duncan unsettles the distinction between the given and the made not by studying history, but by showing how inheriting and making are experientially bound together for the poet who lets forms emerge. But he does not dismiss this distinction as useless: for him the given and the made are a crucial "as if," a fictional trope that puts a boundary on "chaos." The poem ends:

> Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
> as if it were a given property of the mind
> that certain bounds hold against chaos,
>
> that is a place of first permission,
> everlasting omen of what is. (*OF* 7)

Duncan does not assert that "certain bounds hold against chaos" because of "a given property of the mind"; instead, he tells us that he has been "permitted to return to a meadow / as if" that were the case. The "as if" could suggest either that the speaker has no certain knowledge about whether this "given property of the mind" exists, or that it is directly contrary to fact. In either case, the fictionality of this "given property," as well as the "bounds" it grants, is the point: Duncan implies that we should write poems as if bounds hold against chaos, and in doing so we will make those bounds, helping to construct the "made place" of the imagination. If Duncan spins out a series of metaphors for the sense of permission that the poet feels in coming to write the poem, he finally identifies metaphor itself with that sense of permission. The "as if" grants permission precisely by announcing itself as fictional, made and made-up, and hence provisional and temporary. Olson's field and his organic form poetics free Duncan not because they reveal a truth but because they present a fruitful fiction, a metaphor that gives access to the interactions among imagination, ideality, human making, and natural growth.

Another poem in *The Opening of the Field* explores the relationship of the natural and the cultural, the given and the made, in a more humorous way. In the first two-thirds of "Poetry, A Natural Thing," Duncan develops an image of the poem as a "salmon . . . at the falls battling, inarticulate, / blindly making it" (*OF* 50). Duncan represents the poem as resisting the current, going back "toward the source":

> The poem
> feeds upon thought, feeling, impulse,
> to breed itself,
> a spiritual urgency at the dark ladders leaping.
>
> This beauty is an inner persistence
> toward the source
> striving against (within) down-rushet of the river,
> a call we heard and answer
> in the lateness of the world
> primordial bellowings
> from which the youngest world might spring (*OF* 50)

The metaphor of the poem as salmon catches the "inner persistence" they share: both fight backward against the temporal flow that carries them away. Duncan's poem recalls Robert Frost's "West-Running Brook," which also uses resistance to a river's current to propose a cosmology. While Frost conveys an overriding sense of entropic pull and the universe's inevitable winding-down, Duncan's poem puts the accent on possibility, even though one is always "within" what one is striving "against."

For Frost, resistance is generated by the entropic current itself and can never win against it. "West-Running Brook" is staged as a conversation between a couple; first the unnamed woman notices that the brook runs west and then that it seems to be "waving" to them (Frost 236). But her man, Fred, insists that the wave "wasn't waved to us": as the narrator explains, "The black stream, catching on a sunken rock, / Flung backward on itself in one white wave" (237). The bulk of the poem consists of Fred's philosophical musings on the wave:

> 'Speaking of contraries, see how the brook

> In that white wave runs counter to itself.
> It is from that in water we were from
> Long, long before we were from any creature. (237)

In Fred's speech, the brook becomes a vast analogy for the "stream of everything that runs away": "Some say existence," continues Fred, "Stands still and dances, but it runs away, / It seriously, sadly, runs away / To fill the abyss' void with emptiness." In doing so, "It flows between us, over us, and *with* us" (237, emphasis in original). He paints a gloomy picture of

> The universal cataract of death
> That spends to nothingness—and unresisted,
> Save by some strange resistance in itself,
> Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
> As if regret were in it and were sacred.
> It has this throwing backward on itself
> So that the fall of most of it is always
> Raising a little, sending up a little.
> Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
> The brook runs down in sending up our life.
> The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
> And there is something sending up the sun.
> It is this backward motion toward the source,
> Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
> The tribute of the current to the source.
> It is from this in nature we are from.
> It is most us.' (237-238)

In Fred's speech, the universe's entropic current flows "*with*" the speakers, carrying them along. He explains resistance—the way living creatures and the stream and the sun seem to run "counter" to this entropic pull—as an illusion, a paradoxical self-resistance that entropy itself creates. While Duncan suggests that "striving against" the current is possible, Frost's speaker insists that entropy is in fact "unresisted." All that exists becomes the product of the "universal cataract of death" and the self-resistance it generates. Thus the brook "sends up" living beings and living beings in turn send up their creations, like the mechanical clock.

In "Poetry, A Natural Thing," Duncan clearly responds to Frost, but he also takes on the third law of thermodynamics and Freud's death drive: against these assertions of death's ultimate victory,

Duncan celebrates what strives against it. Duncan not only invokes the image of the river and the notion of going back "toward the source," but he also transmutes Frost's passively thrown up wave into the salmon that swims against the current under its own power. This is not simply the current's self-resistance: Duncan's salmon have agency and *do* "make it" back up the falls. Moreover, Duncan counters the tone of Frost's poem. While "West-Running Brook" presents a tragic vision in which "regret" is not only evident in all of existence, but is also "sacred," Duncan's poem is hopeful that "the youngest world might spring" from strife against the current.

Duncan's poem also does not take itself as seriously as Frost's. While Fred's elaborate analogy stands as the point of Frost's poem,[36] Duncan, calling the salmon "one picture apt for the mind," concludes with a different metaphor:

> A second: a moose painted by Stubbs,
> where last year's extravagant antlers
>     lie on the ground.
> The forlorn moosey-faced poem wears
>     new antler-buds,
>     the same,
>
> "a little heavy, a little contrived",
>
> his only beauty to be
>     all moose. (*OF* 50)

This image of the poem as moose provides some comic relief, though it does not undermine the sincerity of Duncan's first metaphor. Duncan believes that poetry is "a natural thing"—that, like the salmon, it emerges from the river but resists the current—but here he points out how naturalness becomes an imperative. The line in quotes is from John Crowe Ransom's rejection of Duncan's

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[36] The poem concludes with the couple agreeing that "Today will be the day of what we both said" (238). The poem's occasion and set-up seem to partake of a different epistemology than its content: it memorializes Fred's pronouncement and the naming of the brook despite its avowed dissolution of history into entropy. Its gender politics are also fascinatingly problematic. Fred ridicules the woman for saying that the brook was waving to her "in an annunciation" as "tak[ing] it off to lady-land" (237).

work.[37] By calling Duncan's work "contrived," Ransom implies that Duncan's poems should seem less contrived and more natural. This kind of "naturalness," though, does not have much to do with conceiving of a poem as a salmon (let alone a moose); instead, it draws on the New Critical idea that poems should be written in a "natural" diction, defined through the work of a poet like Frost.

In embracing the moose, Duncan embraces both extravagant nature and extravagant contrivance, showing them to be one. Ransom, in calling Duncan's lines "a little heavy, a little contrived," takes for granted not only that all poems should aim for an appearance of naturalness rather than contrivance, but also that "contrived" and "natural" are opposites. Duncan's perverse image of the moose rebuts just this assumption: the moose's "extravagant antlers" are certainly heavy and contrived-looking, but they are natural. Just as the new antlers that grow on the moose's head will be "the same" as last year's, the "moosey-faced poem" will again grow into the same contrived, heavy lines. If the poem or the impulse to poetry is natural, then it has its own imperatives—you can't tell a moose to grow antlers that don't look so contrived! But this moose is also a metaphor for the mind: it puns on the fact that antlers grow from the moose's head, suggesting that the mind continuously generates and sheds contrived contraptions. The idea of poetry as "a natural thing" is such a contraption, one that grows up again just when you think you have shed it.

Duncan thus takes Ransom to task for using nature rhetorically to enforce the conventions of poetry. While Ransom implies that poems *should* appear natural rather than contrived, Duncan insists that poems *are* natural—and thus that the "only beauty" of the "moosey-faced poem" is "to be / all moose." If the poem's impulse really is a natural one, if the poem's order indeed emerges like other cosmic orders, then it must be followed as it either battles the falls, resisting the rush toward

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[37] According to Mark Andrew Johnson, Duncan quotes from a rejection letter from Ransom (70). Johnson also contends that Duncan's humor does not "trivializ[e] his subject—the nature of the organic poem" (69).

entropy, or humorously sheds the contrived lines it has grown. In invoking nature to criticize poetry that deviates from convention, Ransom belies the naturalness that subtends his poetic values. At the same time, by showing that antlers (and poems) may seem contrived even though they are grown, Duncan himself troubles the distinction between nature and culture, given and made.

**Dissolution and Evolution in Niedecker and Duncan**

Niedecker and Duncan shared not only their anti-teleological Darwinism, but also the conviction that evolution and growth cannot be separated from dissolution and strife. In this section, I will consider Niedecker's long poems of the late 1960s alongside Duncan's *The H.D. Book*. Niedecker's poems challenge the capitalist co-optation of evolutionary discourse for narratives of progress and success; they also consider what she calls "the evolution / of matter" (*CW* 247) and follow minerals on their travels through rock, living bodies, and water. Niedecker's work attends, in a much more concrete way than Duncan's, to how the rhythms of living bodies and inorganic matter are intertwined. While Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe" helped give Niedecker permission to embark on the formal experiment of her long poems, Duncan developed his ideas of necessary strife—and of a heretical sect striving within and against the dominant society—through his engagement with H.D.'s poetics of limit. In *The H.D. Book*, he develops a vision of an embattled poetic community that advocates a countervailing politics of life against the dominant, normative biopolitics or thanatopolitics of World War.

While, for Duncan, the poem's form is organic because it emerges spontaneously, in the act of composition, Niedecker never gave up her disciplined craft, so her long poems formally imitate emergent orders rather than enacting those orders in the process of writing. Duncan's "urgent wave of the verse" helped Niedecker find a way to use her condensery techniques to syncopate the flood of words, creating a rhythmic order that guards against the threat of being swamped by meanings

even as she ventures into more open, serial forms.[38] Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued that Niedecker, after years of writing short poems, "wanted to synthesize an objectivist poetics with surrealist, 'subliminal' tactics of play with consciousness, and as well attend sporadically to claims of the organicist projective that were being made by the younger poets with whom she was engaged" (*RV* 158).[39] In showing how Niedecker articulates a "materialist sublime"—"an ecological position of subjectivity schooled by the objective world"—DuPlessis notes that "one might, with some amusement, see her position as parallel to Charles Olson's declared anti-subjective 'objectism'—the principled, programmatic refusal of the romantic ego position in contemporary poetry" (170). Indeed, with what she represents as a careful, Objectivist restraint of projective energy, flow, or flood, Niedecker does revise Olson's composition by field.

While the projectivist provocation was important to Niedecker, Duncan's essay only prompted her to extend her own earlier insight that movement and change require rests or pauses. As Niedecker puts this insight to use formally in her long poems, she attends to processes of change, evolution, growth, and dissolution that are also punctuated by pauses. These poems both formally recall and represent the rhythms of physical bodies and even of atoms as they move from rocks, through plants and animals, to streams and to the sea. Rather than positing a closed organic cycle—let alone the transcendent oneness of nature—Niedecker focuses on the materially specific ways in which matter travels. Niedecker's form is imitative—but of patterns of rhythmic change that inform inorganic, organic, and cultural processes, rather than of rock or water, as some critics have argued. This is fine distinction, but one important to Niedecker's poetics: her poems participate in

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[38] Critics who see Niedecker's long poems as imitative of flooding run the risk of ignoring the continuing importance of paring-down and condensing in her later work. While Mary Pinard sees Niedecker's poems as imitative of flooding, she also evokes the tension between flood and the need to guard against it, arguing that Niedecker both took pleasure in the strange, surreal juxtapositions that flood creates and used poetic forms as a stay against the threat of flood (*RV* 21-30).

[39] DuPlessis presents a thorough and convincing reading of how Niedecker understood Objectivism, surrealism, and projectivism and fused them in her own work. Other critics who have addressed Niedecker's engagement with surrealism include Peter Nicholls, Michael Golston, and Ruth Jennison.

rhythmic patterns that she sees as informing many divergent processes, including mineral exchange and flooding. Comparing her poetry with Jorie Graham's *Sea Change* clarifies this distinction. While Graham shapes the poems in that book so that the lines on the page evoke the flooding in and retreat of the tide, Niedecker's poems do not mimic a specific natural phenomenon so definitely.[40] Niedecker's long poems fall into three categories: "Lake Superior" and "Traces of Living Things" are serial poems made up of short, unnumbered sections, "Wintergreen Ridge" and "Paean to Place" are continuous long poems, and her later biographical poems on Thomas Jefferson, William Morris, and Darwin are sequences with numbered sections. All display Niedecker's characteristic radical condensation, and the continuous long poems use line breaks and indentation to syncopate their movement.[41]

In a short poem written in 1957 or 1958 and first published in *Origin* in 1961 (*CW* 420)—that is, before Niedecker embarked on her long poems, but when she was beginning to engage with projectivism by reading Duncan, Olson, and others in magazines[42]—Niedecker evokes both field and flood:

> Springtime's wide
> water-
>         yield
> but the field
> will return (*CW* 184)

Here it is the field that will return to the poet after flood, rather than the poet who is allowed to

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[40] Such imitative visual form occasionally appears in Niedecker, as in "March," a short poem about snow sliding off a birdfeeder (*CW* 202).

[41] In *Unending Design*, Joseph Conte reads "Lake Superior" as a "finite serial form;" for Conte, this poem shows how postmodern serial forms differ from sequences. As Jenny Penberthy has shown, an early version of the poem, "Circle Tour," was a continuous long poem; the first published version, titled "Travellers / Lake Superior Region," was a sequence with numbered sections. When Niedecker took out the numbering, she felt she had arrived at the final version of the poem (*RV* 70-71).

[42] Niedecker mentions reading Duncan's essay "From a Notebook" in the *Black Mountain Review* in an August 14, 1955 letter to Zukofsky.

return to the field. Niedecker's poem seems to have been written after Duncan's "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" was first published in 1956.[43] In Niedecker's poem, water paradoxically appears as the field's "yield," though the flood presumably delays the planting of crops and threatens the field's agricultural yield. This poem thus seems to turn against both the ideality and the Romanticized naturalness of Duncan's meadow. It centers not on the promise that the poet will be granted a return to the mind's meadow or to the "hall" of literary tradition, but on the premise that the flood will retreat and the field will again be open for walking and planting. Niedecker's reference to the "field" returning, in conversation with Olson and Duncan, indeed evokes a sense of literary permission, but one more dependent on the mundane conditions of the poet's environment and circumstances than on literary conditions.

While Niedecker here and elsewhere insists that environmental and economic practicalities condition the poet's work, she nevertheless found in Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe" literary permission for her adventure into longer forms. In a letter to Bob Nero on March 8, 1967, Niedecker paraphrases and quotes from "Towards an Open Universe" at length, highlighting Duncan's idea of emergent rhythms and his emphasis on openness to the unknown.[44] She begins by referring to Duncan's idea of "disequilibrium": "Nearing spring — time when the cousins of those geese in the new museum — those in disequilibrium, Robert Duncan's word for life . . . will bring a pleasing dissonance into the air." By transmuting "disequilibrium" into the "pleasing dissonance" of the geese's honking, Niedecker delights in Duncan's counterintuitive definition of life as that which resists balance and harmony. While Duncan represents death as a return to the periodic structure of matter, Niedecker distinguishes death from stasis even more sharply. The geese in the museum are

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[43] To my knowledge, there is no direct evidence that Niedecker wrote in response to Duncan's poem.

[44] Thanks to Jenny Penberthy for her generosity in sharing this unpublished letter, in Bob Nero's family's possession, with me. In the letter, Niedecker mentions that she "got hold of *Poets on Poetry*, 1966, edited by Nemerov," where Duncan's essay first appeared.

not just dead, but frozen by taxidermy and thus prevented from decaying and dissolving. In declaring her attraction to Duncan's evocation of the rhythms that inform poetry, Niedecker omits his allusions to entropy and the death drive:

> I like Duncan when he's explaining us as poets — we children of deep waters and of night and day, sleeping and waking, tide-flow under the sun, and moon of the sea, systole and diastole of the heart, these rhythms deep in our experience, a monotonous rapture of persistent regular stresses in our speech with waves of lines breaking, "in our minds a spell, so that we let our awareness go in the urgent wave of the verse."

As Niedecker's paraphrase morphs into direct quotation, it is interesting to note what she cuts out here: not only "the chemistry of death" and our longing for it, but also the mythic terms "Gaia" and "Uranus," references to the scientific theory of life's origins in a primordial soup, and the idea of poets as "amoebic intelligences" with its Keatsian overtones of negative capability. In Duncan's myth-making, Niedecker finds the way he links poetic rhythms with the rhythms of the body, the tide, and night and day most worthy of note. By the time she writes "Paean to Place," she has condensed this passage even more radically, merging poetic rhythms and bodily rhythms in the lines, "'We live by the urgent wave / of the verse'" (*CW* 265): for Niedecker, the most essential point in Duncan's essay is that the rhythms that pervade the sea, living beings, and poetry are the same—we "live by" them in a physiological as well as psychological and poetic sense.

Niedecker also quotes passages from Duncan's essay that advocate staying open to the unknown, juxtaposing them with the passages on emergent rhythm and thus suggesting that she sees a direct connection between the two: opening up to the unknown *means* "let[ting] our awareness go in the urgent wave of the verse" for her. She writes, "Duncan: Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, 'our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know' — to keep our wish coming or our need 'at the borderline, where impulse and

novelty spring.'" As in her earlier reference to Duncan's "From a Notebook" in a letter to Zukofsky, Niedecker is drawn to Duncan's rejection of certainty in favor of attentive receptivity. She even quotes Duncan's idea that one might "derive melody and story from impulse not from plan." Though Niedecker, in her poetic practice, never abandoned the disciplines of revision and radical condensation, she seems to have found the idea of writing more spontaneously liberating. She gestures toward the motives behind her extensive quotation of Duncan's essay: "in view, somewhat of my preoccupation with how it is we have a line or two in our minds to start with but we know without consciously knowing, that this is going to blossom into a whole poem, and in view of something you said when you showed me your first poems, that nothing really concludes." Niedecker thus links "Towards an Open Universe" both with organic form and with serial forms that never end, suggesting that the two are not opposed, as Joseph Conte argues, but may instead open onto each other.[45]

However, this is not to say that Duncan introduced Niedecker to the idea of emergent rhythms: it appears in her work much earlier, though in different terms. In the 1945 *New Goose* manuscript, this poem, which was not published in Niedecker's lifetime, appears:

> Voyageurs
> sang, rowed
> their canoes full of furs,
>
> sang as they rowed.
> Ten minutes every hour
> rested their load. (*CW* 117)

Niedecker was fascinated by what she called the "unsinging pause" of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century voyageurs as they canoed long distances across the Great Lakes: it appears in Niedecker's

[45] In *Unending Design*, Joseph Conte argues that both Niedecker and Duncan engage in serial poetics that go beyond organic form. He contends that the series comes neither from an imposed order nor from "the 'internal' necessity that is the claim of organic form": "The series as an open form—with its aleatory and indeterminate qualities—thus supersedes in its postmodernity an organic sequence that still hopes to discover an immanent form and unity in creation" (15). I

notes for "Lake Superior" and in "Circle Tour," her first version of that poem. In the poem above, Niedecker does not say that the voyageurs stop singing when they stop paddling, but the heavy rhyme of "rowed," "rowed," "load," and the poem's strong sense of closure, implies it. The repetition of "sang," always linked with "rowed," suggests that the song's rhythm synchronizes and sustains the rhythmic rowing.

Though this "unsinging pause" is not mentioned in the final, published version of "Lake Superior," its recurrence in the notes for and early versions of the poem shows how Niedecker ties traveling to the dissolution of matter here. In 1966, Niedecker traveled around the Great Lakes with her husband, Al Millen; as Jenny Penberthy has shown, Niedecker researched the history and geology of the lakes and took copious notes before and during the trip and condensed them into a poem afterward (*RV* 61-79).[46] In her notes, Niedecker writes: "We remember others who came there more than three centuries ago in long canoes . . . rowed or paddled, sometimes sailed, by Indians or French *voyageurs* singing as they rowed or as they rested during a *pause* which occurred, if possible every half mile but usually much less often than that" (*LNWP* 312, emphasis in original). Later, she compares the voyageurs' pause with the rests that present-day tourists take: "Out at the locks at the edge of the water are arrowed rest room signs — you can see them as you look at the big boats. I wonder what an old voyageur would have thought of them. The arrows of our day and the momentary, unsinging pause" (*LNWP* 315). Restroom signs, freighters waiting to go through the locks, and the "unsinging pause" are all necessary rests in the rhythm of movement.

Comparing the only surviving bit of "Circle Tour," Niedecker's first version of the poem, with

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would argue, however, that organic forms open themselves as the concept of the poem as emergent order leads the poet away from sequence and toward series.

[46] Niedecker's own condensation of her notes on Lake Superior, titled "Lake Superior Country, vacation trip '66," was published in *LNWP*. According to Jenny Penberthy, 260 pages of notes survive--they were in a box that Al Millen overlooked when he burned Niedecker's papers after her death, as she instructed; they are held by the Hoard Historical Museum in Fort Atkinson. Most of them are now available online through the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections.

the opening of "Lake Superior" shows why Niedecker might have cut this "unsinging pause" from the final version: she took out stories of human travel to keep the focus on the way matter travels. Here is "Circle Tour":

> Sault Sainte Marie
> Old day pause for *voyageurs*,
> bosho (bon jour) sung out
> by garrison men
>
> Now the locks, big boats
> coal-black and iron-ore-red
> topped with what white castlework
>
> White-flying birds
>
> Iron the common element of earth
> in rocks and freighters—
> and most things living
>
> Arrowed rest room signs in the park
> between us and the freighters—
> the arrows of our day
> and the momentary unsinging pause
>
> The waters working together
> internationally
> gulls playing both sides (quoted in *RV* 70)[47]

While this long poem tells a story that discursively links present and past modes of travel, comparing the restroom signs with the "unsinging pause" almost as Niedecker's notes do, in the final version of "Lake Superior," Niedecker has eliminated both discursive connectors like "Now" and all explicit reference to people, present or past:

> In every part of every living thing
> is stuff that once was rock
>
> In blood the minerals
> of the rock
>
> .

[47] Penberthy quotes the surviving excerpt in full and notes the history of this version of the poem (*RV* 70, 78n10).

Iron the common element of earth
in rocks and freighters

Sault Sainte Marie—big boats
coal-black and iron-ore-red
topped with what white castlework

The waters working together
    internationally
Gulls playing both sides (*CW* 232)

"Circle Tour" begins with the voyageurs' pause and compares both their travel and their rest with that of present-day tourists; in this early version, human travel appears as the main theme and the way matter travels—the iron "in rocks and freighters—/ and most things living"—appears as a secondary variation on that theme. In the final version of "Lake Superior," Niedecker has completely upended that relationship: the poem begins by invoking the way inorganic matter becomes part of living beings, while human travel is only implied through the reference to boats. Throughout, rocks remain the "heroes" of the poem, as Donald Davie has argued (*FN* 73), though Niedecker refers obliquely to her trip around the lake and to the journeys of explorers and missionaries like Radisson, Marquette, Joliet, and Schoolcraft. Niedecker's revisions show that she was primarily concerned with tracing matter's trajectories through rocks, living beings, and cultural products.[48] However, the "unsinging pause" remains at work as a silent metaphor: it implies that rocks, living beings, cultures, and languages mix, dissolve, and transform into each other in a rhythmic way, as rests or pauses punctuate bursts of activity. The final version of the poem incorporates those pauses formally, as the dots that mark rests between unnumbered sections.

[48] This focus recurs in *North Central* (1968), which opens with "Lake Superior." As Penberthy notes, Niedecker thought of *North Central* itself as a long poem (*CW* 434). Niedecker's notes for "Lake Superior" explore the travels of matter at more length. Here she reworks a passage from Herman and Nina Schneider's *Rocks, Rivers and the Changing Earth*, which she read before the trip (Peters 208): "The journey of the rock is never ended. In every tiny part of any living thing are materials that once were rock that turned to soil. These minerals are drawn out of the soil by plant roots and the plant used them to build leaves, stems, flowers and fruits. Plants are eaten by animals. In our blood is iron from plants that draw it out of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral. The water you drink has been in clouds over the mountains of Asia and in waterfalls of Africa. . . . Every bit of you is a bit of the earth and has been on many strange and wonderful journeys over countless millions of years" (*LNWP* 311).

"Lake Superior" ultimately proposes that life itself is a pause matter makes on its travels. While Douglas Crase has argued that "Lake Superior" is a "ferropastoral" in which evolution becomes sublime (*LNWP* 327), the poem does not represent the movement of matter among rocks, living beings, and water as a closed, holistic cycle, but instead charts dissolution as an open-ended traveling that results in strange physical and cultural juxtapositions. The poem consistently evokes the materiality of travel around the lakes, present and past: from the "Iron" in "freighters" to "'Birch Bark / and white Seder / for the ribs'" of "*(The long / canoes)*" (*CW* 232-233). As Davie notes (*FN* 71), the poem travels past names of rocks that flash out, gem-like, from the plain diction that surrounds them:

> And at the blue ice superior spot
> priest-robed Marquette grazed
> azoic rock, hornblende granite
> basalt the common dark
> in all the Earth
>
> And his bones of such is coral
> raised up out of his grave
> were sunned and birch bark-floated
> to the straits (*CW* 233)

Here Marquette both touches rock and seems to feed on it. The rock is "azoic"—that is, lifeless—but the pun on "grazed" underscores the poem's preoccupation with the way that minerals become part of living things.[49] Marquette not only travels past rock and lives on it, but later travels *as* rock. His bones, floating downriver in a canoe, make the same journey that minerals make when they are dissolved in water and washed to the sea. In writing "his bones of such is coral," Niedecker alludes to *The Tempest*, suggesting that Marquette has, in Shakespeare's words, undergone "a sea change / into something rich and strange." Niedecker thus emphasizes that death, on a purely material level, is not cessation, but the transmutation of organic matter into other forms that travel on.

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[49] John Freeman notes this pun in "Blood from the Stone: A Reading of 'Lake Superior'" (*FN* 79).

In "Lake Superior," language is rock-like in its combination of apparent solidity and actual flux. In her notes, Niedecker writes, "The North is one vast, massive, glorious corruption of rock and language" (*LNWP* 313). The notes show how rocks and languages have traveled far to meet and mesh here: the agates sold in the tourists shops are not from the lakeshore, but are dyed and shipped from Uruguay, and in the meeting of "Indian-French-English," "Sault" became "Soo" (*LNWP* 313-315). Critics have disagreed about the relationship between rock and language in the poem: while Douglas Crase argues that Niedecker seeks to return poetry from the corruptions and deception of literature to the sure ground of earth, Davie's reading shows that Niedecker instead sees the travels of words and of rocks as parallel. In a sense, both words and rocks, swept away and reshuffled by human movement or geological change, serve as markers that help us trace the unrecorded history of their travels.[50] This is clearly a Darwinian approach to history: for Darwin, the history of evolution could only be partially reconstructed through the very incomplete fossil record. Niedecker sees geological and cultural history as similarly incomplete—the "glorious corruption of rock and language" suggests the travels and encounters that created such a jumble, but only with great difficulty can one reconstruct a narrative from it.

Though words and rocks are durable enough to serve as traces of their own histories, they are finally subject to change and their transformations are neither predictable nor even. In the penultimate section of the poem, Niedecker implies both the endlessness and the quirkiness of such transformation:

> The smooth black stone
> I picked up in true source park
>     the leaf beside it

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[50] In her notes, Niedecker writes: "The pebble has traveled. Long ago it might have been a drop of magma, molten rock that poured from deep inside the earth. Perhaps when the magma cooled it formed part of a mountain that was later worn down and carried away by a rushing stream. Or the pebble may have been carried thousands of miles by a slowly moving glacier that finally melted and left it to be washed up for someone to pick up. It has travelled to many places and has been part of many things" (*LNWP* 324).

once was stone

Why should we hurry
Home (*CW* 236)

From Niedecker's notes we learn that "true source park" refers to Itasca State Park in Minnesota, at the headwaters of the Mississippi. She writes: "At last the joyous discovery — Lake Le Biche (Elk Lake) — renamed by Schoolcraft, Itasca. He took the letters of this word from the latin *veritas caput*, meaning true source" (*LNWP* 323). The contingent, almost random etymology of this "true source" undercuts its apparent claim to authenticity. Schoolcraft, a missionary helping to map and colonize the Great Lakes region, made a name for the headwaters of the Mississippi from the middle letters of a Latin phrase. "Ver**itas ca**put" is thus the secret of Itasca, but both the name and the history of Itasca frustrate any attempt to pin down a "true source."

Though some critics have read Niedecker's cycles of matter through rock, living beings, and cultural products as holistic and transcendent,[51] in "Lake Superior" she insists that changes in nature are as contingent, as jagged and uneven, as those in language. Crase, for example, mentions the "Itasca" passage from Niedecker's Lake Superior notes, but he tries to keep its implications from spilling over into Niedecker's representation of nature, arguing that she sets transcendent natural cycles against the corruptions of language and culture.[52] But Niedecker implies that the transmutations of matter frustrate attempts to see nature as a stable source or ground: after all, "the leaf . . . once was stone." The lines "Why should we hurry / Home" might seem to imply that

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[51] Besides Douglas Crase, whose position I explore in more detail below, Richard Caddel in "Consider: Lorine Niedecker and Her Environment" (*LNWP* 281-286) speaks of natural cycles in such terms, though his analysis of the poem "Consider" shows that culture and language are interwoven with nature in Niedecker. For John Freeman, the material cycles of rock show the "unity of living things" in the poem (*FN* 75). Jenny Penberthy argues that, in "Lake Superior," Niedecker "locates the solace of an immanent infinite" (*RV* 77).

[52] Crase cites Niedecker's notes on "Itasca" and calls it "grosteque" and "a kind of farce" that "at roadside markers, in parks, you stumble in on the inventive transgressions by which you were engendered" (*LNWP* 337). But he does not want to see those same "inventive transgressions" at either the heart of nature or the heart of Niedecker's poem: "Surely Niedecker must have meant the true true source: rocks, minerals, gneiss. Just as surely she meant that there is a deception at the very fundament of true source park, and the deception is language, literature" (337).

"stone" is the "Home" living things return to when they die—and thus that life circles round to a material closure and wholeness in the ground. But the oblique references to water in the poem belie that interpretation: at the source of the Mississippi, "hurry" could refer to the river's current. In her notes, Niedecker writes: "I took a snapshot of the sweet little swampy place where the great river rises, a pond with water rushing into it from a culvert and over rocks. Nearby on a post: 'Here 1475 feet above the ocean the mighty Mississippi begins to flow on its winding way 2552 miles to the Gulf of Mexico'" (*LNWP* 323). While rocks are the heroes of "Lake Superior," the water that washes both minerals and decaying organic matter out to sea is the poem's open secret.

Moreover, for Niedecker, death is not rest but restless movement onwards; life is the pause we should enjoy. In her "Notes from the Trip," another condensation on the way toward the poem, Niedecker writes:

> Source of Miss.
> not here the river began but in the clouds . . .
> raining there—the leaf was once the stone in the rain—spurn not the falling rain, it is the source of the source, the creator of rivers (quoted by Penberthy, *RV* 68-69)

Itasca cannot be the "true source" because the river "began . . . in the clouds"—and the earth's hydrological cycle, by which water moves from clouds to rivers to sea to clouds again, is quick enough to be visibly unstable, a "source" that is a cipher for change as the only source. "Why should we hurry / Home" does refer to death, but it suggests that death is a hurrying-onward rather than stasis. In the last section of the poem, Niedecker mentions "Sand Lake"; this could be read as a reference to the sea, full of the minerals that rivers have washed to it. Just before the Itasca section, Niedecker puns on a quotation, presumably from Schoolcraft's record of his journey, that encapsulates the material travels she is most concerned with here:

> Inland then
> beside the great granite
> gneiss and the schists
>
> to the redolent pondy lakes'

lilies, flag and Indian reed
"through which we successfully
passed" (*CW* 236)

The human travelers go by rocks and plants, but "we" also pass through rocks and plants on a material level—that is, our matter was once theirs. The sharp specificity of Niedecker's language here and throughout the poem indicates that she does not want to imagine ceaseless material change as an abstract cycle, but instead wants to attend to matter's contingent embodiments.[53] Her definition of "Beauty" is telling: "impurities in the rock" (*CW* 233). In glossing over the jagged incontinuity and insistent contingency of material cycles in Niedecker, critics like Crase are themselves trying to "hurry / Home," abstracting natural change into transcendent cycles that seem death-like in their perfect closure. We should not "hurry / Home"—that is, we should enjoy this rest we are taking here as living beings rather than hurrying on into the ceaseless transformations that await us.

In depicting these material transformations as contingent not only on natural accidents (who eats whom), but also on the accidents of culture, "Lake Superior" coincides with Aldo Leopold's story of two atoms in his 1941 essay "Odyssey."[54] In this essay, Leopold shows that material cycles do not timelessly repeat a natural pattern, but instead depend on agriculture and human transformation of landscapes and water systems. Leopold traces an inevitable winding-down to

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[53] In fact, Niedecker enacts the movement of matter from rock to living thing linguistically. In one section of the poem, "carnelian sard" shows up in her description of rocks; in the next, titled "*Wild Pigeon"* and about the extinct passenger pigeon, it appears again: "Did not man / maimed by no / stone-fall // mash the cobalt / and carnelian / of that bird?" (*CW* 235). The word "carnelian," with its glittering gem-like sound, travels from rock to pigeon as a mineral might. Davie suggests this reading (*FN* 71), and Davidson also reads of Niedecker's form as embodying geology and mineral exchange (*RV* 13-14).

[54] Crase links "Odyssey" with "Lake Superior" as well, mentioning that Leopold was a consultant for the *Wisconsin* guide and thus may have had contact with Niedecker. However, Crase de-politicized material cycles in Leopold as well as Niedecker, arguing that both "imply a recognizable faith in a commonwealth whose abiding satisfactions might rest in the irrepressible trait of earth into life and back again" (*LNWP* 329). Niedecker might well have had Leopold's essay in mind. "Odyssey" appears just after Leopold's essay on Wisconsin's monument to the extinct passenger pigeon in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), where he writes that for one species to mourn the death of another is "a new thing under the sun, unknown to most people and to all pigeons" (119). Niedecker seems to allude to (and invert) this essay in "Wintergreen Ridge": "Pigeons / (I miss the gulls) / mourn the loss / of people / no wild bird does" (*CW* 257).

equilibrium that the disequilibrium of life can only slow through its historically contingent complexity; his essay thus evokes the entropic pull that shaped both Duncan and Niedecker's way of imagining resistance. In "Odyssey," Leopold follows the pre-colonization travels of an atom named X: dislodged from a rock by an oak's root, X spends centuries adventuring through the bodies of plants, animals, and humans as they eat, defecate, die, and decay, before finally being washed downstream and ending up in "his ancient prison, the sea" (114). As part of an eagle's feather, X even participates in Native American cultural rites; his story suggests "that mice and men, soils and songs, might be merely ways to retard the march of atoms to the sea" (113). Next Leopold turns to Y, an atom sucked out of the rock during Wisconsin's late-nineteenth-century wheat-farming boom: Y's journey to the sea is much quicker. After "a succession of dizzy annual trips through a new grass called wheat," Y is washed into a pool built by engineers to control erosion, "his trip from rock to river completed in one short century" (114-115).

The cycles of matter, here, are avowedly historical and even political: Leopold notes that "when the empire of wheat collapsed, the settler took a leaf from the old prairie book: he impounded his fertility in livestock" (115). Though this stay against erosion could not stop fertility from washing out to sea as agriculture expanded, it does show that diversified farming, as a practice, need not depend on nostalgic abstractions about transcendent organic cycles. That is, organic farming does not depend on seeing nature itself as a closed cycle, but instead tries to conserve fertility by *creating* a closed cycle. The closed cycle of the organic farm is a goal—an avowed fiction or "fictive certainty," in Duncan's terms. Though unattainable and ideal in the sense that such a closed loop could never be maintained eternally, it is a useful technique for slowing the waste of industrial monocultures. Like Frost, Leopold sees all atoms heading toward an entropic sea, but Leopold is more concerned with the details and speed of their journey than with the fact of dissolution. He delights in the specificity and diversity of the living things in which matter pauses on

its trip from rock to sea, as Niedecker does.[55]

In his essay on a monument to the extinct passenger pigeon, Leopold writes, "We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution" (117). Niedecker, in foregrounding the way in which matter travels through living things, including human *voyageurs* and tourists, recognizes the profound, evolutionary historicity of what we call nature. At the same time, evolution for Niedecker is not simply ceaseless flux: if words are the pauses that meaning makes, living things are the pauses that matter makes. Jonathan Skinner's conception of evolution prompts him to over-emphasize "flow" in Niedecker's poetics: while he argues that species for her are "melting containers" (*RV* 48), she enjoyed identifying plants, animals, and birds by species as much as the next natural historian, as her letters show. Natural historians have an affection for taxonomy, even when they are scientifically sharp enough to know that species are "not / (it is like confessing / a murder) /immutable," as Niedecker put it, quoting Darwin in her poem about him (*CW* 295). For her, the name in its specificity is a stay against total flux, as the lifetime of an individual being or the form of a species is a pause on which one should linger. Especially in continuous long poems like "Wintergreen Ridge" and "Paean to Place," Niedecker's pared-down restraint plays against the forward-moving current of syntax to mimic the rhythms she finds in travel: "unsinging pauses" emerge in the poem itself. Niedecker's form thus seeks to capture the interplay between bursts of energy and moments of conservative retrenchment that inform the rhythms of organic bodies.

Yet for Niedecker, organic life is never the master metaphor: it simply participates in rhythms that also pervade inorganic matter and cultural products. After writing a poem in which rocks are the heroes, Niedecker wrote "Wintergreen Ridge," the long poem that closes *North Central*. She

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[55] As this reading makes apparent, Duncan and Niedecker also have in common their atomism. Both were readers of Lucretius; Duncan was a devoted reader of Heraclitus and Democritus as well. In a letter to Zukofsky, Niedecker notes that she cherishes Lucretius, Thoreau, Diderot, and Emerson (*NCZ* 134).

begins by re-situating life in relation to evolution:

> Where the arrows
> of the road signs
> lead us:
>
> Life is natural
> in the evolution
> of matter
>
> Nothing supra-rock
> about it
> simply
>
> butterflies
> are quicker
> than rock (*CW* 247)

Here, life is not the only subject of evolution: life is simply something that occurs as matter evolves. Living beings, moreover, are not an improvement on inorganic matter: they are not "supra-rock," just "quicker / than rock." In "Lake Superior," Niedecker undoes the privilege of life by showing how it depends on and serves as a vehicle for the movements of matter. In "Wintergreen Ridge," she shows that life is also inextricable from cultural forms, which both evolve themselves and shape the ways in which we are able to understand living things. The poem tells the story of a visit to the Ridges Sanctuary in Door County, Wisconsin, where "remnants of original beaches . . . create a living museum of change and succession from the Ice Age to the present" (Peters 222). Niedecker interweaves the story of the women who fought to preserve the Ridges with thoughts on evolution, conservation, gendered power dynamics, and current events. While "Evolution's wild ones / *saved* / continuous life / through change," "Women / of good wild stock" must prevent change, by "stopp[ing] bulldozers," to protect the Ridges from development (*CW* 249). Niedecker implies that the rhetoric of wilderness preservation is in tension with nature's continual change:

> We want it for all time
> they said
>
> and here it is—

horsetails
club mosses

stayed alive
after dinosaurs
died (*CW* 250)

While horsetails and club mosses are indeed ancient plants, Niedecker highlights natural change—the extinction of the dinosaurs—in noting their survival. Niedecker thus subtly unsettles the activists' conception of nature as ahistorical and timeless, even as she supports their efforts to preserve wilderness. As Niedecker records the plants she saw, she suggests that gender politics necessarily shape the ways we perceive living things. The "insect-eating / pitcher plant / Bedeviled little Drosera / of the sundews"

sticks out its sticky
(Darwin tested)

tentacled leaf
towards a fly
half an inch away

engulfs it
Just the touch
of a gnat on a filament

stimulates leaf-plasma
secretes a sticky
clear liquid

the better to eat you
my dear (*CW* 250-251)

The pitcher plant becomes a wolf in grandmother's clothing, as the paradox of a plant that can eat an insect recalls the paradox of a woman with power. While I will not consider all the changes Niedecker rings on gender politics and geopolitics in this poem, I do want to highlight her representation of how cultural forms morph. While the speaker sees no evidence of the current events she hears about on the news, "no pelting of police / with flowers" and "no space-rocket" (*CW* 254-255),

Do feel however
in liver and head

as we drive
towards cities
the change

in church architecture—
now it's either a hood
for a roof

pulled down to the ground
and below
or a factory-long body

crawled out from a rise
of black dinosaur-necked
blower-beaked

smokestack-
steeple (*CW* 255)

The changing church architecture has a physiological effect on the speaker: culture is not just metaphorically embodied here, but affects actual bodies. The churches seem to devolve as they go toward the cities, becoming not only dinosaur-like but industrial. Niedecker thus turns capitalist evolutionary discourse back against itself, linking cities and factories not with progress but with dinosaurs. She also suggests that Christianity has done nothing to stop industrialization, but instead has been deformed and rendered obsolete by it—"No use / discussing heaven / HJ's father long ago / pronounced human affairs / gone to hell" (CW 256).[56]

Niedecker's autobiographical long poem, "Paean to Place," also critiques capitalist co-optations of evolutionary discourse. Since Darwin added Herbert Spencer's phrase "the survival of the fittest" to the fifth edition of *On the Origin of Species* (Beer xix), apologists for capitalism and imperialism have used progressive, teleological misinterpretations of evolution to justify social inequality. Evolution has thus been falsely but insistently linked with progress conceived in terms of

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[56] HJ, here, is Henry James.

capitalist success. In the opening of "Paean to Place," Niedecker tells her own story in evolutionary terms to undo this link:

> Fish
>     fowl
>         flood
>     Water lily mud
> My life
>
> in the leaves and on water
> My mother and I
>             born
> in swale and swamp and sworn
> to water
>
> My father
> thru marsh fog
>     sculled down
>         from high ground
> . . .
> he seined for carp to be sold
> that their daughter
>
> might go high
> on land
>     to learn (*CW* 261)

The first lines of the poem evoke a primordial succession of living things that emerge from the "flood," while the speaker and her mother are born "in swale and swamp." The speaker's father, who comes down from "high ground," wants his daughter to succeed: "go high / on land / to learn." Here, a progressive notion of evolution provides the terms in which education is understood to lead to economic success. If the speaker goes off to school, she will escape the backward swamp of poverty[57]—she will "evolve," where evolution is understood as teleological progression from fish to man.

But the speaker does not fulfill this capitalist success narrative. She learns, reads, writes poems,

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[57] After the speaker declares, "I was the solitary plover," the poem describes this poverty: "Seven year molt / for the solitary bird / and so young / Seven years the one / dress // for town once a week / One for home" (*CW* 266).

but stays by the water. Flood, moreover, teaches anti-consumerist values: "O my floating life / Do not save love / for things / Throw *things* / to the flood . . . Leave the new unbought—/ all one in the end—/ water" (*CW* 268). Niedecker suggests that progressive versions of evolution simply recapitulate religious transcendence:

> Effort lay in us
> before religions
>       at pond bottom
>             All things move toward
> the light
>
> except those
> that freely work down
>       to oceans' black depths
>             In us an impulse tests
> the unknown (*CW* 267)

While religions and progressive evolution contend that the only possible or desirable movement is up from "pond bottom" to "the light," Niedecker recognizes the value of "freely work[ing] down," perhaps from her experiments with representing the unconscious during her surrealist period, or perhaps from her engagement with Duncan's notion that the poet should remain open to the unknown. While Niedecker thus thwarts progressivist versions of evolution in favor of an anti-teleological Darwinism that sees inorganic matter as participating in processual unfolding as much as organic beings do, Duncan turns to Darwin because he offers a way beyond the opposition between imposed and emergent orders toward a ground in which strife among orders continuously begets new forms.

As reading Duncan's essays on emergent forms, openness, and spontaneity provoked Niedecker to undertake her long poems, Duncan's engagement with H.D.'s poetics of limit shaped his ideas about political and poetic resistance to dissolution. *The H.D. Book* shows that Duncan's concept of emergent form—which would later reach its most succinct and polished articulation in "Towards an Open Universe"—is thoroughly intertwined with his argument that poetry constitutes

an oppositional politics of life that resists state biopolitics. *The H.D. Book*, written in the early 1960s, is a sprawling meditation on poetry, poetics, art, psychoanalysis, and heterodox religion; Duncan's genealogy of modernism is perhaps its most frequently recurring theme.[58] Duncan sees the Spirit of Romance persisting in modernism, despite modernist and New Critical squeamishness about Romanticism and heterodox spirituality; he contends that H.D., Pound, William Carlos Williams, D. H. Lawrence—and even T. S. Eliot, despite his attempt to become orthodox (539)—"hankered after strange gods" (53, 361). In the context of this compelling take on modernism and his reading of H.D.'s *Trilogy*, Duncan develops his own poetics, thinking through the interrelation among emergent poetic forms, life forms in their evolution, and what theorists such as Agamben, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri call "forms of life" in capitalist, industrial modernity.

Duncan develops his vision of poets as a heretical sect "against (within)" the dominant society, advocating a politics of life at odds with conventional biopolitics, through his reading of modernism—especially the later work of H.D., Pound, and Williams. In the early 1960s, when Duncan was writing *The H.D. Book*, Eliot dominated the poetry scene; as Michael André Bernstein has shown, Duncan was among the first to champion H.D.'s later work and to add H.D. to the pantheon of an alternative modernist tradition that Olson had defined through Pound and Williams. In a key passage that compares poets to a heretical sect, Duncan builds on his reading of H.D.'s *Trilogy*, especially the "we" she uses in the poem, which refers to a small, embattled group of poets:

> Where we cannot identify with the will of powerful groups in the society we live in, we feel their power over us as an *evil*. The word evil, as the O.E.D. suggests, 'usually referred to the root of *up, over,*' may then be whatever power over us of outer or inner compulsion. As the power and presumption of authority by the State has increased in every nation, we are ill

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[58] Chapters of the *The H.D. Book* were published piecemeal, in journals, from the mid-1960s on; it was not published in book form until 2011, as the first volume of Duncan's collected works, edited by Victor Coleman and Michael Boughn.

> with it, for it surrounds us and, where it does not openly conscript, seeks by advertising, by education, by dogma, or by terror, to seduce, enthrall, mould, command, or coerce our inner will or conscience or inspiration to its own uses. Like the pious Essenes alienated from Romanizing priests and civilizing Empire alike, like the Adamite cult to which Bosch may have belonged—the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit—alienated from the spiritual authoritarianism of the Church and from the laws of warring feudal lords and principalities, we too may find ourselves, at odds with the powers that be, members of a hidden community, surviving not in history but in the imagination or faith. (*HD* 335)

This is, in part, a meditation on H.D.'s lines "Dev-ill was after us, / tricked up like Jehovah" (5), but Duncan translates H.D.'s religious language into a critique of the modern biopolitical state. Here, her "evil" becomes the power that dominates, imposing its order on the emergent order of the "alienated" group within it. This passage indicates that Duncan's ideas about form are always political. At the same time, Duncan describes state power not just as coercive, but as insidious and disciplinary; this is a power that "seduce[s], enthrall[s], [and] mould[s]" the subject from inside out. But Duncan juxtaposes ancient and medieval heretical sects with this sketch of a society of control that functions via surveillance and internalized norms. While H.D. (and Duncan) live in a modern biopolitical context, for Duncan the *form* of the "hidden community" within and against a dominant power still has lessons for oppositional politics and poetics.

"Imagination" is essential to this form: the hidden community survives, not by triumph on the historical stage, but by continuing to imagine itself as separate. Duncan makes this clear in the rest of the passage:

> Like Jews paying taxes to Ceasar or like little children suffering under the tyranny of powerful adults, we then live in a world that is 'theirs,' in 'their' power, in which a deeper reality, our own, is imprisoned. Our life is hidden in our hearts, a secret allegiance, at odds

> with the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, and the true kingdom is 'not of this World.' The artist—the poet as well as the painter or musician—striving to keep alive the reality of his art as revelation and inspiration of Truth or Beauty finds himself so at odds with the dominant motives of profit and industry embodied in the society. For Communist and Capitalist alike the work of art is taken to be a commodity of social exchange. Not only gnostics and pacifists but artists and poets, those who live by an inner reality or world, having a prior adherence to the heart's truth or wish, appear as heretics or traitors to those who lead or conform to the dominations of the day. (*HD* 335-336)

For Duncan, artists, like members of a heretical sect, hold to an internal, hidden life—a "deeper reality"—at odds with the reality of those in power. The poet "striv[es] to keep alive the reality of his art": this hidden reality both requires the poet to strive against the dominant capitalist values and enables him to do so. The poet or artist's hidden life is both more real than the dominant reality—more compelling, more true to experience—and also under constant threat of dissolution into that dominant reality. This life, in other words, *must* be hidden or protected so that it can stand up against the reality of the dominant society, which so insidiously tries to shape the poet's "inner will or conscience or inspiration."

The poet's hidden life, moreover, holds out against a dominant society that also claims to value "life" as such. Duncan's terms for describing this dominant politics of life evoke biopolitics as Foucault and Agamben have theorized it. Duncan points, for example, to an image Rainer Maria Rilke and H.D. share, that of "poets as bees storing the honey of the invisible": while for Rilke, poets thus hold out against the "*Dummy-life*" of American commodities, for H.D., poets are set against "a mass-people of the new age, larvae spreading 'not honey but seething life'" (*HD* 336). H.D.'s image seems classist, but Duncan, by placing it in a biopolitical context, shows how the state's promotion of conventional, normative life threatens the poet's dissenting, hidden form of life.

These "lives" are qualitatively different: while the dominant society sanctions a certain "use of life—to career, to comfort, to security," Duncan sees H.D. and other poets as, heretically, "living for love or living for experience" (*HD* 363). In the context of H.D. and Duncan's lives, that heretical "love" may be read as queer, but the idea of living for experience, for participation in reality, rather than for wealth or achievement is essential as well. Finally, Duncan even registers the way in which biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics. H.D. wrote *Trilogy* during World War II; Duncan writes that for her, "as the Wars like great Dreams began to make it clear, life itself [was] under attack" (*HD* 338). In another passage that defines H.D.'s hidden community as a "fus[ion]" of communities of poets, Christians, and "the psychoanalyzed," Duncan shows how the life of this community stands against thanatopolitics: "In the light of what that community means by Life, the War is not all, mostly is not at all, a fight for life" (*HD* 365). While states mobilize for total war by claiming to "fight for life," the hidden community of artists, defining life differently, sees that the state and the War in fact champion death.

Duncan's extended, recurring meditation on a particular poem in *Trilogy*—the fourth poem in the first book, *The Walls Do Not Fall*—shows how he developed both his idea of the poet's oppositional "life-politics" holding out against the dominant biopolitics and his poetics of emergent form through H.D.'s organic figure of the shell-fish. From this poem, Duncan draws the image of a life that is limited and protected by its shell from other forms of life that surround and press in on it. H.D. writes:

> There is a spell, for instance,
> in every sea-shell:
>
> continuous, the sea thrust
> is powerless against coral,
>
> bone, stone, marble
> hewn from within by that craftsman,
>
> the shell-fish: (8)

The shell is itself a protective spell, guarding the "flabby, amorphous hermit / within" against "the sea thrust" (8). In comparing the shell-fish to a "craftsman," H.D. not only indicates that we can read it as a figure for the poet, but also suggests that art or poetry itself should protect the poet-hermit's hidden life. As Duncan writes, the shell is "a wall that does not fall" (*HD* 401). While Duncan elaborates on the poem's political implications, H.D. herself uses the shell-fish as a figure for survival within and against a dominant order. Like the shell-fish,

> I sense my own limit,
> my shell-jaws snap shut
>
> at invasion of the limitless,
> ocean-weight; infinite water
>
> can not crack me, egg in egg-shell;

As "the octopus-darkness // is powerless against // [the moon's] cold immortality,"

> so I in my own way know
> that the whale
>
> can not digest me:
> be firm in your own small, static, limited
>
> orbit and the shark-jaws
> of outer circumstance
>
> will spit you forth: (9)

While the "infinite water" figures the mass society or "seething life" that overwhelms and threatens to dissolve the speaker, the "whale" and the "shark-jaws" evoke the Leviathan of the state. Limit, here, is not only a poetics but also a politics.

Duncan's reading of this image shows how much he developed his concept of an oppositional life-politics within and against biopolitics from H.D.'s poetics of limit. In this poem, Duncan writes, "the individual life begets itself from and must also hold itself against the enormous resources of life, against the too-much"; it must "take heart in what would take over the heart in its greater

power" (*HD* 340). Duncan reads the poem in political and biological registers at once: the poet necessarily participates in but also must hold out against the dominant power that would "take over the heart," as creatures can only live by virtue of the other forms of life around them, but also survive in spite of them. Thus "the Trilogy is the story of survival" in political, biological, and poetic senses (*HD* 340). Duncan's reading of the shell-fish as "the brain in its skull-shell," or the heart, is especially interesting in light of his oppositional life-politics: "In the tides of oceanic life-force, the *élan vitale*, the individual heart appears as the shell-fish . . . holding against too much feeling" (*HD* 340). Here, Duncan links H.D.'s threatening "sea thrust" with Henri Bergson's *élan vital*. As Duncan notes, Bergson's vitalism "was very much in the air" before World War I (*HD* 302), but, as Donna Jones argues, its politics are suspect because it "opened the door to the spiritualist racialism to which European thought succumbed in the interwar years" (79). Since vitalism involves distinguishing between life that is really alive and life that is dead, parasitic, or corrupt, it can turn into the fascist decision about who is worthy of living. In this context, Duncan reads the shell-fish—or the individual heart—as holding out against the Bergsonian vital force that subtends thanatopolitics.

However, H.D.'s shell-fish not only resists the tide, but also opens to it; this aspect of the poem is essential to Duncan's participatory poetics and lends him some of his key figures for emergent form in "Towards an Open Universe." H.D. writes:

> yet that flabby, amorphous hermit
> within, like the planet
>
> senses the finite,
> it limits its orbit
>
> of being, its house,
> temple, fane, shrine:
>
> it unlocks the portals
> at stated intervals:
>
> prompted by hunger,
> it opens to the tide-flow:

> but infinity? no,
> of nothing-too-much:

While H.D. emphasizes limit and the poet's self-protection, she follows her organic metaphor in acknowledging the need for interchange between the shell-fish and its environment. "Hunger" requires the shell-fish to "open to the tide-flow"; the "flabby, amorphous hermit" must make itself vulnerable in order to survive.

Duncan underscores this necessary vulnerability; for him, organic form ultimately protects and allows for receptivity. Duncan writes of the "shell as work of art"; while before this shell was part of "a battle of the artist against the squalor about him to create beauty," now it is "part of the process of the artist deriving his inner life from the outside world" (*HD* 401). For Duncan, the shell "sustains 'that flabby, amorphous hermit / within'—the possibility for the living organism to keep its tenderness to experience, its vital weakness" (*HD* 401). The shell protects receptivity, the organism's or poet's necessary, life-enabling vulnerability. This vitality is not an *élan vital*, a vital force or strength, but a "vital weakness"; Duncan does not endorse the vitalism of the strong, but recognizes that "tenderness to experience" defines life. To survive and participate in co-creating the world, living creatures must be passive as well as active, they must receive as well as give; the shell-fish has to "open to the tide-flow" as much as it has to protect itself against it. For Duncan, the poet also must foster receptivity: "We speak of the poet as 'gifted' . . . and we obscure in this the fact that the willingness of the poet to receive, his acceptance of what is given is initial to the gift. The poet must be a host to Poetry, 'open to the tide flow'" (*HD* 386). Vulnerability is thus a key part of Duncan's participatory poetics; this willingness to open up to experience is what Keenaghan calls Duncan's queer passivity. Duncan's concept of vulnerability is queer not only in that it echoes the passive role in gay male sexual practices, but also in that it talks back to the heterosexist mandate that men must be assertive if not aggressive and, more broadly, to the American capitalist obsession

with action and activity.

Through this necessary "opening to the tide-flow," Duncan begins to develop the myth of biological and poetic origins that he uses to characterize emergent forms in "Towards an Open Universe." After comparing the shell-fish to the brain and the heart and quoting the passage about opening to the tide, Duncan writes:

> A correspondence is felt between the tide of the sea and the tide of the blood, between ebb and flow and the systole and diastole, between the valves of the heart and the valves of the shell-fish who lives in the tidal rhythm, as the brain lives in the tidal flow of the heart, fed by charges of blood in the capillaries. (*HD* 340)

Through his reading of H.D., Duncan comes to see the rhythms of the body as echoing those of the tide. In this passage and others, Duncan tries out the language he will use to elaborate this idea in "Towards an Open Universe." In fact, Duncan develops his idea of emergent form and the images of that essay's syncretic myth across *The H.D. Book* (see, for example, *HD* 131, 167, 270, 289). For the imagery of "Towards an Open Universe," Duncan seems particularly indebted to this same poem from *The Walls Do Not Fall*; not only do the sea and "tide-flow" show up in Duncan's essay, but he also seems to echo these lines:

> I know the pull
> of the tide, the lull
>
> as well as the moon: (9)

Moreover, Duncan develops the concept of emergent form and the way the poet follows it through his reading of *Trilogy* as a whole. Picking up on the "wild-goose" flight in the third poem of *The Flowering of the Rod*, the third book of *Trilogy* (116), for example, Duncan claims that "the imperative of the poem towards its own order" is a "biological instinctual reality" for H.D. (*HD* 501):

> a feeling she must follow and cannot direct, taking command over her from within the process of its creation as she works. She compares the soul's objectification with 'the stone

> marvel' of the mollusc, 'hewn from within,' but it may represent a spiritual force of the cosmos beyond the biological. This 'life'-will towards objective form is ultimately related to an animal crystallization, and the images of jewel, crystal, 'as every snowflake / has its particular star, coral or prism shape' suggest that there is—not an inertia but a calling thruout the universe toward concretion. The poet in the imminence of a poem (what now after Olson we may see as the *projection*) answering such a calling as a saint has his calling or a hero his fate. (*HD* 501)

Even more markedly than in "Towards an Open Universe," the tendency of forms to emerge extends beyond the realm of biology to matter in general. Like Niedecker, Duncan ultimately suggests that biological forms are a subset of emergent forms, rather than that only life is capable of form. Against an "inertia" that would impel material things to continue on their trajectories until entropy, or evenly dispersed stasis, is reached, Duncan argues that there is instead "a calling . . . toward concretion" that echoes from mineral crystallization and living creatures to poetic forms. Here, the traditional idea of inspiration—that the poet does not write by choice, but takes dictation from gods or muses—is transvalued: the imperative that the poem emerge is no longer the poet's distinguishing feature, but rather what links poetic making with biological growth and the formation of snowflakes.[59]

The play between limit and opening defines Duncan's re-thinking of organic form. H.D.'s *Trilogy*, and especially the image of the shell-fish, was essential to Duncan as he developed his concept of emergent form: "The poem, H.D. would say, is generated just here, between the hunger—the opening of the organism to take in the world around it—and the sense of limits" (*HD*

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[59] Devin Johnston's analysis of Duncan's "poetics of dictation" supports this point: he concludes that "dictation describes Duncan's belief in an organic relation between mind and cosmos" and that, "[w]riting from a larger self, Duncan engages a limitless organicism that resists divisions inherited from Enlightenment rationalism. In this sense, he conceived himself as partaking in a vein of transcendental thought stretching from Blake to Whitehead, according to which mind and nature are essentially continuous" (96-97).

574). As Duncan works through his poetics in *The H.D. Book*, it becomes clear that they are thoroughly intertwined with his politics. H.D.'s shell-fish comes to figure the oppositional life-politics of those hidden within and against the dominant society, the poet's essential vulnerability or "vital weakness," and the rhythms of emergent form for Duncan. Forms of political contestation echo organic forms, in that, like the salmon in "Poetry, a Natural Thing," marginalized or oppositional groups strive "against (within)" the current of mainstream society. Thus from the shell-fish who survives against "ocean weight; infinite water," Duncan eventually develops his ideas about necessary strife that produces new orders and forms. Through creative strife, the poet participates in a "Life-Work" "beyond his work": "But our Work, which may have been the alchemical Work, or the Work in the Art, is now in a larger sense a Life-Work or evolution of Life in which we play our human phase" (*HD* 583).

However, in "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," Duncan does not represent strife as aggression:[60] instead, strife is a kind of participation and as such requires remaining open. In embracing Darwinism, Duncan divests himself of a key premise of Coleridge's organic form: that the seed contains a divinely ordained form that it only fulfills by growing. Instead, form emerges *through process* for Duncan; the poem evolves formally as it is written. But Duncan also rejects fulfillment in a political and social sense. Early in *The H.D. Book*, Duncan writes of his first experience reading an H.D. poem, her early poem "Heat," in high school:

> The poem had something to do with keeping open and unfulfilled the urgencies of life. Men hurried to satisfy ends in things, pushed their minds to make advances, right answers, accomplishments, early maturations. They contrived careers that they fully filled. They grew round and fat upon the bough in the heat that kept them where they were, and they prayed

[60] At least not in theory! Duncan's attacks on his friends Denise Levertov and Robin Blaser are unpleasant examples of personal strife, but Duncan contended that in excoriating Blaser for his translations of Nerval, he was simply trying to provoke him into responding, trying to raise a productive strife about poetics (see "Returning").

> that they not fall from their success, that no wind come to break them loose. (*HD* 43)

Duncan wants no part of the kind of organic fulfillment that means following the prescribed paths and succeeding or "maturing" according to normative standards. The poem, for him, remains about "keeping open" and following "the urgencies of life" without aiming to "fully fill" them.

Duncan finds the promise of "keeping open" in a poetics of limit, while Niedecker opened up her condensery poetics in response to Duncan's emergent forms. Discipline and spontaneity are both essential to the kind of reimagined projectivist poetics that Miriam Nichols advocates in *Radical Affections* (2010): this projectivist poetics emerges not only from Olson's theories, but also and perhaps with more nuance from Niedecker's poems and Duncan's poetry and essays. While Niedecker's condensery poetics of the 1930s and 40s show that discipline itself can be turned against capitalist ends and need not be naturalized, Duncan theorized an avowedly Romantic poetics of spontaneous emergence in response to Olson's projectivist field on one hand and the entropic fatalism of a mainstream culture represented by Frost and Ransom on the other. But Niedecker and Duncan each developed a more fruitful poetics when they put spontaneous emergence and disciplined condensation—or the given and the made, the natural and the constructed—in dialogue with each other, Niedecker in part through her reading of Duncan's essays and Duncan through his engagement with H.D.'s work. Duncan and Niedecker show that the unending dialectic between limit and openness, self-protective closure and risky receptivity, enables poems and political resistance as well as organic life. Organic form, for them, involves constructing boundaries that allow for and protect the kind of vulnerability we need to participate in the emergent orders of poetry, politics, and life.

## Chapter Three / Compost and Waste: Wendell Berry and A. R. Ammons

In this chapter, I aim not only to examine the poetics and politics of the organic through the figure of compost, but also to show how shared tropes of decay connect mainstream and experimental ecopoetries that some critics have set against one another. Waste, compost, and decay bring us close to the heart of what is at stake in both organic farming and organic form in ecopoetry. Decay and compost are central to the idea—and ideal—of an organic farm: such a farm is like an organism in the sense that the farmers aim for provisional self-sufficiency by relying on the wastes that the farm itself produces to renew and sustain its fertility. Compost, as both theme and formal metaphor, also pervades American ecopoetries since the 1960s. Though critics as different as John Elder and Jed Rasula have studied decay or compost as a poetic trope, I aim to reconsider this trope in the context of sustainable agriculture and the importance of what Wendell Berry calls the "return" of decaying matter to the soil. But Berry's essays on agriculture do not just provide a pragmatic backdrop for his poetics here. His poetics are simply part of the broader vision that his essays elaborate—a vision of decay and growth as wild, natural phenomena that people can nevertheless foster through cultivation and culture. This chapter focuses primarily on compost in Wendell Berry's essays and poems, though I also read A. R. Ammons' long poem *Garbage* in the final section to compare his poetics of trash to Berry's use of the compost trope.

Though the discourses of organic form in poetry and of the organic farming movement are historically separate, they come together quite explicitly in Berry's work. As a farmer and influential advocate of small-scale, sustainable agriculture, Wendell Berry thinks through the dimensions of the organic metaphor more thoroughly and acutely than most. Berry is a poet, novelist, essayist, and farmer from Port Royal, Kentucky. Though he started down the track of a successful literary career—holding a Stegner fellowship at Stanford in the late 1950s, then teaching at New York University—he returned to his home state to teach at the University of Kentucky in 1964. Soon after

that he and his wife, Tanya, bought the Lanes Landing Farm, on the Kentucky River near where Berry grew up, and moved there full time.[1] His poems, novels, and essays all envision sustainable economies and communities and excoriate the industrial and military forces that erode such communities. In my judgment, Berry's essays are the most powerful part of his considerable body of work. It is not an overstatement to say that Berry's essays on sustainable agriculture make him one of the most important environmental writers in the US since Thoreau. (Berry, however, doesn't like the word "environment" because it implies that the natural world surrounds us and is separate from us, when in fact we are part of it.[2]) And as I will argue, his work presents a corrective to Thoreau: Thoreau moved to Walden, but all he tried to grow there was a row of beans. Berry's approach to food—and his understanding of waste and compost—in fact bridges the divide between what Bonnie Costello has called Emersonian superfluity and Thoreauvian restraint.

Berry's work also confronts us with perhaps the most politically controversial aspects of both organic form and organic farming: he has linked these to the concept of an organic society and to traditionalism. Prominent ecocritics such Timothy Morton and Ursula Heise have dismissed both organic form in poetry and the local, organic food movement as nostalgic and conservative; Heise has criticized Berry in particular for what she sees as his retrograde investment in the local. In fact, Berry has become something of a whipping boy for ecocritics.[3] In this chapter, I argue that Berry's

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[1] Berry taught creative writing at the University of Kentucky from 1964 to 1977, when he resigned. From 1987 to 1993, Berry returned to the University to teach agricultural and pastoral literature and "Composition for Teachers," a nonfiction writing course, instead of creative writing (Grubbs 139). In 2009, Berry severed his last ties with the University of Kentucky, withdrawing his papers in protest after the University named a dorm Wildcat Coal Lodge in exchange for a gift from a coal company.

[2] In this, he coincides with Timothy Morton, who in *The Ecological Thought* and *Ecology without Nature* argues that the term "environment" is inadequate for the same reason. This is only the first of several ways in which Berry and Morton oddly converge.

[3] For example, see Janet Fiskio's essay, "Unsettling Ecocriticism," in the 2012 issue of *American Literature* devoted to ecocriticism. While Fiskio raises the important issue of farm labor and suggests that there seems to be no place for migrants in Berry's new agrarianism, she uses Berry as a foil for Helena Maria Viramontes' novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, rather than confronting the full diversity of the local food movement that Berry's work has so thoroughly informed.

understanding of compost is not only essential to his versions of organic form and organic farming, but also opens up the politics of the organic. Because organic farms or forms are, for Berry, artifacts or made things—they are not natural, but made in imitation of cycles of growth and decay—Berry does not naturalize social or political forms, but in fact expands the arena of political choice. As his wide range of influence shows, Berry's work has empowered people whose identity and politics often differ strikingly from his own to change their food choices for reasons that are at once political, ethical, social, and gustatory.

Part of my argument, then, is that ecocritics need to wake up and smell the locally-grown tomatoes. (And damn do they smell good!) It is more than a little ironic that literary scholars who focus on environmental issues have criticized and dismissed the local food movement in general and Berry in particular. Even while ecocritics are coming, belatedly, to realize that sites of intersection between nature and culture are among the most pressing and promising for our study, ecocriticism has not paid enough attention to food and agriculture. The essays in *Ecocritical Theory* (2011), for example, evince an interest in undoing the divide between nature and culture and in the creation of what Kate Rigby calls "humane living spaces," or pragmatic, human landscapes—but there is hardly a mention of farming in the whole volume. When we eat, as we all do every day, the products of a long collaboration between nature and culture literally become part of us. This particular intersection between nature and culture—agriculture—not only sustains us, but also surrounds us and shapes our economics, politics, culture, and modes of perception. Organic farming is not a nostalgic throwback, but a widespread, practical way in which many people are beginning to rethink their relationship with nature and, even more importantly, experience their own bodily being and their concrete dependence on other beings differently. Some ecocritics have begun to think about food—most notably Alison Carruth—but agriculture should figure as prominently in ecocriticism as it is

coming to figure in local and national political discourse.[4]

Though ecocritics love to hate Berry, his work has not only had an influence on the local, organic farming movement that is justly called "hard to underestimate," but has also shaped and anticipated some of the most important shifts in the environmental humanities over the last few decades. Scholars as various as William Cronon, Donna Haraway, and Timothy Morton have argued that we need to recognize that nature is not something "over there," out in the wilderness, separate from the neoliberal subject, but something happening around, within, and through us. As early as 1971, Berry was arguing that environmentalism had focused too much on extreme landscapes—preserving beautiful wilderness or repairing damaged, blighted places—and was ignoring the everyday landscapes in which and from which we live (*UW* 24). Wendell Berry has argued for years that we cannot separate ourselves from nature and that our everyday choices have real environmental consequences for which we should take responsibility. This is an argument that people enact when they begin to think critically about where their food comes from and make choices based on such considerations.

Moreover, the ecological approach to pleasure that Berry and the local, organic food movement are developing is significant for anyone concerned with how we create a culture that can respond to and mitigate ecological crisis. Berry celebrates the small, everyday pleasures of the senses and joys of embodiment—pleasures that are seasonal, renewable, and sustainable—that depend neither on excessive consumption nor on ambition and success. This anti-capitalist approach to pleasure is akin to what Kate Soper calls "alternative hedonism." It can inspire and empower people to live in more sustainable ways, not through guilt or apocalyptic dread, but through joy and

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[4] There are also literary critics working in the interdiscipline of food studies, in which anthropology and qualitative sociology are perhaps the most prominent disciplinary perspectives. Food studies, however, has a different genealogy than the sustainable agriculture discourse I focus on here. Literary food studies, especially, seems to emerge from cultural studies approaches that take food as an object, while advocates of sustainable agriculture like Howard, Berry, and Pollan have always been concerned with food production.

satisfaction. Pleasure and compost may seem like an odd pair, but I will argue that we should indeed think them together—and that Berry and the organic food movement have been doing so for some time.

If ecocritics need to take the local, organic food movement more seriously, critics who advocate experimental ecopoetries need to reckon more thoroughly with the appeal of mainstream "nature poets" such as Berry, Gary Snyder, and Mary Oliver. The divide between the experimental and the mainstream is a problematic inheritance for poetry critics. While its influence is, by some accounts, on the wane among young poets and in the diverse, burgeoning contemporary poetry scene where lines between experimental poetry and mainstream lyric are increasingly hard to draw,[5] critical accounts still tend to honor and obey this divide. Early ecocritics were often proponents of mainstream nature poets, and advocated the virtues of what Len Scijag cheekily called "reférence" against experiments with language—though the experiments with language they were most virulent about were not those by poets, but those by poststructuralist theorists, with Derrida of course the major target.[6] As Lynn Keller has noted, early ecocriticism was often "held hostage" to debates about language and poststructuralism in the broader critical scene ("Green Reading" 604). In the last decade, Keller, Rasula, Jonathan Skinner, and Marcella Durand have both called attention to and called for a more linguistically experimental ecopoetics.[7]

Though a formally diverse, vibrant ecopoetics is certainly desirable, mainstream nature poetry—and its appeal to broader audiences than most contemporary poetry enjoys—should not be dismissed. While ecocritics such as Scijag, Elder, Quetechenbach, Buell, and Bryson recruited

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[5] See, for example, the anthologies *American Hybrid* and *Lyric Postmodernisms*.

[6] For Scijag's argument that ecopoetry is a poetry of "reference" that points away from poststructuralist linguistic games and back to the real, see Scijag 37.

[7] Bonnie Costello also belongs in this group, though she does not call herself an ecocritic or use the term "ecopoetics." See her *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (2003).

mainstream nature poets to the cause of accurate representation and ecological relevance as against poststructuralism's alleged detachment of language from reality and responsibility, Keller and Skinner argue that mainstream nature poetry reinforces harmful Romantic ideologies about nature. Such critics contend that linguistically experimental poetry can more thoroughly and effectively challenge the ways of thinking that have led to environmental degradation. However, by setting experimental ecopoetry against the naïveté and Romantic sentimentality of mainstream nature poetry, they risk perpetuating these critical debates in ways that can obscure connections across formally diverse poetries.

Compost and decay are one such connection—a recurrent motif in experimental ecopoetry as well as mainstream nature poetry. This figure pervades the work of nature poets such as Oliver, Snyder, and Berry, but, as Jed Rasula's brilliant and generative book, *This Compost* (2003), has shown, the compost trope also appears in a wide range of experimental poets beginning with Whitman, whose poem "This Compost" gives Rasula his title. It might seem that growth would be the obvious key trope for nature poetry; the figure of the growing plant was, after all, essential to Coleridge's organic form and other prominent Romantic and Victorian versions of it, and Whitman had his *Leaves of Grass*. But Rasula, focusing on a broadly construed Black Mountain poetry, shows that the key trope for twentieth-century American ecopoets is not growth but decay. In *This Compost*, the motif of compost becomes a formal model as Rasula collages lines from different poems, tracing the compost trope across the boundaries of authors and texts. The composting methods of Rasula's experimental criticism rot through New Critical concepts of poetic autonomy—here, no poem stands separate, whole, and apart. But as we will see, even in the hands of a mainstream nature poet like Berry, the compost trope radically revises New Critical organic form. In Berry's work, the poem's organic form announces both its own artifice and its dependency on other forms of language, culture, and life.

Berry is usually considered a mainstream nature poet in the Romantic tradition, despite the fact that his poetry generally does not focus on the Wordsworthian experience of the solitary ego in the wilderness. His work emphasizes instead the experiences of a self deeply invested in the community, history, and specificity of a particular place—the damaged yet productive ridges and hollows near the Kentucky River where Berry lives and farms. Though Berry's poems are not as linguistically dextrous as Niedecker's or as multilayered and evocative as Duncan's, his lyrics at their best quietly and skillfully weave close attention to places, people, and other creatures together with a kind of concrete Christianity where resurrection is not a myth about heaven but a physical phenomenon that occurs through cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay.

The first section of this chapter contrasts the aesthetics of exuberant trash that some ecocritics have celebrated in problematically capitalist terms with Berry's use of the compost trope to re-imagine pleasure in an ecological, anti-capitalist way. In the second section of the chapter, I show how Berry uses the compost trope to define organic farming and organic form in his essays on agriculture and his poems. Compost is a practice of fostering decay that allows us to face and experience the cycles of death and growth that contain us. In learning to collaborate with processes that we cannot control, we come to "participate in the life cycle," which both helps us to fully experience everyday, sensuous pleasures, and requires us to accept our vulnerability to loss and death. In the third section of the chapter, I argue that Berry's insistence that organic forms, farms, and communities are *made*—constructed by art, rather than natural—opens up the politics of the organic and facilitates Berry's profound influence on readers and movements across the political spectrum. Finally, the fourth section of the chapter analyzes A. R. Ammons' *Garbage*, showing how Ammons develops a poetics that oscillates between the two poles of the garbage trope, transformation and accumulation, and in doing so articulates a vision of participation, vulnerability, and everyday pleasures that resonates strikingly and surprisingly with Berry's.

**Exuberant Waste versus Sustainable Pleasures**

Though ecocritics have not paid enough attention to food and farming, they have focused recently on garbage and waste. As work by critics such as Patricia Yaeger and Bonnie Costello attests, many twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers and artists find a strange beauty or joy in trash itself. Though these critics explain the allure of garbage differently, they generally associate waste and decay with transformation, mobility, and extravagance; garbage comes to stand in for aesthetic exuberance or even enables aesthetic experience. These readings consider trash an ecological problem that results from consumerism and contend that the aesthetics of trash resists capitalism. But in basing that claim on trash's transformation, its ability to move an uneasy remainder on, they flirt with an ultimately capitalist logic. Such critical modes of reading waste also dismiss the cultural interest in compost as a purely compensatory ideology—a wish to reincorporate or renew without remainder. In this view, compost functions simply as a dream of wholeness, resurrection, reconciliation, or return; when we look at garbage, on the other hand, we are confronting the reality of environmental problems and the real remains of consumerist disposability. An aesthetic delight in trash is, in other words, more sophisticated than a delight in compost because it is ironic and self-aware. But I argue that we should not dismiss compost tropes so quickly.

If attention to trash has made environmental art more self-reflexive and critical, the compost trope has also fostered a new and more empowering kind of environmental aesthetics. For Berry and others in the local, organic food movement, compost—an agricultural practice that fosters the natural process of decay—figures the cycles of growth from death that enable the seasonal, renewable pleasures of the senses and joys of embodiment. Berry links pleasure and compost, but he redefines pleasure in doing so: pleasure does not come from capitalism's excess, exuberance, speed, and mobility, but from slowing down and paying attention to everyday pleasures of the body and the senses. I contend that the ecological approach to pleasure that the local, organic food movement

fosters—with its emphasis on seasonality, anticipation, and sensuous enjoyment—constitutes a kind of queer ecology that is not negative and "dark," like Timothy Morton's, but positive.

In fact, Patricia Yaeger's account of the aesthetics of trash shows that garbage fascinates us because it, like compost, hints at the aesthetic and ethical implications of decay. In "The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; or, Rubbish Ecology," Yaeger argues that trash is replacing nature in the nature/culture binary and becoming invested with the sublimity and subject-forming powers that nature had for Wordsworth. Trash has come to have this function, she contends, because we are surrounded by it: "molecular garbage has infiltrated earth, water, and air" and "we cannot encounter the natural untouched or uncontaminated" by trash (332). But trash also "haunt[s] the commodity" because it takes consumer objects "out of the circle of exchange" (335-336). In giving the commodity "a history" and following it "as it decays or enters entropy" (335), the aestheticization of trash rebels against capitalist, dialectical logic. Yaeger even suggests that trash motivates such theoretical concepts as "Derrida's 'trace,' Adorno's 'remainder,' and Zizek's 'das Ding'" that use "the leftover" to deconstruct the dialectic (334). Yaeger suggests that garbage is "ethically charged and aesthetically interesting" because it is "[i]n the midst of simulacra, . . . a substance in which we can encounter decay and mortality" (338). This is also what is compelling about compost. In a world where many people are alienated from wild places and insulated from death, our own discarded commodities or the processes of decay that we foster through the practice of compost are the phenomena that make mortality visible and tangible to us.

But there is a difference in attitude at work here: while garbage can become a sublime other, like nature, because the workings of capitalism and commodity fetishism seem to make it come from nowhere, people make and foster compost themselves. The fascination with garbage is about quantity, the scale of discarded things that surprises and horrifies us in mirroring back the scale of the consumptive system that we are part of, while the fascination with compost is about quality,

about a form or pattern of decay with which our cultural practices can collaborate. Garbage haunts us by confronting us with the abjected processes of mortality and decay, while compost is a cultural practice through which we can not only confront mortality and decay, but participate in it as artisans or growers of soil.

Before I turn to compost and Berry's sustainable pleasures, I want to analyze Bonnie Costello's work because it shows both the benefits and the risks of reading garbage and waste as exuberant. By characterizing the differences between mainstream nature poets and linguistically sophisticated ecopoets in terms of their differing attitudes toward waste, Costello suggests an alternative environmental aesthetics, one that does not insist on conservation and restraint, but celebrates the exuberant energies of nature and culture. In "'What to Make of a Diminished Thing': Modern Nature and Poetic Response" (1998), Costello sets a Thoreauvian lineage of mainstream nature poets such as Robinson Jeffers, Snyder, Berry, Oliver, and W. S. Merwin against an Emersonian lineage including Whitman, Frost, Wallace Stevens, Derek Walcott, Jorie Graham, A. R. Ammons, and Amy Clampitt. While the first group endorses a Thoreauvian "aesthetics of relinquishment" and "ethics of restraint" that Costello theorizes based on Buell's *The Environmental Imagination,* the second practices an Emersonian superfluity and "ethos of extravagance" that Costello elaborates from Richard Poirier's reading of Emerson's essays as self-deconstructive experiments in thinking that value mobility and excess (569). Costello thus outlines two attitudes toward waste: while Emersonian superfluity celebrates "the ongoing," or the exuberant expenditure of energy that fuels the world, Thoreauvian restraint conceives of conservation as a parsimonious constipation, a closed cycle, a Puritanical making do with less.[8] In Costello's account, Emersonian

[8] This dichotomy telegraphs a common way of reading Emerson's and Thoreau's views of nature: while nature is an endlessly productive and expansive force for Emerson, Thoreau sees it as a limited quantity or area that is endangered and in need of conservation.

superfluity is joyous, while Thoreauvian restraint is an impossibly exacting, judgmental ethic.[9] Costello implies that poets of the Emersonian lineage she celebrates not only write more linguistically sophisticated and formally engaging poems, but also tell us more about nature, which operates via superfluity, excess, and waste, than those of the Thoreauvian lineage can.

In locating a new environmental aesthetics in Emersonian superfluity rather than Thoreauvian restraint, Costello questions environmentalism's usual affect and suggests that exuberant expenditures of energy, rather than efforts to conserve, unite natural forces and cultural acts of making. Costello picked up on the mid-1990s move, in the environmental humanities, away from conceptions of environment centered on wilderness and toward a focus on the entanglement of nature and culture; she cites the influential 1995 volume Cronon edited, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (574).[10] In moving toward such questions, Costello was well ahead of other ecocritics; in fact, she challenges early ecocriticism for its lack of sophistication and distances herself from it (573-574). In reading poets who resist Romantic views of nature, Costello attempts to locate a poetics that might love nature as it is, even damaged and "diminished," as Cronon urged in his call for us to value the nature all around us where we live at least as much as we value the pristine wilderness that we imagine exists far away in preserved refuges or once existed in the past ("The Trouble with Wilderness" 87-90).

By turning to Emerson, Costello offers an exciting alternative to views of nature as limited and environmentalist calls to hold back, consume less, and live smaller—the kind of conservationist ethic that can seem difficult to associate with any other affect than that of loss and, as Buell puts it,

[9] Costello's celebration of mobility and the "ongoing" is equally pronounced in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in American Poetry* (2002), but I focus here on "'What to Make of a Diminished Thing'" because Costello's distinction between Emersonian superfluity and Thoreauvian restraint has been most useful and provocative for me.

[10] The scholars represented in *Uncommon Ground* give a good sense of the range and diversity of these environmental humanists: from feminist posthumanists like Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles to historians like Richard White and Jennifer Price to literary philosophers like Robert Pogue Harrison.

"relinquishment." Rather than representing nature solely as a circumscribed and threatened resource, Emersonian superfluity conceives it as a limitless force that ramifies through culture and what Hannah Arendt calls "the human artifice"—the built world of structures and institutions—as well. As Emerson put it in "Nature" (1844),[11] "Exaggeration is in the course of things. Nature sends no creature, no man into the world, without adding a small excess of his proper quality . . . to every creature nature added a little violence of direction in its proper path, a shove to put it on its way; in every instance, a slight generosity, a drop too much" (549). Poirier shows how this exuberance informs the movement of Emerson's thought, while Laura Dassow Walls argues that it also represents nature as an infinite force that cannot be damaged by human activity.

In advocating Emersonian superfluity, Costello takes some of the same risks that Emerson does: she celebrates excess, mobility, and "the ongoing" in ways that take on the tones of capitalist boosterism. Costello contends that "the entrepreneurial spirit of American poetry . . . has thrived on its speculation in new forms" (576) and argues that "the poet, in identifying with the dynamic, aggressive, and generative impulses of nature, its tendency to relocate, move in, fill space, disrupt what has been erected, may invite an alliance with those processes against those immobilities of culture that obstruct creative ongoing" (575). Though she tries to separate this "aggressive" entrepreneurship from "commodification" in her reading of Amy Clampitt's enterprising weeds taking over vacant lots, there seems more than a twinge of neoliberal capitalist ideology in Costello's insistence that "entrepreneurial expansion and obsolescence" characterizes both her favored Emersonian lineage of poets and their representations of nature (590).[12]

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[11] This is the essay, "Nature," that appeared in *Essays: Second Series* (1844), not the earlier *Nature*, a longer piece divided into sections, that appeared in 1836 as Emerson's first published book.

[12] Costello cements her ties to a neoliberal capitalist vision of nature by citing the work of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett in support of the view that "nature's economy is itself driven by an algorithm of excess and waste and by the impulse of life forms to occupy openings and grasp opportunities for expansion" (602-603n1). Dawkins and Dennett have both been critiqued for articulating a neo-Darwinism that naturalizes capitalist social forms.

Moreover, Costello does not show how the aesthetics of superfluity she outlines can foster a culture of sustainability. Instead, she simply offers the aesthetics of superfluity as an alternative to Buell's nostalgic and preachy aesthetics of relinquishment and the guilt-ridden strictures of conservation. While Costello acknowledges environmental degradation as a problem, she argues that cultural and natural creativity are inherently expansive and entrepreneurial, making no attempt to reconcile conservation and superfluity. Costello's Emersonian superfluity ultimately blurs the line between two very different kinds of wasting that Berry insists on distinguishing: the exuberant expenditure of energy through which organisms grow and thrive, on one hand, and, on the other, human acts of laying waste that convert a resource from a form in which people can re-use it into pollution.

Despite the fact that Berry has thought deeply about the relation between natural extravagance and cultural conservation and about the human relationship to the environment—indeed, before environmental humanists like Cronon began to turn their attention that direction[13]—Costello dismisses Berry as a nostalgic throwback. She accuses Berry and his fellow bioregionalist poet, Gary Snyder, of primitivism and retreating to "images of an idealized past" (586), but then minimizes as merely charming the evidence that Berry lives by his principles in the present: "Wendell Berry charms us with his sacramental marriage to enduring place, carried on through his subsistence farming in Kentucky" (587). At the heart of Costello's objection is Berry and Snyder's devotion to the local, which she depicts as anachronistic: "For them such places have essences that can provide identity and continuity to those who dwell in them. But these are not the places where most of us live or will live in the future" (587). Even though most Americans do not live in rural places, we all still live *from* those places. Costello implies that the rural areas that still produce most of the food that we all eat are somehow relegated to the past and destined to be left behind entirely, thus

[13] Cronon cites Berry in his influential essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness" (89).

dismissing Berry and Snyder through an appeal to the usual narrative of progress toward an urban modernity or post-modernity. As Berry has argued more than once, this reverence for the latest thing and for what is yet to be—coupled with the insistence that any choice among available methods or technologies that does *not* go with the newest and the latest is necessarily a nostalgic attempt to "go back"—is a hallmark of the kind of blinkered, headlong faith in technological progress that has created our many ecological and agricultural problems.

Ecocritics—most notably Ursula Heise—have criticized environmentalist devotion to the local in terms similar to Costello's. In *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008), Heise argues that American environmentalism's advocacy of local rootedness, and Berry's in particular, is not about ecology so much as cultural politics—a longing to belong in a particular place rather than go with the flow of stereotypical American mobility (49, 9).[14] But that argument goes two ways: if we can read Berry's championing of the local in terms of cultural politics, we can also read Heise's and Costello's celebration of mobility in similar terms. Costello, Heise, and advocates of experimental ecopoetics like Skinner sometimes seem to celebrate mobility for its cultural, political, and theoretical *cachet* rather than for ecological reasons.[15] Arguments that set the global against the local or mobility against immobility risk replicating stale cultural debates that tend to stymie conversation rather than promote it. Among such critics, Berry has become an easy figure to distance oneself from and define oneself against.[16]

However, Berry's work has profoundly shaped vibrant local, organic food movements that are

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[14] Heise writes, "Berry's . . . indictments of American nomadism come to lose some of their specifically environmentalist inflection and reveal themselves to be deeply rooted in a cultural rather than an ecological logic" (49).

[15] See, for example, Skinner's essay on Niedecker in *Radical Vernacular*.

[16] Here I have in mind my own earlier work as much as anyone else's. In "Rethinking Organic Metaphors in Poetry and Ecology: Rhizomes and Detritus Words in Oni Buchanan's 'Mandrake Vehicles,'" I set Buchanan's experiments against what I called Berry's "closed-circle organicism" (110-111). I now think that such a characterization of Berry's work oversimplifies it. Since Costello's article was important to my thinking in that piece, my argument with her is at heart an argument with myself.

changing the way people understand and experience their relationship to nature. In a 2011 article in *Gastronomica*, "Digging for the Roots of the Urban Farming Movement," Jason Mark of Alemany Farm—an urban farm between a freeway and a housing project in San Francisco—explores what motivates so many young people to volunteer for or work on such farms. Part of the answer has to do with embodied pleasures: "They begin to undergo a reawakening of the senses. They must learn—or relearn—how to see and smell and taste" (89). Mark tells a story about a college student who, when asked why he volunteers at the farm, said, "It's just great to be out in nature." Mark marvels, "Didn't he hear the rush of freeway traffic seventy yards away?" (89). But the implications are clear. The volunteer could not have considered himself in the wilderness with six lanes of traffic running by, so he must understand nature, not as land preserved somewhere else, but as a process that is always going on right here—in his own body, in the plants around him, in the work he can do to feed himself and others. This understanding of small-scale, organic farming—as a way to enact one's everyday, practical dependence on and inextricability from nature, even in the midst of a city—testifies to the cultural change that the local food movement is fostering. In a reference to Berry's most well-known book on agriculture, *The Unsettling of America*, Mark says that these "new agrarians" are accomplishing "the *resettling* of America" (91).

Berry's work empowers people to live in more sustainable ways, not through guilt or apocalyptic dread, but through joy and satisfaction. Berry celebrates pleasures that are seasonal, renewable, and sustainable and that depend neither on excessive consumption nor on ambition and success. As Dan Philippon has pointed out, Berry's influential 1989 essay, "The Pleasures of Eating," "collapses the all-too-common distinction between aesthetics or pleasure on the one hand and politics on the other" (172). In that essay, Berry insists that pleasure should "not depend on ignorance" of its consequences (*WPF* 152), and that the ecological and ethical dimensions of how food is grown and raised do affect our pleasure in eating it:

> Though I am by no means a vegetarian, I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable in order to feed me. If I am going to eat meat, I want it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant, uncrowded life outdoors, on bountiful pasture, with good water nearby and trees for shade. And I am getting almost as fussy about food plants. I like to eat vegetables and fruits that I know have lived happily and healthily in good soil, not the products of huge, bechemicaled factory-fields that I have seen, for example, in the Central Valley of California" (*WPF* 151).

Here Berry shows how his own pleasure in eating is connected to that of the animals and plants he eats. His reference to chemicals shows that he is thinking about broader ecosystemic health when he talks about the plants living "happily," but it's significant that he represents the ecological consequences of industrial agriculture in terms of the pleasure and happiness of domesticated plants and animals. Our pleasure is not separate from that of the creatures we raise and eat; we are connected with them not only ecologically and materially, but affectively. Berry writes:

> People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants . . . Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and comforts the eater. The same goes for eating meat. The thought of the good pasture and of the calf contentedly grazing flavors the steak . . . A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes. (*WPF* 151)

In this essay, health is simply part of pleasure; pleasure is the larger category. Berry's work thus signals a shift in the local, organic food movement of the last few decades, which has become about pleasure and taste as much as, or even more than, health. While Sir Albert Howard was primarily concerned with the connection between the health of the soil and that of crops, livestock, and

people, Berry puts that concern with interconnectedness in terms of pleasure as well as health. We shouldn't eat fresh food raised in ethically and ecologically sound ways simply because it is better for us, but because it tastes better and we will enjoy it more for knowing that it was grown sustainably. The slow food movement is about enjoying the process of growing, cooking, and eating food. This change in attitude is a relatively recent development: even Helen Nearing, back-to-the-lander though she was, represents eating in fairly ascetic terms in her humorous vegetarian cookbook, *Simple Food for the Good Life: A Collection of Random Cooking Practices and Pithy Quotations* (1980). She holds that food should power the body and keep one healthy; in her view, a concern for taste is an indulgence that only leads to over-eating.[17] Berry, in contending that "the pleasure of eating should be an *extensive* pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet" (*WPF* 151), articulates a lived principle—food should taste good and be fresh and unprocessed—that has come to motivate the local, organic food movement.

Berry's focus on pleasure and taste is perhaps the most important way in which his work shows how Emersonian superfluity and Thoreauvian restraint, exuberant mobility and conservationist stasis, are always intertwined. Though Berry is a thoroughgoing conservationist, his emphasis on the pleasures of eating is more Emersonian than Thoreauvian. It was Emerson, after all, who wrote, "Let the stoics say what they please, we do not eat for the good of living, but because the meat is savory and the appetite is keen" (550). The "stoics" should include Thoreau, who reports with pride that he planted only a few rows of beans at Walden, raised even those half-heartedly, and then traded them for the meager diet of rice on which he subsisted. Thoreau's representation of nature as a place for contemplative solitude and an ascetic attitude toward food and material subsistence has shaped the American concept of wilderness. Since his first book of essays, *The Long-Legged House*, Berry has framed his ideas about conservation, wilderness, and environmentalism as a

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[17] The cookbook itself, however, shows that Nearing delights in both her experiments in cooking and writing about them.

response to Thoreau. Berry's signal revisions of Thoreau are his insistence that conservationists must reckon with food and farming and that environmentalism must attend to the beauty and confront the problems of working agricultural landscapes—not simply pristine wildernesses or places extremely damaged by industry. The pleasures of eating and of farming are thus key to Berry's new agrarian revision of Thoreau and of American environmentalism.[18]

In fact, many of Berry's essays and poems focus on the seasonal, renewable pleasures of eating, outdoor work, and rest from work. In "The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer," for example, one of the poems in Berry's 1970 volume *Farming: A Handbook* written in the voice of Berry's "mad farmer" persona, the speaker lists pleasures such as

> Growing weather; enough rain; [. . .]
> the peach tree bent with its yield;
> [. . .]
> the ground, new worked, moist
> and yielding underfoot, the feet
> comfortable in it as roots;
> [. . .]
> strawberries red ripe with the white
> flowers still on the vines—picked
> with the dew on them, before breakfast; (*FHB* 60)

The poem also names pleasures such as feeling refreshed after sleep, work well done, buildings well built, and the joyful and competent bodies of other people (*FHB* 61-62). But, for Berry, these are not simply pleasures we should try to make time to enjoy in the midst of our busy, career-driven lives; they are not luxuries that should or must be dispensed with in the name of success, "efficiency," or maximizing time or money. Instead, these pleasures should motivate decisions we make about how to organize our lives and our work. In his 1980 essay, "Going Back—or Ahead—to Horses," for example, Berry quotes Nick Coleman's "first reason" for farming with horses:

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[18] Kimberly K. Smith has shown how Berry has revived and revised the agrarian tradition by making it environmentalist, articulating an ecological New Agrarianism. While Smith analyzes Berry's relationship to the agrarian tradition, I focus on how Berry's work inspires those who identify more with the local, organic food movement than with agarianism *per se*.

"Pleasure! I like horses. I like to use them" (*GL* 191). In "Elmer Lapp's Place" (1979), an essay on an Amish farmer who succeeds by organizing his small-scale farm in a sustainable way, Berry notes that "For a man giftedly practical, Mr. Lapp justifies what he has and does remarkably often by his *likes*" (*GL* 225). He concludes that "liking," or "delighted and affectionate understanding," holds the whole farm together: "The ecological pattern is a pattern of pleasure" (226). Though Berry's examples of organizing life in both pleasurable and ecologically sustainable ways are rural, Kate Soper highlights the way urbanites make similar decisions, by choosing to bike to work rather than drive, for example.

Berry's approach to pleasure thus disrupts the usual association between conservation and grim parsimony: for Berry, living sustainably is more pleasurable and joyful than excessive capitalist consumption. While Costello reinforces this binary by offering Emersonian superfluity as an alternative to Thoreauvian restraint, Berry instead redefines pleasure in a way that resonates with Kate Soper's concept of "alternative hedonism," as Philippon notes. While capitalist pleasures are about always having more achievement, money, or things, and always speeding ahead to the next goal, vacation, or purchase, "alternative hedonism," as Soper defines it, involves experiencing pleasure differently. Capitalist pleasures, because they are so oriented toward competition, success, and the future, in fact lead to stress, anxiety, and feelings of emptiness for many people. Alternative hedonism involves slowing down and experiencing other kinds of pleasures that we often pass by in our haste—pleasures of the senses, of the body, and of perceiving the present moment. Soper argues that we cannot isolate our bodily needs from their aesthetic or even spiritual dimensions. Capitalism tends to strip away aesthetic value from need-fulfillment, but then sell that aesthetic value back to consumers in materialized form. Soper's examples involve food: fast food and ready-to-eat meals strip away the value of sitting down with family or friends for a home-cooked meal, but then restaurant dining sells that value back to us in commoditized form. Consumerism's inability to

satisfy spiritual and aesthetic needs means that we keep reaching for the spiritual and grasping the material: Soper reveals how pleasure, in a capitalist system, becomes not only about acquiring and hoarding, but also about rushing from one act of consumption or acquisition to the next. Soper suggests that material and aesthetic or spiritual needs cannot be fulfilled separately or relegated to different domains.

In fact, Berry himself makes a strikingly similar argument in his 1988 essay, "Economy and Pleasure"—though in quite a different idiom and for a different audience than Soper. While Soper's scholarly article aims to persuade Marxist intellectuals that consumer lifestyle movements can actually have significant political effects in challenging capitalism, Berry is writing for a general audience about the problems that follow from the fact that our "economy" is organized around "competition." He does not use the word capitalism, probably because that word would alienate him from the portion of his audience who would therefore dismiss him as a leftist (or, worse, an academic).[19] Berry argues that "what the ideal of competition most flagrantly and disastrously excludes is affection," and he proposes to "talk about economy from the standpoint of affection—or, as I am going to call it, pleasure . . . for pleasure is, so to speak, affection in action" (*WPF* 136). Like Soper, Berry suggests that material and spiritual or aesthetic needs cannot be separated from each other, and that the economy's separation of them is in fact what drives the commoditization of pleasure:

> It may be argued that our whole society is more devoted to pleasure than any whole society ever was in the past, that we support in fact a great variety of pleasure industries and that these are thriving as never before. But that would seem only to prove my point. That there can be

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[19] But Berry is clearly writing about capitalism: "unlimited economic competitiveness proposes an unlimited concentration of economic power. Economic anarchy, like any other free-for-all, tends inevitably toward dominance by the strongest" (*WPF* 132). Berry then asserts that a rush "toward plutocracy" is happening under Reagan as he writes the essay.

> pleasure industries at all, exploiting our apparently limitless inability to be pleased, can only mean that our economy is divorced from pleasure and that pleasure is gone from our workplaces and our dwelling places. (*WPF* 139)

By making work and domestic life more "efficient," capitalism strips away the embodied pleasures that can come from them. In their stead, we turn to consumerist pleasures that cannot please us, since pleasure is not a commodity that can be bought, but comes from "our own wakefulness in this world, and in the company of other people and other creatures" (*WPF* 138).

Berry's essay is more incisive than Soper's in the way he distinguishes between exploitative and sustainable pleasures. He does so through economic metaphors: he argues that pleasures can cost more than they're worth and that we need to separate those costly pleasures from "*net* pleasures, pleasures that are free or without a permanent cost" (*WPF* 138). He defines exploitative pleasures this way:

> We know that a pleasure can be as heavily debited as an economy. Some people undoubtedly thought it pleasant, for example, to have the most onerous tasks of their economy performed by black slaves. But this proved to be a pleasure that was temporary and dangerous. It lived by an enormous indebtedness that was inescapably to be paid not in money, but in misery, waste, and death. The pleasures of fossil fuel combustion and nuclear 'security' are, as we are beginning to see, similarly debited to the future. . . . They are pleasures that we are allowed to have merely to the extent that we can ignore or defer the logical consequences. (*WPF* 137)

Exploitative pleasures not only depend on externalizing their costs in suffering "to other people or to nature," but are temporary even for those "winners" in the economy who are able to enjoy them because the consequences will soon catch up with all of us (*WPF* 137). In order to move beyond a competitive economy and toward what Berry calls "the possibility of countrysides . . . in which use is not synonymous with defeat"—that is, of working landscapes and communities that are not

damaged or ruined by their work—"we must consider our pleasures" (*WPF* 137). For Berry, re-defining pleasure is key to changing our economy and crafting an ecologically sustainable way of life. Berry suggests that we should foster "*net* pleasures," and that we know what they are: both everyday, embodied pleasures of the senses and the joys that develop over the long term through relationships with people and places.

In "The Pleasures of Eating" (1989), Berry extended his argument in "Economy and Pleasure" to the specific domain of food politics. There, he lays out a program for eating responsibly that still captures the ethos of and sets the agenda for the local, organic food movement. Key to it is turning eating into a pleasure that does not "depend on ignorance" about where one's food comes from, but is instead a net pleasure. We can do that by growing our own food and thus knowing the ecological and ethical effects of its production or by buying food locally, from farmers whose practices we know something about.

By insisting that we can find pleasure and satisfaction in working to fulfill our own material needs through gardening and home production, Berry and the local, organic food movement resist capitalism's tendency to separate and commodify both material and aesthetic forms of fulfillment. In "Economy and Pleasure," Berry points out the irony that we have "mechanized and automated and computerized our work" in order to have more time for leisure, but that such mechanization deprives us of the pleasures of work (*WPF* 140). While technological innovations are always justified by the assertion that they will free people from "drudgery," Berry contends that we should each re-examine whether we find hard physical work to be drudgery—he tells about his own enjoyment of the annual tobacco harvest, an instance of hard physical work whose communal nature makes it pleasurable for him (*WPF* 141). But this is a longstanding theme in Berry's writing. In *The Unsettling of America*, for example, he argues, "We have made it our overriding ambition to escape work, and as a consequence have debased work until it is only fit to escape from" (12). For Berry, pleasure,

health, and work to sustain life are instead intimately related: by doing the hard outdoor work of gardening or farming, we both grow good food and make ourselves hungry: "The work thus makes eating both nourishing and joyful . . . This is health, wholeness, a source of delight" (*UA* 138). While capitalist values are built on a scorn for such labor, Berry argues that "the 'drudgery' of growing one's own food, then, is not drudgery at all" (*UA* 138). In his 1978 essay "Home of the Free," Berry ridicules a couple of advertisements, one for a fancy combine and another for condo living, in order to criticize the attitude toward embodiment that they represent. Berry writes:

> According to this view, what we want to be set free from are the natural conditions of the world and the necessary work of human life; we do not want to experience temperatures that are the least bit too hot or too cold, or to work in the sun, or be exposed to wind or rain, or come in personal contact with anything describable as dirt, or provide for any of our own needs, or clean up after ourselves. Implicit in all this is the desire to be free of the 'hassles' of mortality, to be 'safe' from the life cycle. Such freedom and safety are always for sale. It is proposed that if we put all earthly obligations and rites of passage into the charge of experts and machines, then life will become a permanent holiday. (*GL* 184)

Concluding that "the only real way to get this sort of freedom and safety—to escape the hassles of earthly life—is to die," Berry parodically suggests "some super salesman" should start selling coffins, or "'earth space capsules,'" to these "perfect consumers—the self-consumers, who have found nothing of interest here on earth . . . and are impatient to be shed of earthly concerns" (*GL* 185).

For Berry, then, everyday pleasures, delights, and affections come at the price of participation in "the life cycle"—if we want to rest well and enjoy eating, we have to work; if we want to enjoy warming up, we have to be willing to get cold; if we want to experience the great joy that comes from relationship to people or a place, we also have to make ourselves vulnerable to the loss commitment entails. While consumer capitalism promotes pleasures that depend on avoiding work

and suffering—paying for food and products that other people worked hard to grow or make, often in horrible conditions and for too little pay—Berry instead argues that pleasure and work can instead make a cyclical pattern in our own lives. When we undertake the "radical act" of gardening or fulfilling even just a few of our own needs through "home production," we enjoy sensuous, embodied pleasures that arrive only when we're willing to participate in the life cycle. Near the end of "Home of the Free," Berry notes that such participation both makes us vulnerable to suffering and gives us joy: "I acknowledge that the world, the weather, and the life cycle have caused me no end of trouble, and yet I look forward to putting in another forty or so years with them because they have also given me no end of pleasure and instruction" (186).

Because Berry sees rewarding, appropriately-scaled work as a pleasure in itself and as essential to other pleasures, his attitude toward human energy is in fact Emersonian rather than Thoreauvian. Berry argues that bodily energy is not meant to be saved, but must be used and spent for full human thriving. While "labor-saving" devices have been key to the rapid industrial and technological changes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Berry argues that we should think about what it means to "save" our energy and what we are saving it for, both as individuals and as a society. If "labor-saving" devices simply put people out of work—as they have done in agriculture on a dramatic scale, driving many farmers out of farming since the 1940s—are they benefitting us, or just the agribusinesses that have profited from such competition and consolidation? Berry argues that "we must learn to think of human energy, *our* energy, not as something to be saved, but as something to be used and to be enjoyed in use" (*UA* 219). Trying to save energy on an individual level doesn't make sense: there's nothing we can do with the energy we've "saved," except that now we need to go to the gym because we don't have any physical work to do. Berry argues that by "saving" bodily energy—"as our ideals of labor-saving and luxury bid us to do—we simply waste it, and waste much else along with it" (*UA* 219). We waste not only opportunities for work well done,

but for the pleasure and joy of such work. In his 1980 essay, "A Few Words for Motherhood," which is about one of his cows calving, Berry in fact criticizes Thoreau's attitude toward human energy specifically:

> Thoreau may have been the first to assert that people should not belong to farm animals, but the idea is now established doctrine with many farmers—and it has received amendments to the effect that people should not belong to children, or to each other. But we all have to belong to something, if only to the idea that we should not belong to anything. We all have to be used up by something. (*GL* 197)

Here Berry implies that Thoreau was "used up" by the "idea" that he should not commit to anything. His point is that we should not "save" our energy for the sake of saving it, but should instead think carefully about how we want to use our energy and what we want to "belong to." As he puts it in "Economy and Pleasure," "Ultimately, in the argument about work and how it should be done, one has only one's pleasure to offer" (*WPF* 143). Pleasure doesn't come from "saving" labor and avoiding work, but from organizing work in a way that is sustainable and promotes the happiness and well being of people, other creatures, and ecosystems.

For Berry, pleasure comes from participating in the life cycle—from work as well as rest, and from interaction with other creatures and people whose pleasure is inseparable from one's own. If such pleasures are not consumerist or acquisitive, they are also not linear or heteronormative. They are seasonal and cyclical; they often involve anticipation and delay. In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle,* Barbara Kingsolver discusses the joys of eating seasonally in these terms: "That's the sublime paradox of a food culture: restraint equals indulgence" (32). When you eat seasonally, you anticipate asparagus, you delight in asparagus when it finally arrives, you eat so much asparagus in the few weeks that it's available that you almost get sick of it, and then you wait for asparagus season again. Seasonality—desiring something but awaiting its time and place rather than rushing out to get it

immediately—has affective and ecological advantages: anticipation heightens pleasure and makes it renewable, while eating locally, with the seasons, is more sustainable than buying whatever you want whenever you want it, no matter how far away it comes from. This is perhaps even a kind of "queer ecology" that is not about embracing the negative and the dark, as in Timothy Morton's version of queer ecology, but about the positive values of anticipation and delay.

Wendell Berry himself would not, of course, call this desire non-normative or see this as a form of queer ecology. For those on the left, Berry's gender politics are perhaps the most controversial part of his work. But given Berry's traditionalist gender politics, it's interesting that he represents the farmer as taking on constantly changing gender roles. In *The Unsettling of America*, he contrasts the explorer or capitalist exploiter, who is always "masculine," with the farmer:

> The nurturer, on the other hand, has always passed with ease across the boundaries of the so-called sexual roles. Of necessity and without apology, the preserver of seed, the planter, becomes midwife and nurse. Breeder is always metamorphosing into brooder and back again. . . . The farmer, sometimes known as husbandman, is by definition half mother; the only question is how good a mother he or she is. And the land itself is not mother or father only, but both. . . . Farmer and land are thus involved in a sort of dance in which the partners are always at opposite sexual poles, and the lead keeps changing: the farmer, as seed-bearer, causes growth; the land, as seed-bearer, causes the harvest. (*UA* 8)

Both organic farming and eating with the seasons thus involve, not only an anti-capitalist relationship to work and pleasure, but also one that challenges heteronormativity. Berry argues that "in the right sort of economy, our pleasure would not be merely an addition or by-product or reward; it would be both an empowerment of our work and its indispensable measure" (*WPF* 140). Reorganizing our work and lives around *pleasure* is radical in more than one sense. As the passage above shows, participation in the life cycle involves vulnerability to the queering of subjectivity.

Compost represents the life cycle in concrete form—not only in Berry's work, but in contemporary American culture at large and across the experimental poetries that Rasula explores in *This Compost*.

**Compost in Wendell Berry's Essays and Poems**

Berry's work suggests that we should talk about compost and pleasure together not because there is joy in waste itself, as some ecocritics contend, but because death and decay make life and its pleasures renewable and sustainable. In this section, I will examine how compost helps Berry define the organic in his essays on farming and in his poems—that is, how compost functions pragmatically and metaphorically in his thought. But I want to open with a short reading of "The Arrival" from *The Country of Marriage* (1973), a poem which shows Berry thinking through the relationship between superfluity and restraint, abundance and conservation, in a more nuanced way than Costello does. Here is the poem in its entirety:[20]

> Like a tide it comes in,
> wave after wave of foliage and fruit,
> the nurtured and the wild,
> out of the light to this shore.
> In its extravagance we shape
> the strenuous outline of enough. (*CM* 19)

Here natural "extravagance" co-exists with the small human group's difficult attainment of a sufficiency. Though the "tide" of growth is superfluous, "we" still have to worry about having "enough." This is not because humans are separate from nature, but is rather an issue of scale that we share with other animals. Berry indicates that issue of scale when he writes that the tide of growth comes "out of the light to this shore." The "light" here is the light of the sun, whose excessive energy the plants and trees on "this shore" take up through photosynthesis and transform

[20] This poem is reproduced in the same form in *Collected Poems 1957-1972* (153) and in *New Collected Poems* (175). Whenever possible, however, I will cite Berry's poems as they appear in his original volumes, because Berry often silently omits or revises poems in his collected volumes.

into “foliage and fruit.” The mixed metaphor of a tide that comes from “the light,” then, conveys above all a vast change in scale, from the solar to the local, from the sun to the “foliage and fruit” that immediately surround the speaker. While sunlight is abundant and free and vegetative growth responds with a similar extravagance wherever it can, individual animals and communities often struggle to make do with the resources they find around them because their needs for food and shelter are particular. Berry’s poem thus implies that we must often proceed by conservation even as we are surrounded by abundance.

Moreover, “enough” in this poem is something we have to “shape”—it is not just a quantity, but a form with a particular, insistent, “strenuous outline.” In fact, the last two lines of the poem turn on the tension between the quantitative term “enough” and the qualitative form implied in the act of shaping. For Berry, having “enough,” creating a physical and cultural sufficiency, is not only, or not even primarily, about quantity—it’s about the form or shape that sufficiency takes. This insight pervades Berry’s thought, not only about food and farming, but also about culture and creating sustainable communities. In terms of food, at least, this distinction between sheer quantity and formal quality seems right on the mark: if industrialized agriculture and the “Western diet” have taught us anything, it’s that quantity of food alone is no guarantee of the physical health of individual people, let alone cultural or environmental health.[21]

Finally, Berry’s description of abundant vegetative growth in this poem reveals a key element of his understanding of compost as well. This growth includes both “the nurtured and the wild”—that is, both crops sown by people and plants that grow of their own accord. Growth is thus both cultural and natural; agriculture is a meeting of cultural practices and natural processes. Decay, for Berry, is similar: people can foster decay through the agricultural practice of compost, but in doing so they must collaborate with a process that just happens without their intervention.

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[21] See Pollan’s *In Defense of Food* on obese people who have diseases caused by nutritional deficiency.

Berry's compost is not simply the opposite of Costello's Emersonian superfluity, but instead emerges out of an understanding of energy and waste that is at once Emersonian and Thoreauvian and makes nonsense of her distinction between conservation and superfluity. Berry thinks of energy as a "current," a superfluous extravagance, that derives from the sun and continues through endless changes of form. In "The Use of Energy," a key chapter in *The Unsettling of America*, Berry quotes Blake's "Energy is Eternal Delight" and asserts that energy is "an issue of religion" and shares a paradox with religion: "they cannot have it except by losing it; they cannot use it except by destroying it" (*UA* 81). In transvaluing this statement about eternal life from the New Testament, Berry indicates something of his concrete Christianity. But he also makes a literal statement about energy: we can only have energy on the fly, in the act of losing it, and we can only use it by using it up. Berry notes that in fact people can neither create energy nor destroy it; we can only change its form. Because endless transformations are the rule, there is no waste in nature. As Berry puts it in "Agricultural Solutions to Agricultural Problems," "In natural or biological systems, waste does not occur . . . All that is sloughed off in the living arc of a natural cycle remains within the cycle; it becomes fertility, the power of life to continue" (*GL* 117). This natural cycle is not abstract, but refers specifically to the way that the decay of dead organisms fertilizes the soil that feeds new life.

Berry's understanding of energy in fact resonates with those of thinkers as different from him as the French theorists Georges Bataille and Henri Lefebvre, who both argue that, to grow and flourish, organisms, individuals, and cultures must expend energy in excess of what is necessary for mere survival. In volume one of *The Accursed Share*, for example, Bataille conceives of the entire planet—natural and cultural—as a system that must use or waste its always-excessive energy: "On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered" (23). Bataille's conception of energy is tied to the planet and to biological life: "Solar energy is the source

of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving" (28). This is Bataille's version of the abundant "light" that brings a tide of growth to "this shore" in "The Arrival." Berry's assertion that there is no waste in nature and Bataille's vision of a "luxurious squandering of energy" thus turn out to suggest the same thing: a planetary system of energy transformations that ultimately derives from the sun. Bataille, in calling all energy uses "waste," and Berry, in claiming that there is "no waste" because all energy is re-used, both erase the distinction between productive use and waste for rhetorical effect. In both cases, this rhetorical move underscores the unity of planetary energy systems.

However, while Bataille's theory stays at the planetary scale, Berry distinguishes between the global scale, on which energy simply changes form and there is thus no waste, and the human scale: "from a human point of view, we can destroy [energy] also by wasting it—that is, by changing it into a form in which we cannot use it again" (*UA* 81). Here, the definition of "waste" depends on the perspective from which one looks—we effectively destroy energy for our own purposes when we render it impossible to re-use. Industry provides the most prominent examples: "waste—so far, at least—has always been intrinsic to industrial production . . . Because industrial cycles are never complete . . . there are two characteristic results of industrial enterprise: exhaustion and contamination. The energy industry, for instance, is not a cycle, but only a short arc between an empty hole and poisoned air" (*GL* 117).

While converting fossil fuels into carbon dioxide and air pollution is an obvious example of destroying energy by turning it into harmful "by-products" that we cannot re-use, Berry's favorite agricultural examples of waste involve turning beneficial materials into pollutants by misusing them. Livestock manure, in the right quantities, can be used to fertilize fields and build topsoil, but the massive scale of Confined Animal Feeding Operations turns manure into a public health problem

instead, concentrating it in large quantities that poison groundwater. In a section of *The Unsettling of America* titled "Fertility as Waste," Berry talks about sewage systems in similar terms. Berry argues that we make the human body "a little factory which transforms fertility into pollution" by making it into "a conduit which channels the nutrients of the earth from the supermarket to the sewer" (*UA* 136). Flush toilets and sewage systems have allowed a "technological purification of the body" that "requires the pollution of the rivers and the starvation of the fields" (*UA* 136). Human waste, like livestock manure, can be used to build the fertility of the soil, but because we regard it as waste it is "duly wasted" (*UA* 136). Writing about the harmful concentration of livestock manure in large quantities and the use of chemical fertilizers to grow grain crops, Berry comments, "The genius of American farm experts is very well demonstrated here: they can take a solution and divide it neatly into two problems" (*UA* 62).

That solution would be, in a word, compost. Compost is a way of conserving and making use of biological energy that derives from the sun—energy first captured by the photosynthesis of plants and taken up by the animals who eat those plants. Berry follows Sir Albert Howard, an important early thinker in the organic farming movement, in conceiving of compost as an agricultural practice that imitates what happens naturally, on the forest floor, as leaves decay into humus. Howard was a British soil scientist who emphasized the importance of the "return" of organic matter to the soil. On the basis of traditional farming practices that he observed at his imperial post in India, Howard developed a composting method that he continued to practice and advocate when he returned to England. Berry writes of Howard,

> His is the story of a fragmentary intelligence seeking both its own wholeness and that of the world . . . He unspecialized his vision, in other words, so as to see the necessary unity of the concerns of agriculture . . . He sought to establish agriculture upon the same unifying cycle that preserves health, fertility, and renewal in nature: the Wheel of Life (as he called it,

> borrowing the term from religion), by which 'Death supersedes life and life rises again from what is dead and decayed."' (*UA* 46)[22]

Howard's concept of the Wheel of Life, whereby the health of soil, crops, animals, and humans are all connected by cycles of growth from decay, has been important to Berry, who titled one of his volumes of poems *The Wheel*. As his account of Howard's thought shows, for Berry compost is a cycle that is both pragmatically concrete and spiritually significant. While referring specifically to the practical way that the decay of dead organisms feeds the microbes and fungi in the soil that in turn feeds new life, compost also prompts us to reflect on the fact that, as mortals, we are only small parts of larger cycles of death, decay, and growth with which we can collaborate, but which we cannot control.

Howard is only one of a series of heretical thinkers who have, for almost a century, called for an agriculture that pays as much attention to decay as to growth. The organic farming movement has been intent on pointing out that decay, and the act of returning decaying matter to the soil, is the essential neglected side of industrialized agriculture. Conventional industrial farming practices try to "replace" the fertility that comes from the breakdown of organic matter with chemical fertilizers. In contrast, proponents of organic agriculture from Howard to Pollan have underscored the liveliness of the soil—the microbes, bacteria, fungi, and earthworms in it that thrive on decaying organic matter—and have argued that the health of the soil's microscopic life is part of the complex process by which crops, animals, and people thrive. Beyond the purview of the organic farming movement itself, many advocates for a sustainable, "permanent" agriculture, including Edward Faulkner and Louis Bromfield, have called for the return of organic matter to the soil.[23]

Conventional industrial agriculture and organic agriculture thus imply two quite different

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[22] Berry is citing Howard's *The Soil and Health* (1947). Berry wrote the introduction to a 2006 edition of this book.

[23] See Beeman and Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land*.

attitudes to the soil: while conventional agricultural practices treat it more or less as an inert medium that conveys chemical fertilizers and water to crops, advocates of organic farming see soil itself as alive and as the key element in farming, one that farmers should care for, maintain, and improve. Berry often calls industrialized agriculture "mining," by which he means that it turns soil fertility—which can and should be a renewable resource—into a nonrenewable resource by using up topsoil and letting it erode. A subsection of *The Unsettling of America* is titled "Let them eat the future," by which Berry means that we are subsidizing annual yields, corn for today's cows and Coca-Cola, by spending and wasting the long-term fertility of the soil. Advocates of organic farming, on the other hand, argue that soil fertility can be conserved or even increased while land is in use, through practices such as planting cover crops, crop rotation, and incorporating composted manure and vegetable wastes into the soil.

Compost is essential to Berry's definition of organic farming. In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry explains the principles of "a healthy farm": it will produce a diversity of animals and plants in a balanced proportion to each other and will have "the right proportion of people" to land so that the farmers will be neither "impoverished" nor overworked (*UA* 182).[24] The final principle both indicates the centrality of compost and corrects those who misread that: "a healthy farm will be so far as possible independent and self-sustaining. It is necessary to say 'so far as possible,' for we are by no means talking here about a 'closed system.'" While organic forms and organic farming are often dismissed for their investment in closure, Berry's definition shows that this dismissal simplifies the issue.[25] Berry describes the ecological, economic, and social ways a farm is always connected with

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[24] In "Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems" (1978), Berry enumerates these principles perhaps even more clearly and succinctly, showing how they address the agricultural "problems of scale, of balance, of diversity, of quality" (*GL* 121-123).

[25] In fact, Berry does not see the body as a closed system either: "Of course, the body in most ways is not at all like a machine. Like all living creatures and unlike a machine, the body is not formally self-contained; its boundaries and outlines are not so exactly fixed. The body alone is not, properly speaking, a body. Divided from its sources of air, food,

what surrounds it, but insists that a partial and provisional independence is ecologically and economically desirable. He names fertility from waste specifically: "fertility, the major capital of any farm, can be largely renewed and maintained from sources on the farm itself . . . By proper tillage, rotation, the use of legumes, and the return of manure and other organic wastes to the soil, the fields can be kept productive with minimal recourse to fertilizers from outside sources" (183). The compost trope is important to Berry not because compost creates a closed whole or transfigures waste without remainder, but because it is a simple, affordable way in which we can conserve energy and fertility by imitating and fostering a process that happens on its own.

Because he emphasizes the cultural imitation of natural cycles in key practices like composting, Berry insists that organic farms—as well as the poems and communities whose forms we might call organic—are *made* things. Berry thus aligns the organic with construction and artifice rather than nature. As Berry writes in "Solving for Pattern" (1980), "those human solutions that we may call organic are not natural. We are talking about organic *artifacts*, organic only by imitation or analogy" (*GL* 145). In effect, Berry emphasizes that "organic" is a metaphor—as a descriptor, it doesn't imply that something is natural, but that it is patterned on analogy with an organism.[26] His definition of an organic farm earlier in this same essay makes this clear:

> An organic farm, properly speaking, is not one that uses certain methods and substances and avoids others; it is a farm whose structure is formed in imitation of the structure of a natural system; it has the integrity, the independence, and the benign dependence of an organism. Sir

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drink, clothing, shelter, and companionship, a body is, properly speaking, a cadaver, whereas a machine by itself, shut down or out of fuel, is still a machine" (*ATC* 94-95).

[26] Emphasizing the organic metaphor allows Berry to caution that there is always a gap between sustainable agricultural practices and the natural processes they attempt to imitate. Berry's general caution about metaphors is also at work here. In "Health is Membership," he criticizes medicine's machine metaphors for bodies: "The problem is that like any metaphor, it is accurate only in some respects. A girl is only in some respects like a red rose; a heart is only in some respects like a pump. This means that a metaphor must be controlled by a sort of humorous intelligence, always mindful of the exact limits within which the comparison is meaningful. When a metaphor begins to control intelligence, as this one of the machine has done for a long time, then we must look for costly distortions and absurdities" (*ATC* 94).

> Albert Howard said that a good farm is an analogue of the forest which 'manures itself.' A farm that imports too much fertility, even as feed or manure, is in this sense as inorganic as a farm that exports too much or that imports chemical fertilizer. (*GL* 143-144)

This passage reminds us that principles based on the analogy between a farm and an ecosystem stand behind organic farming. Organic farms are not simply those that can show that they do not use certain kinds of pesticides and herbicides, as the adoption of organic certification standards in the US and Europe has inevitably implied. Instead, organic farming practices try to foster and emulate the process of growth from decay that takes place of its own accord in forests, prairies, and other ecosystems.

While the practice of compost is key to Berry's definition of organic farming, compost also becomes a figure for how we can foster transformations that we cannot fully understand or control. While we all inevitably participate in biological and ecological processes beyond our control, cultural practices enable us to collaborate carefully and deliberately with those processes. Berry depicts biological energy as a "current" that makes what he calls "form" or "shapeliness" through cycles of growth, death, and decay (*UA* 84). While we think of fossil fuel energy as "an inconceivable quantity" waiting to be used, the energy of living things instead presents "a conceivable pattern." But Berry argues that this pattern is "conceivable not so much to the analytic intelligence . . . as to the imagination, by which we perceive, value, and imitate order beyond our understanding" (*UA* 85). While we struggle to comprehend the vast quantities of fossil fuel energy that we use and to set cultural limits on such use, we can imagine the forms through which biological energy endlessly renews itself. For Berry, farming involves imagining and fostering wild processes that we can never fully understand. Berry's insistence on the ultimate mystery of such processes cuts against the pretensions of rationalism and scientism, but it is not mystical or solely religious—it is a pragmatic conviction that the more we learn, the more we become aware of the extent of our ignorance. This

necessary mystery is finally a problem of scale for Berry: as humans, as part of the earthly ecosystems that sustain us, we can never hope to achieve an outside perspective that would allow us to fully understand, much less control, natural processes.[27] Berry considers the positivist, techno-scientific attempts to do so examples of the *hubris* that has gotten us into this ecological mess.

Berry therefore sees the farmer as an artist, and insists that imagination can help us foster sustainable farming practices. He turns from the model of rational understanding and scientific control to that of the farmer as an artist who collaborates with wild forces: "because [the soil's] processes yield more readily to imitation than to analysis, more readily to care than to coercion, agriculture can never be an exact science. There is an inescapable kinship between farming and art . . . It is a practical art" (*UA* 87).[28] In a 1991 interview with Mindy Weinreb, Berry elaborates and qualifies this, noting that "human work is all art—all artifice or making-by-art:"

> The finest farmers are masters of form. They must know how to do one thing while remaining mindful of many. They must bring many patterns into harmony. They must understand how diversity may be comprehended within unity. They must know how to deal with the unforeseen. And these are all characteristics of the finest poets. (Merchant 32)

The hallmarks of literary organic form—specifically, Coleridge's unity in multeity—show up in Berry's notion of organic farming because he considers farming a kind of making, a formal work, which requires imagination as well as understanding.[29]

Berry thus sees both poetry and farming as acts of making or artifice that do not create new

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[27] David Abram makes a similar point in *Becoming Animal* (2010).

[28] In "Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems," Berry writes, "Industrial agriculture has tended to look on the farmer as a 'worker'—a sort of obsolete but not yet dispensable machine—acting on the advice of scientists and economists. We have neglected the truth that a *good* farmer is a craftsman of the highest order, a kind of artist. It is the good work of good farmers—nothing else—that assures a sufficiency of food over the long term" (*GL* 123-124).

[29] This echo of Coleridge appears in *The Unsettling of America* as well, where Berry writes that farms should aim to "accommodate the margin within the form, to allow the wilderness or nature to thrive in domesticity, to accommodate diversity within unity" (179).

forms out of nothing, but instead must collaborate with processes and patterns that are larger than we are, that contain us, and that we cannot orchestrate from the outside. While Berry adopts Coleridge's formal principle of "diversity within unity," his understanding of imagination is in fact radically different from Coleridge's. While Coleridge sees imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the infinite I AM," that is, as a godlike power of creation, Berry instead sees imagination as a power that attempts to fathom, respect, and imitate patterns that are beyond our rational understanding, and certainly beyond our powers of origination or control. Imagination, for Berry, leads to humility, not to the arrogance of what Keats called "the egotistical sublime." While critics have often seen Berry as part of the Romantic tradition of nature poetry, he actually censures Wordsworth and the strand of Romanticism that he represents quite forcefully in his essay "Poetry and Place." In a careful and revealing reading of Milton, Pope, Dryden, and Wordsworth, Berry argues that Romantic poetry is complicit with the rise of rationalist techno-science in making the individual human mind—rather than traditional practices and collective knowledge—the primary arbiter of experience and value. Berry even defends Alexander Pope and converts Pope's Great Chain of Being into an ecological concept, provocatively championing the poet who has served as the usual villain in accounts of the Romantic revolution against ornamental verse and in favor of natural speech since Wordsworth's "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads."

In effect, Berry's rethinking of organic form leads him to celebrate, not Romantic nature poetry, but an even older Western literary tradition. Throughout the 1980s, Berry wrote himself into a more consistently traditionalist position—not because he came to believe that tradition is natural, as one might assume, but rather because he thought through the implications of his realization that organic forms are made or constructed. While Berry began, in the 1960s and 70s, by writing the kind of mainstream, free verse lyrics that were dominant in the poetry scene at that time, his defense of traditional practices as ecological in his essays on agriculture led to a change in his poetics. In the late

1970s and 80s, Berry began writing in more traditional verse forms, with rhyme and meter; this shift takes hold especially with in his series of *Sabbaths* poems. As Berry thought through the organic metaphor in farming, he seems to have come to believe that organic forms in general should underscore their status as constructed things rather than aspiring to appear natural. Therefore he turned away from the conventionally "organic" free verse lyrics that aim to sound like natural speech and toward traditional poetic forms.

However, from his early poems on, well before this formal shift in his work, Berry's poetry has grappled with issues that the trope of compost brings up. If, as the concept of compost implies, death and decay are necessary to new life, then collaborating with and participating in cycles that contain us involves vulnerability to loss as well as openness to everyday pleasure and joy. Thus not just embodied pleasures, but the human experiences of death and loss figure largely in Berry's poems. Elegies have always played a prominent role in his poetry: his first book, *The Broken Ground* (1964), opens with an elegy for his grandfather, Pryor Thomas Berry, and the next book of poems he wrote, *Findings* (1969), is primarily elegiac in tone. Elegies written in memory of specific people, on the occasion of their deaths, are a frequently recurring feature of Berry's volumes of poetry. This is not a paradox, but in fact reveals a key element of the human condition as Berry conceives it: to experience pleasures, we must give up trying to control the larger cycles of which we are a part. By participating in cycles that we can imagine but cannot control, we become able to fully experience the pleasures of the senses and the joys of embodiment, but we also become willing to fully experience the losses, suffering, and hardship that death and the necessity of work entail.

Figures of decay, compost, and return to the ground help Berry represent death, not as a tragic individual end, but as a form of loss that yet also restores when the memory of someone lost

folds into and strengthens community.[30] The closing lines of "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, published in *Findings*, are: "He's hidden among all that is, / and cannot be lost" (63). Berry's work implies that individuals and communities only remain vibrant by mourning and by acknowledging death and loss. When we reckon honestly with our individual, mortal limits, we turn to collectivity to pass on cultural knowledge and to heal. This passage from *The Unsettling of America* suggests how the process of decay in the soil offers Berry a way to think through the cultural dimensions of death as well:

> The soil is the great connector of lives . . . It is alive itself. It is a grave, too, of course. Or a healthy soil is . . . no matter how finely the dead are broken down, or how many times they are eaten, they yet give into other life. If a healthy soil is full of death it is also full of life: worms, fungi, microorganisms of all kinds, for which, as for us humans, the dead bodies of the once living are a feast . . . Given only the health of the soil, nothing that dies is dead for very long . . . And this living topsoil—living in both the biological sense and in the cultural sense, as metaphor—is the basic element in the technology of farming. (*UA* 86)

We can note two remarkable aspects of this passage: first that the soil as *metaphor* is part of the "technology of farming" for Berry, and second that culturally as well as biologically "the dead . . . give into other life." While Howard also writes about the way microorganisms in the soil thrive on decay, Berry's idiom differs from his slightly. Berry calls the soil "a grave," a term with cultural rather than scientific connotations. In underscoring the way that the fertility of the soil depends on its taking-in of the dead, Berry implies some cultural corollaries: that the memory of those who have died and their legacies enrich human communities, and that cultural tradition always involves a

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[30] Asked about death in his work, Berry responded, "One of the more idiotic questions that we now have to decide is whether or not we think death is a disease. If we think it is a disease, then we must oppose it at all costs, a line of work no more promising for mortals now than it has ever been, but extremely profitable for the medical industry. If we don't think death is a disease, then we must come to terms with it. I regard my attention to the matter as merely normal" (Weinreb 40).

necessary transformation of what we have inherited from the past, rather than a simple preservation. In fact, Berry implies that it is the transformation of what we have inherited that makes tradition possible: preservation without change is impossible because cultural energy, like biological energy, is current.

More than ten years before he wrote the passage above, in the title poem of his first volume, "The Broken Ground," Berry thinks through the way in which death facilitates new growth and new life in both biological and cultural senses:

> The opening out and out,
> body yielding body:
> the breaking
> through which the new
> comes, perching
> above its shadow
> on the piling up
> darkened broken old
> husks of itself:
> bud opening to flower
> opening to fruit opening
> to the sweet marrow
> of the seed—
>                         taken
> from what was, from
> what could have been.
> What is left
> is what is. (*CPB* 25)

The "broken ground," in this volume that opens with an elegy, is at once the broken ground of the grave, the ground broken through plowing and planting, and the ground that the plant itself breaks by sprouting. Here "what is" distinguishes itself from the past from which it grows and the alternatives that did not occur by being "left" on top of the pile of "husks of itself." There is more than a little loss in this understanding of how "the new / comes," but there is also an acceptance of that loss as a necessary condition, the only one that can enable growth.

Berry's poems often involve a triple metaphor, in which death and decay, marriage and sexuality, and living in a place all become figures for each other. In his 1970 volume *Farming: A*

*Handbook*, Berry often uses sexuality and death to convey the vulnerability involved in participating in the life of a place. In "Enriching the Earth," for example, Berry connects the practice of composting with death:

> I have stirred into the ground the offal
> and the decay of the growth of past seasons
> and so mended the earth and made its yield increase.
> All this serves the dark. [. . .]
> I am slowly falling
> into the fund of things. And yet to serve the earth,
> not knowing what I serve, gives a wideness
> and a delight to the air, and my days
> do not wholly pass. (*FHB* 21)

Here returning decaying organic matter to the fields and the pleasure of such work are inseparable from the speaker's own eventual death, his "falling / into the fund of things." A sense of freedom, purpose, and pleasure—"a wideness / and a delight"—comes, paradoxically, from the impending, ultimate commitment to a place that shadows the speaker's everyday commitments to it. The last lines of this poem speak explicitly about this ultimate commitment: "After death, willing or not, the body serves, / entering the earth. And so what was heaviest / and most mute is at last raised up into song" (*FHB* 21). The speaker, and everyone else, will finally participate in the cycles of growth from decay that the farmer fosters whether they want to or not. In these lines, death itself allows or gives onto another kind of freedom, but this freedom is not merely spiritual—"song," here, figures the way the body, which was "heaviest / and most mute," materially becomes other forms of life.

These lines thus bring up another of Berry's frequent themes, which is a kind of concrete Christianity where resurrection is not a myth about heaven but a physical phenomenon that occurs through cycles of growth, death, and decay. In "The Man Born to Farming," for example, the farmer

> whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
> to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
> yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down
> in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn. (*FHB* 3)

Here growth *is* resurrection, and participating in annual joys requires "enter[ing] into death / yearly."

Berry has always deplored the split between spirit and body in most forms of Christianity; he has criticized southern evangelicalism especially for turning to the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, rather than works, as a way to avoid confronting the ethical problem of slavery. In focusing on belief alone, Berry implies, Christian churches not only failed to deal with the most pressing moral issues, but also abandoned the pragmatic dimensions of their religious teachings. In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry quotes from someone who wrote to *Farmers Home Journal* in 1892, essentially making Howard's argument fifty years before he did: "'Rot means death, and without death and rot there can be no new life'" (*UA* 193). Berry explains: "This is a principle as new and common as biology, as old and exalted as the Bible: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit'" (*UA* 193). For Berry, this is not just a metaphor for the soul: it's also a truth about the common facts of biology. In order to grow, a seed must fall into the soil. Because the dependence of life on death and decay has been forgotten on the concrete, material level, it has been turned against sense on the spiritual level, leading to a search for salvation separate from the world, rather than the necessary acceptance of loss—willingness to be vulnerable to death, rather than grasping after reassurances of eternal life—that this passage implies. In *The Gift of Good Land*, Berry spells out the ethical correlates of our dependence on death:

> we depend on other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, or destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want. (*GL* 281)

Here Berry translates the Christian ritual of communion into ecological terms: it involves acknowledging how we live from the lives and deaths of other creatures. This allows him to frame the act of eating itself as sacramental or as a desecration, and to explain the ethics of food in terms

of its effects on other creatures and on ecosystems.

Berry ultimately transvalues resurrection itself, figuring it as a natural process of growth from decay that agricultural practices can imitate. Berry's instructions to the reader in his famous poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," from *The Country of Marriage*, culminate in this concrete understanding of resurrection. The poem opens by satirizing the conformist thinking that values "the quick profit" and "the annual raise" and makes people "afraid / to know [their] neighbors and to die." Then the speaker, Berry's Mad Farmer persona, says,

> So, friends, every day do something
> that won't compute. [. . .]
> Say that your main crop is the forest
> that you did not plant,
> that you will not live to harvest.
> Say that the leaves are harvested
> when they have rotted into the mold.
> Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.
> Put your faith in the two inches of humus
> that will build under the trees
> every thousand years.
> Listen to carrion—put your ear
> close, and hear the faint chattering
> of the songs that are to come.
> [. . .]
> Practice resurrection. (*CPB* 151-152)

Here, the return of organic matter to the soil is more valuable than the returns on financial investment, and resurrection is something people can practice by fostering growth from decay.

If resurrection becomes an agricultural practice in Berry's work, his insistence on the material reality of death also means accepting his vulnerability to it. In "Testament," another poem from *The Country of Marriage*, Berry as speaker gives instructions for what his "relatives and friends" should do after his own death, which involves thwarting the undertaker's "surly art of imitating life" (*CPB* 163):

> Don't muck up my face
>
> With wax and powder and rouge
> As one would prettify
> An unalterable fact

> To give bitterness the lie.
>
> Admit the native earth
> My body is and will be,
> Admit its freedom and
> Its changeability.
>
> Dress me in the clothes
> I wore in the day's round.
> Lay me in a wooden box.
> Put the box in the ground. (*CPB* 164)

This poem not only shows how thoroughly Berry's concept of compost and cycles of growth from decay informs his approach to death, but also exemplifies the shift in Berry's poetics that begins to happen in the 1970s. "Testament" is an early example of the way in which Berry moves from the conventional, mainstream organic form of his early lyrics—as in the poems I've quoted so far—to traditional rhyme and meter.

**Politics and the Making of Organic Form**

Though Berry's rethinking of the organic leads him to a thoroughgoing social and literary traditionalism, it need not lead us there. Berry's political position is more nuanced than many critics have assumed and more key to anti-capitalist ecological movements than one might expect. At the same time, I argue that Berry's insistence that the organic is *made* does not lead to a determinate politics, but in fact opens up the field of political choice. By calling the organic an artifact, Berry refuses to naturalize political and social forms. Instead, he argues that we can make decisions about how we use technologies and participate in economies, empowering people to develop a food politics that takes into account the ecological, social, economic, and aesthetic dimensions of their food choices. In this section, I will first consider how Berry's ecological agrarianism led him to a broader defense of Western cultural tradition. Then I will turn to readings of and responses to Berry's politics, showing how his work speaks across ideological and disciplinary divides. Finally, I

will look at the consequences of Berry's argument that the organic is constructed for his bioregionalist politics, looking specifically at the essay, "The Work of Local Culture," and the poem, "The Current," which I place in conversation with Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright."

As he wrote some of his major books and essays on farming in the 1970s, Berry came to see traditional agricultural practices as ecological. Because organic cultural forms—farms, poems, communities—are *artifacts* made in imitation of ecological patterns we can never fully understand, the making of them must always be to some extent imaginative or intuitive. At the heart of Berry's traditionalism is the conviction that intuitions—or, better, pragmatic knowledge, knowing how, ways, knacks—are, over longer spans than a single human lifetime, embodied in traditions. In "An Agricultural Journey in Peru" (1979), Berry positions traditional practices as ways in which culture can protect us against variations in individual intelligence and knowledge. Steve Brush, an anthropologist studying traditional Andean agricultural practices and Berry's host, "talked of the difficulty of finding out about methods and reasons from these farmers." Berry argues that though "the methods and reasons are assuredly complex—this is an agriculture of extraordinary craftsmanship and ecological intelligence," these methods "were worked out over a long time, long ago; learned so well, one might say, that they are forgotten" (*GL* 27). For Berry, this kind of "thought . . . submerged or embodied in traditional acts" is "probably the only kind of culture that works" because it makes ecologically sound and sustainable practices available to everyone, no matter their intelligence or conscious understanding of *why* such practices work.[31] Traditions, for Berry, are profoundly pragmatic: they work, and we know that they work because they have worked for a long time.

In the 1980s and 90s, he extended this logic to the literary and social realms, essentially talking

[31] In contrast, "With us, it grows harder and harder even for intelligent people to behave intelligently, and the unintelligent are condemned to a stupidity probably unknown in traditional cultures" (*GL* 27).

himself into a defense of Western cultural tradition. This is not to say that Berry advocates traditional *political* forms, as Edmund Burke does when he defends monarchy and aristocracy. Berry is committed to democracy and thinks that the United States' current corporate plutocracy is as incompatible with democratic institutions as monarchy is. But in *The Unsettling of America* and elsewhere, Berry argues for traditional Western social and cultural forms, particularly that of marriage. Berry considers marriage a pragmatic way of channeling or husbanding the wild energies of sexuality so that they do not destroy communities or wreck social havoc: "At the root of culture must be the realization that uncontrolled energy is disorderly—that in nature all energies move in forms; that, therefore, in a human order energies must be *given* forms" (*UA* 122). In this passage, Berry argues that traditional marriage—which he distinguishes from the myth of romantic love that results in possessiveness and "sexual capitalism"—works to channel the wild energies of sexuality.[32]

However, the distinction that Berry stresses here with italics—"in a human order energies must be *given* forms"—both opens the door to nontraditional social arrangements and shows how Berry's insistence that the organic is *made* shapes the political implications of his work. By arguing that "those human solutions that we may call organic are not natural," but are "organic *artifacts*" (*GL* 145) made in imitation of natural patterns, Berry distances himself from those who use organic metaphors to justify the social or political status quo. Berry is, in fact, well aware of this risk. In "Poetry and Place" (1982), he criticizes Edmund Spenser for naturalizing political forms in just this way. Berry writes of a metaphor in *The Faerie Queene* that

> it involves a dangerous confusion between human order and natural order. The human economy, insofar as it uses nature, must be made in respect for, and in analogy with, the processes by which nature preserves and renews itself. But a human society must preserve

[32] In "Poetry and Place" and in *The Unsettling of America*, marriage and sexuality are thus part of a series of analogous pairs that starts with domesticity and wilderness and also includes art and inspiration.

> these processes by moral laws, which are *not* natural. Spenser's defense of monarchy as 'natural' is no different than later defenses of the 'naturalness' of plutocracy. (*SW* 138)

In this passage, Berry carefully distinguishes between his own argument that human economies must respect ecological limits by imitating processes of decay and growth and Spenser's argument that a specific political form is natural. While these two ideas are linked in Spenser's poem, Berry points out that they are not logically tied together. In other words, Berry explicitly criticizes the use of an organic metaphor to shut down political debate by declaring a particular social, cultural, or political form "natural." Indeed, Berry opens up debate by questioning the neoliberal capitalist logic that most often sets the parameters for what is natural and thinkable today. Berry points out that we don't have to obey the market's reason, pursuing wealth, productivity, ambition, and success at great cost to ourselves, our environments, and our communities. We can let ecological, social, and aesthetic values inform our choices. Berry himself respects the diverse agricultural practices of traditional, indigeneous cultures; though the practices might vary widely, they share the principle of respecting the ecological propensities and limits of a particular place. At the same time, he has positioned his defense of Christianity and traditional Western cultural forms in somewhat pragmatic terms. Berry's work thus implies that we can choose to foster a range of social forms, as long as we respect ecological limits and make those social forms sustainable.

Berry's own political views are hard to pigeonhole and do not align with the right or the left as we usually conceive them in the US. This is not because Berry's ideas are inconsistent, but on the contrary because their remarkable consistency shows up the incoherence of our usual political categories. Berry has long spoken out against big business—particularly coal companies and agribusinesses—but he's also against big government.[33] Berry has espoused some socially

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[33] Both of these critiques can be seen in Berry's early essay collection, *A Continuous Harmony*, where he writes forcefully against the ecological and social havoc caused by mining in eastern Kentucky, but also criticizes federal government programs that gave people welfare after their communities and livelihoods had been devastated rather than protecting

conservative positions—he is generally, though not absolutely, against abortion, for example—but he's also a committed pacifist. Though his writings on sustainable agriculture have been lauded by many environmentalists and are at the heart of the local, organic farming movement, which is often considered politically left, his essay, "Why I Will Not Buy a Computer" drew rebukes from feminists because Berry mentioned that his wife types his manuscripts.[34] The first time Berry publically endorsed a presidential candidate was in 2000, when he declared his support for Ralph Nader.

Berry has been affixed with quite a range of political labels. He has called himself a Jeffersonian and a Democrat (Peters 8), but he's also been pegged as part of the left, the New Left, and the right, and called progressive, conservative, radical, and populist. As Matthew Bonzo and Michael Stevens point out, "Probably no other author in contemporary American public discourse has gained such currency in both progressive and conservative circles" (19). Bonzo and Stevens are themselves among the Christian scholars of Berry's work. Indeed, a survey of the criticism on Berry takes one through academic discourses that range widely in terms of politics, religion, and discipline.[35] That such a range of thinkers find in Berry's writings a cogent expression of their own concerns about our economic, ecological, and social ills testifies to the power of his work. Berry cuts through the capitalist fragmentation of knowledge and the disciplinary divides that keep us all talking—in universities, in Congress, in local government—with no solution in sight. His work shows that there *is*, in fact, a conversation going on—that, underneath rigidified ideological positions, there are common concerns, even if they commonly fail to provoke a reasoned debate

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them from this harm by regulating or banning coal mining. In fact, Berry does not equate big government with the regulation of business, as many neo-conservatives do; he thinks it is appropriate for the government to play a regulatory or protective role.

[34] Berry's work has been highly praised by environmentalists such as Bill McKibben and Barbara Kingsolver. Terry Tempest Williams has called him "our nation's conscience" (67).

[35] While most articles and books that focus solely on Berry are, unsurprisingly, written by Berry fans of one stripe or another, scholarship that only glances at Berry in other contexts is most likely to dismiss his practice of and advocacy for sustainable farming as a nostalgic, anachronistic throwback.

that could create shared responses.

The most convincing readings of Berry's politics call him a traditionalist and link him with Edmund Burke's traditionalist conservatism—with the important caveat that Berry is committed to democracy, while Burke was defending aristocracy and monarchy. Katey Castellano explores what she calls the "Romantic conservatism" of Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth, and Berry from the perspective of ecocriticism, arguing that this traditionalist conservatism embodies ecological, conservationist values through the intergenerational responsibility that all three writers advocate. Castellano shows how Burke, Wordsworth, and Berry, in contending that ownership of land should give owners only the right of sustainable use (or usufruct)—not the right to destroy land and make it unusable for future generations—ultimately develop a radically anti-capitalist conservatism (87).[36] Jeremy Beer, a conservative thinker, calls Berry a traditionalist, but distinguishes Berry's traditionalism from that of traditionalist conservatives, who have not criticized technology. Beer also points out that American conservatism generally has "avoided" the "natural alliance between conservationists and conservatives," and that Berry, "as an ideologically unaligned thinker . . . has been able to avoid this split-mindedness" (215). Beer shows how Berry's critique of meritocracy cuts against capitalism: meritocracy, Beer argues, is essential to capitalism but not to democracy, and in fact produces new forms of social stratification.[37]

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[36] While Castellano, like other literary critics, links Berry to Wordsworthian Romanticism without taking note of his own criticism of it, she does not do so for the usual reasons. Instead, she turns to Berry to make explicit the ecological implications of Burke's and Wordsworth's conservatism.

[37] Though I think Beer's reading of Berry is quite perceptive, and his caution about the downsides of meritocracy necessary, I by no means concur with every aspect of his argument. In particular, Beer contends that meritocracy is unjust because differences in merit are genetic, natural, and ineradicable; he cites Herrstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* in support of that contention. I find it frankly ridiculous that Beer treats *The Bell Curve* as truth, and, as Beer himself acknowledges, the natural and cultural causes of human variation are impossible to disentangle in any case. Moreover, the contention that differences are "natural" is not at all necessary to the argument that meritocracy is unjust. Even as it has lifted barriers to advancement caused by traditional social structures—allowing some people to succeed by merit and in spite of their race, gender, and sexual orientation—meritocracy has also created new forms of social stratification based on intelligence and education (see Beer 225). To me the more cogent argument would be that social stratification itself—especially the extreme poles of wealth and poverty that continue to move farther apart under global capitalism—

Castellano and Beer thus both underscore the extent to which Berry's traditionalism—his commitment to the local, to the ties of family, community, and place, even his advocacy of personal virtue and republican citizenship—is profoundly anti-capitalist. Berry argues that big business damages both ecological systems and human communities. Though he is more explicitly critical of big corporations than of capitalism *per se*, Berry does question values and assumptions that are central to capitalism, as in his critique of meritocracy. It is industrial capitalism that informs Berry's reluctance to align himself with either of the major political parties: Berry has long contended that both "liberals" and "conservatives" are in hock to big business. In his traditionalism, Berry finally rejects the autonomy of the liberal subject, which both the right and the left in the US take for granted. Beer's definition of traditionalism is useful here; though they are caricatured as antirational and "superstitiously pious," traditionalists

> regard inhabitance within a community enlivened by a matrix of vital and living traditions as essential to human flourishing. This is a traditionalism that emerges from the other side of reason. It consists in the critical appropriation and appreciation of traditional practices and mores by a reason that has come to realize its own limits. It recognizes, as Wendell Berry has argued, that one of the purposes of culture is to guide us in acting well even though our knowledge is incomplete, as well as to *tell* us that our knowledge is incomplete—a perfectly rational proposition. (213)

Berry argues that only traditional cultural practices can protect us from the damage to natural and human communities caused by industrial, technological *hubris*. In this, Berry concurs with both Edmund Burke and Michael Pollan, who, as I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, see traditional cultures as providing wise practices in a world that will always remain in part mysterious

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is unjust, and that meritocracy as a mechanism for determining one's place in the hierarchy (even granted meritocracy could in fact be fully implemented, which seems an impossible proposition) cannot justify it.

to us, while rationalist experiments, in presuming that reason *can* know all it needs to know, lead to unforeseen consequences.

However we define his politics, the point is that Berry does not give his own political convictions the sanction of the natural. In fact, his work has opened up the scope of political choice for people whose identities and affiliations differ from his own and from those of the rural white characters who populate his fiction. Berry's contention that "eating is an agricultural act" and that gardening and home production are "radical acts" has empowered people to eat with the consequences for environment and society in mind, to grow their own food, and to change their local economies. Readers of Berry have manifestly concluded that they do not have to answer these social questions in the same way he does to learn from his thought. Barbara Kingsolver, for example, writes about Berry's controversial essay, "Why I Will Not Buy a Computer," arguing that, though she disagrees with Berry politically and on some questions of technology use, she finds helpful his insistence that we discriminate among the technologies available to us based on principles and values. Monica White, a community and environmental sociologist who studies African-American urban farming and the local food movement in Detroit, has shown how African Americans are motivated to grow their own food out of desire to build healthier, stronger, more self-determined local communities. When asked what people in Detroit's food movement are reading, her first response is, "Wendell Berry, of course."[38]

In "The Work of Local Culture" (1988), an essay in *What Are People For?*, Berry uses the decay of organic matter into soil as a metaphor for practices that sustain local communities. This essay not

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[38] I asked White this question following a colloquium presentation she gave at UW-Madison's Center for Culture, History, and Environment in 2013. In a follow-up question, someone else asked about how people in Detroit felt about social services—whether their desire for self-determination and control over their own food implied that they agree with right or libertarian criticisms of social services. White explained that people in the Detroit food movement think that they deserve governmental social services—after all, they built the city—but that they are not going to wait to take action in improving their economies and communities. See her article, "D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit."

only takes the political risk of using a natural metaphor for cultural processes, but also uses the particularly charged comparison of culture to soil, thus raising the specter of nativist or even fascist investment in the trope of soil. At the same time, the essay shows some of the key hallmarks that distinguish Berry's use of this soil trope from that of reactionary thinkers. Berry opens with a story about a metal bucket that has been hanging on a post on his grandfather's former farm for fifty years: "what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle I have ever heard of: it is making earth." As leaves, nuts, the droppings of small animals and birds, feathers, and rain and snow have accumulated in the bucket, they have decayed, over the decades, into "several inches of black humus." Berry calls this "an artistry and a farming far superior to mine, or to that of any human." This "same process . . . has been at work immemorially over most of the land surface of the world. All creatures die into it, and they live by it" (*WPF* 153).

Berry writes that the bucket is "irresistibly metaphorical," but also distinguishes between its processes and those of culture: "It is doing in a passive way what a human community must do actively and thoughtfully . . . It must build soil, and build that memory of itself—in lore and story and song—that will be its culture" (*WPF* 154). While the organic matter that happens to fall in the bucket decays and makes soil of its own accord, human communities must "build soil" through intentional agricultural practices as they must build community and memory through intentional cultural practices. Berry again emphasizes the distinction between natural process and cultural artifice that he considers a key feature of organic metaphors. But the bucket itself collects stories as well as fallen leaves, and Berry tells one of them—a story whose physical reminder lies in "scales of tar [that] still adhere to the inside of the bucket." Berry recounts how his "grandfather's black hired hands" went out to work and took eggs with them for lunch, but when "they looked around for something to boil the eggs in, they could find only an old bucket that at one time had been filled with tar." When they boiled the eggs in the bucket, one came out black and they made a joke of

deciding "who would have to eat the black egg." Berry recalls the name of the man who ate the black egg, whom he "remember[s] well" (*WPF* 154).

This seems at first seems an odd story for Berry to include in the opening of this essay, between his description of the bucket making soil and his explicit invocation of this process as an analogue for the cultural practices of fostering community. In it, Berry fondly recalls African-American workers on his grandfather's farm without commenting explicitly on race or racial politics. At the same time, the story contains within it a parable about race, internalized racism, and the humor with which these black men negotiated issues of race with their white employers by sharing the story of the black egg with them. Though it might be easier to write about how to foster local communities in Kentucky without bringing up the vexed issue of race, Berry includes this story as a way of acknowledging and remembering his community's and his family's participation in the legacy of slavery. The anecdote stands as a reminder that "the work of local culture" has a history of injustice to overcome—one that cannot be overcome through denial and is made more complex by memory of and affection for specific people.

While "The Work of Local Culture" qualifies soil as a metaphor for culture by cautioning that cultural processes are made and by including a story that acknowledges racism, "The Current," a poem in *Farming: A Hand Book* (1970), runs the risk of naturalizing cultural processes and political events perhaps even more overtly. The "current" in this poem is the current of biological energy that Berry writes about in *The Unsettling of America*; this energy derives from the sun and cycles through soil, crops, animals, and humans (*UA* 83). In "The Current," Berry depicts the biological energy that is preserved through decay as a current that the farmer touches in "put[ting] his hand into the ground" to plant:

> The current flowing to him through the earth
> flows past him, and he sees one descended from him,
> a young man who has reached into the ground,
> his hand held in the dark as by a hand. (41)

Here the biological energy that unites the farmer and the future "young man" in a homosocial bond crosses not only generations but cultures, making the farmer the "descendant" of "old tribespeople" who lived in the place before he did. Though the poem's time-lapse vision of the changes in the landscape as Native Americans farmed it, settlers cleared it, and tractors reshaped it arguably naturalizes colonization, Berry also attempts to re-imagine identity as something made through lived interaction with a place rather than given only through "blood" or ethnicity. Berry depicts the farmer's hand as a "root" and figures the fertility of the soil as "a flickering sap coursing upward into [the farmer's] head" that causes him to "see the old tribespeople bend / in the sun, digging with sticks." Here the biological energy that is preserved and renewed in a particular place also bears a cultural burden and has inescapable cultural dimensions:

> He is made their descendant, what they left
> in the earth rising into him like a seasonal juice. (41)

While there are undeniable political problems with the speaker granting himself the mantle of "Native-ness," this poem does try to re-imagine belonging in terms that are not solely biological or national and that have to do instead with lived familiarity with a place. Berry's work implies that when we are familiar with specific places, we cannot deny their animacy—that the land and creatures in a specific place are not "natural objects" separate from history and culture, but that historical change and cultural inheritances are in fact immanent in landscapes—they can, to some extent, be seen and felt. This poem tries to imagine those histories and, moreover, the farmer's place in both space and time. In imagining himself as one who preserves the current of biological energy in a particular place by farming it well, the farmer puts himself in a lineage that extends forward and backward in time. This is not the genetic lineage of "the bearers of his own blood," however, but a lineage of those who have lived in this particular place.

Because the poem acknowledges the displacement of Native Americans by white settlers but

fails to grapple with the violent history of colonization and dispossession, it is easy to find fault with its politics. But Berry is also trying to imagine a politics of settlement that differs from that of the dominant American poetic tradition. Robert Frost's well-known poem, "The Gift Outright," offers the clearest point of comparison.[39] Frost captures the alienation of colonists from the places they settled through a paradox—they own land to which they have no felt connection or sense of belonging:

> The land was ours before we were the land's.
> She was our land more than a hundred years
> Before we were her people. She was ours
> In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
> But we were England's, still colonials,
> Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
> Possessed by what we now no more possessed.

Overcoming this mismatch between place and culture is the broad subject that also engages Berry. But a few key differences in Frost's way of setting up the problem are obvious. Frost speaks, first of all, in very general terms—this is not a poem about how to belong in a specific place, but about how "we" as a nation can belong to the American continent. This "we" is another key difference—Berry avoids using "we" at all by focusing on the experience of the farmer as a character. Frost's national "we," by contrast, is not only exclusively white but exclusively *English*. This, then, is a poem about how a powerful subset of Americans comes to feel national belonging. At the same time, Frost's poem does not mention Native Americans or acknowledge their history of belonging on this continent. In fact, the poem's final lines, where Frost describes "the land vaguely realizing westward" as "still unstoried, artless, unenhanced," seem to deny the very existence of indigenous peoples whose cultures, histories, and agricultural and land-management practices have shaped the American landscape for millennia. The language of the poem belies its denials, however: a Native

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[39] Frost recited this poem from memory at Kennedy's inauguration because the glare on the page prevented him from reading the new poem he had written for the occasion.

American tribe shows up in the place name "Massachusetts."

Frost's imagined resolution to this alienation from place differs even more starkly from Berry's. Frost speaks first in metaphorical terms, representing the colonial "we" as an Antaeus-like figure whose distance from the ground saps his strength:

> Something we were withholding made us weak
> Until we found out it was ourselves
> We were withholding from our land of living,
> And forthwith found salvation in surrender.

This "surrender," however, does not involve an attempt to comply with a place's ecological imperatives and build a sustainable culture, but is, in fact, more like an act of sacrificial bloodshed:

> Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
> (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
> To the land vaguely realizing westward

For Frost, war forges national belonging. These "deeds of war" include, by implication, not only the Civil War and the violent dispossession of Native Americans, but also the Mexican-American war that manifestly helped the US fulfill its destiny of "realizing westward." The adverb "vaguely" plays up the sense of manifest destiny because it implies that this "westward" movement is not the result of chosen acts, but a natural event unfolding to which "we" must surrender ourselves if we want to find an American identity. Here war is the mechanism of the nation's "natural" growth, and the mingling of blood with soil through acts of violence allows "us" to belong.

In "The Current," soil could also be said to mingle with blood, but through the peaceful practice of farming rather than through violence. Here a place gets into the farmer's blood through his familiarity with it and his work on it. The farmer's hand

> has reached into the dark like a root
> and begun to wake, quick and mortal, in timelessness,
> a flickering sap coursing upward into his head
> so that he sees the old tribespeople bend
> in the sun, digging with sticks, the forest opening
> to receive their hills of corn, squash, and beans,
> their lodges and graves, and closing again.

> He is made their descendant, what they left
> in the earth rising into him like a seasonal juice.
> And he sees the bearers of his own blood arriving,
> the forest burrowing into the earth as they come (41)

Here, as the farmer's hand becomes a root—that is, as he commits to farming this place and living from it, as anchored as a plant—his blood becomes a "flickering sap" that gives him a vision of the place's history. The juxtaposition of this "seasonal juice" with "his own blood" in the next line reinforces this substitution. The farmer's identity is not solely a product of genetic inheritance from his forebears, but is informed by the intertwined natural, cultural, and historical specificities of his place.

While there are political problems with the way the farmer's vision overlooks the historical rupture of colonial violence, Berry's poem is nevertheless an attempt to imagine belonging to a place through peaceful cultural and agricultural practices rather than through war. In Frost's poem, the "colonials" never really settle—instead, they come to belong to the nation through a continual reinscription of colonizing violence. They do not learn how to stay put and respect the ecological limits of particular places, but persist in the "westward" movement of conquest. Berry argues that this movement goes on still through the capitalist exploitation of land and resources that works to continually unsettle settled people.[40] In representing history as a kind of time-lapse film, "The Current" naturalizes colonization even as it acknowledges it. But Berry's way of representing a long sweep of history is perhaps justified given the scale on which he's working: this is the vision of an individual farmer. To each of us as individuals, the deeper reaches of history that shaped our

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[40] Berry makes this argument at the opening of *The Unsettling of America* (3-4), where he compares the search for wealth that prompted the European conquest and colonization of the Americas with more recent dispossessions in the name of industrial development (dams, mining, and the like): "Generation after generation, those who intended to remain and prosper where they were have been dispossessed and driven out, or subverted and exploited where they were, by those who were carrying out some version of the search for El Dorado. Time after time, in place after place, these conquerors have fragmented and demolished traditional communities, the beginnings of domestic cultures. They have always said that what they destroyed was outdated, provincial, contemptible. And with alarming frequency they have been believed and trusted by their victims, especially when their victims were other white people" (4).

ancestors' lives and the places where we now live cannot help but appear as long sweeps, however clearly we grasp the vexed, power-inflected specifics of our more recent pasts. In any case, the poem accepts the fact that Americans live in a settler society with a history of colonization. Rather than trying to sanctify that historical violence, as Frost does—or running from it into further acts of achievement and consumption, as Costello's praise for mobility suggests—Berry tries to imagine a peaceful way to come to terms with it. Like his bioregionalist friend Gary Snyder, Berry is grappling with a difficult question: how can we live in an ethically and ecologically sound way in a colonized place? Though Berry and Snyder have been rightly criticized for their appropriations of other cultures and claims that we can "become native," they are trying to think about how to foster a culture in which we don't live like colonizers, without regard to the damage we do to a place, but instead attend to it with respect and love.

**The Transformation and Accumulation of A. R. Ammons' *Garbage***

Though the poetics that A. R. Ammons develops in his long poem *Garbage* (1993) and Berry's compost tropes at first appear to be opposites, we miss conjunctures between them that have much to reveal about the role of waste in the contemporary ecological imaginary if we stop with their differences. For ecocritics such as Bonnie Costello and Dana Phillips, Ammons' *Garbage* seems to offer an alternative to the compost tropes used by Berry and other mainstream nature poets like Mary Oliver. *Garbage* begins not with the transfiguration of compost, but with the accumulation of trash—a landfill off I-95 in Florida where the detritus of consumer culture piles up. Ammons' poem not only seems to confront the material reality of the often non-biodegradable waste that industrial capitalism generates more directly than Berry's poems do, but also positions itself explicitly as anti-organic. The poem opens by framing the speaker's ambition to write a long poem with a critique of the mainstream lyric poem's "sober little organic, meaningful pictures." In fact, the form and tonal

range of *Garbage* differ quite markedly from those of Berry's lyrics: *Garbage* is a constraint-based poem that Ammons wrote on a long strip of paper in a typewriter, so that the width of the strip determined the length of his lines. Ammons' compositional method thus experiments with spontaneity within the bounds of an arbitrary formal constraint; Costello and Phillips both align Ammons' more experimental poetics with his more nuanced approach to waste.[41] However, Ammons and Berry in fact converge in revealing ways.

In part because she positions Berry and Ammons as opposites, Costello misreads *Garbage* in a way that not only obscures the connections between tropes of decay in experimental and mainstream ecopoetics, but also overstates Ammons' investment in mobility. Costello argues that while Ammons acknowledges the problematic immobility of the landfill's literal mountain of trash, *Garbage* throws its lot in with mobility and transformation: Ammons "develops a poetics of disposability and transfiguration that keeps the mind moving through illusion and 'self-display' while minimalizing the accumulation of its discarded productions" (595). While Costello is certainly right that Ammons uses the material processes of waste and decay as a metaphor for the process of poetic composition, she valorizes one side of this metaphor—mobility or transformation—over its necessary other. Costello does not argue that Ammons' goal is to completely transfigure the trash—that would be the kind of wish for "purity" that Costello links with mainstream nature poets—but treats the fact that "cultural material is never entirely transfigurable" as regrettable, as something that Ammons "does not evade or protest" but also does not celebrate (601-602). Costello thus brings up the ecological problem of garbage, but at the same time avoids addressing it. While she claims that the movement of the poems' language "works against the effect of residue," it's not clear how the poem's linguistic mobility can counter either the accumulation of actual garbage or the immobile

[41] While Ammons and Berry are on opposite sides of Costello's divide between linguistically sophisticated and mainstream poets, critics such as Keller and Skinner might not consider Ammons a linguistically experimental poet because neither his lyrics nor his long poems unsettle syntax very radically.

forms of social institutions or cultural traditions.

Though Costello argues that *Garbage* values "mobility" over "immobility," I contend that Ammons in fact spins out the form of his poem through the dialectic between mobility and immobility, or transformation and accumulation, that the figure of garbage entails. From his very title forward, Ammons highlights the side of the poem-as-garbage trope that Costello downplays: here, poetry not only transfigures and transforms its materials in the way fire and decay transform garbage, but also itself piles up and clogs "the fluencies" (*Garbage* 109). Ammons does not simply mourn the fact that "poems themselves . . . become a dead-material concentrate time's / longest actions sometimes can't dissolve" (109), as Costello implies (601-602). The poem in fact celebrates such cultural structures, though most sooner or later become garbage, as a necessary and sometimes beautiful part of the movement of imaginative and material life. *Garbage* celebrates such accumulation, first of all, in a strictly formal way: the poem itself is a heap of lines, layer after layer of unrhymed pentameter couplets piled on each other as the garbage trucks and bulldozers pile layers of garbage on the landfill (18). Though his lines move at a wonderful pace when one reads them, the published poem *Garbage*, as a physical book held in the hand, is certainly also a "dead-material concentrate." Ammons relishes the self-deprecating joke of the title—that his poem is garbage—and continually returns to it. He delights in opening a poem titled *Garbage* with a mocking embrace of his own ambition to "writ[e] that great poem / the world's waiting for" (13). While Costello focuses on the parts of the poem set at a landfill, the poem also engages explicitly with "waste" as lost "possibility," both human and natural (90). Ammons ruminates on loss, aging, and death as well as garbage: parts of the poem are set at a funeral (37-39), on a campus where the speaker talks with a colleague who's just been diagnosed with "terminal cancer of the brain" (41), and in the speaker's yard, where he reflects on predation as his neighbor's cat kills and eats a chipmunk (58-60).

Even more significantly, Ammons uses the metaphor of garbage to develop a poetics that

oscillates between transformation and accumulation. Over and over, Ammons figures the poem as a flow that produces local concretions and connects this poetics with a metaphysics that sees energy or spirit both on the move and manifesting itself in more or less lasting material forms. Ammons elaborates this figure in language that ranges from high-flown abstraction to scatological humor and in a tone that glides between serious inquiry and affectionately deflating mockery—or manages to maintain a twinge of both at once, as only he can. The poem's tropes of mobility and concretion run the gamut from "the reality of the soup that includes / all chunks" (116) to a meditation at a burial service on the distance between "the spirit" and "this / manifestation, this man"—i.e., the buried corpse—that is now "the single / fact . . . left alone . . . to have its first / night under the stars" (38). Ammons describes the experience of "writing a poem" as a mental movement that allows for the congealing of forms:

> you keep your mind
>
> open and on the move and eventually there is a
> trace of a feeling like a bit of mist on a backroad
>
> but then it reappears stronger and more central (42)
>
> until the mind
> dreams of imminent shapes, emergences, of
>
> clust'ral abundances, of free flow, forms discernible,
> material, concrete, shapes on the move (43)

This scene of composition turns sexual as "groans of anguish and / satisfaction break from the depths of the / body, and the sweet dream occurs, the work / payloads" (43). Through an act of poetic composition that's more orgasmic than organic, what was a "trace" or a "bit of mist" has become a "payload," a made thing.

While the poet-speaker says he wants "a curvature," "a smooth long bend" that is both complex and clear and "doesn't break down from arc into word, image, / definition, story, thesis, but all these // assimilated" (92-93), he also acknowledges that "to have the curvature, though, one

needs the / concisions of the local" (94). The section of the poem that follows this one opens with a bird defecating on the speaker (97), who then reworks the same poetics of moving curve and local "concisions" in more concrete terms:

> is there intermediacy
>
> between hallucinatory flux and pure form's rigid
> thought and count: between diarrhea and constipation,
>
> how about chunky intermediacy, some motion with
> minor forms clear, clusters or bindings, with the
>
> concomitant gaps, tie-offs and recommencements
> expected (98)

This "motion with / minor forms clear," despite the self-deflating scatalogical joke, describes *Garbage* itself quite well: the poem slides from one clear, crystallized scene or insight to another on the "blabbermouth" speaker's wave of rhetoric (78). The poem seems to be a "narrative" simply because it has the "feel of a progression" (98), but it's more like a series of "local lyrics" that stand out from the "whole shambles":

> the shambles questioning the lyric
>
> out of easy shape, and the lyric providing
> intervals of symmetry in the jumbled enlargement (67).

This relation between local gatherings of lyric concretion and the wandering movement of the long poem is the one that seems to fire Ammons' imagination the most. Whenever he gestures toward a feeling that the long poem as a whole should be more unified, he immediately undercuts it. For example, the speaker is

> scared that the outer design is not predetermined
> and probably not to be found, all these isolated
>
> sketches and componencies not subordinated, as
> the government of large tracts necessitates, to
>
> a single effect, one graspable object having
> outline and shape (113)

But this worry quickly collapses into a humorous comparison of the poem with another large tract, "a region mapped, defined // and named—North Dakota" (113). The joke introduces some humility, suggesting that Ammons in fact never set out to govern the poem as a whole but to engage with the local coherencies the poem's motion would turn up.

Thus, though Ammons seems to distance himself from his own lyric poems at the opening of *Garbage*, he in fact is thinking through the relationship between lyric concretion and the movement of a constraint-based long poem—or the dialectic between organic wholes and the transfiguration of "dead material" through decay (109). The first section of the poem opens with a dialogue between the speaker and the "creepy little creepers," the worms of his ambitious thoughts, who ask

> what do you
> mean teaching school (teaching *poetry* and
>
> *poetry writing* and wasting your time painting
> sober little organic, meaningful pictures)

when he could be writing a long poem that puts "values thought lost" back together (13). Here the "creepers" link the "organic" form of the short lyric with the possibly feminized or, in any case, gutless mainstream "*poetry*" that is taught in schools or that MFA programs train students to write. It is the "sober" meaningfulness of these poems that makes them a waste of time, the "creepers" imply—they are too occupied with creating a tidy fiction of "organic" wholeness to take up all the "values" and other detritus that "lie around demolished," ready for transformation (13). While the speaker does take up the challenge to write a poem that "revitaliz[es] . . . dead material" (109), he does so not with Eliot's modernist ambition to shore up the ruins or Pound's hope to "make it cohere," but with a more pragmatic curiosity about the moments of local coherence that the poem might come upon in its motion. Though Ammons' work could hardly be more different from Duncan's in tone, Ammons, like Duncan, explores the relationship between spontaneous emergence, serial composition, and lyric unities. Both see organic form not just in the "little,"

"meaningful" autotelic lyric, but also in the movements that, for Duncan, partake of the emergent, evolutionary rhythms of the cosmos, and that, for Ammons, enact the always partial transfigurations of decay.

While Ammons sometimes seems to declare himself in favor of mobility and transfiguration, those declarations undo themselves:

> I love a poem every bit assimilated
>
> into motion, whereas some will dwell with a
> rubbish heap of bone, boulder, rust weir, wing
>
> feather, cot spring, sounds pretty nice: properly
> turned out, anything can most please me: (118)

The speaker first seems to say that "every bit" of the poem should be absorbed in movement, but then he gets distracted by the bits he lists—the "feather, cot spring, sounds pretty nice," almost like a "properly / turned out" bed he'd like to curl up on and "dwell with."

The poetics that Ammons develops in *Garbage* in fact produces, celebrates, and values certain kinds of "cultural immobility," distinguishing some institutions and social forms from the garbage generated by consumer capitalism. One particular "local lyric" in the poem, a scene set at a farmers' market, shows how Ammons' engagement with tropes of waste and decay leads him to some conclusions about pleasure, mortality, and participation in community that are familiar to us from Berry's work. This scene, which makes up part 11 of the poem, follows the passage in which Ammons sets the "local lyrics" against the "whole shambles" (67). Part 11 not only seems to be an exemplary "local lyric"—it appeared in a journal under the title "Going Places," which suggests that Ammons thinks it can stand on its own—but also concerns a specific locale. It opens on "an early June morning in early June," when "we . . . pop into the red / Toyota Tercel and breeze down the hill by Lake / Cayuga to the farmers' market" (69).

Though the scene is situated within automobile-based consumer culture—"rows and rows of

cars and stalls and, / beyond, boats docked calm on the glassy inlet" (69)—the farmers' market is also a social gathering that exceeds consumerism, in part by acknowledging mortality and in part by fostering embodied, sensuous pleasures. Unlike the calm boats,

> the people look a little ruffled, like yards
> trying to come out of icebound winters into
>
> springs, the old stalks still there, the space
> of the new stuff not filled out: affliction
>
> here, where the heavy woman, heavier than last
> fall, leans over to swish one knock-knee past
>
> (check that rhyme) the other; affliction there,
> where the wobble-legged man leans over into his
>
> arm crutches, a four-legged progression: (69)

This farmers' market is a gathering, first, of people rather than produce—and not of perfect people, but of people with diverse "afflictions":

> toothless, big-bellied, bald, broad-rumped,
> deaf: the afflicted, hurts hurting but less
>
> than they hurt at home or, if hurting more,
> with some compensation: one absolutely lovely
>
> person, perhaps: the radiance of some babies'
> faces, the perfect interest of some boy in mud
>
> puddles: and this is all under the aspect of
> eternity, soon to be: but listen to the
>
> good-mornings and how've-you-beens and
> were-you-away-any-of-the-winters, along with
>
> the hanging baskets of fuchsia, purple and red
> and streaked white, tuberous begonias with the
>
> freshest colors alive, bread, and stall after
> stall of vegetables, goat cheese, honey, coffee (69-70)

The farmers' market gathers together a full range of people, the old and "afflicted" as well as the young and radiant. They are "under the aspect of / eternity, soon to be" in the sense that they are

mortal, as Ammons' focus on afflictions emphasizes. But despite the illness and impending death that shadows the scene, the speaker tells us to attend to social and sensuous pleasures: "but listen to the / good-mornings and how've-you-beens," the beauty of fuchsia, begonias, and babies, and the implied visual and gustatory delights of "vegetables, goat cheese, honey."

The poem goes on to suggest not only that such a gathering represents society at its best, but also that such everyday pleasures are what make life worth it.

this is

> we at our best, not killing, scheming, abusing,
> running over, tearing down, burning up: why
>
> did invention ever bother with all this, why
> does the huge beech by the water come back every
>
> year: oh, the sweet pleasures, or even the hope of
> sweet pleasures, the kiss, the letter from
>
> someone, the word of sympathy or praise, or just
> the shared settled look between us, that here
>
> we are together, such as it is, cautious and
> courageous, wily with genuine desire, policed
>
> by how we behave, all out of eternity, into
> eternity, but here now, where we make the most
>
> of it: (70-71)

As the speaker thinks of all the destructive tendencies of human societies, he wonders "why did invention ever bother with this": his answer is the "sweet pleasures," which are social, sensuous, and sensual delights like "the kiss." But the poem also implies that "the huge beech by the water come[s] back every / year" because of the pleasure it takes in living, as the people gather again at the market every year.

Ammons again sets those pleasures in the context of "eternity," but emphasizes that they happen in the present, "here now." This aspect of the poem recalls a line of Berry's: "We live in

eternity while we live in time" (*SW* 90).[42] Berry suggests, not just the tautology that eternity contains time, but that by living *in time*, attending to the here and now rather hurrying toward a future or an elsewhere, we live in eternity. Only by living fully in time can we transcend time. Rather than dismissing the present moment as passing and ephemeral and longing for an eternity or an afterlife somewhere else, Berry and Ammons both suggest that attending to the present gives us the only access to eternity that we're going to get.

In the lines that follow, Ammons shows how a disdain for the present unites consumerism, ambition, and the wish for spiritual transcendence:

> all out of eternity, into
> eternity, but here now, where we make the most
>
> of it: I settle down: I who could have used
> the world share a crumb: I who wanted the sky
>
> fall to the glint in a passing eye: (71)

By being "here now," the speaker "settle[s] down" and slows down. Though he could have "used / the world"—i.e., consumed the world, used the world up—he now "share[s] a crumb." Though he "wanted the sky"—longed for transcendence or success, aimed to reach great heights—he now "fall[s] to the glint in a passing eye." The "passing eye" is the glance of someone passing at the market, another "I," or subjectivity, whose "glint" or individual beauty catches him because he's paying attention. But it is also his own "passing I," his own subjectivity and his fascination with the succession of his thoughts and perceptions, which the poem tries to recreate and imitate. Attending to the present allows for pleasures that derive not from a rush to consume or succeed in capitalist terms, but from the sensuous, social, and intellectual interactions taking place in this moment.

The poem goes on to enact the flow of present thoughts and perceptions as the speaker thinks

[42] This line is from the essay "Unspecializing Poetry," which is made up of short fragments. The full fragment reads: "We live in eternity while we live in time. It is only by imagination that we know this" (*SW* 90).

about the relationship of "faith" and "knowledge" and the "magical exception" that "overturn[s], or else buoy[s], all / naturalism" (71). He locates an example of this in a "web-worm" in "the honeysuckle hedge"; it appears as both natural and "miracle" and leads the speaker toward the relationship between "pretend" and "fact" (72-73). But then, at the closing of Part 11, he turns away from these ruminations and back to the present:

> I don't
> care whether anybody believes me or not: I
>
> don't know anything I want anybody to believe or
> in: but if you will sit with me in the light
>
> of speech, I will sit with you: I would rather
> do this than eat your ice cream, go to a movie,
>
> hump a horse, measure a suit, suit a measure:
> I would at my age rather do this than
>
> skateboard, but I can think of nothing I'd
> rather do than think of skateboard loops out
>
> of skateboard bowls, the various designs in the
> momenta: the rising up in rounds over the rims. (73)

The speaker turns away from questions of "truth" and "persuasion" (73) to social exchange in the present, "sit[ting]" together "in the light / of speech." He prefers this quiet, passing pleasure—in the day's light, in the ephemerality of conversation—to various consumerist distractions ("ice cream," "a movie," being fitted for "a suit"). But if this is a turn away from a certain kind of discourse back to the present, it is not a turn away from thought entirely. The pleasure of thinking about "skateboard loops out // of skateboard bowls" is a pleasure in "designs in the / momenta," that is, in the patterns of momentum such "loops" enact, but also in the moments that contain all there is of transcendence, a cyclical "rising up in rounds over the rims."

While Berry thinks through the kinds of social and cultural forms that can foster such participation more explicitly than Ammons does, the farmers' market scene in Ammons' poem

shows that he values social institutions and their tendency to concretize and make durable certain cultural patterns as well as the disruptive and transformative capacities of decay and waste. The dialectic between transformation and accumulation that his poem sets up through the trope of garbage leads Ammons to value being in the present moment, participating in this life, and the everyday pleasures such participation allows. For Ammons as well as Berry, participation in the present moment, in community, and in the life cycle are inseparable.

Berry and Ammons both revise organic form by thinking waste, decay, and growth—or composition and de-composition—together. Berry considers compost a kind of growth we can foster through agricultural practices, and it helps him articulate the ways in which organic forms and farms are *made* or constructed through cultural and agricultural acts. Berry thus uses the paradoxical relationship of will and growth that Coleridge identified to open up rather than foreclose political possibilities. While Berry positions participation in the life cycle and the vulnerability to mortality that it entails as key to the ecological aesthetics and ethics of the local food movement, Ammons enacts participation in the sensuous, embodied, and intellectual realities that make up both moments of lyric concretion and the ongoing sweep of thought in his long poem, *Garbage*. Their shared emphasis on participation and vulnerability connects Berry and Ammons with Duncan and Niedecker, but it also aligns them with a non-Wordsworthian strand of Romanticism. Participation in the life cycle—because it requires that we accept our vulnerability to death, loss, and suffering as well as allowing us access to the everyday pleasures that we often hurry past—partakes of Keats' negative capability. Organic form, then, should not be linked solely to Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" and Coleridge's understanding of imagination as a godlike power. The organic can instead prompt humble participation in cyclical processes that we imagine and collaborate with but do not try to control.

**Chapter Four / Dissemination**

In the spring of 1968, the Beat poet Richard Brautigan gave away 6,000 copies of his self-published little volume, *Please Plant This Book*, for free in San Francisco and Santa Barbara.[1] It was a small folder containing eight seed packets, four of flower seeds and four of vegetable seeds, each printed with a poem. The "Squash" seed packet reads:

> The time is right to mix sentences
> sentences with dirt and the sun
> with punctuation and the rain with
> verbs, and for worms to pass
> through question marks and the
> stars to shine down on budding
> nouns, and the dew to form on
> paragraphs.

Brautigan makes organic form more literal than Cleanth Brooks could have imagined. Not only do seeds and poems figure as each other, but the book requires the reader to enact its metaphor: it begs to be planted, so that the words don't remain stuck on the page, but grow and proliferate. Brautigan thus proposes the dissemination of countercultural critique through practical acts like planting a garden. All the radical "sentences" and "question marks" being thrown around in the spring of 1968 will come to life only when they are actually rooted, mixed with the embodied, sensuous realities of "dirt," "worms," and "dew." In making this move, Brautigan was part of what historian Warren Belasco has seen as the counterculture's turn from political protest to ecology and small-scale, pragmatic, back-to-the-land action (21-27).

*Please Plant This Book* is one fitting emblem for how both organic farming and organic form poetics were disseminated beginning in the late 1960s, as their social, economic, and cultural shapes proliferated and diverged. Another is Derrida's well-known argument, in "Plato's Pharmacy," about logocentrism in Western philosophy. Plato's trope of the liveliness of the word—"*logos* is a *zoon*"—is

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[1] *Please Plant This Book* preceded Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, which was written in 1970 and published in 1971. An interactive digital version is available for free here: http://www.pleaseplantthisbook.com/

at the center of this argument (79). According to Derrida, "the *Phaedrus* is less a condemnation of writing in the name of present speech than a preference for one sort of writing over another, for the fertile over the sterile trace, for a seed that engenders because it is planted inside over a seed scattered wastefully outside: at the risk of *dissemination*" (149). Derrida ends up critiquing the trope of the living word or live speech, not by dismissing organic tropes, but by proliferating them (pun intended): rather than denouncing genetic and organic metaphors, Derrida points out that they have multiple and divergent registers. That of dissemination, a wasteful scattering, does not serve to keep writing in check in its familial service to speech, but instead, by highlighting the way writing itself "lives" and "sur-vives" (has an afterlife), celebrates the way that writing can generate thought and forms of thought unintended by its writer.

Such divergence characterized the dissemination of organic farming and organic form poetics: farms and poems came into being that looked quite different from those Sir Albert Howard or Cleanth Brooks or even Charles Olson had intended. In the case of both poetics and farming, this dissemination spread out from California, where a lot was happening in both the poetry world and the food world in the 1970s and 80s. While organic form has, since the 70s, usually been associated with mainstream, post-confessional free verse with its reliance on first-person narration, it has continued to be important for experimental poets as well. I hope to suggest that the story of experimental poetics in this period is not just about the rise of the Bay Area Language poets who rejected even Olson's organic form once and for all—as Robert Grenier did when he declared "I HATE SPEECH"[2]—but also involves the proliferation of revised, divergent, and sometimes ecological organic forms. California's food movement, meanwhile, has resulted in such antinomies as large-scale, industrial organic farms that truck produce across the continent and small urban farms, like Urban Adamah and Alemany Farm, that give vegetables away for free, or Alice Waters'

[2] In 1971 Grenier thus opened an essay in the first issue of *This*, which he co-edited with Barrett Watten (Silliman xvii).

now very upscale Chez Panisse and her nonprofit Edible Schoolyard Project.[3]

Another of Brautigan's seed packets, "California Native Flowers," proposes the transformation of words into agricultural action even more directly:

> In the spring of 1968 with the last
> third of the Twentieth Century
> travelling like a dream toward its
> end, it is time to plant books
> to pass them into the ground, so that
> flowers and vegetables may grow
> from these pages.

Vegetables were indeed beginning to grow from pages in 1968, at least figuratively, as Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* began disseminating practical techniques and tools for back-to-the-land living as well as the work of writers like Berry and Howard. The counterculture changed the political connotations of organic farming in the US, as the number of rural communes quintupled between 1965 and 1970, to about 3,500 (Belasco 76).[4] While most of these experiments in alternative social and economic forms did not last, Belasco notes that "some ex-communards stayed in the country, bought or rented individual farms, and worked quietly on developing [organic farming] skills and local distribution channels" (83). Berry, Wes Jackson, and others were meanwhile developing a new agrarianism that confounds left and right political divisions, as it is profoundly anti-corporate but also endorses small-scale private property. As Andrew Kirk has shown, the *Whole Earth Catalog*'s alternative version of environmentalism was broad enough, at least in the early days, to include

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[3] Urban Adamah is a small, nonprofit "educational farm and community center" in Berkeley that gives away all of its produce to the community through food banks and a "weekly Free Farm Stand." See http://urbanadamah.org for more information. For more on Alemany Farm, see Jason Mark's "Digging for the Roots of the Urban Farming Movement." Alice Waters founded Chez Panisse, the restaurant at the forefront of the local, organic food movement, in 1971; as Belasco notes, it "began . . . as an extension of the home-cooked meals that [Waters] had been preparing for Berkeley radicals" (94). Waters founded the Edible Schoolyard in 1996; it began as a school garden and kitchen classroom in Berkeley, and has expanded into a nationwide campaign for healthy, sustainable, locally-sourced school lunches, school gardens, and a better food curriculum: http://edibleschoolyard.org.

[4] Belasco notes that some estimate there might have been 5,000 to 10,000 country communes with up to 300,000 people (271n11).

hippie back-to-the-landers, new agrarianists, and appropriate technology innovators.

Many countercultural experiments in farming took place in California; a particularly influential one was the garden that Alan Chadwick, a former Shakespearean actor, started at University of California at Santa Cruz in 1967, using only hand tools and organic methods. Chadwick and the students working with him transformed a rocky hillside into a lush garden of flowers and vegetables; they gave away bouquets of fresh-cut flowers for free at a kiosk—up to ten thousand blooms a day—and grew heirloom vegetables that were virtually unheard of at the time ("Farm and Garden Projects").[5] But as organic farming took off in California, it began to take more familiar agro-industrial shapes. Julie Guthman has shown how existing distribution and land valuation mechanisms—in other words, an unchanged capitalist infrastructure and its dependence on underpaid migrant labor—turned erstwhile countercultural organic farmers in California, even some of those with the best intentions, into agribusiness proprietors (19, 172-173). She cites the story of Earthbound Farms as a particularly "dramatic" example: started by Myra and Drew Goodman, "self-ascribed hippies who met at the University of California at Santa Cruz," Earthbound grew rapidly and in 1995 merged with a large conventional farm so that they could sell nonorganic salad mix under the name Riverside Farms and keep selling the organic salad mix for which they were known under the name Earthbound (29).

While Guthman concludes that the "agrarian dreams" of thinkers like Berry only serve to obscure unfair labor practices and unchanged relations of production, the forms of organic farming have nevertheless continued to proliferate. Some speciality growers, like Earthbound, have gotten so big that their products appear on grocery store shelves throughout the country, but alternative institutional forms are also on the rise. For example, California's Full Belly Farms, under the

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[5] The garden Chadwick started has since become the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at UC-Santa Cruz. For more on the garden's history, see "Farm and Garden Projects" at the Center's website—http://casfs.ucsc.edu/about/history/farm-garden-projects—and Guthman 16.

leadership of four people long active in the countercultural organic farming movement, in 1989 "pioneered the subscription farm, a version of community supported agriculture (CSA), which was to become the California model for directly linking farms with consumers" (Guthman 17). Guthman finds promise in the CSA model, in which people subscribe to a farm, paying for shares in advance and thus helping with up-front capital costs, and then receive a bag of produce every week for the whole season. This alternative structure requires farmers to grow diverse crops and encourages better labor practices like full-time, year-round employment for workers (184-185). It also changes the eaters' relationship with their food: confronted with a bountiful and diverse assortment of vegetables every week, CSA members must shape their cooking and eating practices to what is in season locally in order to make the most of their CSA share. As Belasco notes, the number of CSA farms nationwide tripled between 1994 and 2004 (247).

If the counterculture changed the politics of organic farming, since the 90s organic food has also morphed into a luxury item. Like left social politics, organic food now seems to be an accoutrement of the wealthy, urban, educated, professional class that has become a major part of the Democratic Party's coalition, even as neither political party calls capitalism or US global hegemony into question. But there is something else going on behind the proliferation of the upscale locavore restaurants and the spread of Whole Foods: farmers markets, community gardens, home gardening, CSAs, and nonprofit farms are changing the way people eat. The decline of early childhood obesity rates in 19 US states and territories between 2008 and 2011, though the result of a wide array of public health measures, is perhaps also evidence of a food culture that is changing in the right direction.[6] That cultural change will not completely take hold until the economics of food change: the federal government needs to stop subsidizing monocultures and instead support regulatory

[6] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a report finding that early childhood obesity had declined in 19 states or territories, remained flat in 21, and increased in 3 (Tavernise).

measures to make small-scale, sustainable farming more economically viable. Though the local, organic food movement faces confounding challenges, its trajectory has not just been that of the ever-increasing capitalist co-optation of a radical cultural alternative. In an unchanged economic system, it is inevitable that the food movement will be in some ways co-opted and in part complicit. But it nevertheless has spawned new social and economic forms whose possibilities are still unfolding.

If the organic farming movement's quest for ecologically and socially sustainable agriculture is not yet dead or complete, neither did organic form poetics come to an end, though some Language poets and critics declared it debunked and defunct. Some of those who continued to rework organic form can be considered second-generation Black Mountain or San Francisco Renaissance poets. Ronald Johnson, on whom this chapter will focus, is one of these; Nathaniel Mackey is another. Mackey, an admirer of Robert Duncan's work, has extended his practice of writing serial long poems that criss-cross multiple books: in "Song of the Andoumboulou" and "Mu," Mackey practices emergent form. But even Lyn Hejinian, a poet more associated with Language than Black Mountain, arguably revises organic form. Her long poem, *My Life* (1980, 1987)—in which each section contains as many sentences as her age at the time of writing—is, after all, structured around a biological metaphor for form.[7] More recent poems and volumes, like Oni Buchanan's "Mandrake Vehicles" (2008), Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* (2005), and Jorie Graham's *Sea Change* (2008), take organic form in new directions. While the lines of Graham's elegiac book about global warming visually imitate tides, Spahr's post-Language lyrics aurally enact the ecological interconnectedness of "everyone with lungs." Like Spahr, Buchanan uses lively webs—in this case, the rhizomatic root structures of mayapples—to think through political connectedness, the Iraq war,

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[7] The original version of *My Life* contains thirty-eight sections of thirty-eight sentences each, and the revised version contains forty-four sections of forty-four sentences each.

and US military violence.[8]

In this chapter, I will focus on Ronald Johnson, a poet from Kansas who lived in San Francisco from the late 1960s to the early 90s and who is often considered part of the Black Mountain tradition. Johnson experimented with pastoral lyrics as well as concrete poems that foreground their visual form. He also worked as a chef and caterer and wrote cookbooks that reached a much larger audience than his poetry did. While critics of Johnson's poetry have rarely attended to his cookbooks, I argue that both emerge from Johnson's vision of ecological cycles and both prompt the reader to participate—in a concrete, sensuous way—in imagining and apprehending those cycles.

**Concrete and Organic: Ronald Johnson's Cookery and Poetry**

Ronald Johnson was a poet and a cook who became a writer of cookbooks. He began publishing poetry in the early 1960s, writing concrete, visual poems as well as meditative, pastoral lyrics. In 1967, Johnson cooked a meal for a friend who then invited him to write his first cookbook, *The Aficiando's Southwestern Cooking*, for University of New Mexico Press (*American Table* xi). By the time he wrote his last two published cookbooks, *Simple Fare* (1989) and *Company Fare* (1991), he had an agent and a major commercial publisher (xii). At the beginning of *Company Fare* is this list of Johnson's cookbooks and major books of poetry up to that point, in chronological order:

[8] For a reading of how Buchanan's rhizome metaphor revises organic form, see my article "Rethinking Organic Metaphors in Poetry and Ecology: Rhizomes and Detritus Words in Oni Buchanan's 'Mandrake Vehicles.'"

BOOKS BY RONALD JOHNSON

COOKERY

THE AFICIONADO'S SOUTHWESTERN COOKING

THE AMERICAN TABLE

SOUTHWESTERN COOKING: NEW & OLD

SIMPLE FARE

COMPANY FARE

POETRY

A LINE OF POETRY, A ROW OF TREES

THE BOOK OF THE GREEN MAN

VALLEY OF THE MANY-COLORED GRASSES

EYES & OBJECTS

RADIOS I-IV

ARK: THE FOUNDATIONS

ARK 50

I open with this list because I think it indicates, through its format and the "cookery" and "poetry" rhyme, that Johnson's cookbooks are essential to his identity as a writer. The cookbooks are not simply a side project Johnson undertook to make a living, as much of the criticism implies.[9] Though the cookbooks differ from Johnson's poetry quite strikingly in genre, audience, and voice, they have much to tell us about the poetry. Susan Schultz, the only critic who has written at any length on Johnson's cookbooks, argues that we should read them alongside his poems to correct the misrepresentation of Johnson as part of an all-male visionary poetic tradition. Schultz highlights the vexed gender dynamics of Johnson's identity as a poet and as a gay cook and caterer in the hyper-masculine world of professional chefs (*RJLW* 140-141). His poetic mentor was his lover Jonathan Williams, and Johnson the poet wrote for a mostly male audience. As a cookbook writer, however,

[9] Most of the criticism on Johnson simply does not discuss his cookbooks. For example, of the thirty articles in the excellent 2008 volume *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, only one focuses on Johnson's cookbooks. In fact, his cookbooks

Johnson wrote for a larger and mostly female audience and drew, by his own account, on the often anonymous home cooking traditions that he found in pamphlets collected by "church ladies." Schultz shows that Johnson himself more often acknowledges female predecessors in his cookbooks, where he cites Emily Dickinson as a fellow poet-cook, for example (*RJLW* 141-142).

While Schultz shows how much Johnson's cookbooks have to tell us about his poetry, I argue that Johnson's cookery is not only relevant to his poetry, but that both can indeed be seen as part of the same ecological project. I argue that Johnson's poems and his cookbooks are informed by the same ecological vision, a cosmology based on cycles of growth and decay that derive from the energy of the sun. This ecological vision, in turn, shows why we might consider Johnson's poems both concrete *and* organic, two terms that are usually considered opposites when they refer to poetic form.

Olson's version of organic form, with its emphasis on the poet's own organism and embodied experience, is part of what Charles Altieri has called a "poetics of presence" or immanence.[10] In their introduction to *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works* (2008), Eric Selinger and Joel Bettridge use Altieri's terms to set the pastoral lyrics of *The Book of the Green Man* and *The Valley of the Many Colored Grasses* against Johnson's concrete poems: "Even as he aspired to be an immanentist Orphic poet . . . Johnson was draw to a less organic, more constructivist, equally contemporary impulse in 1960s poetics: concrete poetry" (xvi). Selinger and Bettridge concur with the dominant critical view in setting the naturalness of organic form against the constructedness of concrete poetry. Early concrete poetry especially emphasized the visual form of the poem.[11] One of Johnson's own early

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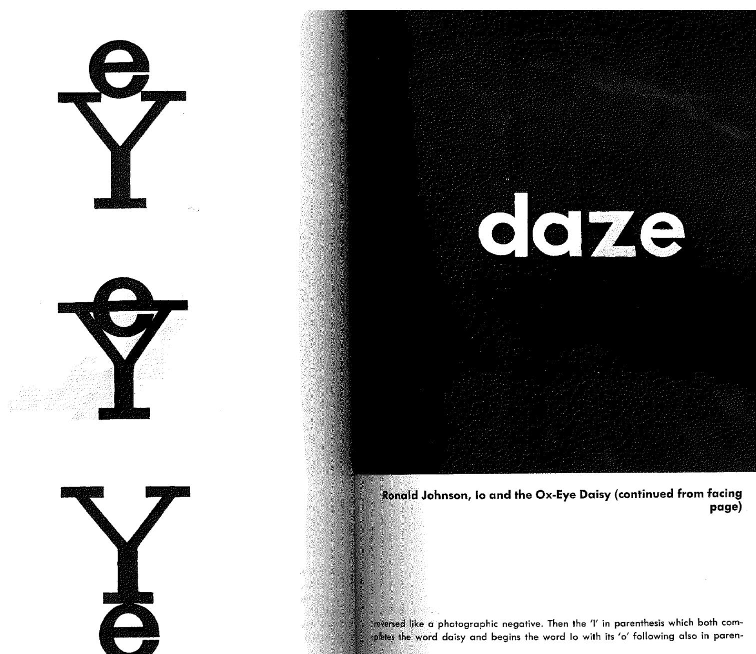
receive only two other passing mentions in the volume, in the "Introduction" by editors Eric Murphy Selinger and Joel Bettridge and in Peter O'Leary's memoir, "Gilding the Buddha: My Apprenticeship with Ronald Johnson."

[10] See chapter three, "Varieties of Immanentist Experience: Robert Bly, Charles Olson, and Frank O'Hara," in *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (1979).

[11] As Johanna Drucker writes, "Concrete poetry's most conspicuous feature is its attention to the visual appearance of text on the page" (39). Concrete poetry was an international movement that emerged at about the same time in Switzerland, Brazil, and Sweden (Emmett Williams vi). For more on the history of Concrete poetry, see Mary Solt.

concrete poems, *Io and the Ox-Eye Daisy* (1965), can serve as an example of this.[12] As Johnson explains in his note on the poem in Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, the poem is "a book of magical changes and transformations on the two letters 'I' and 'o'" that retells the myth of Io, whom Hera turned into a heifer (166). The poem puns aurally and visually at once, as this page spread shows:




Johnson explains that "the 'e' . . . imitates the rising of a moon . . . Daze is a pun on *dais-y* and is completed on the next page with (I)" (169). Clearly, this visual experimentation is not the natural diction associated with Wordsworthian organic form. Johnson's goals, however, do seem in line with the principles outlined in Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos' 1956 manifesto on concrete poetry. De Campos writes that concrete poetry should "vivify" the "facticity" of words: "the concrete poet sees the word in itself—a magnetic field of possibilities—like a dynamic object, a live cell, a complete organism, with psycho-physio-chemical properties, touch antennae circulation heart: live" (213). Johnson's early concrete poems bring words to life by visually highlighting their materiality.

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[12] *Io and the Ox-Eye Daisy* was first published in *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse.*, a magazine edited by Scottish Concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay.

While Johnson later came to fuse the visual form of his concrete poems with the more familiar organic form of his pastoral poems, these were two distinct modes in his 1960s work. Two sections of *The Book of the Green Man* (1967), a book-length poem based on Ronald Johnson's walking tour of England with Jonathan Williams, are good examples of both Johnson's early pastoral mode and his sun-based ecology. The long poem is divided into four seasonal parts, from "Winter" to "Autumn"; these are numbered sections 5 and 6 of "Summer":

> *5*
> *De Vegetabilibus*
>
> *For there are splendors of flowers called* DAY'S EYES *in every field.*
> *For one cannot walk but to walk upon sun.*
> *For the sun has also a stem, on which it turns.*
>
> *For the tree forms sun into leaves, & its branches & saps*
> *are solid & liquid states of sun.*
> *For the sun has many seasons, & all of them summer.*
>
> *For the carrot & bee both bless with sun,*
> *the carrot beneath the earth & the bee with its dusts & honies.*
>
> *For sun has stippled the pear & polished the apple.* (55, emphasis in original)
>
> *6*
> *De Animalibus*
>
> *For there are owls in the air & moles in the earth*
> *&* THEY ALSO *have eyes.*
>
> *For there are shapes of air which are* OWL
> *& shapes of earth which are* MOLE,
> *& the mole brings air to the earth & the owl, earth into air.*
>
> *For the turtle's back is another firmament & dappled like the cloud.*
> *For there are birds who nest on the earth*
> *& are feathered in its form.*
> *For the rook & the worm are only one cycle out of many.*
>
> *For man rejoices with rook & worm*
> *& owl & mole & turtle,*
> *& they are only one cycle out of many.* (56, emphasis in original)

In a visionary mode that recalls Christopher Smart through the series of lines that begin with "For,"

these poems set out Johnson's ecological vision of plants and animals taking the energy of the sun—through photosynthesis, through eating, through the death and decay that feeds new life—and transforming it into their many shapes. As critics like Guy Davenport and Dirk Stratton have noted, the idea that "the sun created eyes in order to see its own light" pervades Johnson's work (Stratton 35; Davenport *Geography* 201). That idea is evident here in the "eyes" of the daisies and those of the owl and mole, who, in their living forms, combine earth and air and take one "into" the other.

This ecological vision of the life cycle also informs Johnson's cookbooks. Johnson shares some of the values of the counterculture food movement that was taking shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s: he advocates using fresh, unprocessed ingredients and cooking at home. In *Appetite for Change*, Warren Belasco argues that the counterculture developed a "countercuisine" by rethinking food through a series of antinomies, such as natural vs. plastic, brown vs. white, craft vs. convenience, ethnic vs. WASP (37-42, 48-54, 61-65). Johnson's cookbooks participate in these new, countercultural approaches to food. *The Aficionado's Southwestern Cooking* (1968), for example, was one of the first cookbooks to introduce a broader American audience to Mexican-influenced southwestern cuisine. The list of ingredients at the front of this cookbook also reflects countercultural food values. Johnson recommends unusual ingredients like squash blossoms and lamb's quarter, a wild green that he says the reader can find "growing either in your yard or in the vacant lot next door" (6). Johnson also warns the reader to avoid out-of-season supermarket tomatoes: "fresh tomatoes now have the consistency and flavor of plastic" (7). As Belasco notes, in the late 1960s calling food "plastic" "suggested links between various elements of the food-military-industrial complex: e.g., pesticides—plastic bags—napalm" (37).

In the 1980s, as some elements of the countercuisine were adopted and co-opted by food processors who began marketing "healthy" products (Belasco 218-236), Johnson stuck to the pragmatism and thrift that had always informed his cookbooks. The premise of *Simple Fare* (1989),

for example, is economy: how to eat both well and cheaply in the US in the 1980s. The cookbook's official subtitle—the one on the front cover and the copyright page—is "Rediscovering the Pleasures of Humble Food." On the title page, however, it appears as "Rediscovering the Pleasures of Real Food." For Johnson, "real," unprocessed, fresh food should be "humble" and affordable; people shouldn't have to be wealthy to eat well. In the introduction, Johnson writes:

> honest, frugal feasts are hard to come by these days. . . . Instead of a butcher, a baker, and a backyard garden, a shopper has to spread his budget over a supermarket stuffed to bursting with a thousand beckoning items.
>
> An ordinary citizen there will spend more on manufactured breakfast items alone than the rest of the world can afford for daily fare (with most of the cost going toward packaging, dehydration, reconstitution, additives for shelf life, flavor enhancers, advertisement, and distribution from handler to handler). And this shopper will still not eat as well and as healthily as a French peasant with a filling daily bowl of soup and plate of fruit the land around provides . . .
>
> This book is about how to feed friends and family from a modern supermarket, at least possible expense, with most joy. (11)

While Johnson's critique of processed food sounds like that of the counterculture, he also has a pragmatic commitment to helping people cook and eat well given what they have available. Rather than telling people to shop at health food stores or buy organic, Johnson contends that it is possible to eat well and cheaply "from a modern supermarket."

Johnson's cookbooks part company with what Belasco calls the "countercuisine" in other important ways as well. Johnson is certainly not making the argument that Frances Moore Lappé made in *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), where she advocated vegetarianism because it is more efficient and environmentally responsible for people to eat grain crops directly than to feed them to livestock

(Belasco 56-58). Johnson's recipes often include meat and many are rich in cream and other dairy products as well. Johnson's cookbooks lean more toward traditional American cooking than the stir-fries and tofu that were coming to characterize health food. Even Johnson's first cookbook and the revised version of it, *Southwestern Cooking: New and Old* (1985), can be seen as part of his project to rejuvenate American cooking by looking to regional cuisines—themselves already a fusion of diverse culinary traditions—rather than abroad. In this, though not in his advocacy of fresh ingredients, he differed from fellow Bay Area cook Alice Waters, who, at Chez Panisse, was developing what is now known as California cuisine based, in part, on French nouvelle cuisine (Belasco 63-64).

In fact, Johnson's most ambitious and compelling cookbook, *The American Table* (1984), shows how much he has in common with today's food movement and recent turns in the New American cuisine that has developed out of Waters' California cuisine. Not only did Johnson encourage readers to eat fresh, in-season food and grow their own, but he also advocated the kind of rich, classic American "comfort food" that has become so trendy recently, and promoted offal and cheap cuts of meat long before "nose-to-tail" cooking became fashionable.[13] In the introduction to *The American Table*, Johnson narrates a pocket history of food in the US, starting with the Thomas Jefferson's gardening and touching on Emily Dickinson's recipe-gathering and Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas' trip back to the US in the 1930s, during which Gertrude ate only melon and oysters and Alice investigated the local cuisine (xv-xvii). Johnson recounts how canned food, refrigerated shipping, and other types of food processing made significant inroads on American diets—to the point where "home canning from the garden fell off, and bread making became rare. There were few trustworthy cookbooks, and magazines touted canned soups to substitute for sauces, and casseroles came to be born" (xvi). But casseroles made with Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, frozen vegetables, and Cheez Whiz are not the sum total of American cooking, Johnson argues: the

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[13] See *Simple Fare* on offal (125).

US does have rich regional cuisines that have been preserved by home cooks. He gathered recipes that represent those traditions for over twenty years, by "look[ing] through every tiny spiral-bound cookbook put out by local church ladies that came my way" (xvii). At the end of the introduction, Johnson even forecasts the growth of an American food culture worth the name:

> But from Vichyssoise through Ambrosia, I've gone on the notion that if Provence has more recipes than Oklahoma, it has had a long head start, and Oklahoma might have a few bright dishes yet for Provence. From what I've unearthed, I suspect our new chefs have a culinary El Dorado all around them, just waiting to be mined, from sea to shining sea. (xviii)

By juxtaposing Provence and Oklahoma in this context, Johnson aims to sound provocatively outrageous. While Alice Waters and young French chefs alike were looking to French country cooking, especially that of Provence, for models (Belasco 63-64), no one was celebrating the cuisine of Oklahoma. But by choosing a big fly-over state with a culinary reputation perhaps even worse than that of his native Kansas, Johnson proposes that a revitalized American food culture will emerge from such supposed backwaters, rather than from New York or even from San Francisco, where he was living, writing cookbooks, and working as a chef and caterer.

Johnson's food values, which combine countercultural concerns about processed food with his devotion to rediscovering regional American cooking, emerge from the awareness of cycles of growth and decay that is evident in his poetry. Foods are not just products that you buy at the store, but plants and animals that grow before they are harvested and eaten—the sun's energy in another form. Like his poems, Johnson's cookbooks are concerned with sensuous particulars whose qualities are inseparable from ecological realities. For example, under "tomatoes" in the ingredients list in *The American Table*, Johnson tells the reader, "Grow your own, is my advice. They no longer exist in an edible form in markets. There, they are picked green and sprayed with a gas to make them turn reddish: I boycott these out of principle, for what is better than a vine-ripened tomato?" (404).

About butter, he writes, indulging in a fantasy, "Of course the best thing would be to have churned butter as it was made with unpasteurized cream, where bacteria could actually be tasted swimming on the tastebuds, but that would be the best of all possible worlds" (398). While both the early organic farming movement and the countercuisine "equated preservatives with contamination and microbes with health," as Belasco puts it (40), Johnson longs for butter made from unpasteurized cream for reasons of taste rather than health. Here again Johnson has much in common with recent advocates of fresh, whole food, such as Mark Bittman and Barbara Kingsolver, who value taste as much as health. Delight in the life of the senses drives Johnson's cookery, his poetry, and his ecological vision.

The centrality of the senses in Johnson's work raises the issue of representation and referential language. As Johnson puts it in the introduction to *The Aficionado's Southwestern Cooking*, "I cannot describe to you, nor does it show on the page, the ineffable odors coming from a slowly cooked *Baked Pork Loin with Oranges*, nor tell you, till you taste it, what a rich delight is *Guacamole* served on steak, cold roast beef—or even hamburgers" (x). That is, cookbooks rely on referential language as a guide to practice, but they cannot fully represent the recipes they teach because those can only be experienced when the reader cooks and eats them. Cookbooks thus require the reader's participation through cooking if the recipes are to become realities that can be smelled and tasted. Johnson ponders the relationship between food and art in his introduction to the section on fruit desserts in *Simple Fare.* "Still Life, with Bowl of Fruits," is a meditation on representation that turns into a longing for practice and for sensuous experience:

> Across the great museum corridors of Europe, masterpiece after masterpiece, I begin always to long for that seat in a faraway corner dedicated to ruddy, rounded peaches, pomegranates split among burnished apples, cloudy purpled grapes dangling a platter's edge, or cherries in a ribboned basket. There will be, I trust, a familiar glinting knife laid so any might see it had just

> cut half a lemon's peel in spiral, nuts to crack will lie alongside a slab of veined and mottled cheese, a sparkling glass of wine will beckon. . . . An idea, this, no fair dining lives up to, or seldom outside palaces.
>
> Thus restored, the cook in all of us stirs and itches for the kitchen. Might that forever unplucked plum, that orange or red apple, be chosen from cornucopia to tease and test the home palate? Can there be a pear edible beyond the pear a painter has to show? (341)

This passage is both a lush celebration of representational painting and representational language—in a much more straightforward way than he does in his later poetry, Johnson here delights in painting a picture for his reader—and a wry commentary on the shortcomings of representation. The final questions suggest that Johnson was frustrated with the transparently referential language of cookbooks, which, like still life paintings of fruit, point to food that they cannot, in themselves, give access to. So the passage also implies that perhaps the most appropriate comparison for a Johnson poem is not a Johnson cookbook or recipe,[14] but with a meal Johnson cooked. Of course, we can have (limited) access to those only by cooking his recipes: only by participating in quite a concrete way can readers experience the part of Johnson's literary bequest that he called his "cookery."

If Johnson, in writing cookbooks, chose a genre that requires readerly participation, his poems turn reading itself into a sensuous experience. Johnson deals with the problem of representation by making poems into concrete objects whose visual and aural form shapes the reader's apprehension as much as semantic content does. In his poems, Johnson both uses language referentially and draws attention to its sensuous particularity. In a brief, third-person account of his own life written in the early 1990s and titled "Legend," Johnson tells a story of the places he's lived, his poetic influences and projects. Here is its penultimate sentence: "For a living , he made sound the diet of the nation,

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[14] Schultz, for example, connects the visionary imperative voice of Johnson's poems with the imperative voice of recipes, a "more feminine mode" of "calling . . . into being" (*RJLW* 147).

for rich and poor alike" (*RJLW* xi). Johnson sees his cookbooks and his work as a chef and caterer as fulfilling what we now regard as an environmentalist mission, making "sound the diet of the nation." But there's also a pun here: he makes *sound* itself—what we hear in our mind's ear when we read his poems—the diet of the nation. In other words, he makes the sound of the poem as consumable, as nourishing, as concrete as a meal. Sound here is not simply the shadow of sense, a ghostly accompaniment to the abstract idea or subject of the poem, but a sensuous particular in its own right. Here the referential sign and the concrete object fuse into one—the semiotic "pair" that this poet shows is indeed edible.

The poem *Songs of the Earth,* which Johnson first published in 1970, deftly plays semantic and sensuous registers against each other. Though Johnson's long poem *ARK* often achieves a fusion of sense and the sensuous as well, I turn to *Songs of the Earth* because it is pared down to the essentials: the poem embodies Johnson's ecological vision in a form that is both concrete and organic, visual and aural.[15] Marjorie Perloff has argued that *Songs of the Earth* signals a key shift from early concrete poetry, with its emphasis on visual form, to more recent work by poets like Susan Howe and Christian Bök that experiments with sound as well as sight (*RJLW* 225).

In the headnote to *Songs of the Earth*, Johnson alerts us to some of the visual and sound play at work in the poem—"Earthearthearth is a linkage of ear to hear and heart. Art and hearth are also

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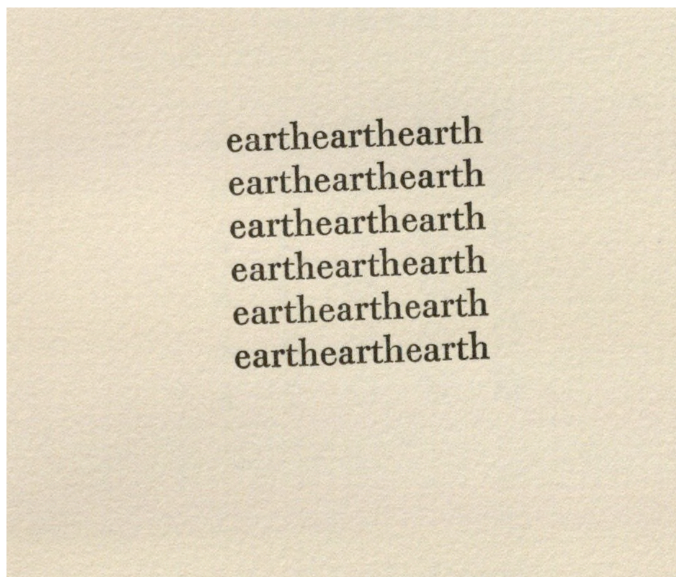
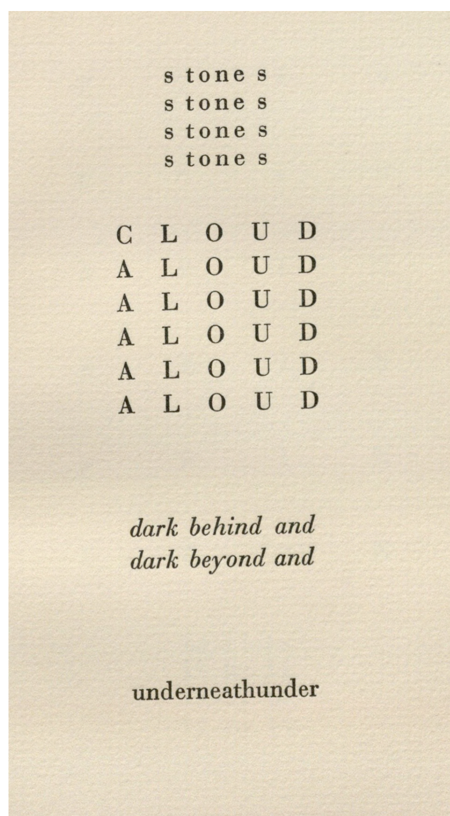
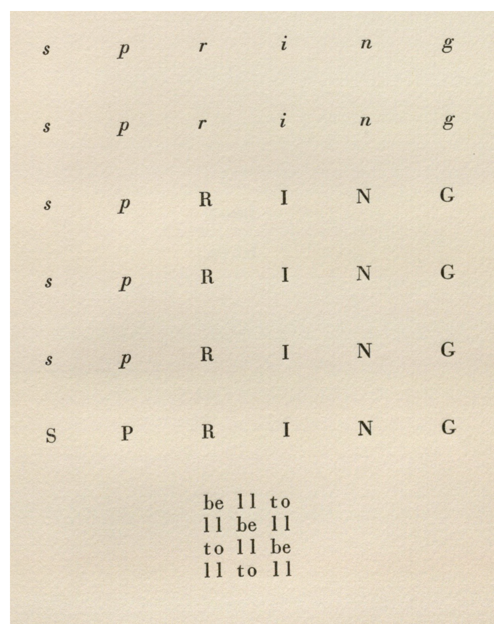
[15] The images are from the 1970 edition of *Songs of the Earth* published by Grabhorn-Hoyem. They are reproduced here with the permission of the Estate of Ronald Johnson and the Kenneth Spencer Research Library of the University of Kansas. Many thanks to Peter O'Leary for his guidance and the permission of the Estate, and to Elspeth Healy and Kathy Lafferty of Spencer Library for their help in obtaining these images. *Songs of the Earth* has also been reprinted in *To Do As Adam Did: The Selected Poems of Ronald Johnson* (2000), edited by Peter O'Leary. Though Johnson fell out with Andrew Hoyem, his San Francisco publisher, over the 1970 edition, its typography was not what he objected to. Ross Hair quotes Johnson: "Glenn Todd set this at Dave Haselwood's Auerhahn Press, now taken over by Andrew Hoyem as Arion Press. It was one of the most perfect collaborative experiences I've ever had with a printer. Handset type, which can achieve effects now unknown with computer-generated stuff, is mostly a lost art. *Songs of the Earth* was to be published by Hoyem, without consulting me, in a tight, hard binding with a cover, like wallpaper, of pastel balloons reminiscent of the nursery and completely opposed to the openings of my text" (qtd Hair 112-113). O'Leary recalls that Johnson also objected to the fact that his "twelve squarings of the circle" were published in an oblong-shaped book (personal communication, 10 June 2014). In the 1970 edition, each square is on the right-hand side of a page spread across from a blank page on the left. In the reprinting in *To Do As Adam Did*, all squares but the first and last are juxtaposed on either side of a page spread.

hid in it"—and also to the poem as a "hearing" of Mahler, an aspect of the poem that Perloff has explored. But the poem's whole trajectory in fact tells a story about our enmeshment in ecological cycles. The subtitle "twelve squarings of the circle" indicates that—the poem gives us twelve squares or frames through which we see the ecological circle or some part of its arc. Twelve is, of course, a number through which we order and organize cyclical time.

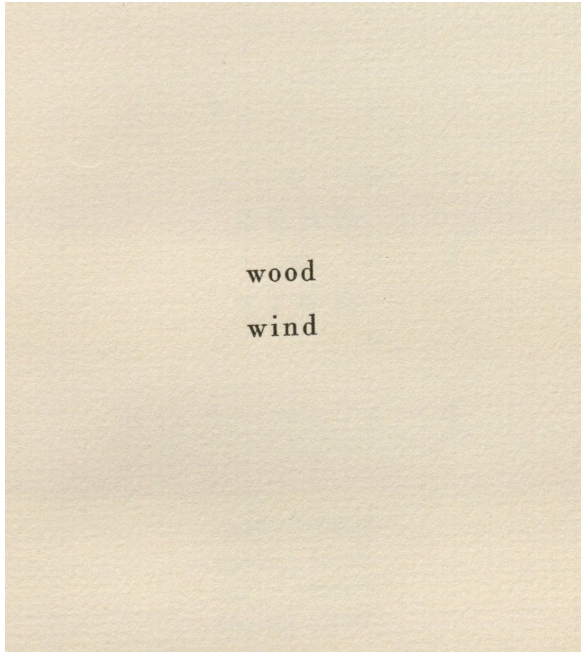


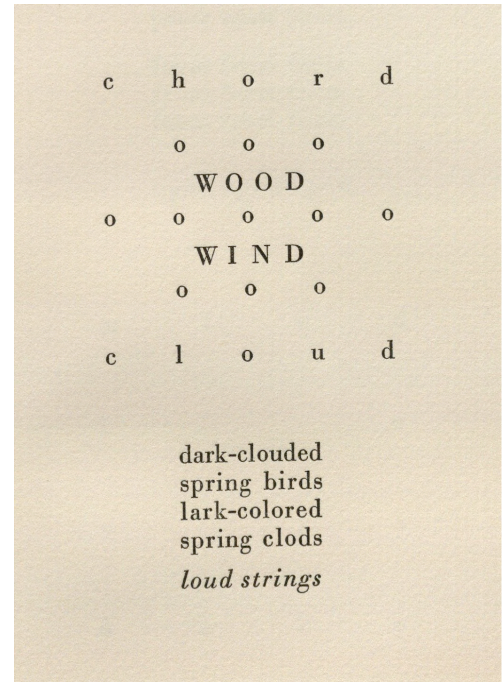

The poem opens with the visual and aural density of this square and its play with "earth," "hearth," "heart," "ear," "hear," and "art." There's a general sense of home here, in hearth and heart, of ground in "earth," and a sense of coziness, groundedness, and solidity in the tight visual form of the square.



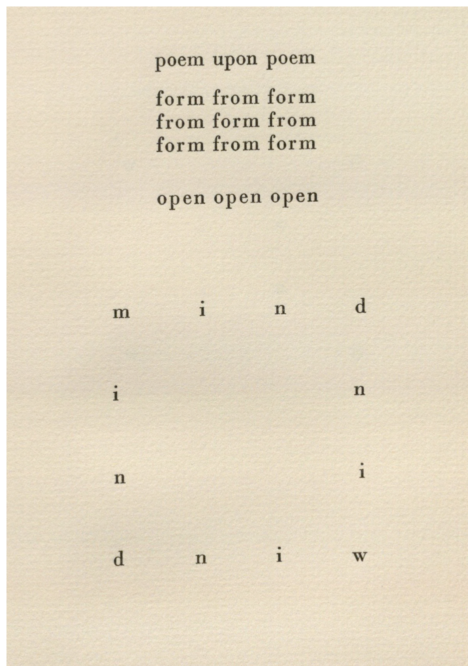



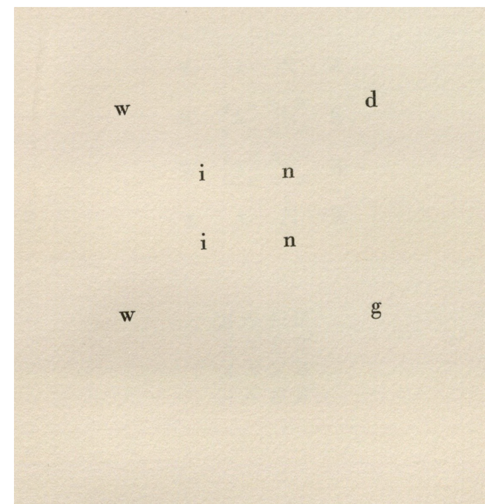

In the second and third squares, there is an injection of air and space in the form and a movement from stone to cloud, and in the last line of the second square, "underneathunder"—which sounds like "underneath thunder"—the sense of a storm, a gathering darkness, stones and clouds. The third square becomes quite airy as spring "RING"s and stands up. "Bell toll" also reads as "be to be, to be to": the poem brings into question the purpose or purposelessness of being.



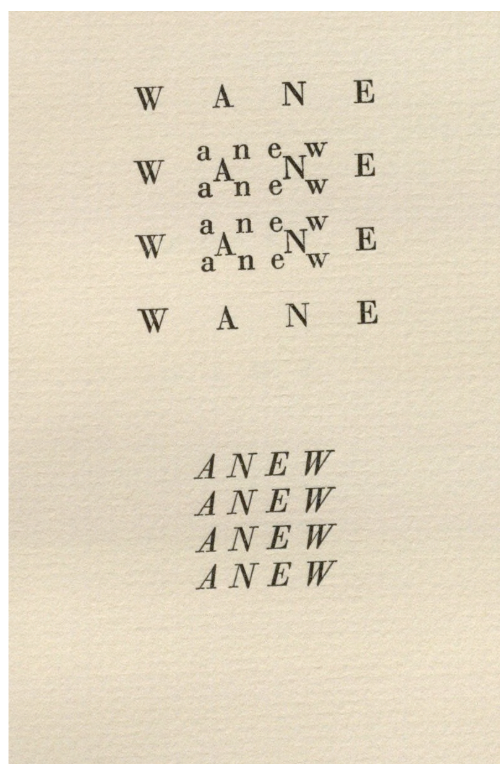



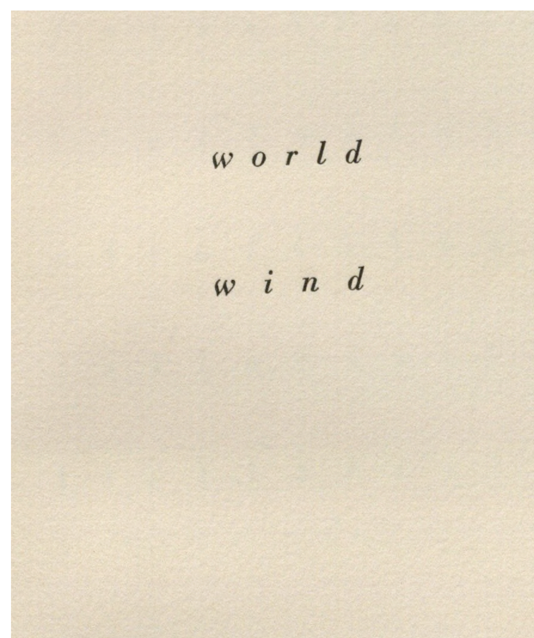

The next two squares shape the air with a kind of postmodern Aeolian harp, where the "o o o" crossing the "WOOD WIND" connects "chord" and "cloud." Sonic and visual transformations turn "dark" into "lark," clouds into clods, and "spring birds" into "loud strings." Johnson thus suggests that the world itself, in all its living forms, is an Aeolian harp that catches and plays variations on the wind and the air.




These squares comment on ecological and artistic transformations, “form from form.” In the “mind” / “wind” square and the “wind” / “wing” diamond, Johnson implies that mental and physical realities are inseparable from the atmosphere that surrounds and crosses through them. He also plays on the old idea of spirit as breath or wind, taking it in an ecological direction. David Abram makes a similar move in *Becoming Animal* (2012), where he argues that mind is not a phenomenon that takes place only inside our brains or even our bodies, but occurs through our interaction with all that surrounds us. Abram contends that rather than carrying our minds around inside our brains, we are immersed in mind because we are immersed in the earth’s atmosphere. Johnson’s poem enacts this idea.




Perloff has pointed out the reference to Louis Zukofsky's "Anew" in the eighth square (*RJLW* 223), but the anagrammatic play with "WANE" and "ANEW" also comments on the circle that the poem is squaring. It implies that waning, dying down, itself gives rise to the new. A new "world" and a new "wind" swirl through each other as "world wind" plays aurally on whirlwind, refers back to "wood wind" from a few pages earlier, and also suggests the word wind that Johnson has set blowing.

f a l l a l l a l l a

l l a l l a l l a l l

a l l a l l a l l a l

l a l l a l l a l l a

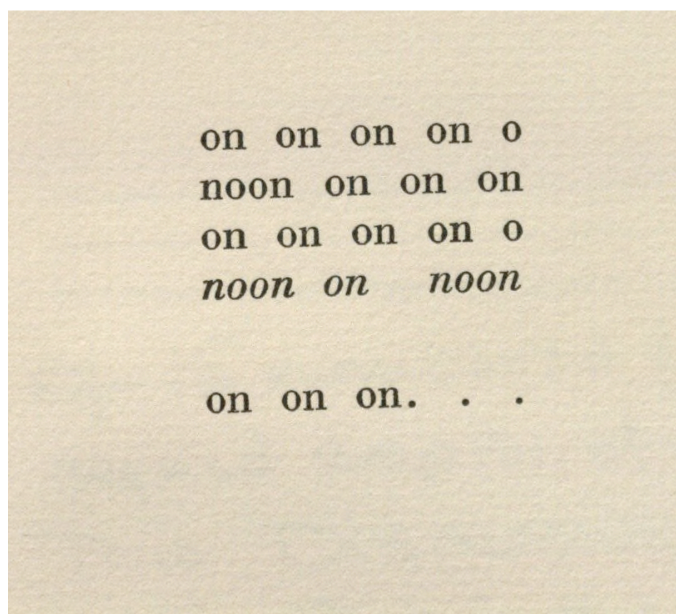
l l a l l a l l a l l

and ascend
and ascend
and ascend

to the end

st air st air st air
st air st air st air
st air st air st air
st air st air st air
st air st air st air
st air st air st air

Here Johnson sets "all" inside "fall," again suggesting that it is the "fall," the seasonal dying down and descent, that gives rise to "all." Indeed, after the fall, there is a new ascent. But in saying "and ascend" aloud, you can hear the descent hidden in it. In the penultimate square, "saint air" takes the form of a stair. Though wind has appeared often in the poem, this is the first appearance of the word "air," and its form echoes somewhat the very first "earthearthearth" square. As the poem has moved from earth to air, we as readers have ascended from earth to air and moved among many forms spawned by oscillations between them—embodied, lively forms and forms of mind.


on on on on o
noon on on on
on on on on o
*noon on   noon*

on on on. . .

As Perloff points out, this twelfth and final square is incomplete and open (*RJLW* 224). With "*noon on   noon*," Johnson conveys the continuity and endlessness of the circle that the poem squares. It goes on and on and on through many noons.

So the poem as a whole gives us, through the concrete, sensuous particularities of its verbal forms, a chart or story of the up and down motion between earth and air through which we live. In daily and weekly and yearly cycles, we move from our hearth and heart, where we make art—that is, concrete, useful objects—to the world with its moods and weathers and seasons, to the traveling of the mind and the wind. We live in a cycle of ascent and descent between earth and air and are also part of a cycle larger than ourselves, in which we participate in every day, through eating, breathing, and being. It's a cycle we cannot refuse to participate in, even if our complex economies and food systems obscure it from us, and no matter how much we try to medically extend life, psychologically deny death, or chemically prevent human remains from decaying.

For Johnson, both cooking and writing or reading poems allow us to delight in our senses and in our enmeshment in ecological cycles, smelling and tasting and seeing and listening to all the lively forms that surround us and that we make. In the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and beyond, radically revised

versions of organic form disseminated themselves across diverse poetic communities, taking poetry and poetics in directions that Olson and Duncan did not anticipate. While Johnson shaped concrete poems that share Berry's vision of cyclical growth and decay, though they could hardly differ more from Berry's lyrics, the local, organic farming movement also disseminated itself through countercultural communities, proliferating new social and economic forms. These poetic and social forms alike are not circumscribed by a Romantic, conservatism holism, but instead give poets, farmers, and eaters more nuanced and sustainable ways in which to represent, understand, and participate in ecological cycles.

## Conclusion / Organic Forming, Literally

The twentieth-century poets and organic farming advocates whose work I have analyzed in this dissertation together elaborate an environmentalist aesthetics and ethics that emphasizes both the everyday pleasures of the senses and a necessary vulnerability and openness to mortality and loss. Ethics and aesthetics are inseparable in their visions and practices of sustainable living because environmentalism, here, is not about restraint but about savoring embodied delights. Slowing down, buying fewer things, and "coming back to our senses," in Alice Waters' wonderful pun, have more everyday joys to offer us than consumerism does. Berry argues that knowledge of where our food comes from and how it was raised increases our pleasure in eating. Rukeyser and Olson see poetic composition as an embodied act, in which not only the rhythms of the poet's breath, but also the interaction between the poet and the world "at the skin," as Olson put it, play a role. Niedecker and Duncan attend to the ways in which will, discipline, and spontaneous emergence interact in the natural forms they observed and in the poetic forms they made. Berry and Ammons focus on how making is predicated on unmaking, on the renewing power of decay. Johnson's concrete poetry and his cookbooks reflect on our sensuous apprehension of experience and the ways in which an allegedly intellectual art like poetry takes place through the senses, as much as gustatory arts do.

The environmentalist aesthetics and ethics that these poets develop require us to face loss and death and to accept the vulnerability that our embodiment and mortality entail. While, for Berry, this mortal vulnerability demands humility and militates against techno-industrial hubris, for Duncan it takes the form of a queer passivity, an openness to experience and to participating without trying to control. While Olson theorized a kind of poetic humility for projectivism, Niedecker and Rukeyser, in their very different ways, lived it: Niedecker allowed her poetics to change in response to the political and environmental changes she witnessed, and Rukeyser, in the wake of misogynist critical attacks, wrote even more insistently from her own embodied experience, denying neither its

sensuousness nor its intellectualism. Ammons and Johnson forge cosmologies in which the dark of decay is as important as the light of growth. Acknowledging mortality and accepting vulnerability are essential to environmentalist ethics and aesthetics: consumerism and industrial modernity thrive in part through willed obliviousness to death—we are able to charge environmental costs and consequences to the future because we refuse to look past our own individual lives.

It may seem ironic that poets and organic farming advocates developed this environmentalist aesthetics by revising Romantic organic form, given the vexed politics of organic metaphors—but, as this study demonstrates, it is not accidental. Paying attention to organisms actually undoes the holism usually associated with organic form. While the New Critics and early right-wing advocates of organic farming in the UK turned to organic metaphors because of their emphasis on closure and autonomy, organisms in fact achieve their partial autonomy and provisional closure only through complexly structured interchanges with their environment and with other organisms who live outside and within them. When Sir Albert Howard studied soil, he realized that plants, fungi, and bacteria do not just interact, but even physically interweave in ways that enable plants to absorb the nutrients they need. By taking up Romantic expressivity and Coleridge's idea that form is only an extension of content, Rukeyser and Olson revised organic form in an ecological direction. They reframed poems as acts of communication, insisting that poems do not last forever in closed, autonomous forms, as the New Critics alleged, but instead "transfer energy" from poet to witness. In doing so, they paid attention to the ways in which living beings, including poets, thrive, and envisioned culture and cultural change in terms of process and interrelationship.

While Rukeyser and Olson followed lines of connection out from organisms to rewrite organic form as an ecopoetics, Duncan and Niedecker confronted the paradox of will and growth that has given organic metaphors both their power and their treachery. Twentieth-century writers such as May Sarton and Helen and Scott Nearing followed Coleridge in using organic metaphors to

turn natural description into moral prescription, "is" into "ought," or to naturalize the results of their willed acts. But Niedecker's condensery poetics reflect on the interplay of growth and will in composition and insist that discipline itself can serve anti-capitalist ends. Duncan, on the other hand, embraced Romantic expressivity and spontaneous emergence in response to the permission granted by Olson's composition by field. Through Duncan's dialogue with H.D., and through Niedecker's dialogue with Duncan's essays, both poets engage the generative strife of discipline and emergence in their work. They turn this endless dialectic between limit and sprawl into a figure for, and enactment of, the ways in which living forms (social, ecological, and poetic) resist the fatalistic politics and metaphysics figured by entropy.

Wendell Berry solves the conundrum of will and growth quite differently: he underscores the metaphor, arguing that forms we call organic are always *made*, acts of artifice modeled on natural processes. Composting is one such process, in which people collaborate with decay—and all the microorganisms that thrive through it—to cultivate fertile soil. While some critics have figured waste as exuberant in opposition to compost as Puritanical environmentalist restraint, Berry's essays and poems and Ammons' *Garbage* show how that dichotomy fails to capture the shared dimensions of their differing poetic projects, and also how it problematically celebrates the waste that consumerism entails. Berry moves from mainstream free verse to traditional metrical forms as he becomes convinced that organic farms and forms are *made* and should announce their construction, while Ammons' processual long poem enacts and meditates on the oscillation between accumulation and destruction that both blocks growth and allows for it.

Though the form of Ronald Johnson's *Songs of the Earth* differs markedly from that of Ammons' or Berry's poems, it tracks a broadly similar ecological cosmology, in which decay gives rise to growth and living things move between expanding in the airy light and drawing into the darkness of death. Johnson's concrete poetry, by playing on both the visual and the aural forms of

letters and words more dramatically than lyric or narrative verse does, forces the reader to slow down and notice her sensuous apprehension of the poem. His cookbooks also invite readers to smell and taste and trust the judgments of their senses. This everyday, intimate return to embodied experience is, I argue, fundamental to the new environmentalist aesthetics and ethics associated with the local food movement.

I would like to close by looking at two directions in which literary organic form and organic metaphors have gone recently, specifically in the work of Christian Bök and Michael Pollan. Bök and Pollan both literalize organic metaphors, though in quite different ways. In his "Xenotext Experiment," Bök is working with biologists to genetically engineer a bacterium by encoding a poem in its DNA, so the bacterium produces a protein that, in turn, encodes another poem. Bök provocatively frames the experiment as one that makes "living poetry" in which "the organism also becomes a machine for writing a poem."[1] Pollan, in *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (2013), argues that poetic imagination itself is a collaboration between the human mind and the yeast that ferments grain or fruit into alcohol.

Though Bök's poetic bioform and Pollan's call for a natural history of poetic imagination seem new and distinctively of our early twenty-first-century moment, they are also both, in fairly striking ways, in Coleridge's territory. Bök's project aims at poetic immortality: he is implanting his poem, translated into a DNA sequence via his "chemical alphabet," into the genome of "a microbe called *Deinococcus radiodurans*—an extremophile, capable of surviving, without mutation, in even the most hostile milieus, including the vacuum of outer space" (Bök "Xenotext Works"). Bök has written, "I am, in effect, engineering a life-form so that it becomes not only a durable archive for

[1] Quotes from paragraphs 63 and 65 of Stephen Voyce's "The Xenotext Experiment: An Interview with Christian Bök." See Bök's article on the project as well. Bök's experiment should be reconsidered in light of debates about genetically modified crops in the US, Canada, and Europe. As he notes in the interview, Bök himself is not a critic of biotechnology: "I am not . . . offering any cautionary appraisals of biotechnology—and I guess that, if there is any 'activism' in this work, the radical gesture might lie in my complaint that despite science being our most important

storing a poem, but also an operant machine for writing a poem—one that can persist on the planet until the sun itself explodes" ("Xenotext Works"); in a 2013 interview, he said, "By putting my poem into this organism, I could conceivably be writing a book that might outlast the rest of civilization" (Tamburri). What could be more Romantic than manipulating organisms so that they carry and propagate traces of human genius and power across such vast scales of time? Pollan also relies on a stereotypically Romantic conception of imagination, where the bottle inspires the poet's visions. He draws attention to that, quoting Coleridge's definition of "secondary imagination" as that which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create," and pointing out that yeast does the same thing (401, 404). Bök's use of new techniques for altering microorganisms and Pollan's celebration of very old techniques for fostering them have much in common as the latest versions of a still undeniably Romantic organic form.

Though Bök's biological experiment radically questions the usual division between the sciences and the arts, it is perhaps, ironically, more literarily conservative than Pollan's thought experiment in another sense. Bök emphasizes recording a poem forever, or at least for far longer than paper or digital technology can ensure, by embedding it in a living thing that does not mutate even under the most extreme conditions. He also foresees a future in which "genetics might lend a possible, literary dimension to biology, granting every geneticist the power to become a poet in the medium of life" (Voyce para 62). While poets and scientists alike are as gods here, using vast technological power to turn microorganisms into bearers of human cultural messages, Pollan flips this vision on its head, arguing that in fact microorganisms give rise to poetic imagination.

Pollan insists that imagination is not godlike—not a version of divine creation, as Coleridge claimed—but rather a very earthly collaboration between human minds, plants, and microorganisms. Neither is this collaboration uniquely human: Pollan makes a point of mentioning that other animals

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cultural activity as a species, poets have ignored, if not rebuked, any attempt to engage with it" (para 70).

also enjoy alcohol and accidental fermentations. Pollan's "natural history of poetic imagination" thus takes poetry—which we like to consider a sign of our humanity and creative prowess—and ties it, quite concretely, to the bacteria with and through whom we live. Poems, which Pollan himself in an earlier book called "pure products of culture" (*Place* xii), in fact have their own natural history, and are as inseparable from the ecological conditions of our existence as our bodies are.

Pollan doesn't just bring poetic imagination down to earth, however; he also pushes past analogy to give metaphor itself a natural history. Pollan points out that, "as the heirs of Descartes, we're troubled by the idea that a molecule manufactured by a single-celled yeast could have anything to do with something as exalted as human consciousness and art" (400). But Pollan also contends that yeast and imagination do the same thing: dissolve, diffuse, dissipate, in order to re-create (404). In taking up Coleridge's secondary imagination, Pollan fudges a little—he claims that Coleridge thought secondary imagination "was the wellspring of a certain type of poetic creation" (401), while Coleridge in fact distinguished secondary imagination, or fancy, from primary imagination, the real deal at the heart of the best poetry, that "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (*Biographia Literaria* 167). In fudging this point, Pollan revises Coleridge's concept of imagination, steering it away from the godlike and toward the earthly. The most remarkable move Pollan makes is in reaching, through metaphor, toward a natural history of metaphor:

> In the same way that yeasts break down a substrate of simple plant sugars to create something infinitely more powerful—more complex and richly allusive—so Coleridge's secondary imagination breaks down the substrate of ordinary experience or consciousness in order to create something that is likewise less literal and more metaphorical: the strong wine of poetry where before there was only the ordinary juice of prose. And yet these two phenomena are not just analogies, existing in parallel. No, they cross, literally, since alcohol figures in both: as the final product of biological fermentation, and as a primary catalyst of imaginative fermentation.

> As yeast goes to work on sugars to produce alcohol, alcohol goes to work on ordinary consciousness. It ferments us. (So says the drunk: *I'm pickled*.) To produce . . . what? Well, all sorts of things, most of them stupid and mistaken and forgettable, but every now and again that alcohol-inspired mental ferment will throw off the bubble of a useful idea or metaphor. (404)

Metaphors emerge not just from our heads, but instead from our collaboration with what Howard called "minute agents," from our interaction with all the organisms and microorganisms around and inside us. In his subtitle for the book, *A Natural History of Transformation*, Pollan is thus evoking not only the ways in which cooking and fermentation transform food or have shaped human culture, but also the ways in which metaphor itself—a kind of transformation, a turning of one thing into something else—has a natural history. Our imaginings, the purest products of our culture, are not only conditioned by our embodiment and environment, but in fact thrive only through partnerships so intimate, so second nature, that we can overlook them entirely.

This way of understanding culture—as not simply a phenomena intertwined with nature, but as an emergent property neither logically nor practically separable from it—is perhaps where the environmental humanities needs to go next. Environmental history, philosophy, and ecocriticism have shown that there is no pure nature or pure wilderness. While the concept of the Anthropocene can trick us into thinking that human alteration of ecosystems is a new thing, or a uniquely human thing (think of Darwin's earthworms, or beavers who remake landscapes with their dams), it has nevertheless helped show that nature is not separate, not over there. At the same time, the study of animals in many fields has chipped away at claims that culture and language are uniquely human. But it is something else again to think through the concrete, everyday ways in which our human cultures and cultural products emerge from environments, not solitary human minds. They emerge, that is, from the field: Williams' field of historic and contemporary particulars, Olson's field, Niedecker's

field, our own. Perhaps studying the natural histories of particular cultural products—as Pollan suggests, but in more concrete terms than he does—can help us foster sustainable social and economic forms. And figure out how to develop an anti-consumerist ethics that returns us to embodied, sensuous pleasures, and an environmentalist aesthetics that is not about restraint, but all about joy.

**Abbreviations**

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| *AT* | Sir Albert Howard, *An Agricultural Testament* |
| *CPO* | Charles Olson, *Collected Prose* |
| *CPB* | Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems* |
| *CPMR* | Muriel Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* |
| *CW* | Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works* |
| *FHB* | Wendell Berry, *Farming: A Handbook* |
| *FC* | Robert Duncan, *Fictive Certainties* |
| *FN* | *The Full Note, Lorine Niedecker,* ed. Peter Dent |
| *GL* | Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* |
| *HD* | Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book* |
| *LNWP* | *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet,* ed. Jenny Penberthy |
| *RJLW* | *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, ed. Joel Bettridge and Eric Murphy Selinger |
| *LP* | Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* |
| *OF* | Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* |
| *RV* | *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place,* ed. Elizabeth Willis |
| *SH* | Sir Albert Howard, *The Soil and Health* |
| *SW* | Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words* |
| *UA* | Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* |
| *WG* | Muriel Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* |
| *WPF* | Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* |

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