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Animism in American Poetry, 1945-Present: Ecopoetics, Ontology, and Coloniality

By

GARIN SHERMAN HAY
DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I argue that postwar American poetry offers a neglected history of animism's re-emergence as a response to colonial modernity's failed worlds. Through the poetry of Gary Snyder, Haunani-Kay Trask, Michael McClure, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, I examine how writers defend, recover, or construct social relationships between human and nonhuman persons. I define "animist poetics" as the formal and affective strategies through which poems compose, sustain, communicate, or contest these relationships. Rather than treating animism primarily as a belief about the consciousness of nonhuman beings or the agency of matter, I approach it as a social ontology whose value depends upon the worlds it helps produce. My evaluative horizon is eco-social viability: the historically situated capacity of animist lifeways to sustain or repair a more-than-human world amid ecological change. I therefore ask what capacities and obligations particular poetic forms enable, whose continuance they support, and how their consequences are conditioned by colonial histories.

My ecological-pragmatic and Indigenous-normative approach brings the "new animism" of anthropology and religious studies into conversation with Indigenous studies and process philosophy. I distinguish immediate forms of relatedness from the relationships that acquire durability through reciprocal responsibility as well as emergent animist assemblages from worlds maintained through normative practices across time. These distinctions allow me to track a central tension between settler animisms that seek recovery or novel syncretism from modern alienation and Indigenous animisms grounded in survivance, territorial continuity, and responsibility to particular lands. I argue that animist poetics require reading poems not as representations separated from the real but as events capable of modifying relational fields. Yet

making nonhuman presence aesthetically perceptible does not by itself establish an ethically accountable relationship.

In my first chapter, I theorize Snyder's "animist universalism" in *Turtle Island*. Snyder attempts to recover animist relation as a planetary human inheritance and to translate it into ecological praxis. I show how his poetry produces genuine forms of geo-material attunement while also reproducing the appropriative logic of settler counteridentification. In Chapter Two I turn to Trask's "poetics of kāhea," a mode of animist address that reterritorializes animism within Hawaiian genealogy, sovereignty, and aloha 'āina. Her land-connected eros joins sensual relation to political obligation, while her asymmetrical forms of address call Kānaka readers into animist world-maintenance without granting settlers equivalent claims to intimacy or belonging. Then, in Chapter Three I develop "animist expressionism" to describe McClure's attempts to make poetry participate in more-than-human fields of force. His "Beast Language" and mammalian encounters produce moments of interspecies resonance, but the colonial spaces organizing those encounters reveal the difference between affective immediation and accountable relationship. A second mode of animist expressionism I refer to as "becoming-person" instead approaches personhood as a contingent relational technology through which ecological consequences become perceptible. Finally, in Chapter Four I read Berssenbrugge's *A Treatise on Stars* through Whiteheadian process philosophy and panpsychism. I call her poems "animist transversal propositions" because they invite readers to feel relations across conventional scales of relevance and to experience stars as participants in a shared cosmos. Although these propositions offer an animist reorientation toward non-anthropocentric modes of experience, their decontextualization of Indigenous ideas demonstrates how relationality without historical responsibility can to some degree extend coloniality.

Across these chapters, I argue that animist poetry is most consequential when it tests whether aesthetics and practices of relatedness can form sustainable worlds that are ethical to both their human and nonhuman constituents. Animist poetics thereby reveals both the ecological promise of more-than-human sociality and the difficulty of transforming aesthetic emergence into accountable practices of world-maintenance under colonial modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

Animist Poetry and Colonial Modernity's Failed Worlds

Who will find peace with the lands? The future of humankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things. Who will listen to the trees, the animals and birds, the voices of the places of the land? As the long-forgotten peoples of the respective continents rise and begin to reclaim their ancient heritage, they will discover the meaning of the lands of their ancestors. That is when the invaders of the North American continent will finally discover that for this land, God is red.

— Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red*.¹

Indian people must not be the only ones who remember the agreement with the land, the sacred pact to honor and care for the life that, in turn, provides for us. We need to reach a hand back through time and a hand forward, stand at the zero point of creation to be certain that we do not create the absence of life, of any species, no matter how inconsequential they might appear to be.

— Linda Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals*.²

The Return and Survival of Animism

In her recent poem, “Watching Over,” Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan describes her ethos of care for the land in Colorado on which she lives—a land not associated with the ancestral territories of her people and therefore bearing a history she inherits as a guest and steward:

This land, I watch over it,
the place with ancient stories,
the plants of medicine,
the place where mountain lions
walk down the hill and look in on the light of my life
in this little cabin made of happiness,
of stone laid on stone so perfectly
a hundred years ago,
the year before my father was born.³

Hogan acknowledges the land's stories and alludes to the care work she does for the local plants that she describes elsewhere.⁴ While she measures the cabin in the kinship-based temporality of

¹ Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Fulcrum, 2003), 296.

² Linda Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals* (Beacon Press, 2020), 94-95.

³ Linda Hogan, *A History of Kindness* (Torrey House Press, 2020), EPUB.

⁴ See “Re-minding” in Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals*.

her father's birth with which its construction nearly coincided, the cabin is also not a family heirloom; she purchased it a few years before the publication of the poem.⁵ The verbs "watch" and "look" suggest the transience of human life, the protective nature of her stewardship, and the way the land itself returns its gaze in the form of the mountain lion witnessing "the light of my life," both the literal quartz fireplace referred to later in the poem and the life-source that is the cabin itself. Reflecting on her father's birth, "[p]eople came from afar just to see / that new Indian baby, all silent / in his presence, the way we did live / then with the newly born," centering awe and respect for the emergence of new life also through the act of witnessing.⁶ Casting her gaze further back in time, "[i]n this valley of trees and river and crystal, / the fault lines of history broke" with colonial occupation and exploitation of the land. A small piece of the reparation of human relationship with land lies in the way other beings witness Hogan's life in the cabin:

Now something always watches over
this small cabin, the bison away from its herd,
the ghostly wolves that passed
outside the door last year,
the great hawk flying across
and even the fox that sits each morning
and looks in for no other reason
than to watch how I live,
to make sure it is
the right way.⁷

On land not belonging to her ancestors, Hogan finds herself held accountable to ethical land relations—to live "the right way"—by bison, wolves, hawks, and foxes, all of whom are part of the wider gaze of a "something." The ambiguity of her language—"ancient stories," "something," "how I live," "the right way,"—shows that her goal is not to communicate

⁵ See "This Land I Live" in *ibid.*

⁶ Hogan, *A History of Kindness*

⁷ *ibid.*

Chickasaw cosmology or even necessarily to demarcate what is particular about Indigenous relationship to place. Instead, in my reading she foregrounds an ethics of respect with norms and standards for how to live in right relation founded on a view of nonhuman others as a community of neighbors. Watching is then a metonym for a larger normativity accessed in part through optics—a community of agents who maintain respect even across predator-prey and competitive relations—and this ethical framework is both particular to place and what Hogan inherits with the land. The poem then places the reader in a firmly animist world—one in which humans and nonhumans share social relations ethically motivated for the maintenance of the health of the land as a whole over time. Rather than humans as exceptional stewards of mere natural resources, this animist world calls the reader to approach their dwelling and lifeway as responsible to the nonhuman peoples who are their neighbors.

Over the past few decades animism has forcefully re-emerged across the environmental humanities, including anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, technology studies, and contemporary poetics. Within scholarship, discourses among artists, and increasingly even the public there is a dissatisfaction with liberal humanism's separation of nature from culture amidst the escalating ecological catastrophes of the Sixth Mass Extinction and global warming. Relational ontologies such as animism provide an increasingly attractive alternative to the anthropocentric and mechanistic foundations of modernity. Posthumanism, new materialism, affect theory, animal studies, and other fields that have emerged since the turn of the century have all contributed to a broader intellectual movement seeking to redefine the human not as a rational, moral subject apart from nature, but as dependent upon and constituted by relations with nonhumans. Animism's contribution to this global discourse is crucial. As Yoruba philosopher Báýò Akómoláfé lyrically entreats, "[i]t's extremely difficult to overestimate how desperately

needed an animist cosmovision is right now” that is able to recognize and respond to the more-than-human: “[w]e are forced to notice the vigorous potency of archetypal flows; the near-primitive humming of cavernous entities lurking beneath the humdrum of the modern; the mythopoeic excursions of the orishas; the molecular experiments of the subatomic; the espionage of bacteria; the lamentations of ancestral ghosts.”⁸ By removing the human from the center of the cosmos, new and old animist ontologies, epistemologies, and lifeways emerge better suited for ecological interbeing. The (re)turn to animism would then become a mode to rethink the problems of our⁹ time in a frame including the participation, sociality, and ancestrality of the nonhuman multitudes that have always been there acting with and through us.

This turn has been sought by Indigenous peoples for a long time. My opening epigraphs by Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota) and Linda Hogan call non-Indigenous peoples to make what are essentially animist relationships with the lands on which they live. Animism has recently been touted as the appropriate response to such Indigenous calls.¹⁰ As Native Americans and Indigenous peoples across Earth have claimed space in public discourse since the postwar period as knowledge-holders of sustainable lifeways with the natural world, they have urged settlers and non-Indigenous peoples to reestablish relationship with land in response to the planetary-wide ecocide and more recently climate catastrophe *alongside* advocacy for issues more directly affecting their own sovereignty, environmental justice, and cultural autonomy. Simultaneously, “animism” is increasingly no longer the pejorative term it once was, instead becoming a positive moniker by which primarily non-Indigenous peoples who want to create a kinship-based

⁸ “It’s an Animist’s Animist’s World,” author’s website, published September 10, 2023. <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/its-an-animists-animists-world>

⁹ Throughout this dissertation I use “we” and “our” to recognize the inherently social dimension of writing and to at least entertain a shared endeavor of inquiry with my (likely scholar) reader to combat the solitariness of academic work. I attempt to avoid a representational use of the first person plural that assumes that I can speak for others.

¹⁰ Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, “Responding to the Indigenous Call,” posted on March 6, 2024, by Nordic Animism, YouTube, https://youtu.be/5eir1BfImoI?si=_s-II_K4GZ9SJZv_.

relationship with land identify themselves. This animism would challenge the colonial, capitalist, and Enlightenment foundations of the dominant global order by advancing an ontological reorientation that recognizes other-than-human beings as relatives to make social and ethical relationship with rather than as organic machines or resources to exploit. Across literary studies, this Indigenous call has not been given enough attention, nor the uneven attempts of non-Indigenous poets whose work consciously or unconsciously responds to this invitation.

The contemporary animism is a reappropriation and transformation of its fraught past in anthropology. Victorian anthropologist Edward Tylor originally employed the concept of animism to designate the “first religion” of all peoples, founded on the belief that “everything is alive” or “everything has a spirit.”¹¹ While this definition is still variously adopted by animists today, Tylor coined animism as a pejorative and paternalistic moniker denoting a childish extension of purposefulness to objects and beings clearly lacking such qualities from a rational, Enlightenment perspective. Animism as a classificatory term was thereby used to exclude other forms of knowledge and practice within Europe and especially in its colonies. Animism was thus part of the colonial and racial-capitalist formation that violently suppressed, racialized, and folklorized animist worlds. Even after the period of direct colonization, modernity continued to define itself against its others by producing them as animist in the sense of being primitive and irrational. As anthropology as a discipline began to take a more ecumenical and less directly colonial and white-supremacist approach to its methodologies around the middle of the 20th Century, the term animism fell out of favor among anthropologists given its dark history.¹²

¹¹ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 5-6.

¹² For a more detailed history of animism within scholarship, see “Part I: From a Derogatory to Critical Term” in Harvey, *Animism*, 3-29.

However, recent scholarship has resuscitated the animism in altered form, redefining and repurposing this concept to take seriously the ontologies and cosmologies of mostly-Indigenous modes of existence. Instigated by anthropologists such as Irving Hallowell, Philippe Descola, Nurit Bird-David, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, what religious studies scholar, Graham Harvey, has named the “new animism”¹³ is part of the broader ontological turn in anthropology that stages scholarly encounters with the ontologies and cosmologies of Indigenous peoples as challenges to Western philosophies and academic epistemologies. I begin with Harvey’s popular definition of animism, not meant to be definitive¹⁴ but very useful in its capaciousness: “animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and life is always lived in relationship with others.”¹⁵ While the concept “person” obviously bears ontological weight, the importance of this definition for me is primarily *sociality* rather than the ontology of personhood. These other-than-human persons require differing forms of relation and respect from human persons in support of balanced, mutual flourishing in particular locales. This is what transforms animism from “belief” or “worldview” into a range of ecological lifeways. While Harvey’s emphasis on personhood and his lack of a politically-foregrounded framework has come under some critique,¹⁶ it is generally accepted that animism is a social religion and way

¹³ Harvey, *Animism*, xi.

¹⁴ This definition is less specific than that of other scholars—whose goal is to mark distinctions across Indigenous cosmologies. The capaciousness of Harvey’s definition makes it especially useful for me to form a conversation that bridges a variety of established and emergent forms of animism in my study. This reflects a general condition in the scholarship in which the simplicity and extension of Harvey’s definition makes it popular and has engendered interdisciplinary engagement in ways that other typologies have not. For other typologies, see Descola’s distinction between animism, “totemism,” “naturalism,” and “analogism,” which is widely circulated. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (The University of Chicago Press, 2013). See also de Castro’s “perspectivism” and Cabot’s “agents,” “shamans,” “mystics,” and “diviners” are other examples. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structuralist Anthropology*, trans. and ed. Peter Skafish (Univocal, 2014); and Zayin Cabot, *Ecologies of Participation: Agents, Shamans, Mystics, and Diviners* (Lexington Books, 2018).

¹⁵ Harvey, *Animism*, ix.

¹⁶ Philip Dickinson and Sam Durrant, “Editorial,” *New Formations* 104-105 (2022): 5-6, Project Muse; Philip Dickinson, “Dispossessing Animism: Zong! and Spiritual Baptism,” *New Formations* 104-105 (2022): 78, Project Muse.

of life: animists engage with other-than-human beings who can socially receive and reciprocate communication in pursuit of sustainable and ethical relations. In many of its positions, the new animism overlaps with recent philosophers of the Western philosophical tradition such as Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and others who have been instrumental in shaping the discourses within posthumanism, and it is worth utilizing the concepts such philosophers have contributed to the project of describing and expanding animism and its interests. Yet animism's mobilization of the social for the primary end of ethical and sustainable ecological relation—proven imperfectly but nonetheless effectively across thousands of years in human history compared with the ecological destruction enabled by Christianity and scientific materialism—makes it stand apart from other more recent posthumanist philosophies and suggests its potential to reshape human relations with the vulnerable Earth upon which we depend. As humans personify what we are bound to respect (in our contemporary moment, mostly only fellow humans), there is rationale at the very least on a pragmatic level considering the planet's limits to human will within the Anthropocene and the profound ecological grief and anxiety we face that the re-personification of the nonhuman agents and participants in Earth's fragile and compromised endurance would be a powerful tool for more desirable lifeways.

However, the contemporary resurgence of animism cannot be understood simply as a belated ecological correction to Western modernity that automatically stands against its colonial and extractivist paradigms. There is ultimately a tension between emergent or reclaimed forms of Euro-descendent animism and surviving Indigenous animisms. In what can be seen as the latest instance of an Indigenous tradition to defend their religions through reappropriation of derogatory epithets dating back at least to Zitkala-Ša's 1902 essay, "Why I Am a Pagan,"¹⁷ some

¹⁷ Zitkala-Ša, "Why I Am a Pagan," *The Atlantic*, December 1902, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1902/12/why-i-am-a-pagan/637906/>.

Indigenous writers have found “animism” a useful bridge to discuss Indigenous religion with ideas and practices available to non-Indigenous peoples who want to enter into better relationship with the other-than-human world.¹⁸ Yet it is Indigenous survivance itself that conditions reclamation of animism. Even as Indigenous peoples’ cosmologies and practices were labeled as animist and thereby rendered primitive and conquerable, the increasingly obvious ecological unviability of modernity itself has ironically placed contemporary Indigenous thinkers in the role of defending and promoting animism. Literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) affirms Harvey’s definition as “a broadly inclusive term for the relational cosmologies of most Indigenous peoples.”¹⁹ I am not arguing that Indigenous thinkers affirm animist studies uncritically, but I contend that animism is an invaluable framework for taking seriously Indigenous philosophies’ eco-relational viability and their potential to influence and shape non-Indigenous peoples for this purpose.

Yet the resurgence of animism also emerges through a variety of contradictions: animism circulates simultaneously as a proposed ecological alternative to extractive modernity, a spiritual practice for subjects alienated from land, and potentially even as a marketable aesthetic within an array of alternative cultures under late capitalism. By contrast, for many Indigenous communities animist relations are not one of many spiritual options but instead are longstanding forms of land-based kinship and cultural survivance maintained despite centuries of colonial oppression. These divergent positions cannot be collapsed into a single, generalized discourse of restorative eco-relationality without also obscuring the extremely uneven historical conditions under which animism is inhabited or desired. For many Indigenous writers, their animist relations with land

¹⁸ Tanya Tagaq (Inuk), “Tanya Tagaq Talks Animism (EPK),” posted on September 2, 2014, by Six Shooter Records, YouTube, 1:40, <https://youtu.be/pFHL341OpHU?si=2nai3MoOp2B9g9ZT>.

¹⁹ Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 97.

and ancestors are based in ancestry, territory, and collective obligation. By contrast, many settler animist writers approach animism either as a project of recovery—presenting challenges either of historical sources or unethical appropriation—or else as a form of experimental escape from the alienations of modern life. In both cases, such elective animism is frequently largely aspirational rather than actualized because the forms of grounded relation it seeks have been fractured or rendered practically or ethically inaccessible by the historical conditions from which settler modernity itself emerged. Yet I also take seriously the importance and potential of Euro-descendent animisms as one source for eco-ethical transformation in their own right, and as such they must be evaluated for their ecological dimensions in addition to their relationship to colonialism. Indeed, these dimensions are not fully separable since ongoing colonialism structures environmental destruction, but—as I argue below—Euro-descendent animisms and the philosophical tradition and in contemporary practice are worth scholarly interest for their specific ontological and ecological implications even if they have and often continue to fail to articulate decolonial ends. I hope that spaces like this dissertation are helpful for identifying both the aptitudes and shortcomings of extant Euro-descendent animisms towards formulation of ecological and decolonial animisms in the future. I find this project more worthwhile than mere critique, so I occasionally push back on scholars who would reduce philosophical animisms or settler animist projects to colonialism.

Animism's recent historical tensions are especially visible in postwar American poetry where the central problem of contemporary animist poetry is not merely whether nonhumans possess agency or personhood, but whether modern subjects can cultivate forms of relation capable of sustaining ecologically viable worlds amidst colonial modernity. In this dissertation I examine the work of a generation of poets born between 1930 and 1949—Gary Snyder,

Haunani-Kay Trask (Kānaka Maoli/Indigenous Hawaiian), Michael McClure, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge—in order to understand how postwar American poets both theorized or defended animistic ontologies and attempted to make animist relations aesthetically available through poetic form. While the new animism is a phenomenon that gained momentum only in the 1990s and animism was by and large not yet a category of spiritual or religious practice by which either Indigenous or non-Indigenous identified, the American poets I study were functionally animists since at least the 1950s, and some of them even referred to themselves as animists explicitly. I analyze animist poetics as historically situated and often contradictory efforts to negotiate the possibilities and limitations of eco-relational life and worlds still structured by colonial dispossession, capitalist abstraction, and uneven inheritances of land and power. If, in Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne’s discussion of the ecopoetry of the postwar period, “various experimental poetics—objectivism, composition by field, projective verse, and other modernist-influenced renovations of form—anticipated postmodern environmental consciousness and registered poetry’s evolved sense of the material interconnection of all life, anxieties about annihilation and extinction, and humanity’s impact on and place in geologic time and history,”²⁰ then animist formal strategies mobilized many of these modern forms along with some of poetry’s oldest techniques with the effect of anticipating many of today’s ecological discourses such as the importance of Indigenous cosmologies and sovereignty; nonhuman personhood in the Rights of Nature legal framework; scientific discoveries in the varied sentience of animals, plants, and fungi; and the rise in popularity of philosophical panpsychism²¹ and its ecological implications.

²⁰ Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne, “Ecopoetics as Expanded Critical Practice: An Introduction” in *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, eds. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (University of Iowa Press, 2018).

²¹ This is exemplified in the popularity of and range of interviews in Annaka Harris, *Lights On: How Understanding Consciousness Helps Us Understand the Universe* (Macmillan Audio, 2025). Accessed via Apple Books.

I analyze these tensions through what I refer to as animist poetics, naming the formal and affective strategies through which poems attempt to compose, sustain, communicate, or even contest relations among human and nonhuman beings. I pay special attention to how poets aesthetically produce animist relations through techniques such as address, prosopopoeia, montage, sensorium-attuning imagery, and embodied practice. Existing studies of animist poetry usually appear as single-author studies that see animism as a worldview held by an author or else view their animism as derivative of some other ecological philosophy (especially new materialism) rather than studying animism in its larger context and in itself. By contrast, I examine the re-emergence of animism as a historical phenomenon and trace its various manifestations and ideas across the poets of my study. There exist remarkably few monographs on the role of animism in modern poetry, and those that do focus on African literature.²² While a handful of articles take up the new animism to read contemporary poetry, this literature is still emerging. The poetry in my study ranges from Michael McClure's participation in the famous 1955 Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco that inaugurated the Beat phenomenon in poetry to Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in her 2020 *A Treatise on Stars*. Across substantial differences in politics, genealogy, and aesthetics, these writers use poetry to explore the possibilities and limits of animist relation under the conditions of colonial modernity. Together they reveal historically specific animisms within a contested field negotiating between emergence and maintenance, transgression and normativity, and ecological desire and historical responsibility.

²² Jay Rajiva, *Toward an Animist Reading of Postcolonial Trauma Literature: Reading Beyond the Single Subject* (Routledge, 2021); Ryan Topper, *Animist Poetics: Ancestral Trauma and Regeneration in African Literature* (SUNY Press, 2025); Chukwunwike Anolue, *Time and Nature in the Poetry of Niyi Osundare: Poetics of Animism, Anthropocene, and Capitalocene* (Routledge, 2024).

Animism: Tradition and Eco-Social Viability

While I offered Harvey's definition above as a grounding point, the definition and use of the term "animism" in contemporary scholarship is far from settled. In this section I review some common uses of the term and broadly frame my own conceptualization of animism for this dissertation and distinguish my analysis of animism from other frameworks. In my formulation, contemporary animism has overemphasized agency and change while underemphasizing tradition, normativity, and historically situated forms of relation. A primary challenge for conceptualizing animism resides in two principal ways in which animism is used: 1) animism describes a *category* of what might be called "religion" or "spirituality" but is better thought of as ontologies or cosmologies and their practices, 2) it is a synonym for recent posthumanist philosophies, especially new materialism, or 3) it refers to *tendencies* that appear in most human societies despite their dominant ontology or cosmology, a tendency that might be described as extending human sociality or social techniques (e.g. human language, a human-like conception of personhood, social conventions, etc.) to nonhumans. Examples of such tendencies are users' often emotionally-motivated personification of large language model artificial intelligence systems, Catholic worship of certain sacred wells that deliver the power of saints, or the near-universal personification of household pets. In this project I take the first definition as my model—animism as an ecologically social cosmology—while also discussing in depth the various forms of personification poets utilize that do not add up to a fully social animist ontology and clarifying the role of matter's agency that guides new materialism in this view. However, my goal is less to measure poets' animism to an ideal norm than to use animism and its components as a guiding inquiry to understand why particular forms of animism emerge and their affordances and limitations.

To begin by addressing the third definition, animism as a word invites the idea that animism is most fundamentally referring to the animacy of all or at least many nonhuman things—living beings or in certain philosophies even the “inanimate.” In recent years, critics and theorists have mobilized a variety of concepts etymologically related to the word “animism”—especially “animacy,” “animatedness,” “the animate”—in such fields as new materialism, affect theory, and eco-phenomenology. I will begin with these other fields before moving to animist studies. Animacy or related words can denote more or less exclusively to the vitality of natural phenomena, as with eco-phenomenologist David Abram;²³ it can function as a descriptive statement of the agency, activity, and potential of all matter, as with new materialist Jane Bennett in the form of “animate matter.”²⁴ Both these definitions use animacy or a related term to challenge typical Western distinctions between the animate and the inanimate, and this in turn modifies expectations as to who or what has agency. It is popular to refer to the assumptions of new materialist frameworks as “animist” since many of their analytical objects possessing agency are nonhuman. Some critics’ misplaced fears of new materialists’ removal of human agency aside,²⁵ this emphasis on distributed agency has in turn informed critiques of animism as compatible with capitalism and late liberalism. Achille Mbembe, Elizabeth Povinelli, and others charge animism under these guises with being a perfect fit for capitalism. Positing animism as a flat ontology in which everything is potentially vital and thereby animated through acts of

²³ He uses “the animate.” David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (Vintage Books, 1997).

²⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Some fear that New Materialism’s expanded analytic of agency results in a blindness to human agency and an evasion of human responsibility. See for example Min Hyung Song, *Climate Lyricism* (Duke University Press, 2022), 12. However, I think this critique ultimately mischaracterizes these frameworks’ purpose. Any ecocritical framework must acknowledge nonhuman agency because these agencies are fundamental matters of fact: humans and their systems do not create the real by themselves. This is not an either/or nor a conceptualization that seeks to identify and measure the impacts of particular agents as opposed to others; that the nonhuman world acts is no great revelation.

valuation justifies such statements as “capitalists can be said to be the purest of the Animists” because “nothing is inherently inert, everything is vital from the point of view of capitalization, and anything can become something more with the right innovative angle.”²⁶ Yet I would counter that only by ignoring other features of animism besides this expanded agency can it be argued that capitalism is the “purest of the Animists.” Capitalism relies on a *non-relational* ontology or at best has features of “weak relationality” and thus has nothing to do with a social understanding of animism besides the phenomenon that under capitalism, humans personify or mystify their products.²⁷ As Sam Durrant argues, we must see “the abstracting logic of global capitalism, understood both as a *deanimating* force that turns souls into things and as a *falsely animating* force that turns things into fetishised commodities” [emphasis in original].²⁸ Animacy is important for animist studies since forms of animist personhood and relationalities emerge partly from this universal agency. However, agency itself does not allow us to understand social animist relationships.

Another common use of animacy indicates a measure of what is animated and therefore imbued with certain affective values and salience within a social field, leading to arguments that animacy describes how mechanisms of power operate, and thus that we already exist within a kind of “animism”—one in which certain bodies or “genres of the human” are more animated than others. In Mel Chen’s work, animacy names the ways modes of power hierarchize and structure how different bodies, substances, and populations are valued.²⁹ Following similar

²⁶ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), 20. See also Achille Mbembe, “Weighing Lives,” trans. Luiz Paulo Leitão Martins, *Ágora* 26 (2023): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-4414-2023-023>.

²⁷ Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*, trans. David Frye (Duke University Press, 2020), xiv.

²⁸ Sam Durrant, “Critical Spirits: New Animism as Historical Materialism,” *New Formations* 104–105 (2022): 52, Project Muse.

²⁹ Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Duke University Press, 2012), see especially 2–4.

logics, important theorists in animist studies have recently used animacy as a way to critique animism as a newly valued ontology through what they see as colonial modernity's *biopolitical* animism operating. If scholars take the animist ontology seriously by recognizing the animacy and agency of all things *and* agree that coloniality/modernity is the current historical totality, is animism itself not simply "the distribution of animacy" and thereby life by this world system in the first place?³⁰ That is, does animism merely describe the full scope of the biopolitical dimensions of extant relations of power? Added to this is Philip Dickinson's argument that since animism as a term emerged with a colonial project, "a racialised process of onto-epistemological division" in his words, animism must be understood as "an operative signifier within the colonial division of the world, bound to the violence of modernity's conceptual and material autoconstitution."³¹ Such a definitions lock analysis into either mere reifications of colonial power or an absolute negative movement of sabotage on the other. James Burton, in a similar but different vein, speculates that "if there is a particular mode of (something like) animism accompanying and perhaps helping direct the course of modernity/rationality, its most significant elements would be found not in the fact that it makes distinctions between animate and inanimate matter, but in that it presumes a subject capable of making this distinction – of, effectively, possessing privileged access to objective truth/reality."³² However, I believe that the chief move of animism is not a decision between what is animate and what is inanimate, nor between life and death. Indeed, Istvan Praet challenges the idea that modern-biological and Indigenous-traditional conceptions of life and death are commensurable.³³ Animism gets collapsed into

³⁰ Philip Dickinson, "Dispossessing Animism," 103.

³¹ *ibid.*, 84.

³² James Burton, "Manimism: Worrying about the Relationship Between Rationality and Animism," *New Formations* 104-105 (2022): 223, Project Muse.

³³ See Istvan Praet, *Animism and the Question of Life* (Routledge, 2014).

modern biopolitics in these views. By reducing animism to a mere distribution of animacy, we lose almost the entirety of what makes animism an ontology and tendency of practices distinct from new materialism. While I will certainly explore the ways in which modernity/coloniality shape would-be animist practice on the ground, I hope to show that a fully social animism is still at root a challenge to modernity/coloniality and that we can also think something called “animism” beyond any absolute enclosure by the historicity of our concepts and epistemologies.

In my own thought, animacy as the agentic and affectively salient vitality of nonhumans must be balanced with the firmly *social* to deserve the name animism. Animism is a social ontology depending on the organization of relations among humans, nonhumans, and land through normative systems of obligation. Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) in her now-classic *Braiding Sweetgrass* uses the term, “the animacy of the world,” to refer to “the life that pulses through all things” and “a world where everything is alive.”³⁴ This however is neither a transcendentalist sublime nor only a posthumanist or new materialist agentic field of potential. Instead, it is an ontological claim for nonhumans’ personhood, requiring ethical forms of relation including communicative technologies (grammars) of accurately listening, describing, and responding to these nonhuman peoples.³⁵ Learning the “grammar of animacy” “could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one— with moral responsibility to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species.”³⁶ The importance of normativity and responsibility is clear, which I will argue are essential to all animisms that aspire to ecological viability. Kimmerer’s “grammar of animacy” shows how relatability begins at least

³⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 55.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 55-59.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 57-58.

in part with a sense of generalized animacy, but this is only one essential step on the path to recognizing personhood and relatedness. Poetry in particular is a privileged site for the exploration of grammars of animacy in the sense of making alive and felt an eco-relational field, but it also models the norms and protocols of animist sociality.

In addition to Kimmerer's claim for the importance of normativity, I argue that contemporary animism as a field of study and practice can benefit from understanding the importance of "tradition" in the role of actual, historically existing animisms. In her influential chapter, "We Call It Tradition," to Harvey's important anthology, *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Linda Hogan brings an important challenge to the straightforward application of the term to Native American religions:

Animism is the word scholars now use to define the worldview and intelligence that ... "begins" to understand other than Western ways of knowing. However, it is not a term traditional indigenous peoples would use to describe our relationship with, and love for, the world around us. Nor is it a word that fully defines the complexity of knowledge systems we have had of the world around us. At least on the surface of its new territory, the study doesn't yet take in the thousands of centuries of historical relationships and intimate kinship with the land and our companion species. Nor does it consider how diverse indigenous languages contain and hold within them the embedded knowledge and deep science of our natural habitats, some containing more meanings in a single word than could be held in ideas written in a book in the English language, others with more verbs and ways of using them than the entire number of words that exist in the entire vocabulary of other languages.³⁷

Hogan rejects the ability of scholars' term "animism" as a universal ontology to sufficiently describe or understand the historically-garnered knowledge systems and relational cultural tools of actual Indigenous societies. As the title of her chapter suggests, she distinguishes academic animism from what Native American tribes use themselves: "[f]or tribal peoples, our relationships and kinship with the alive world is simply called tradition."³⁸ Tradition names the

³⁷ Linda Hogan, "We Call it Tradition," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Routledge, 2013), 18-19.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 19.

particular and historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and their lands that animism as a universal ontology cannot include. Yet rather than simply taking a critical stance, Hogan offers that “[t]he traditional knowledge of the environment, history and language, and relationships in all of their intricacies must be taken into the new animism, and its roots continue to grow.”³⁹ This investment in “tradition,” while typically anathema to dominant poststructuralist philosophies, is important because it recognizes the Indigenous societies’ historical identity, land-relations, cosmological integrity, and foundation of survivance. Tradition can be understood as a key feature of what Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar calls “ancestrality,” “the ancestral mandate that inspires today’s struggles and that persists in the memory of the elders” and that “stems from a living memory that orients itself to the ability to envision a different future—a sort of ‘futurity’ that imagines, and struggles for, the conditions that will allow people to persevere as a distinct world.”⁴⁰ While the danger that tradition be conceived or deployed as a monolithic, static, and unalterable set of norms, this is not what Hogan nor Escobar have in mind. Tradition is rather dynamic and adaptive, “something aimed for and lived towards rather than simply inherited” in Harvey’s words,⁴¹ and the term summons a cohesive set of historical knowledges in a way that “practices” cannot. Tradition also points to the absolute importance of Indigenous studies to animist studies both for the study of existing Indigenous cosmologies and lifeways *within their own vocabulary and epistemologies* as well as for the importance of framing any contemporary animism within the conditions of colonial modernity.

Following Harvey, this dissertation then centers the importance of what I classify as “traditional animisms”⁴² as an open, normative baseline for the analysis of contemporary

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, 73.

⁴¹ Harvey, *Animism*, 34.

⁴² *ibid.*, xxiv.

animisms. Historically, most human societies were animist, so I refer to contemporary Indigenous societies and past societies practicing animist lifeways as “traditional societies.” Traditional societies have “traditional animisms” based in cosmologies and cohesive sets of land-connected and bioregional practices enacting those cosmologies. Within Westernized societies there are forms of animism that can be understood as remnants or “non-contemporaneous heritage” in Ernst Bloch’s understanding deriving in direct or indirect ways from European animisms.⁴³ *Ancestral* traditional animisms help describe a normative horizon of contemporary animisms: the reappropriation of settlers’ or arrivants’ *own* ancestral pasts for models of animism rather than appropriating those of others.⁴⁴ This lands my project within diaspora studies, as historical displacement and land-alienation is the standard condition would-be settler or arrivant animists face. Many white scholars claim that moderns need an animistic worldview (usually drawing on insights of new materialism) that is not an “old” or “neoprimitivist” animism (i.e. ancestral animism).⁴⁵ I am not opposed to more radically novel and emergent forms of animism—indeed, McClure and Berssenbrugge offer prime examples worthy of study—but I worry that such views generalize whiteness’s rupture with the diverse ethnic roots it excised itself from and thereby advances colonial modernity’s suppression of traditional animisms. Ancestral, traditional animisms do not provide universal or fully functional templates for emergent animisms since they were always dynamic, functionally imperfect, and historically-materially specific, but they do provide cosmologies, ontologies, orientations, and tools with eco-relational efficacies and adaptive potentialities that might acquire new durabilities in new

⁴³ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (University of California Press, 1991).

⁴⁴ For an excellent example of such a project with firmly decolonial ethics, see “Nordic Animism,” Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, <https://nordicanimism.com/>.

⁴⁵ See Bénédicte Meillon, *Ecopoetics of Reenchantment: Liminal Realism and Poetic Echoes of the Earth* (Lexington Books, 2022), 26; Jemma Deer, *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022) 50.

historical situations. While traditional societies utilize animism in part to adapt to and shape ecological conditions for *longue durée* sustainability, modern societies on the other hand are by and large “maladaptive” due to the narrow, short-term, and instrumental purposes that have acquired the authority over society’s enduring values.⁴⁶ Yet a functionalist approach that would explain animist cultural forms by their ecological function risks exhausting animism’s meaning in its ecological purpose, making ecological consequence the sole explanation or measure of animist life.

Inspired by another of Hogan’s poems that I read below and the pragmatist bent of the posthumanist philosophers I discuss, in this dissertation I take an ecological-pragmatic and Indigenous-normative approach to animism. I ask how particular animist cosmologies and poetic forms organize relations; what capacities and obligations those relations enable; whose continuance they support; and how their consequences are conditioned by colonial histories and unequal distributions of power. My evaluative horizon is then eco-relational viability: the historically situated capacity of animist lifeways to sustain or repair a more-than-human and human world amidst the dynamic and “discordant harmonies” of the natural world and the asymmetrical relations of history.⁴⁷ This approach draws from Indigenous accounts of grounded normativity to locate ecological efficacy within bioregional relations, reciprocal responsibilities, and adaptive ancestral practices. Yet it also recognizes that—following philosopher Brian Burkhart (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma)—“the ideals of the Western (delocalized) discipline of ecology are not the ideals of Indigenous locality;” Indigenous philosophy and ethics are grounded in respect towards nonhuman kin within a web of relations in particular places rather

⁴⁶ Rappaport studies “ritual,” but I think this can be safely extended to animist practices. Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (North Atlantic Books, 1979).

⁴⁷ Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

than guided by a quantification-based, abstract, and universalizing science.⁴⁸ My emphasis then is on human-nonhuman relations rather than the science of ecology itself.

My perspective does not entirely bracket questions of the consciousness or intentionality of nonhuman beings—as will become clear, both the poets and I are interested in such inquiries—but they are secondary to the ethical and ecological viability of the society and world in which they are posed. Questions of the *what* of existence must also be accompanied by the *how, in what way, or doing* of existence and the worlds it engenders. At the level of poetry, this method examines relational affordances rather than presuming ecological outcomes. Poems can intensify nonhuman presence, transmit forms of address and norms, and propose modes of collective existence, but such aesthetic effects do not by themselves establish durable or ethically accountable relationships. I therefore read animist poems by moving between two temporal scales: the emergent relations and transformations made perceptible by poetic form, and the longer processes of obligation, reproduction, and world-maintenance through which those relations might—or might not—become viable forms of shared life.

Reading Animism through the Postwar Poets

An analysis of animist poetry brings to animist studies a variety of versions of *what* and *how* animism is or might be instantiated. What is an animist poem? What distinguishes animist relation from metaphor, anthropomorphism, or projection? How does a poem depict or propose animist relationship, and what particular kinds of work does a poem do that is different than a physical, lived animist relationship? If animism in my definition depends upon ongoing, maintained social relationships, how does lyric poetry—so often the expression of a moment—

⁴⁸ Brian Burkhardt, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (Michigan State University, 2019), 186; 271-306.

address social animism's temporality? What forms of ecological and social life become imaginable through animist poetics, and what kinds of relations remain foreclosed? What pressures do the particular historical forces of the period such as coloniality, racialization, and capitalism place upon the result? How do these differences in historical pressures mark the animist poetics of the early postwar period as different from today's?

Although some of the modernist who preceded my archive utilized what can be described as animist formal strategies in their work,⁴⁹ what Joshua Schuster argues convincingly of the vast majority of American modernist poets generally holds true for modernists at large: they were “keenly interested in environs but ambivalent about environmentalism” by not treating ecological concerns in and for themselves.⁵⁰ By contrast, in the postwar period environmentalism emerged as such within popular discourse and become a concern for poets both conventional and experimental, while mobilizations of animist poetics became fully ecological in turn. The postwar period in the United States began with nuclear weapons' threat of near-total annihilation on the Earth at large counterpoised with the first image of Earth from space in 1946, inaugurating an era in which the major global powers are understood to have planetary-shaping capacities and the Earth itself is seen as a small, contingent, and vulnerable. This shift in the existential imaginary combined with reckoning the horrors of World War II, disillusionment with Western philosophies and religions, and rejection of new forms of American imperialism abroad and racial subjugation at home first produced interest in animism among the New American

⁴⁹ By and large, the moderns divorced animist myth from the realm of emplaced eco-social relations and transformed them into figures for global, more limitedly international (i.e. Europe-focused), national, and individual symbolic narrative. Some obvious names here are William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and H.D.. The so-called “myth-and-ritualist literary school” even made a critical method out of this. Yeats' early work was based in place-based Irish folk animist tradition, but gradually his work became more preoccupied with internationalist occultism.

⁵⁰ Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (The University of Alabama Press, 2015), 3.

Poets and then the Beats. Postwar poets such as Charles Olson and Snyder turned to anthropology—especially the fieldwork traditions of Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Bronisław Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and Claude Lévi-Strauss as well as to Native American ethnography more broadly—for models of nonmodern lifeworlds, mythic consciousness, and place-based relations that helped structure and authorize the era’s ethnopoetic and ecological recovery of animist ways of imagining human and more-than-human communities.⁵¹ Adding to this Mircea Eliade’s popular writings on shamanism, myth, rites of passage, and other subjects along with a watershed moment of new publications on Asian religions, poets developed experiments in poetic animism from their interests in Asian and Indigenous religions, anthropology, psychedelia, and ecology. Spurred by Rachel Carson’s landmark *Silent Spring*, the rise of the Ecology Movement, Deep Ecology, and the Gaia hypothesis among other sources, these animisms become more ecologically inflected rather than remaining sources for psychic and cultural transformation. Ecology supplied a framework for understanding the ecological viability of non-Western spiritual traditions and the principles of interdependence, systematicity, and precarity that characterize contemporary animist thought and practice. The environmental crises of the period—including pollution and toxicity, species extinction, habitat loss, and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples under globalization and the Green Revolution—pushed poets to entertain or adopt animism as a response and gave them a wide and receptive audience for animist ideas beginning with the baby-boomer counterculture. The American Indian Movement rendered struggles for sovereignty territorial, material, and spiritual, placing Indigenous animist traditions at the center of Indigenous survivance, and the so-called Native American Renaissance developed this program in poetics. The Black Arts Movement also

⁵¹ For the influence of these anthropologists, see Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (The University of Alabama Press, 2013).

brought reclamation of African animisms and landscapes to the new Black poetics or registered historical traumas on land or Atlantic Ocean in terms of haunting animacies.⁵² The period witnessed the birth of ecologically animist poetics in its contemporary ecological and social exigences, and the poets remain in shaping what animism has and might become today.

Under these conditions poetry becomes a particularly important site for animist experimentation because of its capacity to reorganize perception, sensation, and relation beyond the explanatory or descriptive capacities of scientific, philosophical, religious, or anthropological discourses. The poets of the postwar period utilize poetry in the figurative and syntactic flexibility afforded to the genre to attempt to formulate grammars of animacy in Kimmerer's sense. Poetic language is uniquely capable of instantiating animist perception and dramatizing animist concerns by destabilizing key binaries that structure the modern worldview and its "ontology of separation," including subject-object, nature-culture, self-environment, and literal-figurative.⁵³ Poetry's formal strategies can produce affective and sensory engagements that exceed purely representational relationships to the world and allow the reader to enact animist modes of perception. Animist address, personification, and prosopopoeia—rather than erroneous projections or wishful thinking on the one hand or naively ecologically restorative in and of themselves on the other—as social forms extended to nonhumans test ecological viability in the work of reading. The affective effects of animist poetry stage, speculate, or maintain sustainable relations as worlding operations, both risky and affording. And while poetry's work is distinct from other genres for these reasons, many of the poets in my archive also mobilized ideas from their non-poetic discourses to help make this poetry legible and urgent to their audiences—

⁵² Animism towards ancestors drowned during the middle passage haunts the speaker in Clifton's poem beginning, "atlantic is a sea of bones." Lucille Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton*, eds. Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser (BOA Editions, 2012), 268.

⁵³ Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*, xiii-xiv.

whether Gary Snyder's immensely popular essays informed by anthropology and ecology, McClure's speculative biology, Trask's influential theorizations of settler colonialism and communication of Native Hawaiian cosmologies, or even Berssenbrugge's interviews engaging with quantum physics. I draw extensively on these poets' para-poetic texts to elucidate the rich ontological and theoretical frameworks behind their poetry and to think with them as I conceptualize animist poetics. These para-poetic archives then render these particular poets exemplary figures for my study in their rich ontological and historical discourse that enables a robust analysis of their respective animisms and their significance.

While the modernists before them "stumbled onto the idea that any representational form can engage with the existence of any particular environs,"⁵⁴ the animist postwar poets generally mobilized a more consolidated set of formal strategies that gradually expand over the period as ecopoetics by name at the turn of the century.⁵⁵ The poems I analyze from Snyder, Trask, and McClure extend from the early 1955 until 2002 yet share a set of common features across their noteworthy differences. They share vocative and lyrical, address-based poetics that strongly hail, invoke, or confront; intensified and expressive energy through chant forms or emphatic orality, refrain, and parallelisms; field-based or experiential forms that stage animist relations territorially, bodily, socially; mythic or cosmological storytelling that registers deities' participation in human life as ecologically grounded; and world-programmatic statements that propose lifeways and attempt collective reorganization through normative declarations. Many dimensions of this poetics are derived in part from Olsonian projective verse and from the activist poetics of the social movements of the period. Berssenbrugge is somewhat of an outlier

⁵⁴ Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism*, xi-xii.

⁵⁵ Inaugurated by Jonathan Skinner's seminal journal *ecopoetics* archived at Jonathan Skinner, "Ecopoetics," WordPress, last modified August 7, 2009, <https://ecopoetics.wordpress.com/>.

in my study, coming to an animist-centered poetics only later in her career and through Language poetry—which by and large rejected many of the formal strategies I just listed and had limited engagement with ecology, much less ecological animism. However, her later animist turn is important in demonstrating that animist poetics need not share the features of the other poets nor firmly stand on the latter position of the “dialogue between Postmodernism and Neoromanticism” that Albert Gelpi argues characterizes the poetry of the postwar period, instead pointing to an animistic contemporary synthesis.⁵⁶ Berssenbrugge’s diffuse and paratactical subjectivity, theoretically-dense diction, and much more readerly syntactic unfolding proposes conditions of perception rather than declaring worlds. Nonetheless, some strategy of address, prosopopoeia, and personification are animist formal strategies common to all the poets. And so while Lynn Keller’s influential study of contemporary ecopoetics stresses the importance of novelty and experimentation that “push the bounds of literary convention as the poets seek forms and language adequate to respond to the complex and varied environmental issues of our time,”⁵⁷ I will show that poets’ animist repurposing of older forms, while perhaps “experimental” for the context, demonstrates less the importance of novelty and more a range of strategies new and old with their own particular affordances and problems under the uneven conditions of history and the incongruence of scale between traditional societies and modern globalization.

More fundamentally, I argue that animist poetics throughout the period negotiates a process-based poetics that elucidates and makes relatable nonhuman personhood through sensory perception with a more normative and social poetics that would communicate, demarcate, and maintain discrete forms of eco-sociality for particular human audiences. The latter is a function

⁵⁶ Albert Gelpi, *American Poetry after Modernism: The Power of the Word* (Stanford University Press, 2015), 8.

⁵⁷ Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press, 2017), 3

largely of coloniality/modernity's problematics in the period, which I will develop more the next section. Here I submit that at its most primary level, a key feature of animist poetics is a processual, pragmatist bent that challenges the received ontology of poetic language that splits the figurative from the literal. This process tendency I locate in Olson's poetics, Indigenous poetics, and the influence of East Asian philosophies. I discuss the Olsonian component here and the Indigenous in the next section. Olson's adaptation of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead into his projective verse and wider philosophical poetics begins an animist propensity in poetics at the affective level. His short essay, "The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought," is an early meditation on "the animate" as category. For Olson, "the animate" is the primordial condition of embodied, processual activity through which beings participate in reality as responsive, historical, and situated events. Influenced by Whitehead's process philosophy, Olson treats experience, relation, and event as more fundamental than abstract thought, arguing that thought itself is only valid when grounded in organismic perception, movement, and material placement within the world. The animate then names a mode of existence defined by experiential responsiveness, ecological situatedness, and continual becoming opposed to the descriptive abstractions and universalisms and Newtonian spatiality of modern thought. Poetry is a mode of participating in eventful process and carrying the "freshness" of events through time.⁵⁸ Nathaniel Mackey later develops Olson's breath-based poetics into a meditation on the breath as source for animacy in Black life.⁵⁹ Olson's friend and an influence on Snyder and McClure, Robert Duncan, developed a poetics of pan-animacy—"I think it's all alive"⁶⁰—in which

⁵⁸ Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (University of California Press, 1997), 368-370.

⁵⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, "Breath and Precarity" (Three Court Pour, 2021).

⁶⁰ Robert Duncan, *A Poet's Mind: Collected Interviews with Robert Duncan, 1960-1985*, ed. Christopher Wagstaff (North Atlantic Books, 2012), 39.

“‘Everything is sentient!’ / Everything has power over your being.”⁶¹ While not progressing into grounded-normative animism, this Olsonian-Whiteheadian conception of the animate influences McClure and to a lesser extent Snyder and helps frame an understanding of Berssenbrugge’s work. By tracking animism across the period through my authors, I help fill a variety of gaps in ecocritical research in the period. I show that animism in its various iterations provides an important vessel for innovations in ecological poetics and practice. By taking seriously my authors’ para-textual sources for their ontologies in essays, notes, or interviews, I demonstrate that this work is not merely supplemental to the work of poetry but rather supplies frameworks for understanding the full scope of their ecological interventions.

Throughout the period the poets turned to the eco-erotic as a vessel for animism. Not merely incidental, animist societies’ very long-term viability relies in large part on social forms of erotic interrelation designed for the flourishing of humans and nonhumans through mutual pleasure, care, kinship, creativity, reproduction, and vitality. The flowering of the eco-erotic in the period can be seen both as a precursor and outcome of the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and ‘70s that redefined possibilities for sexual identity and expression across identitarian categories and the reclamation of ancestral eco-erotic traditions by Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and minoritized communities. The eco-erotic poem in general served to establish the vitality and naturalness of previously repressed or oppressed sexualities. Poets also staged more truly animist, social, and participatory eco-erotics in both collective forms and individual—exemplary of the latter is a line from an early Berssenbrugge poem: “[w]hen I think this landscape is a lover / I want low brush to rub against my breasts.”⁶² I introduce the term, “land-

⁶¹ “Golden Lines” in Robert Duncan, *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (University of California Press, 2014), 375.

⁶² Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, “Numbers of the Date Become the Names of Birds” in *Random Possession* (Reed Books, 1982).

connected eros” or “land-based eros” to refer to the former: community-based eco-erotic systems of ideas and practices based in grounded normativity and social, reproductive relations with nonhuman persons characteristic of Indigenous and traditional societies. I believe it is important to have a term more general than “Indigenous eco-erotics”⁶³ both because land-connected eros implies the collective, grounded, and normative basis of these eco-erotics and because non-Indigenous animists such as Snyder have and continue to attempt to instantiate eco-erotic frameworks similar to those of traditional animist societies. Land-based eros is not meant to replace the eco-erotic; instead, it is a distinct version of the eco-erotic that is normatively bounded and practiced by a particular community (whether local or dispersed). Across scales, poets in my study respond to and are shaped by modern and colonial discourses and conditions of the erotic as they attempt to model forms of animist eroticism. What emerges is a variety of

⁶³ Regarding the “eco-erotic,” describing anything at the juncture of the ecological and the erotic, while being able to bring together diverse phenomena for comparison, also does not offer the specificity that animist modes of the eco-erotic demand. I will start with the extant definition of the eco-erotic that comes closest to what I am looking for occurring in the work Melissa K. Nelson (Turtle Mountain Chippewa). Here focusing on the sexual and the aesthetic, she synthesizes the eco-erotic in queer and Indigenous studies, arguing:

eco-erotics is a type of *meta* (after, higher)-sexual or *trans* (over, beyond)-sexual intimate ecological encounter in which we are momentarily and simultaneously taken outside of ourselves by the beauty, or sometimes the horror, of the more-than-human natural world. This means we are potentially aroused by *anything*, meaning “pan,” or all: pansexual. [emphasis in original]

Melissa K. Nelson, “Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures,” in *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, ed. Joanne Barker (Duke University Press, 2017), 230. Her definition emphasizes the (etymologically) ecstatic quality of the erotic, assumes a baseline of anthropocentric orientation, and is quite inclusive in the concept’s application. She sees the dangers this expansiveness offers, noting that such eco-erotic experiences could be one dimension of the “peak experiences” travelers seek in exotic locations; she notes that “that these fresh, often ahistorical moments of superficial arousal or stimulation,” while providing meaningful experiences, “can be linked to colonial desire and exotic romanticism” (231). I would add the term “ecosexual”⁶³ here, which Megan Flaherty and others have critiqued as anthropocentric and distracting from the real work of “restoration” and “reparation.”⁶³ While some practices fall within similar conceptual territory, animist erotic relation-making with land is not simply a version of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens’ individualist-identitarian “ecosexual.” Another compartmentalized identity category of the modern individual, the ecosexual is ultimately about non-consensually and exploitatively seeking pleasure from land and the performance of identity for other humans rather than about holistic relation-making with land. While I acknowledge Sprinkle and Stephens’ desire to use ecosexuality as a means of activism, I nonetheless argue that their individualist-identitarian framing renders actual ethical relationship with land optional. See Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens with Jennie Klein, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Megan Flaherty, “On Not Becoming an Ecosexual: The Question of Animism,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (2022): 135. Project Muse.

strategies that all would overcome the anthropocentrism of late capitalism's erotic imaginary even as they must negotiate the historically specific conditions that gender and racialize their erotic templates.

I end this section developing some characteristics and problematics of personification and address in animist poetry of the period. There is not a straightforward term in poetics to refer to poets treating nonhumans as persons. "Personification" classically denotes an abstract concept's human-figuration to speak or be addressed; "anthropomorphism" denotes bestowing features of the human body to nonhumans, while in the sciences it means the erroneous attribution of human traits to nonhumans; and "prosopopoeia" means the poet speaking directly through a nonhuman voice. Within the dominant ontologies of Christianity and scientific materialism over the past millennia, all these tropes provide an "animating" function: giving agency, voice, or presence to the inanimate or to the nonhuman *non-person*. In contrast, as I use it in this study, animist personification is any technique to *socially relate to nonhuman persons*—whether through conventions of human sociality or nonhuman sociality. Personification is composed of techniques of mutual address with or recognition of nonhumans as social persons with capacities such as intentionality, consciousness, self-reflection, communicability, agency, ethics, responsibility and response-ability, identity, interiority, and other features that are integral to sociality. For animist personification to be eco-relationally viable, such address and recognition serve the purpose of relating well. At best, personification "directs inquisitive concerns to the being-together of oneself and the other and to learning mutualities within the *pluralities* that *are* in the world;" in other words, animist personification is not projection of human interests and ideas but a social inquiry into how to co-exist through differences that make up a shared context

[emphasis in original].⁶⁴ Even when poets were not committedly animist in the period, such an animist concern of sharing space and world sometimes appear as horizon even if not fully pursued.⁶⁵

In my study there are basically two modes of personification. The first assumes a more or less already-developed animist cosmology within which a poet composes; there are already-recognized persons who populate and inform the poet's context and text. Key functions of personification in the poem then are to convey nonhuman persons' interests, affects, and roles in the world to the reader and to call the reader into participation with that world. An example here is what Snyder designates the "shamanic" function of the poet: the ability to "speaks for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds"⁶⁶—to communicate their actually-existing desires, dreams, needs, relations, etc. allegedly on their own terms. This particular mode of personification sometimes incites representational problems that I delineate most fully in Chapter One and which I can allude to here in the naïve and potentially harmful confidence of a line like Snyder's "I speak for hawks."⁶⁷ In the second mode, personification is an act co-constituting a more emergent, mutual sociality with the beings of a place. In animist ritual, words can be part of an ensemble of techniques to create, invoke, or otherwise invest personhood into a being (e.g. an artifact) that did not possess that personhood before or can summon "spirit possession" of a human by a nonhuman. While the poems in my study do not necessarily attempt such work directly, their animist address nonetheless calls forth the agentic and subjective capacities of lands or entities in way that make the poem and/or its performance

⁶⁴ Danny Naveh and Nurit Bird-David, "Animism, Conservation, and Immediacy," in *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, 28-29.

⁶⁵ In Denise Levertov's 1967 "Living While it May," the speaker find herself recognized and haunted through the personified gaze of a young elm growing too near her house and requires felling. Denise Levertov, *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, ed. Paul A. Lacey (New Directions, 2013), 248-49.

⁶⁶ Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways* (City Lights Books, 1977), 12-13.

⁶⁷ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Counterpoint, 1996), 21.

an essential mode of contact between persons, a hailing of a person for immanent relation. Such personification also frequently works reciprocally, inciting the poet to modify their own personhood and sociality to match that of their nonhuman interlocutor in order to meet them in their sociality. This looks like McClure attempting to become more mammalian in body and communication when confronting large felines, for example. Such personifications would reduce the isolation caused by the human exceptionalist worldview in which the human person can only be recognized and addressed by other human persons and stimulates new modes of sociality and interactivity (e.g. in vocalization, comportment, gesture, affectability, etc.).

Whether operating in the first mode or the second, animist personification relies on a range of modes of address. Famously, for Paul de Man personification or prosopopoeia as the poet's role of making the world speak is "the master trope of poetic discourse."⁶⁸ In an animist ontology, the "master trope" becomes literal⁶⁹ but also *accountable* to that world. Jonathan Culler's classic account of apostrophe reads the vocative trope as a "will to a state of affairs" in which "the apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces."⁷⁰ While Culler's focus on the "circuit of communication" that apostrophe creates and his more pragmatic than representational focus on what it makes happen in the poem is useful for me, he works within a strictly modernist ontology in which apostrophe can only be a "sign of a fiction which

⁶⁸ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 48.

⁶⁹ In the non-animist poetics of figuration, such personification is a non-veridical comparison that operates in the subjunctive whether expressionist projection (something in the world affects the speaker as though it were a person), poetic fancy (Wordsworth's ocean baring her breast to the moon as if she were a woman), or figurative agency of a concretized social form (commodities have affective agency as if they were more alive than some humans). In all cases, there is an implied but firm "as if" that is a figurative crossing of the assumed non-animist ontology; there is no social relationship with such figured persons. On the one hand, such work exemplifies Harvey's speculation that "if we have not been modern perhaps we have always been animists" in the sense that humans cannot help but personify. On the other hand, the great majority of this poetry is non-relational with such figured entities because they, by and large, function as mere figures within and in service of the assumed ontologies (Christian or materialist) of the poet and audience. According to an animist perspective, these poets operate from ontologies that have already de-personified the cosmos. Harvey, "Introduction" in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, 11.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, and Deconstruction* (Routledge, 2001), 154.

knows its own fictive nature:” “the things of earth function as *thous* when addressed” in the poem because they are *invented* or *projected* to do so by the poet’s fancy, but the animated entities of apostrophic address are never *actually* *thous* [emphasis original].⁷¹ The meaning of address in this model is in the speaker’s self-constitution rather than the world itself. In an animist ontology by contrast, address to a nonhuman person is not merely rhetorical and can receive any number of forms of reply: sensory effects, affective reorientation, environmental changes, or changes in animal behavior. Yet the addressee can also resist or refuse address, respond counter to the address’s intention, or remain inaccessible. In any case, the poet is accountable to a real world beyond the two solipsistic choices—fictional hubris or self-referential irony—often effected through apostrophe in the Western tradition. And while Culler posits apostrophe as occurring within the eternal *now* of the lyric and limited to the *I-Thou* relationship of speaker and addressee, we need a theory of address that can operate at larger spatial and temporal scales. In Monique Roelofs’ theory of address, modes of address take place within “structures of address,” significantly tied to the endurance of gender formations, racialization, coloniality, and other symbolic systems and traditions. And so while animist poets utilize modes of address typically repressed by modernity/coloniality—engaging with nonhuman sociality and thereby troubling modernity’s foundation in human exceptionalism—they also often replicate the hierarchies and assumptions motivated by structures of address. At a more minute level, animist poetics instantiate what Roelofs calls “aesthetic relationality,” or “the aesthetically inflected and productive relationships that we bear to each other and the material world.”⁷² This includes the affects, the prosodic qualities, the performance, and other aspects of

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 161.

⁷² Monique Roelofs, *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 41.

poetry's aesthetic orientation towards its addressees and audiences. Transitivity, these arts of address recognize, solicit, or maintain relationships with other-than-human beings within and beyond the determinations of modernity/coloniality—what might be called the “situated answerability” of the address. Thus I eschew “apostrophe” in this study for the more general “address,” and in some cases I give names for particular modes of address I see operative in the poems such as Trask's “kāhea” and Berssenbrugge's “animist propositions.”

Yet an animist poetics should also be interested in the effects of the act of address on the speaker as well. Similar to the “pray in order to believe” method of efficacy, address can modify the affect and rapport of the speaker towards the addressee. Poetry can thereby attempt to reshape structures of address at a normative scale or to activate the kinds of empathy that are activated in our address to human persons—effective forms of modifying relation and the real in the making of animist worlds via aesthetic relationality. An example in animist practice itself can be seen in Four Arrows (also known as Donald Trent Jacobs and Wahinkpe Topa)—identified as an Oglala relation, Sun Dancer and Pipe Carrier—description of an exercise he sometimes runs with his audience before he gives a presentation:

I will have scouted out a place outside the building where there are trees. If it's not too far of a walk from the room we are in, I ask the attendees to leave their things on the table and go out to touch a tree and then step back and count to ten. (Sometimes I have them come back to the room.) Then I ask them to do it again, but this time asking permission ... and waiting for an answer before touching. People usually laugh when I give this instruction. Sometimes they go out of the room shaking their heads. When they come back, however, and I have done this close to a hundred times over the years, there is a different energy. When I ask people to report on the experience, invariably someone will cry. Disbelief is often mentioned, followed by, “But I truly felt it tell me.” I conclude the exercise by saying, well, that is how we all lived in relationship to other-than-humans 24-7.⁷³

⁷³ Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows) and Darcia Narvaez, *Restoring the Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth* (North Atlantic Books, 2022), 93.

What Four Arrows describes is not a belief nor even a mindset—many of the participants seem in fact to have believed strongly that nothing would happen when they asked the tree for permission—but rather requires a new term, something like a “reflexive address effect” or “reflexive intention effect.” From a more conventional semiotics perspective, through the address—in this case taking the intentional form of asking for permission—the participants conditioned themselves to receive a signal and likely provoked a feeling then interpreted as a “yes” or “no” sign. However, this signal would be entirely self-generated rather than received from or in any physical way provoked by the tree, a kind of illusion or trick generated by the brain’s structural expectation of an answer after making an inquiry. This troubles the frequent requirement in semiotics that all signs be physical.⁷⁴ In the classic psychoanalytical framework, this would be a form of projection or Freud’s analysis of children’s mistaken belief in the “omnipotence of thoughts.”⁷⁵ Such explanations are of course insufficient for my purposes. For one, they commit the error Whitehead proposed as science’s “bifurcation of nature” in which reality and appearance are separated. Likewise, from a Deleuzian perspective, the received answer is “real,” a material effect with consequences; the act “brings the territory into being by power of its performance.”⁷⁶ From an Indigenous and animist perspective, this communication really takes place between persons. As I will explore, Berssenbrugge’s late poetry is full of these reflexive address effects, registering the minute but profound effects of addressing plants, stars, and other nonhuman entities on the event of encounter.

Animist Poetry under Settler Colonial Modernity

⁷⁴ For an example of the latter, see Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 182-183.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin Books, 2003), 147-149; 156.

⁷⁶ Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 98.

To understand both the conditions and possibilities of contemporary animism and its poetry, it is necessary to track the imposition of what Aníbal Quijano names “coloniality” on non-modern ontologies. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira summarizes Quijano’s coloniality below:

While *colonialism* is often presented as the formal occupation and administration of lands and the subjugation of the original peoples of these lands, *coloniality* refers to the enduring manifestations of colonial relations, logic, and situations—even after the official decolonization of formal structures of governance. In this sense, coloniality represents a global hegemonic form of power that organizes bodies, time, knowledge, relationships, labor, and space according to economic parameters (i.e., exchange value) and to the benefit of particular groups of people, with or without formal colonization. [emphasis in original]⁷⁷

Since the modernization of the globe was begun by historical colonization and continues to be sustained by the wider epistemological and ontological paradigm of coloniality, the term “modernity/coloniality” reminds that the “modern” is founded upon this paradigm. The global suppression of animism can be seen as part of what Quijano describes as “a systemic repression ... of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination.”⁷⁸ While settler colonialism itself is of course alive and active in the United States, I begin by invoking modernity/coloniality to expand to a global frame of reference that matches the often-global movements and interventions to which the poets in my study see themselves belonging. Animism—when taken up in its traditional, land-based forms that reject colonial notions of land as private property and natural resources—can be seen as what Walter Dignolo calls “decolonial spirituality,” such spiritualities being one of what he calls “roads to re-existence” by “delinking from the beliefs that modernity and development are the only way to

⁷⁷ Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (North Atlantic Books, 2021), 19.

⁷⁸ Aníbal Quijano, *Foundational Essays on the Coloniality of Power*, eds. Walter d. Dignolo, Rita Segato, and Catherine E. Walsh (Duke University Press, 2024), 74.

the future.”⁷⁹ This is not to claim that animism is always in contrast to modernity/coloniality. However, since Europe and North America vehemently attempted to extinguish animism as part of the project of modernity, and since animism is rooted in land-based ontological, epistemological, and viable lifeways at the very least in friction with modernity/coloniality, the reclamation of animism is particularly fertile for decolonial struggles in those contexts if also accompanied by action to return sovereignties to Indigenous peoples.

Hogan’s distinction between animism as an academic category and actually-existing Indigenous traditions is helpful because it sets a goal for emergent animisms: establishing animist traditions, which would occur at a *viable threshold*. An important inspiration for this stance is Hogan’s own contrast between viable Indigenous worlds and what she calls “failed worlds” of Europe that she argues precipitated historical colonization. In an essay entitled “Reminding” Hogan argues, “[w]e need the indigenous intelligence that has existed before the Europeans first stepped off ships with the broken knowledge systems that had failed the European continent.”⁸⁰ These “broken knowledge systems” fail not only whole continents physically but also the “worlds” these continents are composed of. She explains this in a note to her poem, “Map,” which I will read below:

This poem addresses the alive, sentient world and all its creations. It is about the arrival of the new people on this continent that came from their own failed worlds, and saw this one, as well, through their western philosophical lens, which failed in other places. Nevertheless, our older understanding of this world, and indigenous knowledge, have remained. They have been re-acknowledged and have the brilliant intelligence of what is called now nature.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2021), 64; see also 62-65.

⁸⁰ Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals*, 10

⁸¹ Linda Hogan, “Map,” Poets.org, published on March 6, 2021, by the American Academy of Poets, <https://poets.org/poem/map-0>

Through the “western philosophical lens” Europeans produced “failed worlds,” worlds that transformed lands into natural resources serving extractivist, capitalist growth while simultaneously dispossessing their own populations of their land-connectedness and land-based livelihoods to ensure a robust, motivated, and land-alienated settler population for colonization. While economically successful for certain demographics in the historical short-term, these worlds failed to honor and live relationally with “the alive, sentient world and all its creations” and set in motion the colonial genocides and extractivism dominant in today’s world order.⁸² And so while modernity/coloniality rests upon a destructive ontology, it is more profoundly a mode of failed world-production that systemically disorganizes relations towards unviable presents and futures. A pragmatic take on animism requires that emergent animisms produce viable worlds proved over many generations—that is, new traditions. This in effect makes emergent animisms only partly a category of ontology; it is also a horizon of practice that is as yet unrealized within coloniality/modernity.

“Map,” draws attention both to settler colonialism—both in its historical initiation and ongoingness—and to the more ontological and epistemological aspects of modernity/coloniality. One of Hogan’s primary concepts through which she describes how beings negotiate or rupture interspecies sociality is natural law.⁸³ “Map” reveals how contrasting relationships between language and land demonstrate a failure or adherence to natural laws in settler and Indigenous cultures. Language provides an interpretive framework that engenders or precludes ecologically-viable knowledge systems and sustainable world-making. That is, for Hogan, language is central

⁸² This recalls Deer’s heralding of animism as the end of the world as its etymological *wer-eld*, or “the age of man” in *Radical Animism*, 21-22.

⁸³ See also Four Arrows and Narvaez, “Chapter 19: Laws of Nature as Highest Rules for Living” in *Restoring the Kinship Worldview*, 183-190; C. F. Black, *The Land is the Source of the Law: A Dialogic Encounter with Indigenous Jurisprudence* (Routledge, 2011).

to a community ontology and epistemology, whether Native or colonial. Colonial ideologies and practices de-personify other-than-human beings for extractivist purposes—an insatiable hunger—making relation impossible. In “Map,” she focuses on language as a key vessel for this undoing:

This is the world
so vast and lonely
without end, with mountains
named for men
who brought hunger
from other lands,
and fear
of the thick, dark forest of trees
that held each other up,
knowing fire dreamed of swallowing them
and spoke an older tongue,
and the tongue of the nation of wolves
was the wind around them.
Even ice was not silent.
It cried its broken self
back to warmth.
But they called it
ice, wolf, forest of sticks,
as if words would make it something
they could hold in gloved hands,
open, plot a way
and follow.

This is the map of the forsaken world.
This is the world without end
where forests have been cut away from their trees.
These are the lines wolf could not pass over.⁸⁴

The colonizer’s map is an epistemological tool utilizing a language based in an ontology of separation to turn the land into exploitable natural resources: “forest of sticks” and “forests have been cut away from their trees” implies both depersonification of trees and a failure of language to perceive forests as living ecosystems, much less nations of tree people. The naming function

⁸⁴ Linda Hogan, *The Book of Medicines* (Coffee House Press, 1993), 37-8.

of the map also enacts colonial worlding by both its material tools (the fences that “lines” designates) and by populating the map with mountains named after themselves. Colonizers’ act of renaming—both toponyms and their names for sentient beings—creates the “world without end,” an abstractive and reductive map composed of infinitely-constructable space out of natural resources. The “hunger” driving the colonizers is not for food, but rather the hunger that is capitalism’s need for infinite growth.

The poem presents a multinaturalist ontology in which each type of being is a people or “nation” and has its own language, as fire speaks an “older tongue” than that of the colonizers, and the “tongue of the nation of wolves” is also distinct:

This is what I know from science:
that a grain of dust dwells at the center
of every flake of snow,
that ice can have its way with land,
that wolves live inside a circle
of their own beginning.
This is what I know from blood:
the first language is not our own.

There are names each thing has for itself,
and beneath us the other order already moves.
It is burning.
It is dreaming.
It is waking up.

The colonizer’s map is a palimpsest erasing the “first language” and “other order” that is not “our own.” This is natural law; it appears in this poem primarily as the web of cause-and-effect that eventually guarantees that systems driven by non-ecological worldings will experience destruction.⁸⁵ In my reading, the first-person plural follows the earlier logic, referring to human beings at large, so while colonial languages actively distance themselves from the first language,

⁸⁵ I credit this formulation of natural law also to Joshua Schrei, host, *The Emerald: Currents and Trends through a Mythic Lens*, “On Clouds and Cosmic Law,” April 9, 2024, <https://www.themythicbody.com/podcast/clouds-and-cosmic-law/>.

even Indigenous languages cannot claim to fully know it.⁸⁶ Since in other poems, each species has its own “law,”⁸⁷ the first language designates each species’ or “nation’s” cultural norms for ethical relationality within the common, interdependent existence. Westerners’ own normativity bears little relationship to the first language, and so it inspires earthly retaliation due to natural law in the form of “burning,” “dreaming,” and “waking up”—together suggesting global warming in all its catastrophic implications along with the transformative potential it has for human futures. While Native American stories are full of characters who exercise greed and face its consequences, coloniality/modernity has forged failed worlds that displaced millions of people in Europe in pursuit of capital’s growth (its prime virtue), rationalized those lands for productivity with devastating ecological consequences, and exported this model to the Western Hemisphere. The poem implies that because coloniality/modernity is a failing world when viewed from the imperatives of natural law, this failure will be made accountable soon. In the end, humanity at large will need to recover normative cultural modes for respecting natural law.

The recovery of cultural forms respecting Hogan’s “first language” for viable worlding bespeaks a central tension in the period between colonial modernity’s rendering animism as a relic of humanity’s historical past, its ongoing survivance in Indigenous societies, and its reclamation and practice by diasporic populations. The latter project sometimes emerged in the period as what has been described as “primitivism.” This typically denotes an attempt to return to historically prior social forms and modes of production. In the literary sphere, primitivism refers

⁸⁶ “While most of us agree that wilderness is necessary to our spiritual and psychological well-being, it is a container of far more, of mystery, of a life apart from ours. It is not only where we go to escape who we have become and what we have done, but it is also part of the natural laws, the workings of a world of beauty and depth we do not yet understand. It is something beyond us, something that does not need our hand in it. As one of our Indian elders has said, there are laws beyond our human laws, and ways above ours. We have no words for this in our language, or even for our experience of being there.” Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (Simon & Schuster, 1995), 45.

⁸⁷ For an even clearer depiction of multinaturalism and species-specific law, see Hogan’s “Crow Law” in *The Book of Medicines*, 31.

to utilizing formal strategies and imaginaries from the past to resist modern modes of alienation, or following Ben Etherington's reformulation, a set of ongoing responses to capitalism's planetary-wide totalization by attempting to animate nonsynchronous primitivist remnants in the form of literary techniques of immediacy to at least open a "decolonial horizon" if not actually achieve historical decolonization.⁸⁸ Influenced especially by Olson, in the postwar period the notion of the primitive was a source for a poetic project that would re-embed the human in a milieu of cosmic and interspecies forces and agencies.⁸⁹ Settler poets in my study appeal to Native American, East Asian, or Paleolithic sources for their primitivism—all with varied and uneven ethical consequences. For a time, Snyder evangelized his own minimalist lifestyle and poetics under the banner of "the primitive"⁹⁰ as a rally to return to an imagined, common animist origin shared by all humanity. However, I do not utilize literary primitivism as a critical framework in this study. Marking the poetic and para-poetic practices associated with the term as primitivism places them in a forever-outmoded position within an assumed "settler time"⁹¹ that thereby would require their justification in present use. It does not make sense to me to contain animist poetics within an account that would forever place it in the past, especially considering contemporary Indigenous poets' continued use of such poetics. Native writers in particular make this clear; their tradition mediations are not "primitive," which would reinforce their pastness and irrelevance, but "traditional," which is dynamic but materially and animistically rooted. I assume

⁸⁸ Ben Etherington's *Literary Primitivism*, and essential reconsideration of the oft-reviled phenomenon, argues that the first major generation of literary primitivists—including Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, D. H. Lawrence, and Claude McKay—Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 6.

⁸⁹ See Sherman Paul's *In Search of the Primitive: Rereading David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder* (Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

⁹⁰ See Gary Snyder, "Poetry and the Primitive" in *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New Directions, 1969), 117-130.

⁹¹ Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Duke University Press, 2017).

instead time as something produced; animist time⁹² or Kyle Whyte's (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) "time as kinship"⁹³ reveal time as something ongoingly enacted through maintaining animist relations rather than modernity's linear force relegated to nature separate from culture. When settler poets do invoke the primitive, however, I will discuss its stakes and consequences, as I explore Snyder's attempt to ground a universally accessible notion of animism in the primitive in Chapter One. But generally I do not describe animist poetics as only ever a remnant production of colonial modernity.

Instead, I treat animist poetics' relation to the past in terms of ancestrality. In this way poets form their animist poetics by positioning themselves as either descended from or engaging within geographic, racial, and/or tribal histories or genealogies that span varying periods of time. Indigenous poets like Trask draw upon ancestral poetics while also being conscious of their place within a wider geographic and racialized discourse of Indigenous poetics and simultaneously negotiating writing in a colonial language and poetic tradition. In the wake of Black Arts Movement's Africanist influence, poets such as Larry Neal,⁹⁴ Ishmael Reed,⁹⁵ and Audre Lorde frequently utilized ancestral animist traditions to ground anticolonial ethoi and aesthetics (see the more ecological moments of Reed's "Neo-HooDoo" aesthetic⁹⁶). Lorde's incorporation of Yoruba cosmology into poems designed in part to incite land-connectedness are particularly remarkable. In the opening to "The Winds of Orisha," the speaker declares that "[t]his land will

⁹² Jason Allen-Paisant, "Animist Time and the White Anthropocene," *New Formations* 104-105 (2021): 47, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NewF:104-105.02.2021>.

⁹³ Kyle Powys Whyte, "Chapter 4: Time as Kinship" in *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, eds. Jeffrey Cohen and Stephanie Foote (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 39-55.

⁹⁴ Exemplary is also Larry Neal, *Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts* (Howard University Press, 1974).

⁹⁵ In Reed's "Neo-HooDoo" aesthetic, poems sometimes imagine times "where once man animals / plants & stars freely / roamed thru each other's / rooms, ikhnaton came up / with the door" as an eco-decolonial horizon but seek less ecological grounding than the poets in my study. Ishmael Reed, "Why I Often Allude to Osiris" in *New and Collected Poems 1964-2006* (Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 54-55.

⁹⁶ See Jonathan P. Lewis, "Set and Osiris in Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," *Pacific Coast Philology* 49, no. 1 (2014): 78-98. Project Muse.

not always be foreign,” thereafter proposing belonging through women’s ancestral animism and lesbian eco-eroticism as she invokes a disruptive power animated by the orishas operating at both corporeal and ecological levels.⁹⁷ White settler poets like Jerome Rothenberg in his formulation of “ethnopoetics,”⁹⁸ Clayton Eshleman’s *Juniper Fuse*, Anne Waldman’s shamanistic bent or “trickster feminism,” or Diane di Prima’s European hermeticism all formulate animistic poetic claims that attempt to speak for or through vast geographical and temporal ranges from Paleolithic Europe to the Americas to South and East Asia. The trans-ancestral influences or appropriations of these animisms all have varying stakes and problems, but central to this period is a mobilization of the ongoingness and/or recoverability of animist ancestry as a means to resist perceived hegemonic forces, instantiate or maintain alternate social forms, and sometimes to relate with land. In addition to investing old poetic forms with “new proportions in relation to the accelerating destruction of habitats and biodiversity loss” the importance of traditional lifeways, pre-colonial cosmologies and histories, and the very retrograde status of animism itself within modern discourse makes animist poetics “out of sync with its present”⁹⁹ and thereby positioned within what Margaret Ronda characterizes as “remainders” or “devalued remnants of capital’s circuits of production, circulation, and consumption.”¹⁰⁰ Many of the animist forms and ideas that the postwar poets advance thus can be seen as residual cultural formations persisting within colonial modernity while maintaining an (unevenly) alternative or oppositional relation to it.

⁹⁷ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (Norton, 2000). EPUB.

⁹⁸ Eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetic* (University of California Press, 1983).

⁹⁹ Margaret Ronda, *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature’s End* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 5.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 13.

The four poets in my study produce four distinct solutions to animist relation under colonial modernity rather than advancing a single animist program. They are sometimes complementary and sometimes competing, but they each negotiate modernity/coloniality, the salient features of an animist cosmology, and the poetics of animism quite differently. In my framework animist poetry does not transcend coloniality but is also not reducible to it or conditioned by a closed totality that exhausts its meaning. Throughout this project, I treat colonial modernity as a historically specific field of relations that organizes, channels, and constrains the possibilities of animist poetry and practice without ever fully determining the effects of their propositions. I show that animist poets are caught up within dominant structures of desire: while I do not believe that this is a historical necessity, it must be stated clearly that all the settler poets in my study fail to formulate a truly decolonial animism. They seek radical ecological and social transformation but often reinscribe the universality of whiteness or at least a negligence of Indigenous sovereignty into fantasies of animist access to land. Settler animists' relation to the lands on which they write as settlers frequently fails to register Indigenous presence in their palimpsest. The non-relational character of the individualized modern subject and the discursive and material structures nonhumans exist within sometimes enables forms of animist relating that are touristic and extractive or at least negligent of any actual obligation; in any case, animist practices are entirely *elective* for settlers and context-dependent. White settler appeals to a common, Paleolithic animist tradition as noted above has trouble with contemporary differences in race, power, mobility, land access. Settler poets of the period of course had no shortage of poems about their recent, non-animist ancestors, but on the whole there was remarkably little interest in recovering more distant animist ancestors to make relationship with

land outside of the more mythic versions of ecofeminism.¹⁰¹ While traditional animist societies are relatively bounded and inhabit or at least regularly traverse particular places for long periods of time—forming what Marisol de la Cadena calls “socionatural region[s]”¹⁰² composed of human and nonhuman persons, settlers’ mobility and the scale¹⁰³ of their worlding make their animist relation to place tenuous and individual. Modern notions of gender, race, and nationhood also influence Indigenous poets in turn as they struggle for sovereignty and the re-establishment of animist traditions within given dominant cultural forms. Within the colonial world, Indigenous poets are also in what Durrant calls a “doubled relation” to their own traditions,¹⁰⁴ a self-consciousness in which they follow their animist traditions but also are placed in a performative relation to them as they write in part for a “modern” audience. For all poets, the problem is less how to generate novel forms of animism than how to collectivize and sustain those relations over time under colonial duress.

Yet despite their constraints, these poems—by virtue of the worlding capacities of poetics—also “bear world systems other than the capitalist one.”¹⁰⁵ Poetry in the period was a site of contestation, experimentation, and reclamation for building viable worlds in the face of globalization’s dis-relational propulsion towards mass extinction. The ontological work of personification places profound pressures on objectifying extractivisms and human exceptionalism. Poets model animist lifeways in both poetry and prose to both demarcate boundaries between harmful and restorative modes of animist enactment and to provide or

¹⁰¹ There are exceptions. See for example Le Guin’s “Arboreal.” *Ursula K. Le Guin: Collected Poems*, ed. Harold Bloom (Library of America, 2023), 18.

¹⁰² Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2015), 5.

¹⁰³ See Nurit Bird-David, *Us, Relatives: Scaling and Plural Life in a Forager World* (University of California Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁴ Durrant, “Critical Spirits,” 59.

¹⁰⁵ Edgar Garcia, *Signs of the Americas: A Poetics of Pictography, Hieroglyphs, and Khipu* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 42.

problematize ethical modes of relation for a reader to adopt. As much as the often-expansive lyric subject's proposed animist alliances across race, histories, gender, and class are imperfect and sometimes fail, they also envision emergent modes of animist sociality with the potential to refuse the logics and processes of modernity/coloniality. I take seriously the notion that Indigenous literatures can actively shape the ideas and writing of settler poets with real consequences that are not reducible to "appropriation."¹⁰⁶ What I hope emerges is not the softening of colonialism's ideological and material force but an account that can register the full relational possibilities of the field through which it operates. These possibilities are unevenly distributed, differentially enabling and foreclosing forms and efficacies of animist relation. The question is not whether a poem stands inside or outside coloniality, but how it rearticulates or challenges relations that colonial modernity organizes.

Methodologically, it is ethically important that animist studies itself consider its relationships to colonialism in any given context. It can and has been argued that the ontological turn in and beyond anthropology is an extension of colonial modernity and that any engagement with Indigenous ecological thought and practice is "colonial imperialism." Sarah Jaquette Ray programmatically argues that "the use of Indian identity to advance environmental causes is a form of cultural imperialism" and cites Soenke Zehle's critique that Indigenous communities "appear primarily as repositories of ecospiritual alternatives," pointing to the danger both of reading Indigenous literatures primarily for ecological purposes and of the adoption of animisms among settlers.¹⁰⁷ These arguments are advanced to defend Indigenous sovereignty from mainstream environmentalism's many historical failures to do so. I attempt in this project to

¹⁰⁶ An inspiration is "discursive possession." Wendy Belcher, *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 42-61.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (The University of Arizona Press, 2013), 86.

center Indigenous sovereignty and critique appropriation even as I also believe it is ethically possible and even necessary to also discuss both the eco-relationality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous animisms for the very purpose of envisioning a decolonial horizon. Scholars also critique the ontological turn in anthropology more broadly and thereby animist studies; David Chandler and Julian Reid launch one of the most polemic, arguing that the speculative work of the field to understand and learn from Indigenous cosmologies for practical ends is simply a new form of colonialism:

The indigeneity at stake in anthropology's desire to 'become Indigenous' is the imaginary product of a white liberal and colonial fantasy. From being forms of culture and knowledge that once demanded respect from a distance, indigeneity is hereby reduced to a 'transferable skill set' that white people can learn from and adopt for themselves. This is the reality of colonialism today.¹⁰⁸

While I appreciate the authors' wariness towards means by which colonality/modernity might utilize Indigenous peoples' philosophies and lifeways as a means to further the goals of colonial processes, the over-corrective response they take is to *ad hominem* attack the "privileged white Eurocentric academic elite" rather than colonialism and its processes itself.¹⁰⁹ The authors ignore Indigenous calls like those I began this introduction with (such scholars explain all Indigenous-led environmental discourse as tactical or performative) and the contributions and discussions of non-white scholars in the field. Furthermore, their injunctive is effectively for academics to stay modern, to remain within the very ontologies that were instrumental in colonialism in the first place. They imply both that non-Indigenous scholars should not engage seriously with Indigenous philosophy ("respect from a distance") and that operating from the default modern ontology is the only proper mode of academic knowledge-building. Although well-intentioned,

¹⁰⁸ David Chandler and Julian Reid, "Becoming Indigenous: The 'Speculative Turn' in Anthropology and the (Re)colonisation of Indigeneity," *Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 500.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 485.

such orthodoxy would abandon any scholarly project to actually change the beliefs, epistemologies, and practices of non-Indigenous peoples from the little influence the humanities have in the culture at large. Even as the dominant critical discourse of settler accountability might condemn adoption of animism as just another “settler move to innocence”¹¹⁰ this discourse hinging on the innocent-culpable binary has the danger of only inducing more settler guilt or else the reactionary reconsolidation of the populist political ideologies in fashion at the time of my writing.

Animist studies must be critically aware of the potentially extractive nature of its orientation to its research subjects, pillaging Indigenous knowledge to further the interests of settlers, Europeans, and colonial institutions. I attempt to take an ethical approach while also keeping in mind the near-inevitable extractive nature and colonial context of academic knowledge. By examining the ways settler poets in my study are at times vessels for colonial processes, I hope to demonstrate that it is possible to not reduce animism to colonialism while also maintaining a critical eye for animism’s ethical problems. Animism itself is of course not decolonization, but I believe it can be an important assistant in the process by instantiating an ontology counter to that of coloniality/modernity and by highlighting its *historical* destruction of animisms within Europe and its colonies and thereby bringing attention to *continued* destruction of animisms in the present. While animist studies is expanding rapidly outside of anthropology, this dissertation is particularly invested in the role Indigenous studies has to play in shaping the field. Animist poetics can both show us the importance of the return of ancestral lands to Indigenous peoples while also providing paths of inquiry for restorative if imperfect forms of settler land connection.

¹¹⁰ Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

Animism across Emergence and Maintenance

In this section I trace my framework and methodology of reading in more detail and attempt to synthesize or at least strike a balance between modalities that are basically processual-philosophical to register animism's ontology and worlding; critical-ethical towards animism's power to evade coloniality altogether; and a constructive response to Indigenous studies. This tension reflects the varied frameworks and methods present within animist studies that I negotiate in this dissertation. Animist and Indigenous studies provide the basic frameworks for animism as a social, normative, and ecologically viable set of practices within a cosmology. Process philosophy affords a descriptive grammar of animacy whose vocabulary registers on a minute level what poetry in particular achieves as its own animate grammar. I position process philosophy more generally as tremendously useful in its power to analyze how phenomena such as affect, agency, novelty, and emergence make animist poems on a minute level. The work of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Alfred North Whitehead, Erin Manning, and Brian Massumi are all philosophical sources of guidance, in addition to the anthropological scholars influenced by Deleuze and Guattari. At the same time, because of their drive for novelty, creativity, and mobility these same analytical goals often reach their limit at the normative dimension of animism emphasizing personhood, the social, normativity, the emplaced, and the long durée of maintaining those social relations. Critical reading tracks colonial agencies and incentives in both my theorizations and the poetry itself. Finally, Indigenous studies' focus on durational animist forms places pressure on certain theoretical moves common within process philosophy and combined with models of "worlding" from the latter field forms a framework for me that

both registers animism's attention to the contingent vitalities of the Earth and cosmos and the social forms required for sustainable relationship with them.

Animism shares with many new materialists and posthumanists the position that both beings and their agency are fundamentally relational in nature.¹¹¹ While modernity/coloniality operates through “logics and practices [that] are characterised by separable categories of society and nature, the belief in a single real world separable from socio-cultural perceptions of it, and the search for universal explanations and solutions,” relational-ontological models such as animism are distinguished by “(i) the embodiment of, or desire to pursue, alternatives to separable categories of society and nature, (ii) a sense of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and mutuality between human and nonhuman beings, and (iii) an emphasis on ethical obligations, responsibilities, and care for these relationships.”¹¹² Personhood as such then arises from this relational milieu. Arianne Conty neatly articulates the relational view of persons in animist ontologies:

Persons exist only through their relations, because they are all dependent upon a shared ecosystem, or location, our third trait, that grounds and gives meaning to their communication. So all persons are relational, and all relations are situated, and the location determines the communication and thus the persons that depend upon it. A relational ontology is possible only because beings are immersed in specific and irreplaceable localities that allow specific beings, cultures and ecosystems to thrive.¹¹³

¹¹¹ As Deer argues, “[a]gency is something that happens between things, an emergent property of the dynamic interactions of all kinds of forces ... as they act upon and through each other.” *Radical Animism*, 13. Barad’s ontology likewise is founded on “phenomena,” defined as “*the ontological inseparability of intra-acting ‘agencies’*” or again as “*ontological entanglements*” [emphasis in original]. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 333.

¹¹² The authors refer explicitly to Indigenous-kinship, eco-Marxist, systems theoretical, epistemologies of the Global South, and many posthumanist approaches among others, but animism is implicit to their definition. Simon West et al., “Relational Approaches to Sustainability Transformations: Walking Together in a World of Many Worlds,” *Ecosystems and People* 20, no. 1 (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26395916.2024.2370539>.

¹¹³ Arianne Conty, “Animism in the Anthropocene,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 5 (2021): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211039283>.

This definition is helpful for providing a non-essentialist notion of the person, though its focus on locality raises a problem I will address throughout this dissertation. It also recalls Tim Ingold's popular redefinition of "the animate" in animism not as something projected onto nonhumans, but rather as a process-oriented worlding prior to the constitution of any persons who might do such projection: "the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence."¹¹⁴

Personhood is an imperfect term, and it has come under critique within animist studies. Povinelli submits that personhood is not a requirement for relationship, and she questions the requirement for nonhuman beings to be modeled after human personhood or to be composed of "the same intensive and extensive substance" that grants them legal personhood, as in the rights of nature movement.¹¹⁵ She prefers the more vague but capacious "mode" or "form of existence." This argument reflects a general push among some anthropologies who say that many Indigenous communities do not conceive of nonhuman beings as "persons" in the ways that humans are persons. For some Indigenous writers, the opposite is the case; Justice argues that art and literature's complicity in the project of settler colonial land control has relied upon dissolving Indigenous kinship bonds, as dominant artistic and literary modes "still pathologize other-than-human personhood and kinship as fictive, fantastical, or illusory" (86).¹¹⁶ "Peoplehood" might also describe the state of intersocial relationships among and between nonhuman species, sometimes also referred to by Native American poets and thinkers as a

¹¹⁴ Tim Ingold, "Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought," *Ethnos* 71, no. 1 (2006): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840600603111>.

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 125-126.

¹¹⁶ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 86.

species' "nation." "Person" for me has usefulness in that it is widely used and recognizable, and my definition marks the sociability and relatability of such a being both within and across forms of being (such as species). Indeed, it makes sense to me that person ought to be a loose analytical category rather than specific ontological category if being discussed across communities of belief and practice. My definition of personhood as socially relatable beings attempts to avoid problems of the projection of human personhood onto the nonhuman by treating "person" as "a socially relatable entity." My definition draws inspiration from Bird-David's use of Marilyn Strathern's "dividual persons," another analytic popular among anthropologists, emphasizing the formative acts by which we constitute one another's personhood.¹¹⁷

A chief way I mobilize process philosophy in this dissertation is that I read poems primarily through assemblage theory derived from Deleuze and Guattari's work in *A Thousand Plateaus*¹¹⁸ with the aid of Ian Buchanan. In Buchanan's words, assemblage theory is "a way of analysing a thing or situation;" it asks what holds a formation together, where its limits lie, and what function it fulfils."¹¹⁹ Assemblages are composed through the interaction of content and expression: content referring to material organizations of bodies, environments, practices, and territorial arrangements, while expression refers to the "incorporeal transformations" of bodies enacted by instances of enunciation by semiotic regimes and the affects and rhythms that

¹¹⁷ "When I individuate a human being I am conscious of her 'in herself' (as a single separate entity); when I dividuate her I am conscious of how she relates with me. This is not to say that I am conscious of the relationship with her 'in itself,' as a thing. Rather, I am conscious of the *relatedness with* my interlocutor *as I engage with her*, attentive to what she does in relation to what I do, to how she talks and listens to me as I talk and listen to her, to what happens simultaneously and mutually to me, to her, to *us*" [emphasis in original]. Nurit Bird-David, "Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40, Supplement (1999): S72.

¹¹⁸ See especially "4. November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics" and "587 B.C.-A.D. 70: On Several Regimes of Signs" in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 75-110; 111-148.

¹¹⁹ Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 132.

organize and give consistency to those material relations.¹²⁰ Poems can then be read as operating “diagrammatically” like Deleuze and Guattari’s “abstract machine,” which “constructs a real that is yet to come.”¹²¹ That is, they organizing relations among humans, nonhumans, sensation, memory, ecological processes, and systems of value. Animist poems thereby actively compose relational fields in which nonhuman beings emerge as socially and affectively consequential participants within shared environments. This work is structured through processes of territorialization and deterritorialization operating across multiple “strata.” The strata refer to relatively stabilized organizations of matter, language, perception, social organization, and ecological practice that structure habitual forms of life and thought.¹²² Animist poetry frequently intervenes into these stratifications by deterritorializing dominant habits of anthropocentric perception and mechanistic ontology while simultaneously territorializing modes of ecological relation through formal techniques. Such poems formulate moments of resonance across human and nonhuman bodies, reorganizing what becomes perceptually salient within a given ecological field. In this sense, animist poetics can be understood as experimenting along a “plane of consistency,” detaching heterogeneous materials and forces from established strata so that they can enter into new relations.¹²³ They can propose types of what Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski call “earthly multitudes:” situated, iterative, and thoroughly social arrangements of humans and the more-than-human.¹²⁴ The animist poem thus experiments with how relations might be composed differently within and against the dominant stratifications of colonial modernity.

¹²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88-89.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 142.

¹²² *ibid.*, 40-74.

¹²³ *ibid.*, 69-70.

¹²⁴ Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Polity, 2021), 96.

This framework is especially useful for understanding the complex and ambivalent role of desire in animist poetics in the period. Following Deleuze and Guattari, desire here is not understood as lack or subjective fantasy but as a productive force that organizes relations and generates new capacities for connection and world-making. Animist poems often register desires for ecological reciprocity, interspecies relation, territorial belonging, or forms of collective life perceived as foreclosed within capitalist modernity. Yet these desires emerge within historically uneven conditions shaped by colonialism, ecological crisis, and fractured inheritances of land and tradition. I follow Alexander Weheliye's adaptation of Deleuze and Guattari's work, attending closely to colonial desires and racializing forces driving assemblages; in his thought racialization is a process of incorporeal transformations, or what he explains as "etching abstract forces of power onto human physiology and flesh in order to create the appearance of a naturally expressive relationship between phenotype and sociopolitical status."¹²⁵ Assemblage theory therefore allows me to analyze animist poetry neither as a transparent recovery of authentic relation nor as a mere ideological reflection of historical conditions, but as a site of experimentation in which competing forces, affects, and ecological imaginaries are organized into provisional relational forms. In this sense, the animist poem functions as an abstract machine or diagram that maps and tests possible configurations of human and nonhuman life, producing temporary consistencies through which alternative modes of ecological and social relation may become perceptible, affectively real, or politically imaginable.

While there has been some notable and fierce rejection of Deleuze and Guattari from Indigenous studies, by attending to coloniality and racialization as key animating features of assemblages, my application of their work attempts to avoid reproducing these philosophers'

¹²⁵ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke University Press, 2014), 50.

inadequate theorizing of race¹²⁶ and especially Indigeneity in *A Thousand Plateaus*. One of the most influential critiques of Deleuze and Guattari from Indigenous studies comes from Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw Nation). Byrd argues that for these philosophers, the figure of the Indian is merely a block of affects or “presignifying semiotic” that supposedly disrupts hegemonic signifying regimes, resulting in an intended-revolutionary figure that in practice evacuates Native American identity and sovereignty. They appropriate Indianness into their rhizomatic model of thinking that relies upon a settler denial of actual tribal ancestry and territory, producing what they call “Indians without ancestry.” Byrd further alleges that their positive reading of the becoming-Indian of settlers like Carlos Castaneda “represents the becoming-Indian as a pathological colonizing condition of faux-Indian, a pathology that haunts any left intellectual who steps forward to ventriloquize the speaking Indian by transforming the becoming- into *replacing*-Indian” [emphasis in original].¹²⁷ Thereby, Deleuze and Guattari’s encouragement of affect and becoming over interpretation and signification serves to make Indianness available for a kind of affective appropriation that comes with denial of their own actual community forms and their sovereignty. Byrd’s work is helpful to historicizing and diagnosing what might be called “the Castanedan period” that peaked in the late ‘60s and ‘70s and that influenced Deleuze, Guattari, and the Beat poets alike in which becoming Native as a white fantasy achieved popular success. I agree that Deleuze and Guattari erred in theorizing the Indian as a privileged figure of designification and of affect’s liberatory power available to whiteness and that failing to think Indigenous territory and ancestry was a grave mistake.

¹²⁶ See *ibid.*, 49-50.

¹²⁷ Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 17; 16.

However, I resist totalizing actions from Indigenous studies to throw out entire fields of study based on such errors. Tiffany Lethabo King's extension of Byrd's critique is a case in point and is even more condemnatory, claiming that "nonrepresentational theory of lines of flight is only possible as a form of White self-actualizing posthumanism due to the death of Indigenous peoples and their excision from the Earth/land," and so—in King's strongly-worded statement—Deleuze and Guattari "engage in a discursive genocide of Indigenous peoples."¹²⁸ Such critical overstatement and the overgeneralizing of the value of other fields' and theorists' faulty treatment of Indigeneity risks foreclosing productive engagement between Indigenous studies and other theoretical fields. In this study I venture that revision rather than rejection is the most valuable way forward. I use Deleuze and Guattari's concepts as a critical vocabulary for analyzing how problematic normative politics of becoming-other or other colonial processes occur in the first place. Deterritorialization for Deleuze and Guattari is not inherently liberatory, and becoming is not about self-actualization. I extend their ideas to read how deterritorialization can describe the extraction of practices and signs from their land-based conditions even if they failed to do so themselves. Becoming does not grant identity nor unqualified escape from it but rather captures processual, asymmetrical, and non-transferable events of relation. Instead of choosing between theoretical construction and ethical critique, I read poetry in this dissertation as sites of animist experimentation whose formal strategies both enable and limit the relations they attempt to stage, producing neither absolute innocence nor absolute culpability. Reading settler texts as mere colonial reiterations prevents analysis of how such texts dramatize desires for relation under coloniality/modernity in their full complexity.

¹²⁸ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Duke University Press, 2019), 100.

While assemblages help understand the desiring, experiential, and affective work poems do, “worlds” helps move us into the more durational scale necessary for animist sociality. The mobility of becoming—which poetry as a genre stages particularly frequently and effectively—must be read in tension with grounded-normative forms of relation. Animist, eco-social worlds emerge when animist assemblages achieve sufficient durability, normativity, and social reproduction across time to organize lived forms of ecological and collective existence. In this sense, worlds are not static totalities but relatively stabilized and historically maintained assemblages whose relations among humans, nonhumans, and land become reproduced through normative practices and traditions. I study how poems propose or enact worlds, recalling *poiesis* as making in its most fundamental sense. This project is committed to what Mario Blaser calls “political ontology:” a framework grounded in the “pluriverse” of many worldings and ontologies and the relations between them as they all enact the real.¹²⁹ Even as poets enact animist worlds with more or less enclosure or cohesion, the “partial connections” they have with other (e.g. colonial-capitalist) worldings create “problem spaces” where divergent ontological assumptions and enactments of the real conflict, negotiate, or hybridize. Even as poets’ prose and poems enact “storied performativity” of an animist reality, they are also shaped and constrained by discourses of other worldings that problematize or delimit what relations are tenable or desirable and with whom. Worlds bridge different ontologies or even render different beings varying ontological statuses depending on context, making animist enactment situational and uneven.¹³⁰ The poets in my study also show that the work of worlding is one of grieving the loss

¹²⁹ Mario Blaser, “Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology,” *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 5 (2013).

¹³⁰ Naveh and Bird-David describe for example how Baka hunters temporarily changed their perception of and relations with elephants as persons due to economic incentives. “Animism, Conservation, and Immediacy” in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, 34.

of both human and nonhuman kin, or in Donna Haraway's words, "to cultivate and invent the arts of living with and for damaged worlds in place, ... as and for those living and dying in ruined places."¹³¹

Even as many of the process-oriented analytical methods I draw upon provide tools for discovering and articulating novelty and difference, animist traditions require concepts with a longer temporal scale of analysis and that explain stasis rather than variation and concepts to describe forms of normativity that tie peoples to lands through forms of reciprocity. Burkhart offers a useful way to preserve the analytical capacities of process philosophy while marking their limits, following Deloria in treating Whitehead as a "proto-locality philosopher" and finding an affinity between Deleuzian immanence and Indigenous relational thought. Yet process cannot remain an abstract account of universal becoming, as Burkhart insists that land become the "ground and the limit" of thought and being.¹³² Indigenous studies is necessary to reground the capacities of emergence and relation in particular lands, histories, kinships, sovereignties, and practices of obligation. Drawing from Indigenous studies, I lean heavily into the normative aspects of worlding in poets attempting to install or maintain animist traditions like Snyder and Trask. The concept of "grounded normativity" is a central term to understand the importance of animist traditions. Coulthard and Simpson define grounded normativity as "the ethical frameworks provided by ... Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge. Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place."¹³³ Such

¹³¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 143.

¹³² Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, 230; xxvii-xxviii.

¹³³ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 254.

norms are essential to maintaining ethical animist eco-social relations made possible by long-term relations with particular lands. Indeed, while “land” has come under critique as a concept in process philosophy,¹³⁴ I follow Burkhart: land is animist sociality’s ontological and epistemological ground. Burkhart defines Indigenous locality as “being-from-the-land, knowing-from-the-land, and meaning-from-the-land,” while his concept of “delocality” names the colonial “attempted unmooring” of being, meaning, and knowledge from land.¹³⁵ Because animist eco-social relations are inherently normative, they operate via modes of power and recursivity. And while grounded normativity is mobilized to name and defend eco-relational efficacies of Indigenous traditions, I also explore in Chapter One the possibilities and problems of settler animists forming their own forms of grounded normativity. In one sense, it is obvious that settlers need normative systems grounded in the care of land and place, but where they derive these norms and how they practice them makes all the difference.

As may be apparent already, I also draw on Indigenous studies for the importance of the social in animism. Bird-David critiques “relationships” as a “reified and constructed as an entity itself” compared to her favored term, “relatedness,” “meaning two beings/things mutually responsive to each other.”¹³⁶ It differs from relationship in that it is not formally fixed or formally determined. Yet Justice argues from a Native American position that discrete “relationships” are a defining feature of Indigenous literature:

I’d go so far as to argue that *relationship* is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers—relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and

¹³⁴ While Manning critiques the noun “land” for its making nature an “empty vessel through which culture moves” and making property of nature’s activity, interrelation, and difference, I retain the word in this study in large part because of its centrality to Indigenous activist discourse even though I agree with her on a philosophical level (40). She also appeals to Tommy Orange’s problematization of the common colonial view that “urban Indians” are inauthentic and that authentic Natives must “return to the land” (39). Erin Manning, *Out of the Clear* (Minor Compositions, 2023), 39.

¹³⁵ Burkhart, *Indigenous Philosophy through the Land*, xvii; xv.

¹³⁶ Bird-David “‘Animism’ Revisited,” S88.

our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs—and that these literary works offer us insight and sometimes helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing these meaningful connections [emphasis in original].¹³⁷

My view is that relatedness and relationship exist on a spectrum between affect and the social.

That is, relatedness describes more immediate and experiential forms of relation that are dynamic and responsive, while relationship is a better term to describe more normative or ritual relational forms that sustain eco-social communities over time. Animists bring techniques of the social to a relational ontology. This includes forms of sociality that may be considered neurodivergent, raced in particular ways, non-Western, etc. Some foundations constitutive of relationships might include interactivity, rights, participation, communication, practice, responsibility, obligation, accountability, and reciprocity. Kinship is a term Indigenous studies has appropriated from anthropology to describe both Indigenous relations to land and nonhumans and to describe the kinds of relationships settlers ought to make with lands themselves. The importance and challenges of kin-making in settler animist sociality is evident throughout the project. Haraway has reframed kinship as an expansive category of those to whom one is actually responsible in the project of living-with and dying-with well, emphasizing accountability rather than mere affect.¹³⁸ Reading animist poetry with Indigenous studies offers ways to concretize and problematize both Indigenous calls for greater settler land-connectedness and for settler accountability to ongoing colonial processes. Considering that more humans in the United States and around the world are losing land-connectedness, the former call is particularly challenging. How can the deep time horizon implied by animist relation-making be formed by populations in

¹³⁷ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, xix.

¹³⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

diaspora or urbanized? Is an animist poetics even effective if not enacted on the long-durational horizon of tradition-making? How does animist poetry reveal modes of settler accountability?

Finally, I believe my framework is especially apt for studying animist poetry through an animist view of language because it reflects that “[n]othing is arbitrary within ecological reality.”¹³⁹ Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari and the process-philosophy theorists I have mentioned has the added benefit of utilizing a theory of language and poetry that I contend better suits animism than frameworks based in representation. Jon Clay, systematically applying Deleuze to the reading of poetry, argues that poetry “does not represent a world of which it is a copy. Rather, poetry is itself a real part of the world (‘true’ because real) with its own forces and effects.”¹⁴⁰ Reading this way is preferable for two reasons. First, in many animist cultures, words—especially in particular contexts—are understood ontologically in very different ways than the representational model of language would suggest. They are heard and responded to by nonhuman beings, they are given by nonhuman beings, stories themselves are ancestors, and they can be understood to be part of and directly affect reality. The radical pragmatist view—while not necessarily sharing the same ontology as all animists—nonetheless provides an analytical framework that I believe is more appropriate for analyzing what poetry is and does than the representationalist model. In an animist ontology, the figure (metaphor, symbol, simile, allegory, personification) is not an arbitrary literary tool in the realm of representation nor mere code or language game. So while metaphor’s definition is a comparison between two unrelated things, “there is nothing unrelated in a *relational* cosmos, in a reality that is composed of relationality.”¹⁴¹ The split between the literal and the figurative relies upon the split between

¹³⁹ Brenda Iijima, *Presence: A Novel* (University of Georgia Press, 2024), see “Little Cayman Island, Central Caribbean.”

¹⁴⁰ Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities* (Continuum, 2010), 12-13.

¹⁴¹ Gordon White, *Ani.mystic: Encounters with a Living Cosmos* (Scarlet Imprint, 2022), 62-63.

nature and culture and is a product of coloniality/modernity. Instead, the figure or the symbolic is part of the real. In Kirk's words, explaining Whitehead, "[t]he symbolic does not 'stand for' the literal. It is at the same time, the transcendence of the literal and the literal's own power of being."¹⁴² This is consonant with the more pragmatist orientation towards poetry advanced by Olson¹⁴³ and Duncan that would then influence McClure and Snyder, and it respects animist uses of poetry to modify the real.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One I examine the work of Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* through the framework of what I term "animist universalism:" a poetics that attempts to recover animist relation as a planetary condition obscured, though never fully eliminated, by the ontological partitions of colonial modernity. I place my study of Snyder as my first chapter because he offers the most general and ecumenical project closely engaged with the questions and ideas of contemporary animist studies and thereby also sets some of the most profound the *limits* of animism by name as a project in the period. As Snyder remarkably formulated this reclaimable theory of animism at midcentury, this chapter becomes a meditation on some of the problems facing the reclamation of animism today by examining the formal and contextual strategies of his animist poetics. He thus provides a provisional baseline to which other chapters offer revision and deviation. Reading Snyder through assemblage theory and ecocritical debates surrounding appropriation, I argue that Snyder's poetry constructs an expansive vision of past and present animist cosmologies modulated first and foremost by the pragmatics of how to develop a

¹⁴² James Kirk, *Organicism as Reenchantment: Whitehead, Prigogine, and Barth* (Peter Lang Publishing, 1994), 135.

¹⁴³ For a discussion on the compatibility of Olson and Deleuze, see Miriam Nichols, *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (The University of Alabama Press, 2011), 27-64.

normative, animist praxis within modernity. Rather than treating Snyder simply as a poet of ecological consciousness or Buddhist spirituality, the chapter situates his work within the contradictory problem-space of postwar globalization, where the desire for reconnection to animist worlds emerges simultaneously with the planetary expansion of extractive modernity. I give particular attention to Snyder's montage forms, geographic juxtapositions, and mythopoetic crossings that diagram relations across Indigenous traditions, Asian religious practices, and modern industrial systems in ways that both challenge and reproduce universalizing tendencies. Through close readings of poems such as "The Way West, Underground" and "Mother Earth: Her Whales," I claim that Snyder's animist poetics are organized around formal efforts to perceive and maintain relations across heterogeneous scales and locales of existence in ways that raise cautionary problems of overgeneralization, representation, and trans-ancestral appropriation in animist studies. In this sense, Snyder's poetry would develop an ecological normativity grounded in practices of attention, ritual, labor, and habitation, even as the chapter remains attentive to the tensions produced when such universalizing visions encounter the historical asymmetries of settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty. I conclude the chapter on a more positive note as I read Snyder's poems such as "Toward Climax" and "The Bath" on the erotics of matter-energy as they develop an animist eros across normative and affective levels; the latter poem in particular is fruitfully examined through Manning's explanation of "emergent valuation."

If Snyder's poetry seeks to universalize animist relation across cultures and scales, Haunani-Kay Trask's two volumes of poetry forcefully reterritorialize animism within Native Hawaiian histories, territorial struggles, and forms of grounded normativity that resist settler appropriation. Chapter Two turns to Trask's *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* and *Night is a*

Sharkskin Drum and political writing to examine animism not as recovery or speculative experimentation but as the defense and continuation of an existing Indigenous world grounded in genealogy, land, and sovereignty. Trask will be forced to speak some of animism's discourse for her own culture's survival and provides the most direct and strongest revision to Snyder's model. I argue that Trask's poetry develops an animist poetics of land-connected, erotic relation in which the Hawaiian Islands, deities, ancestors, and other nonhuman entities are active participants within a living social and cosmological order. Drawing upon Indigenous studies, political ontology, and theories of grounded normativity, I read Trask's work as insisting that animist relation depends not simply upon affective openness or ontological recognition but upon the maintenance of collective obligations, protocols, genealogies, and territorial continuities under conditions of colonial dispossession. I attend to Trask's mobilization of Hawaiian chant structures, apostrophic address, and eco-erotic imagery to formulate what I call an "animist poetics of kāhea"—a call to Native Hawaiian readers into participation with land-based relations and political responsibility that simultaneously and asymmetrically functions to block settler intimacy with the land and encourage settler self-awareness *as settlers*. Trask complicates many contemporary celebrations of relationality by demonstrating that relations themselves are unevenly distributed and historically conditioned: not all subjects stand in the same relation to land, ancestry, or sovereignty. In this sense, Trask's poetry provides one of my clearest models of animist world-maintenance foregrounding the normative, historical, and territorial dimensions of animist sociality while simultaneously exposing the limits and dangers of universalizing settler appropriations of Indigenous cosmologies.

Departing from the more normatively grounded and social animisms of Snyder and Trask, Chapters Three and Four explore more emergent and affect-driven forms of animism

through McClure and Berssenbrugge. These authors will repeat some of animist universalism's problems outlined in my first chapter, but they also provide unique affordances to the possibilities of animist poetics as well as ontological differences that show the diversity of what animism can be. Thus the dissertation moves from affinity to revision to a more exploratory and speculative mode. Chapter Three explores how Michael McClure develops a novel animist poetics rooted in sensation, mammalian embodiment, and processual becoming. I examine McClure's Six Gallery reading, *Ghost Tantras*, and *Specks* as a form of what I call "animist expressionism" organized around bodily immediation, affective confrontation with mammals, and the destabilization of human exceptionalism. Drawing upon Charles Olson's projective poetics, Deleuze and Guattari's theories of affect and assemblage, Brian Massumi and Erin Manning's concept of immediation, and McClure's own speculative biology, I argue that McClure attempts to re-open human perception to the place's animate forces and energetic continuities suppressed by mechanistic modernity as well as mutually ignite attempted therapeutic encounters with mammals through the "mammalization" of poetry. Through close readings of his Beast Language experiments and ecological lyrics, I show how McClure's poetry seeks to produce moments of interspecies resonance in which human and nonhuman bodies enter provisional relations of affective resonance. I study McClure's use of vocalization, chant, rhythmic intensification, and typographic experimentation as formal strategies for deterritorializing normative human subjectivity and opening the lyric voice toward more-than-human fields of sensation and desire. At the same time, I assert that McClure's emphasis on immediacy and becoming also reveals important tensions within postwar animist poetics. Because his work privileges affective emergence over durable social relation, McClure often struggles to articulate the normative and collective dimensions necessary for sustaining animist

worlds over time. His poetry therefore marks a critical transition within the dissertation from the territorial and world-maintaining concerns of Snyder and Trask toward more processual forms of animist perception, emergence, and ecological sensation.

Unlike the vocative and confrontational animism of McClure, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's work approaches animist relation through diffuse cognition and iterative presence in place as she writes about her walks on the mesa outside her home in New Mexico. Chapter Four considers Berssenbrugge's later poetry in *A Treatise on Stars* as a distinctly processual and event-based form of animist poetics operating at a fully cosmic scale. Drawing upon Whiteheadian process philosophy, philosophical panpsychism, and contemporary ecopoetics, I argue that Berssenbrugge's poetry attempts to render perception itself as a relational event in which human consciousness emerges within broader fields of animate process rather than standing apart from them—what I refer to as “animist transversal propositions.” Her poems frequently dissolve distinctions between interior and exterior, self and environment, perception and materiality, allowing stars, plants, weather systems, animals, and cosmic processes to appear as co-participants within distributed networks of feeling and attention. I give attention to Berssenbrugge's address, parataxis, recursive syntax, and suspended referentiality, all of which create a reading experience that privileges resonance and ecological co-presence. I suggest that Berssenbrugge's later work represents an important development within postwar animist poetics because it shifts from the overtly programmatic and socially declarative tendencies of earlier ecological poetry toward a subtler and more diffuse reorganization of perception itself. At the same time, her poetry raises important questions about the limits of process-oriented relationality when detached from more explicit frameworks of normativity, territory, or collective obligation. Berssenbrugge's work therefore concludes the dissertation by exploring how animist poetics

might be instantiated beyond some of the more consolidated settler lyric subjectivities mobilized in the earlier postwar period to use writing as an ongoing experiment testing the sufficiency of the “I” to represent a singular self or other across the differences that experience make moment by moment.

CHAPTER ONE

Problems in Animist Universalism and Settler Grounded Normativity in Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*

Diagrammatic Desire and Animist Universalism

As a self-described “Buddhist animist,”¹ Snyder ambitiously attempted to synthesize eco-relational traditions into a new culture for North Americans that would see nature composed of nonhuman persons to whom humans owed ethical relation. Building upon his studies in anthropology, he sought to communicate and revitalize what he saw as humanity’s common animist heritage. One example is his interest in bear animism across time and cultures in the Northern Hemisphere. From “this poem is for bear,” a “shaman song” in *Myths & Texts*,² to *The Back Country*’s “A Berry Feast,”³ to *Turtle Island*’s “The Way West, Underground,” Snyder was intensely interested in this myth and in human relationships with bears. He opens the latter poem with an allusion to a story of human-bear kinship of the Pacific Northwest peoples:

The split-cedar
smoked salmon
cloudy days of Oregon,
the thick fir forests.

Black Bear heads uphill in
Plumas county,
round bottom scuttling through willows—

The Bear Wife moves up the coast.

where blackberry brambles

¹ Quoted in Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press, 2010): 17.

² Gary Snyder, *Myths & Texts* (Totem Press, 1960), 22-23.

³ Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (New Directions, 1968), 3-7.

ramble in the burns.⁴

The opening stanza's metaphors establishing the setting begin ambiguously: the practices describing the "days of Oregon" might refer to the cedar plank-splitting and salmon preservation of the Northwest Coast peoples or to the modern practices of loggers and fisheries. While the former might be implied by the Bear Wife who appears later, the colonial toponyms "Oregon" and Northern California's "Plumas [C]ounty" strongly suggest the latter. The ambiguity fabricates continuity across colonial rupture and flattens difference, in turn opening a geography practically and mythically available for settlers. The blackberry brambles—an invasive species—imply a modern, post-disturbance ecology as they "ramble" into empty spaces where "burns" take place. The parallel upwards movement and capitalization of both the Black Bear (in land-locked Plumas County) and the coastal Bear Wife similarly make interchangeable a Western species designation and an Indigenous ancestor. The upshot is a geography based on the permeability of Indigenous lifeways and kinship relations with the settler world. Even the strangely-placed period at the end of "coast" where the sentence continues and the cadence of the line space would clearly be enough formally reproduces the awkwardness of this enmeshment. The Bear Wife reference suggests his much later essay, "The Woman Who Married a Bear," from 1990's *Practice of the Wild*. There Snyder comments on a well-known story among the Pacific Northwest Indigenous peoples detailing kinship relations between humans and bears.⁵

⁴ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New Directions, 1974), 4.

⁵ In the story, a young woman who falls behind out on a berry-picking sojourn meets and marries a man who turns out to be a bear. Living with him in a cave, she births two children, but the man is killed by her brothers. Before his death, her bear husband gives her instructions on the proper ritual activities to perform after he is killed. Snyder argues that the purpose of the woman's marriage to the bear was "to teach humans the precise manners in regard to bears" when hunting them (169). In this essay and others in *Practice*, he outlines a common ontology in these stories in which there is a "a world behind the world" or spirit world that takes the form of classic perspectivism: "Shapes are fluid here. For a bear, all the beings look like bears. For a human, they all look like humans" (164). While he makes clear that the spirit world "need not concern itself with reproduction," this is often a purpose which humans turn to contact it (111). Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (North Point Press, 1990).

However, in bare allusion, it is unclear what actual content this reference brings to the poem, as the Bear Wife here is simply a figure moving in a setting, signaling more an animist value than any actual relational content. This poem's compositional method utilizes one of his preferred poetic techniques to assemble common animist tradition out of disparate geographical and historical circumstances: the Poundian montage. In doing so, the poem stages both the generative potential and the political risk of universalist animist gestures under settler modernity. Reading through Deleuze and Guattari, his poem is motivated by a diagrammatic desire—or an “abstract machine” of selection and connection—that assembles heterogeneous elements (animist intensities, expressions, or relations) while ignoring or dysselecting others (frequently, historically uneven relations), producing a consistency across the strata that compose the poem's animist world. This diagram selects and arranges bear myths, Indigenous ritual practices, imagery of hunter-gatherer lifeways, and Paleolithic cave art into a single field of resonance, creating the appearance of animist continuity by connecting cultures of the Northern Hemisphere “underground,” below the surface histories of colonization.

The parallel journeys of the Black Bear and the Bear Wife merge into a more mythic migration across northern ecologies in the next stanza as the imagery moves back in time. As the optical desire structuring the poem's movement moves across the Pacific Rim, it produces an imagined migration that reverses the prehistorical Asia-to-Americas migration (of both humans and modern bear species) with the effect of making legible specific aspects of “other” cultures to his audience:

And around the curve of islands
foggy volcanoes
on, to North Japan. The bears
& fish-spears of the Ainu.
Gilyak.
Mushroom-vision healer,

single flat drum,
from long before China.

Women with drums who fly over Tibet.⁶

The brief “bears / & fish-spears of the Ainu,” while providing little actual content to the poem, territorializes this Indigenous culture within the poem’s animist-ecological network through the repeated frame of bear and human technologies. The Ainu’s famous *iomante* bear ritual is surprisingly neglected but perhaps implied for the informed reader as the montage moves on to the field-note-like list that follows. The whole sequence compresses ethnographic references into brief image-clusters. The “Gilyak,” a Russian term for Nivkh people of the lower Amur and Sakhalin region, uptakes another people colonized by China and Russia. The poem seemingly summons from this people a typical shaman figure appearing like a vague, still image frozen in time from antiquity juxtaposed with Indigenous Tibetans on the other side of China. The trance flight and ritual percussion bring the animist-shaman figure into the poem to complement the Bear Wife kinship story, linking the perspectivism of the former with the trance journey of the latter. The Tibetan shaman is figured through a playful but orientalist image of shaman as airplane flying over a whole nation rather than a bird over a landscape. Actually this gaze mirrors the poet’s own flight of planetary mapping, illustrating a use of Snyder’s modern “poet-shaman” figure from his prose in an attempt to outline a healing trajectory for the Western reader from a privileged, visionary position that has pan-cultural access.⁷

⁶ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 4.

⁷ In his essay, “Poetry and the Primitive,” the “Shaman-poet is simply the man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams” (122). This is quite congruent with the privilege accorded to the modern poet, who has the luxury of ignoring cultural boundaries: “Part of our being modern is the very fact of our awareness that we are one with our beginnings—contemporary with all periods—members of all cultures. The seeds of every social structure or custom are in the mind.” *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New Directions, 1969), 126.

Through this roving, modern gaze, the poem deterritorializes specific practices from their original social contexts, reterritorializing them within the broader narrative of a Paleolithic-grounded animism based in the Northern Hemisphere. The gaze skips over the continent into Europe as it reaches the Finns:

Following forests west, and
rolling, following grassland,
tracking bears and mushrooms,
eating berries all the way.
In Finland finally took a bath:
 like redwood sweatlodge on the Klamath—
all the Finns in moccasins and
pointy hats with dots of white,
netting, trapping, bathing,
singing holding hands, the while

see-sawing on a bench, a look of love—⁸

The first, subjectless sentence is driven by participial verbs “following,” “tracking,” and “eating,” which in turn stages the ecologically-driven movement as the organizing principle. Forests, grassland, mushrooms, and berries are successive nodes within the ecological corridor extending the northern hemisphere. “[T]racking bears” implies the poem has changed subjects unannounced to the humans who follow the bears of the earlier poem. The poem’s desire attempts to produce both the making-Indigenous of the Finns but also compares them to the settler loggers and fishermen implied above. The playfulness in Snyder’s poetry, while likely part of what endears him to audiences, often functions through orientalization—here of the pastoralized and even infantilized Finns in their “moccasins and / point hats with dots of white,” “singing holdings hands,” and “see-sawing on a bench, a look of love—.” Confusingly, this depiction nearly conflates the Finns—who might wear pointed wool hats in the sauna—with the actually-Indigenous Sámi with their *nutukas* or *supikkaat* shoes that resemble moccasins and

⁸ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 4-5.

ládjogahpir horned hats.⁹ The Sámi would make more sense considering his previous references to Indigenous cultures. This ambiguity combined with the pastoral scene of the poem erases Sámi presence in the attempt to find hunter-gatherer, historical likeness from a North American point of view that is settler but claiming Indigenous practices (here the “redwood sweatlodge on the Klamath [River]” and stories.

So far we have seen the poem’s cartographic authority positioning poet as selector and arranger who maps animist resemblance across space and time. From Finland, the gaze terminates in a meditation on Europe as a whole, juxtaposing past and present potential:

Karhu—Bjorn—Braun—Bear

[lightning rainbow great cloud tree
dialogs of birds]

Europa. ‘The West.’
the bears are gone

except Brunhilde?

or elder wilder goddesses reborn—will race
the streets of France and Spain
with automatic guns—¹⁰

The linguistic propagations of “Karhu—Bjorn—Braun—Bear” link the geographic gaze of the poem from Finnish to Norse, Germanic, and finally English forms. The parataxis of these words forms its own montage analogous to the earlier geographic drift across cultures. This small philological map of Northern Europe is evidence for commonality across space and time, suggesting that the mythic relationships with the bear predate the differentiation of particular linguistic trees. “Europa” and the space until the quoted “The West” cuts the momentum of the poem, which thereafter turns reflective on these monolithic political and cultural categories that

⁹ Snyder would later refer to the Sámi directly in “Villanelle of the Wandering Lapps” in Gary Snyder, *Left Out in the Rain: New Poems 1947-1985* (North Point Press, 1986), 181.

¹⁰ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 5.

have hovered implicitly behind the poem's trajectory. These metonyms for civilization, associated with the bears' decline, degrade the bear to only the most distant (and false) etymological relation to the Völsunga Saga's "Brunhild[]" who has no substantial relationship with bears besides an analogical fierceness as a warrior. The poem laments this loss of bear kinship in the shadowy figures of "elder wilder goddesses" who might have mediated bear-human relations in the past like the Bear Wife. Instead of being "reborn" in salvific form, it is rather Brunhilde's fierceness that returns in violent form on "the streets of France and Spain." The suggestion is that without animist relation, we face being animated by the tools of civilization: "automatic guns" instead of the Ainu "fish-spears."

Finally, the poem abruptly detours away from the bear-desolate cities of Europe towards the subterranean strata where Europeans' animist origins are still present. Here the diagrammatic gaze of the poem completes its quest to displace Euro-Christian exceptionalism and progress narratives:

in Spain,
Bears and Bison,
Red Hands with missing fingers,
Red mushroom labyrinths;
lightning-bolt mazes,
Painted in caves,

Underground.¹¹

Beneath strata of nation, empire, and Christianization, Paleolithic cave painting sites such as El Castillo and Altamira feature such animal figures, hand stencils, and abstract patterns ("lightning-bolt mazes"), recalling also their common interpretation as imagery associated with shamanic visions. If bear animism has been suppressed in some form by all the nation-states listed in the poem, the poem's conclusion in deep time and human origin suggests animism as a

¹¹ *ibid.*

common but fragile human birthright needing protection and reclamation. That the poem terminates in Europe makes this call specifically to Europeans and their diaspora, rendering bear kinship traditions a normative, shared heritage waiting to be reclaimed.

The conclusion with the separated single word, “Underground,” strongly recalls the ending of Charles Olson’s “The Kingfishers” in which the speaker—after disavowing Greek and Roman heritage—determines to “hunt among stones,” signaling Olson’s own faith in the prehistorical as source to respond to modernity’s troubles. Yet unlike Olson’s poem, Snyder’s notational collage presents imagery as fact without much processing; its work is cartographic rather than narrative or lyric as it relies on the reader to make connections across parataxis and pursue allusions. The effect creates an open territory of animist suggestion for the reader to imaginatively complete rather a problem to be worked through. The moment a problem arises (the disappearance of bears and the violence in Europe), the poem veers underground, precipitating an unclear relationship between the “solution” and the problem. Even though the poem seems to resist lyric rumination and interiority in favor of imagistic constellation, the absence of lyric guidance does not efface the diagrammatic desire of his mostly-white Americans seeking a re-enchanted world across space and time positioned very vaguely as a means to resist or guide destructive modern forces through rather flimsy and at times careless use of the comparative source material; the reader is invited to reinhabit animist continuity and universality through oversimplification.

I open this chapter with my rather negative evaluation of this poem not to reject Snyder’s project but rather to describe some of the stakes of writing comparative animist poetry and of literary articulations of animist projects. The diagram of desire driving “The Way West, Underground” draws together disparate bear-animist traditions across deep time and exemplifies

what I will refer to as Snyder's "animist universalism"—a project spanning poetry, prose, and practice that sees animism as a recoverable communal lifeway available for all modernized peoples. Snyder does not use the term "animist universalism" himself—instead he refers to them most often as "the old ways" or the "primitive"—but I believe that animist universalism describes the project most accurately and helps us see the relevance of Snyder's work for contemporary discussions and trends across religious, ontological, and ecological studies. His attempt to more specifically ground this animism primarily in Native American, East Asian, and European Paleolithic cultures and histories creates important theoretical and methodological problems, much of which other scholars have discussed. While I utilize this work in my chapter, here I focus on his poetry as it attempts something both differently ambitious and unstable: the formal mapping and diagramming of animist universality across scales from the individual-present to historical, world, and mythic scales through lyric, percept-based forms on the one hand and Poundian montage on the other. As "The Way West, Underground" deterritorializes bear myth from its place-based contexts in pursuit of common ancestral heritage in deep time, the poems of *Turtle Island* risk substituting broken and merely imagined origins for differences across actually-existing lineages and historical accountability.

Snyder's animist universalism is the most ambitious settler-directed project in my study. It is based in a constellation of claims and assumptions made relatively consistently throughout his work. First, animism is humanity's ancestral common culture or baseline ontology originating at least in Paleolithic deep time (what Tylor referred to as "the first religion"); this ontology is fully continuous in surviving Indigenous religions and variously continuous in present-day East Asian religions and cosmologies. Two, because this tradition is common to humanity and he rejects modern, nation-based forms of identity, he believes these traditions are

universally available to modern people; they are so many of the same archetypal practices simply practiced in different forms across cultures. Third, he believes that American settlers, who historically lost their animist traditions through Christianization and/or secularization, can and should reclaim these animist traditions primarily for their ecological sustainability. Fourth, he assumes certain forms of syncretism as both appropriate and advantageous for founding a new animist culture where his own Europeans traditions are irrecoverable: specifically the place-based Native American animisms and East Asian philosophies and cosmologies he believes are mostly available to American settlers. Fifth, he proposes an animist normative program for settlers focused on kinship, reproduction, ecological sustainability, economic simplicity, and anarchistic forms of communal living to translate animist ideals to practical human outcomes. Snyder's project is thus not merely aesthetic but fully civilizational. While there are some significant differences (especially the fourth claim), his animist universalism most straightforwardly resembles the contemporary framework of constructive, settler- or modern-directed animist studies of all the poets I discuss. Considering this and his popularity as a poet, it is essential for animist studies to reckon with his project.

The poetry is a site where the problems with this animist universalism in a North American, settler context become legible and negotiated. Poetry becomes a means both for reforging communication with nonhuman persons and for recovering and envisioning animist collective life by didactically providing scripts, philosophies, knowledges, and practices to perform or practice in the world beyond the page. *Turtle Island* offers a window into an early global conception of animist poetics and shows Snyder at the peak of formulating a fully normative and social form of animism.¹² In the book Snyder has two main projects relevant to

¹² Animism runs throughout Snyder's poetry but is especially prominent in *Myths & Texts, Regarding Wave, Turtle Island*, and *Mountains and Rivers without End*. While Snyder's later work continues to bear traces of animism, the

my purposes: he dedicates himself to poetically teaching by example through animist “reinhabitation” at his home near Nevada City, California called “Kitkitdizze,” and he delivers cultural commentary and wider-scale connections from an animist perspective. At the cusp of the 1970s globalization, his poems have in common with later poets’ of the global attempts to “grasp and renourish the roots of poetry—song, dance, praise, exhortation, possession—by fusing them with the roots of globalization and the enclosure of economic and political spaces.”¹³ It is certainly not the case that the poems and essays of *Turtle Island* fail to register colonial harms both historical and ongoing. But characteristic techniques such as historically-sweeping, paratactic montage; prosopopoeia; metaphor; metonymy; and gender-essentialist metaphor work to construct an animist history and present that relies on easy, grand gestures to do community-creating work; disavows or obfuscates forms of settler ancestral responsibility; performs a kind of colonial or at least orientaling gaze and mapping; and speaks for rather than with, universalizing without authorization. At the same time, I acknowledge that in many ways Snyder is still *the* exemplary animist-universalist poet of the United States as I am writing, and his work has managed to help cultivate animist sensoria in its readers, pose political and ethical animist questions, and legitimate animist cosmologies and lifeways in ways that have resonated with a very wide audience and continue to do so. Snyder was arguably the most influential white author who undertook a literary, animist project of the reinhabitation of Turtle Island in my period of study, only comparable with Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*, which did not garner Snyder-level popularity. I next turn to one of the most important features of his animist

personifications and eco-relational social visions in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s are less apparent, and ecological personhood is more metaphorical. I focus here on *Turtle Island*, whose vision is more cohesive and confident than *Myths* and is more invested in questions of ancestrality and community than *Mountains*. Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers without End* (Counterpoint, 1996).

¹³ Walt Hunter, *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization* (Fordham University Press, 2019), 17.

reinhabitation—his proposals of a settler grounded normativity based on ecologically low-impact living, communal forms of inhabitation, bioregionalism, and animist ethics.

Problems in Settler Grounded Normativity

With rare exceptions scattered in his poetry and prose, Snyder's assumption is that the forms of animist relating within European traditions are too fragmented to be recoverable, at least in what remains from the historical corpus. This in turn prevents him from grounding animist universalism in the animist remnants of his own ancestral traditions. He states bluntly in "Plain Talk's" "The Wilderness" that "I don't like Western Culture because I think it has much in it that is inherently wrong and that is at the root of the environmental crisis that is not recent; it is very ancient; it has been building up for a millennium."¹⁴ He claims elsewhere that the literary remnants of pre-Christian religions—as seen in Homer or the Icelandic sagas—are already caught up in agriculturalist, patriarchal societies bent on expansion and unrelated to living ethically in place.¹⁵ In "Good, Wild, Sacred," he argues:

Occidental expansion brought an acceleration of habitat degradation to the whole globe, but it is interesting to note that even before that expansion such political and economic processes were already well under way. The destruction of species, the impoverishment and enslavement of rural people, and the persecution of nature-worship traditions has long been part of Europe.¹⁶

Recalling my argument in my Introduction, Snyder's whole project is a response to what Hogan calls the "failed worlds" of Europe. For Turtle Island, the consequence of the suppression of "nature-worship" traditions in Europe was that "the French and English explorers of North America, the early fur traders, had no teachings from the societies they left behind that would

¹⁴ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 106.

¹⁵ Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways: Six Essays* (City Lights Books, 1977), 75-76.

¹⁶ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 89.

urge them to look on wild nature with reverence.”¹⁷ In “The Etiquette of Freedom” he argues that “The possibility of passage into ... myth-time world had been all but forgotten in Europe.”¹⁸ And so in the poem from *Turtle Island*, “Dusty Braces,” when he addresses settler logger ancestors with “O you ancestors ... you bastards,” the insult is against their acts of ecological abuse detailed in the poem but can also be read as a criticism of a wider ancestral detachment from ecological kinship.¹⁹ In his 1976 essay, “Re-Inhabitation,” he states perhaps most bluntly: “I had no notion of a white American or European heritage providing an identity; I defined myself by relation to the place.”²⁰ The abandonment of Western animisms in Snyder’s work is not wholesale—there is a substantial number of poems scattered throughout his corpus engaging with various Western traditions²¹—but such poems are still extremely marginal compared to the East Asian, Native American, and Paleolithic materials.

This general disavowal of the usefulness of Western animist remnants enables and motivates him to reach back to the Paleolithic Era for what he believes is a truly universalist animism. By grounding animist universalism in deep time, he expands the scope and scale of his claims, giving him a platform to generalize about all cultures and to support his appropriation of East Asian and Native American animist practices and discourses. The latter two sources are of particular interest—the former serving as a foil to Western Civilization and the latter being the authentic source of the myths of the land his audience lives on. Indeed, the whole of the project

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 75.

²⁰ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 58.

²¹ For example, see “Artemis” and “For Plants” in Gary Snyder, *The Back Country*, 84; 88-89; “The Third Watch,” “Sestina of the End of the Kalpa,” and “Versions of Anacreon,” in Gary Snyder, *Left Out in the Rain* (North Point Press, 1986), 185-186; 187-188; 197-199; “With This Flesh” and “Earrings Dangling and Miles of Desert” in *Mountains and Rivers without End*, 75-78; 125-127.

is framed as hailing settler or arrivant populations to embrace their “ancient solidarity” in Paleolithic animism in his “Introductory Note” to *Turtle Island*:

The poems speak of place, and the energy-pathways that sustain life. Each living being is a swirl in the flow, a formal turbulence, a “song.” The land, the planet itself, is also a living being—at another pace. Anglos, Black people, Chicanos, and others beached up on these shores all share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions—African, Asian, or European. Hark again to those roots, to see our ancient solidarity, and then to work on being together on Turtle Island.²²

This call collapses difference through Paleolithic deep time—species time rather than historical time—and is devoid of the many complexities of actually-existing structural conditions and differences across racialized groups in a search for a universal belonging based in animist, ecological care. A series of prose essays in a section entitled “Plain Talk” ends the book in attempt to bring this animist universalism to his audience through normative and sometimes programmatic recommendations. For example, in his essay, “Four Changes,” he imagines the end of cities within a political vision that suggests anarcho-primitivism:

bring up our children as part of the wildlife. ... Ultimately cities may exist only as joyous tribal gatherings and fairs, to dissolve after a few weeks. Investigating new life-styles is our work, as is the exploration of Ways to explore our inner realms—with the known dangers of crashing that go with such. Master the archaic and the primitive as models of basic nature-related cultures—as well as the most imaginative extensions of science—and build a community where these two vectors cross.²³

I am not interested here in the feasibility of practically achieving Snyder’s vision; as a whole, the work is more valuable for the radical alternatives in eco-social life it brings into conversation. As Margaret Ronda argues, “the work as a whole engages a subtractive logic that opens up a space for envisioning an ecologically centered commons by thinking with and without the material conditions of the present,” and “[i]t is precisely the untimeliness of this poetics, with its investments in the nonmodern and the revolutionary, that allows it to open a vantage on, and

²² Snyder, *Turtle Island*, unpaginated.

²³ *ibid.*, 101-102.

beyond, the closing frontiers of the present”²⁴ In addition to these political aspirations, Snyder’s vision on animism is indeed untimely, seeking to excavate Paleolithic animist practices such as the bear relations discussed above for cultures that have nearly or entirely eradicated bears.

Many of Snyder’s poems in *Turtle Island* attempt to model this Paleolithic-inspired, animist life for the reader. They can be read as diagrammatic attempts to develop and exemplify settler grounded normativity or even Gerald Vizenor’s “natural reason.”²⁵ This normativity in the book is often based on a mix of Native American practices and imaginaries of Paleolithic life. For example, Snyder refers to practices taught to him by a Pueblo friend in his poem “The Dead by the Side of the Road,” but this is also mixed with a general Paleolithic fantasy. In the poem his community remediate roadkill for food and tools. A red-tailed hawk’s wings become “dance fans,” a skunk’s pelt is tanned for an unspecified purpose, and a ringtail “will be a pouch for magic tools,” implying some would-be shamanism.²⁶ Remediated aesthetics would be an ethical imperative against waste and for respect, even though these are obviously leisured activities in contrast to ancestral subsistence. For a fawn turned into “stew on Hallowe’en / hit by a truck on highway forty-nine” he states imperatively, “offer cornmeal by the mouth; / skin it out.” In his essay, “The Wilderness,” Snyder details the cornmeal reference learned from his Pueblo friend’s hunting practices: “You sprinkle corn meal in front of the mouth of the deer, and you pray to the deer, asking it to forgive you for having killed it, to understand that we all need to eat, and to please make a good report to the other deer spirits that he has been treated well. One finds this

²⁴ Margaret Ronda, *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature’s End* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 75; 69.

²⁵ “Native storiers of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a *consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world*, the turn of seasons, sudden storms, migration of cranes, the ventures of tender lady’s slippers, chance of moths overnight, unruly mosquitoes, and the favor of spirits in the water, rimy sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver, and faces in the stone” [emphasis added]. Gerald Vizenor: *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 88.

²⁶ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 7.

way of handling things and animals in all primitive cultures.”²⁷ It is unclear whether he was directly instructed to replicate this practice by his friend or not. After this, a doe who was victim to a failed hunting attempt is prayed to:

The Doe was apparently shot
lengthwise and through the side—
shoulder and out the flank
belly full of blood

Can save the other shoulder maybe,
if she didn’t lie too long—
Pray to their spirits. Ask them to bless us:
our ancient sisters’ trails
the roads were laid across and kill them:
night-shining eyes²⁸

I concede that offerings of gratitude and prayers to the spirits of dead animals are quintessential and nearly universal animist tools for reciprocity.²⁹ Regardless of whether this mode of address is recognized by the deer’s spirits, the intention creates an affective orientation for the speaker, a reflexive intention effect that helps fortify respect towards nonhumans. In this sense it can be said that Snyder is engaging in a near-universal animist practice but through a specific Pueblo protocol. The prayer is offered to the spirits of “our ancient sisters” for their agentic capacity to “bless” the speaker’s community. This blessing does critique colonial infrastructure (“the

²⁷ *ibid.*, 109.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 7-8.

²⁹ Similar practices of address and gratitude to nonhumans also appear in Snyder’s Buddhist community at the Ring of Bone Zendo built on Kitkitdizze:

It was not so much Zen as it was Chan. By that I mean not so narrowly monastic and Japanese, but more “Chinese” - earlier, less codified, more ecumenical, ecological, and playful. Still, I gave it the forms I had learned in the Daitoku-ji monastery zendo where I had studied six years. Although I lectured in the early days on such texts as the Hannya Shingyo, the Linji-Lu (Record of Rinzai) and the Platform Sutra, we also read and discussed Maidu mythology, Tibetan songs, ecology articles. We acknowledged the need to harmonize with the wind and water of Turtle Island. We found singing, hiking, sweating, and working together, and spontaneous gathas of praise or apology to rattlesnakes, deer, babies, or tools, part of our play. I mention this because those creative commitments to women-men-babies-houses-soil-and All Beings - being together spirit has been central to the inspiration of this Sangha for years.

Quoted in Katsunori Yamazato, “Kitkitdizze, Zendo, and Place: Gary Snyder as a Reinhabitory Poet,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 1, no. 1 (1993): 56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44085343>

roads”), though “our ancient sisters” elides contemporary Indigenous kinship relations for genetic and/or Paleo-historic ancestral, animist relations. He argues elsewhere: “performance is currency in the deep world’s gift economy,” where performance for nonhuman communities is the taken-for-granted method to navigate a lifeway within an entangled world, to pay respects for what is taken and to acknowledge the presence of the other as person worth respect.³⁰ Yet, following Monique Roelofs, address is not merely communication between subjects but a set of practices that produce and reorganize relationships already motivated by extant social structures and differentiations.³¹ Because modes of address participate in existing structures of social differentiation even as they seek to transform them, Snyder’s universalization of Indigenous protocols risks reorganizing settler-nonhuman relations while leaving settler-Indigenous relations insufficiently addressed. The question is not simply whether Snyder really speaks to deer or its efficacy, but under what conditions he becomes authorized to speak as if he shared the traditions that make such address intelligible.

Other practices of settler grounded normativity are numerous throughout the book. “Prayer for the Great Family,” attributed as “*after a Mohawk prayer*” models an animist gratitude protocol. The opening stanza gives the general idea: “Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day— / and to her soil: rich, rare, and sweet / *in our minds so be it.*”³² The appropriation expands the referent of the “*our*” and removes any contextual grounding of the prayer, producing a mobile gesture intended to be applicable to any number of circumstances by settlers. Various poems operate in the negative, enforcing boundaries around appropriate settler behavior. “The Call of the Wild” critiques naïve urban hippies “[c]onverted to Guru or Swami”

³⁰ Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*, 75.

³¹ Monique Roelofs, *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

³² Unless otherwise noted, all emphasis in Snyder’s poetry is in the original. Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 24.

residing in spiritual retreats in the forest and “dream[ing] of India, of / forever blissful sexless highs” but in poor relation to the beings around them.³³ “Spel Against Demons” demonstrates Snyder’s otherwise ecumenical animism hitting its limit at modern animal ethics with the prohibition: “[m]essing with blood sacrifice in the name of / Nature / must cease.”³⁴ “Control Burn” suggests that settler grounded normativity should be based on Indigenous practices on the land in the past, as he outlines:

I would like,
with a sense of helpful order,
with respect for laws
of nature,
to help my land
with a burn. a hot clean
burn.
 (manzanita seeds will only open
 after a fire passes over
 or once passed through a bear)

And then
it would be more
like,
when it belonged to the Indians

Before.³⁵

The Nisenan tribe are relegated to an ancient “Before” rather than present in any way, and it is settlers’ work to mimic them as they have replaced them. This indicates another danger for animism in which human cultures are simply so many replaceable functional participants in the ecology rather than bearing important historical difference. Even the intense enjambment in the last sentence building slower emphatic phrasing places the focus far more on pastness itself with the capitalized and spaced “Before” rather than the longer line, “when it belonged to the

³³ *ibid.*, 21-22.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 16.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 19.

Indians.” Finally, this last clause suggests that said Indians have no contemporary claim to the land.

This grounded normativity does include activism for the land, exemplified in poems such as “Front Lines” in which the speaker describes the extractivist, rape eros of loggers and developers in lurid metaphors (“Landseekers, lookers, they say / To the land, / Spread your legs”).³⁶ Against this the speaker declares: “Behind is a forest that goes to the Arctic / And a desert that still belongs to the Piute / And here we must draw / Our line.” This acknowledgment of Paiute sovereignty is one of the few concrete acknowledgments of contemporary Indigenous presence in the poems that otherwise background Native peoples to the past. A bit more robustly than the poems, Snyder’s essay “Energy is Eternal Delight” brings more attention to Indigenous struggle in defense of an animist politics in which he argues that the activist slogan “[p]ower to all the people” must apply to nonhuman people as well. He continues:

On Hopi and Navajo land, at Black Mesa, the whole issue is revolving at this moment. The cancer is eating away at the breast of Mother Earth in the form of strip-mining. This to provide electricity for Los Angeles. The defense of Black Mesa is being sustained by traditional Indians, young Indian militants, and longhairs. Black Mesa speaks to us through an ancient, complex web of myth. She is sacred territory. To hear her voice is to give up the European word “America” and accept the new-old name for the continent, “Turtle Island.”³⁷

While the importance of Indigenous sovereignty is implied by this call, the focus remains on what this means for Snyder’s settler audience. The lesson is more about protecting the land than safeguarding Indigenous rights to protect the land. He does state elsewhere in an interview that “We must all work to help [Native Americans] keep their lands and cultures together,” but he omits any consideration of the return of stolen lands.³⁸

³⁶ *ibid.*, 18.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 104-105.

³⁸ Gary Snyder, “The Bioregional Ethic,” interview by Michael Helm, 1979, reprinted in Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*, ed. Wm. Scott McLean (New Directions, 1980). Ebook.

Returning to “Front Lines,” the parataxis shortly after the passage above suggests animism as a means of becoming Native: “Loving and protecting this soil, these trees, these wolves. Natives of Turtle Island.” The fragmented sentence makes it unclear whether he is referring to the soil, trees, and wolves, or the populations listed earlier under the new conditions of “[l]oving and protecting this soil.” However, the Paleolithic functions more clearly as a means to becoming Native in other contexts. In 1992 he says it like this to an audience at a talk he gave in New York City:

I don’t know if I’m an Indian or not. However, I do know that I’m a Native American. Here again is a Turtle Island bioregional point. Anyone is, metaphorically speaking, a Native American who is ‘born again on Turtle Island.’ Anyone is a Native American who chooses, consciously and deliberately, to live on this continent, this North American continent, with a full spirit for the future, and for how to live on it right, with the consciousness that says, ‘Yeah, my great-great-grandchildren and all will be here for thousands of years to come. We’re not going on to some new frontier, we’re here now.’ In that spirit, African-Americans, Euro-Americans, Asian-Americans, come together as Native Americans. And then you know that those continents that your ancestors came from are great places to visit, but they’re not home. Home is here.³⁹

As I quoted Snyder above saying, “I defined myself by relation to the place,” the work that “place” does here is to obfuscate human-social relations. That is, Snyder attempts a relational definition of identity—which scholars agree is most appropriate for animist cosmologies—yet “place” here is the ecological conditions of the land and its mythic history rather than currently-existing people on those lands. This is then a selectively relational identity. A settler desire for belonging seeks its actualization here by claiming the very term of distinction that preserves *historical* Indigenous difference from settlers rather than racial difference (“Indian”). Snyder thus imagines becoming animist as a *conversion* process (“born again on Turtle Island”) into a universalism that would evacuate Native American identity of its ongoing historical difference

³⁹ Quoted in Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Counter-cultural Community* (University of Iowa Press, 2006), 274-275.

and flatten humanity into a new universal plane of tribes similar to his imaginary of the Paleolithic. So while Snyder in one sense wants to make the United States as a nation accountable for the ravages of white colonial history—which he does write extensively about—the implication of this conversion is that by practicing animism, individual settlers themselves bear no more colonial accountability. Counteridentification⁴⁰ with animism against mainstream American culture in effect becomes disavowal and thereby “an aesthetic devoid of an ethical burden.”⁴¹

Flattening of historical difference is seen overtly in the ways Snyder’s settler grounded normativity diagrammed in poetry would be a universally ancestral project. In his 1975 essay, “The Politics of Ethnopoetics,” he argues: “What I want to talk about [sic] now is not the poetry of others, ‘ethnoi,’ but the poetry of ourselves. Diné poetry, people-poetry, Maidu poetry, human being poetry. In the 40,000 year time scale we’re all the same people. We’re all equally primitive, give or take two or three thousand years here or a hundred years there.”⁴² This comment is made in the context of attempting to describe a poetry rooted in “primary experience”—a sensorium rooted in lifeways close to the natural world.⁴³ This in turn helps authorize him to appropriate other cultures’ animism. Yet in a private letter that same year, Vine

⁴⁰ Counteridentification—Michel Pêcheux’s term—is the rejection of key identificatory processes and sites both upholding and propagated by a dominant ideological order by proposing an identity antagonistic to such formations. The moniker, “counterculture,” that Snyder was caught up in and attempted to shape suggests the “counterdetermination” and “controlled symmetry” that is counteridentification’s weakness, as its oppositional role can merely reinforce the dominant identificatory system. In this specific case, this reinforcement is less about the dominant-counterculture relationship than both functionally cooperating to erase a minoritized group through different identificatory systems. Summarized in José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

⁴¹ “We may hear echoes of this concern in certain modernist ‘recoveries’ of indigenous culture and knowledge systems: H. D., Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and so on. But an important issue is the locus of enunciation from which artists speak about primitive practices, and whether the primitive is invested as dwelling practice, or contrarywise, as an idealism or an aesthetic devoid of an ethical burden.” Jason Allen-Paisant, “Animist Time and the White Anthropocene,” *New Formations* no. 104 & 105 (2021): 36, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NewF:104-105.02.2021>

⁴² Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 33.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 35.

Deloria Jr.—Snyder’s friend—*encouraged* him to utilize stories from The Oceti Sakowin (“Sioux” tribes) published in a new anthology “as a framework for a long epic or narrative poem on North America and incorporate all the various strands of ideas and beliefs that you had in *Earth House Hold* as part of a general revelation of the nature of the world,” fundamentally in support of the Native-derived montage project of *Myths & Texts* and the kind of shamanic mapping of “The Way West, Underground” that I outlined above.⁴⁴ Deloria’s praise reflects his desire that a national audience take seriously Native American religions, and his own framing of them as fundamentally place-based is of course congruent with Snyder’s own views.⁴⁵ And while “animism” was a pejorative term when Deloria wrote his major works,⁴⁶ his support of Snyder’s project suggests his support of settler adoption of animism and the diagrammatic poetic project of exemplifying animist common culture. It is to be expected that some Native Americans would support Snyder’s project for the respect it gives to Indigenous religions and lifeways considering settlers’ ongoing genocidal projects in the period and continued rejection of the value of Native religion; for example, the 1978 The American Indian Religious Freedom Act had not even been passed yet.

Even though Snyder did receive some Native encouragement, much has been written of another cohort of Native writers who definitively and influentially critiqued Snyder or Snyder-adjacent poets in the 1970s, so I will focus on what is most relevant for animist universalism. Wendy Rose and Leslie Silko critique Snyder’s abandonment of European animist traditions beyond the Paleolithic. Rose argues that “European-derived Americans face a cultural imperative to cut their own roots to Europe,” neglecting recuperation of any extant “shamanic” or animist

⁴⁴ Vine Deloria Jr. to Gary Snyder, December 1, 1975, Box 44, Folder 16, Gary Snyder Papers, Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Davis.

⁴⁵ See Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Fulcrum, 2003).

⁴⁶ He notes this himself in *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (Fulcrum, 2012), 49.

traditions in European folklore or pre-Christian culture, and they additionally fail to produce a sense of identity as Americans that fulfill the function of the shamanic, leading them to appropriate Native and Black cultures.⁴⁷ More broadly, Silko bluntly states: “Anglo-Americans have failed to create a satisfactory identity for themselves,”⁴⁸ and this identity must be formed in relation to their historical and ancestral roots. She specifies for Snyder:

... unless Snyder is careful, he is headed in the same unfortunate direction as other white pioneers have gone, a direction which avoids historical facts which are hard to swallow: namely, that at best, the Anglo-American is a guest on this continent; and at the worst, the United States of America is founded upon stolen land. Unless Snyder comes to terms with these facts, and his own personal, ancestral relation to them, the “rediscovery” which so many Americans are waiting for, will be just another dead-end in more than two hundred years of searching for a genuine American identity.⁴⁹

This critique of a lack of settler identity might sound like it assumes and reifies a monolithic concept of culture. Rather, I believe the issue here is that these Native critics recognize the failure of white Americans to develop a normative, enduring, and widespread cultural framework that engenders an animist relationship with nonhumans and the land *based on their own ancestral traditions*. Rose’s well-circulated poem, “For the White Poets who would be Indian,” implicitly critiques Snyder’s claim to ground animist, settler normativity in Paleolithic common culture:

just once. Just long enough
to snap up the words, fish-hooked
to your tongues: you think of us now
when you kneel on the earth, when
you turn holy in a temporary tourism
of our souls;

⁴⁷ Wendy Rose, “Just What’s All This Fuss About Whiteman Shamanism Anyway?” originally published in *Coyote Was Here: Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization*, Ed. Bo Schöler, *The Dolphin* 9 (1984). Reprinted in “About Whiteman Shamanism,” *Modern American Poetry: An Online Journal and Multimedia Companion to Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson, accessed June 24, 2026, http://maps-legacy.org/poets/m_r/rose/whiteman Shamanism.htm

⁴⁸ Leslie Marmon Silko, “An Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts: Part One: Imitation ‘Indian’ Poems Part Two: Gary Snyder’s Turtle Island,” in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Geary Hobson (Red Earth Press, 1979), 213.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 215.

with words you paint your faces,
chew your doeskin, touch beast
and tree as if sharing a mother
were all it takes, could bring
instant and primal knowledge.
You think of us only when
your voice wants for roots,
when you have sat back on your heels
and become primitive.

You finish your poems
and go back.⁵⁰

The central irony of course is that the addressee's ancestors attempted to exterminate Native peoples while the addressee himself finally "think[s] of" them only when stealing their culture. This poem also implicitly critiques white ancestral disavowal that motivates the appropriation of Native cultures, sought by the addressee's when his "voice wants for roots."

Counteridentification is contextual and based on convenience; the addressee can "go back" to their privileges after writing the poem. The speaker rejects the addressee's attempts at any "holy" relating with nonhumans as he "touch[es] beast / and tree as if sharing a mother / were all it takes" to become Indian or "Native" in Snyder's terminology. I believe that the issue is not animist modes of relating or developing grounded normativity in itself—the injunction is certainly not to reify the addressee's original identification with cultural whiteness nor to stop an ecocidal culture—but rather attempts at grounded normativity that are appropriative and that disavow ancestral responsibilities to contemporary Native communities. Settler identity must begin with the recognition of "ancestral catastrophes" in Elizabeth Povinelli's useful term and the responsibilities they imply.⁵¹ White ancestral disavowalists, by abdicating responsibility to

⁵⁰ Wendy Rose, "For the White Poets who would be Indian," in *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*, ed. Dexter Fisher (Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 86-87.

⁵¹ "Ancestral catastrophes are past and present; they keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism rather than emerging over the horizon of liberal progress. Ancestral catastrophes ground environmental damage in the colonial sphere rather than in the biosphere; in the not-conquered earth rather than in the whole earth; in errancies

their ancestral past's ongoing colonial consequences, falsely enable their own appropriative counteridentifications and culturally extractive practices.

In my reading, both the Native friends and critics of Snyder do believe in the importance of settlers creating animist, grounded normativity. At the level of his futural, utopian project, Snyder knows these are *long-standing* land-based practices, achievable only through the proof of their ecologically ethical relations. Crucially however, grounded normativity includes *human-to-human* relations across historical difference, a dimension Snyder often lacks in his universalizations and keenness to absolve settler animists of colonial accountability. Finally, the vision Snyder outlines in *Turtle Island* cannot be described as decolonial since it does not involve the returning of Native land, and while it finds its ultimate realization in a commons free from private property, the means by which it seeks this is settler re-inhabitation on privately held land.

The Universal Poet Shaman: Prosopopoeia, Address, and Representation

Snyder's popular poet-shaman figure reveals a central contradiction within the grounded normativity in Snyder's bioregionalism: while he repeatedly insists that knowledge emerges from sustained relations with particular places, the poet simultaneously claims authority to speak across multiple cultures, species, and cosmologies. The poet-shaman appears frequently in Snyder's early work as an ur-figure for poet's role in society, but beyond the questionability of this generalization, it is the *modern* poet-shaman's license to speak for diverse lands and peoples that is the focus of my critique. In his 1974 essay, "The Yogin and the Philosopher," he

rather than in ends; in waywardness rather than in war; in maneuvers, *endurance*, and stubbornness rather than in domination or resistance, despair, or hope." Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2021), 3.

articulates the modes of address shared by the poet in the pre-monotheistic traditions and the shaman in traditional societies: “[t]he shaman speaks for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing for him.”⁵² David Barnhill summarizes that “[f]or Snyder, shamanism has three principal elements: communication with the transhuman (animals, spirits, and, more broadly, life’s network), giving voice to that contact in one’s community, and healing,”⁵³ the last term Snyder himself describes as: “our oneness with nature, the oneness of mind and body, the oneness of conscious and unconscious, our oneness in society with each other. These are the basic and ancient conditions from which we flourish.”⁵⁴ I will focus on the first two aspects. “[G]iving voice to” lands us in the poetics of representation and speaking for others. The problem is not necessarily how Snyder claims the shaman functioned in traditional societies; instead, it is that he uses this as a model for the contemporary poet. Shamanic poetics for him problematically assumes that the *modern poet* has sufficient training to speak for nonhuman beings in an accurate capacity *across diverse geographies and cultures* (as we have seen and as I will continue to show below). It is nearly impossible to imagine a poet trained enough to carry out this function—much less the cavalier attitude Snyder takes in that representation. Such universal voice would seem to run counter to the bioregionalist approach of learning the relationships of place that Snyder expounds and that I agree is important for revitalizations of animism. This is not even to begin to question the transference of other aspects of the shaman role to that of the modern poet such as training in healing or trance visions. By universalizing the role of the shaman into that of the modern poet, Snyder expands poetic authority through his theory of animism. However, the very transcultural

⁵² Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 12.

⁵³ David Landis Barnhill, “An Interwoven World: Gary Snyder’s Cultural Ecosystem,” *Worldviews* 6, no. 2 (2002): 120, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809214>

⁵⁴ quoted in *ibid.*, 122.

mobility inherited from modernist ethnopoetics à la Ezra Pound undermines the situated relations and obligations upon which traditional shamanic authority depends.

An example of the challenges of prosopopoeia and the “shaman” function therewith appear in his poem, “Magpie’s Song.” The first stanza stages a contrast between the mundane machinations of extractive capitalism as the speaker sits “by juniper and desert S.P. tracks / interstate 80 not far off / between trucks” with the presence and tenacity of wild coyotes “howling and yapping from a rise” and thriving despite this altered landscape. The speaker is then visited by a magpie who “[t]ipped his head and said:”

*“Here in the mind, brother
Turquoise blue.
I wouldn’t fool you.
Smell the breeze
It came through all the trees
No need to fear
What’s ahead
Snow up on the hills west
Will be there every year
be at rest.
A feather on the ground—
The wind sound—*

*Here in the Mind, Brother,
Turquoise Blue”⁵⁵*

The prosopopoeia of the magpie responds to the implicit ecological concerns of the speaker with a surprisingly calm reassurance, especially considering the more urgent tone of some of the more activist poems I discuss below. The magpie apparently is “[t]urquoise blue” in the mind—at peace and undisturbed—and calms the speaker’s fears through appeal to “[w]hat’s ahead,” namely nature’s eternal cycles. This reads to me as Snyder’s Buddhism speaking through the magpie, both in the call towards inner peace and the idea along with the Western idea that

⁵⁵ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 69.

animals live in a state of immanent presence unconcerned by the future, which is assumed to be symbolically-cognitively mediated. Rather than speaking for the magpie's actual interests as an individual or species, the poem anthropocentrically provides comfort to the human speaker, rehearsing the Buddhist trope of nonhumans delivering dharmic wisdom. The magpie functions less as a representative of avian interests than as a vehicle for a simplified Buddhist ethic of equanimity.

In "What Happened Here Before," he outlines the long past of the land on which he would build Kitkitdizze and settle for the rest of his life beginning with geologic processes 300,000,000 years ago to the time he wrote the poem. While he acknowledges Nisenan past presence on his land, he utilizes a definition of the Buddhist concept of *anattā* to deflect any responsibility to the present-day Nisenan tribe or to question his ownership of the land: "the land belongs to itself. / 'no self in self; no self in things.'" ⁵⁶ This is consonant with Sara Wilson's claim that for the Beat Buddhists, "[w]hen whiteness comes into contact with the cultural materials of Zen Buddhism, ... Buddhism in a sense becomes white-enabling; the characteristics of Buddhism that serve to support whiteness (here, think of ideas like emptiness and non-essence) simply contribute to the special kind of ignorances that whiteness tends to perpetuate." ⁵⁷ The universal emptiness of the land mirrors the unmarked, universal position of whiteness that Snyder enjoys. This is the same logic behind the move to become "Native" above; the "emptiness" of identity categories becomes a means to strategically ignore differences and responsibilities implied by their historical relations.

⁵⁶ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 80.

⁵⁷ Sara Wilson, *Buddhist Poetics, Beat "Cosmo-Politics," and the Maker Ethos: Asian Americanist Critiques of Whiteness in Midcentury American Beat Writing* (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2022), 2.

By casting the poem in geological time and the succession of owners in recent history, he prepares the reader for the turn to the question of cosmic identity and action devoid of historical accountability:

we sit here near the diggings
in the forest, by our fire, and watch
the moon and planets and the shooting stars—
my sons ask, who are we?
drying apples picked from homestead trees
drying berries, curing meat,
shooting arrows at a bale of straw.

military jets head northeast, roaring, every dawn.
my sons ask, who are they?

*WE SHALL SEE
WHO KNOWS
HOW TO BE*

Bluejay screeches from a pine.⁵⁸

The prosopopoeia of the jay—populous and adaptable—challenges which modes of human existence will survive into the deep future. Kai’s question about human ontological status in the cosmos is juxtaposed with low-impact practices of life brought to this settler “homestead.” Indeed, a few of the arguments of the poem are that: 1) forms of life in place make identity, 2) these are always ecologically entangled, which the jay knows in contrast to the military jets, 3) simplicity in form of life is ecologically preferable, and 4) family is an important site for the iteration of forms of life into the future. Adding to this some material I will address later in the essays that close *Turtle Island*, the bluejay’s response is interpreted to herald a lived community built “ground up” from the family to larger social formations, remaking the United States into what might be described as anarcho-primitivist communities that would be ecologically viable as opposed to yet another iteration of Europe’s failed worlds propagated across the planet. And yet

⁵⁸ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 80-81.

while Snyder imagines forms of life beyond private property elsewhere, the nuclear family on private property is nonetheless a privileged site of experimentation and gestation for these new modes of existence. This scene of address would expand ethical community beyond the human, but it also conceals the unequal historical conditions under which settler subjects acquire the authority for such worlding.

I have just shown ways in which Snyder utilized Buddhist ideas to avoid responsibility for historical accountability, but Buddhism also contributes specifically animist qualities to Snyder's animist universalism. Daniel Capper argues that in Buddhism nonhuman persons are "karmic actors" and that these "relational animist persons help to supply the system through which karma shapes the world."⁵⁹ Such Buddhist animism forms the basis of relational animist poems elsewhere such as "The Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais" using apostrophe to the mountain embedded within ritual social practice to see the mountain as "[n]o longer just a playground or a getaway, but a temple and a teacher, a helper and a friend."⁶⁰ The same attitude is taken in "O Waters," in which address is a means of tutelage to a nonhuman teacher:

O waters
wash us, me
under the wrinkled granite
straight-up slab,

and sitting by camp in the pine shade
Nanao sleeping,
mountains humming and crumbling
snowfields melting
soil
building on tiny ledges
for wild onions and the flowers
Blue
Polemonium

⁵⁹ Daniel Capper, "Animism among Western Buddhists," *Contemporary Buddhism* 17, no. 1 (2016): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2016.1189130>.

⁶⁰ Tom Killion and Gary Snyder, *Tamalpais Walking: Poetry, History, and Prints* (Heyday Books, 2009), 41.

great
earth
sangha⁶¹

The animist supplication to the waters recalls Zen ritualistic use of bathing to clear the mind and body for practice. The poem then moves into Snyder's characteristic locative description, as "the wrinkled granite / straight-up slab" combines a subtle anthropomorphism associated with aging and wisdom with the unembellished. Assuming that this poem was written on one of poet Nanao Sasaki's visits from Japan during the composition of the poems, this poem is likely set on the Yuba River near Snyder's home. The long stream of actions following "Nanao sleeping" suggest both the seasonal and geologic processes ("mountains ... crumbling / snowfields melting") at work and the ways those processes subtly support us if the "soil / building on tiny ledges" for the onions and flowers is interpreted metaphorically. The final three lines written like vertical Japanese script frame the address and material processes previously in the poem as dharma from the natural world. While this might appear respectful to the natural world, it can also be situated within Buddhism's frequent teleological figuration of nonhumans as mere conduits for enlightenment rather than complex beings with their own worlds and motivations, recalling "Magpie's Song" above. The waters also do not receive reciprocation in the poem despite their offerings to the speaker.

Having discussed problems in examples of Snyder using prosopopoeia to speak for nonhumans, I now move to his speaking for other humans. Many white poets in the period—especially the late '60s and '70s—seeking counteridentification against dominant culture, engaged and/or appropriated Native American traditions. Controversially, Snyder was a key figure in this entire process, as Geary Hobson alleges that his "Shaman Songs" sequence in his

⁶¹ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 73.

1960 *Myths & Texts* catalyzed the phenomenon of the “white shaman,” or white poets who “assume the persona of the shaman, usually in the guise of an American Indian medicine man,” even if Hobson admires qualities of Snyder’s own attempts to represent Native American philosophies in the poems.⁶² Rose critiques Snyder’s and white shamans’ attempted prosopopoeia of Native American philosophies or points of view, arguing that “[a] non-Native poet cannot produce an *Indian* perspective on Coyote or Hawk, cannot see Coyote and Hawk in an Indian way, and cannot produce a poem expressing Indian spirituality” [emphasis in original].⁶³ Snyder’s shamanic move is essentially a legitimization of the colonial poet’s discursive liberty as poet for human as well as nonhuman perspectives. Snyder says as much himself in an interview responding to the criticisms he faced from these Native scholars: “To invoke the term ‘imperialism’ is to invoke the liberal value system of Europe. But in this case the term isn’t very interesting anyway because in poetry we all know we are free to lovingly use anything that’s available.”⁶⁴ Evoking my argument above, the desire often motivating the Snyder poem assemblages are selectively “loving[.]” towards the land *detached from Indigenous presence and relationship*. Regarding his critique of being identified with imperial culture, this is a clear attempt to bypass settler accountability by only invoking colonial history when it is convenient to his aims. It is all too convenient to assume that “anything that’s available” can be used in service of art that in turn transcends ethical bounds; indeed, the processes that make Native cultural traditions “available” in the first place are non-neutral. Hobson stresses the importance of normative tradition in the practice of medicine in Native American communities: these practices

⁶² Geary Hobson, “The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism,” in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Geary Hobson (Red Earth Press, 1979): 105; 125.

⁶³ Rose, “Just What’s All This Fuss About Whiteshamanism Anyway?”

⁶⁴ Snyder, “The Bioregional Ethic”

are at once highly regulated through apprenticeship and community accountability while also being far more diffused among the community than the stereotype of the lone “medicine man” that Westerners fetishize. While there are many commonalities across animist traditions that might usefully be collected under the moniker of “shamanic,” archetypal overgeneralization for settler poet power is an evident danger. The harms of bad animist poetry are real, and it took a concerted effort by Indigenous and Black writers to “kill[] off [the] industry” of the white shaman movement in poetry.⁶⁵

And yet I do not see direct prosopopoeia through a Native American perspective in *Turtle Island* the way this was rampant in *Myths & Texts*. Instead, the shamanic gesture is to *speak for* Native American (and other cultures’) *traditions, histories, and interests* without necessarily directly formulating poetic speakers from those positions. Such a representative function of the Snyder speaker is exemplified in “Mother Earth: Her Whales,” a poem he wrote after he and Michael McClure “took it upon themselves to represent whales, Indians, and the freedom of the diversity of the environment” in McClure’s words at the 1972 United Nations Environmental Conference in Stockholm.⁶⁶ Written at the scale of an international event, this poem organizes a global animist assemblage composed of a wide range of strata: biological, geological, historico-political and institutional, and cosmological to articulate a single animist field of solidarity. The poem opens with a juxtaposition of images that form an immediate perceptual frame meant to legitimate the authority of speaker as a voice of nature:

An owl winks in the shadows
A lizard lifts on tiptoe, breathing hard
Young male sparrow stretches up his neck,
big head, watching—

⁶⁵ Geary Hobson, “The Rise of the White Shaman: Twenty-Five Years Later,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 14, no. 2/3 (2002): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20737138>.

⁶⁶ Michael McClure, *Scratching the Beat Surface: Essays on New Vision from Blake to Kerouac* (Penguin, 1994), 33.

The grasses are working in the sun. Turn it green.
Turn it sweet. That we may eat.
Grow our meat.⁶⁷

The speaker voices the desire of the owl, lizard, and sparrow in the second stanza on the strata of material-energetic flows, but the “we” clearly also expresses a general human need when considered in the next stanzas:

Brazil says "sovereign use of Natural Resources"
Thirty thousand kinds of unknown plants.
The living actual people of the jungle
 sold and tortured—
And a robot in a suit who peddles a delusion called "Brazil"
 can speak for *them*?

 The whales turn and glisten, plunge
 and sound and rise again.
 Hanging over subtly darkening deeps
Flowing like breathing planets
 in the sparkling whorls of
 living light—

And Japan quibbles for words on
 what kinds of whales they can kill?
A once-great Buddhist nation
 dribbles methyl mercury
 like gonorrhea
 in the sea.⁶⁸

The first stanza presents its central problem of who gets to speak for the interests of the Earth and Indigenous peoples as Snyder introduces a contrast between what Clark and Szerszynski call “earthly multitudes,” or assemblages of humans and nonhumans who both adapt to and shape “the self-differentiating dynamics or multiplicities of the Earth.”⁶⁹ The first earthly multitude is that of the modern nation state—here a collective “delusion”—that reterritorializes the

⁶⁷ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 47.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Polity, 2021), 96.

productivity of animate life into “Natural Resources” and whose interests is represented by the “robot in a suit,” the bureaucratic subject of modern governance whose humanity is metaphorically supplanted by the technology- and growth-driven state. The rhetorical question leaves no doubt that this robot cannot speak for the Indigenous peoples “sold and tortured” nor for the jungle. This earthly multitude is contrasted with the earthly multitude of nonhumans—expressed in imagistic, elegant actions—and humans in resistance to the state: the Indigenous people and the collective, activist subject that appears later in the poem. The poem abruptly returns to the immediate, biological stratum of the whales who are “like breathing planets” and embody “sparkling whorls of / living light,” the simile providing an incorporeal transformation that codes them as awe-inspiring, celestial bodies. This wonder again contrasts with modern whaling in Japan and the Buddhist moral framework of ecological reverence that Snyder mobilizes. The metaphor of industrial pollution as venereal disease provokes disgust and expresses the sea as a living, reproductive system. In a long following stanza, a similar critique of “what we call ‘China’” is made in which the biological and material strata of rivers, forests, geese, tigers, boars, and monkeys are “[g]one in a mist, a flash” as “the dry hard ground / Is parking space for fifty thousand trucks.” The existence and borders of some nation-states are critiqued as arbitrary (“what we call ‘China’”) while others are affirmed (“A once-great Buddhist nation”). This mirrors the ambivalence of the status of the United States in the book, whose entire history is here critiqued (“North America, Turtle Island, taken by invaders”) but in “Tomorrow’s Song” only “lost its mandate / in the middle and later twentieth century” as if it was deserving of its mandate before.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 77.

The poem then moves to more fully articulating the contrast between the two earthly multitudes:

North America, Turtle Island, taken by invaders
 who wage war around the world.
May ants, may abalone, otters, wolves and elk
Rise! and pull away their giving
 from the robot nations.

Solidarity. The People.
Standing Tree People!
Flying Bird People!
Swimming Sea People!
Four-legged, two-legged, people!

How can the head-heavy power-hungry politic scientist
Government two-world Capitalist-Imperialist
Third-world Communist paper-shuffling male
 non-farmer jet-set bureaucrats
Speak for the green of the leaf? Speak for the soil?⁷¹

Unlike the variety of institutions and actors evoked in the last line, the poet-shaman has the authority to speak into being an activist, earthly multitude composed of many types of nonhuman people in the call to “Rise!” and the chant-like litany thereafter. This could be considered the political subject of his animist universalism, the moniker—“People”—deterritorializing political identity by dissolving the social boundaries between humans and ecologies. He repeats the question of representation; Snyder’s long adjectival list attempts to gather in such a catalogue of the machinic assemblage of bodies that it risks collapsing under its own intelligibility (what exactly is he saying about the “Third-world”?). The poem resolves the crisis of representation by grounding authority in perceptual immediacy, suggesting that the voice of nonhumans across historical and geographical contexts can be anyone with keen and awe-driven perception of the natural world. The bureaucrats—partly by virtue of their lack of immediate experience in

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 48.

nature—lack authority to speak for it, while the poet-shaman can speak with authority as a representative despite also not necessarily being in direct relation to the humans or nonhumans of such a place. Even more significantly, the poem assumes that the Indigenous peoples mentioned earlier in the poem cannot speak for themselves (or at least receive assistance in doing so) or that a dialogic approach to their representation is unavailable. The wholesale attribution of personhood to all beings—recalling *Regarding Wave*’s “All the Spirit Powers Went To Their Dancing Place” equation “all beings—all persons”—also risks overgeneralization of an aspect of Indigenous cosmologies.⁷² As Hazel Rickard argues, “[t]o hold that all things are persons could be seen as a colonizing gesture—reacting to a harmful way of thinking in Western philosophy by creating a universal theory that ignores Indigenous perspectives.”⁷³ Such wholesale generalization is not necessarily made in Indigenous religions. Finally, the incorporeal transformation attempted by the call for the earthly multitude of “The People”—due in part to the vague, global scale of its scope and its only vague connection to what this means for a reader in their own embedded context among nonhuman people—is bound to fail.

Animist studies benefits from examining Snyder’s project by understanding both his astounding success as a popular animist and the reasons for the backlash against him and the poets he inspired. As animist studies itself relies upon a certain universalism in the constitution of its research object across geographies and cultures, Snyder dramatizes some of the dangers of this gaze when put into para-academic practice. James Burton cautions against animism instrumentalized by “Man” in Sylvia Wynter’s sense for the construction of a new dominant

⁷² “All the Spirit Powers Went to their Dancing Place,” in Gary Snyder, *Regarding Wave* (New Directions, 1970), 62.

⁷³ Hazel Rickard, “Spiritualist Material Performance, Whiteness, and the Animist Other,” in *Puppet and Spirit: Ritual, Religion, and Performing Objects*, eds. Claudia Orenstein and Tim Cusack (Routledge, 2024), 39, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003150589-4>

genre of the human, “Man3,” with “a more ‘reconstructed’ worldview, with a more pluralistic, ecologically-sensitive, multi-naturalist descriptive statement, but one which, nevertheless, allows certain of the key features of Man to remain largely intact, and indeed to acquire a renewed resilience.”⁷⁴ To the extent that animist universalism obscures racial and colonial difference, appropriates Indigenous grounded normativities, and assumes transparent representation of human and nonhuman others, it risks reproducing what Burton calls “Manimism.”

Land-Connected Eros and the Erotics of Matter-Energy

I devote the rest of this chapter to examining a dimension of the project that has remained largely implicit in the preceding sections and that concludes the chapter on a somewhat more positive note: the role of eros in reproducing animist forms of life across scales. If Snyder’s poems and essays repeatedly imagine alternatives to colonial modernity, they do so not only through political visions of reinhabitation or representations of animist community but also through attempts to reorganize desire itself. The erotic is consistently central to Snyder’s animism throughout his poetic career and generally falls into two categories. The first is comprised of appropriation of mythical or cosmological erotic stories from East Asian, Native American, and occasionally European sources; such stories are either retold or alluded to, or else the persons or deities (typically female entities) are addressed and/or manifest in the land and erotically related to.⁷⁵ Indeed, Snyder is especially drawn to this kind of erotic source material. Because of the heavy appropriation of Indigenous and East Asian sources (which would lead me

⁷⁴ James Burton, “Manimism: Worrying about the Relationship Between Rationality and Animism,” *New Formations* 104-105 (2022), 236, Project Muse.

⁷⁵ *Myths & Texts* is the largest repository of Native American appropriations in this vein, while there are numerous poems utilizing erotic East Asian material or simply eroticizing East Asian goddesses. “The Dance” is emblematic. Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers without End*, 133-136.

to rehearse the kinds of critiques I have already made above), the largely individually-focused erotic encounters within this category, and because little of it appears in *Turtle Island*, I set this category aside for this chapter. The second category posits the erotic as a material-energetic force that links bodies and their reproduction to the collective continuance of bioregions. What emerges is a form of land-based eros: an effort to root kinship, sexuality, family, and social reproduction within broader ecological processes and bioregionally-determined lifeways. Compared to previous poems, the animist dimensions of poems such as “Toward Climax” and “The Bath” rely less on cross-cultural syncretism and instead map animist universality at scales that range from the evolutionary to material-culture to the intimacy of the domestic. These poems provide the affective and reproductive foundation for Snyder’s civilizational ambitions. If animist universalism proposes a transformed way of inhabiting Turtle Island, the land-connected eros he details in his “Four Changes” essays and these poems supply the means through which such a form of life might be sustained across generations. I argue that the eco-erotics of the body’s material-energetic ancestrality is therefore central to Snyder’s thought. Human pleasure, reproduction, and kinship are consistently situated within broader ecological processes, making eros one of the principal mechanisms through which Snyder attempts to reconnect settler life to the nonhuman world.

Snyder writes extensively of his ethics based in material-energetic flows across his prose, but a relevant reference is his essay, “On ‘As for Poets,’” from the end of *Turtle Island* in which he interprets Blake’s “Energy is Eternal Delight” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in the context of dominant fossil fuel and nuclear energy. He argues first that “[r]enewable’ energy resources are the trees and flowers and all living beings of today, especially plant-life doing the primary work of energy-transfer” and secondly that “there is another kind of energy, in every

living being, close to the sun-source but in a different way. The power within. Whence? ‘Delight.’ The delight of being alive while knowing of impermanence and death, the acceptance and mastery of this.”⁷⁶ Snyder’s use of Blakean delight as an erotic—life-animating and creative—force and valuable in itself is anti-capitalist by proposing contentment with meeting the body’s primal needs for vitality within ecologically low-impact lifeways. This erotic on a wider scale operates thus not towards endless reproduction and growth (colonial eco-erotics), but towards “climax” and stability, a characteristic he extols that Indigenous cultures achieve.⁷⁷ Snyder imagines desire as something that should culminate in ecological stability and durable forms of inhabitation, making eros itself a matter of bioregional and civilizational design that philosophically grounds his land-based eros. This is still animist universalism recoverable from all world traditions, as he proclaims directly after this that “[t]his joy is continually reflected in the poems and songs of the world.”⁷⁸ Poems like “Charms”⁷⁹ and “The Dazzle” (both dedicated to McClure) register the erotic pull of the natural world’s reproductivity, perhaps described most straightforwardly in the latter poem as “the dazzle, the seduction the / design / intoxicated and quivering.”⁸⁰

The normative dimension of reverence for this erotic force also takes place in the reproductive dimension, proposing a settler land-based eros across *Turtle Island* but most plainly articulated in the book’s essays. Snyder’s poems are often but certainly not exclusively focused on the heterosexual couple or the family, but they nonetheless ground the erotic within and responsible to a wider environmental and ancestral eros. His manifesto, “Four Changes,”

⁷⁶ He restates this in a more Buddhist definition of delight as well. See Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 113.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 28.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 65.

advocates for non-monogamous kinship structures as a means to reduce settler population on Turtle Island, a response to the then-common anxieties for an overpopulated future that was actually primarily directed at brown bodies in so-called developing countries.⁸¹ He does also make a more planetary argument, asserting that “[a]rea by area of the globe, the criteria of ‘optimum population’ should be based on the sense of the total ecological health for the region, including flourishing wildlife populations,” but his primary focus of his argument is Turtle Island.⁸² He proposes to achieve this through a variety of non-coercive means, including the alteration of erotic and kinship structures in human and nonhuman communities. He asserts this both for the level of community and ideology (“[o]ur own heads”):

The community: Explore other social structures and marriage forms, such as group marriage and polyandrous marriage, which provide family life but many less children. Share the pleasures of raising children widely, so that all need not directly reproduce to enter into this basic human experience. We must hope that no woman would give birth to more than one [two?] child, during this period of crisis. Adopt children. Let reverence for life and reverence for the feminine mean also a reverence for other species, and future human lives, most of which are threatened.

Our own heads: “I am a child of all life, and all living beings are my brothers and sisters, my children and grandchildren. And there is a child within me waiting to be brought to birth, the baby of a new and wiser self.” Love, Love-making, a man and woman together, seen as the vehicle of mutual realization, where the creation of new selves and a new world of being is as important as reproducing our kind.⁸³

He suggests applying emerging ecofeminist ideas of the period that linked nature with the feminine as a means to extend the family and that “group and polyandrous marriage,” by virtue of producing fewer children, is more ecologically sustainable than monogamy or polygamy.

While I do not have space to fully elaborate the land-based eros Snyder proposes, read with the

⁸¹ Snyder—along with many white people in the era of Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*—is concerned with the planet-wide general growth in population overburdening the Earth. While Ehrlich’s predictions were wrong, and methods of population control have continually been coercively practiced against racialized women before and since, there is also a growing consensus that population is still a relevant issue to sustainable futures. Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Ballantine Books, 1968).

⁸² Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 92-93.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 93.

attempts to develop settler grounded normativity above, Snyder would map a settler eros rooted in bioregionally-determined social forms and animist land-connection with a scope of vision singular to the settler poets of his era.

In the poem “Toward Climax,” it becomes clearer that this land-based eros derives from a broader theory of ecological kinship. While “The Way West, Underground” disperses myth across geographical space, “Toward Climax” constructs a temporal axis of human development toward ecological and cultural maturity. Likewise, the poem is less overtly mythic than it is structural in the way it tracks human-nonhuman relationality through adjacency and material interaction:

brain-size blossoming
on the balance of the neck,
tough skin—good eyes—sharp ears—
move in bands.
milkweed fiber rolled out on the thigh;
 nets to carry fruits or meat.

catch fire, move on.
eurasia tundra reindeer herds
sewn hide clothing, mammoth-rib-framework tent.

Bison, bear, skinned and split;
 opening animal chests and bellies, skulls,
 bodies just like ours—
pictures in caves.
send sound off the mouth and lips
formal complex grammars transect
 inner structures & the daily world—

big herds dwindle
 (—did we kill them?
 thousand-mile front of prairie fire—)
ice age warms up
learn more plants. netting, trapping, boats.
bow and arrow. dogs.
mingle bands and families in and out like language
 kin to grubs and trees and wolves

dance and sing.
begin to go “beyond”— reed flute—
buried baby wrapped in many furs—
great dream-time tales to tell.⁸⁴

Again, in Snyder’s notational style there is little lyric mediation of these juxtaposed actions and biological and prehistorical transformations, but the suggestion is clearly that the human is not a master but a mediator of flows within the wider material-energetic ecosystem of Paleolithic lifeways. It also implicitly proposes that animism emerges from a culture of human-nonhuman kinship visualized first through images of skinning—“opening animal chests and bellies, skulls, / bodies just like ours—” —juxtaposed with cave paintings and the development of language. This kinship appears again as “kin to grubs and trees and wolves,” providing a biomaterial, affective, and familial foundation for the work’s land-connected eros. Snyder situates erotic life within a larger field of trans-human continuity rather than within species or exclusively human kinship units. Art and language emerge from and are conditioned by this land-based eros beginning with “dance and sing;” they are expressive of and used in testament more-than-human relationality in Paleolithic lifeways. The hunter-gatherer forms of human culture resemble language in the way they “mingle ... in and out,” distinct but porous and interactive, recalling the alternative kinship structures proposed in “Four Changes.” Finally, this development ends with the relationship to the spirit world in ritual, burial, and shamanism, positing that enactments of a firmly animist world emerge simultaneously with the emergence of humanness with which burial practices are often associated.

The rest of the poem tracks a decline from this common culture, signifying that Paleolithic rationality and ecological maturity (relative stability and minimal impact) is a baseline from which deviation is measured. In the Neolithic it is: “forget wild plants, their virtues

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 82-83.

/ lose dream-time / lose largest size of brain—” before the eventual devolution into kingdoms and modern nation-states. As reason becomes disconnected from living with natural processes and becomes “Law,” it even produces a form of bad animism as “[a] rooster was burned at the stake / for laying an egg. Unnatural. 1474.).”⁸⁵ After mapping this decline across history, in Part III Snyder offers:

science walks in beauty:

nets are many knots
skin is border-guard, a pelt is borrowed warmth;
a bow is the flex of a limb in the wind
a giant downtown building
 is a creekbed stood on end.

detritus pathways. “delayed and complex ways
to pass the food through webs.”

maturity. stop and think. draw on the mind’s
stored richness. memory, dream, half-digested
image of your life. “detritus pathways”—feed
the many tiny things that feed an owl.
send heart boldly travelling,
on the heat of the dead & down.⁸⁶

The first line, in which science “walks in beauty” is likely an appropriation of a Diné phrase used in a ceremony called the Night Chant.⁸⁷ The monolithic “science” here suggests (optimistically) that all scientific epistemologies can participate in a relational worldview rather than be detrimental to it if properly oriented. The following lines in their tracking of material-energetic flows (creek bed, wind, limb) and enclosures (skin, pelt) use discourse from ecology (“delayed and complex ways / to pass the food through webs”) to map entities as nodes within networks of distributed causality and as temporary assemblages of material relations. The imperatives to

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 84.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 84

⁸⁷ For the prayer and its translation, see Zachary Colbert, “Owning a River: Whiteness, Property Rights, and Counter-Representations on the Colorado Plateau,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 78, no. 2 (2024): 354.

“stop and think,” access memory, and “send heart boldly travelling, / on the heat of the dead & down” shift from the previous descriptive register to the normative, describing a “mature” culture in which rationality and affect are instrumentalized sustainability. This suggests that sustainability requires not simply correct ecological information but a collective eros capable of extending attachment beyond the human community. As a whole, the poem responds to an implicit problem it constructs: if animism as an ontology and its land-connected eros historically emerged from a common human material culture in the Paleolithic Era and was gradually superseded when the mode of production transformed after the introduction of agriculture, how can animism and eco-erotic normativity be reclaimed today under a political economy even more radically remote from animism’s origins? What the poem omits in its abstraction to humanity as a single subject of evolution (suppressing historical unevenness again and generalizing from Europe’s history), it would attempt to gain by suggesting that in light of a planetary vista of destruction there could emerge a single planetary earthly multitude with the reflective capacity and agency to will itself to animist sustainability.

I will end this chapter with a reading of “The Bath,” which—like “The Egg”—explores the erotic, material-energetic animation of the human body in the process of bathing within Snyder’s home of Kitkitdizze. If “Towards Climax” and Snyder’s essays prescribe norms and lifeways for a settler land-connected eros, “The Bath” instead generates elements of that orientation affectively by allowing ancestral continuity, domestic intimacy, and environmental presence as dimensions of the same event. I read the poem’s series of images as a process of what Erin Manning calls “framing” to analyze the eco-relational vitality of the body that arises as an “emergent valuation” of the poem. Snyder as speaker both actively participates in the family’s bathing while also experiencing a wonder that removes him from the immediate scene and into

contemplation of the material-energetic composition and movement of their bodies amidst other bodies and the ongoingness of their genetic, ancestral heritage. These views on the bathing experience are examples of framing in Manning’s terminology: an “in-gathering” or “backgroundingforegrounding” of experience that selects and intensifies particular “movement-effects” as poetic images.⁸⁸ I read the poem’s search for emergent valuation, which Manning describes as what “co-composes in a surround to produce a quality of vitality, a mode of existence as of yet untethered to the modalities of use of existence-foretold.”⁸⁹ The refrain—“*is this our body?*”—functions to in-gather sequences of images into an ancestral question extending both within and beyond the human-genetic to encompass a whole field of ecological interactivity. This reframes the body itself as animated by a relational field, and the value emerging in the poem is the wonder and care of this expansive, materially animist “our.”

The frame of the poem begins first with the surround of the sauna itself, which proceeds straight into the bathing struggle between father and son:

Washing Kai in the sauna,
 The kerosene lantern set on a box
 outside the ground-level window,
 Lights up the edge of the iron stove and the
 washtub down on the slab
 Steaming air and crackle of waterdrops
 brushed by on the pile of rocks on top
 He stands in warm water
 Soap all over the smooth of his thigh and stomach
 “Gary don’t soap my hair!”
 —his eye-sting fear—
 the soapy hand feeling
 through and around the globes and curves of his body
 up in the crotch,
 And washing-tickling out the scrotum, little anus,
 his penis curving up and getting hard
 as I pull back skin and try to wash it
 Laughing and jumping, flinging arms around,

⁸⁸ Erin Manning, *Out of the Clear* (Minor Compositions, 2023), 103-104.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 105.

I squat all naked too,

*is this our body?*⁹⁰

The second through the seventh lines in-gathers the sauna's relations as perceptual field, backgrounding foregrounding specific relational intensities of heat from the stove, the moisture and "crackle" of the steam and water, and planes of tactile contact with stone. The human bodies of the poem emerge preconditioned by these forces and undergo micro-transformations—like the liquid becoming vapor—by in turn becoming backgrounded foregrounded relational sites of material-energetic exchange as the poem continues. Kai's command—"Gary don't soap my hair!"—interrupts the smooth flow of care through the limit of sensation threatened by the soap in his eyes. This is part of the dynamic element of chaos involved in washing Kai that produces the scene as co-composed ("fear" as well as "[l]aughing and jumping") rather than as a harmonious unity. Bodies are topologies of surfaces and movements emergent from the sauna's relational field of affects and potentials, as suggested by the perspectival shifts in which Snyder dissociates his hand into "the soapy hand feeling" and Kai's body appears as an assemblage of its surfaces, struggles, and affects.

The first appearance of the poem's refrain withdraws attention from the scene itself into a sense of awe towards the body as ancestral heritage, the indefinite "our" here referring certainly to the shared genetic material among family but also to the common physical-energetic form shared among our species. Yet the nonhuman (though not a participant in the same way as the humans in the family) still contributes more than setting to this scene as the "*this*" of the body is an emergent valuation of the sauna as collective, relational field. The noun phrase implied within the pronoun is indefinite and vast, in-gathering all the affects, sensory qualities, relationships, movements, water, and objects. Set aside both spatially and through italics, "body" takes on such

⁹⁰ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 12.

a number of modifiers as to exceed its identity, dramatizing the gap between the event and the emergent valuation instigated by the brief moment of reflection. The following stanza momentarily pans back from the sauna frame with a string of breathless compound modifiers to involve the whole haecceity of the wider milieu, paralleling the work that “*this*” did above:

Sweating and panting in the stove-steam hot-stone
cedar-planking wooden bucket water-splashing
kerosene lantern-flicker wind-in-the-pines-out
sierra forest ridges night—⁹¹

The almost ritualistic “[s]weating and panting” that begins the stanza is almost lost by the end of the centrifugal, long prepositional phrase of compound modifiers. Before being abruptly cut off by the em dash and Masa’s entrance, the speaker’s attention whirls out from the body into the night qualified by the just-so of the sauna and place forming the night’s haecceity, a concept itself suggested in the “*this*” of the poem’s refrain but described as the immediate environmental field of the text rather than reflection’s re-staging. The “*this*” is a haecceity that occurs from a corporeal perspective, as seen in his poem for McClure, “Charms,” in which the speaker imagines being sexually attracted to females from other mammal species if he were inhabiting their bodily point of view: “Thus I could be devastated and athirst with longing / for a lovely mare or lioness, or lady mouse, / in seeing the beauty from THERE.”⁹² Perspective is distinct from other mammals but continuous with them by virtue of sharing mammalian bodies. The speaker in “The Bath” registers the whole erotic field from which his momentary experience emerges, a confluence of interconnected environmental forces inflecting the ritual cleansing.

The erotic as the body’s ancestral generativity becomes thematically obvious at the center of the poem, and this more material-energetic animism takes on a distinctly gendered

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*, 28.

universalism. As Masa takes over cleaning Kai's hair, Snyder shifts from the more purely imagistic to the metaphorical as the more abstract components of the poem's diagram manifest:

The body of my lady, the winding valley spine,
the space between the thighs I reach through,
cup[s] her curving vulva arch and hold it from behind,
a soapy tickle a hand of grail
The gates of Awe
That open back a turning double-mirror world of
wombs in wombs, in rings,
that start in music,
is this our body?

The hidden place of seed
The veins net flow across the ribs, that gathers
milk and peaks up in a nipple—fits
our mouth—
The sucking milk from this our body sends through
jolts of light; the son, the father,
sharing mother's joy
That brings a softness to the flower of the awesome
open curling lotus gate I cup and kiss
As Kai laughs at his mother's breast he now is weaned
from, we
wash each other,
this our body

Kai's little scrotum up close to his groin,
the seed still tucked away, that moved from us to him
In flows that lifted with the same joys forces
as his nursing Masa later,
playing with her breast,
Or me within her,
Or him emerging,
*this is our body:*⁹³

In counterpoise with the long the prepositional phrase at the beginning of the stanza moving “out” beyond the scene, Masa's vulva and vaginal opening lead inward but, significantly, also “back” in time to the long, figured-infinite series (“double-mirror world”) of the wombs that produced her, incarnated ancestrality also being part of the present “*this*” of “*our body*.” Across

⁹³ *ibid.*, 12-13.

these stanzas, Masa is the hinge from which the interrogative “*is this our body?*” becomes the confident “*this is our body*” by serving as a material-energetic source for man and boy that is both immanent and transcendent. Tom Lavazzi argues that the grail-vulva comparison reveals the speaker’s “quest into the trans-sensual and ultimately unsayable,”⁹⁴ and Gray reads how in another poem Masa “gets marked and enjoyed as the symptom of the Western male’s quest for self-knowledge.”⁹⁵ The “Awe” central to this poem, previously an emergent valuation garnered by the relational field the sauna opened on a material and energetic level, becomes territorialized and overcoded by a discourse on the feminine as the primal mystery. While the metaphoric dimensions of the grail and “open curling lotus gate” give way back to the immanent affects and materials of the scene, the gaze clearly inscribes the feminine as the limit point of the body’s intelligibility, putting pressure on the supposed universality of material-energetic transfer that is inevitably felt and registered through Snyder’s particular life and thought. Still, the interchangeability of father and son’s pleasure at Masa’s breast is not to construct an Oedipal rivalry; the speaker rather leans into a kind of ancestral sublime in which both he and his son’s identities are not as important as the pleasures themselves; indeed the double noun in which the family’s reproduction and ongoingness is a process of “flows” “with the same joys forces” suggests an enjoyment of energetic transfer and reproduction at a basic material level. The “seed still tucked away” that opens the poem futurally beyond its present focus shows a material-energetic reproductivity to be the agent of the poem. The speaker, for all his activity in the poem, is simultaneously standing outside that action as he sees himself part of a continuity of bodies carried back and forth through time via simple, sensual routines and pleasures.

⁹⁴ Tom Lavazzi, “Pattern of Flux: The ‘Torsion Form’ in Gary Snyder’s Poetry,” *The American Poetry Review* 18, no. 4 (1989): 41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27779853>.

⁹⁵ Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim*, 255.

Attention to land returns along with a glimpse towards human community outside the nuclear family in the following stanza:

Clean, and rinsed, and sweating more, we stretch
out on the redwood benches hearts all beating
Quiet to the simmer of the stove,
the scent of cedar
And then turn over,
murmuring gossip of the grasses,
talking firewood,
Wondering how Gen's napping, how to bring him in
soon wash him too—
These boys who love their mother
who loves men, who passes on
her sons to other women;

The cloud across the sky. The windy pines.
the trickle gurgle in the swampy meadow

*this is our body.*⁹⁶

As the bodies taking in the sensual pleasures of the first four lines “turn over” to “murmuring gossip of the grasses, / talking firewood,” it is as if social animism is accessible through a perspectival inversion that makes visible what he elsewhere refers to as the “spirit world” shared by traditional cultures.⁹⁷ While the speaker turns his attention back to human family, there is a sense of wider human community than before as Masa “loves men,” and “passes on / her sons to other women” in a futural vista whose “other women” too constitute “*our body*.” In its most animist moment, “[t]he cloud across the sky. The windy pines. / the trickle gurgle in the swampy meadow” are all directly juxtaposed with “*this our body*,” showing that what might be called “horizontal ancestors,”—non-genetic ancestors who nonetheless are integral to pleasure, ongoingness, and reproduction—are included in the “*this*” of “*our body*.” While he is in awe of this expanded reproductivity, Snyder is not interested in his own continuity through Kai and

⁹⁶ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 13-14.

⁹⁷ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 22.

Gen; instead, the continuity here is a finding of haecceitistic *ecstasis* among the daily erotic force of shared life. The desire driving the speaker's framing and image-making is to momentarily step out of the personal frame of reference and into the cosmic. This reframing produces a change in affect that is an eco-relational valuation—not in terms of belonging or nativity that I have shown drives much of *Turtle Island*—but instead a communality in domestic care that extends across species and across ancestral time. In the final two lines of the poem, “Laughing on the Great Earth // Come out from the bath,” the final “[c]ome” can be read in the imperative mode to the reader to participation in the ecological kinship described in the poem, and the “Great Earth” emphasizes the shared, human material ancestry in the elements of the Earth itself.⁹⁸ The animist wonder and kinship forms of “The Bath” rely upon a universality that excludes or avoids from its frame of reference many of the social issues Snyder attempted to address in other poems of *Turtle Island*, and so its stakes and import are thereby limited. This universality operates at a more modest, local, and materially grounded register as an emergent orientation: a mode of attunement to the interpenetration of bodies (humans, man-made objects, elements, pines and grasses) and their ancestral material-energetic animation for a poetics of wonder, if not exactly an ecological ethics. And even though “The Bath” privileges the midcentury nuclear family and therefore a settler-colonial reproductive social form,⁹⁹ historicizing the universal ambitions of the poem and contrasting it with East Asian and Indigenous kinship and domestic social forms, Snyder's polyamorous manifestos and his poem, “On San Gabriel Ridges” (in which Snyder imagines ongoing erotic material-energetic entanglement with all his former lovers), strongly

⁹⁸ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 14.

⁹⁹ See 36-37 and “Chapter Three: The Duration of the Land” (95-128) in Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Duke University Press, 2017).

suggest that the focus on the nuclear family is contingent and situational rather than normative or representative.¹⁰⁰

While “The Bath” might be considered an outlier among the more fully social and normatively focused poems above, the role of affect, sensation, and the erotic will continue to be a source of animist renewal in upcoming chapters. Snyder’s poems in *Turtle Island* taken together stage a productive tension in formulating animist universalism in the twilight of the counterculture era. Between a civilizational vision seeking to base settler life in animist appropriations and a more immanent and affective practice of embodying the animacies of geo-material existence, neither part of this project fully resolves its ethical and political contradictions. While Europe may have created and exported failed worlds, Snyder inadvertently reveals the problems with attempts at counteridentification that would seemingly re-identify with the other without sufficient relation to that other.

¹⁰⁰ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 40.

CHAPTER TWO

Haunani-Kay Trask's Kāhea Poetics: Animist Participatory Address

Aloha 'Āina and Animist Kāhea

Like Gary Snyder's aspirational animist poems in the previous chapter, Kanaka (Indigenous Hawaiian) poet Haunani-Kay Trask's poems assert forms of animist, normative maintenance whose full actualization takes place in a wider eco-social context beyond the page itself. Yet, unlike the other poets in my study, Trask is part of an intact animist tradition in its traditional home, and coloniality itself also takes a center stage as poetic subject. So while other poets utilize a becoming-based poetics to forge novel animist relations or look to distant or non-Western animist traditions for new ground, Trask's main concern as an animist poet is not how to ignite relation but rather how to maintain, protect, adapt, and evolve it. Her poetry is part of collective labor to sustain genealogical and eco-ethical relations under historical conditions of colonial rupture. Although her poetry does open the reader to a distributed and participatory erotic world through sensually intense poetic events, such events are always accompanied by a grounded-normative infrastructure: a set of inherited rights, responsibilities, forms of address, and other practices embedded in the 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian Language) and culture through which animist relations are maintained. Kanaka grounded normativity includes the kapu system but also extends to kuleana (responsibility), mo'okū'auhau (genealogy), and practices of mālama 'āina (care for the land). While colonial normativity utilizes disciplinary and biopolitical regimes to regulate sexuality and reproduction for property, racial governance, and labor, Kanaka grounded normativity regulates relations to cultivate pono ("right balance of relations"),¹ sustain

¹ Noenoe K. Silva (Kānaka Maoli), "Pele, Hi'iaka, and Haumea: Women and Power in Two Hawaiian Mo'olelo," *Pacific Studies Journal* 30, no. 1-2 (2007): 161.

genealogical continuity, and safeguards land-centered reproduction. Even though power in animist, grounded-normative systems is always ethically complex and non-innocent, such frameworks presuppose normative structures not for domination or colonial moralism but rather for mutual co-flourishing calibrated to dynamic conditions across human and nonhuman communities. However, this maintenance is not neutral under colonial rule, as animist normative maintenance must take on a defensive posture requiring ongoing negotiation between inherited protocols and the structures, lived realities, and discourses of colonial governance. Trask's own work stages problems—especially in contestation over perceived illicit forms of sexuality—when grounded and non-grounded normative systems collide. As I will explore, Trask's goal is not formal innovation for the sake of poetry's own potentials; instead, she utilizes conventions across Hawaiian and Western literatures to write poems that call readers into the Kanaka world at a level beyond the merely representational. As animist poems, they evoke poetry's embodied affordances to make the reader responsible to land.

For Trask, the problem of colonialism and the struggle for sovereignty is in part an erotic problem whose nature lies both in the erotic capacities of and between the Kānaka Maoli (Indigenous Hawaiian people) and their 'āina (land).² This relationship is in part recorded in the rich tradition of genealogical chants that Trask draws upon in her poetry. Mo'okū'auhau is not merely human kinship relations as the translation suggests but also “encompass[es] the vastness of Kanaka familial relationships that extend well beyond the human realm to include islands,

² The case for sovereignty is different in Hawaii'i than in the continental United States. Kānaka Maoli do not have a reservation system of nations-within-a-nation like Native Americans. Furthermore, some Kānaka Maoli have insisted on the original sovereignty of the Hawaiian Kingdom and have thus advocated for de-occupation rather than decolonization. This group resists the moniker “Indigenous.” Trask and the assumed position throughout this chapter is that Kānaka Maoli are most effectively understood as an Indigenous people who struggle for full sovereignty rather than the nation-within-a-nation reservation model. For this discussion, see Judy Rohrer, *Staking Claim: Settler Colonialism and Racialization in Hawai'i* (The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 53-55.

oceans, planets, and the universe.”³ In “Chant of Lamentation,” the elegiac title poem of the beginning section from her first poetry collection—1994’s *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*—the speaker invokes a seemingly absent and collective Kanaka addressee through whose reproduction and flourishing are tied to that of the ‘āina:

I lament the abandoned
terraces, their shattered
waters, silent ears
of stone and light

who comes trailing
winds through
taro lo ‘i?

I lament the wounded
skies, unnourished
desolate, fallen drunk
over the iron sea

who chants
the hollow *ipu*
into the night?

I lament the black
and naked past, a million ghosts
laid out across the ocean floor

who journeys from

³ Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu (Kānaka Maoli) and Manulani Aluli Meyer, “Introduction: I Ka Wā Mamua, The Past before Us” in *The Past Before Us: Mo‘okū‘auhau as Methodology*, ed. Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2019), 1. Below the authors provide a beautiful unpacking of this rich concept:

Mo‘o in this context can be defined as a succession, a series, stories, traditions, or lineage. Kū refers to standing upright, stopping, halting, or anchoring, and in another manifestation presides over aspects of battle and warfare. ‘Auhau is the femur and humerus bones of the human skeleton. When strung together mo‘okū‘auhau speaks of the succession of our ancestors and the mana within their bones, buried in the ‘āina (land), which establishes our place to stand tall, our place from which to speak, protect, defend, and love. Our mo‘okū‘auhau gives us our strength, direction, guidance, and mana. (2)

See also Nu‘uhiwa:

From the Hawaiian perspective, mo‘okū‘auhau is generally considered a genealogical map of the origins of all things that are birthed. Mo‘okū‘auhau also includes the inception and creation of anything tangible, intangible, animate, inanimate, built, birthed, or created. Simply stated, a mo‘okū‘auhau is a recorded explanation of the kumu (origin or source) for anyone or anything that has come into being or into existence. Kalei Nu‘uhiwa (Kānaka Maoli), “E Ho‘i ka Piko (Returning to the Center): Theorizing Mo‘okū‘auhau as Methodology in an Indigenous Literary Context” in *ibid.*, 40.

the rising to the setting
of the sun?⁴

The indented stanzas would seem to recall the Western tradition of *ubi sunt* through which rhetorical questions serve to lament what is irreparably lost, in this case a whole Kanaka world in which people, ancestors, gods, and land all share mutual flourishing through relation. Yet the genre and logic of Trask's lament is quite different: rather than mourn an irretrievable past, its primary function is to invoke Kanaka kuleana through renewed relation with ancestors who are still present.⁵ The refrain then asks who takes up their genealogy as reproductive force under colonial conditions. Anthropomorphism and personification structure the lament's relational-ethical field, as in the first stanza pair the taro terraces (*taro lo 'i*) of traditional agriculture suffer from "shattered / waters, silent ears / of stone and light," missing a caring "who" meant to tend the fields after winds. The skies in the following stanza are "wounded," "unnourished / desolate, fallen drunk / over the iron sea" not out of pathetic sympathy with Kanaka ruin, but because no one "chants / the hollow *ipu* [a traditional gourd drum] / into the night?" The skies act erratically or fail to provide nourishment because this provision is dependent upon the relational capacities of chant addressed to the skies; this section of the poem suggests the decline of rain-fall that was already in process, attributed to colonial deforestation and disruption to traditional taro farming practices.⁶ Coloniality structures the scene of the speaker's own address as she "lament[s] the black / and naked past, a million ghosts / laid out across the ocean floor," but she also seeks to reignite the past glory of Kānaka sailors to "journey[] from / the rising to the setting / of the sun."

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all emphasis is in the original. Haunani-Kay Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* (Calyx Books, 1994), 23.

⁵ Silva: "Our ancestral knowledge includes close relationships with people in the pō (the realm from which we come and to which we return at death; therefore the realm where our deceased kūpuna continue to exist)." Noenoe K. Silva, *The Power of the Steel-tipped Pen: Reconstructing Native Hawaiian Intellectual History* (Duke University Press, 2017), 9.

⁶ Cited in Candace Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance: Kanaka Maoli and Critical Settler Cartographies in Hawai'i* (Duke University Press, 2021), 6. See also 20-21.

This dual mode of mourning and reclamation shows that “Chant of Lamentation” is more generally a genealogical lament in which grief functions to reaffirm ongoing relations with ‘āina, ancestors, and gods rather than marking their absence:

I lament the flowers
a‘ole pua, without
issue on the stained
and dying earth

who parts the trembling
legs, enters where
*the god enters, not
as a man but as a god?*

I lament my own
long, furious lamentation
flung down
into the bitter stomachs

into the blood-filled streams
into the far
and scattered graves

who tells of those
disinterred, their
ground-up bones, their
poisoned eyes?⁷

The poem ends referring to “blood-filled streams” and human ancestors disinterred for development and stolen and analyzed (“ground-up”) by archaeologists,” and earlier the human-genealogical enters metaphorically in the lament for being “*a‘ole pua*, without / issue on the stained / and dying earth. Trask clarifies that *a‘ole pua* “*means, literally, without flowers. The flower is a metaphor denoting child and thus, in genealogies (our form of history), a bloodline listed as a‘ole pua is a line without children.*”⁸ Yet while she acknowledges loss of Kanaka

⁷ Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 23-34.

⁸ *ibid.*, 25.

fertility, the implied subject of her questions shifts to the gods themselves in an erotic address: “who parts the trembling / legs, enters where / *the god enters, not / as a man but as a god?*” The italicized portion Trask explains as “*a traditional reference to our great creation chant, the Kumulipo, in which life is born of the divine presence of both the human and the godly,*” recalling a central refrain repeated in the second chant of the poem in which the creation of species is recounted.⁹ The great cosmological epic that is the Kumulipo “establishes mo‘okū‘auhau as a foundation of ‘Ōiwi culture, identity, and worldview.”¹⁰ Trask’s explanation and invocation of the epic offers a participatory view of *ongoing* creation in which humans are integral to the creative process, which includes the wider context of the line begun by the formula “Man by Waiololi, woman by Waiolola” that begins the Kumulipo’s stanzas. Trask’s juxtaposition of the Kumulipo’s line with “who parts the trembling / legs, enters where” can thus be read as both an appeal to the gods’ renewing participation in creation as well as a call to her primary addressee to reclaim what Trask elsewhere calls “a universe of familial relations” as a means for Kanaka repopulation.¹¹ The eros of the land is not as an object to be desired nor for

⁹ This example tells the origin of a type of coastal grass, the *akiaki*:

Man by Waiololi, woman by Waiolola,
The Akiaki was born and lived in the sea;
Guarded by the Manienie Akiaki that grew in the forest.
A night of flight by noises
Through a channel; water is life to trees;
So the gods may enter, but not man.

I provide the translation by Queen Liliuokalani. Beckwith, whose translation is most widely circulated, translates the last line as “[t]he god enters, man can not enter,” arguing that this line is a reference “to the office of gods rather than man in the fertilizing process ... hence the reverence with which Hawaiians approach nature, both animate and inanimate, filled as it is with powers beyond their control. ... In these different ways is expressed the separation between man and the natural world, for whose fructifying, so essential to the life of mankind, man must nevertheless wait upon the gods.” Beckwith’s position represents the typical midcentury depiction (originally published in 1951) of helpless Natives worshipping an all-powerful nature. Martha Warren Beckwith, *The Kumulipo: A Hawaiian Creation Chant* (University of Hawaii Press, 1972) 52. On the contrast between Beckwith’s and Liliuokalani’s translation, see Brandy Nālani McDougall (Kānaka Maoli), “Mo‘okū‘auhau versus Colonial Entitlement in English Translations of the Kumulipo,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2015): 749-779, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2015.0054>.

¹⁰ ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui (Kānaka Maoli), cited in *The Past Before Us*, 1.

¹¹ Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999), 5.

private affect but as generative ancestors and partners. The poem's interrogatives are thus less modes of mourning than procedural prompts that argue for genealogy as a structure that must be enacted rather than merely remembered. It is highly specific—cataloguing places, elements, ancestors, and traditional metaphors—but also generalizes into national belonging as a response to the negative work of colonialization as it forges group identities that exceed traditional tribal demarcations through racialization. Trask's poem itself is not a genealogical chant, which traditionally are stories and would have formal requirements that she does not observe in her poems.¹² This and other poems utilize genealogy as a framework for inciting and maintaining land-relational, Indigenous-nationalist identities.

I explore in this chapter how Trask's poems function by inviting Kānaka readers into forms of participation with the akua (gods present in the natural elements) and disclosing their kino lau (the many particular forms taken by a god in the natural world) through sensation. I describe this as an animist poetics of kāhea, "kāhea" translating as to call, hail, invite, or command—all presuming a response. While kāhea operates in an ordinary manner to carry out these meanings, it also designates or be used in a variety of distinctly animist modes, including call-and-response chants in hula; chants requesting permissions to enter a land, aligning with the akua, or calling for kuleana towards that land;¹³ and working as a rallying call for activist acts in protecting land.¹⁴ My use of this term is primarily for its role in calling for responsibility and addressing the land through the framework of aloha 'āina. Speech acts of "kāhea with an aloha" employ sonic resonance to "create ... alignment" with the akua.¹⁵ While Trask's poems utilize

¹² For example, see Kalei Nu'uhiwa on the convention of listing genealogical succession before beginning a story in *The Past Before Us*, 40.

¹³ Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance*, 102.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 120.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 119-120.

sound suggesting possibilities for such alignments, their primary audience is human, but the mana of poetry is to call *humans* into alignment. In this chapter I argue that the poems differentiate their modes of kāhea according to the reader's relation to land and genealogy. The poems summon Kānaka readers into animist relation and kuleana (responsibility) through address and invocation of a shared ancestry, and they position non-Hawaiian readers in asymmetrical relation—one where they are taught or hailed towards political responsibility rather than welcomed and revealed aspects of an animist, land-connected erotic intimacy that they cannot claim. I analyze her two collections of poetry, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* (1994) and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* (2002). While separated by eight years, the books are thematically and structurally similar enough to warrant analysis together for my purposes. In both books, the majority of the poems depict scenes of abjection or struggle amidst colonial presence harming the land and people. Each collection also ends with a section devoted to primarily celebratory eco-erotic poems, serving as both a source of renewal for an Indigenous reader and as a renewal to commitment to the land. While Trask includes a glossary for Hawaiian words in both collections, *Light* includes additional explanatory notes for non-Kānaka readers, translating enough of Kanaka ontology and worlding to make her claims intelligible to settler readers while simultaneously refusing complete translation into settler categories. The two books are part of the same project of declaiming destructive settler and tourist worldings and countering them with aloha 'āina. Trask's poems are part of mo'olelo Hawai'i "the stories and histories, in oral tradition and writing, composed by Kānaka Maoli."¹⁶

Trask's kāhea to the Kanaka reader is to maintain this world through acts of recognition, calls to genealogical kuleana, and experiences of land-based pleasure. These acts of invocation call

¹⁶ Ho'omanawanui, "E Ho'i ka Piko," 52.

Kānaka readers into identity and shared world not through praise of inherent qualities but through responsibility and relational maintenance. They set the conditions for the erotic relations of aloha ‘āina through its normative dimensions, especially in depicting proper protocols and forms of le‘a (pleasure) and disparaging improper relations. Importantly, these norms emerge from within Kanaka tradition¹⁷ rather than from outside authority and are thereby the very means by which animist relations can be sustained under colonial rupture. Indeed, after annexation in 1898, “‘white’ was a ‘natural’ category by official standards (one of the few categories that actually counted), whereas ‘Hawaiian’ did not even appear in the taxonomy,” so a reassertion of Kanaka normativity can be understood as a form of struggle for sovereignty.¹⁸ These norms regulate genealogical belonging, erotic address, and political commitment in ways that inextricably bind the land’s eros to sovereignty. The poems propose a collective Kanaka subject enjoying le‘a and mana by taking up kuleana within the ongoing relational network of gods, land, and ancestry. They sustain relations not as a reification of a fixed, abstract framework, but as an animist call to immediate, ethical, and erotic relations with nonhuman relatives from which ecological flourishing is a natural byproduct. Trask’s poetry does not detail the specifics of traditional practices meant to honor the akua and reciprocate the generosity of the land. However, these norms are often obliquely referred to and are foundational to the community the poems imagine. Chanting, song, and hula are the forms of respect that most often appear.¹⁹

¹⁷ While Kauanui argues for the replacement of the word “traditions” with “practices” to avoid treating them as “bounded objects,” I retain “tradition” both because Trask uses it herself and—more importantly—because I argue that “practices” risks flattening and deterritorializing acts from their cultural and historical contexts. Viewing tradition as a loosely cohesive set of adaptive practices rather than a monolithic and rigid set of laws to be transhistorically obeyed describes Trask’s own use of the term, the pragmatic view of animist tradition, and respects Kanaka cohesion as a people. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and Colonial Politics of State Nationalism* (Duke University Press, 2018), 35.

¹⁸ Rohrer building on Virginia Dominguez’s work, *Staking Claim*, 117.

¹⁹ See “Night is a Sharkskin Drum,” 5; “Hi‘iaka Chanting,” 6; “The Broken Gourd,” 11; “Ruins, 14; “Returning,” 42; “Afternoons,” 46; “Sweeten the Mango,” 56. Haunani-Kay Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002).

Kāhea poetics however does not hail all readers the same way and is asymmetrically answerable as well. Settlers are clearly addressed in the poems but very differently than Kānaka Maoli. Trask's poems are rich in kaona, or hidden meanings woven through "metaphors, allusions, connotations, and evocations associated with words and place names."²⁰ Such meanings are part of the very relational fabric of the familial cosmos invoked through skillful use of words, not merely representational and ornate aesthetics, and Trask herself provides many key details in her glosses and notes for her readers—especially non-Indigenous readers in Hawaii and the continental United States. Even Trask's kāhea invokes pre-existing relations among Kānaka Maoli, it exposes the absence of relation or bad relations for settler readers. Settlers often cannot answer the call provided because they obviously do not stand in the same relation to 'āina, ancestors, or history, and grounded norms in the poems delimit who may speak, desire, and belong. The poems address non-Kānaka readers by enumerating forms of historical and contemporary harm; explaining Kanaka cultural history, language, and customs (especially through the explanatory notes in *Light*); and depicting forms of land-based erotic pleasure from which non-Kānaka readers are excluded. The land-connected erotic poems model subject positions and erotic relations whose affects are to some extent transferrable—provoking the reader to imagine themselves what it might be like to exist in a familial cosmos—while preserving distinction along lines of identity and categorical logic, maintaining binary separation between what belongs to the Indigenous and to the non-Indigenous. Simultaneously, they block settler fantasy and consumption—both touristic and becoming native—by confronting the reader with bilingual poems and a rich tapestry of invoked deities, spirits, place names, and cultural heritage. Linguistic, ontological, and other forms of cultural difference in the poems impress

²⁰ Silva, *The Power of the Steel-tipped Pen*, 10-11. See also Brandy Nālani McDougall, *Finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature* (The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 130-146.

upon the settler reader the outlines of a longstanding land relationship that they do not and cannot possess. Normatively, the poems judge and refuse the terms under which erotic relation to land are appropriate, insisting that animist relation under colonial conditions must involve exclusion and accountability. Trask also takes on an uncomfortable didactic role to her settler audience as she educates them in her notes or glossary, understanding the potential political value in settlers recognizing the richness of Kānaka knowledge and land relations while also certainly feeling a frustration for needing to share such intimate cultural knowledge with an occupier. The poems are designed to invoke admiration for Kānaka land intimacy and even a desire for such intimacy themselves as the poems simultaneously exclude the settler reader and block them from converting that desire into possession or identification. Other poems do address non-Kānaka readers directly by naming forms of violence and extraction in addition to demanding recognition of harm. Significantly, they do not offer relational belonging in return. From an animist perspective, these poems demonstrate that animist responsibility for a settler subject does not require—and indeed maybe even prohibits—forms of animist intimacy.

In addition to these modes of hailing, Trask's kāhea functions primarily through animist sensory engagement. Hsuan Hsu has analyzed the ways olfactory metaphors and sense-perceptions in Trask's poems register both colonizing and decolonizing processes, showing cosmological and political specificities of Kanaka sensoria, colonialism's unequally distributed risk of slow violence, and the constitution of "settler colonial atmospheres."²¹ Fujikane notes the rich, cosmo-ecological theory of the senses in Kanaka cosmology that gives rise to sensual knowledge of 'āina described through Katrina-Ann R. Kapā'anaokalāokeola Nākoa Oliveira's (Kānaka Maoli) scholarship:

²¹ See Hsuan Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (New York University Press, 2020), 169-182; quotation from 182.

She argues that such a sensual knowledge of ‘āina grows out of five “sense abilities” and goes beyond them to include the “sense ability of na‘au [guts, mind, heart, seat of knowledge, or visceral core],” the intuitive, visceral responses to super natural phenomena that deny “rational” explanation; the “sensibility of kulāiwi,” a rootedness to the place of one’s ancestry where the bones of the kūpuna reside; the “sense ability of au ‘āpa‘apa‘a,” life according to ancestral time, measured in the lunar cycles, the seasonal cycles, and the life cycles of the earth; and the “sense ability of mo‘o,” the culmination of knowledge gained over generations in mo‘okū‘auhau, a genealogical line remembering the lessons of ancestors and the ordering of space and time.²²

In contrast to Enlightenment hierarchies of the senses in which knowledge gains authority through distance from bodily susceptibility,²³ Kanaka sense abilities locate knowledge precisely in being affected as a deeply located body—modes that colonial pedagogies attempt to erase. While these scales of the five senses, intuition, and ancestral and ecologically embedded place and time all play significant roles in Trask’s kāhea, I will focus on the animist-erotic aspects of this theory of Kanaka sensoria below while also considering the poems’ effects on settler sensoria. Cultivating ‘ini (desire) and le‘a (pleasure) through place-based erotic imagery is central, though we will see that the kāhea also functions negatively by depicting eco-sexual violence. There is an implication that for Kānaka readers, a full participation in aloha ‘āina also requires a poetic response to the kāhea in the form of chant and other ritual protocols. ho‘omanawanui (Kānaka Maoli) argues that “[t]he vocalization of oli [“chant”] requires hā (breath), a manifestation of one’s personal mana, making it an appropriate offering. There is an implied spiritual association between wind and breath as well as between chanter and nature mediated through the forms of nature (such as the ‘ōhi‘a tree) being evoked.”²⁴ Vocalized performance of chant therefore is an essential form of reciprocity with the land. Trask’s poems

²² Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance*, 18.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. and ed. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29, 45-50.

²⁴ ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui, *Voices of Fire: Reweaving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi‘iaka* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 61.

exist side by side with communal oratory forms in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, the former performing an indexical work that signals readers to enact the latter. The poems’ mana is not self-contained as an individual expression. Instead, as well shall see, it lies also in their ability to function as a kāhea to other forms of performance, for Kānaka readers to chant directly to the akua. Mana is “performative—it takes speech in order to produce action, and that action constitutes and/or creates, increases or decreases mana. The word is used often to describe a collective rather than individual good.”²⁵ This is not “performative” in the sense of inhabiting an arbitrary model or *habitus*, but rather real, consequential enactments witnessed by relational beings of an animist cosmos. Trask’s poems thus bridge the sensuality of reading as a solitary act with a call to sensory participation in a living world.

Both aspects of kāhea and grounded normativity are achieved in the poems through the consistency and cohesiveness variety of other formal choices, many of them rooted in traditional Kanaka literary forms. Rhetorically, Trask’s animist kāhea is accomplished primarily through interrogative address, infinitive and prepositional phrases, parallelism, place names, and repetition of sound. As I discuss below, she stresses the importance of personification in Kanaka cosmology and literatures. She utilizes many formal features characteristic of traditional Hawaiian-language literatures as Hiapo Perreira catalogues, especially pīna‘i (repetition of words, actions), ho‘okanaka (personification), and inoa ‘āina/pāna (place names).²⁶ As Samuel H. Elbert also notes of Kanaka chant, “[t]he presence in Hawaiian of only eight consonants (*p, k, glottal stop, k, m, n, l, w*) and only five long vowels and five short vowels, makes alliteration and

²⁵ Noenoe K. Silva, “Mana Hawai‘i: An Examination of Political Uses of the Word Mana in Hawaiian,” in *New Mana: Transformations of a Classic Concept in Pacific Languages and Cultures*, ed. Matt Tomlinson and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan (Australian National University Press, 2016), 38.

²⁶ Hiapo Keikikāne Kichie Perreira (Kānaka Maoli), “He Ha‘i‘ōlelo Ku‘una: Nā Hi‘ohi‘ona Me Nā Ki‘ina Ho‘āla Hou I Ke Kāka‘ōlelo” (University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, 2011), xv, xvi, and 324–325. ProQuest.

repetition easy and effective” and Trask’s poems make significant use of both in English and in her uses of Hawaiian.²⁷ The poems are rich with place names, an essential component of Hawaiian literature that imbues them with allusions to stories of the akua and cultural knowledge specific to those places.²⁸

This chapter stages problems in animist poetics and praxis in and adjacent to struggles for Indigenous sovereignty. Besides the problems of normativity under colonial conditions I gestured to above, I also discuss what Trask’s work means for settler animists while attempting to not merely instrumentalize her work for settler purposes. In my Introduction I framed this project as one means of answering the Indigenous call for non-Indigenous peoples to remodel their philosophies to the concept of ecological kinship. Trask herself, as I show below, critiques settler philosophies for lacking familial relations with nonhumans, even extending this critique to attempts made by ecofeminists to bridge this gap. While Trask’s primary concern is a call for sovereignty rather than for better settler ecological relations, Trask’s heavily eco-erotic poetry brings attention to the importance of the erotic dimensions of the kinship worldview both for Kānaka Maoli, for settlers who would be allies of Indigenous struggles, and for an understanding of contemporary animist discourse and praxis. As non-Indigenous animists exist within, are shaped by, and often benefit from a capitalist-materialist ontology that both separates human reproduction from nonhuman reproduction and relies upon objectifying and quantifying the latter, it is obvious that settler eco-erotics must reckon closely with complicity and colonial normativity. Yet, both in order to overcome ontological separation that reinforces human exceptionalism and to imagine more reciprocal reproductive relations across diverse modes of

²⁷ Samuel H. Elbert, “Hawaiian Literary Style and Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 53 (1951), 351, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1951.53.3.02a00040>.

²⁸ ho‘omanawanui, *Voices of Fire*, 55-56.

existence, it is necessary to track the histories and possibilities of animist eco-erotics. While Trask does not propose a model of settler land erotic or grounded normativity, I end this chapter by considering her relationship with haole scholar David Stannard as it appears in her poetry and considering the role of animism in settler allyship.

Trask's kāhea also clarifies the difference between her grounded animism and the universalist animism examined in the Snyder chapter. Snyder's diagrammatic poems move rapidly among ecological scales by juxtaposing bodies, species, energies, and cultural practices in order to disclose relations presumed to be available to sufficiently attentive readers. Trask's poems instead situate address within named genealogies, inherited protocols, and politically differentiated forms of belonging. As I discuss below, her rhetorical questions, infinitive constructions, Hawaiian vocabulary, possessives, and chant-like repetitions do not offer every reader an equivalent position within the poem. They call Kānaka readers toward the renewal of specific obligations while positioning settler readers as implicated outsiders whose participation remains limited by the sovereignty and genealogical priority of Kānaka Maoli. Where Snyder's poetics expands the field of possible relation, Trask's kāhea regulates entry into relation.

Land-Connected Eros: Ecofeminism and Re-establishing Aloha 'Āina

In this section I track the development of Trask's early feminist theorizing of women's erotic power and how she adapts these ideas after the Indigenous nationalist turn into the Kanaka (Native Hawaiian) concept of aloha 'āina, or "love of land," and mana wahine, a Polynesian concept loosely translated as "women's power." I stage the contrast she encounters between a universalist-feminist eco-erotic discourse based in analogical reasoning and a land-connected, animist eros—aloha 'āina. Trask's dissertation, published in 1986 as *Eros and Power: The*

Promise of Feminist Theory, provides some foundations for the erotic in her later, poetic work. Trask spent her early work building on the work contemporary feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde had done in theorizing the erotic. These feminists embraced and expanded upon Herbert Marcuse's theorization of a path towards non-repressive civilization led by an Eros empowered by a historicization of its relationship with Thanatos. Once freed of the historical sources of repression, Eros—in Marcuse's thought—would be freed to perform “its cultural work of combining life into ever larger units,” a project clearly aligned with the care work and social reproduction typically relegated to women.²⁹ Like other feminists of the time, in her dissertation Trask begins with Freud's expanded notion of Eros as “life force”³⁰ or “the totality of the life impulses” while eschewing the sexism and historical pessimism of his general framework.³¹ She argues that “[w]omen have suffered particularly because they are defined by an erotic potential which is misconstrued as purely sexual and is then used for sexual/reproductive purposes;”³² advocating for the de-sexualization of Eros allows women to reclaim sources of pleasure beyond the confines of private sexual relationships and to embrace its affiliative, expansive drive to affectively support their activist work. Writers engaged the erotic for such reasons as to recover women as sexual agents, articulate non-normative modes of sexual relationships, celebrate the pleasures of non-sexual relationships between women, and to

²⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (The Beacon Press, 1966), 79. See also: “The erotic aim of sustaining the entire body as subject-object of pleasure calls for the continual refinement of the organism, the intensification of its receptivity, the growth of its sensuousness. The aim generates its own projects of realization: the abolition of toil, the amelioration of the environment, the conquest of disease and decay, the creation of luxury. All these activities flow directly from the pleasure principle, and, at the same time, they constitute *work* which associates individuals to “greater unities”; no longer confined within the mutilating dominion of the performance principle, they modify the impulse without deflecting it from its aim. There is sublimation and, consequently, culture; but this sublimation proceeds in a system of expanding and enduring libidinal relations, which are in themselves work relations.” *ibid.*, 212.

³⁰ Haunani-Kay Trask, *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), x.

³¹ *ibid.*, xi.

³² *ibid.*, 94.

contend for the importance of women's care-work and social reproduction in child-rearing and familial and extra-familial networking. Trask thus formulates "the feminist Eros" as a "critical consciousness which arises out of women's particular form of social practice: their erotic/reproductive roles of biological and emotional mothering of children, men, and other women" (x). She claims that this critical consciousness emerges from erotic knowledge, that:

feminists argue, the true pursuit of women's deepest erotic knowledge—the kind of knowledge, for example, that springs from the mothering relation—should become the taproot of women's lives. The erotic, once understood, can transform the merely sexual into an expansive life-force, into a commitment to life which is grounded in women's experiences. The feminist Eros thus unleashes a desire—for creative expression, especially in the areas of sexuality and work; for balance among needs, particularly those of autonomy and nurturance; for sharing and interdependence without bondage.³³

The feminist Erotic is thus an epistemology and ethos as well as an affective lure for expansive, creative relationality. Only by meeting the needs of women in their everyday lives, which necessarily involves a recognition of "woman" as a shared historical category, can the feminist Erotic become valued instead of sexualized and repressed and thereby enabled to energize women.

Yet Trask ultimately disidentified with the feminist movement, arguing both that it was a vessel for white women's priorities at the expense of women of color and that ecofeminism failed to overcome Western assumptions and worldviews.³⁴ I focus here on her critique of

³³ *ibid.*, 94.

³⁴ While Lorde's theorization of the erotic does not mention the ecological, thinking with her conceptualization of the erotic does help point to the particular rethinking a feminist eco-erotic would take beyond an initial ideation of an eco-erotic. It might be the case, for example, that one might think of erotic aspects of the ecological as a source for the erotic in humans accessed through sensation; in this formulation, Eros exemplified in nature would be an inspiration or resource for human Eros without requiring human action. However, Lorde's erotic is a resource that resides in the self but that is actualized through action and relationship. It is not sourced from the outside without interaction. This interaction may be with a person or with objects (thus her famous example of building a bookcase), but it is important that it is cultivated through actions in which women feel "acutely and fully" (54). Most relevant for an animist context is her "function" of the erotic "in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (56). While Lorde would not have had nonhuman persons in mind, extrapolating to an Indigenous or animist context, this becomes quite useful. Indeed, I argue that Trask's eco-erotic poetry hinges upon this shared life pursuit with nonhuman persons. The land eros as concept helps think collective modes of erotic relating with particular places over time while being continuous with an individual's eco-erotic sensorium. Lorde's

ecofeminism. Exemplary is Susan Griffin's influential 1978 *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, which framed Western patriarchy's separation from and domination of nature and women are co-implicated, founded on the same gesture of separating matter, Earth, women's bodies, and the erotic from such patriarchal ideals as spirit, reason, the human, abstraction, and mastery. Through a personal encounter with a personified-female Earth in a key passage titled, "This Earth: What She is to Me," Griffin dramatizes a vision of women's eco-erotic kinship as a source of strength in response to shared historical traumas. While not framed as such, animist visionary encounter is at the heart of Griffin's work: an animism in its address towards a personified earth with consciousness and emotion who bestows knowledge, an asserted kinship through the Earth as a caring "sister," and erotic interpersonal pleasures of washing and caressing the speaker in need of comfort, illustrating the centrality of care-work and social reproduction that both women and the Earth perform.³⁵ Feminist poets likewise used varying degrees of animist eco-eroticism to identify with the Earth's shared historical suffering, to source life force, or for more traditional modes such as providing settings or metaphors for sexual pleasures, including Diane di Prima, Marge Piercy, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Denise Levertov, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde. But even in *Eros and Power* Trask

erotic famously provides self-knowledge, and a land eros can certainly provide this function insofar as self is relationally embedded. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 2007).

³⁵ For example:

As I go into her, she pierces my heart. As I penetrate further, she unveils me. When I have reached her center, I am weeping openly. I have known her all my life, yet she reveals stories to me, and these stories are revelations and I am transformed. Each time I go to her I am born like this. Her renewal washes over me endlessly, her wounds caress me; I become aware of all that has come between us, of the noise between us, the blindness, of something sleeping between us. Now my body reaches out to her. They speak effortlessly, and I learn at no instant does she fail me in her presence. She is as delicate as I am; I know her sentence; I feel her pain and my own pain comes into me, and my own pain grows large and I grasp this pain with my hands, and I open my mouth to this pain, I taste, I know, and I know why she goes on, under great weight, with this great thirst, in drought, in starvation, with intelligence in every act does she survive disaster. This earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am *how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know: we are stunned by this beauty*, and I do not forget: what she is to me, what I am to her.

Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Harper Colophon Books, 1980), 219.

identifies shortcomings in key early eco-feminist thinkers (she names Carolyn Merchant, Susan Griffin, Sherry Ortner, and Peggy Sanday), arguing:

While there is much more to American Indian relationships with nature than what I have described, this is sufficient to make my point: nature must be understood as more than a ‘female entity’ like women, who in turn, are ‘like nature.’ No matter how useful the connection between women and nature for understanding the oppression of women, nature is beyond a simple ‘female’ analogy. Therefore, white feminist theorists need to understand nature as a greater whole of which they are a part rather than as an extension of their nurturing capacities. Put another way, nature is only partly comprehensible through an understanding of women’s oppression while more comprehensible through an harmonious existence with other living creatures.³⁶

So while my example from Griffin above dramatizes an equal encounter between a woman and the personified-female Earth, Trask argues that such 1:1 figurations (“a simple ‘female’ analogy”) give aggrandized importance to humans’ cosmic role. Analogical personification—even though premised on a kind of kin recognition—makes accountability optional, while personification as *kinship-relational practice* in a cosmos populated with such persons demands obligation. Humans are merely a “part” of the “greater whole” of “nature.”³⁷ Put in Mario Blaser’s terms, Trask is not simply contesting a particular representation of nature but intervening in a colonial “political ontology.” She has in effect been forced into a “problem space” structured by colonial modernity’s modes of worlding. Ecofeminist analogies between women and nature remain largely within a settler ontology that presumes a universal nature available for interpretation, whereas Trask insists on a world in which the land and its akua and humans already exist within genealogical relations. Her explanatory labor therefore enacts a Kanaka world of relations across the “partial connections” of ecological concern, feminist

³⁶ Trask, *Eros and Power*, 182.

³⁷ This argument reflects conceptual overlap between so-called “deep ecology” contemporaneous her writings and Indigenous philosophy, though deep ecology as such does not appear in Trask’s dissertation. See Arne Næss, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95-100.

theory, and of course wider colonial material and discursive processes that have placed Kanaka worlding under duress.

By *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* there is a clear shift from a general feminist interest to the experience and power of nationalist Kānaka women in a Kanaka cosmology, which would make up a significant focus of her influential 1993 *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. In an essay entitled, “Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism” she makes this break clear, arguing that feminism fails Kānaka Maoli for a variety of reasons, including its foundation in an Enlightenment individualism and (an ultimately false) universalism as well as its complicity with capitalism, the liberal state, and American imperialism.³⁸ In an argument grounded even more in Indigeneity than her critique of ecofeminism above, and relevant for my purposes, she argues that feminists fail to recognize Indigenous “familial” relationship to land and cannot even conceive of such a relation within their historical and ideological position as settlers:

But why is land, our mother, not a women's issue? The answer, almost too obviously, is that Hawaiian land—this land that all of us in Hawai'i enjoy—is not the mother of haole feminists because haole are not born of this land. Culturally, Papahānaumoku is not the mother of Americans. So, haole may see Hawai'i as beautiful, or exploited, or crowded, or expensive, or hostile, or even a haven for racism, but they cannot ever see our land as familial. This is to say, haole can never know what we know, or feel what we feel, about our mother, the land. Thus does history—and genealogy—separate our politics, and our analysis.³⁹

Mo'okū'auhau functions both as a refutation of settler claims to belonging and as an important historical source of Kanaka legitimacy and sovereignty in the fight against Western notions of Native authenticity. This legitimacy is not based in settler genealogical notions of blood

³⁸ Haunani-Kay Trask, “Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism,” in *Feminist Nationalism*, ed. Lois A. West (Routledge, 2013), 187-198.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 193.

quantum, race, or heterosexual marriage bonds, but through historical-cosmological kinship and kuleana.⁴⁰

She makes the argument early in *From a Native Daughter* that Kanaka personification of the land creates the foundation for respectful, familial relations with the persons of the land. Referring to the traditional ethical system of kapu, she ends this passage by emphasizing the importance of the eco-erotic enacted through poetry and dance to express these relationships:

Moral order, or the code upon which determinations of "right" and "wrong" were based, inhered in the kapu, or system of sacred law. It was the kapu that determined everything from the time for farming and war-making to correct mating behavior among ali'i and maka 'ainana alike. My people believed that all living things had spirit and, indeed, consciousness and that gods were many and not singular. Since the land was an ancestor, no living thing could be foreign. The cosmos, like the natural world, was a universe of familial relations. And human beings were but one constituent link in the larger family. Thus gods had human as well as animal form and human ancestors inhabited different physical forms after death. Nature was not objectified but personified, resulting in an extraordinary respect (when compared to Western ideas of nature) for the life of the sea, the heavens, and the earth. Our poetry and dance reveal this great depth of sensuous feeling—of love—for the beautiful world we inhabited.⁴¹

Kanaka personification is thus not analogical—an “as if” relation—but rather what de Castro would call a “personification process”⁴² or what Bird-David, Strathern, and Marriott would call “dividuation.”⁴³ On the other hand, as Trask bluntly states, “Americans have no cultural beliefs that connect them, as a people or nation, to other human beings or to the natural world as brothers and sisters in a familial cosmos.”⁴⁴ This is at the heart of why settler worlds are always

⁴⁰ See especially David A. Chang (Kānaka Maoli), “Transcending Settler Colonial Boundaries with Mo‘okū‘auhau: Genealogy as Transgressive Methodology” in *The Past Before Us*, 99-101.

⁴¹ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 5.

⁴² He contrasts personification processes with personification deriving from “extensionist semiotics of literal and metaphorical meanings” (the analogical “as-if” relation) or else conceived of as a “social form.” I agree that the “as-if” relation is no relation at all, but I argue that when culture is extended to nature (at it is in animism), “social form” works as well. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Hau Books, 2015), 150.

⁴³ Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism,’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40 (1999), S68.

⁴⁴ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 18-19.

“failed worlds” to recall Linda Hogan’s term: settlers lack traditions of grounded normativity based in ecological kinship. Having overwhelmingly banished nature from social relations in favor of a version of nature that capitalists can “map, identify, quantify, measure, and code” for capital accumulation, what Jason Moore usefully calls “abstract social nature,”⁴⁵ colonial modernity, if making space for analogical personification, still excludes nature from the social and fails for the most part to personify in earnest kinship.

This is why personification resides at the heart of an animist, land-connected eros: the person as a relational form is a first step towards constituting ecological kinship and the long-durational practices of grounded normativity. It is social—interpersonal—because the person tends to be an effectual form through which human-driven ethical relations are accomplished. A personified cosmos is one in which nonhumans witness and implicate humans as ethical actors. Persons—nonhuman and/or ancestral—are involved in narrative or discursive archives of erotic history and action—the myths of the land—or to contexts of ongoing relations between persons, the real contexts of encounter. These archives provide normative frameworks for individual and collective action. Recurrent relationships build comportment, erotic habits and entanglements rather than extricable pleasures. Importantly, kinship structures compel practical, ethical relation in grounded-normative form such as the kapu system where an analogical and affect-centered ecofeminism does not demand accountability. Fujikane argues that “what mattered to Dr. Trask was not recognition by the settler state but recognition by the elements,” the akua.⁴⁶ I add that not only recognition but *relation* with the akua make for a realized aloha ‘āina.

⁴⁵ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (Verso, 2015), 194.

⁴⁶ Candace Fujikane, “‘To Breathe the Akua’: Aloha ‘Āina in the Poetry and Activism of Haunani-Kay Trask,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (2023), 90. <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.46.1.fujikane>.

Aloha ‘āina is this grounded-normative, animist eros of the Kānaka Maoli. Trask describes the reeducation she underwent when she returned to her homeland after she wrote her dissertation. In a beautiful passage, she recounts the grounded activities of care in which she partook, including learning ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i:

To know my history, I had to put away my books and return to the land. I had to plant *taro* in the earth before I could understand the inseparable bond between people and ‘āina. I had to feel again the spirits of nature and take gifts of plants and fish to the ancient altars. I had to begin to speak my language with elders and leave long silences for wisdom to grow. But before anything else, I had to learn the language like a lover so that I could rock within her and lay at night in her dreaming arms.⁴⁷

This passage highlights the importance of a kind of erotic participation as a means to knowledge of self, community, and land. Through care, interrelationship, and—remarkably—an erotic relationship to her language itself, she overcomes the land alienation her people have suffered through dispossession and genocide. Her reeducation through traditional practice and language immerses her in the kinship relations that form the basis of the wider animist eros of aloha ‘āina at the center of her work. Fujikane defines aloha ‘āina as “a deep and abiding love for ‘āina (lands, seas, and skies that feed physically, spiritually, and intellectually)” that emerges from “genealogical relationship with the akua (elemental forms),” a deep ancestral kinship with land and the nonhuman people of the land testified for through ancient poetry such as the Kumulipo, the Hawaiian chant of creation.⁴⁸ Fujikane stresses that “[t]his love is also one that stands for the political independence of the lāhui Hawai‘i,” the collective of Native Hawaiian peoples:

Both a verb and a noun, aloha ‘āina is the direct action born out of Kānaka Maoli radical resurgence at the same time that Kānaka Maoli embody aloha ‘āina as the people who stand for lands, waters, and the lāhui. Dr. Trask’s activism, scholarship and poetry demonstrate aloha ‘āina in every sense of these words.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 118.

⁴⁸ Fujikane, ““To Breathe the Akua,”” 76.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 77.

I below examine the ways Trask presents personal and collective erotic relationships with land in service of realizing aloha ‘āina as both genealogical obligation and struggle for the Hawaiian nation (lāhui). In Trask’s poetry, we will see a kāhea that binds the Kanaka reader’s eroticism to national future. Trask herself in her essay, “Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature,” argues for the essential role of the erotic in Hawaiian poetic chant and political work:

Because Hawaiian is a profoundly metaphorical language, and Hawaiians an openly erotic people, descriptions are always rendered with fertile imagery: the land is a fecundity of beauty; our traditional deities are gods of abundance, of plentitude. In this chant, passionate references express the poet’s deep *aloha* as well as the reverberating eroticism of the Hawaiian language

It is commonplace in the Hawaiian worldview to see relationships as both political and erotic. The Hawaiian kinship system as the governing chiefly system contains both eros and power, displaying a relatedness to the human and natural worlds that is tactile, sensual, and always metaphorical. Today, as in traditional times, Hawaiians move easily between what often appears to Western eyes to be divergent force fields. But to the Hawaiian, the world of imagination, like the world of practicalities, is a fecund, sentient world, rich in multiple layers of meaning and interrelatedness.⁵⁰

This passage recalls my argument made in my introduction about animist metaphor: metaphor is a non-arbitrary, not-merely-figurative expression of relatedness. Adept, animist metaphorical bridging between semantic contexts reveals connections and relationships in an entangled cosmos in which—if it occurs—“vessel” subordination to the “tenor” serves the reality of relation. Land-based erotic poetry bears witness to the ancestral-traditional entanglement with land that produces the present reality of relation. For Trask, the master metaphor is fertility, around which notions of authentic Kanaka identities and sexualities revolve.

Violation, Normativity, Fertility

⁵⁰ Haunani-Kay Trask, “Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature,” in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 174

As I turn to her poetry, I show how Trask stages Kanaka struggle as over two modes of eco-eroticism: aloha ‘āina and rapacious settler colonialism. I analyze the crisis of le‘a and reproduction for both Kānaka Maoli and the ‘āina under conditions of settler colonialism, whose effects Fujikane describes as “the evisceration of the living earth into the inanimacies of non-life.”⁵¹ Trask employs fertility imagery and gendered and sexual normativity as a historically pressured attempt to reassert erotic and reproductive sovereignty under colonial biopolitical duress. While utilizing viable, animist relation and practice rooted in Kanaka tradition, these moves are also inevitably shaped by colonial discourses and disciplinary regimes. Applying Foucault’s notion of biopower in analysis of Hawaiian sovereignty, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (Kānaka Maoli) demonstrates that colonial power in Hawai‘i has historically operated by regulating reproduction, sexuality, and propriety to manage and dispossess Indigenous populations. The processes force anticolonial efforts to negotiate and sometimes even rearticulate the very norms through which colonial power has regulated Indigenous subjects.⁵² And yet I am not arguing that all of Trask’s fertility imagery is merely produced by colonial sexual discourses and regimes. At the same time, animist fertility in Trask’s genital imagery—rather than a celebration of individual sexual capacity or heteronormative virtue—is a heuristic of fertility in a relational ontology: it indexes the land’s and people’s capacity to regenerate.

Across her collections, Trask criticizes extractivist and tourist eco-erotics enacted by white American and Japanese settlers and vacationers in addition to the infrastructure and effects of American military occupation. Indeed, as Teresia K. Teaiwa has influentially illuminated, the two colonial formations of tourism and military occupation cooperate to reorganize land, labor, gender, and Native representation; and “while many native Hawaiians are homeless and landless,

⁵¹ Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance*, 2.

⁵² See especially Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty*, 21-25.

US military bases, as well as such tourist-dependent enterprises as hotels and golf courses owned by transnational corporations, occupy large tracts of land, use up water, and pollute native fishing grounds.”⁵³ Both of Trask’s books are replete with equations of extractivism wrought by these colonial formations with ecological rape. While this comparison has historically been common even in Western poetry and certainly more so since the rise of ecofeminism, from an Indigenous ontology this equation is more literal than often read. If the world is populated with nonhumans people and all beings are bound in ethical erotic relations of reproductivity, then unrespectful and wholesale killing is a violation of these erotic norms. Trask intends the rape allegation literally when she writes that “loud-voiced foreigners / ravage the land at will”⁵⁴ or that ferns and bamboo are “disfigured / by *haole* power / burned through these mountains // with missionary lust.”⁵⁵ This reflects Marcuse’s view of technics on nature,⁵⁶ though Vandana Shiva articulates the feminist viewpoint most clearly in her preface to *Ecofeminism*: “I have repeatedly stressed that the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked – both metaphorically, in shaping world-views, and materially, in shaping women’s everyday lives” since “[t]he resource-grab that is essential for ‘growth’ creates a culture of rape – rape of the Earth, of local self-reliant economies, of women.”⁵⁷ Yet the rape “metaphor” becomes less merely an animating device when considering the animist viewpoint of metaphor, in which trope

⁵³ Teresia K. Teaiwa, “Militarism, Tourism, and the Native: Articulations in Oceania” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2001), 22.

⁵⁴ Trask, “The Flute of the ‘Ohe,” *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 15.

⁵⁵ Trask, “Ha’ikū,” *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 86.

⁵⁶ “Nature is literally violated” as “its objects are in most cases actually and violently assailed, deprived of their form, and reconstructed only after partial destruction; units are forcibly divided, and the component parts forcibly rearranged” (86). For Marcuse too, the knowledge derived from technics is unfulfilling: “The growing mastery of nature then would, with the growing productivity of labor, develop and fulfill the human needs *only as a by-product*: increasing cultural wealth and knowledge would provide the material for progressive destruction and the need for increasing instinctual repression,” *Eros and Civilization*, 87.

⁵⁷ Vandana Shiva, “Preface: to the critique influence change edition” in *Ecofeminism*, eds. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (Zed Books, 2014): xvi.

is a means of relating with persons, and a general view of reproduction is taken: that settler-human reproduction is maximized at the expense of nonhuman persons' reproducibility and very existence. If kinship is not (just) a metaphor, then so too with relations, and Trask's imagery indexes colonial damage to reproductive systems and *persons* human and nonhuman.

Accompanying the rape imagery is Trask's concern with settler erotics as a form of contamination to Kanaka health and deviations from acceptable gender and sexual norms. This firm "cultural delineation"⁵⁸ between settler and Native is a function of a will to survivance within colonial suppression and capitalist deterritorializations of Indigenous cultures. It is a counter-diagnosis of biopolitical invasion by which she names sexuality as a vector whereby colonial power infiltrates bodies and land. Trask depicts tourism, a tool of settler colonialism for monetary gain, dispossession, and Indigenous cultural degradation, also as a predatory and exploitative eco-erotic. In "Tourist," the title's referent has "a predatory / face without dreams" and is "murdering the trees" with "glittering knives of money."⁵⁹ In "Dispossessions of Empire," she criticizes erotically-charged the orientalisms used in tourist brochures:

Fecund, the offerings
of mysterious Polynesians:
"bejeweled Kaua'i,"

"majestic Maui,"
"volcanic Hawai'i..."
"The Hawaiian Islands," one off
the tourist log of fun.⁶⁰

Capitalism reterritorializes select Hawaiian materials within touristic regimes of desire: the brochure's "fecund," "bejeweled," and "majestic" adjectives constitute an expressive form of an

⁵⁸ Taupouri Tangaro (Kānaka Moali), "Forward," in *Ka Honua Ola: 'Eli 'eli Kau Mai* by Paulani Kanaka'ole Kanahele (Kamehameha Publishing, 2011), ix.

⁵⁹ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 20.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 34.

assemblage whose material forms include hotels, restaurants, resorts, and other institutions relying upon racialized cultural labor, monetary exchange, and dispossession. Settlers, alienated from land and with no kinship relation to it, eroticize the land and Kānaka Maoli as setting and resource for tourists' peak experiences, another form of extraction. Native women in the same poem are economically coerced into performing tourist-friendly versions of Hawaiian culture, bodies becoming simulacral sites of exchange as profit redirects pleasure:

The empire degrades
through monetary exchange,
leaving quaint Hawaiians
dressing as "natives,"

in drag for the 10 o'clock
floor show, faking
a singsong pidgin
with the drunken crowd

hoping for tips
after the French kisses.⁶¹

Trask asks in response: "Even prostitutes know / their profession, but natives?" The poem recalls Teaiwa's argument that under military and tourist occupation, "the Native's *job* is not actually to *labor*, but to entertain, to host, to guide, *to be Native*."⁶² The quotation marks around "natives" exposes the expressive component of the assemblage: Kānaka performers are compelled to occupy the touristic category that colonial discourse has prepared for them.

Yet the gendered and sexual normativity of Trask's particular version of Kanaka land-connected eros are most evident here, organized around the Native/settler binary and the perceived perversions she associates with the latter compared to the authentic and proper identity

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 35.

⁶² Teresia K. Teaiwa, "Militarism, Tourism and the Native," 155.

of the former. That is, transness or transvestitism (“in drag”), sex work (“prostitutes”), and elsewhere sexually transmitted diseases⁶³ are all viewed as dangerous importations of tourist-driven regimes of colonial sexuality. I point this out not to minimize the effects that colonial notions of gender and sexuality have had on Kānaka Maoli⁶⁴ (here clearly both culturally and sexually exploiting Native women) nor to argue that Trask’s views represent traditional Kanaka sex/gender systems.⁶⁵ Indeed, they may have arisen from colonial notions of sex and gender adapted in Hawai‘i⁶⁶ or even from the feminist discourses of the time.⁶⁷ In any case, Trask’s rhetoric mirrors the very biopolitical grammar through which colonial power has managed Kanaka life (e.g. the very category of “prostitution”), even as she tries to reverse the terms’ valence.⁶⁸ Trask is not attempting to reinstate a former stage of gender relations; she elsewhere even challenges traditional gender restrictions placed on women in the traditional kapu system of laws delineating the taboo from the free.⁶⁹ Here the emphasis is on Kanaka alienation from their own tradition through colonial sexual economies. Speaking the language of sexual legitimacy under colonialism, she rearticulates colonial sexual norms to flag the ironies of Kanaka agency, even if these articulations are clearly non-innocent, reimposing colonial codes in a reactionary mode. In Fanon’s terms, this might be a “defensive attitude” or reactive normativity emerging in a “colonized personality” in response to coloniality’s dehumanization of the native.⁷⁰ Where the

⁶³ see “Waikīkī,” *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 60.

⁶⁴ Including the initial contact that brought population collapse to Hawaiian civilization. See ho‘omanawanui, *Voices of Fire*, 8.

⁶⁵ There is growing scholarship on queerness in Native Hawaiian traditions, for example. See for example, Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio (Kānaka Maoli), *Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo‘olelo, Aloha ‘Aina, and Ea* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

⁶⁶ See Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty*, Chapters 3 and 4.

⁶⁷ See for example, Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (The Women’s Press, 1979).

⁶⁸ See Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty*, 128-129.

⁶⁹ See Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 52-3.

⁷⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1963), 250.

colonial regime targeted Indigenous sexuality as a site of humiliation and discipline, Trask's erotic normativity in this context is not some kind of traditional Kanaka conservatism but rather a conditioned response. This normative rhetoric represents a risk of a sustaining land-connected eros among a changing historical context: the historical effects of colonial sexual economies on aloha 'āina.

While settler colonialism erotically violates the land, this compromises the reproductivity of both the land and Kānaka Maoli since they are relationally entwined. Her work portrays gendered sterilities in both the Hawaiian people and the land; the masculine in her work often suffers forms of emasculation in castration or disloyalty to nation, while the feminine is subjected to rape. Both also undergo shriveling and reduction in fecundity. The clearest examples of emasculation are seen in "Kona Kai'ōpua" from her first collection. In "Kona Kai'ōpua," niu—coconut—symbols of testicles and sources of male mana,⁷¹ are commercially harvested, resulting in an emasculated landscape: "Between coastal *heiau* ["[t]emple of worship"⁷²]/ castrated *niu*, shorn // of fruit and flower, / fawning." The waves' action on the lava stones forms an "eternal / *kanikau* [dirge]" for "forgotten" chiefs "entombed / beneath grandiose hotels" and "mocked" by "crass amusements / Japanese machines / and the common greed // of Americans."⁷³ The waves' "eternal / *kanikau*" acts as a counter-refrain within the resort assemblage. Hotels and "crass amusements" have materially and semiotically reterritorialized the coast as tourist space, but the recurring waves and the *kāhea* to both mourning and reclamation continue to organize it as a genealogical territory populated by chiefs and *heiau*. The "castrated *niu* dramatizes a view among some Kānaka Maoli men themselves who "have felt intensely

⁷¹ See "Notes for 'Ulu' and 'Niu,'" *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 84.

⁷² Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 64.

⁷³ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 16-17.

disempowered by the legacies of colonization” and the tourist industry’s “feminiz[ing] image of Native Hawaiians marked by the pervasive figure of the dancing hula girl.”⁷⁴ The focus however is not on masculinity itself as though it is something Kānaka men had and how have lost as symbolized by the imagery; instead, Kanaka gender and sexuality are relational capacities always tied to the land’s own flourishing.

Colonial power also sterilizes female reproductivity in the land, forcing the reader to imagine extraction viscerally as violation through disgust and humiliation rather than simply as an economic process. In “Sovereignty,” the feminine earth is exposed to the harsh “revelation” of American naval occupation as:

No shadow falls across
those volcanic labia
of fern and spongy
cliff, flooded
by the sun
of revelation.⁷⁵

This “sun / of revelation” belongs to a militourist optics as the naval gaze exposes the feminized ‘āina as surveillable and occupiable territory and tourism converts a comparable exposure into pleasurable spectacle. In Part VI of “Hawai‘i,” developers’ geothermal energy projects compromise Papahānaumoku’s (the Earth Mother, often “Papa”) life-giving powers, causing the land (here, a variety of native plants) to wither or be “unborn” altogether:

Breath of Papa’s life
miraculously becomes
Energy, stink with

sulfurous sores. Hi‘iaka
wilting in her wild home:
black *lehua*, shrivelled
pūkiawe, unborn ‘a‘ali‘i.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty*, 183.

⁷⁵ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 25.

⁷⁶ Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 36.

Extraction contaminates with the “stink” of “sulfurous sores” and “wilt[s]” and “shrivel[s]” the native flora of the forest home of Hi‘iaka, Pele’s sister. In Part VIII of the same poem, Trask explains that “*The ma‘i, or genitals, are honored by our people (as in mele ma‘i, or genital chants) as the source of our continuity,*” explaining that the following stanza “*refers to our dying out as a nation, as a people:*”

And what do we know
of them, these foreigners
these Americans?

Nothing. We know
nothing.

Except a foul stench
among our children

and a low hollow
of mourning
in our *ma‘i*.⁷⁷

The “foul stench / among our children” describes a colonial atmosphere in which olfaction produces a collective knowledge of toxic occupation directly counter to colonial sensory rhetoric of civilizing habits “cleaning” the “dirty” native. The stress her work places on fertility and the alignment of value and power with sexual potency certainly reads against the grain of most modern gender and ecological theory. From the perspective of a land-connected eros, this can be understood in the first place as a continuation of pre-colonial traditions where the flourishing of populations within a dynamic environment was never a given and secondly as a historical response to colonial depopulation and an inability to fulfill traditional land stewardship responsibilities. She centers the importance of sexual reproduction in both decimated human and nonhuman populations. So while early Trask and other feminists such as Lorde advance a more

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 37.

de-sexualized corrective to the popular notion of the erotic, and Marcuse laments the “genital supremacy” of sexuality,⁷⁸ the Trask of her post-dissertation, Hawaiian period reclaims the significance of genitalia from traditional Kanaka discourses of sexuality and land. I argue that this is a characteristically animist response wherein the land’s reproduction takes place between nonhuman persons, and human sexual reproduction provides the guiding metaphor to relate to the land’s sexual life.

In an animate, interpersonal cosmos, co-reproduction with the land takes place through sexual-reproductive normativity and epistemology. Hawaiian cosmology’s stories are replete with examples of consensual and non-consensual sexual acts with symbolic import that form the general framework of sexual norms between humans and with the land.⁷⁹ From such an ontology, the settler eco-erotic can be viewed as a rape-epistemology, a knowledge of resource manipulability extracted for human purposes and pleasures. In the notes Trask emphasizes the source of the “nothing” that is known referenced above that: “*a foreign culture and people whose practices are antithetical to the Hawaiian cosmology in which the universe is a creation of familial relations.*”⁸⁰ In an inanimist, depersonalized cosmos, sexual normativity—heterosexist or otherwise—requires drastic reformulation to create norms in which the land is not merely resource for human sexual flourishing and expression. The animist cosmos, in which the land is erotic co-participant and co-producer of the wider cosmic community, assumes the need for these norms. Jodi Byrd from a queer Indigenous studies perspective would reject the normative dimension of “grounded normativity” and replace it with “relationality” in light of queer theory’s

⁷⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 201.

⁷⁹ This is consistently remarked upon by both Native and non-Native scholars; see for example the references to the sexual adventures of Kamapua’a and reference to farming prayers directed to him in John Charlot, *The Classical Traditions of the Hawaiian Pig God as a Body of Literature* (The Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1987): 21-22.

⁸⁰ Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 39.

long resistance to Western, hegemonic normativity.⁸¹ Some of the settler sexual normativity Trask displayed above might be used in evidence for such a position. Yet I argue that Trask's work also demonstrates the importance of grounded normativity for Indigenous survivance and flourishing. Relationality as a concept offers many tools for worlding through ongoing difference, but I believe its usefulness for the preservation of tradition is limited, and this dissertation stands behind the importance of tradition as an open and revisable but cohesive system of relations that endures through time. As I next explore, the protocols, obligations, and rituals implied in Trask's kāhea furthers the importance of the grounded normative view of Indigenous survivance.

Kāhea to Kānaka Women: Mana, 'I'ni, Le'a

While Trask uses considerable space in her work to delineate forms of erotic loss and contamination, she is just as concerned with inviting Kanaka erotic participation in the traditional cosmos. This exigence of broken relationships wrought by colonialism frames her erotic work, the majority of which both depicts women's personal relationships to the land and calls for women to renew relationship with the land for power, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly for political work. It should not be surprising, considering the weight of women's caregiving task under patriarchal and colonial rule, that Trask's erotic poems focus on intense experience of erotic renewal with the land. They stage a speaker or set of women in sensuous enjoyment of land and the suppressed yet nascent or ongoing creative processes of the gods. Trask's erotic poems are animist in that they are not for pleasure in itself for a universal, atomized individual, but rather the erotic encounters they depict—at least in part—renew the

⁸¹ Jodi A. Byrd, "What's Normative Got to Do with It?: Towards Indigenous Queer Relationality," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 105-123, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8680466>.

speaker's *mana* for their relational life. In the glossaries of her poetry collections *mana* is simply translated as "divine power," but in her essay, "Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of Decolonization," she defines it as "(spiritual power) that is generated by human beings in love with, and dependent upon, the natural world."⁸² In *From a Native Daughter*, she is concerned primarily with a particular use of *mana*: *mana* for community leadership in which a leader "embod[ies] sovereignty only if they are *pono*, that is, only if they believe in and work for the well-being of the land and the [Kānaka] people."⁸³ In her chapter, "Women's *Mana* and Hawaiian Sovereignty," she contrasts the "collaborationist elite," mostly male Kānaka politicians who capitulate to the assimilative pressures of electoral politics and fail to represent real Kanaka interests with the dominance of women in the truly decolonial movement for sovereignty.⁸⁴ Reflecting on this phenomenon, she argues that women's traditional caregiving responsibilities logically extend into the political sphere, where care for family becomes care for *lāhui*. This political role is further grounded in women's genealogical relationship to Papahānaumoku, the earth mother, such that participation in the land's generative and erotic life becomes an important source of women's *mana*:

But I believe the main reason women lead the nationalist front today is simply that women have not lost sight of the *lāhui*, that is, of the nation. Caring for the nation is, in Hawaiian belief, an extension of caring for the family, the large family that includes both our lands and our people. Our mother is our land, *Papahānaumoku*, she who births the islands. Hawaiian women leaders, then, are genealogically empowered to lead the nation.⁸⁵

⁸² Trask, *Inside Out*, 19.

⁸³ Trask, *From a Native Daughter*, 90-91.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 94.

This extended notion of family to include both nation and land enables the caregiving social form traditionally undertaken by women to have a total eco-political purview. Care is then a form of action essential to eco-social reproduction. Concerning the land, such protection under colonial rule involves safeguarding the bodies of nonhuman kin. She gives the example of activist and kumu hula (master teacher) Pualani Kanaka‘ole Kanahele, who in Trask’s words, among other actions, “led the long struggle to stop both the drilling of wells into the breast of Pele.”⁸⁶ This care “serves ... as a Native reenactment of the reality that Hawai‘i is *our* mother and we are her children. Our family responsibility, then, requires us to behave according to tradition. We must protect and preserve our family, that we may survive as inheritors of the lands of Hawai‘i.”⁸⁷ So-called “family values” then, in an Indigenous context, take on a very different meaning, a “reality” that is “reenact[ed],” created through reengagement in ecological kinship, in which women’s caretaking protects the people’s and land’s reproductive capacity.

Brandy Nālani McDougall’s (Kānaka Maoli) indispensable reading shows Pele’s role in Trask’s poetry to enable Native women to reclaim mana wahine, or women’s power, through the relationship with the goddess. McDougall’s work shows us a way to rethink and ground “eros” and “power” in aloha ‘āina. She cites scholar ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui’s definition of mana wahine:

Within Oceania, mana wahine describes an indigenous, culturally-based understanding of female em/power/ment that is rooted in traditional concepts such as mo‘okū‘auhau, aloha ‘āina and kuleana (responsibility). It is the physical, intellectual and spiritual (or intuitive) power of women. It is individually embodied, but often employs collaborative strategies with other women for the benefit of the ‘ohana (family) or lāhui (nation) where women are the source of knowledge.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁸ Cited in Brandy Nālani McDougall, *Finding Meaning*, 124.

McDougall adds: “mana wahine is partially sexual in nature because a woman’s power is rooted in mo‘okū‘auhau and ‘ohana, as procreation is a part of creation, and women give birth to future generations.”⁸⁹ She shows how, across her two poetry collections, the poet uses traditional forms of address to the goddess Pele to “call[] for a political awakening and resistance from both Kānaka Maoli and Pele, an embodiment of the land and their god, against colonialism”⁹⁰ Trask accomplishes through invoking stories of Pele’s sexuality, the power traditional women worshippers of Pele had, Pele’s volcanic power against colonists, and imagining forms of women’s renewed relationships with Pele. Pele-relating then provides one essential means of renewing the Kānaka land-based eros, aloha ‘āina. Others have brought attention to non-genealogical forms of reproduction—especially networks of care and activism among women—that leads her to declare herself “slyly / reproductive.”⁹¹

Recalling “Chant of Lamentation,” the kāhea interrogative address returns with a more positive valence in two poems of *Night*, creating virtual verb phrases for the reader to inhabit. Generically, while these poems make use of the Western love lyric, they channel erotic energy not towards consummation with a beloved but towards a decidedly *collective* aloha ‘āina. “Where Is the Elegant Light” calls for the nurturing of women’s ‘i‘ni and le‘a, beginning: “where is the elegant / light, intimate / finger of lovers?” The poem proceeds to draw attention to women’s pleasure in their bodies through natural metaphors: “where is the breast / of sea, tender dark perfection” and “where is the crevice / of rose, pleasure’s / infinite sun?” Ending, “where is woman’s / desire, moonlit / eternity?” I read the poem in the context of both the obstacles to

⁸⁹ McDougall, *Finding Meaning*, 124.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 142.

⁹¹ Trask, “Sons,” *Light*, 55. See Kēhaulani Vaughn, “The Slyly Reproductive Lessons of Haunani-Kay Trask,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.46.1.vaughn>; Ha‘āni Lucia Falo San Nicolas, “From a Pacific Daughter: Haunani-Kay Trask’s Legacy for Indigenous Pacific Feminisms,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.46.1.san-nicolas>.

Kānaka women's sexual agency and expression in response to colonial sexual regulation as well as an invitation to connect the rediscovery of le'a in the land with its rediscovery in the self or the lover.

"Who Would Find the Midnight Rainbow" for her sister, Damien Marie Onaona Trask, asks the reader for a Kanaka subject to make a night journey from the coastal region of Pana'ewa, glossed as "Place on the Hilo side of Hawai'i Island, famous for *maile* and resistant Hawaiians," through the forests that lead to Pele's home in the volcano of Kīlauea:⁹²

who would find the midnight
rainbow, *lei* of Pana'ewa?

who would follow
Hōpoe's forest,
shimmering with Hina?

who would seek the woman
of Kīlauea, smoldering
in her caldera?

who would *oli*
in the bosom of Pele
wreathed in flame?⁹³

The parallel structure stages a virtual Kanaka subject on an episodic journey to the goddess. The moonbow is described as a lei, a wreath of light, produced by Hina—the moon goddess—who also shimmers on Hōpoe's forest. The poem ends with the dramatic question, "who would *oli* [chant] / in the bosom of Pele / wreathed in flame?" "Wreathed in flame" recalls the lei wreath of the first stanza, here adorning Pele's "bosom," an image both invoking sublime danger and her function as Pelehonuamea, or Earth Mother, who generatively creates new land. Trask specifies

⁹² Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 69.

⁹³ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 4.

that to oli is to “[c]hant, especially with prolonged phrases in one breath,”⁹⁴ suggested by the parallel form and stanza lengths of the poem itself. From human bosom of breath and voice to Pele’s bosom of creative-destructive fire, there is a suggestion that the renewal of Kanaka honorific practices reforge an intimate kinship bond that will support the futurity of the people and land while Pele is capable—as Trask describes in another poem—of “devouring the foreigner.”⁹⁵ The land is already populated with kin, waiting for the subject to recognize, journey, and address.

Kāhea and Choreographing Abundance

Poems structured on infinitives and prepositional phrases invite the Kanaka reader into series of sensual, pleasurable actions through anaphoric, chant-like form in which ongoing rhythms of the land offer sensual relata for animist, social renewal. I read these poems as prime examples of Fujikane’s concept of “mapping abundance,” a counter-cartographic method refusing colonial narratives of scarcity and disappearance, instead asserting the fertility and agency of the ‘āina through intimate contact and participation. They are “Kānaka Maoli cartographies” that provide “a sensual knowledge of ‘āina.”⁹⁶ They are also “ea-based cartographies”—ea translating to “life, breath, political sovereignty, and the rising of the people.” Reading for ea-based cartographies “teaches us how to cultivate aloha ‘āina.”⁹⁷ The poems mobilize a cartographic gaze that immerses the reader in forms of pleasure intertwining akua, gods, animals, and plants. Most abstractly, they are animist propositions awaiting a reader’s sensorium, but more specifically, they demonstrate aloha ‘āina as a land-based literacy

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁶ Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance*, 18.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 4.

encoding ecological knowledge and ongoing ethical obligation through erotic participation in the ancestral field of relations. The ongoing availability of these relations counter the determining net of linear, colonial cause-and-effect and cultural decline that haunts many poems in her collections. Indeed, mapping is instantiated even in poetic form. While the poems of *Light* are written in the conventional left-aligned, “ragged right edge” shape, in *Night*—with some of the most geographically and site-based abundant poetics—the poems are shaped in stanzas that ebb and flow across the page, perhaps mimicking the tides or the archipelago and dramatizing Kanaka temporalities.

With Fujikane we can take a step closer towards the work poetry does in particular. These parallelisms structure poems dependent upon a subject not yet grammatically supplied, providing an animist field of unrealized action awaiting a Kanaka reader’s actualization. They present “I ka wā mamua,” or “the past before us,” a Kanaka temporality that the poem layers into the land denoting the way the past is ahead, serving as a guide for action. Through proposed actions and sensations they not only map but *choreograph* participation to renew abundance. Such choreographies repeat sensory rehearsal of relation until le‘a and kuleana become habitually incorporated into the Kanaka reader’s sensorium. “To Hear the Mornings” enacts this through infinitive phrases, promises of le‘a, and dense use of ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, signifying the imagistic, sensory-conceptual lexicon of aloha ‘āina:

To hear the mornings
 among *hāpu‘u*: a purity
of cardinals, cunning bees
 in shell-covered sleeves
 of honeysuckle,
 ...the aqua undertones
 of cooing doves.

To seek our scarlet

‘*apapane*, Hōpoe restless
 amongst the *liko*
 and ‘*ōlapa* trees,
 shimmering the leaves,
 ...*shush-shush*
 of burnt rain
 sweeping in from Puna.

To watch our lustrous
 volcanic dawn seducing
 ‘*elepao*, speckled beak
 sucking ‘*ōhelo* berries
 oozing sap
 under a crimson sun.

To breathe the Akua:
lehua and *makani*,
pua and *lā‘ī*,
maile and *palai*,
 ...pungent *kino lau*.⁹⁸

The infinitives suspend action and with it colonial linearity by folding ancestral time into an open present, gesturing towards fulfillment by the reader. The verbs (“hear,” “seek,” “watch,” “breathe,” “sense,” “honor,” “chant”) choreograph a sequence of sensory and embodied acts through which the land becomes sensually and socially present. Read as a refrain, the anaphoric “To” is a performative capable of producing territory—what Ian Buchanan (after Elizabeth Grosz) calls a “liveable order”—composed here through the rhythmic ordering of birds, winds, *kino lau*, ancestors, sensory capacities, and human practices into a relational territory that the Kanaka reader is asked to inhabit.⁹⁹ Kāhea is therefore territorializing in a precise poetic sense: its repetitions do not claim land as property but rehearse the perceptual and ethical actions through which genealogical relation to ‘āina becomes liveable and reproducible. Such renewal

⁹⁸ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 40-41.

⁹⁹ Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 85.

begins on an intimate level among the hāpu‘u, tree ferns with synaesthetic images in a “purity / of cardinals” and “the aqua undertones / of cooing doves.” In the next stanza the goddess Hōpoe, a master hula teacher from Puna, is sought in the appearance of the ‘apapane, another red bird, whose restlessness “amongst the *liko* / and ‘*ōlapa* trees, / shimmering the leaves” perhaps resembles the hula. Trask’s glossary describes that Hōpoe’s “emblem is the flowering *lehua* tree,” and *liko* is the same tree’s leaf bud.¹⁰⁰ Still, “emblem” denotes the merely symbolic and does not capture the full animist implication: the goddess has *kino lau* in the ‘*ōhi‘a lehua* (blossoms).¹⁰¹ Trask glosses the ‘*ōlapa* as “[s]everal native species of forest trees with green leaves that flutter like aspen trees; dancer as contrasted with the chanter; dance accompanied by chanting and drumming on a gourd drum.”¹⁰² Into the poem then appears a metaphorical layer in which the dance of the land is in need of a chanter to guide it into full fruition. Even a seemingly passive verb like “watch” becomes intensely sensual in the third stanza as the “lustrous / volcanic dawn seduc[es]” the ‘*elepaio* monarch flycatcher, whose feeding on ‘*ōhelo* berries is figured erotically through “sucking” “under a crimson sun.” The Kanaka reader is then invited “[t]o breathe the Akua” present in the breeze (*makani*) and variety of flora (*pua*, *lā‘ī*, *maile*, and *palai*) who are their *kino lau*. The liquid and softly percussive consonants (l, p), nasals (n, m), and open vowel assonance (a, ai, au) of the Hawaiian words resonates and circulates smoothly with the material and even “pungent” presence and *mana* of the gods themselves alive in the land.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰¹ Silva explains:

Within this idea of aloha ‘āina is the concept of *kino lau*, or multiple physical bodies of spirits. Such spirits may include that of individual humans; ‘*aumākua*, ancestors whose spirits were transformed into specific animals or elements; and *akua* (deities or other spirits), who may manifest in animals, plants, or elements such as rain, rainbows, clouds, volcanic fire, and so on. Our familial relationships to these beings are part of our feeling and our ethic of aloha ‘āina. *The Power of the Steel-tipped Pen*, 4.

¹⁰² Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 68.

After this dense sensory choreography, the poem moves somewhat at a wider and more abstract scale:

To sense the ancients,
 ka wā mamua—from time before
 slumbering still
 amidst the forests
 of Ka‘ū, within the bosom
 of Pele.

To honor and chant,
 by the sound
 of the *pū*, our
 ageless genealogy:
 ‘*āina aloha*,
 ‘*āina hānu*,
 ...this generous, native Hawai‘i.¹⁰³

The *kāhea* for the Kanaka reader is to “sense” more openly the “the ancients, / *ka wā mamua*—from time before / slumbering still;” the vaster land itself not a relic of the past but a field of ongoing, animist-social potential. The redness of the birds and sun previous in the poem implicatively returns in primordial aspect of “the bosom / of Pele.” The final *kāhea* calls upon the reader “[t]o honor and chant, / by the sound / of the *pū*” (a “triton conch or helmet shell used as a trumpet”) “our / ageless genealogy,” culminating in the practical maintenance of ancestral ties through aloha ‘*āina* and “‘*āina hānu*,” or “land of one’s birth.” The poem invites the Kanaka reader to enact through chant and other cultural practices of love and respect for the erotically fecund land, which in turn renews the reader’s ancestral continuity with the land and participation in a peopled landscape. The choreography of the poem serving as animist, sensorial protocol—normative pathways of relational cultivation—ends with its limit: its actualization. Indeed, there is something self-conscious in the way the chant-like forms Trask engages

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 41.

themselves depict chanters, as if her work itself is not accomplishing the cultural work of the chants being depicted. This is reflected formally in the arc of the poems, as many poems across *Light* and *Night* end in images of these practices of performance for the land, as if the poem's limit resides in its actualization in communal form. This limit enforces a distinction between kāhea and its fulfillment. "To Write by Moonlight" exemplifies this literally, moving from the titular first line to end with "chant before / our vaulting Ko'olau."¹⁰⁴ The mana of the poem is not as an isolated expression but rather in its inciting a continuation of its discourse. This split between the work of the poem and the work of animist protocol and ritual itself is also reflected in the bilingual form of the poems. Many anticipated Kānaka readers will not speak 'ōlelo Hawai'i, demanding that they too refer to the glossary and in turn taking the reader out of the immediate sensual imaginary of the poems. I do not believe that this additional layer of colonization's mediation of Kanaka land-relations via English is primarily to dramatize this disconnect for the Kanaka reader (as if the poems were a study in alienation). Rather, it is part of the educative project of Trask's poetry for Kānaka readers and to call them to learn their native language to fulfill ancestral responsibilities informed by the rich tradition of the language. More broadly, this points to the challenges facing Indigenous communities in amplifying, preserving, or re-establishing their own animist traditions across conditions of uneven cultural knowledge.

"Into Our Light I Will Go Forever" is also based in parallel structure—here through locative prepositional phrase—ends *Night* and can be seen as a culmination of the cartographic method and stages a more subtle choreographic kāhea. While inhabiting a lyric speaker's point of view, the poem is not one of encounter, but of virtual patterning over diverse locales to articulate a shared world. The personal pronoun of the poem is continually in virtual relation

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 50-51.

with the first-person plural who, in possessive form, constitutes the historical-territorial context of the land the speaker penetrates, the “light” that illuminates the relationship of belonging and shared reproduction between herself and the land:

Into our light
I will go forever.

Into our seaweed
clouds and saltwarm
seabirds.

Into our windswept
‘ehu kai, burnt
sands gleaming.

Into our sanctuaries
of hushed bamboo,
awash in amber.¹⁰⁵

This penetration is a proposition and commitment, a Kanaka future born from “will go,” the only verb phrase the speaker utters in relation to herself. The “forever” detaches the action of the poem from the individual, mortal life of the speaker, and the lack of subject grammatically installs the Kanaka reader as the implied genealogical agent. The short stanzas that ebb and flow across the page here combine with parallel structure to make a reverent tone measured with regular waves. This repeated “[i]nto our” shows the speaker involved in shared heritage and belonging as well as collective possession of the nouns and noun phrases catalogued by the speaker. The noun phrases still the activity of the land for a moment, providing a mobile, nationalist sensory engagement both taking in the elemental entities (‘ehu kai glossed as “sea

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 60.

spray, foam” and so joining the first list) and living kino lau of the land and finding affective solace in them.

As the poem continues, the speaker names places and the le‘a there not as a collective claiming of relationship to the land, akua, and ancestors—a counter-mapping of tourist cartographies. Places names play a large role in Kanaka poetry and literature, as this poetic utterances in these land-based literacy connect the speaker to the ancestors and their knowledge “embedded in the place names, orature and physical presence of the land.”¹⁰⁶ As an animist practice, this naming is a grounding animacy in a familial world. The presence of male and female creative deities, Kane and Hina, shows the immanent presence of the gods in the land but also that they are part of the diverse sensual array of elements and beings described in the poem:

Into the passion of
our parted Ko‘olau,
luminous vulva.

Into Kane’s pendulous
breadfruit, resinous
with semen.

Into our wetlands
of He‘eia,
bubbling black mud.

Into our spangled,
blue-leafed *taro*,
flooded with *wai*.

Into Waiahole,
chattering with rains
and silvered fish.

¹⁰⁶ Kapā Oliveira (Kānaka Maoli) quoted in Silva, *The Steel-Tipped Pen*, 6.

Into our shallows
of Kualoa,
translucent Akua.

Into the hum of
reef-ringed Ka‘a‘awa,
pungent with *limu*.

Into our corals of
far Kahana, sea-cave
of Hina.

Into our chambered
springs of Punalu‘u,
ginger misting.¹⁰⁷

Unlike the optically-dominated, colonial view-from-above designed to map property for extraction, the “into” of Trask’s panorama is a multi-sensory *immersive* and therefore participatory mapping. The “bubbling black mud,” “chattering” rain, “hum” of Ka‘a‘awa’s reef, “pungent” limu (plants), and “ginger misting” calls for an erotic knowledge developed through multi-sensory exposure to nonhuman relatives. The le‘a of the land, which the land itself autoerotically enjoys as well, are intimately tied to the Hawaiian people: the speaker grammatically describes the mountain range of Ko‘olau—a site of love between Haumea and Wākea—as the “our’s” collective vulva, “parted” with “passion.”¹⁰⁸ Kanaka erotic identity exceeds the human, inhering in the land itself. The staple breadfruit, an aspect of the masculine deity Kane, provides reproductive potential to the people through his “semen” immanent in the plant. Le‘a and reproduction are both at play in the sensual enjoyments listed, including both life-sustaining items—breadfruit, taro, limu, fish, water—that directly nourish the Kānaka Maoli. Various types

¹⁰⁷ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 60-61.

¹⁰⁸ Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance*, 150.

of land- and water-forms are brought into the speaker's purview, including Hina, the earth mother, present through subterranean access. Hina traditionally "guides the rhythmic cycles of the moon ..., guide[s] the rhythm of the sea," and "embodies growth and reproduction." The coral heads themselves are her genitalia that birth various underwater kin.¹⁰⁹ The place names encompass the perimeter of the island of Hawaii, yielding a map of territory for sensual participation. The occlusion of colonial histories (which Trask richly confronts in "Born in Fire" and "A Fragrance of Devouring" sections earlier in the book) affords the poem a united assertion of Indigenous presence, belonging, and reproductive futurity. Likewise, the erasure of colonial presence in the poem is a form of rhetorically dislocating and alienating White, Japanese, and tourist bodies from the land—part of the work of previous poems in the collection.¹¹⁰ The ancestors' ongoing storying holds the agency to affectively disalienate Kānaka Moali while affectively alienating foreigners in the land's erotic continuation. Erotic imagery in Trask's work, even when seemingly an individual encounter between a human speaker and land, always takes its erotic meaning in part from the implied or explicit presence of the wider Indigenous community.

While "To Hear the Mornings" offered prescriptions for discrete forms of participation, the kāhea of "Into Our Light I Will Go Forever" dissolves the lyric "I" into a plural territorial claim, evoking affective immersion through the near-autonomy of imagery itself. The anaphora of "into" is call for this immersion, an open subject position for the Kanaka reader. The speaker's gender is unspecific, and the reproductive acts are left vague other than implied consumption; Eros and reproduction instead saturate the poem more generally and normal cosmic processes

¹⁰⁹ Hōkūlani K. Aikau (Kānaka Moali), "Mana Wahine and Mothering at the Lo'i: A Two-spirit/Queer Analysis," *Australian Feminist Studies* 38, no. 117 (2023): 367.

¹¹⁰ See the earlier poems in the collection, such as "Dispossessions of Empire," *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 33-36.

and pono rather than transgressive acts. Nor is there an assumption of heterosexuality in the aloha ‘āina; the collective subjects addressed by Trask’s kāhea are invited to sensual connection with the land’s erotic capacities across genital dimorphisms, reflecting the normalcy of same-sex romantic love in traditional Kanaka society.¹¹¹ The eroticism here is also not an individual expression nor a celebration of sexuality for itself. Instead, eroticism is a distributed and entangled capacity that is relationally maintained. Whereas the social context in which other writers of the period often marked erotic encounter was their synecdochic relationship to the coming-together of a universal “man” and “woman,” in Trask’s work, le‘a is reinscribed within the nation and its land-relations. The poem ends: “Into our sovereign suns / drunk on the *mana* / of Hawai‘i,” a final triangulation of speaker, collective, and the erotic energy of the land through Indigenous sovereignty. Here mana is a power emanating from the land, or rather from the land in relation to the inherent sovereignty that belongs to the Hawaiian people, and this power is so pleasurably-sensually registered as to make the speaker “drunk.” The poem is a culmination then of the erotic as source of mana for Indigenous relationality. Indeed, noting the power of this kāhea, scholars Matt Tomlinson and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan (Kānaka Maoli) ask, “who can resist Trask’s urgent call to launch ourselves outward and look for mana in the future?”¹¹² The erasure of settlers from the poem also shows Trask’s asymmetrical kāhea performing what Buchanan calls the production of “critical distance,” the expressive regulation of how differently positioned subjects may coexist within a territory; territorializing its readership, it assigns settlers the distinct positions of witness to the intimacies they cannot attain and implicated outsiders to the fulfillment of extant and futural Kanaka territory.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Silva, “Pele, Hi‘iaka, and Haumea,” 166.

¹¹² *New Mana*, 28.

¹¹³ Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method*, 104-105.

Coda: Settler Animism and Aloha ‘Āina

I have argued that Trask’s poems function as a kāhea to settlers to accept accountability and responsibility of ongoing colonial injustices and to teach them about the intimate, ancestral depths of an aloha ‘āina they cannot claim. Trask’s goal is not to prescribe ways for settlers to come into animist relation with the land; instead, she aims to make settlers politically and historically accountable. Trask’s poems function primarily negatively towards settlers, offering few suggestions for remediation. Obviously decolonization is implied, but even then the work of the poems is not to describe this work for settlers. In this light, I want to consider two poems of Trask’s addressed to her haole partner, scholar David Stannard. “Love Between the Two of Us” from her first collection reveals, despite the rhetoric above, that Trask’s erotic is not strictly race-based and even hints towards a preferred settler erotic, one based in disidentification with settler desires and allyship in the “war” against colonialism. In the first two parts of the poem she recounts how she warily doubted his amorous intentions considering typical “*haole* ‘love’ / bounded by race / and power and the heavy / fist of lust,” asking: “how could I possibly believe? / why should any Hawaiian believe?”¹¹⁴ But the poem ends in a profound shift of the speaker’s tone:

but it is a year
and I am stunned
by your humility
your sorrow for my people

your chosen separation
from that which is *haole*

I wonder at the resolve
in your clear blue eye

¹¹⁴ Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, 62-3.

III.

do you understand
the nature of this war?

Stannard shows a “humility” that avoids hallmark “bitterness” and “guilt” of white fragility and rejects the colonial *haole* erotic of “lust” based on racial exclusion and domination all mentioned earlier in the poem. His “chosen separation / from that which is *haole*” marks a counteridentification, but—unlike we saw in Snyder—it is grounded in participation in the “war” against colonization. Trask questions here if Stannard’s love is strong enough to enable him to stand on the “front lines” of this “war” against colonialism. This rejection of colonial lust in favor of a love grounded in political action is the implied *kāhea* for settlers. Any settler land-connected eros then is premised on upholding Native ancestral sovereignty and belonging, upholding their ability to practice aloha ‘āina on their own terms. Stannard’s work to elucidate Kanaka population and history before colonization is an example of settler allyship through scholarship that supports Kanaka genealogical history. In his words, “[f]or those who bring on a holocaust, willfully or not, nothing is more desirable or sought after than historical amnesia. Thus, the politics of the subject.”¹¹⁵

But while political work for an animist tradition is to some extent an animist act, where does this leave settlers regarding forging their own animist relationship to land to affectively support such activism? Stannard implicitly reappears directly addressed in *Night* again in “The Shallows.” Her beloved’s eyes earn a likeness to the land through metaphor, comparing “Your sea-blue / eyes” with:

... the shallows

¹¹⁵ David E. Stannard, *Before the Horror: The Population of Hawai‘i on the Eve of Western Contact* (University of Hawaii, 1989), 143.

and reef
of Waimānalo

an underwater
morning
of caves

filled with
cooled lava

and little
sparkling fish.¹¹⁶

The only relationship offered here is resemblance to the Waimānalo reef, where Trask “took her early morning swim,” and the short poem is much more statically imagistic than most in her collection.¹¹⁷ However, while Trask’s poetry mostly rejects settler land intimacy for understandable decolonial purposes, the poem does entertain a small form of haole belonging through the praise and comparison of mutual beauty across lover and land. So while in my dissertation’s introduction I outlined ways in which Indigenous writers have explicitly made this call for settlers to create animist land relations, Trask engages the discourse of animism to draw a dividing line between settlers and Kānaka Maoli with a few tentative exceptions. The implied message seems to be either that political and historical responsibility must come before making animist connection to land, or even that any version of settler animism is ethically abhorrent.

Elsewhere Trask also warns against the vacuous and degrading settler appropriations of aloha ‘āina for their profit and for positive tourist experience.¹¹⁸ Trask leaves largely unresolved

¹¹⁶ Trask, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Fujikane, “To Breathe the Akua,” 88.

¹¹⁸ For example:

Everything from Hawaiian hula (dance) and 'olelo (language) to aloha 'āina (our indigenous love of the land) is manipulated to support tourism. Everywhere, one can hear the tireless advertisement that "giving" is Hawaiian. Aloha, a traditional value of generosity and love, is used to peddle vacations, cars, hotel rooms, city events, and anything else politicians and businessmen wish to sell. Tourism employees are

what a non-appropriative, *animist* settler relation to Hawai‘i might look like besides activist work that benefits both the Kānaka Maoli and the land’s nonhuman persons. Fujikane, a Japanese settler whose invaluable work I have cited throughout this chapter, offered an impassioned formulation of what she called “settler aloha ‘āina,” an example of a settler adoption of an Indigenous cosmology and land-connected eros grounded in decolonial settler activist labor for Kanaka sovereignty struggles and kuleana, respect of Kanaka protocol, learning of ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, environmental stewardship.¹¹⁹ What would make this different than the appropriation we saw in Snyder and the “white shamans” is its status as an *assimilative* settler animism that is truly tutelary—a process under the continued supervision of Indigenous authority rather than independently appropriated. However, she retracted this term after receiving feedback from Kānaka Maoli who argue that aloha ‘āina is a genealogical relation and therefore non-transferrable to settlers.¹²⁰ Yet the more generic term, “settler ally,” does not communicate how *ontology* might be important for settler allyship. Settler adoption of an Indigenous cosmology and land-connected eros is certainly not meant to suggest that this is appropriate everywhere or even in most circumstances, nor especially does doing this work lead to “becoming Indigenous,” which was not Fujikane’s claim anyway. But Fujikane’s original term does incite the question of animist-assimilative models through tutelage to Indigenous cosmologies accompanied by a

trained to practice aloha on the job, to offer aloha freely to tourists, all 6.5 million of them. The din of this constant promotion has the same effect as elevator music: Most residents, including Hawaiians, don’t protest the grotesque commercialization of our culture because they have become inured to it.

“The Dog that Runs in the Rough Seas” in *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals*, eds. Linda Hogan, Deena Metzger, and Brenda Peterson (Fawcett Columbine: 1998), 39.

¹¹⁹ She argues, “[t]he challenge for us as settler aloha ‘āina is to recognize that we are all born of these lands and to love them, to act according to the laws of the akua while also recognizing the genealogical relationships to land that Kānaka have and that we do not.” Fujikane, *Mapping Abundance*, 15. See also 16-17.

¹²⁰ Candace Fujikane, “I have been using the term ‘settler aloha ‘āina’ that Noe Goodyear Ka’ōpua posed as a possibility in 2014. But there have been Kānaka Maoli who don’t like that term because they define it as being genealogically descended from lands. I am reverting back to using “settler ally.” Facebook, October 22, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/candace.fujikane/posts/pfbid02Xi422MvMPdM1fN1mGhvNmZnR9cNK7XpdJBC3wbXehZgTumS6bCvhnCYLFQuCmHal>.

committed political allyship intimately related to those cosmologies. Practices among tribes on Turtle Island of the “adopted relative” might be considered examples of such assimilative Indigenous animisms. Read through Trask’s poetry however, what is important is less the possibility of Indigenous-animist forms of settler belonging garnered through relation and activism than the activism itself and the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty. Finally, Linda Hogan’s guest stewardship model that I discussed in my introduction demonstrates the possibility of accountable nongenealogical relation; Trask’s Hawaiian context shows why such responsibility cannot be generalized into a claim of Indigenous belonging.

CHAPTER THREE

Michael McClure's Animist Expressionism:

Becoming-Mammal, Becoming-Person, and "Beast Language"

Revising Artaud and Defining Animist Expressionism

In critical discourse, Michael McClure has generally remained one of the under-sung forebears of ecopoetics, which was generally much more ecologically and especially biologically informed than the environmental poetry of his peers. Jonathan Skinner has brought some due attention, arguing that "an ecopoetics emerges directly from McClure's engagement with Olson's process-based composition by field, one that finds guidance from theories at the nexus of the developing biological sciences of the cell and genetics—general systems theory, thermodynamics, and information theory—rather than from tropes based on closed ecosystems"¹ For McClure's landmark debut at the famous 1955 Six Gallery reading in San Francisco—hailed as the inception of the West Coast Beat era—he read explicitly environmentalist poems such as "FOR THE DEATH OF 100 WHALES" alongside Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, and Philip Whalen, helping to make ecological concern present at the very inception of the Beat phenomena.² This ecopoetics ranged from an interest in ways to envision and articulate at a primal level the experience of organisms ranging from complex mammals to the most basic forms of life; a midcentury Romantic's take on systems biology and ecology; to the less critically praised Beat trope of the poet-prophet declaiming truths in environmentalist jeremiads. But while some of McClure's poetry incites embarrassment, I believe that both at its

¹ Jonathan Skinner, "Visceral Ecopoetics in Charles Olson and Michael McClure: Proprioception, Biology, and the Writing Body," in *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, ed. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 73.

² Michael McClure, *Scratching the Beat Surface: Essays on New Vision from Blake to Kerouac* (Penguin, 1982), 78.

best and in its rich problematics, his poetics needs to be revisited as a singular model of postwar animist poetry. Significantly, while in Snyder and Haunani-Kay Trask's work we have seen the full enactment of animist social relations in the para-poetic eco-social practice and ritual inherent to grounded normativity, McClure's animism is fully manifest in the poetry itself and his performances off the page—even if his animism is not as socially and normatively scaled as Snyder or Trask's.

It is simple enough to first situate McClure in the animistic ecstasies of the neo-Romantic tendencies of the Beats, Ginsberg especially having brought Romantic pantheism to a wide audience. McClure too extends Romanticism's nascent or overt animisms—especially following William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. He is also one of the few poets of the period routinely called an animist by name, a moniker he declared himself and in fact claimed was central to the Beat movement,³ arguing:

I believed that the cosmic scale of Whitman's *Song of Myself*, the experience seed of *Leaves of Grass*, was already manifest and was demonstrated within visionary precepts. The awareness that we are all without proportion, and that all living beings are proportionless, seemed natural. We who felt deeply in the cold fifties were monists and animists. The fifties were most distinguished in the mental field by the creative energy of the artists and poets, and by war neurosis by the country at large.⁴

His and at times other Beats' poetry often dramatizes the struggle against the general postwar condition of alienation towards an ecstatic freedom garnered by a breakthrough into aesthetic immediacy, but this passage also grounds this effort in an animist ontology.⁵ McClure argues that the Beats understood that the nature of experience for all organic bodies is "proportionless," a sense of being unbounded by bodily finitude—ideas garnered from the Romantics but also certainly from Eastern philosophies and meditation practices. He suggests an animism that

³ See Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (MIT Press, 1999), 336; Skinner 77

⁴ McClure, *Scratching*, 30

⁵ See the likely influence of Sartre, *ibid.*, 76.

privileges the biological and organic nature of experience but also arises from a monist ontology, producing an aesthetic significance via the Beats' "creative energy." Whitman's "cosmic scale" then returns in the embodied Beat lyric as an animist tendency in American expressionism. This expressionism emerges not from the European avant-garde's crisis aesthetics but rather from Transcendentalist concerns with intuition, receptivity, and the problem of giving form to experiences that originate outside established discursive frameworks.⁶ Unlike the German movement's reliance on dissonant montage, American expressionism centers on continuity and presence between speaker and world.⁷ As I shall show in McClure's poetry, such expression is not the "expressivist" revelation of human interiority but rather a practice of attunement through which the lyric voice positions itself in relation to nature's "language full of poetry," yielding a mode of voice that is organic, embodied, and ecologically receptive.⁸

McClure's own version of expressionism is built from a matrix of this Whitmanian tradition, English Romanticism, Antonin Artaud, and the American Abstract Expressionists. However, he also adds to this mix speculative biology, Reichian psychology, ecology, systems theory, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Olsonian projective verse, and transformative experiences with hallucinogenic drugs. This results in an eccentric but resoundingly animist poetics rooted in an aesthetics of immanence and expression. The nature of his work and thought calls for analysis through a relational, process-philosophical lens that animist studies frequently employs and a poetic analytic elucidating poetry's forceful rather than representational construction. In this chapter I mobilize Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari through assemblage theory to analyze and theorize what I call McClure's "animist expressionism." As animist, the art arises from more-

⁶ Ryan Carr, "Toward a Genealogy of Americanist Expressionism," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 96-102, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2015.0013>.

⁷ *ibid.*, 102-104.

⁸ *ibid.*, 100-101.

than-human, impersonal fields of becoming. As expressionist, the becoming-autonomous and composition of materials make otherwise imperceptible forces sensible through the poem. In McClure's version of animist expressionism then, an idiosyncratic regime of sonic, typographic, and gestural materials becomes autonomous matters of expression, composing territories and subjects rather than externalizing an antecedent interiority. Following Deleuze and Guattari's account of the refrain, I use animist expressionism to analyze the poem's composition of these heterogeneous materials into an assemblage capable of capturing and rendering perceptible McClure's energetic encounters within an ecology of forces.⁹ Brian Massumi and Erin Manning will also help me to think the animist-expressionist poem as experiential sequence, an idea important to McClure's own poetics, and articulate the processual lyric "I" that McClure employs. These theorists help me portray McClure as an amplified tendency of the New American Poets that results in animist expressionism.

The "amplified" or even hyperbolized nature of this poetics is evident upon reading his own explications of his prosody (or rather, anti-prosody), but the ecological and animist nature of his eccentric ontology of the poem shines through redescription via Deleuze and Guattari. McClure's claims about his poetics can be challenging; what else is a critic to do with a statement like: "[t]he poem is a whole breath or group of breaths, the line (making shape) is a tensile manipulation, and should be felt as such. Esthetics is not a point! There is no prosody. The syllable is precisely a syllable and is to be read as syllable, a heavy melody. The letter is exactly a letter"?¹⁰ Instead of *form*, he advances "shape"—seeing poetry "as an extension of

⁹ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 315–18, 329–37, 342–43.

¹⁰ McClure, *Scratching*, 101.

physiology.”¹¹ He describes this as a “breakthrough” for his poetics first realized in the poem, “Rant Block:”

In Rant Block I made the discovery that “THERE IS NO FORM BUT SHAPE! NO LOGIC BUT SEQUENCE!” and the discovery that shape is the cloak, and simultaneously the being, the actual organism of love, desire, hatred, and hunger. I saw the Bulk, and the Bulk is the Body of what we are and what we strive for. . . I felt that our lives were lines of synaptic stars—literally—and it seemed *that* simple—and it is—and *that* brutal. It is life, not beauty, that we are after, for if there is beauty (and we do live in beauty) it is our perceptions raining lightning upon our fleshly pads that is glorious. [emphasis in original]¹²

Revising the principle of projective verse, “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,”¹³ “shape” emphasizes the inextricability of matter (the body, then the printed verse) and the proportionless desire (content) propelling the poem. The poet’s body—or better, sensorium—both is and expresses “the Bulk,” or from a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, “blocks of affects,” complexes of modifications in becoming that are transpersonal (for McClure, even cosmic) in origin. This energetic poetics is rooted in Charles Olson’s Projective Verse and American Abstract Expressionism; he compares these “action poems” to the record of the artist’s embodiment and energy that Jackson Pollock’s paintings leave for the viewer, a kind of information that is meant to act on the reader.¹⁴ A poem for McClure is a non-mimetic “extension” or “appendage” of his body that matches his environment with his desires in a kind of contest and even enjoys its own separate existence and power.¹⁵ The poem thus takes on an animist existence as its own “living bio-alchemical organism.”¹⁶ To translate into Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory, the poem is the production of a new assemblage that affects and

¹¹ *ibid.*, 89.

¹² *ibid.*, 89.

¹³ Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (University of California Press, 1997), 240.

¹⁴ McClure, *Scratching*, 91.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 100

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 89.

modulates other bodies—thus its status as its own organism. The poem is neither an expression of a prior subject nor even a transparent extension of a special object called “the body,” but a relatively autonomous expressive machine that emerges from the poet’s entire sensorium in experience and then circulates beyond it—recomposing what a body can do. Once produced, the poem enters into new assemblages and affects other bodies as a block of affects in its own right—a living process insofar as it continues to modulate relations within a shared ecological field.

The ecological import of this animist expressionism can be seen already in McClure’s early work, which builds on and departs from another of his central expressionist sources: Artaud. At the Six Gallery reading, McClure read a poem invoking animism by name, “Point Lobos: Animism,” that mobilizes Artaud’s expression of bodily intensities out of the theater and into the then-new marine reserve in the poem’s title. The result is a transformation of the poet’s role from singular, interior expression into a more distributed, animist expression of experience of life in place. In witness to the crabs, mold, and the presumably foggy beach and forest, the speaker posits a kind of dark ecstasy uniting all organic beings, an ecstasy that removes the speaker from the solipsism of Artaud’s embodiment and instead seeks to express the intensive experience of life’s vitality in place. The poem in an Artaudian interiority only to reject it:

It is possible my friend,
If I have had a fat belly
That the wolf lives on fat
Gnawing slowly
Through a visceral night of rancor.
It is possible that the absence of pain
May be so great
That the possibility of care
May be impossible.
Perhaps to know pain.
Anxiety, rather than the fear
Of the fear of anxiety.

This talk of miracles!¹⁷

McClure states that the poem is a reply to a statement of Artaud—"It is not possible that in the end the miracle will not occur"—though this is somewhat misremembered.¹⁸ Artaud's point in any case is that, with enough skill in the performer's dramatic expression of inner life, the viewer will experience the "miracle" of an intense "*human* anguish," that "he" "will be shaken and antagonized by the internal dynamic of the spectacle, and this dynamic will be in direct relation to the anxieties and preoccupations of his whole life" [emphasis in original].¹⁹ The poem begins in such an inner mode in the viscera, suggesting a bestial and digestive "rancor" in the body ("the wolf") yet—contra Artaud—knows neither pain nor care and so does not locate the animating origin of the poem in human anguish. McClure then paradoxically entertains the idea that "to know pain" or anxiety through this wolf metaphor (what McClure describe as a "body image" below) rather than through the mind may produce a more direct knowledge of anxiety—a kind of anxiety not based on a fearful, ruminative mental state, but rather anxiety as sensation. However, the stanza ends with him dismissing "[t]his talk of miracles!" and the knowledge of the body in and for itself. It is as though he is interested in the energetic transference from performer to viewer promised by Artaud but rejects both the all-too-human source in mental anxiety and a poetics attempting to communicate such negative affects to a reader to reproduce this anguish in her via expressionism's contagion.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 24-26.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 24. This is likely a misremembered rendering of a series of statements Artaud made in "On the Theater of Alfred Jarry: "If we did not have faith in a possible miracle, we would not embark on such a risky course. But a single miracle would be sufficient reward for our efforts and our patience. We count on this miracle." Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 158.

¹⁹ Artaud, *Selected*, 156.

Instead, as animism appears by name, McClure moves outwards towards the animate world in a way that nonetheless repeats Artaud's *confrontational* bent:

Of Animism:
I have been in a spot so full of spirits
That even the most joyful animist
Brooded
When all in sight was less to be cared about
Than death
And there was no noise in the ears
That mattered.
(I knelt in the shade
By a cold salt pool
And felt the entrance of hate
On many legs,
The soul like a clambering
Water vascular system.

No scuttling could matter
Yet I formed in my mind
This most beautiful
Of maxims.
How could I care
For your illness or mine?)
This talk of bodies!

Surprisingly for an embodied ecopoetics—which might be expected to be non-interventionist as not to disrupt or harm nonhumans—McClure's is often based on confrontations aiming to find a mutually-transformative bond through adversity. Although he describes himself as “the most joyful animist,” rather than first experiencing elation encountering the “spot so full of spirits,” the speaker in his wolf image's apathy “[b]rood[s]” as he finds a kinship between his belly and the land's own “clambering” hunger. The parenthetical portion of the poem details the speaker receiving “hate” from the spirits around him, an animosity in parallel with the “rancor” earlier. He does experience ecstasy, but it is an impersonal one: “How could I care / For your illness or mine?” The realization of “This most beautiful / Of maxims” is not a property inherent to nature, as if “it” were indifferent to suffering, but rather is a realization specific to the encounter that is

McClure at this moment with the particular beings (especially crabs) in the particular place. It is an emergent potential for the speaker that allows him to join the land through his body. For all McClure's investment in the body, the body as an object that a subject must locate and express is not the point; such a view fetishizes the body as separate, owned, and disconnected from the environment. Thus he also dismisses "This talk of bodies!"²⁰ Beyond the body itself, he argues that we are one with a general hunger and animosity in nature.

The poem concludes in an ecstatic mode that transforms this animosity into affinity:

It is impossible to speak
Of lupine or tulips
When one may read
His name
Spelled by the mold on the stumps
When the forest moves about one.
Heel. Nostril.
Light. Light! Light!
This is the bird's song
You may tell it
To your children.

Speaking of flowers ("lupine or tulips") and their benevolent connotations gives way to a darker ecological reading for what McClure calls the "undersoul" that links us all through bodily digestion (the "belly" earlier in the poem) and the ecological "digestion" of decay ("mold on the stumps"). He explains the undersoul concept as he comments on the poem in an essay:

I wanted to say how I was overwhelmed by the sense of animism—and how everything (breath, spot, rock, ripple in the tidepool, cloud, and stone) was alive and spirited. It was a frightening and joyous awareness of my undersoul. I say *undersoul* because I did not want to join Nature by my mind but by my viscera—my belly. The German language has two words, *Geist* for the soul of man and *Odem* for the spirit of beasts. *Odem* is the undersoul. I was becoming sharply aware of it. [emphasis in original]²¹

²⁰ For another example of this phrase and where this turn to Buddhism is explicit see McClure, *Scratching*, 102.

²¹ *ibid.*, 26.

The poem dramatizes a movement from an internality affectively isolated from others towards collective forms of potential—the poem’s culminating revelation—garnered through sensation—“the undersoul” as a kind of visceral holy spirit. This is most dramatically illustrated in the simplicity of the sequence of intensities in “Heel. Nostril. / Light. Light! Light!” that joins in with the bird’s song and opens out into a virtual, collective becoming that joins with the reader: “You may tell it / To your children.” The ecstatic and revelatory repetition of “Light” posits that the meaning of the bird’s song becomes communicable only when the body sensuously takes in the animate world.²² There is however a sort of miracle in the poem in that McClure’s “frightening and joyous awareness” materializes from this animosity felt by other beings and elements of the land. “Point Lobos: Animism” showcases how McClure’s expressionism stages a corporeal transformation of the lyric subject and the agonies that drive it, insisting on an “I” in their co-becoming with the way an invading otherness—both other entities and sense of world generally—makes itself registered and felt in expression.

These notions of antagonism, sensation, and the animist poem-event will assist me below as I elucidate McClure as a case study for animist poetics in theorization and practice at midcentury. Reading across 1964’s *Ghost Tantras* and 1985’s *Specks*, I will consider McClure’s confrontation with otherness both within the body and with other mammals, the latter constituting animist poetic performance. While it may be tempting to analyze McClure’s mammalian confrontations through bio-semiotics, I use the Deleuzo-Guattarian frame to stay faithful to McClure’s own conceptualization of his work: “[c]ommunication was not as important to me as expression. To speak and move was the most important thing.”²³ I discuss his

²² In Pawlik’s words, “Concern for death distracts from the more deserving task of appreciating and ensuring life’s continuation.” Joanna Pawlik, “Artaud in Performance: Dissident Surrealism and the Postwar American Literary Avant-garde,” *Papers in Surrealism* 8 (2010), 9.

²³ McClure, *Scratching*, 28.

ontological commitments, how they inform his poetics, and close read poems from *Ghost Tantras* written in what he calls “Beast Language”—a non-semantic “language” based in mammalian sound-symbolism. Of particular interest in this chapter is his reading of “Tantra 49” from the collection to a group of lions at the San Francisco Zoo. This chapter argues that McClure’s animist expressionism operates as a powerful but structurally ambivalent mode of attunement, one whose ecological promise and colonial complicity emerge from the same expressive conditions. Grounded in an animist ontology that understands the world as composed of agentic, vibrating forces rather than separate objects and subjects, McClure develops a poetics of expression that seeks to deterritorialize representational signification in favor of what I will describe as “immediation,” privileging nonhuman intensities to be felt as force rather than decoded as meaning. Such expressionism expands the poetic field of relation, opening perception to mammalian and environmental forces in ways that challenge anthropocentric habits of sense-making. At the same time, however, this expansion does not in itself determine how attunement is taken up, distributed, or held accountable, particularly under the colonial-infrastructure conditions that participate in many of McClure’s encounters with animals. What animist expressionism affords then is not a stable ethical position but a volatile expressive field in which sensation can either remain exposed to relational consequence or be reabsorbed as aesthetic intensity for human becoming. By reading McClure’s animal encounters as performances within such a field—where expression reorganizes perception without guaranteeing responsibility—this chapter diagnoses both the generative force and the ethical limits of animist expressionism as a poetic practice, showing how its capacity to attune across species boundaries is inseparable from the risk that such attunement will be unevenly distributed, appropriated, or experienced as human becoming rather than obligation.

Influenced by the anti-psychiatry movement and the neo-primitivist ideas circulating at the time, McClure forges an animist ontology and animist aesthetics as a therapeutic response not only to midcentury “war neurosis” but other forms of neurosis suffered both by humans and animals. He uses his experimental praxis of mammal confrontation in an attempt to free poetry of habitual, anthropocentric modes of thought, writing, and embodiment. McClure formulates a neo-Romantic animism in response to a variety of contemporary forces at play including: an increasing awareness of environmental destruction; Christian and increasingly secular utilitarian views of nature as mere resources for human progress; urbanization and suburbanization and their separation of humans from other-than-human environments; the existential threat of nuclear war; a dread of technology’s dehumanizing capacities; a deferral of white colonial guilt into perceived anti-establishment, primitivist masculinities; and the fear of home-grown totalitarianism emerging from an increasingly powerful and bureaucratic state and a conformist mass culture. Although McClure’s poetics provide a primitivist fantasy of immediacy²⁴ as a solution to a mediated world, I re-conceptualize this move through animist expressionism. In my thinking, this expressionism does deliver the promise of a re-enchanted world, but not by abolishing mediation; rather animist expressionism redistributes mediation, shifting the site of relation from representational cognition to bodily immediation and affective encounter. Immediation stages the participation of the colonial in the felt through its machinic assemblage of bodies—zoos and cages—that organize McClure’s animal encounters.

Revolt, Intra-animism, and Expressionism’s Immediation

²⁴ From a different theoretical angle, this is a quintessential example of Etherington’s “literary primitivism,” which is “a movement through the mediate toward the immediate” with the objective of re-aestheticization of life against the global totality of capital. Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 56.

In an essay entitled “REVOLT” from McClure’s first book of prose, *Meat Science: Essays*, published the year before *Ghost Tantras* appeared, he delineates a speculative biology of the animal body. While some of the ideas about organisms in “REVOLT” would eventually come to be reformulated through his later encounter with biological systems theory, many of the key impulses of his somatic poetics are already in place already by this essay. He bases his theory of the body on a class of the lower phylum of the animal kingdom—the flatworms (Platyhelminthes)—that is the first in evolution to have developed three anatomical characteristics shared with humans: ectoderm (exterior skin), endoderm (“inner stomach skin”), and mesoderm: “muscle and organ flesh.”²⁵ His interest lies in the planarian species of flatworms who can reproduce asexually by a process of division in which the organism’s head separates from its body, both sections eventually forming into two complete and autonomous bodies. His speculative biology enters as he analyzes this as a process of what he calls “revolt”: “physical spirit divisions of resentment and subindividuality.”²⁶ While planarians have heads that seemingly control their bodies throughout their individual life, a portion of their body “revolts” by division against the “set and unchanging vision”—a regime of adaptive mentality and behavior—that “the Head” learns through experience in order to survive in its environment over the course of its life.²⁷ Even though heads pragmatically exist to coordinate the complex parts of bodies for survival, the subindividuals (sub-organisms) of Body wish to enact revolt as “a desire to experience normal physiological processes that give pleasure of fullness and expansion,” against the “preconceived goals and preconceived reality” and limited “self-image” of the Head.²⁸ This is “[t]he Erotic impulse” essential to reproduction and life that McClure radically

²⁵ Michael McClure, *Meat Science: Essays* (City Lights Press, 1963), 57.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 58

²⁷ *ibid.*, 59

²⁸ *ibid.*, 59-60

generalizes to all animal life as an animating inner tension, even though most animal forms obviously do not asexually reproduce by Head-Body division. Although micro-organisms joined together in evolutionary history to form larger organisms such as flatworms, for McClure the myriad of these subindividuals within the body experiences desire autonomously, and working with this desire is central to a healthy and satisfactory animal life. Mostly clearly defined, “REVOLT is the constant reformation of the body image until it is exactly Spirit—with regimen and fluxing of intellect and emotions pushing the wilfull [sic] desires to success with sureness and energy.”²⁹ This is an ever-ongoing process of the body’s energetic re-aligning or abolishing the Head’s restrictive body image with a new body image that is more vitally agile and creative.

For humans, the problem that we cannot detach our heads from our bodies to resolve our internal conflicts is compounded by the fact that our heads are full of socially-derived psychic strictures internalized through memory—repression. This requires that humans revolt as a single self: “My revolt must be of complete meat and spirit. I must fight the passing vision within myself that freezes into a cemented way of seeing.”³⁰ The Head’s limited self-image freezes the organism in time into this “cemented way of seeing,” and the body revolts by striving to overcome this with a new self-image. This turns into a theory of politics, or rather a kind of anti-politics. As the Head is the store of social control, and this restricts the body’s freedom, “Revolt is the striving for *success* ... against an overlay of unnaturalities frozen into the nervous system.”³¹ The “unnaturalities frozen into the nervous system” recalls one of his influences, Herbert Marcuse, who describes how the individual’s “autonomous personality appears as the *frozen* manifestation of the general repression of mankind.” [emphasis in original]³² The social

²⁹ *ibid.*, 69

³⁰ *ibid.*, 62

³¹ *ibid.*, 63

³² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Beacon Press, 1966), 57.

mnemonically folds itself into the human organism's Head through the brain's memory storage. McClure then maps this onto the social problems of his time, a version of a familiar, postwar counter-culture diagnosis that Western humans' brain-focused culture estranges them from their bodies. Scaled up to a human social level, McClure's argument is that in modern society, social mechanisms of repression of desire and of the body lead to a suppression of the revolt instinct. In McClure's historiography, ever since the transition to farming in the Neolithic Age, humans have been on a path towards the overdevelopment of their intraspecies sociality and a separation from their mammality.³³ The Enlightenment removal of the human from the divine and the body in addition to modernity's environment dominated by industrialization, bureaucracy, and mass-media is just a culmination of this process. Differently articulated later, the separation of matter and spirit results in a mechanical view of the world, while the separation of the mind and body produces mass "neurosis," overemphasis on our "social self," and disconnection from our "biological self."³⁴ McClure reaches the conclusion early however that "[t]here is no political revolt. All revolt is personal and is against interior attitudes and images or against exterior bindings of Society that constrict and cause pain."³⁵ His politics is thus a kind of individualist existentialism (another influence for him) but with a biological addition influenced by Wilhelm Reich's liberatory investment in the body's energies. What might be called here McClure's "intra-animism" is non-vitalist; there is no mysterious animating principle: in his non-dualism, meat or flesh *is* spirit. At the same time, meat and personhood is differentiated: we consist of subindividuals or "sub-beings," degrees of personhood (based on complexity) and energetic striving that go all the way down.

³³ McClure, *Scratching*, 134.

³⁴ Michael McClure, *Lighting the Corners: On Art, Nature, and the Visionary* (University of New Mexico, 1993), 10-11.

³⁵ McClure, *Meat*, 65

While this animistic ontology of the organism may read as eccentric, it enables him to further reinvent the lyric form itself in ways adequate to the postwar ecologization of the self via its ongoingly emergence in a field of animate forces that Olson began. I analyze the central mechanism through which revolt operates as immediation, a key feature of McClure's animist expressionism. The collective striving of the body's sub-beings emergently appears to the mind as the Body's self-image (or "body image"), the imagistic unit that sequentially propel McClure's poems, adapting projective verse's "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION."³⁶ The Head's "intellect" is not bad in and of itself; instead "[t]he use of the Intellect can be athletic and physical as it is part of the athletic and physical body," and "[t]he idea of intellect must be shifting and open to change, and must not itself become an attitude. Definition and personification must change constantly."³⁷ McClure's sequential poems then are then the dramatization of intellect's adaptative response to the body's feedback, intellect functioning as "a contained auxiliary" to the body in forming new personifications of the thoroughly processual self: "INTELLECT MUST CHANGE CONSTANTLY AS BODY CHANGES CONSTANTLY, AND THE PICTURE OF THE BODY MUST CHANGE AS THE BODY CHANGES." The poem as an intellectual enterprise thus expresses the sequence of body-images, and this is why McClure distinguished his work from Olson's by its locus on the interiorization of the environment's forces and affordances for desire and becoming.³⁸ McClure's poems then characteristically proceed in a vertical form down

³⁶ Olson, *Collected Prose*, 240.

³⁷ McClure, *Meat*, 65.

³⁸ This helps clarify how his work is inspired but distinct from Olson's projective verse. As McClure recounts: As I came to understand Olson personally and through his work I began to object to his concept of "anagogic," of poetry *leading out*. I believed that the spring of poetry must be more physical, more genetic, more based in flesh, and have less relationship to culture. It must, I discovered for myself, be something that occurs before the anagogic, something that happens before the *leading out* —it must be "pre-anagogic."

the page resembling the spinal column, at once an index of his own body as catalyzing locus of ecological sensation, the DNA double helix, a flow of experience in which all perceptions are spatially equalized, and even what he describes as a tape recording of the plurality of selves that emerge through that experiential flow.³⁹ The sequential perceptions in which self emerges through environmental intensities might be helpfully characterized through Manning and Massumi's theorization of "immediation." Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead, Massumi explains that immediation is "a direct, unmediated feeling of what past events have left in the world for the coming event to take up as its own potential"⁴⁰ As McClure's poems are intended as a moment-by-moment expression of experience, immediation is that which links and generates the intense novelties of experience as they unfold down the page. Immediation's revelations—such as the undersoul above—often appear in all capital letters to denote the pitch of experience and its emphatic force. As the reader experiences the poem as action rather than representations, they co-compose the sequence of arising affects into their own immediations that propel the reader into the reading's next potential. McClure's spinal column form then also signals its body-to-body expression via the reading process.

McClure's singularity as a poet then is his form's capacity to match nonhuman affects with those of an adaptive, affirmative, and plural sensorium. Although his voice sometimes slips into a simple self-present "I" that seems to territorialize the multitudinous inner foundation or fail to attune properly to environment, his most ecological work presents voice as propulsive sequences of deterritorializing affects, spreading across scales from an "I" that is an in-folding of

Olson's poetics—at least at the time McClure made this distinction—posit the subject ongoingly re-constituted in the unfolding act of the writing-experience across historical intensities, but McClure demands recourse first to the immediations of the body before "leading out" to world. McClure, *Scratching*, 54.

³⁹ "Rare Angel tracks vertically on the page and is Oriental in that way. The selves that comprise our whole being may play over this poem, as if it were a tape, and make prints and new codings. The selves can reach out and speak as the pages move past." Unpaginated, see Forward. Michael McClure, *Rare Angel* (Black Sparrow Press, 1975).

⁴⁰ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Polity, 2015), 147.

experience to virtual, collective subjects named by “we” in other poems. In my framework of animist expressionism, McClure’s “I” in dialogue with the body image is best understood as a sequence of provisional stabilizations or haecceities formed at the intersection of bodily intensities, the involvement of environmental forces and presences, and the habits of McClure’s sensorium. What McClure calls revolt names moments when an assemblage that drives experience loses its capacity to sustain a given distribution of forces: when immediation’s potentials overcome the extant powers and limits of the body overcoded by memory and social constraint. These moments demand reconfigurations of capacities and a new bodily consistency called for by the event. Understood this way, McClure’s animist expressionism is a body learning to inhabit itself differently in an animately interpersonal and immanent field of experience. It is by an animistic attunement to the inner persons of the body through our sensations that we experience a eudaemonic resocialization: both towards ourselves as we partake in the sequences of experience and as mammals among fellow mammals. McClure’s expressionism is not a line of flight into pure immediacy but rather a reorganization of affects into an organic consistency for new emergent consolidations of the “I.”

As I transition to McClure’s mammalian encounters, mammals—whose bodies and affects are continuous with humans—provide models of accomplishing his poetic project of subindividual liberation since mammals are not overburdened with the stifling regulations of human sociality. By meeting animals in the tension between their own stabilizations and erotic potentials, McClure believes he can more directly activate revolt within both the human and nonhuman animal bodies. McClure’s speculative biology here offers a refreshing alternative to the various strands in animal studies or posthumanism that claim animals exist in a state of pure immanence because they do not have language, and they are essentially unthinkable to us

because we are trapped in the prison-house of language.⁴¹ While in McClure's thought animals do enjoy an immanence that we have largely exiled ourselves from at our peril, he also implies that they also experience intra-animism, restrictive social overcoding, and generative self-difference. His thought is also an alternative to the argument that animals are unknowable, radical Others.⁴² I worry that such ideas persist within posthumanist conceptions of the human and continue to exile the human from animals. The absolute alterity of animals is an understandable move to counter the long tradition of human supremacist conceptions of them in Western philosophy, but the challenge that animist studies provides is that ecologically viable societies saw and continue to see animals in profoundly "anthropomorphic" ways. Anthropomorphism "expose[s] various fracture points in humanism that assembled around the threat to the unified rational subject conceived of in terms of human exceptionalism."⁴³ The domination of the social self on the individual traps her in mechanistic and exceptionalist logics that alienate her from her body and his environment, but positing this process in other organisms will allow me to consider the possibilities and limits of seeing from caged large felines below. Human exceptionalism confines us in what Olson described as "the universe of discourse" in which descriptions are attached to objects; returning to mammality would invite us to again become embodied beings in an Umwelt. Yet as I now discuss, this position is not free from problems.⁴⁴

Becoming-Mammal or Becoming-Person?

⁴¹ Felice Cimatti, *Unbecoming Human: Philosophy of Animality after Deleuze*, tras. Fabio Gironi (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 139-140.

⁴² Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi.

⁴³ Claire Parkinson, *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters* (Routledge, 2020), 2.

⁴⁴ McClure, *Lighting*, 13.

Although battling human exceptionalism, McClure does make distinctions between the human and the animal that inform his expressionist poetics and that anticipates posthumanist uses of Deleuze and Guattari. As he addresses a deer in a poem from a later collection, “I always become an animal / as you are always / BEING ONE.”⁴⁵ Or, in another poem from that collection, we can contrast McClure’s signature confidence and with Jacques Derrida’s logical deferrals when McClure states in another poem, “I AM THE ANIMAL I KNOW I AM.”⁴⁶ In either case, the declaration-form is better thought of as *act* than as *fact*. This naturally takes us into animal studies and posthumanist theory on the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of becoming-animal. There are generally two strains of thought regarding becoming-animal. Many animal studies scholars have criticized becoming-animal for, in one way or another, being ironically anthropocentric in its focus on animals as resource for human vitality or posthuman sublime, having little actual concern with animals themselves in their material, and the biopolitical economies and side-stepping ethical questions of animal relations.⁴⁷ The recuperative position argues that the first completely misunderstands Deleuze and Guattari, arguing that becoming-animal is not really about animality at all but rather simply denotes the “no-longer-human;” becoming-animal is about becoming in itself, a radical decentering and even “fleeing” from the human-as-subject and thereby retaining a truly ecological significance.⁴⁸ This last position is compelling to me as the most accurate reading of Deleuze and Guattari, who define becoming-animal as “*an inhumanity immediately experienced in the body as such*,” “humanity” here being

⁴⁵ Michael McClure, *Rebel Lions* (New Directions, 1991), 90.

⁴⁶ See “Coke Kick!” *ibid.*, 40; Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (Fordham University Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27–28; Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 15–18; Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 30–32.

⁴⁸ Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 84. See also Cimatti, *Unbecoming*, 190.

a normative-regulatory notion best escaped from [emphasis in original].⁴⁹ McClure's work as it pertains to animals sometimes works in this last category, but it is also operating often in the first mode, for animality is the more authentic form of the human in McClure's thought. Although many of his poems feature intensive de-subjectivization as experience unfolds down the columnar sequences of his poems that stage becoming in itself, and although these are set into motion by inner self-difference of the body and its sub-beings, interpersonal interactions, as well as from environment more generally, the stream of becomings in other poems are in turn re-territorialized by the lyric "I" or by familiar intersubjective dynamics in a way that often do not fully realize the radicalism suggested by Deleuze and Guattari's concept. When it comes to mammalian encounters, McClure might certainly be critiqued for committing a self-serving use of other mammals for affects, for treating the lion in particular as a "fetishized system" of intensities, and I will explore this below.⁵⁰

Scholars have variously reformulated the "becoming-animal" concept towards more overtly ecological ends,⁵¹ but here I look to Anthony Kubiak's notion of "becoming-performance" or "becoming-person," which rethinks becoming-animal from animist studies. He critiques the limits of a becoming-animal primarily driven by "desire-as-excess" and the "celebration of one's own life force," asking "what the import of becoming-animal might be in terms of life and, beyond this, of the environment itself." Kubiak alleges that Deleuze and Guattari do not go far enough towards an ecological, animist cosmology:

How might becoming-animal lead to a greater sensitivity to the health of the bionet in all of its living and non-living aspects? This is what *animism* directs itself to: beyond

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 273.

⁵⁰ MacCormack, *Ahuman* 84.

⁵¹ See Bednarek's "becoming-with" in Joanna Bednarek, "The Oedipal Animal? Companion Species and Becoming" in *Deleuze and the Animal*, eds. Colin Gardner and Patricia MacCormack (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 52-74; and Jason Cullen, "'An inside that lies deeper than any internal world': On the Ecosophical Significance of Affect" in *Ecosophical Aesthetics: Art, Ethics and Ecology with Guattari*, eds. Patricia MacCormack and Colin Gardner (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 49-64.

becoming-animal, it is the extension to all of life, and to the environment itself, the awareness that is *becoming-person*. It is realizing (and not simply thinking or naming) the world as alive. In order to understand this world-experience, we must move well beyond simply becoming-animal, and even becoming-Other, into becoming virtual, becoming nothing at all and so becoming potentially everything at once – what Buddhism might call becoming-empty. Animist awareness is not so much opposed to Deleuzian becomings as it is an inversion of them. It is not a call to see the animal in the human or the human in the animal but rather to actualize the virtual personness of all things.⁵²

For Kubiak, a truly animist becoming is an “inversion” of Deleuze because the goal is not escaping the category of “the person” through affect’s contagion but rather as a means towards “realizing” or “actualiz[ing]” the personhood in the becoming of the world. It is a formal category rather than a content, a means by which we find ethical relation:

The issue is not, to put it crudely, whether animals are people, too. The issue is, rather, to recognize that the impulse in humans towards recognizing something called personness (not mere subjectivity or, worse, ‘subject position’) is an impulse that is not necessarily bound to notions of what constitutes the human of the humanist traditions – this much has been said many times in recent decades. The *recognition* of personness grows out of the propensity to be concerned about an other. The *ratification* of personness emerges from the recognition of dis-ease in the other, from a realization that the boundaries between self and others are permeable, fluid and constructed. ... These entities (rivers, mountains, animals) are not persons within themselves, but then again neither are we – we have suspected for some time now that such essentialism is false epistemology. These entities, these creatures, are persons because we introject personness into them, as we introject it into ourselves and other human beings. Their personness is the means by which we understand our bond to them. They are not some *thing* called a person; as we are not things called persons; we and they are becomings-person, we and they come to awareness through the process of becoming one-another.⁵³

Personhood is the form through which we both understand ourselves and others, and because in a process ontology there are processes rather than essences, becoming-person rather than essential personhood is the appropriate way to understand this capacity both for ourselves as humans and for nonhumans. Yet Kubiak’s recourse to Freudian “introjection” and the liberal governance terminology, “recognition” and “ratification,” seem odd choices within a Deleuzo-Guattarian and

⁵² Anthony Kubiak, “Animism: Becoming-performance, or Does this Text Speak to You?” *Performance Research* 17, no. 4 (2012): 53-54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2012.712252>.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 55-56.

Buddhist framework. And while Deleuze and Guattari do often push their analyses towards end-goals of deterritorialization, they are not against functional personhood. Instead, the “interiority” of personhood might be described as a consistency of relations within a singular center of immanent experience; in regard to the personification of others, they are presences of consequence that command certain attunements or obligations—they participate in and co-create our world. This redescription helps me activate what I think is otherwise a useful concept. The virtual personness of all things lands us in a cosmos consisting of “overlapping spheres of sentience [that] can be understood as its own theatre and that this mode of theatre becomes the space within which the permeabilities and instabilities of life can best be approached aesthetically and politically.”⁵⁴ This embedded, participatory inhabitation Kubiak calls “performance” that requires more than just an acknowledgment of relationality as our ontological condition. Performance denotes action in a world rife with sentience. Life is performed in these theaters of contact. It is life that is symbolically and affectively involved in the sentience and becoming-person of all that is immediate. As performance, it is action *witnessed* by nonhumans, and its stakes are how life is performed (including performing death) in the becoming of a particular theater of sentience. As such, it is also messy, conflictual, and—in McClure’s case—confrontational.

With Kubiak’s notion in hand, my point is that McClure would seem to have it both ways concerning becoming. On the one hand, “to see the animal in the human” and the intensive transformations of a *literal* becoming-mammal are foundational propositions of McClure’s project. I use “literal” both in the sense that mammality is a real destination as well as the idea that poetry (made of words) is the expressive act of this becoming. Animist-mammalian

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 59.

expressionism would help us actualize our participation in the mammalian “sphere of sentience” that modern subjectivity is formed to habitually ignore and deny. This becoming-mammal is oriented toward authenticity and arrival in which particular animals function as privileged reservoirs of affect whose territorial force is aestheticized and incorporated into a revitalized human subject. From a Deleuzo–Guattarian perspective, the problem is not that it takes animals seriously as sources of affect, but that it repeatedly arrests becoming by treating animality as a destination rather than as a vector, reterritorializing intensity onto a fetishized figure of mammalian power and thereby folding what might have remained a line of flight back into a humanist project of self-recovery secured by colonial conditions of safety and containment. Crucially, this reterritorialization does not operate only through the visible apparatus of the zoo cage, but also through the poet’s own expressive function, as McClure’s role as witness and channel allows the asymmetry of the encounter to be stabilized as aesthetic resonance rather than opened onto obligation or consequence. In this chapter, I read the zoo form as a colonial-carceral assemblage governed by the broader logic of coloniality: imperial circuits of capture and transport, settler occupation of Indigenous land, and carceral techniques of enclosure and forced visibility converge to deterritorialize animals from their lifeworlds and reterritorialize them as classifiable, spectacular, and affectively available bodies for a metropolitan public. The cage organizes the machinic assemblage of bodies while the zoo’s taxonomic and spectacular discourses organize its collective assemblage of enunciation, binding animal confinement to coloniality’s continuing conversion of dispossession into human knowledge, pleasure, and (especially relevant here) becoming.

On the other hand, as we have seen intimations of in “Point Lobos: Animism,” his lyric voice is also premised on a more ecological field poetics (demonstrating Kubiak’s “greater

sensitivity to the health of the bionet”) in which the speaker actualizes (expresses) the virtual personness of all things as a standpoint, a sequence of felt intensities, in the co-performance of life in place. From this perspective, “This talk of bodies!” rigidifies us, preventing the transpersonal flow of energy and spirit and the proportionless nature of experience. This becoming-person is not a line of flight from the human, but a reterritorialization of the person as a functional position within a particular ecological assemblage: temporary stabilizations of perspective produced as the lyric voice is forced to recalibrate itself through “concern” in relation to other beings whose affects and demands reorganize the field of experience into the “undersoul.” This concept can be thought of as a pre-personal field of affective life emerging at the level of organic composition rather than consciousness—belly, breath, digestion, weight, and tone. The undersoul becomes a modification of McClure’s sensorium and a mode of participation in the event. This is a genuinely immanent ethics of becoming: one in which identity is loosened rather than secured, affect is not immediately recuperated as power or meaning, and relation remains exposed to the uneven, colonial conditions that structure it. In both literal becoming-mammal and virtual becoming-person, the poem is revolt’s body-image (here the undersoul as the poem articulates it)—formed from the energetic porosities of interpersonal encounter and intensive interoception—striving for expression. So while “undersoul” is not a dominant term in McClure’s poetics beyond this poem, it does help us point to an ecological dimension of embodiment and confrontation persistent in his work: they produce modes of subjectivation within an ecological assemblage of living and nonliving forces wherein the affects of place modulate bodies’ organic capacities.

Read through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari, the ambivalence that structures McClure’s animal encounters between becoming-mammal and becoming-person is less a

contradiction than the coexistence of two distinct—and ultimately divergent—modes of becoming that the work never fully reconciles, each differently entangled with the colonial machinic conditions that make the encounters possible in the first place. Tracking these two modes as they emerge and collide across McClure's animal encounters allows me to identify both the genuine ecological force of his animist aesthetics and the limits of their ethical reach. Yet I believe those limits do not arise from the intensive resonance of his work but rather from the specific ways becoming-animal is repeatedly captured and reterritorialized within a colonial assemblage of bodies, affects, and poetic expression.

I will now turn to such mammalian encounters that appear in his prose and in prose-poem form in *Specks*. I consider these encounters as performances in animist sociality driven by McClure's becoming-mammal poet-resonance. His confrontation with sea lions gives us our first example of Beast Language before I turn to McClure's formal deployment of it in *Ghost Tantras*. Confrontation's energetic stimulation affords sensorium-modification and expression for both humans and other beings—especially mammals. In his essay, "A Mammal Gallery," his description of confronting a group of sea lions on the Farallon Islands off the coast of San Francisco registers the raw aesthetic and affective qualities of their rage as he disturbs their peace:

I wandered on the island—seeing a rabbit and traces of rabbits—but not a blade of grass or a bush. The island is rocky, craggy, like a miniature, eroding crest of the alps. After climbing the tiny peak, I descended to the beach, which was scattered with boulderlike rocks. I found myself looking down onto a herd of sea lions, the closest no more than thirty feet away. They were drowsing and lolling in the sun. Seeing something comic in the scene, I raised my hand and began speaking as if I were delivering a sermon. The astonished sea lions dived into the ocean. The ones in the ocean swung about to see me. They began a chorus of YOWPS, and huge angered MEAT CRIES, dense in volume and range. I continued my performance and they carried on their yowping. Perhaps thirty or forty of the animals were yowling at one time. They were FURIOUS, ENRAGED, ASTONISHED. ... [T]heir voices were driven by hundreds of pounds of meat force and energy. I was frightened, worried that they might charge about, clamber out, and pursue

me. They remained in the water cursing me in a clear ancient language that left little doubt about meaning.

AND THEN I knew that not only were the monster shapes of meat enraged, they were PLEASED. THEY WERE SMILING AS WELL AS ENRAGED! They were overjoyed to be stimulated to anger by a novel—and clearly harmless—intruder. Undoubtedly they enjoyed my astonishment and fear as well as the physical pleasure of their rage. Perhaps they relished my physical reaction to their blitzkrieg of sound. They began to yowp not only at me but to each other.

My ears could not take it any longer and I began walking up the beach. I walked halfway around the island. Five members of the tribe followed in the waves. They watched, taunted, encouraged, scolded, and enjoyed me to the fullest. I have not been in finer company.⁵⁵

McClure's first reaction to the lounging sea lions is to express the comic affect through a "sermon" performance, ironic to him but delivered with an implied pitch and tone (and presumably in English) that hits the sea lions' sensorium as an aggressive and predatory vocalization from which they form a line of flight into the water. While they at first flee into the ocean, they recompose the space and hold their territory with a choral "blitzkrieg of sound," a barrier of sheer expressive intensities. The collective body of the sea lion herd exert their territorial refrain of "YOWPS" and "MEAT CRIES," the latter term denoting the "hundreds of pounds of meat force and energy." The cry is inseparable from the implied power of its original physical body. At the same time as their cries mark a territorial barrier and seek to repel, it is also an affective field of sheer sensation that draws McClure in. Our first example of beast language is its being heard, but it is not just a re-description of mammalian communication. It is a mode of listening, of sensorial attuning to receiving mammalian vocalization as an aesthetic-driven immediation. His sensorium is an assemblage of sensation and arousal that ranges across excitement, fear, "astonishment," and pleasure. He co-composes affects from the intensive yowp-force received, adding satisfaction ("PLEASED," "enjoyed") to assemblage. So even as the yowp-barrier territorializes through the resonance of threat and repels McClure's vulnerable

⁵⁵ McClure, *Scratching*, 157-8

human body, the distance between them and McClure's resonance as poet also allows the refrain to take on aesthetic capacity, modulating McClure's body into hearing beast language as mammalian intensities until they in turn overwhelm his auditory faculties.

Besides his praise that he "ha[d] not been in finer company" as he is drawn into the yowp-refrain's affective field, we are not yet in the realm of becoming-person. In a similar but also distinct description in *Specks*, McClure recounts a non-confrontational island encounter with sea elephants. While we do not hear beast language as vocal-auditory aesthetic expression, he provides a more animist reflection on his ancestral identification with the sea elephants:

The odor spreading from the tiny island is a physical aura. It is the smell of blood, of mummifying meat, of rotting flesh, of placenta lying in the sun, of the excrement of giant mammals and of their sexuality and pheromones. It is the odor of the Pleistocene – of the age of great mammals. There is also a physical aura of mammal-energy radiating from the island. I recognize it. My sub-beings know what it is.

These auras have the beauty of sudden recognition, of terror, of cousinhood, and of the special, thoughtless ogrehood of these near-brethren.

The sea elephants – the size and weight of small trucks – raise their heads and threaten us as we walk among them.

They are very dumb and sweet and cruel. They are mindless and comic and terrible. These giant seals have the faces of feeble-minded babies grown gray and stubbly whiskered and with noses changed into trunks. They are uninvolved with morality and amorality, and are caught within the processes of their evolving instincts. They are more than human.⁵⁶

Flesh, mass, pheromones, decay, heat, and excrement form a thickened olfactory territory or "aura" that is expressed through McClure's sensorium as a common Pleistocene plane—a field of "recognition" re-emerging from deep time. While Deleuze and Guattari would describe McClure's sub-beings' recognition—a kind of corporeal epistemology in how they "know" what the sea lions are at a deep-time, mammalian level—as an array of "microperceptions" that immerse bodies together in a shared field of instinct, smell, force, and evolutionary duration, from a more directly animist perspective this is a moment in which the relational field differently

⁵⁶ Michael McClure, *Specks* (Talonbooks, 2012), 39.

engenders McClure's becoming-person with that of the sea lions.⁵⁷ That is, McClure's becoming-person is as mammalian kin, an attunement of what it means to be human to its deep-time ancestry as it manifests in relation to an affect-field of mammalian others. This field is defined by "threat" again (but not displaying the imminent danger above), an interspecies-animosity defined by territoriality as a material-affective assemblage of bodies. The recognition is of both difference and similarity, as he pictures the sea elephants as metamorphized "feeble-minded babies," asserting a common root of the amorality of human infancy and sea elephant personhood. This personhood is "more than human," overflowing with powers and proclivities in excess to human embodiment. While the non-political animal is a post-Enlightenment notion, and McClure does not speculate about Pleistocene ethics, there is nonetheless an animism here even though it is largely implied: a deep-time, common sociality of the mammalian body that is part of what enables Beast Language to be a shared heritage.⁵⁸

Beast Language and the Animist Erotics of Mammalian Confrontation

This shared heritage and the work McClure believes it can perform is made clearer in his confrontations with large felines, but I want to first extend the notion of Beast Language as a mode of listening as much as it is a mode of speech. As such, it is possible to listen to human language itself as Beast Language. Elsewhere in the "A Mammal Gallery" essay, he describes an observer (himself) watching an argument between two humans; he "closes his ears to the

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 162.

⁵⁸ For example, Mathur describes public imaginaries of big cats in India: "In these diverse theories on the making of man eaters, big cats do not appear just as passive objects that humans impose their cultural, political, and social beliefs on. Instead, we see big cats as active agents with their own biological features, temperaments, histories, political leanings, memories, social structures, kinship patterns, desires, emotional lives, and individual psyches," Nayanika Mathur, *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 31.

meanings of the words and listens only to the vocalization as *sounds*” and realizes he is listening to what he calls “*mammal* conversation:”

He is listening to two mammals. It might be two snow leopards, two bison, two wolves. It is a *mammal* conversation. The man and woman are growling, hissing, whimpering, cooing, pleading, cajoling, and threatening. The specific rite and bio-melodic patterning of meat conversation rises and falls in volume. It makes variations, it repeats itself, it begins again, it grows, diminishes. There is a hiss and counterhiss. There is a reply and new outburst. The game that the man and woman are enacting, and the ritual, is as old as their plasm. It is capable of extremes of nervous modulation because of their neuronomic complexity but it is more than ancient—it is an Ur-rite. [emphasis in original]⁵⁹

The semiotic coding of expression (human-linguistic meaning) is only the surface-phenomenon of the deeper mammalian coding (in which the raw growl or hiss content is variously expressed as “pleading, cajoling, threatening”). David Abram describes this second layer as “[l]anguage as a bodily phenomenon [that] accrues to *all* expressive bodies,” “a rippling rise and fall of the voices in a sort of musical duet, rather like two birds singing to each other.”⁶⁰ Once semantic content is backgrounded, the argument appears as a patterned sequence of vocal actions (game-like and ritualistic) that temporarily compose the speakers into a shared affective field that exceeds the intentions of either participant. The animist and erotic dimensions of this becomes clear as he reads the cosmic processes at work in the argument:

If the man and woman are lucky, and if their intelligences are open, then one of them will HEAR that it is a rite—that they are growling and hissing. Then he, or she, will laugh at the comedy and the ridiculousness of the pretext. The other partner will laugh in response, intuiting the same perception. Most likely it is a sexual ritual. They are hungry for contact with each other. Their intellectual and emotional processes have been frozen into simulations of indifference by pressures of the surroundings and events. If they are lucky enough, one of them will raise a hand to the other, and touch or stroke, recognizing the other as the universe, the counterpart of a star, a galaxy, a planet, a bacterium, a virus, a leopard. Then they have enacted and completed a *tantra* of Shiva and Shakti. They have become mammals and gods and goddesses. [emphasis in original]⁶¹

⁵⁹ McClure, *Scratching*, 152.

⁶⁰ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (Vintage Books, 1996), 80.

⁶¹ McClure, *Scratching*, 152.

The reference to the Hindu Śākta-Tantric tradition at the end appears like an afterthought, but—as I discuss below—this is actually a primary framework for *Ghost Tantras*. In this tradition (available to him through translations and interpretations by Mircea Eliade, John Woodroffe, and Heinrich Zimmer) Śiva and Śakti are the polar principles animating reality. Śiva is pure consciousness: aware, transcendent, and passive—in my understanding, the temporary organization or consistency that allows the assemblage to hold together as a recognizable configuration. Śakti is the ongoing, living, and vibratory energy of the cosmos through which mind and body manifest; that is, the universe is made of sound (śabda) in this tradition, and creation is a process of vibration emanating from the goddess herself.⁶² For me this is the energetic and affective forces circulating through the assemblage that continually pressure that organization toward transformation of relational capacities. The couple’s argument emerges from an assemblage composed of bodily affects, habits, memories, and environmental pressures that have sedimented into what McClure calls “simulations of indifference.” The potential for laughter and touch marks a transformation in the assemblage’s functioning, opening capacities for relation previously constrained by those habitual organizations. What McClure describes as becoming “mammals and gods and goddesses” can thus be understood as a shift in attention from language as transmission of meaning to language as the expression of an assemblage’s relations, producing affirmative vital affects.

The Śiva-Śakti tradition’s ontological foundation in vibration and erotic creativity makes it particularly appealing for McClure as a poet preoccupied with the body’s erotic energies, and

⁶² Some sources available to McClure would include: Arthur Avalon (John Woodroffe), *Shakti and Shākta: Essays and Addresses on the Shākta Tantra Śāstra* (Luzac & Co., 1918); idem, *The Serpent Power: Being the Śaṭcakra-nirūpaṇa and Pādukā-pañcaka* (Luzac & Co., 1919); Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton University Press, 1951); Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Routledge, 1958).

these erotics are at play in one of McClure's most remarkable descriptions of Beast Language as it arises in a confrontation with a snow leopard at the San Francisco Zoo:

I STAND IN FRONT of the cyclone wire cage containing the female snow leopard. My friend has a tape recorder. We have been taping sounds of animals before the zoo opens. I step over the guardrail where the snow leopardess is watching us. She is indifferent to humans when they keep at a distance. Her task is to fight the physical psychosis of encagement and madness. Most of her waking is spent pacing the constricted outlines of her cage. But now it is early morning and she is resting. When I step over the guard rail she growls in anger without moving — except her head, which swivels to watch me.

No part of her can reach through the mesh of the cyclone wire. I put my face almost to the wire and nearly to her face. There are only a few inches between her mouth and my face. She is enraged, and her face, which seems divine in such proximity, twists into feline lines of rage. The anger and rage are clearer than the conflicting human expressions on the daily streets. She knows the uselessness of pawing or clawing at me.

She puts her face within an inch of the wire and SPEAKS to me. The growl begins instantly and almost without musical attack. It begins gutturally. It grows in volume and it expands till I can feel the interior of her body from whence the energy of the growl extends itself as it gains full volume of fury. It extends itself, vibrating and looping. Then, still with the full capacity of untapped energy, the growl drops in volume and changes in pitch to a hiss. The flecks of her saliva spatter my face. I feel not smirched but cleansed. Her eyes are fixed on me. The growl, without a freshly drawn breath, begins again. It is a language that I understand more clearly than any other. I hear rage, anger, anguish, warning, pain, even humor, fury — all bound into one statement.

I am surrounded by the physicality of her speech. It is a real thing in the air. It absorbs me and I can hear and feel and see nothing else. Her face and features disappear, becoming one entity with her speech. The speech is the purest, most perfect music I have ever heard, and I know that I am touched by the divine, on my cheeks, and on my brow, and on the tympanums of my ears, and the vibrations on my chest, and on the inner organs of perception.

It is music-speech. It is like the music one hears when he places his head on the stomach of his beloved. The gurglings, the drips, the rumblings, the heart, and the pulsebeats in the interior of the body are perfect music. It is the meat speaking and moving—as the testicles move and twist and writhe within the sac making their own motility and pursuing their ends. I hope that the drops of the leopard saliva will never dry on my face.⁶³

An encounter in the wild would have a very different effect on McClure, as the absence of the cage would absolutely territorialize the space and elicit a fear that would prevent the much more aesthetic-sensory reception exhibited in the passage. As it is, the colonial stricture of encagement

⁶³ McClure, *Scratching*, 155-6.

recomposes his sensorium for aesthesis as he becomes a resonant surface for animal affect. At the same time, McClure notes that the cage form threatens the snow leopard with “physical psychosis” and “madness,” and his extra-ordinary proximity to her allows the leopard to overcome “indifference” and express her energies in cathartic release. In the description of the growl, the leopard’s expression is not describable simply as signs of her anger. Able to focus on the expressive “physicality of her speech,” McClure claims the leopard momentarily *is* her speech act, as it involves her whole body. In Deleuze and Guattari’s language, this is an asymmetrical affective event in which deterritorialization occurs primarily on the side of the human listener: McClure’s perceptual and semiotic organization is loosened from representational habits as the growl is received as force rather than sign. As with the sea lions, McClure’s sensorium registers a complex of affects expressed in the leopard’s growl: “anger, anguish, warning, pain, even humor, fury.” The point is not that the leopard expresses all these inner emotions. Her speech—along with all the other sensory domains at work—create a block of affects that is already an aesthetic practice that acts directly on other bodies. The leopard’s vocalization itself remains fully territorial—an assertion of threat and boundary—but its effects are redistributed across the assemblage such that its territorial power is felt aesthetically rather than enacted physically. The growl operates as a forceful incision in the expressive field, reorganizing McClure’s perceptual capacities without dissolving the animal’s territorial stance. The cage, proximity, and saliva function as material conditions that intensify this encounter, not by neutralizing threat but by preventing its physical enactment while amplifying its affective impact. As a result, the leopard’s vocal territorialization and McClure’s sensory saturation reinforce one another, producing an encounter in which bodily material—breath, muscle, vibration—is apprehended as expressive force, as “music.”

Here both bodies suddenly change what they can do: the leopard's territorialization towards McClure produces both aesthetic and erotic effects precisely through a reduction in some of its capacities via the cage, and McClure takes on a submissive sexual role. The leopard's frustration at being caged is energetically bound up in her body and is momentarily released onto McClure's gratefully-receiving sensorium. Reading the description of the leopard's meat speech, or Beast Language, as the autonomous working of testicles with the following reference to the saliva on his face suggests the female snow leopard embodying a masculine, sexually dominant position. The saliva on McClure's face is a kind of sexual residue from the encounter, one that—recalling the divine aspirations of a tantric sexual act—leaves him “not smirched but cleansed” and in the eagerly receiving position of sexual fluids that he “hope[s] ... will never dry on [his] face.” Compared to much of McClure's erotic poetry wherein there are evident intersubject dynamics, in this encounter he is unusually passive besides the initial provocation. The cage as form enables McClure to experience a version of what he could not safely experience otherwise: the submissive (feminine) position to the leopard's energy and power. The erotics of Beast Language become sense-able through the colonial structure of the cage. It is an erotics emerging at the edge of being food—in Val Plumwood's words, “a sidereal identity in a fleshly, decaying body, thinking flesh, knowing flesh, singing flesh, flesh that knows of its own vulnerability.”⁶⁴ The “divine” quality McClure attributes to this moment does not indicate transcendence or mutual fusion, but rather the felt intensity of mammalian power as it is received and registered by the human body as inversion of masculine power and transgression of death.

Like McClure's theory of his own poetry, the leopard's speech has an organismic life of its own once it leaves her body: it externalizes force (breath, muscle, energy), but its material

⁶⁴ Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, ed. Lorraine Shannon (Australian National University Press, 2012), 15.

existence and affective powers are real and intensive on a pre-signifying level independent of their origin in either animal or human-animal poet. So rather than anthropomorphic prosopopoeia,⁶⁵ the Beast Language of the leopard is an autonomous expressive event in all its embodied origin (“It extends itself”), its co-expressive context (here colonial via the cage and the leopard’s displacement from its native land), and its effects on its listeners.

Ghost Tantras: Beast Language in Performance

When Beast Language becomes poetry proper, it is a human attempt to construct a poetic assemblage capable of sustaining animal intensities without reterritorializing them into representation. Rather than animal speech rendered human, it is human language deterritorialized toward animal expression. It is force becoming perceptible as form that demands attunement rather than interpretation from its reader/listener. This is consonant with the Hindu dimensions of its inspiration. When McClure describes in his preface to second edition of *Ghost Tantras* that the poems are “ninety-nine tantras to the goddess” and in the preface to the first edition, “[a] goddess lies coiled at the base of man’s body, and pure tantric sound might awaken her,” he is framing his project in the Hindu Śākta-Tantric tradition and Kundalini Yoga.⁶⁶ The book is composed of 99 tantras (poems) inspired by this tradition, which itself used non-referential vocal utterances to break through habitual mental barriers of illusion for enlightenment. Generically, a “tantra” in Hindu Śākta-Tantric tradition is a structured teaching or system of practice, particularly one that weaves together ritual, philosophy, meditation, and cosmology. In South Asian religious contexts, it often denotes a revelatory text that lays out esoteric teachings, usually

⁶⁵ The danger being: “We might give other animals a voice so that they can say what we want to hear, a move that reveals the anthropocentric bias of anthropomorphism.” Parkinson, *Animals*, 109.

⁶⁶ Michael McClure, *Ghost Tantras* (City Lights, 2013), unpaginated.

in the form of a dialogue between a deity and a disciple. Importantly however, poetry itself can be a sacrament; verse is not descriptive but operative, intended to arouse the goddess within the listener through vibration and rhythm.⁶⁷ Such generic features—chant-like repetition, invocatory address, and oscillation between awe and erotic surrender—stress that the goddess’s creative speech (*vāc*) is the very fabric of reality.⁶⁸ In this sense, *Ghost Tantras* functions as a modern *stotra* (devotional poem) stripped of its ritual frame: a spontaneous hymn to the goddess as vital energy, rendered in a language that fuses beastly utterance with sacred vibration. Crucially, *Śākta* insight provided by the empowered word (mantra) bridges animal, human, and divine life, an idea appealing to McClure rendered in his reference to “pure tantric sound” above. In Kundalini Yoga, mantras serve to activate and guide the flow of Kundalini Śakti (dormant divine energy) within the body. At this level, they are devotional poems to Śakti, central goddess of tantric practices and who is manifest within the body. Śakti only appears by name once in the collection,⁶⁹ but she is implied throughout the poem by the “thou” who is addressed. As a direct engagement with immanent, animating powers of the cosmos personified in Śakti, the poems are deeply animist even if also profoundly decontextualized and appropriated for McClure’s own purposes. Through my lens of animist expressionism, what tantric discourse names as Śakti or *vāc* can be translated at the level of poetic practice into an immanent field of affective force in which sound operates as a refrain that reorganizes bodily and perceptual relations. In this light, *Ghost Tantras* may be understood as experimenting with mantra-like utterance as a nonrepresentational technique to compose a poetics of embodied intensities.

⁶⁷ This develops in the medieval Śākta lyric tradition—the hymns of Rāmprasād Sen, Lallā Ded, and the Sanskrit *Śākta stotras*.

⁶⁸ See Woodroffe, *The Serpent Power*, and Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, esp. chapters on Śākta cosmology.

⁶⁹ McClure, *Ghost*, 3.

Critics have delineated how Beast Language emerged from McClure's study of abstract expressionism and Artaud.⁷⁰ The abstract expressionists informed McClure's general theory of poetry as an extension of his body, and Artaud inspired the primal, more-or-less non-linguistic utterances of beast language. Instead of pursuing this further—and keeping in mind McClure's turn from Artaud's form of interiority I argued for above—I want to consider its mammalian-aesthetic qualities as sound poetry before turning to its performance. In sound poetry, where symbolic semantics are side-stepped, what linguists refer to as “sound symbolism” takes the foreground. Recent developments in linguistics show—against the uses of Saussure so critically dominant in the latter half of the 20th Century—that a considerable portion of linguistic signs across world languages are non-arbitrary. Linguists use the term “sound symbolism” to a variety of cases in which there is a “direct linkage between sound and meaning” both conventionally (i.e. through a specific linguistic system) and non-conventional (cross-linguistic or near universal) utterances.⁷¹ A conventional example: the “gl” sound combination is non-arbitrary in English because it is systematically associated with the meaning “light.” A universal non-conventional example would be the cry of someone in danger. Sound symbolism also includes features of sound such as pitch or tone. We use sound symbolism all the time through the tone of our voice, but it plays an even more direct role in non-conventional enunciations like sighs, shouts, grunts, etc. These “vocal bursts” designates the range of non-verbal sounds humans make to express emotion; they are found to be “at least as universal [among humans] in meaning as

⁷⁰ see Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat* and Pawlik, “Artaud in Performance” for Artaud's influence on McClure. For McClure's relation to the American Abstract Expressionists, see also Kevin Power, “Michael McClure: ‘Cherries gleam above the blood of Geryon,’ *Revue française d'études américaines*, no 15 (1982): 411-438.

⁷¹ Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, and John Ohala, *Sound Symbolism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

facial expressions, demonstrating that people in many different cultures reliably attribute a range of specific meanings to different types of vocal bursts.”⁷²

While Beast Language might be fruitfully analyzed for its potential as a form of interspecies communication, this is not my goal, and—recalling McClure’s disavowal of communication—is not McClure’s either. Instead, Beast Language is primarily designed from expressive performance to human animals. However, it uses a common system of sound symbolism shared by many mammals. Among human corporeal sound symbolism, which scholars define as “the use of certain sounds or intonation patterns to express the internal state of the speaker, emotional or physical,” there is a range of sounds common to mammalian sound symbolism.⁷³ These are posited to have a similar expressive role, as researchers of animal vocalizations assume that animals exhibit less voluntary control of their emotional expressions, and so vocalizations should more or less directly reflect their emotional state.⁷⁴ I do not claim here that beast language draws upon exclusively universal components that extend the same way evenly across all mammals; nonetheless, he utilizes common signs such as growling and cooing that have remarkable preservation in both sign and meaning across many mammals.

Aesthetically employing sound symbolism disrupts speech’s uptake into linguistic symbolism and emphasizes humans’ participation in a common system of mammalian expressivity. An animist use of sound symbolism like McClure’s pushes such a system to speculative limits.

The poems may appear on the page to be a kind of cave-man language of grunts, growls, and roars—and indeed one of his favorite “words” in the language is some variation of “grahr”—but

⁷² Jeffrey A. Brooks et al., “Deep Learning Reveals what Vocal Bursts Express in Different Cultures,” *Nature Human Behavior* 7 (2023): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01489-2>.

⁷³ Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala, *Sound Symbolism*, 2-3.

⁷⁴ E. F. Briefer, “Vocal Expression of Emotions in Mammals: Mechanisms of Production and Evidence,” *Journal of Zoology* 288 (2012): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7998.2012.00920.x>.

listening to recordings of McClure's readings do affirm the subtleties in volume, tone, and duration that one might expect from the musical side of "muscular music." Perhaps surprisingly, more than anything, he *croons*. Beast Language is not meant to represent a universal mammalian language; instead, its expressive regime shares consistencies with many but not all mammals.⁷⁵ While an expression of corporeal sound symbolism typically takes place alone as a brief, complete utterance,⁷⁶ McClure strings such utterances into a non-denotative language. This returns human speech to what Abram refers to as its primary *aesthetic* and *pragmatic* functions: "to affirm that linguistic meaning is primarily expressive, gestural, and poetic, and that conventional and denotative meanings are inherently secondary and derivative, is to renounce the claim that 'language' is an exclusively human property. If language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant, then it can never be definitively separated from the evident expressiveness of birdsong, or the evocative howl of a wolf late at night."⁷⁷ If we laugh at Beast Language (as the audience often does when he performs from *Ghost Tantras*), "[t]he laughter becomes a moment of deterritorialization (an abandonment of being inside or outside the social terrain) that works against reason."⁷⁸

To begin with beast-language's sonic qualities, although beast language does engage a range of vowels and consonants, McClure often utilizes certain phonetic patterns. Beast language tends toward the back vowels /u/ and /oo/ as well as the central open /a/. Favored consonant phonemes are /g/ and /h/, and frequent consonant combinations are "gr" and "dr." He employs

⁷⁵ McClure himself thought Beast Language unfit for kangaroos at the San Francisco Zoo during the same time he read to the lions: "I decided beast language was not right for them, so I recited Chaucer. A couple of them literally clamored down from the stumps they were on, walked over to the edge of the moat and stood in a wobbly-wavy way looking at me." I will speculate that Chaucer's more gentle and rhythmic prosody was at least non-threatening, but perhaps it was the pitch and cadence of McClure's voice reading that would be unusual and interesting to them. Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat* 340.

⁷⁶ Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala, *Sound Symbolism*, 2.

⁷⁷ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 80.

⁷⁸ Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 112.

the front vowel /i/ rarely, nearly universally associated with the diminutive.⁷⁹ Paired with data linking low-frequency vocalizations in many animals to aggression versus high-frequency vocalization (such as yelps) to submission, there is at least an assertive bent in McClure's language.⁸⁰ Considering these are dedicated to Śakti, they are a particular apostrophic relationship with her that is frequently quite sensual considering the tone: he often draws on and draws out the sensual associations that phonetic vowels /a/ and /u/ have to make this worship fully embodied. The reading to the lions that I now address however lands clearly on the aggressive-expressive spectrum of his Beast Language phonetics.

McClure visited the San Francisco Zoo to record himself performing to and with the lions first in 1964 as a tape recording done by Bruce Connor and again in 1966 in a famous video recording featured in Richard O. Moore's landmark *USA Poetry* television series.⁸¹ I will reference both the earlier audio recording⁸² and the video.⁸³ His reading of Tantra 49 to the four lions activates a shared mammalian affective field as he instructs them to turn toward interior experience in mostly English and then activates their own territorial refrains in his famous "Ghrahrr" litany:

SILENCE THE EYES! BECALM THE SENSES!
Drive droor from the fresh repugnance, thou whole,
thou feeling creature. Live not for others but affect thyself
from thy enhanced interior — believing what thou carry.
Thy trillionic multitude of grahh, vhooshes, and silences.
Oh you are heavier and dimmer than you knew
and more solid and full of pleasure.
Grahhr! Grahhr! Ghrahhr! Ghrahrr. Grahhr.
Grahrr-grahhr ! Grahhr. Grahrr Ghrahhr.

⁷⁹ Ultan, Russell. "Size-sound symbolism." *Universals of human language* 2 (1978): 525-568.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Charles Bernstein, "Michael McClure Reads to Lions," *Jacket2*, July 31, 2014
<https://jacket2.org/commentary/michael-mcclure-reads-lions>.

⁸² "Michael McClure Reads to Lions, 1964 and 1966," PennSound Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, 2014, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/McClure/McClure-Michael_reading-Beat-Language-to-Lions.mp3

⁸³ *ibid.*, <https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/McClure.php>.

Ghrarrrr. Ghrahr ! Ghrarrrr. Gharrrr. Ghrahhr.
 Ghrahrr. Ghrahr. Grahhr. Graharr. Grahrr.
 Grahhr. Grahhr. Gahr. Ghrahr. Grahrr. Grahrr.
 Ghrahr. Grahhr. Grahrr. Gratharr ! Grahrr.
 Ghrahr. Ghraaaaaahrr. Grhar. Ghrrarr ! Grahrr.
 Ghrahr. Gharr ! Ghrahhr. Grahrr. Ghrahrr.⁸⁴

Even though Tantra 49 would be an obvious choice to inspire a participatory reading with lions considering the “grahr” refrain that closes the poem, the imperative drive toward interoception and its inner bodyscape of intensities serves as a recommendation to contend with the “psychosis of encagement and madness” mentioned above considering the lions’ inability to engagement their sensorium in the ways they were designed to on the savannah in the severely stymied environment of the zoo. In “drive drooor from the fresh repugnance,” the lengthened “droor” is a kind of rumbling, low-intensity attentive capacity that can spark higher intensity outburst (e.g. Tantra 53: “THIS IS MY BODY’S WORK. MY MIND IS HE / noor thahln ahh deem err. Droor moveth ... Aeiiiiiii”), here mobilized to turn from this depleting exteriority of sensation to an inner organic landscape of rhythmic power, a “trillionic multitude of grahh, vhooshes, and silences” denoting the activity of the sub-beings of organisms nested within the body. The following litany of “grahr”—rendered in unequal accretions of *h*’s and *r*’s and variant spellings to prevent the refrain from being mechanical—intends to incite this inner multitude of sub-beings enclosed from light (“dimmer”) to unified expression as means to reclaim a selfhood that is a tactile weight (“heavier,” “more solid”) of the body and—at least through this act—relishing in the pleasure of self-affection. The relationship McClure attempts to establish with the lions is that of the anti-psychiatry therapist as he attempts to treat their psychosis through a Reichian, expressive therapeutics of the body. Reich appears as a source for his theorizing of Revolt,⁸⁵ and

⁸⁴ McClure, *Ghost Tantras*, 49.

⁸⁵ McClure, *Meat Science*, 60

as Douglas Kahn observes, “Reich argued for a move away from the *word language* of the talking cure to a *biological language* expressed by the body, thereby paralleling ... McClure’s muscle speech.”⁸⁶ Before Arthur Janov’s primal scream therapy, McClure and the lions roared together in this “biological language” to overcome limiting self-notions internalized from environment. McClure asserts the therapeutic value of these signs in Tantra 82: “The heavy curtains [of Maya] are raised / by roaring / upward flowing with implesharr grahh grace” (82). The possibility of this relation is perceived possible since for McClure human-made bonds delimit the lions’ “Spirit” (as “REVOLT” would have it) in a way analogous to the social bonds that accomplish the same effect in humans. In true Blakean fashion, it is through opposition that development occurs. A masculine mammality aggressive or at least playfully antagonistic in its confrontation is intended to help stir revolt by stimulating the body to overcome complacent or stymied psychic states.

This performance of the poem is thus socially animist in that it assumes analogous psychic pathologies in humans and animals while then treating said pathologies through a therapeutic relation communicated by signs both linguistic and sound-symbolic. It is in many ways a contemporary Orphic poetic mode that Marcuse describes: “[t]he world of nature is a world of oppression, cruelty, and pain, as is the human world; like the latter, it awaits its liberation. This liberation is the work of Eros. The song of Orpheus breaks the petrification, moves the forests and the rocks—but moves them to partake in joy.”⁸⁷ While the lion’s particular pain here comes from the fact he no longer has recourse to the “world of nature,” the basic assumption is the same: the poet’s role is to liberate both nature and humans from suppression and repression. More directly, McClure is also assuming the role of Milarepa, who appears as an

⁸⁶ Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 341-2.

⁸⁷ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 166.

inspiration in Tantra 2. In Milarepa's Vajrayāna Buddhism, the skillfully used voice with its vibratory mastery is intended as a salvific force. Milarepa converts local deities and other spirits that he finds dwelling in mountain caves and the wilderness by singing, even singing to the snow to release him after a storm traps him in a cave and to goddesses appearing as pigeons.⁸⁸ Here McClure would use sound symbolism to help the lion find and express its own vibratory energy for its power, freedom, and enlightenment. The roaring at the end of the poem recalls a comparison of Milarepa to a lion by his disciple, Rechung. He describes him delivering the dharma with the "deep, thundering roar of a lion" and that he "revelled [sic] in freedom in the limitless and centreless sphere of the heavens, like an unbridled lion roaming free among the mountain ranges"⁸⁹ Power and freedom are all embodied in the becoming-lion that is the gift of enlightenment, then directed through voice to the lucky receiver of the dharma. Treating trauma through poetry as both therapy and vessel for enlightenment, while perhaps a fantasy more than a possibility, nonetheless restages both the typically anthropocentric audience of poetic address as well as its intended interventions.

The two recordings have distinct effects. The tape recording delivers a very impressive depiction of the lions, as the listener is easily absorbed into the raw and immense power and qualities of the lions' roars without visual information. The lions are quiet at first but gradually begin roaring during the first part of the poem, which McClure performs loudly but not yet shouting. During the "grahr" litany, McClure roars and the lions really join in; his roars do not follow the nuance of the roars on the page, which I suspect is simply because he wanted to match the power of the lions and thereby lost the subtle distinctions. There is around a minute of audio

⁸⁸ While this latter process represents the historical conversion from Tibetan animist cosmologies to Buddhism, such place-based deities continue to play a role in Tibetan Buddhist cosmology. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, trans. and ed., *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa* (Pilgrims Publishing, 2002), 238-239.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 35.

after the poem ends that the lions continue roaring. Audio deterritorializes the confrontation's roars into an immediation that asks for some response in the face of lions' sonic power and McClure's becoming-mammal. Viewing the video is a much more ambivalent experience, as it shows clear signs of the lions' stress as they pace in their holding cages. The lions are actually stressed before the reading even starts—perhaps because of the presence of the unfamiliar humans and their equipment, or perhaps McClure was recording multiple takes. In the video McClure's body is still, not pressed up against barriers as he reported in his confrontation with the snow leopard, but he is still very close, leaning in just a few feet from one of the cages. Their agitation clearly rises during the shouted “grahr” litany, as does their roaring response, which is almost continuous with McClure's refrain. For the viewer of the video, the lions are rather more ambivalent blocks of affect: they are the power-intensifiers that McClure would have for some viewers, but they are pathetic victims for others. This is evident in the YouTube comments, which are frequently scathing towards McClure for stressing them out. The lions in the video display pacing behaviors, commonly interpreted to indicate stress in response to this perceived threat.⁹⁰ One of them even stands up at one point. In the video especially, the viewer is drawn into a zone where the lion's encaged perspective reorganizes the terms of encounter. The lions' personhood compels a world organized by lion-capacities, lion-affects, and lion-sound-symbolism. For some viewers, this is McClure's world of “rebel lions”—symbols and affect-bearers of revolt. For others, it is stress-signs that territorialize the viewing, compelling concern for lion wellbeing as victims. Within the animist performance, to return to Kubiak, McClure is certainly concerned and responding to their “dis-ease” of containment and staging this

⁹⁰ Considering behavioral research on lions in zoos, this is a result of both being caged and their lack of “ability to control their access to social stimuli.” Meredith J. Bashaw et al., “Environmental Effects on the Behavior of Zoo-housed Lions and Tigers, with a Case Study of the Effects of a Visual Barrier on Pacing,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 10: no. 2 (2007): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888700701313116>.

performance within their sphere of sentience; reading generously, expression might be truly cathartic for the lions. In both cases, the “grahr” litany solicits, synchronizes, and intensifies the lions’ vocalizations into a shared human-lion refrain, presumably producing an immediation that stages revolt as a shared possibility.

But regardless of whether one thinks the confrontation is beneficial or harming for the lions, the cage is the true content of the performance as its enabling condition. The performance stages the ambiguity of animist compassion trying to operate with the “machinic assemblage of bodies” that enter into colonial expression. This is the limit-case where animist expressionism where potential deterritorializations are bottlenecked by performance’s limits. As the whole field of the event participates in performance, the resonance of territorial confrontation holds the event together, but coloniality is its expressive force as much as revolt. McClure does not become responsible or accountable to the lions even while they serve as an affective operator throughout his poetry towards becoming-mammal. The lions that appear throughout McClure’s work are not exactly “symbols;” rather it is the affects his body receives from them that then become the stance of revolt in his own expression.⁹¹ Yet in traditional animism, McClure would have responsibility and obligations to actual lions who would bear a personhood more ethically consequential. It is hard to imagine an Indigenous writer performing such a reading. Indeed, Indigenous peoples have historically been all too familiar with a kind of reverse situation,

⁹¹ “A rebel lion is a spirit in revolt against his or her own custom and habit.” McClure, *Rebel Lions*, vii-ix.

captured and placed on display.⁹² The ethical dimensions of the performance are many however, and I will leave more development to the footnotes.⁹³

The effects of McClure's confrontations are real and interesting in the way they stage masculine vulnerability (the sea lions he feared could have charged him), erotic submission (with the leopard), and weakness (McClure's "grahrs" of course pale in comparison to the lions' power). Read obliquely, McClure's animal confrontations are an attempt towards reclaiming these animist traditions common to being human and initiatory masculinity. The vital difference of course is context. McClure's confrontations are enabled by colonial conditions and structured

⁹² It is also worth noting that if McClure conceives of the lions as nonhuman persons, this personhood does not carry the ethical boundaries of human personhood; it is also unthinkable that McClure would have read the poem to an encaged human person. However, this recalls the "ethnographic exhibitions" of Indigenous peoples encaged or otherwise, practiced until not so long before McClure's reading. It is also worth recalling the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in 1904, which included "model schools" of Native children from boarding schools demonstrating literacy achievements. In both cases, less-than-human-persons are forced to participate in forms of literacy for a white public. The lion's "literacy" here however is supposedly its own literacy—its self-expression—on whose terms McClure attempts to meet in part through Beast Language. Nancy J Parezo and Don D Fowler, *The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition: Anthropology Goes to the Fair* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

⁹³ The reading with the lions would rile an animal ethics founded on the belief that stress equals suffering. This equation only applies *tout court* to chronic stress. The lions both subjected to and participating in McClure's reading were likely engaged in a dominance contest over territory. Although the volume of McClure's reading was the primary feature that inspired the lions' wrath, considering the phonetic properties of beast language that I outlined above, it is perhaps not surprising that the lions would respond aggressively. Certainly, defending their territory was acutely stressful as evinced in their vigorous physical excitation and roar response, but there's no reason to conclude this caused them to suffer. While there is no direct evidence that the lions benefitted from McClure's provocations, research on environmental enrichment, behavioral agency, and species-typical territorial activation in captive carnivores suggests that opportunities for successful environmental engagement and defensive display may mitigate some effects of captivity-induced stress and stereotypy. Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 1998). McClure's reading intended to incite, share, and revel in an expression of power with animals who utterly lack it. Obviously granting true agency to these animals would entail transferring them to a different kind of environment—if not in the wild, then to a larger sanctuary—but within the capacities McClure had, it is still possible and even likely this was not an experience that brought them suffering; it could even have inspired some of its intended effects. At the very least, the lions' forced participation in this encounter is questionable; an animal's being given the choice whether to interact with humans or not through having a spatial refuge hidden from the human gaze is important to ethical zoo encounters. Sabrina Brando and Elizabeth S. Herrelko, "Wild Animals in the City: Considering and Connecting with Animals in Zoos and Aquariums" in *Animals in our Midst: The Challenges of Co-existing with Animals in the Anthropocene*, eds. Bernice Bovenkerk and Jozef Keulartz (Springer, 2021), 352. That McClure attempted to treat the lions through purely psychic means rather than material (that is, advocating for better material conditions for the lions) points to the limitations of a politics in which "[a]ll revolt is personal:" namely, that psychic "liberation" on a large enough scale is simply assumed to eventually create less pathological social conditions without any clear delineation of how this is supposed to happen. Michael McClure, *Meat Science*, 65. That his performance attempts therapy in single sessions (not to mention their being primarily staged for the aesthetic enjoyment of humans through audio and visual recording) also show the limits of the relationality proposed.

through colonial relations to other-than-human persons, especially in the zoo form. His seeking out intensive events of becoming-mammal makes sense within a discourse of masculinity that saw modes of both Nazi and American conformism as two apotheoses of industrial society's mechanizing of men's capacities and energies for deathly ends: the first in the war machine and the second by stymying them through increasingly alienated labor and psychological repression. A perceived reclamation of primitive masculinities through expressive practices of libidinal and repressed energies, alternative communities, and animal affects attempts an escape from capitalism's alienations, even if ultimately unsuccessful in remaking culture as a whole. I do not however read McClure's primitivist masculinity as merely reactionary, nostalgic, and reified masculinist bids for power within the emerging countercultural sphere. From an animist perspective, it makes sense that—at a time when behavioral strictures started loosening (first only for white men of course)—men would want to “animate” their masculinity: that is, to construct masculine identity through relations to nonhuman beings and—for McClure at least—to explore masculinity in relations to its capacities for vulnerability, submission, and weakness in addition to aggressiveness. Such attempts of course are not without problematic ideas of gender and settler moves to innocence. My goal is not to “repair” the damage of this relation but to reveal the field of forces at work in the confrontations. It is not even McClure's valuation of animal affects nor confrontation itself that is ultimately the problem, but rather the duality of what relations his confrontations are actually staging. McClure's confrontations dramatize the risks of animist relations under coloniality's machinic assemblage of bodies to do further harm on nonhumans and the resonance of the poet-role unbounded from obligation even as they suggest more ethically relational potential. Reading his mammal confrontations is structurally diagnostic of both a midcentury craving for immediacy under conditions where mediation cannot

be escaped and poetic performance as a spectacular encounter rather than a sustained, normatively constrained practice. The drive toward becoming-mammal can be understood as a crisis of expressive location as the poet attempts to discover where the Western human subject ends and where ecological relation begins.

Becoming-Person and the Expressive Event

Although becoming-mammal structures some of the most iconic moments of *Ghost Tantras*, I end this chapter by developing becoming-person in the devotional poems of the book and in the systems-biology and Buddhist turn in *Specks*. What links the devotional personifications of *Ghost Tantras* to what I will show to be a more diagrammatic personhood of *Specks* is McClure's treatment of personhood as an expressive achievement rather than an ontological given. In *Ghost Tantras*, the figure of Śakti emerges as a dividual person assembled through techniques of Beast Language mobilized as devotional address. By the time of *Specks*, this insight has expanded beyond the goddess figure into a generalized animist poetics in which personhood appears wherever relations temporarily stabilize into a consequential center of organic experience. McClure thus moves from composing a single animist person to a poetry of scalar mobility in which juxtaposed levels of organic personhood generate experiments in writing animist experience.

I want to now pick up an earlier thread and consider: what are the animist implications of sound-symbolic poems framed in part as devotionals to a Hindu goddess? The poems should be considered in the context of his practice of Kundalinī yoga, at least as he received it from Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power*.⁹⁴ Kahn describes the basic process:

⁹⁴ Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 341.

The Goddess Shakti, a powerful energy coiled at rest at the base of the trunk, through various means employed by the yogi is awakened and begins the ascent, often intensely experienced as a molten flow of energy, up the spine through the chakras. Both the coiled, dormant energy and the spine itself when fused with the rising power are often symbolized as a snake. As the serpent reaches and cleanses the chakra, various states are achieved and powers obtained, until it reaches the top of the head, where a fusion with pure consciousness occurs.⁹⁵

The intended goal of traditional Kundalinī meditation is to dissolve the Śakta energy of its initial lower-chakra carnality as it reaches the state of pure consciousness.⁹⁶ Kahn proposes that McClure’s use of Beast Language however, in all its carnal mammalian affects, might then be described as a “malfunction” of the original intention of the Kundalinī process from the traditional perspective. This might not be surprising considering the range of rather cavalier midcentury appropriations of Eastern philosophies and spiritual practices of which McClure is one example.

However, rather than merely dismiss the overtly Kundalinī passages of *Ghost Tantras* as botched appropriation, this frees me to examine them on their own terms and analyze the particular abstract machine diagrammed through McClure’s idiosyncratic Beast Language version of the Kundalinī process. The devotional Śakti pomes in *Ghost Tantras* enact Śakti as a dividual person gathering and intensifying Beast Language vocalization, sensation, ritual and erotic energy, and devotional address into the poem as one expressive event. More technically, Śakti functions as part of the event’s “form of expression” that imposes an order on the “substance of expression” that are Beast Language’s phonemes and affects.⁹⁷ In Tantra 95 Śakti appears immanent in the landscape: “In the emptiness thy face appearest upon the hills.” She is a “Mirror of my absolute pale harmony made real.”⁹⁸ Rather than instrumentalized for Śiva-

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 343.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 344.

⁹⁷ Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 42-43.

⁹⁸ McClure, *Ghost Tantras*, 95.

consciousness, Śakti operates poetically as a transpersonal figure through which ecstasy, landscape, and erotic vitality are gathered into felt consistency. The poem most clearly depicting Kundalinī meditation, Tantra 90, shows McClure recalling an ecstatic experience of chakra meditation. He recounts to Śakti how “I drew thee up” through his spine, “cleaning the nerve tube.” Through visualization of her “Power” in him, he “felt movement” from the fourth to the sixth chakras, a repetition in the body that he describes as “thou memorensorium ! / Each return a joyful surprise / without fail !”⁹⁹ The final tantra of the book closes with a celebration of Śakti’s immanence as cosmo-organic pleasure in the human-mammalian body:

IN TRANQUILITY THY GRAHRR AYOHH
 ROOHOOERING
 GRAHAYAOR GAHARRR GRAHHR GAHHR
 THEOWSH NARR GAHROOOOOOOOH GAHRR
 GRAH GAHRRR ! GRAYHEEOARR GRAHRGM
 THAHRR NEEOWSH DYE YEOR GAHRR
 grah groom gahhr nowrt thowtooom obleeomosh.
 AHH THEEAHH ! GAHR GRAH NAYEEROOOO
 GAHROOOOOM GRHH GARAHHR OH THY
 NOOOSHEORRTOMESH GREEEEGRAHARRR
 OH THOU HERE, HERE, HERE IN MY FLESH
 RAISING THE CURTAIN
 HAIEAYORR-REEEEHORRRR
 in tranquility.

LOVE
 thy
 ! oh my oohblesh !¹⁰⁰

Such poems certainly complicate the claim that “Nobody has yet ever heard the non-linguistic voice of the body. This would be an absolute voice, non-semantic, non-representative and—precisely—non-linguistic.”¹⁰¹ The English content is fairly simple: that through devotional arousal

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰¹ Cimatti, *Unbecoming Human*, 141.

of Śakti within the body to energetically rise through the chakras, one is “RAISING THE CURTAIN” of illusion and enabling “tranquility” and “LOVE.” The prevalence of the /u/ vowel through the “OO” and /a/ through “AH” in this makes this a poem of autoaffected crooning and pleasure. While in “Tantra 90” presents a relatively recognizable scene of meditative ascent, the closing tantra foregrounds sound and vibration itself modifying his body as an expressive, mammalian event. The “GR” becomes no longer a vibration of territoriality as was the case in “Tantra 49” but rather an emphatic purr. This change in sound makes the refrain work as a maintenance of intimacy rather a territorial device for provocation. “AHH THEEAHH!” (which I will transliterate “ah thee!”), and “OH THY” along with “LOVE / thy” (“thy” can function both as a possessive and as the object pronoun “thee” in beast language) receive the pleasure of Śakti as an activated mode of immanent experience. What *Ghost Tantra* experiments with then is the poetic production and subsequent empowerment of personhood itself in ways resonant with traditional animist poetic expressivity. In the West Coast tribute to McClure after his death, poet Andrew Schelling described how in a remote village in the Himalayan foothills he taught *Ghost Tantras* to Indian writing students, who reportedly “took to these tantras with extraordinary exhilaration,”¹⁰² perhaps not signaling faithfulness of the poems with Hindu traditions, but certainly suggesting shared animist modes and affects of Śakti-personification.

McClure’s engagement with Hindu and Buddhist philosophy is significant to his animism, and I do not want to give the impression that “Revolt” and Beast Language form the main animist aspects of McClure’s work nor the entirety of his poetics. By the mid-1980s, McClure had developed what I call animist expressionism under systems-biology and Buddhism into a practice of provisional person-making. Here persons are temporary centers of experience

¹⁰² “Michael McClure Memorial Tribute,” *LIVE! From City Lights*, August 13, 2021, 1:18:28-1:1:20:27, <https://soundcloud.com/livefromcitylights/michael-mcclure-memorial-tribute>.

within an open, empty, and interconnected field in which linguistic coding plays a necessary but also ultimately empty role. Interestingly, while the spinal form is peppered throughout *Specks*, conventional left-aligned poems and prose passages are common, speaking to a more descriptive scale of interest. He rethinks animism through distributed systems, and the immediation and expression of the earlier work is accompanied by an investigation of the person as a “diagram” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense: an “abstract machine” or the ideational patterns of an assemblage that produce revisable and pragmatic forms of personhood.

What the poems in *Specks* dramatize is not simply the proposition that “everything is alive” but the continual rescaling of assemblages. McClure is interested in the ways biological systems such as organisms are not persons in essence but rather as nested, scale-relative, and functional consistencies:

The King and Queen pretend they are Gods and Goddesses. Gods and Goddesses pretend they are Titans. Titans pretend they are Complex Molecules.

We are baby lives.

THE ARGUMENT IS DIVINE!

The starfish dance
and kiss.

Limpets on the rocks
have harems.

WE

ARE
THE BLESSING

of space
!

The argument, the fight, the battle, the war is a meeting of systems.

Systems float in larger systems. They often change shape. There are no systems. There are systems. They are something else. They are nothingness.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ McClure, *Specks*, 20.

The passage performs scalar animism through its serial syntax and abrupt shifts between prose and centered lyric. The isolated “WE // ARE / THE BLESSING // of space” suspends the human pronoun within white space, presenting “we” as a provisional spatial arrangement rather than the poem’s stable ontological center. Organisms are all “gods” for McClure (the line “THE GOPHER SNAKE IN THE CREVICE IS A GOD” that opens his poem “BEYOND THOUGHT” makes this plain enough), and this extends all the way down within the organism’s sub-beings.¹⁰⁴ We are systems of systems, or assemblages of assemblages, participating in systems and assemblages larger than ourselves; wholes and parts continually exchange roles, and personhood is scalar: it appears wherever a system temporarily stabilizes a point of view capable of response (again figured in opposition: “the fight, the battle, the war”). Each person, whether a cell, an organ, an organism, or a social role (“The King and Queen”) are centers of consequence within a larger field. Personhood is “empty” in the Mahayana Buddhist sense in that they do not have an essence nor a stable ideal form: they are dependently derived and contextual. If limpets “have harems,” the poem grants even seemingly insignificant organisms participation in the same expressive and relational field as kings, gods, and humans. Kings become gods, gods become titans, titans become molecules; wholes become parts and parts become wholes. What is distinctive about McClure’s mid-career animist poetics is that this scalar ontology becomes a compositional principle: the poem shifts the reader between levels of the organization of personhood without granting ontological priority to any one of them.

In his left-aligned passages, the diagrammatic mode of personhood comes to the foreground. What emerges is a pragmatic Buddhist account of personhood that posits personifications as flexible requirements of an expressive event in question. In an especially

¹⁰⁴ Michael McClure, *September Blackberries* (New Directions, 1974), 33.

diagrammatic passage, he reflects on the role of personification in the living accessed through language via poetry and science:

Language is the body — an extension of the body.

English requires personifications — qualities and states and so forth are made into persona. Some personifications are shown with capitals — *West Wind* and *Nature*. Others are not usually shown: *Childhood*, *Hunger*, *Stress*, *Pleasure*

English denies personifications just as it implies them.

Language is for poetry and science. Poetry and science do not intend communication.

Science and poetry diversify and extend the cave of the sensorium.

The universes are a cave of Nothing.

Personifications may be used — or not used — freely. Poetry and science create and abandon personifications with impunity and joy.

Science and poetry are Boys and Girls with toy boats.

Chinese is not English. No tenses.

Personifications that are not abandoned become strictures.

Self-image is personification.

Dissolve self-image with sun-up, noon, and sunset.

Absence of personification is shapelessness.

Real mythologies are invented moment to moment.¹⁰⁵

“Personification” operates here as a refrain whose meaning is repeatedly composed and undone. Capitalization briefly gives abstractions the consistency of persons, while parataxis, contradiction, and white space prevent those persons from becoming “strictures.” The passage creates and abandons centers of agency from one aphoristic unit to the next. Personification as a conceptual strategy, a diagrammatic operator, is an epistemological tool for the bodymind as

¹⁰⁵ McClure, *Specks*, 7.

organic system. In other words, personification is an ontological function that allows systems to attend to themselves or one another. Buddhism does not just undermine personhood; instead, it explains why personhood is temporary, tactical, and dissolvable, able to be “abandoned” as the situation demands. As all beings are both continuity and discontinuity, both personification and de-personification are required to grasp the consequential but empty nature of the world’s intersubjectivity. This interplay is necessary to create “[r]eal mythologies,” to weave meaning amidst the creation and destruction of identities through the stream of experience. Personification is a temporary diagram that allows an organic system to feel, think, or perceive itself at a given scale. “Language is the body — an extension of the body” because it is part of the assemblage, entering as its “form of expression” in Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding, meaning that “the real” of our instantiation as organic beings is inseparable from our expressivity. This is the McClure of becoming-person, guided by a resonance to become worthy to the animacy of the event:

Our sensoriums pass over an event and various particles of the event stimulate our sub-beings. Our life, which is an aggregate — a sensory model — is then brought into brighter being.

Or: we move

through an event — which is a purely arbitrary segment of what we can perceive. And/or: we, and the event, cybernetically bring each other into being and shape the totality of what is perceived.

Or:

all of these possibilities, or none of them, or some of them, or some of them, plus something else.¹⁰⁶

If he does not settle on a model, McClure is less a philosopher than a poet invested in the intensification of experience (“brighter being”) among, with, through, and as an ecological reality. By shifting agency from “our sensoriums” to “we” and finally to “we, and the event,” the syntax formally constructs the reciprocal personhood it describes. The resonance holding

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 41.

together *Specks* and the majority of McClure's work is this desire. The animist poet is one whose sensorium attunes to the ecologically intensive nature of the event, who can affirm the real with the antagonisms that compose the net of relations. *Specks* above all is a book of wonder—wonder for the beauty of experience amongst the strife occurring between and among systems-persons across all scales. This is the McClure of becoming-person. Rather than seeking access to a privileged mammalian authenticity, *Specks* increasingly treats personhood itself as a poetic operation. The poem becomes a site for creating, revising, and abandoning personifications as situations demand, allowing organisms, affects, social roles, and ecological processes to emerge as temporary centers of consequence. In this sense, McClure's later animist expressionism generalizes the personifying operation first concentrated in the figure of Śakti, transforming it into a compositional practice through which consequential relations become perceptible across an ecology of assemblages, while depersonification prevents those relations from hardening into fixed identities.

McClure singularly does intuit something important: expressionism is a means to make poetry and its embodied performance a participation with the nonhuman world as force-bearing event rather a representational discourse cut off from the real. All his poetry pushes this point, but *Beast Language* and its performance advances it furthest. Being an animist-expressionist poet itself is a task of sensorium development, of attuning to the event in all its complexity. Animism is not benevolently accomplished either through the fetishization and projection of a personhood that is just Western human subjectivity in disguise or an absolute deterritorialization of or evacuation from human personhood. Becoming-person instead shows personhood as a contingent relational technology, stabilizing intensities long enough for their ethical stakes to become perceptible amongst the changing demands of events. Its analysis reveals the set of

constraints that make animist relation livable—constraints in ongoing colonial infrastructures of space, desire, time, and animal-human sociality among others. McClure does not engage becoming-person as a means for grounded normativity; instead, he is a poet of the event. McClure calls for a reorientation towards ourselves that might allow us to “BECOME[] COUSINS / with all creatures” and reconsider the very telos of our bodies from an animist ecology: “THE CHAMBERS OF THE EAR ARE THERE / FOR THE SNOW LEOPARD, THE WOLF, / the lichen, and the salmon to speak to.”¹⁰⁷ This is becoming-performance, a listening within the overlapping spheres of sentience, and the work of attunement. While he stages the ambivalences of ethical animist relations, McClure guides us to attune to and affirm the ecology of the event, to become expressive of all the becoming-person we are able to perceive and imagine, and to participate in the event with a creative confidence, even if that participation must also recognize and negotiate its complicity under colonial conditioning.

¹⁰⁷ McClure, “THE SKULL” in *September Blackberries*, 26; 23.

CHAPTER FOUR

Transversal Propositions: Composing Animist-Panpsychist Star Relations in Mei-mei

Berssenbrugge's *A Treatise on Stars*

Pandemic Stargazing

In an interview about the creative propulsion behind *A Treatise on Stars*, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge reports how ecological collapse and the recent viral pandemic revealed a cosmic imperative for her new work:

I've been desperate to see, create, a world that extends beyond the immediate degradations of Earth, and I see Covid-2 as an emissary of this challenge. Fighting the awesome virus myself showed me a huge, otherworldly force that was beyond my preconceptions of ecology and stability.

I'm trying to incorporate this vitality into writing without being enigmatic, and the word that comes is possibility. How to incorporate possibility into my perception and then my assessment, so that one's perception of possibility acts on the future? Even before, I found hope to be too small in scale. The dynamism I was shown is so vast.¹

While the tendency for personal suffering and general apocalypse to elicit a desire for a vaster order or refuge might seem an inadequate response to the public catastrophe, redirecting precious attention from immanent problems to transcendent comforts, Berssenbrugge nonetheless follows a speculative intuition that this perceptual orientation to a cosmic "vitality" or "force" can create "possibility" where none seem available. She opens this possibility through writing a book of poems she calls a "treatise" declaiming not just a cosmic vitalism, but also a panpsychist interpretation of quantum physics in which speakers and characters relate with stars and cosmic phenomena. As a text driven to a kind of animism by a "desperate" feeling, Berssenbrugge's

¹ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's Poetry of Attention: The possibilities of perception," interview by Lacey Jones, *The Yale Review*, June 21, 2021. Accessed September 30, 2025. <https://yalereview.org/article/-mei-mei-berssenbrugge-interview>.

Treatise exemplifies a broader contemporary phenomenon in which widespread ecological catastrophe is mobilizing some towards animistic ontologies. While the tone of her book traverses the spectrum between this painful exigence and the ludic, the work posits that its ontologically speculative ventures into the possibilities of animist cosmic relating are worth their conjectural nature. In fact, Berssenbrugge deliberately emphasizes the confidence of her speakers' and characters' ontological assertions to the point of New Age and magical thinking, essentially asking if the way out of catastrophe is through a troubling of our rationalities and realisms so drastic that it verges on the *impossible*. Studies of the emergent, contemporary animisms among Westernized peoples that are proliferating need tools here not necessarily to parse the truth or falsity of claims, but rather ways to understand their pragmatics—the possibilities for worlds they would make and unmake.

Berssenbrugge re-enchants the cosmos to re-world with relational possibility by advancing a foregrounded, relational ontology of stars that is less about *what* stars are than about how we exist with them. Westernization has backgrounded stars and the entire cosmos from the narrowly anthropocentric foreground of the social and the personal. Besides being literally obscured from perception by industrialist light pollution, stars of course have been disenchanted through scientific materialism. In an interview Berssenbrugge laments that reductionist, scientific epistemologies have “taken [the stars] away from us because they’re presented in terms of thermodynamics, nuclear fusions, mathematical calculations, and physical measurements, the same as with our bodies.”² While there is wonder to be felt through scientific discoveries, the stars are rendered largely irrelevant from everyday human life. This combined with their literal obfuscation creates a phenomenological terra-centrism in our experience, severing the stars from

² Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge," interviewed by Angela Hume, *Lana Turner*, no. 13 (2021): 222.

meaningful participation in what counts as reality—in effect depotentializing this “layer” of perception from acting on Earth. In response, Berssenbrugge relates animistically to the stars, explaining, “I have been trying to return the stars to myself as living beings and companions, as all things are living beings. I try to experience them as nurturing, as all things are evolving toward a more conscious whole.”³ Taking up both the more classical notion of animism (“all things are living beings”), the new animism (viewing and addressing them as “companions” or persons), and a cosmic, organicist intentionality (“evolving toward a more conscious whole”), her description in this interview constellates these terms that I will explore below. She is not dogmatic about the ontology of stars; she playfully moves between “spirit,” “extraterrestrial,” “star visitor,” and other nominations as “permeable terms.”⁴ What is most important rather is her relational approach to these entities. While the frequent mention of “extraterrestrials” in *Treatise* might first appear like Berssenbrugge is not taking her own work seriously, the relational method—inspired by her Indigenous neighbors in the Southwest—emphasizes the primacy of relationality over definition: “I liked interviews about ET encounters by Native American peoples because of how these experiences were integrated into larger holistic attitudes and cosmologies.”⁵ Indigenous cosmology brought Berssenbrugge to a relational view of the land: “I tried to learn to understand lands around me as repositories of experience and relations, including astronomical events.”⁶ *Treatise* then plays on the edge of the outlandish to bring readers’ focus not on *what* stars or cosmic beings are, but rather how to relate with them and the consequences of that relation. By bringing the stars into the realm of the social and the personal, Berssenbrugge

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, 225.

⁵ *ibid.*, 227.

⁶ *ibid.*

challenges her readers' ontological division between the natural and the supernatural to depict a relational cosmos.

This priority of relation and the imperative to cross typical layers of phenomenological salience are more or less stated explicitly in her poem "The Pleiades." She draws upon human relational tools to create affective kinship with stars in a mix of lyrically narrative and expository statement:

It's March; rain fills seven indentations in a large stone, like a table.

Then twilight, all is permeable, open to relation.

Then the Pleiades at night shine in collected rain; I open myself to receive their reflected light.

Starlight is so bright it seems dark to my unaccustomed eyes, as I enter into a closeness like disorientation.

So long as I feel my family around me, I haven't experienced oneness; it's difficult at night to hold onto self, when earth shifts through transformation.

Bright Pleiades circling night sky I address as sisters, kin, suggesting human form.

I refer more to relation than beings.

Everything seen establishes relation.⁷

The "seven indentations" of the first line parallel the seven stars of the constellation, and the rain that fills them indicates temporary entities that come into being through another's content.

Twilight's softening of human vision's distinctions frames the porous boundaries of entities, making all things appear "open to relation." Distance as phenomenological structure collapses upon looking up into the night sky as the speaker "enter[s] into a closeness like disorientation."

Both boundaries and void are altered to take new phenomenal relevance to the speaker even as she focuses on the reflected stars in the most proximal detail. In chiasmic reversal, the presence of

⁷ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars* (New Directions Books, 2020), 33.

the speaker's family inhibits her from feeling "oneness," and yet the experience of self's dissolution brought on by her cosmic gaze nonetheless bring her to a new family in which she "address[es]" the stars as "kin." The *address* to these as "sisters" produces the outcome of "suggesting human form;" it is the mode of human kinship address itself that bears with it human-affective kin structures, values, and norms into the star-relation. Such lyric address elicits human form not in how the star literally appears but rather as a reflexive intention-effect that the relational act of social address itself elicits within the speaker. The status of all entities involved together is indefinite, as she "refer[s] more to relation than beings;" the event of sororal address is the primary existent in this moment. And thus the seeming impossibility of the last line: through a relational framework, event-entities co-arise through interaction—here through sensation of light. While the human-human relations of her family command salience and draw her into individual identity, it is human-star relations that afford a "oneness;" human social relations of address directed towards the stars produce an experience of relationality that address towards a human family member would not. An analogy would be the particular kinds of mutually-transformative relations and values that emerge through human-pet interactions that are similar to but distinct from those with other family members. Throughout *Treatise*, Berssenbrugge's combination of lyric tools with cosmic re-orientations explores stellar-human socialities that re-constellate rather than simply reify humanness.

Treatise posits a world where people's experienced, animistic relationships with stars change their ontological and ethical standpoints in the cosmos. With a poetic and ontological wager, the book responds to a historical-ontological problem—that the historical undoing of star-relations as constitutive of worlds (put differently, the de-animation of stars) reinforces the force of anthropocentrism and the melancholy of human-exceptional worlds. The project largely does

not investigate the historical sources of this undoing, and so its implications for our understanding this historicity (especially its colonial dimensions) are limited.⁸ However, in *Treatise* Berssenbrugge evolves her ongoing poetics of phenomenological intimacy in a relational, quantum, and panpsychist ontological framework, demonstrating how poetry can help reconstitute cosmic relations. Attendant are a handful of questions I investigate: what formal strategies might poetry use to instantiate ethically compelling speculative ontologies (quantum physics and panpsychism)?; what are the affordances and limitations of an animist poetics that freely coalesces around both “the person” and animating flows and forces?; what is an appropriate analytical framework for such a poetry?; what can poetry teach us about the worlding implications of panpsychic animism? She asserts her thesis in the final sentence of *Treatise*: “[m]y book describes how communicating with star beings can teach us to continue our world through love and grace, communal grace.”⁹ Her animism is pragmatic, its aim “to continue our world”—the “our” referring to nonhumans as well as humans, and “world” to our shared cosmos at large. By the end of this chapter I will read *Treatise* to better define this “communal grace” as an animist ethos. Berssenbrugge’s social poetic forms based in an animist, relational ontology challenge readers to transcend anthropocentric perceptual “layers” and encourage a participatory and ecological cosmic orientation.

Berssenbrugge’s “treatise” invokes the genre’s didactic purpose to advance an animist reorientation towards the cosmos based on principles of quantum entanglement and panpsychism. The book formally does not resemble the genre’s conventions, as its only elements

⁸ Gordon Fraser’s history of nineteenth-century American “space power” provides such colonial genealogy. Astronomical print and surveying technologies rendered the cosmos measurable and useful to the projection of commercial and military force, extending the settler logic of the frontier into “star territory.” Berssenbrugge’s reanimation of stars can be read at a basic level against this longer history of cosmic instrumentalization, but—as I discuss below—she ultimately fails to provide a truly decolonial astral poetics. Gordon Fraser, *Star Territory: Printing the Universe in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

⁹ *ibid.*, 99.

of systematic order are the numerically-ordered book and poem sections typical of her previous books.¹⁰ Its content is also not particularly treatise-like except that it contains many declarative, axiomatic statements that might be seen to be “demonstrated” through example or legitimized through appeal to authority, though these authorities—who are mysterious “interviewees” of her speakers—are certainly not traditional authorities. Theodor Adorno suggests that the treatise form—in contrast to the modern essay—attempts to be a “master-work that reflects the idea of creation and totality.”¹¹ Considering this, we may make the rather than a banal remark that Berssenbrugge’s book destabilizes the genre and its epistemological aims in a typically postmodern mode. But rather than mere disruption, I believe Berssenbrugge’s treatise does have pedagogical intent and a theory of knowledge—one grounded in relation and experience—and does advance the “idea of creation and totality” in its poetics, albeit not reifying the modes of totality that Adorno critiques. It achieves this through recalling the organicist Romantics; indeed, Berssenbrugge’s treatise sometimes reads like the paratactical meditations of Novalis’s philosophical fragments. Like Charles Armstrong says of Friedrich Schlegel’s theory of the fragment in relation to a total system, “[t]he fragment will not prove to be a simple denial of the system, but rather a more inclusive operating of the manifold of possibilities evinced by the preconditions of the system. Simplifying somewhat, one might say that the fragment embodies the system’s dispersal from within.”¹² Berssenbrugge’s juxtaposed sentences sometimes do build on one another in logical progression, but they—and the spaces between them—are each

¹⁰ For example, their navigational apparatus, which include prologues that defined scope and utility, along with tables of contents, indices, marginal notes, and diagrams, facilitated both study and reference. Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Theodor W Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” Translated by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 165. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488160>.

¹² Charles Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2003), 30. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230287754>.

isolatable, referring back to a larger cosmic vision that may not exactly be described as a totalizing “system,” but rather an open whole that might recall cosmically-scaled aspects of Édouard Glissant’s unrealizable totality¹³ or Wilson Harris’s “ceaseless *expedition* into wholeness” [emphasis original].¹⁴

To get there, we need a framework that will be appropriate both for Berssenbrugge’s ontological assumptions and her poetic method. In this chapter I read Berssenbrugge’s ontology based in an organicist, panpsychist, relational, and process-based interpretation of physics with the philosopher whose cosmology most closely mirrors this view: Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead’s theory of symbolic reference, especially that of “propositions,” also offers me valuable analytical tools to understand how her work functions as an animist treatise. In order to extrapolate to the full implications of these poetics, I supplement Whitehead with more recent philosophers who have followed in his footsteps, namely Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Erin Manning, and Brian Massumi. These thinkers help me extend the ideas of relevant, relation-based anthropologists in animist studies including Marilyn Strathern and Tim Ingold to consider the connections between panpsychic physics, poetic form, and animistic relationality. Berssenbrugge’s relational attending to the most seemingly irrelevant beings—the stars—proposes ecologically suggestive modes of orientation that emerge when this seemingly remote layer of the cosmos is phenomenally treated as an array of salient intimates who participate in the world’s ongoingness. She engages space as a relational rather than absolute phenomenon and provides a process ontology in which entities are events rather than stable identities persisting through time. Rejecting the gradations of relevance typically built into the Enlightenment

¹³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5-42.

¹⁴ Quoted in Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5.

framework of absolute space—which, if scientifically disproven is still the implicit assumption upon which our daily lives are structured—she shows that categories of personhood, contact, and ethics transform when stars are animistically related to as kin. I argue that Berssenbrugge’s treatise is structured by what I call “transversal propositions,” or invitations to modes of relating across conventional, ontic layers of relevance to form animist saliences. Transversal propositions suggest ways readers might imagine and feel their way into animist subjectivities through an emergent co-constitution via their relations with nonhuman persons. These propositions operate in the subject-destabilizing formal imperatives of post-Language poetry to articulate an animist ontology.

Whitehead: Panpsychism, Relation, and Organicism

In this section I will sketch a rough outline of the relationship between quantum physics, panpsychism, and animism with the goal only of providing a framework to open *Treatise*’s ontology. Modern physics shows us not a Newtonian, mechanical universe of separable objects in which matter interacts according to predictable laws in a vacuum of absolute space. Instead, the universe is structured and interconnected, and it acts in ways that defy classical physics. Relational-ontological interpretations of the cosmos based on the new physics are common in quantum physics, perhaps most popularly exemplified by Carlo Rovelli, who argues that quantum physics shows that the properties of any object or system of interacting objects exist only relative to another object or system.¹⁵ Karen Barad similarly takes “phenomena” as the fundamental ontological unit, which “*are the ontological inseparability of intra-acting*

¹⁵ Carlo Rovelli, *Helgoland: Making Sense of the Quantum Revolution* (Penguin UK, 2021), 96-97.

‘agencies’” [emphasis in original].¹⁶ While Rovelli is adamantly opposed to panpsychism, and Barad does not discuss it in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, it is also easy to find prominent physicists and philosophers who take the panpsychist route in their relational interpretation of quantum physics. While Philip Goff, prominent promulgator of panpsychism, does not argue that quantum physics proves panpsychism, he explains how it is not incompatible with it and that panpsychism provides a helpful way to understand phenomena such as consciousness playing a role in the collapse of the wavefunction.¹⁷ From a less purely metaphysical perspective, Federico Faggin argues for a kind of idealist panpsychism in which consciousness is fundamental and physical reality is emergent instead of the other way around.¹⁸ While neither relational ontology nor panpsychism can be empirically established here, both offer productive speculative frameworks for interpreting the reality proposed by the poems.

Whitehead in fact provides a panpsychic philosophy informed by quantum physics, but his work is generally under-discussed among analytic philosophers and physicists who philosophize. A noteworthy exception is the rather high-profile work of Rupert Sheldrake, Stuart Hameroff, and Roger Penrose. The latter two argue in a much-cited article that their theory “perhaps aligns most closely with Alfred North Whitehead,”¹⁹ both their views broadly asserting that “proto-conscious events” occur during “moments of quantum state reduction (intrinsic quantum ‘self-measurement’) and that biology “orchestrate[s]” these events into more what we typically define as true consciousness.”²⁰ In fact, there is an ongoing discourse among

¹⁶ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 333.

¹⁷ See “Chapter 2: Is There a Ghost in the Machine?” in Philip Goff, *Galileo’s Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness* (Pantheon, 2019). EPUB.

¹⁸ See “Chapter 2: The Nature of Quantum Reality” in Federico Faggin, *Irreducible: Consciousness, Life, Computers, and Human Nature* (Essentia Books, 2024). EPUB.

¹⁹ Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose, “Consciousness in the Universe: A Review of the ‘Orch OR’ Theory,” *Physics of Life Review* 11 (2014): 71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.plrev.2013.08.002>.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 40.

panpsychist philosophers on the possibility of stars having some degree of consciousness.

Theories of consciousness that take electromagnetic fields, which are at the very least essential to the activities of our brains, might actually possess consciousness themselves.²¹ Sheldrake suggests that “[i]f the electromagnetic fields associated with the activities of brains are the principal interface between measurable physical activities and conscious and unconscious minds, then the electromagnetic activity of the sun may well be the principal interface between the physical activity of the sun and the solar mind.”²² He outlines a handful of “concerns” the sun might have if it is conscious, ranging from “the regulation and preservation of its own body” to “sensing and influencing what happens in the solar system” to interacting with other stars and solar systems through “plasma permeating the arms of the galaxy” as “part of a vastly greater electromagnetic system,” a cosmic organic whole.²³ Although he does not suggest that the stars are concerned with the lives of individual human beings, the potential consciousness of the sun nonetheless alters the default, Western notion of the cosmos and our place in it by asking us recognize the sun as a kind of subject. His interpretation makes ample use of Whitehead, who he argues “was the first philosopher to recognize the radical implications of quantum physics.”²⁴ Despite having written at the birth of the new physics, Whitehead is still one of the best philosophers based in that physics, and his work remains relevant and useful to the major thinkers of relational, panpsychist cosmologies today.

Relational ontologies are almost assumed in new animist studies, but there are fewer studies of contemporary panpsychist animisms. There is a general consensus among scholars that animist philosophies are not founded on individual persons with essences. To take a relational

²¹ See Rupert Sheldrake, “Is the Sun Conscious?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 28, no. 3-4 (2021): 14-18.

²² *ibid.*, 21.

²³ *ibid.*, 24.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 12.

view of the “person,” there are many analytical tools, perhaps most influential being anthropologist Marilyn Strathern’s notion of the “dividual”—adapted by Nurit Bird-David for animist studies²⁵—along with other terms that entered the field’s vocabulary to designate “relational persons” or “partible persons”²⁶ These terms are more or less appropriate for analyzing sustained group relations and registering particular social forms of personhood. This general view of a relational and partible rather than individual person is appropriate for Berssenbrugge’s traversals between persons as subjects and as processes. On the other hand, to conceive of “the environment” relationally, there is Tim Ingold’s concept of “meshwork” as life “being constituted within a relational field.”²⁷ This “domain of entanglement” is something beings “inhabit” and move “through,” the way in which this movement is enacted being constitutive of their being.²⁸ While “life” is not my main focus here, I think Ingold’s terms are appropriate for Berssenbrugge’s relational view of the cosmos. Yet while philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen argues that animism is panpsychism in practice,²⁹ panpsychism and mentality are less often objects of analysis in animist studies than “life.”

Berssenbrugge helps us begin to think panpsychism’s and mentality’s role in animism, and Whitehead comes to our aid here. Berssenbrugge’s influence by Deleuze and Guattari partly makes Whitehead a justifiable framework, as Deleuze was heavily influenced by the English

²⁵ Nurit Bird-David. “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology.” *Current Anthropology* 40, no. S1 (1999): S67–91. <https://doi.org/10.1086/200061>.

²⁶ See Marilyn Strathern, “Chapter 15: Persons and Partible Persons” in *Schools and Styles of Anthropological Theory*, ed. Matei Candea (Taylor & Francis, 2018), 226–246.

²⁷ Tim Ingold, “Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought,” *Ethnos* 71, no. 1 (2006), 13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840600603111>.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 14.

²⁹ “That the world is alive, that to be means to participate in this aliveness that is encountered everywhere and in everything, is the meeting-point between panpsychism as philosophy and animism as practice.” Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism, and the Limits of Posthumanism* (Routledge, 2019), 16.

philosopher. While it is unclear if Berssenbrugge herself has directly engaged with Whitehead, her husband, artist Richard Tuttle, names him explicitly as an influence on his own work.³⁰ In any case, it will become clear that thinking with Whitehead's cosmic organicism will help draw out the significance of the relation between poetic form and panpsychism and makes his framework more directly relevant to examine *Treatise* than Deleuze and Guattari. Besides Whitehead's explicit panpsychism, his engagement with quantum physics—which Berssenbrugge frequently refers to—also make him a good choice. Finally, his pragmatic bent will be appropriate for analyzing Berssenbrugge's poetic propositions.

Before returning to Berssenbrugge's poetry, I want to introduce a few important concepts from Whitehead that orient us in the physics Berssenbrugge entertains. Taking Whitehead's process view, I will use his term, "actual occasion" or "actual entity," which takes the view that anything that exists most fundamentally does so within each new pulse of becoming rather than as a static, enduring object. The "personal" for Whitehead is any group ("society") of entities which has a consistent order of "genetic relations between its members" while being embedded within a "social background" of an environment.³¹ The "social" is the way all actual occasions interdepend in their respective becomings; the way they feel and "think" together. The personal thus endures because of its particular internal sociality embedded within the wider sociality of its environment.

Significantly, internality is a property not only shared by all entities but also is a structuring principle that interconnects these entities. Whitehead refers to this fundamental form

³⁰ Richard Tuttle, "Richard Tuttle by Bob Holman: The Artist on the Making of one World out of Disparate Parts," interviewed by Bob Holman, *BOMB Magazine*, October 1, 1992, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/1992/10/01/richard-tuttle/>.

³¹ Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (Free Press, 1985), 137-138. [all citations from the original pagination]

of internality as “experience” or “feeling,” but consciousness as such only emerges at higher levels of complexity in organic beings. Before the publication of *Treatise*, Jen Crawford has already noted that Berssenbrugge’s writing “seems to register a bio-physical and spiritual orientation in the possibilities of unitary consciousness as source,” and to me *Treatise* patently removes the qualifier, “seems to.”³² In a mechanistic science, we might still understand these internalities as radically separate from one another. But for an organicist like Whitehead—and Berssenbrugge—internalities are not marked by absolute separation. In Whitehead’s terminology, the concept of “prehension” advances a vision in which there is an *internal connection* between all things in the universe. Prehension denotes how entities take one another as data in their next becoming. As internalities in this metaphysics are continuous with one another, the entity “positively” prehends or “feels” the other entity; otherwise they “negatively” prehend all the other data in the universe not playing an affective role in the occasion’s becoming.³³ Any actual occasion must only very restrictively select what to perceive so that it is not overwhelmed with irrelevant information.³⁴ Berssenbrugge is more liberal than Whitehead in her reading of consciousness at various scales in the universe, but these differences are fairly inconsequential. As I will discuss, poetry is particularly adept at registering this mentality at

³² Jen Crawford, “Cultivating Inter-Being: Human-Plant Society in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s *Hello the Roses*,” *Ka Mate Ka Ora: A New Zealand Journal of Poetry and Poetics* 13 (2014): 80.

³³ James Kirk, *Organicism as Reenchantment: Whitehead, Prigogine and Barth* (Peter Lang, 1993), 28-29.

³⁴ Charles Olson takes up this notion in his “Human Universe” essay:

I am not able to satisfy myself that these so-called inner things are so separable from the objects, persons, events which are the content of them and by which man represents or re-enacts them despite the suck of symbol which has increased and increased since the great Greeks first promoted the idea of a transcendent world of forms. What I do see is that each man does make his own special selection from the phenomenal field and it is true that we begin to speak of personality, however I remain unaware that this particular act of individuation is peculiar to man, observable as it is in individuals of other species of nature’s making.

Personality here is the character of our selection of all that exists over time, and nonhumans too can have this characteristic. While Olson’s “man” betrays a certain investment in the singular individual—even if that individual is more like a dividual—Berssenbrugge’s shifts in perspective throughout her poems disrupt the synthesizing work of a particular personality. Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (University of California, 1997), 161.

work in the unfolding of events, events in which the identity of the “personal” is porous as it embeds and inter-becomes in the wider sociality of the environment.

Whitehead’s concept of the fallacy of “simple location” helps us understand how Berssenbrugge can claim, “[s]tars are not separate entities lost to each other in the depths of space.”³⁵ Such radical separation characterizes the classical view; Whitehead argues this concept of “simple location” has been dominant since the 18th Century and explains it thus: “[t]o say that a bit of matter has *simple location* means that, in expressing its spatio-temporal relations, it is adequate to state that it is where it is, in a definite finite region of space, and throughout a definite finite duration of time, apart from any essential reference of the relations of that bit of matter to other regions of space and to other durations of time” [emphasis in original].³⁶ Thus, when we seek to explain an object, we need look no further than where and when it is; its full composition as a being is right there and then. Countering this view, Whitehead and Berssenbrugge both insist on organicist-relational ontologies; being is not separate from experience, and all beings are related to one another in space-time. They are related in a cosmos in which consciousness emerges at any point of it through that relating. Michael Epperson explains that in quantum physics, “the decoherence effect and its required mutual interrelations between the measured system and all facts environmental to it” justifies Whitehead’s ontological principle since “the universe in its entirety as the only truly closed system to which quantum mechanics might apply, and it is this recognition that guarantees the necessary, mutual interrelations among all facts. ... The ontological principle is: Every fact is a determinant in the becoming of every new fact, such that the evolution of any fact entails both temporally prior facts and logically prior

³⁵ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 40.

³⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Pelican 1948), 58.

potentia as data, and an integration of these data that is unique to that evolution.”³⁷ This lands us in a universe without radical separation where it becomes possible to consider relationality with stars.

Finally, since mentality or internality are in this ontology not simply interpretations locked in isolated minds but rather participants in the ongoing creation of reality, the role of feeling is primary in Berssenbrugge’s poetics. Whitehead rejects a premise of common scientific rationality that he calls “the bifurcation of nature” in which scientists attempt to separate nature from their experience of it in the pursuit of objectivity. Instead, he holds that what we typically refer to as “subjective experiences” are “real” in the sense that they participate in the creation of what exists and becomes. They too are “primary data” of reality rather than secondary and separate views upon it. James Kirk, interpreting the importance of Whitehead’s assertion, proposes that the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century (both the rationalists and later empiricists), by requiring knowledge to be clear and distinct, excluded affect and ethos (or interiority) from that epistemology, producing the exteriorization of knowledge and what he calls the “ontology of surface.”³⁸ In the machine metaphor for nature most clearly developed by Newton, entities’ nature is simple and comprehensible.³⁹ This view has lead us to our disenchantment and to treating the world like an insensate machine. In response, Kirk offers that internal or narrative knowledge is an essential component of the universe and looks back to Plato to conceive of knowledge as participation.⁴⁰ This too is a dimension well-traversed in poetry, where internalities and externalities are particularly liable to intermix.

³⁷ Michael Epperson, *Quantum Mechanics and the Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead* (Fordham University Press, 2004), 119-120.

³⁸ Kirk, *Organicism as Reenchantment*, 2.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 17.

Proposition as Form in “You Are Here”

All this justifies placing Berssenbrugge more firmly in some poetic traditions and inclinations she is less often critically associated with. Typically, Berssenbrugge is read through various frames experimental writing including Language Poetry, contemporary women’s or Asian American poetics,⁴¹ and post-structuralism.⁴² While it is important to consider Berssenbrugge from within the usual frame of Language Poetry’s formal interventions to undo the domination of the individual and self-present lyric “I,” I submit that *Treatise* also finds her in the traditions of postmodern organicism such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Nathaniel Mackey (all three influenced by Whitehead). I am not the first critic to note her similarities with the first two poets, but in *Treatise* the persistence of organicist formal strategies and imperatives is undeniable. Here, in contrast to much of Language Poetry, experience takes account of its participation in an open and dynamic whole rather than among postmodernism’s world of polyvocal fragments or discontinuous movements.⁴³ That is, while multi-perspectival, Berssenbrugge’s work attempts to cohere an animist world or common ground of relation, even if the forms of that world and its relations will be different for each participant. This is an example of what Edward Alexander calls Berssenbrugge’s continuation of the Black Mountain “project of

⁴¹ Jeannie Chiu, “Identities in Process: The Experimental Poetry of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Myung Mi Kim” in *Asian North American Identities*, eds. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht (Indiana University Press, 2004), 84-101.

⁴² Edward Schelb, “‘Decode into Chrysanthemums’: Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Post-Structuralist Thought,” *Philosophy and Literature* 37, no. 1 (2013): 118-135, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2013.0013>.

⁴³ As Michael Davidson summarizes the postmodern, formalist strategy in his contribution to the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* double issue 9/10 from October 1979 called “The Politics of Poetry,” “The formalist contends that by radically altering the structure of conventional discourse, by decontextualizing, fragmenting, foregrounding the material element of language, he or she will illustrate the lesions and gaps within ruling class ideology.” Michael Davidson, [Response], *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, no. 9/10 (1979). Reprinted in *Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein’s L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: The Complete Facsimile*, eds. Matthew Hofer and Michael Golson (University of New Mexico Press, 2020), 273.

transforming human consciousness,” which she accomplishes through the pragmatics of sentence construction—poetry as “an event in language” that importantly “no longer depends on or necessarily concerns the conscious experience of a represented speaker or author” to which poets like Olson and Duncan resorted.⁴⁴ *Treatise* sees the extension of the open and dynamic whole beyond earthly phenomena to the stars as well as a formal evolution in Berssenbrugge’s “I.” In Julia Clark’s words on *Treatise*, “the ‘I’ of this collection has a distinctly different tone to that of previous collections where the ‘I’ moved easily between first, second, and third person across time and space,” and her employment of “hypotheticals and rhetorical questions” is “more pointed, more meditative and reflective of the practice of poetry than any of Berssenbrugge’s earlier works.”⁴⁵ In *Treatise* Berssenbrugge also needs to be acknowledged as a companion of poets whose atypical ontologies—often animist—register immanently on their poetic form, especially on the relation between the personal and the cosmic: three such poets are Diane di Prima, Hannah Weiner, and again, Will Alexander. Alexander and Berssenbrugge, in particular, share metaphysical, cosmic organicism, and Amy Catanzano argues both poets deserve a place in the thinking of contemporary “quantum poetics.”⁴⁶ This organicist open whole can also be seen as an example of what Meliz Ergin calls “an ecopoetics of entanglement.”⁴⁷ For such poets, both

⁴⁴ Edward Alexander, “Reversible Time as Habitation in the Recent Poetry of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge,” *Contemporary Literature* 59, no. 4 (2018): 422-423, Project Muse.

⁴⁵ Julia Cooper Clark, “‘She Believes She is Herself’: Contemporary Feminist Poetics Under Late-Stage Capitalism” (PhD diss., The University of Sydney 2023), 127-128.

⁴⁶ Amy Catanzano, *The Imaginary Present: Essays in Quantum Poetics* (University of Michigan Press, 2025).

⁴⁷ Influenced most by Jacques Derrida and Karen Barad here, Ergin argues: “relationality is not measured by a simple connective tissue between two separate entities. Entanglement is the ontological inseparability of intra-acting elements; it is what enables any agentiality to take place.” Ergin argues that poets of entanglement reveal complicities and responsibilities across familiar troubled binaries of nature-culture, local-global, and material-discursive. While the Derridean framework is also appropriate for Berssenbrugge, I believe *Treatise* necessitates thinkers with metaphysical commitments. Meliz Ergin, *The Ecopoetics of Entanglement in Contemporary Turkish and American Literatures* (Palgrave, 2017), 74.

scientific and metaphysical explanations of the fundamental relational composition of the cosmos drive formal experimentation and ecological poetics.

To begin to describe Berssenbrugge's poetics in terms of Whitehead's organicism, *Treatise* is best read not as a systemic declaration of facts but as a series of asserted possibilities that arise in experience from a panpsychist view. I argue that these assertions can be helpfully illuminated by reading them as Whiteheadian "propositions." In contrast to classic philosophical understanding of propositional statements, whose primary outcome is belief or disbelief, Whitehead instead argues that their function is "for feeling at the physical level of unconsciousness;" that is, feeling precedes belief.⁴⁸ Whitehead defines a proposition as "the unity of certain actual entities in their potentiality for forming a nexus, with its potential relatedness partially defined by certain eternal objects which have the unity of one complex eternal object"⁴⁹ To translate, a proposition is a complex form of potentiality for the becoming ("complex eternal object") of a set of entities (a "nexus"). It is an assertion of possible relation for what can next emerge in the relational field from a particular cosmic standpoint. The "primary function" of these propositions is "to be relevant as a lure for feeling;" that is, the proposition provides a "subjective aim," which controls the becoming of a subject." This "subjective aim" "is that subject feeling a proposition with the subjective form of purpose to realize it in that process of self-creation."⁵⁰ Propositions, as potentials for becoming, provide the "lure for feeling" that is essential to any new occasion for a subject at any scale of capacity for feeling.

⁴⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 284.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 35-36.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 37.

The first part of “You Are Here” presents a sequence of statements that thus do less to present a state of affairs than they propose experiential and orientational experiments for their reader:

We’ve powerful analytical tools to simplify an experience, so we can absorb it immediately.

There’s joy in transmuting a supernova into science and wonder, at the same time.

World’s a net of relations in which appearance is one; to correlate the visible with the personal makes it real.

Seeing, a kind of consciousness, materializes form.

Then everything constellates out to the farthest star.⁵¹

To look at these sentences conventionally, they are a series of expository propositions composed of subjects and predicates. To summarize crudely, they assert that our forms of apprehension such as seeing (the subjects) are “analytical tools” that “simplify” and “make[] real” the cosmic “net of relations” that exists as potential (the predicates). And yet these sentences are less assertions to be believed or refuted than invitations to the reader to follow their guidance, to practice their command so that the reader too can discover at the end how the complex eternal object—“everything constellates out to the farthest star”—can be actualized (felt as a “nexus”) through “joy,” one of the affective lures of this poem. Without this participation, the statements are incomplete. Each concept is an “eternal object,” a form of mentality of the cosmos appearing as thought, and the reader’s participation through a generous reading enables new actual occasions to arise. As James Maynard describes of Whitehead, the proposition “fuses eternal objects (possibilities) with a particular location in the actual world to form a hybrid entity. As complex feelings derived from comparisons of the physical with the conceptual, propositions

⁵¹ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 45.

affect the way eternal objects are felt as ‘transmutations’ (objectified forms). As intimations of what ‘*might be*,’ hints of an immanent creativity Whitehead refers to as the ‘Category of the Ultimate,’ they are invaluable in the process of the world’s advance into novel intensity.”⁵² The reader’s reading is more than just an interpretation of symbols; it is composed of potentials that control the subjective aim of the reader to produce a “hybrid entity” that relates entities in the cosmos.

To simplify, the conceptual activities of Berssenbrugge’s words combine over the course of her expository and directive sentences into complex patterns for the becoming of new relations, and thus, new existents. The reader is intended to follow the lure of the text’s affective force to transform through relation. Almost paradoxically, the speaker invites the reader towards the complex manifold (the “net of relations”) through our “analytical tools to simplify an experience.” We simplify complexity through the combination of concepts and sensations that are signs, but the reader becomes a particular kind of “hybrid entity”—participates in the “net of relations” and “constellates out to the farthest star”—by “correlat[ing]” their personhood with such signs—or rather, recognizing that their personhood is always already involved. The non-linear quality of Berssenbrugge’s writing creates complex patterns of feeling towards a cohesive whole, staging both the way “concrecence” (a becoming) strives towards “satisfaction” in its completion and the finitude of such satisfactions. The satisfaction here is an organicist sublime, using animist star relations as a means towards prehending an entire cosmic structure.

The point is not necessarily that the reader follows the directions or mimics the progression of the speaker; her non-linear logics discourage this anyway. Although the poems make use of lyrical voice, the propositions are not a direct recording of the interiority of a stable

⁵² James Maynard, *Robert Duncan and the Pragmatist Sublime* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 86.

lyrical subject but rather are multi-sourced—in others, in fact, in observation, in speculation, and other forms—all registering the general conceptual activity of the panpsychic cosmos. Her collage method of composition has gained more lyric grounding over time, but collage in her recent work and its metaphysical turn can be seen as a formal practice to collage diverse instances of (mostly human) mentality. The result in *Treatise* is reading occasions ongoingly emergent through proposed patterns of relating, through the acts of language that lure concepts from diverse sources into the reading's horizons of possibilities. In her work, language and its utterance captures and extends the intimate mentality of the universe. Berssenbrugge's propositions use modes of relation (a string of concepts in relation) to lure the reader into the felt, modeled intensities of animist relations.

To draw out their animist character, I want to specify these types of propositions as “transversal.” The concept is from Guattari and Deleuze, but it is compatible with Whitehead's thinking, as both transversality and Whitehead's propositions exist through the relationships of a particular milieu or “meshwork” of the animistically social environment. I take the lead of Patrick Durgin, who argues that Berssenbrugge's fellow Language poet Hannah Weiner's “clairvoyance” is an example of transversal poetics through the non-normative forms of sociality afforded by neurodivergence.⁵³ Such poetics transversally crossing normative boundaries of kind and salience in what Guattari calls “ecological praxes,” which “strive to scout out the potential vectors of subjectification and singularization at each partial existential locus.”⁵⁴ Operating across neurotypical, Enlightenment categories of thought, Berssenbrugge's propositions encourage the reader towards novel forms of ludic affectability, opening the reader to join in the

⁵³ Patrick Durgin, “Hannah Weiner's Transversal Poetics: Collaboration, Disability, and Clairvoyance” in *The Matter of Disability: Materiality, Biopolitics, Crip Affect*, eds. David T. Mitchell, Susan Antebi, and Sharon L. Snyder (University of Michigan Press, 2019), 90.

⁵⁴ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (The Athlone Press, 2000), 45.

assemblages of the entangled and fundamentally unpredictable “net of relations” that is the world.

Transversality in Berssenbrugge is the intimacy demanded by the relational, panpsychic view of quantum physics; the concepts of a proposition are always worlded somewhere, and this worlding is in part a product of entangling intimacies. As Whitehead argues, “every proposition must be somewhere.” Statements are never completely abstract, divorced from reality; they have a “locus” that “consists of those actual occasions whose actual worlds include the logical subjects of the proposition.”⁵⁵ Berssenbrugge picks up in the second part of “You Are Here” with:

So that a family’s entangled.

Here is the relation under scrutiny; *there*, yourself as observer, your perceptions, feelings, also everything that is not them.

This quantum state is a property of the boundary or interface separating family, relation, from universe including yourself, because observing leaves you out.

Yet there must be some leakage of information between you.⁵⁶

Relationality “here” is what is actually experienced, while the separateness of the “I” and its qualities is an abstraction. While observation is *of* the universe—that is, made of it—it also creates the necessary and functional illusion of separateness and individual identity. Under the directive of the transversal proposition, form is the *what* and *how* of new relation-making for the creation of new collective actual occasions. The layering of paratactic, indicative exposition provides both a framework and lines of flight for these ventures, but the sentences are ultimately

⁵⁵ “When an actual entity belongs to the locus of a proposition, then conversely the proposition is an element in the lure for feeling of that actual entity. If by the decision of the concrescence, the proposition has been admitted into feeling, then the proposition constitutes what the feeling has felt. The proposition constitutes a lure for a member of its locus by reason of the germaneness of the complex predicate to the logical subjects, having regard to forms of definiteness in the actual world of that member, and to its antecedent phases of feeling.” Whitehead, *Process*, 283.

⁵⁶ Berssenbrugge, *Treatise*, 46.

only evanescent mentalities to be actualized by the reader's standpoint.⁵⁷ For Whitehead, forms are not something applied to matter by a subject. Instead, form lures fact through a relational standpoint; concrescence involves both the "objectification" of previous facts and conceptually-abstractly of possible eternal objects, and this itself produces a new entity. Manning writes: "Existence is nothing else than the relational milieu [a standpoint] is made of. Existence is its formation – force-of-form."⁵⁸ When Berssenbrugge's speaker states, "This quantum state is a property of the boundary or interface separating family, relation, from universe including yourself, because observing leaves you out," this exclusion that observation causes is a kind of "cut" in the world's activity, what Manning calls the "emergent valuation" of becoming human: "[i]n the Whiteheadian cosmology, it is the concept of decision that activates this schism that pulls activity out of the immanent valuation of the world in flux. Not a world and then human, but vectored activity decisionally become-human."⁵⁹ Form is a "vector:" "[w]e are worlded into being through a vectoring of the field. This vectoring cuts process to activate the angle on existence we come to know as what came to pass. The movement of our being is the becoming of the world. There is no separation, only conduit and cut."⁶⁰ While these cuts create the very possibility of standpoint and observation, Berssenbrugge posits there is "some leakage" between observational standpoints in the fourth stanza. By the end of the page, the speaker asserts more confidently, "[o]ur units of existence are not particles, but exchange, events, context in which attributes are defined by relation, by others. / The measuring device may be an all-seeing universe, and the context intimacy." Only relation makes actual occasions possible, and only

⁵⁷ As Angela Hume adeptly expresses, for Berssenbrugge, "the 'significance' of form, that which ultimately defines form, lies in what is most fleeting and transient about it: its being 'here.'" Angela Hume, "Beyond the Threshold: Unlimiting Risk in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Kiki Smith's *Endocrinology*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, no.4 (2015): 832, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isv027>.

⁵⁸ Erin Manning, *Out of the Clear* (Minor Compositions, 2023), 91.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 67-68.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 68.

“intimacy” makes them meaningful, which I read as the inevitable context of participation that prevents observation from being dualistically cut off from the universe. While the cosmos may be panpsychically “all-seeing,” it is only the intimacy of being a relational standpoint *of it* that creates meaning. Berssenbrugge writes the intimacy of our being “here” as a transversal coming-to-be amongst animist relation.

In Part 3, the speaker turns from the illusionary and abstractive nature of the “I” to the illusory and abstractive nature of space and time in the cosmos generally. While we typically try to understand the cosmos by analyzing its parts, if the ability to achieve true analytical separability of these parts are false, this calls for a different epistemology. Berssenbrugge’s own epistemology instead mobilizes the imaginative capacity of poetry to suggest the open and entangled totality of the cosmos out of paratactical fragments that nonetheless each in themselves are whole utterances. In their long, solar movement her sentences trace an arc of becoming that both register the irreducible standpoint of utterance while also attempting to overcome their own partialness in the paratactic jump to the next sentence and participating in the whole movement of the poem. Our imaginal capacity beyond the isolation that is the threat of the fragment is one of our graces: in a cosmos that seems to appear as external relations divided by absolute time and space, imagination rescues us from radical separation. She argues that “[s]pace is a stand-in for complexities of relations among ‘things’ that happen,” while in another sentence: “imagining precedes space-time; it has point-source characteristics; it’s all at once.”⁶¹ Her speaker imagines a transversal vision of herself moving through the entangled meshwork of her relations across this long sentence: “I became very emotional when I realized particles of my body are entangled with every person I’ve ever known, touched or thought of, not only family, but our president,

⁶¹ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 47.

every artist I've seen or read, strangers described to me by others or named in their prayers."⁶²

The "emotional" quality, modeled in the speaker, becomes the lure for the reader who is invited to re-imagine their own selfhood from this transversal sublime in which the totality and actual intimacy of relations is too vast to be described. The role of language in Berssenbrugge's poetic propositions is to orient the reader in a particular symbolic vision of the cosmos and to provide the lure for forms of relation with it. In Whiteheadian terms, she uses symbolic reference to incite our affective tendency towards outwardness and becoming—what Whitehead calls "causal efficacy"—for an organicist vision of our belonging in the cosmos. In contrast to "presentational immediacy," which is Whitehead's way of describing the abstraction of experience "in the interest of manageability," analogous to the sensory experiences which provide the surfaces available for scientific knowledge, Whitehead also posits "causal efficacy," "the process by which we become aware of a complex, vague, imperative, and intimate world which continually impinges upon us."⁶³ In presentational immediacy, we (and sentient nonhumans) abstract and simplify the world through symbolic reference.⁶⁴ Symbolic reference can either lead us into error (misreadings or oversimplifications) or can help us "stimulate[] the vividness and depth of the whole experience," providing the way to the true organic wholeness of experience depending on how we use it.⁶⁵ The perspectival shift of her work and its only vaguely linear developments use symbolic reference to relate the reader to the cosmic totality of causal efficacy. Imagination and its causal efficacy thus functions as a sensorium-attuning animist practice, training the reader to experience the stars not as remote objects but as socially consequential participants in a shared field of existence.

⁶² *ibid.*, 48.

⁶³ Kirk, *Organicism as Reenchantment*, 26-27.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 28.

In Part 4 she extends the limits of her sentence form to lure her reader into this transversal sublime. She states, “[t]he description of an object includes every particle or frequency with which it interacts, so we who observe night sky belong to it inextricably.”⁶⁶ Full description of any entity then becomes impossible if considered over its whole lifespan, and identity is better explained by relations in the moment, so she turns to imagination’s capacity to constellate rather than self-identify in one of her directives (and the longest sentence of the collection):

Rather than mapping it with an arrow pointing to earth, YOU ARE HERE, draw the brightest stars you see with sufficient detail, so there’s no other observer, place or moment for which this description would be the same, and even though any description of sky incorporates all beloveds in a hyper-dimensional collectivity of earth and space, data from past and future, consciousness and oversoul, love merging with a star, so you go there.⁶⁷

The “YOU ARE HERE” representation of identity fails to register relation, so Berssenbrugge instead turns to a participatory registering of a “hereness” recalling Part 1 of the poem. The “here” is an irreducible standpoint amongst relation composed of the qualities of speculative star experience that she instructs the reader to draw. And “even though” the organicist sublime of total relation might seem to preclude the uniqueness of individual standpoint, the “so you go there” asserts the non-identity of each standpoint, which itself only exists in the span of a concrescence. The long sentence itself of course mimics the sublime limits of what a span of becoming canprehend, and the strange grammatical transition of “even though...so” moves the reader from qualifying logic to indicative action and participation. The proposition invites the reader into the description and participation of their own standpoint in the Ingoldian meshwork, to what the poem calls “joining the inner collectivity” that is the Whiteheadian internal

⁶⁶ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 49.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 49.

connection between all beings in the universe. The feeling that Berssenbrugge's propositions offer is part of the epistemology she is exploring,⁶⁸ what Crawford describes as "Berssenbrugge's Deleuzian empiricism, [in which] knowledge, as experienced qualities of being, is not just remembered or uncovered in the Platonic model, it 'accretes' through experience."⁶⁹ Massumi's Whiteheadian "relation-of-nonrelation" clarifies that the permeability of the open, organic whole need not culminate in mystical fusion, as beings enter a shared event precisely through the differential that prevents either from being absorbed into the other.⁷⁰ Berssenbrugge's animist experience is not a collapse into cosmic oneness but a participation in which difference itself becomes the medium of relation.

In a process view beyond the analytical unit of particular bodies, as Manning argues, "the world itself is alive with the movement of thought." The mentality of the panpsychic cosmos, not reducible to "mind," is "the conceptual share is that excess of experience that tunes the occasion to its potential. All activity in the world has a conceptual share, but it is true to say that some aspects of existence make use of it more emphatically." It is "the force of existence. It is the world's capacity to exceed itself. All incomplete, the world continuously renews itself."⁷¹ This

⁶⁸ See Kirk:

But most importantly, Whitehead's notion of symbolism and error also involves the correlate concept of truth. Hume's empiricism and modern deconstructive analyses of language completely sever the relationship between symbol and referent. For Whitehead 'truth' is the organic wholeness of experience and the process of abstraction which is presentational immediacy can indeed separate one from this totality. However, when the process works properly, 'the effect of the abstraction stimulates the vividness and depth of the whole experience. It stirs the depths.' There is no radical separation between primary experience and its symbolization in presentational immediacy. One mode of experience is not more real than another. One is simple and the other complex. When we experience the world in the mode of causal efficacy, we apprehend the vague complexity of a whole in which we are enmeshed. As presented to us in the mode of presentational immediacy, the world appears much simpler, more manageable and understandable. But this simplicity is created by abstraction from a more fundamental and complex experience. The inversion of this order led scientists and philosophers to identify truth with simplicity and superficial clarity. But Whitehead's approach to truth is one that 'stirs the depths' and leads us back toward a complex and unmanageable reality.

Organicism as Reenchantment, 28-29.

⁶⁹ Crawford, "Cultivating Inter-Being," 82.

⁷⁰ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (The MIT Press, 2011), 20-23.

⁷¹ Manning, *Out of the Clear*, 36-37.

conceptual share I argue is equivalent to what Berssenbrugge refers to as the “abstract” in an interview on another poem in *Treatise*. In “Lux,” the speaker states, “Your consciousness lovingly assimilates new events to enhance cognition that ensouls space.”⁷² When asked about this line in an interview, Berssenbrugge replies:

I’m trying to unify the abstract in a continuous reality with beloved beings and their experiences, using the poem as a canvas. I could also use a word like general or conceptual for abstract. So, in the line you quote, “consciousness,” “cognition,” and “space” are concrete entities like people, stars, and plants. The abstract by itself somehow gives witnessing too much distance. I hope care can dissolve this distance, “ensouling” space.⁷³

Abstractions—and symbolic reference generally—do not exist outside the real; they are just more or less pragmatically justified for what they enable in contributing to new occasions.⁷⁴

Hypostasizing these abstractions seems to commit Whitehead’s “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” in which we “neglect[] the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought.”⁷⁵ Yet I believe Berssenbrugge is doing the opposite, bringing abstractions back into the concreting event; she uses their vagueness to draw out the causal efficacy underneath symbolization as the particular standpoint that is the “you” approaches the event with intention and is lured to new satisfactions rather than to construct an abstract system of thought to categorize experience. And so when she ends “You Are Here” with the playful “[s]igned with love: The Entelechy,” this personification of a kind of cosmic vitality is not a determining, transcendent force; instead, it is an idea meant to invite the reader to relate to the world by becoming open to its conceptual vitality.

⁷² Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 59.

⁷³ Berssenbrugge, “Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s Poetry of Attention.”

⁷⁴ or what Whitehead terms a “fortunate evolution.” See *Process and Reality*, 275.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 11.

Address and Listening and “Pegasus”

If “You Are Here” proposes a kind of participatory, total description in light of speculative interpretations of the new physics, “Pegasus” foregrounds animist address and response through the more outlandish and New Age metaphysics I raised at the beginning of this chapter. While her previous book, *Hello, The Roses* engages scientific study of sensory processes in plants and humans as a foundation to then leap beyond what is visible to science in her description of plant-human communication, *Treatise* for the most part does not found its speakers’ relationality in sensation with the exception of vision. The consistent interest in second-hand experience and speculative modes of being through her propositions instead draws the reader into a liminal world where the coordinates and laws of reality are at play. Throughout the book, Berssenbrugge asks the reader to suspend their disbelief. In addition to what Robert Baker identified in *Roses* as the writing’s “risks becoming precious in the way New Age writing tends to be precious: too much beauty and too little tension, too much harmony and too little dissonance,” *Treatise* adds additional threads of paranormality and magical thinking.⁷⁶ She models the suspension of disbelief she asks of her reader through the conceit of a quasi-anthropologist speaker and her “interviewee” or through friends or family members who are able to contact invisible beings. In part 1 of “Pegasus,” she opens:

I never doubted the existence of sky beings, sky deities, or any encounters with ETs.

Stories of beings from the stars and of cosmic travel merge to characterize me as their listener.

I take each subject for her word, during the length of our conversation, and do not ask for evidence.

Though the words aren’t unique, they’re sincere, and her experiences as such are primary data, in some cases comprising revelation:

⁷⁶ Robert Baker, “‘A Kinship between Air and Awareness’: Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s *Hello, the Roses*,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 26, no. 1 (2019): 105, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isy077>.

One visitor disguised as a primrose teaches my interviewee to ensoul her words with the emotions of flowers.

Dragonflies encircle her, confirming the presence of others, who tell her to plant trees under starlight.⁷⁷

The reader, like the speaker, is asked to read these “revelation[s]” not necessarily as factual portrayals of an objective reality, but rather as part of a reality that does not exclude experience from its constitution. Although the speaker “take[s] each subject for her word,” the reader may feel dissonances with the stated descriptions. Some of Berssenbrugge’s more speculative propositions may read as what Whitehead calls “non-conformal propositions,” a proposition that pushes the reader’s “synthesis of fact with the alternative potentiality” of the ontology she entertains. The novelty of such non-conformal propositions “may promote or destroy order; it may be good or bad. But it is new, a new type of individual, and not merely a new intensity of individual feeling.”⁷⁸ The upshot is that this novelty produced by non-conformation with previous facts generates a new entity: in this case, a reader who is coerced by the act of reading to entertain star-relations through plants and animals. Conformal propositions give value to facts within frameworks we already have; at the risk of error, it is non-conformal propositions that create true novelty. Considering her audience, who might know her association with Language poetry, these propositions count as a kind of non-conformity that might be asking a lot of their readers as they are catapulted beyond the materialism and linguistic focus of the field. The reading’s becoming includes whether the reader admits the proposition into feeling, and the speaker’s almost defiant naïveté actually encourages the reader’s disidentification with the speaker. This places emphasis on the other’s “experiences as such,” suggesting that across

⁷⁷ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 39.

⁷⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 284.

ontologically separated worlds, it is the qualities and values that experience produces that pragmatically matter to the eco-relationality Berssenbrugge is interested in rather than their validity. The orientation rather than the validity is the primary concern; in reading the “supernatural” or New Age as utterance, as surface-level proposition among others, the poem offers speculative forms of relation that hold value in their modeling of animist, organic relationality that deliberately provoke the reader to entertain the ecological value of “irrational” experience.

As I argued earlier, Berssenbrugge’s intervention is to uncover or incite our capacity for animist relationality rather than provide a systematic exposition describing reality. Part 3 of “Pegasus” introduces telepathic address as a means to “restore our relations with stars:”

Stars demonstrate entanglement by helping us to hold, to integrate light.

The more we restore our relations with stars, the more luminosity.

There’s a shift now, as humans seek coherence, this beauty, through imagination.

Star-human communication occurs in mind first, then a way is prepared for contact.

She tells them her hopes, which they amplify; beings align with her thought through an inner connection to their common source.

Imagining may be my perception of hope, and wonder at night sky authenticates contact.

We who watch stars claim the Vital Principle, cosmos, is conscious, minded and intelligent like DNA, plants, stars, evolution.

You could say imagining has the point-like characteristic of creation.⁷⁹

The ubiquity of light in the universe helps it serve as a sign for our common world and as a metaphor for the entanglement that conditions our existence. Perceiving-interacting with stars as signs of these qualities is thereby a central means for communal grace, for it is by perceiving our

⁷⁹ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 41.

relatedness that we are brought into this grace. While the sensation of light can help us recognize this condition, the speaker guides the reader into another capacity of imagination—communication—as “[s]tar-human communication occurs in the mind first, then a way is prepared for contact.” As imagination, one of our conscious forms of the universe’s general mentality, is continuous with the cosmic internal relatedness (here “an inner connection to their common source”), the speaker proposes that through address, the “she” both receives a kind of reciprocation through “amplif[ication]” of her hopes and an “align[ment]” with other beings. While this would be the epitome of magical thinking—that thought changes reality—in a panpsychist cosmology, it is not inconceivable that mentality or thought alters events. We can also draw upon Massumi to help distinguish Berssenbrugge’s suspension of disbelief from credulity. In his words, imagination is a “suspended ambulation” that foretraces possible world-lines, whereas delusion begins when such a speculative tendency is mistaken for an already demonstrated fact.⁸⁰ The poem’s propositions are animist not because they certify Pegasus’s empirical presence, but because they rehearse forms of responsiveness to *dividual* and mythic more-than-human forces and possibility. Add to this an interpretation of quantum physics that any type of interaction—even through thought and imagination—can be entangled, and we can at the least not dismiss the proposition wholesale. Address also reflexively alters the speaker here by increasing possibility—not an “empowerment” of the speaker or the “she”—but rather a different way of being worlded in which a felt general intimacy engenders new possibilities. This is a transversality where new conditions of meaning emerge through the relational contact of stars and humans “authentica[t]ed” by “wonder;” the affect provides the speaker a kind of proof that the speaker has joined the continuity of cosmic mentality.

⁸⁰ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 120-121.

Intentionality is important here, as for Berssenbrugge, intentional address has real effects.

In an interview she muses:

I imagine there's a dimension in which every intention exists as real, also every thought. Intention is agency, so the quality of one's intention is crucial. I aspire to caring nurture as a kind of impetus that gives direction to writing a poem. Caring beyond the present. In this way intention is like a possibility that becomes real. The future and the possible become more kind.⁸¹

When all action—including mental action—is viewed as effectual, intention is no longer trapped in an isolated internality. Instead, it “exists as real” and “is agency” in that it modifies the universe and what emerges in the instant. Her propositions bring care “beyond the present” into lures for feeling, and in turn it is these becomings that modify the present through reading. Like a Mary Oliver cosmonaut, Berssenbrugge directs her reader to open their affectability towards the stars, either directly or through the model of her speakers or characters. In part 4 of “Pegasus” it is: “[a]sk a star or planet to come into empty space inside you. / It wishes to contact the other, whom you dream, and to take on this role. / Its contours merge with the dream; estrangements heal. / So you describe the dream as our collectivity with stars and use its synergy for new, hybrid culture.”⁸² Like a prayer, this is a beseeching for a form of grace in a future horizon, and this grace can be animistically and communally received from a multitude of beings, but its manifestation is in the now of the reading and what Charles Altieri calls the “specific configurations of intimacy” it proposes for its reader.⁸³ The poem proposes a kind of

⁸¹ Berssenbrugge, “Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s Poetry of Attention.”

⁸² Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 42.

⁸³ As Charles Altieri argues, “[i]n Berssenbrugge the crucial issue is not whom one addresses but where the address can be envisioned as fully taking place. Questions about identity prove much less important than concerns for being able to shape whatever identities we have to the specific configurations of intimacy that the poems offer.” Intimacy takes precedence over identity and recognition, and “[i]ntimacy is less a matter of coming to know the other better than of learning to enter the space created by the desire to give another access to one’s energies as they extend beyond what communication can contain.” Charles Altieri, “Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s *Empathy*,” in *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics*, eds. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (University of Alabama Press, 2002), 65.

transference of the mode of address from star to “the other, whom you dream,” this intimate intention that traverses cosmic distance through the instance of perception is a mobile mode of address that can be extended to any “other” from whom one feels estranged. This “other” also stands in for links that might build a wider “collectivity,” a “hybrid culture.” Like Whitehead’s “hybrid entity,” intention in address is the origin of new actual occasions at a wider social scale. In animist terms, this makes intention an ethical mode of participation. Because thought enters the shared field of becoming, the quality of one’s attention and address is a responsibility to the beings with whom one composes the world.

While the stars and the speaker’s friends and family are important as specific addressees in *Treatise*, the emergent valuations afforded by caring address enable the ecological intimacies the poems achieve. While it may appear fuzzy how a poetics that might be described as an individual addressing the cosmos can have planetary, ecological import, Manning argues how Whitehead’s cosmic philosophy is both cosmological and ecological:

Experience is never individual in the Whiteheadian account. It is cosmological. Ecology must be understood in this cosmological philosophy as relation itself. Experience is how the world shifts into a shape, and how that shape has concern for the field. Experience as ecology means concern for the field is never reducible to “my” concern. That would return us to nature overcoded by culture. Concern for the field is attunement to the singularity of how nature makes itself felt, how it *matters*.⁸⁴

Are propositions a mode of self-help? Do the stars animistically address humans to comfort them, to do emotional labor for them? At first blush, Berssenbrugge’s book seems to offer this interpretation. But I believe the real question is how these propositions create forms of mattering irreducible to human and to star. The shifts in perspective show that the point is not how the “I” internalizes an experience, but rather how the standpoints generated by events are all part of the event. The point is not to escape being human, but the mattering of the event helps us no longer

⁸⁴ Manning, *Out of the Clear*, 41

be “all too human” in Friedrich Nietzsche’s phrase. What ends up mattering are the ecological intimacies experienced through a particular relational standpoint.

Why does Berssenbrugge shift perspectives between speaker, character, interviewee, etc. if address would seem to imply a clear subject-subject dyad? As Berssenbrugge states in an interview: “The first and third person may be aspects of my voice that portray varying distance from self, or even from reader. The one who listens can heal their own disconnection with compassionate listening. And the witness, the person transformed by their experience, can be integrated, healed, by being listened to.”⁸⁵ Even as perspectival shift models the healing reciprocity of speaker-listener relation, so too there is an implication that the poem’s reader might perform such a role through “compassionate listening.” As Yugon Kim discusses, this is territory she has explored from Buddhist philosophy. Another way to describe entanglement is interdependence, and Kim registers how perspective-leaping juxtapositions both perform interdependence and elicit the reader’s capacity to see “compassionate or ethical responsiveness” across the paratactic gaps.⁸⁶ Address anticipates response, and this listening brings the opportunity for healing. But this listening is also ecstatic in that it pushes the mind out of its own bounds. At the end of “Pegasus,” she connects the shaman, a key animist figure, to quantum physics: “[s]hamans study astronomy, and yet they call starlight spirit, their gloss for a complexity of occurrence that’s non-causal, non-sequential, that happens as it’s felt. / Passing in and out of form, beings of waves co-create with us an illumination for consciousness to inhabit.”⁸⁷ In her speculative interpretation of the science, the implications of panpsychism are

⁸⁵ Berssenbrugge, “Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge,” 224.

⁸⁶ Yugon Kim, “An Ethics for the Erotic Avant-Garde: Feminism, Buddhism, and the Idea of Compassion in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s Lyric Poetry,” *Arizona Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2016): 108-109, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2016.0006>.

⁸⁷ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 44.

that the role of art is to move the reader into this “non-causal, non-sequential” wave-reality. Her shifts in perspective help break down narrative’s linear pull and to open space for participation in an animist cosmos, a web of listening and address.

Similitude & Measure in “Consciousness Self-Learns”

Berssenbrugge’s animist propositions invite readers to be re-worlded by her sentences’ lures for feeling, but if we stop there, we miss the implications her work has on an animist conception of poetics. Her propositions—beyond offering modes of relation—actually alter how we might understand and analyze reference, particularly forms of similitude like metaphor, simile, and metonymy. At first, Berssenbrugge may not strike a reader as a poet of metaphor, but this is because she thinks about it differently than the conventional notion of the figure. Classically conceived, metaphor consists of a “tenor” and a vessel.” The “tenor” is meant to be taken literally and is what the metaphor is about; the “vessel” is figurative, and its semantic content and contribution is only by analogy. A common critique of conventional metaphor finds fault in its subordination of the vessel to the tenor, the former losing any significant content beyond what it adds to the latter. This hierarchical relation in lyric poetry typically serves only the figurative development of the interiority of a speaking subject; the world supplies figurative metaphors for the literal content of the speaker’s feeling and thought. I would also suggest that metaphor in Western poetics is typically human-exceptionalist and representationalist: it assumes a split between language and reality in which human figuration is arbitrary and non-relational to the reality it represents. Language in such thinking is a way humans represent reality to themselves, and it exists in an ideal mental realm that has no relation to reality except as representation, so the art of poetry is one of making creative figurations that bear no actual

effects or responsibilities to the signs they use. The problem of hierarchy and representation are both possible from an ontology in which humans are the only creatures with language and that language is divorced from world.

In a panpsychist and animist ontology, metaphor can take quite a different form. Reading Berssenbrugge with Whitehead can help reveal the ontology and epistemology of her poetics. I contend that what Berssenbrugge calls “measure” and “proportion” in her rhetorics of similitude challenge us to see language not as an act of representation ontologically separate from reality but rather as a way of accounting for and co-creating with our relational meshwork. In Berssenbrugge’s poetics, similitudes through juxtapositions are used to transversally “measure” forms of relation and thereby create animist possibility. *Treatise* is a continuation of her employment of sentence-level parataxis for emergent creation out of typically unattended-to relational possibilities. In her own thinking, “[m]etaphor, metonymy, relations, proportion echo the sacred geometry, sacred relations of the world”⁸⁸ The abstractions that show up in her work have long functioned to creatively compose in the relations of the world: “the abstract is a matter of mathematics, of proportion. Metaphor is really a matter of proportion, a system of proportion and equivalence.”⁸⁹ Both “laterally” through juxtaposition and metonymy and “vertically” through metaphor, language for Berssenbrugge is a kind of mathematical art of proportion. They are a proposition of similitude in which there is not an *as if* relation between reality and figuration, but rather a consequential bringing-together. In a panpsychist cosmos, figuration is no longer merely arbitrary representation, but an effective part of the real that synthesizes or

⁸⁸ Berssenbrugge, “Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge,” 230.

⁸⁹ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, “Blurring the Borders between Formal and Social Aesthetics: An Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge” interview by Zhou Xiaojing, *MELUS* 27, no. 1 (2002): 210. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3250643>.

disrupts worlds.⁹⁰ Since interior experience is not separate from what exists, signs “present” aspects of the real even if they do not fully encapsulate it, and in that presentation, they modify it. Berssenbrugge’s propositions, in their juxtapositions, disclose forms of similitude that both “echo” the totality of relations that create our being and *are* tools for composing with that totality.

I discuss here how the transversal propositions of “Consciousness Self-Learns” use similitude as a relational tool for worlding both in two of the “master metaphors” of *Treatise* and particular juxtapositions in the poem. Skillful reference in a panpsychist cosmos produces the title’s designation: a self-learning of the world’s intelligent relationality. She begins, “[p]lants and rocks lay under night sky; ground is a subject of sky; the relation’s a force.”⁹¹ This “force” of relation between land and sky, in which ground is taken as a “subject” or content for the sky in the seeing, suggests sky relations are an agency of salience and orientation, a foregrounding. Berssenbrugge explains in an interview that seeing itself in *Treatise* is a metaphor, but this symbolic meaning is actually a property of seeing and its metonymic referents (“all perception”) itself:

I use the metaphor of seeing, of all perception, as a way of creating the world. And the world *being seen* co-creates our experience, and also us. It’s a rich, sensual interweave. It’s more atmospheric than one-to-one. The reciprocity of seeing and being seen, receiving light from a star, connecting, is like receiving love. The connection implies a unity which, throughout the book, I try to experience as love. [emphasis in original]⁹²

⁹⁰ Kirk describes Whitehead’s notion of the symbol as “presentation” rather than representation. He explains, “Our symbols are not problematic by virtue of some ultimate ontological gap between the appearances and the things-in-themselves; but because the reality they present is irreducibly complex. We must get over the idea that symbolic communication is somehow second class. ... The freedom to revise these symbols reflects an awareness that the process out of which they arose is neither static nor simple nor closed.”

Organicism as Reenchantment, 40.

⁹¹ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 11.

⁹² Berssenbrugge, “Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s Poetry of Attention.”

The beholding-and-being-beheld relation of seeing in the concrescence of an actual occasion is participatory and contextually involved rather than a subject-object encounter. The reciprocity inherent in the form that is seeing is an act that Berssenbrugge's propositions invite us to "receive;" the world subtly guides us towards this unity, an "us" that is always constellated in diverse relations. The speaker then apostrophizes to an addressee to see the proportional similitude of stars within their own body: "[I]ook inside when you are struggling; every cell in your body emits light. / Cilia beat rhythms into space, signaling cells of wildflowers in a field, signaling sky. / I connect to it, holding the hand of our friend, who's sleeping."⁹³ Similitude's proposition is both the wonder of the body as a cosmos and a literally-acting agent of light; the speaker "connect[s] to" this agency to integrate her care for her friend into this larger relational force. Seeing therefore becomes a reciprocal social technique as the cell, star, wildflower, and suffering friend help constitute a temporary community of care.

Inevitably however, events rustle and disturb the proportions that offered grace, calling for new measures to fit the evolving occasion:

Then, talking to you about his illness provokes tension, disagreement that stirs in my memory lost thoughts.

Our difference became a permeable membrane between each person and the whole.

Even though my mind focused within bounds, it's indivisible from sky I see, because seeing it as a field.

Looking is an innate impulse toward wholeness.⁹⁴

While the speaker experiences separation from her interlocutor through disagreement (non-conformal propositions), this difference "become[s] a permeable membrane" when read through the sky. That is, the open totality of the cosmos widens the field of interaction beyond the

⁹³ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 11.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

interpersonal into “the whole.” As companions sensed and returned to with intention, the stars’ metonymic reference to the whole cosmos causes the speaker to read her and her friend’s disagreement metaphorically within this wider, intersocial context. While the disagreement is not resolved in the poem, the difference is held within a desired mutual integration into a world that could contain it.

While the speaker’s foregrounding of the sky in this interaction contextualizes suffering within the totality of relations, the poem turns towards more earthly animist relations in Part 2, where the speaker seeks the proportions to confront death:

Particles flash in and out of being; the border between life and death may not continue in other dimensions; gravity and time flex.

Struggle and freedom elide.

When you arrive at my house ill, I throw my arms around you and lead you to a chair,
“What happened?”

“I’m glad your mind is clear, even with such pain;” I place my hand on your chest and pray.

And I pray when I read the paper, for lost people.

Any transformation is an expressive aspect of this intent.

World is undivided, observer and observed, as particle from its wave nature, as prayer from a compassionate outcome, when prayer is multiplied.

Next week, you find me crying over a fawn whose mother was killed; I drove to town for milk, but when I returned the fawn had died.

“It was very hungry, now it’s dead,” I tell you; “Its mind flows into my mind.”

“I’m weeping because I want milk.”⁹⁵

The opening proposition frames the poem with the possibility of some kind of quantum continuity after death. As thought and prayer in this case are an aspect of reality and affect it, the

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 12.

speaker argues that “[a]ny transformation” of reality that may occur “is an expressive aspect of this intent.” In animist figuration, we can expect mutual relevance in metaphor: the fawn is not a metaphor for the friend’s illness; it is in proportion to it. Like the prayer modifies reality, the fawn’s hunger is stated as the speaker’s feeling told to the addressee, a prehended objective immortality felt as one-to-one transfer of consciousness—a mode of what I will discuss below as “channeling.” Whether the tone is preciously sentimental, playful, or even eerie as the speaker “want[s] milk,” the proposition is that by opening oneself to the relevance of cross-species similitude—here, the threat and actualization of mortality across human and fawn—there is not resolution of suffering but rather a bringing-into-proportion that keeps the speaker worlded and animistically relating. In Massumi’s terms, Berssenbrugge’s metaphor is a “nonsensuous similarity:” “a being of analogy occurring in the in-between event of the two component events’ coming abstractly together” that composes a temporary field of mutual relevance.⁹⁶ Metaphor as relational similitude forms reciprocal relevance, a co-implication with ethical implications in its refusal of anthropocentrism. It is the proportion that lets us know that the other beings of the world do not stand *for* us but rather stand *with* us. Berssenbrugge’s speaker’s prosopopoeia of the dead deer elucidated through objective immortality then is a means for nonhuman death to continue to solicit grief, attention, and response from the living, recalling Donna Haraway’s “Speakers for the Dead” from “The Camille Stories” in which the speakers “bring[] critters who had been irretrievably lost into potent presence for giving knowledge and heart to all of those continuing to work for the still diverse earth’s robust and partial recuperation.”⁹⁷

In Part 3 the speaker more fully reframes the fawn’s death in light of quantum panpsychism to compose her propositions. She states:

⁹⁶ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 123.

⁹⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 164.

The dead fawn is a delicate, cosmic holding-position, like the invisible spiral around a crane circling the marsh to land.

Its pattern of being maintains without a fixed structure, whose virtual particles and fields may include my prayers, my compassion for it.

The way some waves continue into space when light and matter are removed, using a latent mentality outside space-time, my fervent plea may evolve physically.

From possibility, feeling for a faun generates photons like rain on matted fur; words, visions, images of milk engage with the baby for a better outcome.

When I recognize this, effects become intentional, hopeful, because love is a measurement.⁹⁸

The fawn is a “cosmic holding-position,” an effective force of its mentality in the cosmos after its death, recalling Whitehead’s “objective immortality” in which all entities are immortal in the specific sense of their imprint on the chain of causation and new becomings. The fawn’s ongoingness includes the speaker’s prayers and compassion since the non-separability of observer and observed is assumed here. The speaker’s intention creates new possibility in these “virtual particles and fields,” a different outcome in a different universe. When asked in an interview about the idea of love as a measurement in the last line, Berssenbrugge answers:

I’m working with the wave-particle metaphor in quantum physics: if wholeness or the field is the wave, then perception or measurement condenses it into a particle. If love were the measurement, what would it condense to? The loved entity? Which could be a lover or earth, universe? Whatever you can “measure” and materialize by loving?⁹⁹

Again, we are in the realm of metaphor that is not simply a figuration of reality. Berssenbrugge’s physics bring her to see the perception-love relation as one of similitude; perception—in its capacity for wholeness I have discussed—is like love’s erotic connections and unifications. The

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁹ Berssenbrugge, “Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s Poetry of Attention.” See also: “I use quantum theory as a way to include multiplicity and to include subjective, personal agency. In quantum physics, looking, observation, measurement, physically create matter, reality. Measurement condenses the quantum wave into a particle. This creative agency of the subject and the ubiquity of wave energy I can see as a paradigm shift across all fields of knowledge.” Berssenbrugge, “Interview with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge,” 228

unity within wholeness that Berssenbrugge's speaker seeks must manifest in discrete acts of perception that are the "measurement" of this wholeness relative to the speaker's participation. Following a posthumanist notion of "measurement" that does not ontologically exceptionalize a human observer,¹⁰⁰ any act in which one system "observes" (in quantum physics), or for Whitehead, "objectifies" another in the process of becoming will be mediated by the relative potential forms of transmutation to that interaction. This "measurement," or for Whitehead, "prehension" produces not a kind of omnipotent subjectivity (New Age quantum physics), but rather "the evolution of novel facts *jointly* determined by both the world of facts antecedent to the evolution and the character of the subject prehending this evolution by virtue of its inclusion in it" [emphasis in original].¹⁰¹ The outcome of a measurement is a relational becoming, the general, erotic mentality (in Whitehead's sense—not "mindset") that informs a new actual occasion. The love carried into the event of measurement in part determines the outcome that Berssenbrugge lists in her questions. Love as form—or really, as in-forming vector bearing the speaker into and through interaction—does not produce a definite outcome, but rather its power is to accentuate the relational constitution of all becoming. Love as measurement is thus an animist technology of salience, making another being matter as a participant in the event and converting ontological interdependence into an incipient ethics of care.

In Part 4, the line of thought developing in the poem turns from death and love to the relationship between absence in general and standpoint. The quantum ongoingness of the previous sections is the springboard into a meditation on how bridging of standpoints of experience through sociality (and poetry) allows us to become relation's participatory witnesses:

¹⁰⁰ See also Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 337-338.

¹⁰¹ Epperson, *Quantum Mechanics and the Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, 132-133.

I think waves that condense into particles retain their original information and that coherence among these waves is lost when an organism dies, like a person swept into the chaos of a party.

He can no longer hear himself or speak.

When no one observes us, not even ourselves, our particles regain their wave aspect.

Our attention that collapses quanta contains a kind of meaning intrinsic to feeling connected.

I sit on the patio and watch small birds calling, fluttering in the rain.

Our friend asks if I saw an oriole on the stones outside his window, but I did not.

Describing a bird you see, which I did not see, is part of collective consciousness self-learning.

Ghosts, angels, phantom birds, crop circles, even hoaxes incarnate some of the wholeness.

Connecting to it is being, wherein through prayer my consciousness binds with subtle energy of a bird I did not see?¹⁰²

The “[h]e” recalls the ill friend with the same pronoun from Part 1 of the poem, and the inability to “hear himself or speak” juxtaposed with the following line suggests that he is entering this liminal state of non-observation, the “wave aspect” that is part of the totality and measureless. The line providing the title of the poem then appears as both the learning about another’s experience and the speaker’s imagining of the unseen (and even “phantom”) bird is argued to be “part of collective consciousness self-learning.” Whitehead’s negative prehension, as Massumi glosses it, means that exclusion still expresses a bond.¹⁰³ The bird’s absence is therefore not a void in the poem’s world but one of the relations giving that world its determinate form, allowing the unseen nonhuman to participate without being converted into visible evidence to the speaker. To link with other occasions, with what is absent to the phenomenal purview of the self,

¹⁰² Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 14.

¹⁰³ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 155.

is a recurring gesture of the work as the self is continually re-constellated in the general mentality and sociality. Provoking her reader again, she suggests that even hoaxes—a prime feature of the post-COVID era—are part of a more primal need for meaning revealed through totality, and the project as a whole dances along this line of what ought to be taken seriously when all events are admitted to the real. The final sentence, a statement that turns into a question, proposes a possibility that is worth the venture for the wider connection with the real that it implies.

As possibility becomes actuality through observation or interaction, the implication is that metaphor as proportion—in which comparison of the terms is an alteration of both—captures something about the nature of perception: namely, the co-emergent nature of subjects and objects.¹⁰⁴ I argue that Berssenbrugge's work asks us to consider metaphor as a relation-making action across standpoints, a process in which the similarity-through-difference that is metaphor forms and reveals worlds as a web of solidarities in how the real thinks. Berssenbrugge looks to the impulse behind metaphor in her Coda:

I love a person leaving who sees birds in other worlds, nearby.

All the good in nature I imagine in birds, their images like quantum leaps.

Goodness is part of my awareness that sensing a bird intends.

We feel love shape a situation in which our friend's inseparable on a constitutive level from the immediate.

Worlds emerge and transform, so metaphor uses birds to extend disrupted thought.

I want to learn from what generated the metaphor, the need.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Catanzano in her essays on "quantum poetics" offers that "[i]n poetry, distinct objects compared in metaphor are changed, or made novel, by the act of comparison, suggestive of how matter is changed by observation in quantum theory." Amy Catanzano, *The Imaginary Present*, 97.

¹⁰⁵ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 15.

Consistent throughout *Treatise*, affect is inseparable not only from the act of perception but also from the very constitution of an event. Affect bears its own intention different from the intention the “I” produces through language. Significantly, Berssenbrugge conceives metaphor as prior to the subject’s conscious will. Instead, metaphor itself is mentality’s response to the change in its world(s), a means of continuity and coherence in time. It is interesting that the poem does not explicitly use the birds as metaphor; instead they only hold the symbolic quality of “[a]ll the good in nature.” Instead, when the speaker’s friend describes a bird she herself does not see, her imagination’s conjuration of the bird “is part of collective consciousness self-learning” and is a process of connection that is “being” itself. Metaphor then is not an “as if,” nor a figurative structure in which birds’ qualities teach us something about the nature of reality. Rather, the birds are a conceptual link in the panpsychic cosmos. I believe the point is that Berssenbrugge advances metaphor not as a figurative use of one term to describe another, but rather a literal relating with another being for the extension and continuity of a world that holds both terms in the comparison, for the concrescence of what is available to emerge from this holding side by side. When the speaker “want[s] to learn from what generated the metaphor, the need,” this refers to the impulse towards relation, for relation—becoming with the other—is constitutive of being even if it is rarely acknowledged. Metaphor’s etymology is to “carry across,” and what is carried is the intention to relate. It is not the birds themselves, but rather the birds’ images in the speaker’s mentality that are “like quantum leaps,” that are figurative similitudes to the nature of reality. All figuration has real effect on relation between entities in an entangled universe. Kirk asks, “[i]f, as Whitehead asserts, there is no clear and distinct ultimate reality and our very sense experience is produced by a process of symbolism, what can ‘literal’ mean?”¹⁰⁶ Metaphor in this

¹⁰⁶ Kirk, *Organicism as Reenchantment*, 118.

account is an animist social technology of kin-making because it does not consume the nonhuman as material for human meaning but rather experimentally composes a world in which heterogeneous beings can matter to one another.

Channeling in “Chaco and Olivia”

“Chaco and Olivia” is the final poem in *Treatise*, and it presents some of the most radical claims of Berssenbrugge’s poetics. She argues in Part 1 for the importance of “channeling” or “taking dictation” in literary technique. Channeling has been a marginal if nonetheless important tendency experimental poetics, notably present midcentury in Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan and later in Language or Post-Language Poetry through Hannah Weiner and Susan Howe. However, channeling only more recently has played a stronger role in ecopoetics, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s ancestral channeling project, *Dub: Finding Ceremony*, demonstrates this form gaining contemporary animist traction.¹⁰⁷ Berssenbrugge proposes panpsychic quantum physics as a means for poetic channeling:

Channeling, part of daily experience, is an underrated technique in literature.

It’s natural for an artist to receive information from a non-objective source.

New spirits are expressing themselves from new quantum realms.

There are synchronous memories to integrate and ideas, which suddenly emerge.

One part of myself is taking dictation, while one part enjoys a calm, empty day.

How does my body make room for another, who perceives with my senses?

Does she see what I see, or is merging with me a new hybrid world?

Sometimes the entity comes out of love, and you’re like a candle flame; versions of yourself are drawn to you; they fly into you, and you transmute.

¹⁰⁷ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (Duke University Press, 2019).

Others seek “individual” experience, as frequencies rapidly increase on earth.

Many intelligences reveal themselves through animals or plants.

Ask for a grand enhancement of your identity through trust, through living in the moment, as you sit at your desk.

“We wish you to speak with gama grass, quartz crystals in sand, petals of morning glories, white moths, ants, ravens, new cholla leaves, evaporating rain and to receive the knowledge stored in living form by transcribing.”

Writing can shift the mechanism of time by changing the record, then changing the event.¹⁰⁸

While this poem might seem to mark a turn from previous poems in the collection in which the speaker co-arises through interaction or experiences a porousness of mentality while generally retaining distinct identity, here the speaker verges on an animist poetics of possession in which one consciousness gives way to another. I believe however that channeling is distinct from a poetics of possession, in which the subjectivity or agency of the other is experienced as agony, as painful struggle and mastery over a previously autonomous self.¹⁰⁹ Instead, this kind of channeling taps into a general porousness and interconnectivity at play in the cosmos. The channeled voices, “we,” direct an unspecified addressee to in turn address nonhuman entities for the purpose of recording “knowledge stored in living form.” Regarding these “[n]ew spirits expressing themselves from new quantum realms,” we can build on Altieri’s description of Berssenbrugge’s “notion of spirit as simply an extension of bodies into something like auras of energy and processes of attunement” which “manifest as the folding and unfolding of surfaces that we produce as we engage in various relationships.”¹¹⁰ To this I will add that these “auras of energy and processes of attunement” emerge relationally in the version of quantum physics

¹⁰⁸ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 93-94.

¹⁰⁹ I am thinking here of Belcher’s concept of “discursive possession.” Wendy Laura Belcher, *Abyssinia’s Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹⁰ Altieri, “Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s *Empathy*,” 60.

Berssenbrugge advances and that this opens the ontological co-imbrication of self and other to the event's valuations.

Animist channeling is a “mak[ing] room for another” within a general condition in which this kind of otherness is already at play, proposing something similar to what Deleuze and Guattari call the “three virtues,” “imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality:”

To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one's zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way enter the haecceity and impersonality of the creator. One is then like grass: one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has made a necessarily communicating world, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things.¹¹¹

The “new hybrid world” Berssenbrugge references emerges when one sees the self inhabited by other presences, even persons. Berssenbrugge compares the artist to the informant figure of her project, both influenced by “non-objective source[s].” The point is not to latch onto certain sources for revelation, but rather to use channeling as a means towards discovering a wider cosmo-erotic underlying condition that makes channeling possible. Benjamin Kossak sees in her earlier work the dimension of “impersonality,” arguing that “[i]f her intimacy is impersonal, it is not because it is cold or distant but rather because it is unconcerned with the abstract schema that define a subject. That is, it is precisely *impersonal* because it ignores the category of ‘person’ and focuses instead on relationships that develop on both much larger and much smaller scales”¹¹² While *Treatise* does often move between these “much larger and much smaller scales,” personhood receives more attention than in previous books. These are the star persons who dependably constellate the sky, the speaker and her beloveds, the particular kinds of animals and

¹¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 280.

¹¹² Benjamin Kossak, “A Choreography of Parts: The Impersonal Intimacies of Touch and Movement in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's Poetry, Contact Improvisation, and Embodied Reading,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 45, no. 1 (2021): 106, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.45.1.07>.

plants related with. However, this personhood, this “grand enhancement of ... identity” is an emergent and dynamic outcome of process and relationality, and one’s “identity” in a concrescence may be entirely “outside” oneself: as in a line from Part 2: “An insect singing may be your identity there, a momentum, as surrounding energy moves into this sound.”¹¹³ Reading Berssenbrugge then contributes to animist studies the idea that personhood is not projected onto a preexisting object nor simply refuted but contingently and dynamically emerges through transversal practices of attention, address, and response the poems figure as responsive.

Channeling in this sense can be seen as the becoming of communal grace through proposition, a nature coming forth. Manning argues that “subjectivity [is] produced environmentally in us, through us”¹¹⁴ and “[n]ature is not a container. It is the carrying itself, the force that moves the preindividual across the tangle of relation. Any form it individuates is replete with the tangle of all that is still moving through it.”¹¹⁵ This recalls Robin Blaser’s description of dictation in Jack Spicer as the in-forming-of-otherness (“[i]t is within language that the world speaks to us with a voice that is not our own”) that constitutes world rather than something supernatural: “The dictation remains persistently of the world, and as it is unknown, it moves into the language as the imageless moves into image.”¹¹⁶ Channeling is a form of registering this “tangle of relation,” a kind of recording that receives and modifies its impulse as Berssenbrugge articulates in the last line: “[w]riting can shift the mechanism of time by changing the record, then changing the event.” Panpsychism challenges the dogma of the late 20th Century that would find fault in channeling—namely, “as if consciousness existed prior to—aside from—

¹¹³ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 95.

¹¹⁴ Manning, *Out of the Clear*, 114.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 119.

¹¹⁶ Robin Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” in *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, ed. Miriam Nichols (University of California Press, 2006), 121.

language & had to be ‘put into’ it,”¹¹⁷ or “there are no thoughts except through language.”¹¹⁸ At the very least, such views are refuted by the mentality of animals. For panpsychism, while language and thought may be bound together for humans (and perhaps other beings), there is thought in the cosmos.¹¹⁹ Writing is then an animist communicative practice when authorship is distributed across human and nonhuman intelligences through the prehensive attunement of channeling.

Yet “Chaco and Olivia” is also an example of the ethical limits of the work as a whole. At times *Treatise* is motivated by colonial discourses that decontextualize land and stars from settler-Indigenous relations. The text also takes advantage of the porosity of subjectivity assumed by an animist ontology to deterritorialize and appropriate Indigenous-derived ideas for the affective becomings of the non-Indigenous speakers or subjects in the poems. While Berssenbrugge notes that Indigenous philosophy informs her work, these ideas are not accompanied by an overt decolonial political commitment in the work. On the contrary, the beliefs enabling exploitative, New Age spiritual tourism are presented as cosmic matters of fact and even cosmic imperatives such as the passive voice statement, “[s]ome will be drawn to Machu Picchu or Uxmal, to artifacts perhaps no one else sees, because a certain inspiration is

¹¹⁷ Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein's *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, 506.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 508.

¹¹⁹ To be fair, there are counter-examples in Language writing. For example, see Nick Piombino, whose notion of indeterminate possibility is much more in the spirit of the quantum poetics described in this essay:

Writing is reading. I live in a world of signs which acausally direct my consciousness. Thought is writing, just as thinking is proto-linguistic. Thought is reading just as listening enforces a transposition of an interval of related sounds into a specific inner focus of attention. Writing silences a babel of voices each of which calls attention to its own point of origin. At the root of all comprehension exists an indeterminate number of possible meanings which are coming into being, into consciousness. All understanding or visual or aural recognition contains within it an underlying chaotically disordered core in flux, moving as a system of connected points toward an entropic state of inertia, a stable pattern.

Nick Piombino, “Writing and Conceiving,” *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, no. 13 (1980). Reprinted in *Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein's L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: The Complete Facsimile*, eds. Matthew Hofer and Michael Golson (University of New Mexico Press, 2020), 450.

required for that dimension.”¹²⁰ Moreover, the sense of embarrassment the reader feels from the frequent passages on dolphin communication betrays New Age fetishization of charismatic fauna who are perceived to possess special powers at the expense of the wider land and ocean’s needs themselves. Finally, a “channeled” voice parrots an Indigenous voice in its reference to “creator:” ““Even asleep in the eaves, we’re building high frequency bridges for you to meet others and know creator’s light in us all.”¹²¹ While I do not deny that New Age discourses of “frequency” might appear in contemporary Indigenous discourses—and it is not my purpose here to judge their appropriateness in those communities—the complicity of the work in colonial and New Age decontextualization, appropriation, and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and the history of what Gordon Fraser calls colonialism’s construction of “star territory” shows how animism without historical responsibility can reproduce the decontextualizing and appropriative operations of New Age coloniality.¹²² While the work confronts many of its own limits through its playfulness, it misses the way it is dangerously structured by colonial discourse for non-Indigenous benefit. To put it bluntly, the proposition form in the work at times functions as colonial self-help. This is a feature of Berssenbrugge’s work itself rather than the lens through which I have been reading it; the relevant Whiteheadian traditions have generally been eager to understand how historicity is fundamentally built into relationality. So while within Asian American studies Malissa Phung has argued for a “politics of relationality” centering Asian settler indebtedness to Native Americans, relationality in Berssenbrugge’s work lacks a fully

¹²⁰ Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars*, 97.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 98.

¹²² Fraser, *Star Territory*, 1-13.

developed acknowledgement of this indebtedness and even extends forms of colonial dispossession.¹²³

Taken together, these analyses show that Berssenbrugge converts panpsychism's general claim that mentality pervades the cosmos into an abundance of specifically animist poetic forms that I have reviewed above. Her transversal propositions make more-than-human relatedness available as an event of reading, even when Berssenbrugge's own standpoint on the cosmos only negatively prehends the historically grounded relationships of coloniality. Examining Berssenbrugge's investment in intentionality through Whitehead's web of connected internalities shows us perhaps less a compelling description of reality extrapolated from a quantum-panpsychist view than the possibilities and significance of a variety of animist, relational reorientations that might accompany such a view. Her non-conformal propositions suggest that representational accuracy of the cosmos is not necessary for developing an ecologically viable relationship with it. The work should also be read as adjacent to, though not itself straightforwardly an instance of, the "conspirituality"¹²⁴ that has proliferated amongst New Age discourses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic¹²⁵ even if the ideas Berssenbrugge's speakers present are lacking in overtly political content. In the wake of a global if uneven

¹²³ Melissa Phung et al., "Settler Colonial Studies, Asian Diasporic Questions," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 5, no. 1 (2019): 3; 18-29. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.5.1.0001>.

¹²⁴ They define conspirituality as follows:

We argue that conspirituality is a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age:

- (1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order (Fenster).
- (2) Humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview.

Charlotte Ward and Prof. David Voas, "The Emergence of Conspirituality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011): 104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2011.539846>.

¹²⁵ See for example, Giovanna Parmigiani, "Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 2 (2021): 506–529. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab053>.

pandemic, the work is part of a collective internal turn in the face of existential threat and even a possession by this nonhuman agency; the poetry dramatizes the attempt to garner its activism of the heart and communal grace—its reaching for possibility out of a sense of its utter lack in planetary crisis—through incorporating recognition of the sociality of the cosmos into intentionality. It is an argument for enchantment at the risk of irrationality. For what the speakers lack in any sense of or interest in *historical* relationality, the work's transversal propositions point to the glaring lack of ecological relationality at all cosmic layers within an implicit claim that this lack has in part caused our alienation from the cosmos and destruction of the layers we have influence over. These propositions attempt to re-establish the context of these relations in the reader's sense of world. Berssenbrugge achieves this through form as much as through content, challenging the reader's very ontology of language. If Gary Snyder aspirational animism and Haunani-Kay Trask's maintained animism would be fully manifest in a grounded-normative world beyond the page; and Michael McClure's required embodied performance, participation, or recording; Berssenbrugge's animism would be staged through thought and subtle perceptual differences on or off the page. As panpsychism and quantum physics will undoubtedly continue to trouble our models of language, self, personhood, relation, and consciousness, poetry—in the way it articulates the mentality at work in our world—is a privileged medium to explore its possibilities and consequences.

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