QUEER ENVIRONMENTALITY:

THOREAU, MELVILLE, CATHER, AND BARNES

by

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Abstract

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My chief objective in this project is to draw some connections between queer studies and environmental studies within the more general context of literary studies. I will propose an alternative understanding of literary environmentalism, rich in tropological abundance, poetic complexity, and hermeneutic indeterminacy, and I will magnify a queer sensibility, present in varying degrees, in this history, or what I call "queer environmentality." In order to develop this queer-environmental literary theory, I perform careful exegeses of four key figures in the American tradition: Thoreau, Melville, Cather, and Djuna Barnes. Each writer problematizes conventional notions of the strange matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual, and thus challenges the assumption that the subject of American environmental literature is essentially and consubstantially heterosexual. Each brilliantly demonstrates the ways in which the queer project and the environmental project are always already connected, that is to say, in which the questions and politics of

human sexuality are always entwined with the questions and politics of the other-than-human world.

Like Charles Darwin, the four primary objects of my analysis—Thoreau, Melville, Cather, and Barnes—believe in reconsidering the human as a natural being, as a species, or type of being, that occupies a particular niche in the order of things, and, therefore, as subject to the explanatory gestures afforded to other species that also constitute and populate their particular biological kingdom. But figuring the human as natural does not provide a stable ontology, nor does it permit an escape from all kinds of epistemological problematics. Like Henri Bergson, each thinker takes seriously the profound connection between ontology and epistemology and offers long meditations on the super-saturation of life—human and otherwise—with desires and aims, with indeterminate geneses and inexplicably deferred endpoints. Thoreau's sinewy sense of "sensuality" within the animal-human-divine matrix, Melville's symbolic struggle with extra-human forces, Cather's cryptic musings on the singularity of organic composition, and Barnes's biologically inflected—perhaps *infected*—decadence all point to an environment as explosive with meaning, with "interlinked terrors and wonders" (*Moby-Dick* 139), as the creatures that dwell within.

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Most of all, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, and my friends, for reminding me that life operates in many different ways, that time and space run in many different directions, and not just theoretically.

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Chapter I

Queer Environmentality:

An Introduction

Djuna Barnes spent the last forty-two years of her life living in a small apartment at 5 Patchin Place in Greenwich Village. After Paris in the 1920s, and after *Nightwood*, Barnes published a play, *The Antiphon* in 1958, but she mostly spent her time writing little poems. One of these poems is called "There Should Be Gardens." Because her writing process was complicated, often recycling and accumulating adapted phrases for decades, it is difficult to date the poem exactly. But the following is "There Should Be Gardens" as it stood around 1974.

Djuna Barnes writes:

> There should be gardens for old men to whimper in,
> For where's the great bull-curl that swagged the leg?
> Nothing as vanquished as an old man's groin
> Where now hangs a sullen bag,
> A sac of withered infants on his leg.
>
> There is no swarming in him now,
> His heart's an hive
> That's banished all its bees,
> He keeps alive
> By shivering;
> Reverberation of oblivion is his motion,
> Disintegration now is all as motion;
> Yet cat-wise he will fall, all four feet down
> On paradise, the upside down.
>
> (*Collected Poems* 187)

"There Should Be Gardens" can stand as emblematic for the work of Djuna Barnes, on both stylistic and thematic levels. The poem condenses and articulates a poetic vision

that is comparativist in scope. Comparativist not in the usual sense of inter-cultural, inter-linguistic, or inter-national, but in the unusual sense of inter-species or inter-being. Comparisons may be odious, but they are nonetheless the basis for poetic expression, for aesthetic creation, for the workings of consciousness.

Barnes's comparativist poetics yields a symbolic ecology. Human being is never considered as-it-is-in-itself, but always in relation to other beings, to the parts and to the whole, to Being or *Dasein*, as Heidegger might say. The organic range and anatomical movement of the poem is dazzling: gardens and hives, old men and their groins, bulls and their legs, withering and shivering, sperm in motion and at rest, bees and cats, reverberations and disintegrations, paradise and the upside down. The effect of this subtly explosive transformation on the main subject of the poem, the old man for whom there should be gardens, though, is not joy, but sadness. "There should be gardens for old men *to whimper in*." What kind of ecological sensibility, metaphysical position, onto-theological prescience—all of which may end up amounting to the same thing—is this?

The poem is divided formally into two sections: the two stanzas. Conceptually, however, the poem involves a different topography of division. Conceptually, the poem is also divided into two sections, but in this regard it is the first line and everything after. The first line is an ethical claim—"There should be gardens for old men to whimper in"—and everything after justification for why there ought to be gardens. Lines two through fourteen confront the ethical ought. Line two, the rhetorical question—"For where's the great bull-curl that swagged the leg?"—begins a series of ontological answers to explain the profound sadness, and humiliation, in the old man's inability to slow time and, unfortunately hence, his ability to waste away. Embedded within these

ontological answers, the tone of the poem is unapologetically and almost mockingly cruel. The vanquished old man, disintegrating into the push and pull of the elements, becomes a site of spectacular amusement. He becomes a joke for the poet and her audience.

For Barnes, the ethical injunction becomes a parody of the ethical injunction. There is a sense of delight in the poet's voice, achieved through stylistic innovation. Hers is a delight in witnessing the finality of the old man's being, not only of his death, but also, and more importantly, of his self-reflexive realization of his own end. He is in full consciousnesses of his downfall and this understanding is precisely why he whimpers. The poet's tonal delight infuses the poem and helps us to recognize the parody. If ethics presupposes a serious ethical agent, capable of decision-making within the extra-human realm, Barnes brings an acute absurdity to the pursuit.

Thematically, "There Should Be Gardens" continues the Barnesian parody of reproduction that admiring—and perhaps unadmiring—readers have noted in her earlier work, especially *Ryder* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1936). If one's participation in the propagation of the species is supposed to return a bankable immortality, "Gardens" renders futile this bio-symbolic investiture in the future. There is "nothing as vanquished as a old man's groin." His scrotum has become "a sullen bag." His testicles, sacs of "withered infants." He survives through shivering, or that involuntary reflex that coldly bespeaks its own imminent end, the cessation of shivering and survival.

Why should this existential drama take place against the backdrop of the garden? The garden, as part of the pastoral tradition in poetic language, invokes an escape from the purely cultural, from civilization and the technological. The garden invokes a return

to simplicity and peace. There should be gardens, then, at least ostensibly, to alleviate the pain and suffering of old men. For the garden to be a place to get back to the tranquility of nature, for the garden to be a place of relief, its nature would have to be of a very particular kind. The garden as nature could not be the nature of the wilderness tradition, in which danger lurks behind every corner, in which one's purpose is to test one's purpose. Instead, the garden as nature would have to serve as the harmonious middle-ground between nature and culture, in which human aesthetic intention, other-than-human beings, and physical processes come together to create something of beauty. But Barnes does not believe this literary leitmotif to be true, or at least not wholly true outside of its literary parameters. For Barnes, the garden represents the strange conjunction between comedy (as I have noted in her parodic tone) and tragedy. The garden, expected to counteract the knowledge of mortality, does not console, but reveals the most terrorizing aspects of each of the components in this middle ground between nature and culture. The garden becomes the site to suffer biological disintegration, the severe callousness of nature, but the garden also becomes the site to register, through poetic representation, that suffering as culturally, as intra-humanly, significant. The tropological garden surprisingly reveals a human ecology of death; the Edenic drive becomes an impulsion into unexpected horror.

This garden has an ambiguous denouement, as indeed does the poem itself. The final two lines of the poem, introduced through the mysterious conjunction "yet," offer a potential—albeit an extremely *ambiguous* potential—for some sort of redemption. "Yet cat-wise he will fall, all four feet down / On paradise, the upside down." For Barnes, Oedipus's solution to the Sphinx's riddle was wrong, or at least not wholly right. The

final stage of human being is not three-footed, hunched over with cane, but once again fallen, down on all fours. Furthermore, the final stage of human being is not *wise*, but *cat-wise*, cat-like, like a cat, forced to reconcile with its animal nature. But the *wise* persists beyond its signifying *like*. In this paradise, the upside down, the old man finally may achieve wisdom, or rather, a kind of wisdom, of *feline* wisdom. For Barnes, through her comparativist poetics, this queerly ecological vision will be the subject of endless interpretation and reinterpretation, of sustained imagination and reimagination.

"There Should be Gardens," the entire corpus of Djuna Barnes, as well as the writings of a number of other major figures in the American literary tradition, all require a critical methodology that draws from diverse schools of thought, a theoretical synthesis that can capture the multiple thematics dwelling within the text. My chief objective in this dissertation, then, will be to draw some connections between queer studies and environmental studies by tracing a queer-environmental lineage in American Romantic and post-Romantic literature. I intend for this queer-environmental synthesis to have both aesthetic and political implications. For those of us whose *aesthetic* taste leads us to think that reading environmental literature is like watching grass grow, I will propose an alternative understanding of literary environmentalism, rich in tropological abundance, poetic complexity, and hermeneutic indeterminacy. For those of us whose *political* taste leads us to think that reading environmental literature is like watching a spectacular dramatization of heterosexual teleology, I will magnify a queer sensibility, present in varying degrees, in this history, or what I call "queer environmentality." I will define this term, at least preliminarily, as a habit of thought that conceptualizes human beings, other

life forms, and their environments as disregarding—and, at times, flaunting their disregard for—the ostensibly primary, natural law "to survive and reproduce."

In order to develop this environmental counter-history, this queer supplement, I will perform careful exegeses of four key figures in this history in the American literary tradition: Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Willa Cather, and Djuna Barnes. Each writer problematizes conventional notions of the strange matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual, and thus challenges the assumption that the subject of American environmental literature is essentially and consubstantially heterosexual. Each brilliantly demonstrates the ways in which the queer project and the environmental project are always already connected, that is to say, in which the questions and politics of human sexuality are always entwined with the questions and politics of the other-than-human world.

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extra-human forces, Cather's cryptic musings on the singularity of organic composition, and Barnes's biologically inflected—perhaps *infected*—decadence all point to an environment as explosive with meaning, with "interlinked terrors and wonders" (*Moby-Dick* 139), as the creatures that dwell within.

If one considers the critical histories of queer studies and environmental studies, one notices a disconnection, bordering on out-right tension, between the two fields. I would like to begin by exploring the disconnect between the queer project, especially queer literary criticism, and the environmental project, especially ecocriticism, or environmental literary criticism. The tension seems to stem from the very different use of "the natural" within the two discursive histories. The major question that will serve as the leitmotif of a queer-ecocritical synthesis will be: what is at stake for queers, on the one hand, and environmentalists, on the other, in the rhetorical development and political deployment of the concept of nature and its variations? The concept of nature has a long, tortuous—perhaps even torturous—history and a critical examination of this history would be well beyond the scope of this chapter. One should consult Neil Evernden's important *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992), a text well known in ecocritical circles, for such a history. What I would like to accomplish here, in exploring possible answers to this question, is threefold: 1) to introduce the reader to the central debates regarding the concept of nature in queer studies and environmental studies as separate fields, 2) to explore the intersections between the two fields in theoretical articulations of ecofeminism and queer revisions of ecofeminism, and 3) to suggest a way of overcoming the current impasse between the two fields regarding "the natural." I will divide the remainder of this chapter into five parts:

1. The Environmental Project

2. The Queer Project

3. Ecofeminism and Queer Ecofeminism

4. Queer Environmentality

5. The Trajectory of the Text

1. The Environmental Project

The disjunction between the ways in which ecocritics and queer critics approach the concept of nature originates in their different assumptions about science (its use and abuse) and critical theory (its use and abuse). Generally, ecocritics emphasize the use of science and the abuse of theory, and queer critics do the opposite. If one considers ecocriticism as it was first articulated in the 1990s, one senses its struggle to come to terms with the "grand theory" of the 1970s and 1980s, especially Kuhnian and Foucaultian critiques of scientific knowledge, and de Manian and Derridean critiques of stable meaning. The prefatory "conversion narratives" that so often accompany early ecocritical monographs depict literary studies as a spiritual wasteland before the ecocritical light. While there have been challenges to this tendency, and to ecocriticism more generally, such as Dana Phillips's *The Truth of Ecology* (2003) and Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007),[1] the legacies of this anti-theoretical history are

[1] See also Anne-Lise François's "'O Happy Living Things': Frankenfoods and the Bounds of Wordsworthian Natural Piety" (2003), Michael P. Cohen's "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique" (2004), a special issue on ecocriticism in the summer 1999 issue of *New Literary History* and, more recently, a cluster of articles in the March 2008 issue of *PMLA*. Another important set of challenges to ecocriticism has come from advocates of environmental justice. These ecocritics work to understand the uneven effects of environmental harm on persons based upon their race, gender, and economic status. Representative work in this vein includes Joni Adamson's *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (2001) and

still very much present. Most articles in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, the field's primary journal and regulatory apparatus, do not engage with extra-ecocritical theoretical discourses. One article, for example, was returned with an anonymous note advising the author to stop worrying about "the jejune idea that everything is constructed" and to remember "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

In order to circumvent jejune ideas, early ecocriticism set out to ground its literary practice in scientific methodology, and more specifically, *ecological* methodology.[2] If "ecological" can stand for "environmental" in contemporary popular discourse, early ecocritics took a somewhat different, somewhat more precise, approach to the terminology. Scholars like William Rueckert and Karl Kroeber wanted their ecocriticism to employ the science of ecology; they wanted their criticism to be not only environmental, but also scientific. Many ecocritics looked to Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977), the standard history in the field, for a

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Jeffrey Myers's *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (2005). See also two edited volumes: Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein's *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (2002) and Rachel Stein's *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (2004).

[2] For an important anthology in the field that brings together articles from the 1970s through the 1990s, see Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). See Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic's edited *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (2003) for an updated anthology of texts. Two monographs helped to coalesce the field in the early 1990s: Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) and Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991). What Buell did for the American literary tradition Bate did for its British counterpart. Buell develops his thinking further in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005). Bates develops his in *The Song of the Earth* (2000).

vocabulary that helped to unpack the work of writers, especially in the Anglo-American Romantic and post-Romantic tradition, who focused primarily on environmental ideas.

The first use of the term "ecocriticism" was in William Rueckert's "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), a short, and admittedly superficial, application of ecological science—specifically, the laws of ecology that Barry Commoner delineates in *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (1972)—to the practice of literary criticism. Kroeber's 1994 study, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, unlike Rueckert's rudimentary theoretical venture, presents a more thorough engagement with contemporary environmental research and attempts a major definition of "ecologically oriented literary criticism." Kroeber's definition will serve as a touchstone for later ecocritics and will reflect a prominent ethos in the field. He writes:

> This [ecological] criticism, escaping from the esoteric abstractness that afflicts current theorizing about literature, seizes opportunities offered by recent biological research to make humanistic studies more socially responsible. Biologists have arrived at the frontier of revolutionary new conceptions of humanity's place within the natural world. Humanists willing to think beyond self-imposed political and metaphysical limits of contemporary critical discourse can use these scientific advances to make literary studies contribute to the practical resolution of social and political conflicts that rend our society. Humanists could help ensure, for example, that the effects on our world of new biological research are beneficent rather than malign. (1)

Kroeber begins by casting contemporary literary theory as "afflicted" by "esoteric abstractness" and positions ecocriticism as an "escape" from such affliction. The means of escape comes in the form of biological science and its promise to make literary criticism more practical, more grounded, more in touch with reality, and therefore more socially responsible.

The deep suspicion—one might even say, paranoia—about critical theory evidenced and reinforced in Kroeber's definition has tended to produce an insularity in the field. Ecocriticism is cast as practical, scientific, and ethical, while its other, variously defined as postmodernism, deconstruction, or just "theory," is cast as impractical, recalcitrant, and dangerous. Even N. Katherine Hayles, a major figure in post-humanist theory, writes in 1995, "The deconstructionist paradigm, if accepted broadly, would not only threaten the privileged role of science as a source of truth about reality. It would also destroy environmentalism, since the environment is just a 'social construction'" (viii).

For many ecocritics, Joseph Carroll for one, queer literary criticism is, unsurprisingly, part of this latter category, part of the impractical, the recalcitrant, and the dangerous. These ecocritics would view texts such as Jennifer Terry's "'Unnatural Acts' in Nature: The Scientific Fascination with Queer Animals" (2000) and Roger N. Lancaster's *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture* (2003), both representative examples of queer critiques of the naturalization of nature as part of the problem—indeed crisis—in the environmental movement. Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease, for example, in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*

(1995) sum up the anxiety shared by many ecocritics about constructivism,[3] especially constructivist theories of science and ethics, by writing, "certain contemporary forms of intellectual and social relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chainsaws" (xvi).

Joseph Carroll in *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995) expresses an even more specific frustration with queer theory, or what he describes as "militant homosexuality," especially its "smirking" disregard for two objective facts: 1) that heterosexuality is "species-typical" and, 2) that "the adaptive function of sex is procreation" (165-167). Ecocritic Glen A. Love in "Ecocriticism and Science: Toward Consilience" (1999) cites Carroll's text approvingly as "a formidable attempt to dismantle poststructuralism" (565).

According to Soulé, Lease, Carroll, Love, and other critics in this camp, the position that nature is "socially constructed" is indicative of a greater human hubris that they identify as the cause of the environmental crisis in the first place. This hubris and its attendant tragic consequences are part and parcel of the postmodern condition. In order to escape from this condition, this camp advises, ecocriticism should align itself not only with the science of ecology, but also with ecology's "uniting theory," evolutionary biology (Love 566). In this regard, Carroll and Love echo the sentiment of Joseph M. Meeker's foundational study, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972), in which Meeker argues that literature has an evolutionary function as a means to ensure survival, to increase fecundity, and thus to perpetuate the species as a whole.[4]

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[3] I undertake a more thorough discussion of constructivism in the final section of this introduction.

[4] To be fair, Meeker's argument is much more interesting than Carroll's or Love's. For Meeker, tragedy, as a metaphysics and literary mode, figures the human as a noble creature capable of intense struggle and cosmic suffering. This view envisages human

My point here is not only to address the ways in which ecocritics have positioned their scientific practicality vis-à-vis literary theory, but to highlight the ways in which this positioning hinders any possible synthesis with queer theory. Nowhere is this hindrance more apparent than in environmentalist discussions of human population dynamics. In these discussions a more general heteronormative undercurrent surfaces with increasing strength. Heteronormativity, as I use it here, signals the ubiquitous ideological framework that identifies heterosexuality as the norm, the "default setting," and all other expressions of both sexuality and gender abnormal, deviant, or *exceptional*—and not in a good way. This taxonomical system, like many taxonomical systems, also includes very specific modes of valuation based upon the subject's classification and the degree to which it deviates from the norm.

In "Sex in Public" (1998), Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner offer another useful definition of heteronormativity. They write:

> By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be

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being as equal to, or higher than, the forces that challenge that being. Comedy, on the other hand, suggests a quite different metaphysics and literary mode. For Meeker, comedy becomes the more appropriate option in the face of the contemporary environmental crisis because comedy concerns itself with the ordinary, the quotidian of getting by.

> summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts sex between men and women might *not* be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality. (348)

The heteronormative tendency, as elaborated by Berlant and Warner, is not very surprising, especially in the environmental context, since most evolutionary theorists discuss nature (human and otherwise), or that discursive, metaphysical, and physical realm most heavily—indeed violently—regulated by a putative heteronormativity.

Before proceeding, it would be wise to say what I am not saying. I do not want to conflate all versions of heteronormativity with homophobia. Pragmatically speaking, heteronormativity certainly does "work" in a number of biological sub-disciplines, such as conservation biology, in which pressing methodological and political issues come to bear on the calculation and prediction of future population dynamics. The problem arises when the biologist assumes his or her calculations can capture the complex web of forces contained under the sign of reproduction, when, in other words, the biologist reads the subjects of his or her graph as heterosexual. This problem is more prevalent than one would assume. One hears it in Carroll's claim that heterosexuality is species-typical without any acknowledgement that 1) heterosexuality is a form of human social organization influenced by socio-economic and cultural arrangements and 2) in the great majority of life on this planet heterosexuality—and let us willingly suspend our disbelief

for a moment and assume that heterosexuality unproblematically signifies procreation between two oppositely sexed creatures—*is not* species-typical.

In order to conclude this section, then, and in order to tease out what I mean by heteronormativity in the environmental context, I would like to turn to the recent work of environmental philosopher Dale Jamieson and his view of ethics in relation to "evolutionary fitness." In the introduction to his *Morality's Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature* (2002), Jamieson sets out to defend the unfashionable idea of progress in moral or ethical terms. Although his notion of progress entails various qualifications that preclude a strict Darwinism, he does rely on evolutionary language to support this idea and describes his book "as an attempt to draw out the moral consequences of a thoroughgoing Darwinian Naturalism" (vii).

In order to formulate his argument for morality's progress, Jamieson begins by identifying the origin and development of human ethics as a natural component of human evolution. Ethics, according to Jamieson, is an adaptive strategy, comparable in the context of *Homo sapiens* to walking upright, with the primary goal of ensuring the survival of the species. Jamieson, however, is not an ethical determinist, in its strictest sense. Because "morality is both an evolutionary phenomenon and a human construction" (8), we see a great deal of variety in the comparative ethical practices of human cultures. His metaethics is at least partially determinist, though: "Particular moralities are largely cultural phenomena subserved by various capacities and dispositions, which are themselves complex products of development and genetics" (8). Jamieson seems to be saying here that the further away one moves from "development

and genetics"—that is to say, *nature* in this theory—the more likely we encounter diversity. Nature, in other words, implies sameness while culture implies difference.

While I am suspicious of this metaethics in general, I am more concerned with the clear heteronormativity implied in Jamieson's objectivist theory of biological fitness. Objectivism, as I use it here and understand it in Jamieson's work, distinguishes a mode of theory and praxis that locates truth—and in the context of ethics, value and the regulatory "ought"—outside of the realm of the human, including human history, cognition, and language. It signals a methodological position that purports ontological description while ignoring epistemological problematics. It is often associated with "realism" or "naïve realism," depending on one's own philosophical orientation, but I am hesitant to make this conceptual link because the association implies that its philosophical rival—i.e., constructivism—is unrealistic, or rather, has nothing to do with that which we call reality. Although it is not my intention to explain the origin of objectivism in environmental thought, it does seem largely a legacy of positivist philosophy of science drawn principally from Karl Popper's influential *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1935).

Jamieson writes, "one moral ideal that I share with many environmentalists is voluntary childlessness (or that, at most, people should have only one child). It seems clear that acting on this principle is to act against one's own biological fitness" (8). Population control and its ethical underpinnings, then, according to this philosophy appear to be "fitness-denying moralities" (8), but Jamieson tries to solve this alleged enigma by identifying "group selection" (9) as the primary goal rather than transmitting

one's individual genes to the next generation. This move leaves in tact a brand of futurity, ultimately heterosexist, associated with the preservation of the species.

Jamieson's statement is not merely tangential, but an articulation of the very theoretical underpinnings that ground *Morality's Progress*. Jamieson's epistemological objectivism illustrated by the construction "it seems clear"—which Jamieson intends for us to read as "it *is* clear"—assumes a great deal of consensus, a great deal more, perhaps, than is actually there. This epistemological objectivism, casually assumed, allows him to move unproblematically into a discussion of "voluntary childlessness" as a biologically fit ethical decision because biological fitness should signify the biological fitness of the (heterosexual) group rather than of the mere (heterosexual) individual. One may object that this notion of "group selection" is precisely non-heteronormative because individual procreation is sufficiently de-valued to allow for a re-valuing of non-procreative sex. I would argue, however, that this discussion of "group selection" still occurs within a very specific context of heteronormativity for at least two reasons. First of all, Jamieson assumes that "voluntary childlessness," as an example of Darwinian "group selection," in the environmental movement is a voluntary decision of an exclusively heterosexual constituency. *Videlicet*, they would if they could, but they can't. Second of all, it also implies a master narrative of heterosexual progress, condensed in the figure of "the child," in which the main characters are those that obey the Biblical injunction to engage in heterosexual sex and reproduce, while all the supporting roles go to those that do not.

Make no mistake about it: the child as future, as *next* generation, achieves an incomparable value equal, almost, to those that create him.[5]

In a generally suggestive article on "Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice" (1999), Brian Barry outlines an ethical theory for relating to future generations, an essential task for environmental thought. Like Jamieson, part of his interest in this particular project is human reproduction and population. The stabilization of the population, he says, "is perfectly possible as a result of voluntary choices made by individuals" (109). We know this perfectly obvious fact, furthermore, because "a number of Western countries have already arrived at the position at which the (non-immigrant) population is only barely replacing itself, if that" (109). Leaving aside the congratulatory tone afforded to "a number of Western countries" and its accusatory component afforded to their (invasive) immigrant populations, I would like to focus on Barry's sexual assumptions.[6]

Rehearsing the standard plan for reducing population, Barry writes, "Women have to be educated and to have a possibility of pursuing rewarding occupations outside the home while at the same time compulsory full-time education and stringent child-labor laws make children an economic burden rather than a benefit" (109). In this remark,

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[5] I intentionally write "him" rather than "him or her" or even "it" in order to underscore the gendered quality of this rhetorical appeal.

[6] There are also, of course, sexual assumptions in the West/Other dichotomy that employ tropes of the civilized, human, sexually-modest West and the primitive, animalistic, sexually-hyper Other. I will not address these issues here, although these tropes certainly figure into discussions of human population in the so-called Third World. For an excellent analysis of sexuality from a postcolonial perspective, see Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995). A related issue, in the American context, is the figuration of Black sexuality as quintessentially natural, that is, quintessentially animalistic, outside of the human. See Siobhan Somerville's *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000).

women and children are the responsible parties in this plan and bare the brunt of the political work. The passive construction—"women have to be educated"—elides the subject of the verb that does the educating. Men, Barry assumes, are supposed to be the true agents, however unidentified as such. But Barry's main point comes later: "Stabilizing population at its current level in these [non-Western] countries can be achieved only if women have only one child" (110).[7]

Let me state something that seems totally obvious. The entire ethical claim—that women ought to have only one child—rests on the presumption that *all* women will have *at least* one child. The claim and its grounding warrant, furthermore, assume an uninterrogated—indeed, even unacknowledged—reproductive heteronormativity. Barry assumes: 1) that all women identify as women and 2) that all women will engage in heterosexual sex because 3) all women are heterosexual, that is to say, all women desire anatomically-sexed men who identify and act as such and who desire women.[8] He ironically participates in the same exact ideological framework—reproductive heteronormativity—that produces and sustains the human population disaster in the first place. While there are certainly other factors involved in this disaster, such as economic motivation, technological innovation, and medical advancement, the quasi-universal belief that all human beings ought to engage in heterosexual sex—in marriage, preferably, but not necessarily—with the goal of procreation should not be

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[7] Bill McKibben makes a similar argument—and mistake—in his *Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families* (1998).

[8] For an important study of the social construction of anatomical sex, see Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000). The question of reproduction and sexual identity is incredibly vexed. One should remember, too, that not all procreative sex acts are performed by participants who are exclusively heterosexual.

underestimated. Instead of taking the opportunity to critique this ideology, Barry naively reiterates what Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) has called the "heterosexual matrix," or the supposedly teleological relationship, conceived dichotomously in each stage, of sex, gender, and desire. In fact, the volume of which Barry's chapter is part, *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice* (1999), does not include a single female author or a single feminist/queer critique of reproduction and population.

While I generally agree with Barry's position that we indeed have an ethical obligation to human beings—and, I would add, other-than-human beings—who are not yet living, I do think that an assessment of human reproduction and population that fails to acknowledge the fundamental assumption of reproductive heteronormativity and the various discursive repercussions of this assumption is fatally flawed. What is even more problematic is that this assumption originates in an objectivist epistemology that equates the whole of nature, from the birds to the bees, with heterosexuality.

Like the male homophobe who takes every opportunity to say he's *not* gay, many scientists with a penchant for moralizing are quick to reduce all purpose in life—human and otherwise—to heterosexual sex with the ultimate goal of procreation. The popular press feeds this ideological fodder to a hungry public that is on the verge of losing faith. When other-than-human beings, especially "closely-related animals" *do* display signs of same-sex sexual desire,[9] many scientists are quick to set the record straight, so to speak,

[9] For two studies on this doing, see Bruce Bagemihl's *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (2000) and Joan Roughgarden's *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (2005). For a wonderful, short piece on Darwin's barnacles, see Elizabeth A. Wilson's "Biologically

and say the behavior is highly unusual or, ironically, unnatural. Even Kate Soper in *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (1995), a study that otherwise opens the term "nature" up to multiple significations at almost every turn, identifies "heterosexual relations" as "a *prescription* of nature" (142 italics mine), uncritically—perhaps even unconsciously—employing the medical discourse of "the cure." In the next section, I would like to address the queer response to the rhetoric of reproductive heteronormativity and the two pillars upon which it is built: the naturalization of heterosexuality and the heterosexualization of nature.

2. The Queer Project

If some ecocritics and environmental philosophers have a reputation for taking nature and biology as knowable fact, many queer theorists have one for adopting a "radical" hermeneutics of suspicion, especially when it comes to matters of sex and nature, sexuality and biology. Nature, according to certain queer formulations, presents itself as the *a priori* essence of reality, as the cause of culture, but is actually the expression, the effect, of complex social, cognitive, psychological, and linguistic mechanisms that produce it as such. The primary, if not exclusive, concern of the field, then, becomes an effort to expose these mechanisms of naturalization. This move is understandable and politically vital in many rhetorical situations, especially since homophobic violence often seeks justification in the naturalization of a heteronormative nature. Judith Butler, in a good example of this move, begins her *Bodies That Matter* (1993) with an epigraph from Derrida: "There is no nature, only the effects of nature: naturalization and denaturalization" (1). While I am generally in tune with Butler and similar queer

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Inspired Feminism: Response to Helen Keane and Marsha Rosengarten, 'On the Biology of Sexed Subjects'" (2002).

theorists, as well as with their Derridean sensibilities, I wonder why the bodies that matter to Butler are necessarily *human* bodies. In my environmental critique of queer theory, I would like to ask, following Cary Wolfe in *Animal Rites* (2003), why we "take it for granted that the subject is always already human" (1).[10]

Queer studies as a field of academic inquiry began, arguably, when critics started to identify sexuality as a key nexus of cultural and social power and, therefore, as a crucial object of analysis in its own right. Although the exact moment of this prioritization is difficult to ascertain, Gayle S. Rubin's famous essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," first published in 1984, certainly does point to this decision to "think about sex" (3) and to develop "an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality" (34). Although this kind of analytical separation was necessary in the early days of the field, most critics and theorists assumed that to study sexuality *in itself* was impossible. Sexual subjects are produced not only in the discourses of sexuality, but also, and perhaps even more so, in other discourses—the

[10] It seems to me that we "take it for granted that the subject is always already human" because all other beings are rendered silent, incapable of articulation and therefore lacking presence. For a learned and passionate essay on this topic, see Christopher Manes's "Nature and Silence" (1992). Manes argues, "the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (15), and identifies medieval Christianity as a crucial moment in this history of silencing. In the twelfth century in particular, Christian theologians like Hugh of St. Victor began to interpret "the Book of Nature" according to the principles of Biblical exegesis. In this way, Manes writes, "the things in nature could thus be seen as mere *littera*—signs that served as an occasion for discovering deeper realms of meaning underlying the forms of the physical world. According to medieval commentators, eagles soared higher than any other bird and could gaze upon the sun, undazzled, because they were put on Earth to be a symbol of St. John and his apocalyptic vision, not the other way round. From this hermeneutical perspective, it was inconceivable that eagles should be autonomous, self-willed subjects, flying high for their own purposes without reference to some celestial intention, which generally had to do with man's redemption. Exegesis swept all things into the net of divine meaning" (19).

discourses, that is, of anatomical sex, gender, race, nation, class, ability, and age, to name just a few. The recent work of Gayatri Gopinath, Robert F. Reid-Pharr, Marlon Bryan Ross, Robert McRuer, and Siobhan B. Somerville immediately come to mind as important and innovative examples of this problematization of sexuality-in-itself and this radical reunification of "the sexual" with other forms of discourse.[11]

Being truly interdisciplinary, each of these critics takes seriously the ostensibly paradoxical axiom that sexuality is socially constructed outside of the field of sexuality and helps to rearticulate the notion that sexuality is indeed everywhere. In this particular academic climate, then, why has queer theory been so disconnected from environmental studies? The disengagement between queer theory and, say, critical race studies or globalization studies would be inconceivable in contemporary criticism, so why does that extrication work so well with environmental studies? To put the question in an appropriately different manner, why do queer theory and environmental studies figure as so *naturally* disconnected?

In a new preface written in 1999 to her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler explains the rhetoric of denaturalization that is a prominent feature of queer theory. She writes, "The dogged effort to 'denaturalize' gender in [*Gender Trouble*] emerges, I think, from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary

[11] See Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), Reid-Pharr's *Black Gay Man* (2001), Ross's *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (2004), McRuer's "As Good As It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability" (2003), and Somerville's *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000).

and academic discourses on sexuality" (xx). The rhetoric of denaturalization, interestingly described as "dogged" in Butler's account, has two motivations in queer theory. The first has to do with anatomical sex, the other with sexual desire. Nature is imagined to consist of two anatomical sexes, two sexes with formal stability and categorical differentiation. The natural is imagined to consist of one anatomical sex desiring its opposite. But nature (anatomical sex and desire) for Butler is a fantastic production of *cultural* forces. Living human bodies will never measure up to this ideal anatomy, understood as a kind of Platonic Form, and the same can be said for the ideal of sexual desire.

My point here is not to call into question the motivation to denaturalize, but to point out the central source of tension between queer studies and environmental studies. Although Butler represents a major critical stance, hers is not the only strain in queer studies. In fact, another prominent queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, illustrates an important rejoinder to Butler in the field and may help to mediate the tension between the queer project and the environmental project. Sedgwick has refused, over and over again, to set up the binary between culture and nature, social constructionism and essentialism, history and biology, not because she wants to please all of her readers, but because of a more profound conviction that the debate distracts from alternative questions and excludes in advance all sorts of avenues of inquiry. Moreover, as she writes in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), "The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nurture and nature" (40).

Sedgwick continues:

> I am additionally eager to promote the obsolescence of "essentialist/constructivist" because I am very dubious about the ability of even the most scrupulously gay-affirmative thinkers to divorce these terms, especially as they relate to the question of ontogeny, from the essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought through which they have developed. (40)

Inherent in any theory of the beginning is a trajectory for the end. Geneses—whether biblical or astronomical—provide the conceptual seeds for their apocalyptic opposite. On a smaller scale, in the context of sexuality, any explanation for the ontogenesis of aberrant sexual desire provides the key to the extinction of that desire. If "it," homosexuality, is cultural, an effect of nurture, it can be undone through the selfsame logic, a kind of de-homosexualization therapy. If "it" is biological, an effect of nature, it can be undone again through the selfsame logic, here a kind of genetic surveillance and reengineering.

What is Sedgwick's solution to this seemingly hopeless problem? She writes:

> In this unstable balance of assumptions between nature and culture, at any rate, under the overarching, relatively unchallenged aegis of a culture's desire that gay people *not be*, there is no unthreatened, unthreatening conceptual home for a concept of gay origins. We have all the more reason, then, to keep our understandings of gay origin, of gay cultural and material reproduction, plural, multi-capillaried, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished. (43-44)

Sedgwick's discomfort with the nature/culture debate surrounding the origins of sexual desire opens up a creative space for a new ethics. The overdetermination of sexual desire is not something to determine, to reduce and explain, but instead is something to be respected and cherished. The naturalization of heterosexuality has indeed spawned homophobic violence, but an argumentative retreat into the domain of culture may not be without its dangers. In the next section, I will turn to ecofeminism and queer ecofeminism as an important reply to Butler and Sedgwick from a specifically environmental perspective.

3. Ecofeminism and Queer Ecofeminism

Ecofeminists generally identify just a handful of texts written in the late 1970s as their theoretical origins. The term *ecoféminisme* was first published in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort*. In this text, according to Catriona Sandilands in *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (1999), "d'Eaubonne celebrated [the woman/nature connection] as a means of revaluing those aspects of life degraded and distorted through centuries of patriarchal cultural and economic domination" (7). This celebration of the woman/nature connection serves as the basic assumption of other foundational ecofeminist texts, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether's *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978), and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980).

These theoretical articulations linked up with feminist practices, such as lesbian separatist communes, that advocated equality among individuals in the community,

certainly, but also egalitarian, respectful, and sustainable relationships with other-than-human beings. These theorists and activists tried to ground their practice in a form of ethics that was assumed to emanate naturally from women, and more particularly, from *the woman's body*.[12]

Many early ecofeminists assumed some of the key binary oppositions that organize reality were real in the sense that they were outside of rhetoric and their social construction. In contemporary theory, we assume that 1) binary oppositions are rhetorical, linguistic, epistemological devices that give order to reality, that 2) one side of a binary opposition is not really opposed to the other side, but instead depends on its supposed opposite in order to signify, and that 3) binary oppositions depend on other sets of binary oppositions to signify. So all of the constructs in the left side of the following are rhetorically connected with the constructs on the right side:

man/woman

culture/nature

reason/emotion

oppression/equality[13]

In other words, binary oppositions work both horizontally and vertically. But early ecofeminism did not engage with deconstructive thought and the initial celebration of the oppressed side of the man/woman and culture/nature binary opposition transformed into essentialist dogma: the right side of all these binary oppositions is better than the left side

[12] For a more nuanced discussion of the "strategic essentialism" of these lesbian separatist communities, see Catriona Sandilands's "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology" (2002).

[13] And the list could go on and on to include detachment/connection, transcendence/immanence, thought/extension, mind/body, spirit/matter, active/passive, animal/plant, etc.

and they (woman, nature, emotion, and equality) are all *really* (rather than ideologically, rhetorically, or discursively) connected. Women, as a stable category, really are "closer" to nature, as a stable category, and are, therefore, more capable of solving environmental problems.[14]

Outside of the lesbian separatist communes, however, early ecofeminist discourse took on a somewhat different shade. Strangely enough, some non-lesbian ecofeminists adopted the anti-feminist rhetoric of the 1950s: since ecology comes from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or household, and a woman's proper place is in the home, women are the most effective environmentalists. In other words, in their roles as dutiful mothers and wives, women are best suited to care for an endangered or threatened planet, or to make it more ideologically blunt, to clean up a *messy* house. This logistical formulation again relies on essentialist notions not only of women, but also of nature and the environment, as well.

The history of ecofeminism, as this short sketch illustrates, is a history of identity politics grounded in the supposedly cohesive categories of women and nature. In this logistical configuration, every woman, by occupying the same oppressed position in a totalizing structure of domination, shares a common bond or identity with other women. Since nature, too, is forced to occupy this abject side of the binary, women share with it a special affinity and are therefore potentially more effective agents in its liberation. Sandilands's work as a scholar and activist attempts to critique this logic and detail the problems that identity politics engender for feminism, environmentalism, and radical democracy. She is particularly interested in the ways that identity politics may silence

[14] For a critique of this essentialism, see Victoria Davion's "Is Ecofeminism Feminist?" (1994).

particular voices and uncritically amplify others in its necessarily obsessive attempt to cohere. As Judith Butler has spent much of her early career showing, identity categories are more prescriptive than descriptive.[15]

I agree with Butler's position on identity in general and with Sandilands's position on ecofeminism in particular and would suggest that the ability of identity categories to stabilize themselves—however precarious this stability ultimately is, especially in early ecofeminist discourse—rests in the ontological construction of, and rhetorical appeals to, the binary opposition between the authentic and the artificial. It seems for identity politics to work at all, the subject of identity needs to conceive of himself or herself as an appropriate or authorized, indeed *natural*, occupant of his or her position. Not just a visitor.

While there certainly are problems here, we should not underestimate the importance of ecofeminism as a critical intervention at the end of the 1970s into an environmental ethics that did not address the discursive associations (and extra-discursive repercussions) between women and nature or, even more generally, the discursive life of "the natural" outside of the primary subject of environmental ethics: the physical environment and its other-than-human inhabitants. Karen J. Warren's famous "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism" (1990) succinctly articulates "a logic of domination" that produces the oppression of both women and nature. This logic can be

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[15] This is the major point of her essay "Contingent Foundations" (1992). She writes, "Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary. This is not to say that the term 'women' ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that 'women' designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability" (15-16).

summarized as: For every X and Y, if X is successful in creating a difference, whether real or imagined, from Y, and that difference is given moral value, then "X is morally justified in subordinating Y" (129). While this critique of domination does seem simplistic, especially from a Foucaultian perspective in which power becomes dynamic and relational rather than static and totalitarian, it does ask us to address the ways in which the naturalization of women has been a primary mechanism in women's oppression while the feminization, as a devaluative technique, of other-than-human beings and the physical environment has been a primary mechanism in animal cruelty and environmental degradation. In the end, though, grand theorizing often works to reify the categories progressive theorists seek to undo.

The very small amount of literature in queer environmental studies may properly be thought of as a queering of ecofeminism from within and thus inheriting much of ecofeminism's theoretical framework. This development makes perfect sense, of course, considering that queer studies itself, intellectually and institutionally, has come out, as it were, from an explicitly feminist context.[16] In "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" (1997), one of the earliest examples of a decidedly queer-environmental synthesis, Greta Gaard tries to demonstrate that "a democratic, ecological society envisioned as the goal of ecofeminism will, of necessity, be a society that values sexual diversity and the erotic" (115). In order to support this primary argument, Gaard begins by mapping out her understanding of social power as working through the creation, deployment, and policing of binary oppositions, or what Michel Foucault would call "dividing practices."[17]

[16] The work of French theorists, such as George Bataille, Guy Hocquenghem, and Michel Foucault, are notable exceptions.
[17] See Foucault's "The Subject and Power" (1983).

She writes, "The first argument linking ecofeminism and queer theory is based on the observation that dominant Western culture's devaluation of the erotic parallels its devaluations of women and of nature; in effect, these devaluations are mutually reinforcing" (115). In order to illustrate this "parallel," she sketches out a series of connecting and reinforcing binary oppositions—man/woman, heterosexual/queer, culture/nature, reason/eroticism—in order to demonstrate how each binary is "conceptually linked." Her ultimate goal asks feminists to be environmentalists, environmentalists to be feminists, both to support queer politics, and queers to be ecofeminists. She continues, "Ecofeminists must be concerned with queer liberation, just as queers must be concerned with the liberation of woman and of nature; our parallel oppressions have stemmed from our perceived association" (132).

Commenting on this theoretical articulation, Sandilands in "Desiring Nature, Queering Ethics: Adventures in Erotegenic Environments" (2001) writes:

> To Gaard, there is an ideologically reinforcing relationship among the normalization of heterosexuality, the devaluation of the erotic, and the understanding of the supremacy of human culture over nonhuman nature; the containment of nature supports the suppression of sexual diversity, and the regulation of sexuality is an active part of the oppression of nature. (177)

In Gaard's original position and Sandilands's explanation we can see the ways in which queer ecofeminism inherits the rhetorical moves and theoretical framework from Warren's earlier work. In my response to queer ecofeminism, I would first like to suggest that this grand logic of oppression, singular in scope, in which every oppressor

and oppressed figure fits neatly into a stable schematics obfuscates historical complexities and collapses important differences in various gestures of power.

Consider the following claim from "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism":

> The rhetoric and institution of Christianity, coupled with the imperialist drives of militarist nation-states, have been used for nearly two thousand years to portray heterosexuality, sexism, racism, classism, and the oppression of the natural world as divinely ordained. Today, although twentieth-century Western industrialized nations purport to be largely secular, those countries with Christian and colonial origins retain the ideology of divinely inspired domination nonetheless. (122)

While making historical generalizations is indeed a necessary and important component of academic discourse, such claims also have a tendency to obscure historical specificity. Many historians, for example, understand "the nation-state" to be a relatively recent historical development.[18] Likewise, the contemporary military-industrial complex exists on a radically different scale than any other moment in history, which is to say, is radically different from any other moment in history.

In addition to this tendency for grand theorizing is a desire to locate an originary moment of this totalizing system of oppression. Gaard writes:

> I am arguing that a careful reading of these several movements of domination—the persecution of women through the witch burnings, of nature through science, and of indigenous peoples through colonialism—which reached a peak during the same historical period in Western

[18] See, for example, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

> Europe, will lead to the roots of an ideology in which the erotic, queer sexualities, women, persons of color, and nature are all conceptually linked. (132)

By trying to identify the root of the problem, Gaard's idealism assumes that if we could only expose the truth of ideology, we could solve the problem of oppression. Furthermore, she does not understand the radical disjunction between the official narrative and actual cultural practices. If I understand the central message of queer theory, it is that queer sexuality does not occupy a marginalized position, but a very central one in the making of modern culture.

Gaard's solution to the problem of oppression "requires embracing the erotic in all its diversity and building coalitions for creating a democratic, ecological culture based on our shared liberation" (132). In the following paragraph she qualifies this embrace of the erotic by distinguishing between good eroticism and bad eroticism. She writes:

> [T]he way out of this system of endemic violence requires liberating the erotic—not in some facile liberal scheme, which would authorize increased access to pornography or child sexual encounters, but through a genuine transformation of Western conceptions of the erotic as fundamentally opposed to reason, culture, humanity, and masculinity. (132)

In Gaard's account there are a number of problems. First, the account figures an essential sexual nature that is then actively repressed by a non-sexual or anti-sexual culture.[19] Second, for Gaard, the solution to oppression "requires liberating the erotic" by which

[19] Foucault famously critiques this repressive hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (1976).

she means a deconstruction of various binary oppositions that pit eroticism against reason. While I agree with Gaard's deconstructive motivations—and not only of the eroticism/reason binary—the erotic here has nothing to do with actual sexual stimulation and orgasm. To me, this is an exceedingly tame version of what queer sex is and what queer sex can do on a political level. Furthermore, eroticism, for many people, does entail pornography and does entail intergenerational sexual relations. I am not comfortable with Gaard's uninterrogated assumption of a good eroticism and a bad eroticism. This position also completely overlooks the very striking ways in which twentieth century capitalism and consumer culture depends on eroticism and commodity fetishism to function. Of course, Gaard would argue that this is not the *kind* of eroticism she means or wants to liberate, but it does bring into focus the complicated ways in which eroticism or the erotic work in unintended ways.

"Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" is limited precisely because in trying to articulate a grand theory of oppression, Gaard overlooks the nuances of the social construction of desire, eroticism, and sexual identity, on the one hand, and the social construction of nature and the natural, on the other. Her position, also, tries to advocate a "return" to sensuality or eroticism as a necessary component for environmental ethics. This return is neither possible nor particularly promising. While I generally agree with Gaard in a number of ways, especially in her evaluation of queer theory as a productive disturbance in environmental ethics and the necessary deconstruction of the erotic/reason binary, in my critique of queer ecofeminism I have highlighted the grandiosity of its claims, the lack of historical specificity, and the concentration on a very singular notion of eroticism.

Although there are many exceptions to these generalities about the queer project and the environmental project (not to mention the problem of talking about *the* queer project and *the* environmental project as if they were coherent systems of thought and politics),[20] I still maintain that there is a large philosophical gap between *most* environmental and *most* queer approaches to the concept of nature created as a result of their very different discursive histories and political exigencies. Part of my purpose here is to bridge that gap. In order to do so, I would like to begin the next section with a more general discussion of epistemology: the logic of knowledge, the writing of truth.

4. Queer Environmentality

Truth, according to many critics on both the political right and left, has recently come under the attack of so-called extreme postmodern relativists. As is typical in times of conflict, those who think of themselves as under attack, or defending that which is under attack, present their opponents in abrasive, exaggerated terms. These postmodern relativists, their critics maintain, believe that truth does not exist, that reality is an individually-subjective construct, that logic and rationality collude with evil, and that all knowledge is made up in our heads however we want it to be. This position, it's true, sounds very alarming.

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[20] Environmental philosopher Steven Vogel, for example, in *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (1996) writes, "To view the environment as socially constructed is to see it as something for which we are literally *responsible*; it is in this recognition of our inextricable connection to and responsibility for the world we inhabit, it seems to me, that the source of a morally justifiable 'environmental ethic' is to be found" (10). See also his "Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature" (2002). For a related study of the intersection between deconstruction and environmental philosophy, see Robert Briggs's "Wild Thoughts: A Deconstructive Environmental Ethics?" (2001).

More alarming, though, are the consequences and implications of this insidious relativism. If truth—that most fundamental of philosophical categories—is false, what happens to everything else? If we cannot appeal to truth *qua* truth, we will have to abandon all scientific projects and to acknowledge all interpretations of politics and historical events as equally valid, including those, for instance, of Holocaust deniers. Epistemological relativism, in other words, will inevitably elicit an excessive *ethical* relativism or quietism in which "anything goes" or "might makes right" and we will no longer be able to ensure even the most basic of human rights.

In *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth, and the Human* (2006), Barbara Herrnstein Smith seeks to intervene in this debate by addressing the charge against relativism. She begins by reminding us that "postmodern relativism" is mainly a "phantom position" conjured up by epistemological objectivists to haunt academic discourse. Relativists, or more precisely, *constructivists*, are rarely accurately represented, directly quoted, or even identified by name. The term "postmodern relativism," then, acts as a warning not to venture too far outside of philosophical objectivism, not to fall prey to the dangerous—but all too tempting—logical and ethical perversity to which the term points. For Smith, though, it is objectivism and an uncritical, automatic dismissal of relativism that dangerously produces "a demand for dogmatism—for predetermined judgment armored against new thought" (23).

Contra objectivists who hold a "notion of truth as correspondence to the autonomously determinate features of an external reality" (47), Smith advocates a radical form of constructivism and believes it is the only sensible—logically, politically, ethically—way to think of knowledge. For her, constructivism is an approach to

knowledge that conceives of "the specific features of what we experience, think of and talk about as 'the world' (objects, entity-boundaries, categories and so forth) not as prior to and independent of our sensory, perceptual, motor, manipulative and conceptual-discursive activities but, rather, as emerging from or, as it is said, 'constructed by' those activities" (3).

Smith continues by defining truth more precisely as a belief or system of beliefs—void here of negative connotations—that is "contingently shaped and multiply constrained" by human cognition, discourse, and the material force of that which we call "the world," that is "more or less congruent with and connectible to other relatively stable and well established beliefs," and that is more or less pragmatically effective (11). Fact and opinion, by extension of this reconfiguration of truth, should be conceived "as variable gradients rather than fixed, distinct and polar opposites" (11).

A tremendously valuable articulation of the theory and practice of constructivism, *Scandalous Knowledge* is an important and effective intervention into a variety of epistemological debates in a number of different disciplines. Of considerable importance in this book, though, is Smith's warning against theoretical attempts to synthesize objectivism and constructivism. Often, when a critic encounters such an intense polarization, he or she is tempted to seek a middle-path, to appropriate the strategically useful and to ignore the subsequently specious. But Smith reminds us, quite emphatically, that the very basic conceptual frameworks of objectivism and constructivism are utterly incompatible. If we agree that we are active agents in the production of knowledge and that our role in the formation of reality is constitutive, then we *cannot* agree that knowledge points to some autonomous reality outside of this

constitutive pressure. A negotiation between these terms of (dis)agreement, perhaps enticing when objectivists fault constructivists with solipsism, is logically fallacious and intellectually evasive.

My thinking on queer environmentality generally follows the constructivist epistemology that Smith presents. Her position, of course, echoes a number of other figures in the history of modern philosophy: Berkeley and Kant, Nietzsche and Foucault, Rorty and Kuhn, to name just a few. I differ with Smith not so much in my philosophical position than in my inquisitive emphasis. My major question is not about the mechanisms of construction (i.e., To what extent should the natural sciences, from physics to ecology, be conceived as a branch of psychology?) but rather about the shape of the constructivist controversy itself (i.e., What is at stake for environmental studies relating to this question of epistemology?).

I differ with Smith in another respect, as well. At times I focus on the constructedness of truth and knowledge, such as in the earlier discussions of Jamieson and Barry, with a mind for detecting ideological inflection. But at this juncture I wonder if it is possible that the cry of constructivist epistemology signals a moment of encountering unlikable ontological description, if, in other words, we are most likely to suspend our disbelief (of the capital T truth of science) when the scientific claim corroborates our understanding about how the world is or should be. My more general approach to the primary objects of my analysis—Thoreau, Melville, Cather, and Barnes—then, will be closer to what Sedgwick calls "reparative" or what Paul Ricoeur calls "restorative."

Following Ricoeur, Sedgwick sets out to distinguish two modes of reading in contemporary literary criticism: paranoid and reparative. Paranoid is marked by profound disbelief, reparative by its willing suspension. In *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), Ricoeur names Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx as instigators of this first mode of reading, Sedgwick's "paranoid," but this critical-cognitive habit in fact goes back much further. One can cite Descartes as an important precursor in his demonstration that the first task of philosophy is to doubt everything. And like the Cartesian framework, the scientific method itself, perhaps the hallmark of the modern world, works, if it works at all, only as eternal skepticism.

In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Sedgwick writes about paranoid versus reparative reading practices:

> In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant. I myself have no wish to return to the use of "paranoid" as a pathologizing diagnosis, but it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds. (126)

She then describes the resistance to these "alternative kinds" of reading habits:

> The vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to

> describe their acquaintance with such motives. The prohibitive problem, however, has been in the limitations of present theoretical vocabularies rather than in the reparative motive itself. (150)

Ricoeur's comments on the topic promise to solve this "prohibitive problem," or at least to circumvent the prohibition. He writes:

> Does that mean that we could go back to a primitive naïveté? Not at all. In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism. In short, it is by interpreting that we can hear again. Thus it is in hermeneutics that the symbol's gift of meaning and the endeavor to understand by deciphering are knotted together. (351)[21]

Ricoeur's "second naïveté," Sedgwick's "reparative," both point to the central problem in close reading: the hermeneutic circle. Ricoeur describes this circle, succinctly, in the following way: "We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand" (351). He continues, "The circle is not a vicious circle, still less a mortal one; it is a living and stimulating circle. We must believe in order to understand: never, in fact, does the interpreter get near to what his text says unless he lives in the *aura* of the meaning he is inquiring after" (351). It is within this kind of hermeneutic circle that my readings of Thoreau, Melville, Cather, and Barnes try to dwell.

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[21] One such study that takes Ricoeur's advice to heart is John Gatta's *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (2004).

Unlike an ecocriticism or environmental philosophy that tries to ground itself in objective science, and unlike a queer ecofeminism that singularly focuses on domination, queer environmentality, as a mode of reading—interpreting, understanding, believing, being—has a different and more complex aim. It at once takes seriously Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, and thus loses the immediacy of belief. But it also retains the will to believe, to entertain the apparently impossible, and thus gains a "second naïveté," a maturity of belief in seeing the other-than-human world in all its non-human-ness, its poetic complexity and queerness. Whether such a mode will be embraced by biologists, "practical" ecocritics, or analytic philosophers is not the issue. The issue, instead, is whether or not modern fiction and poetry makes more sense, is more *understandable* in Ricoeur's meaning of the term, through a queer-environmental theoretical conjunction.

The theoretical background of this dissertation consists of queer geography,[22] the rhetoric of science,[23] especially queer and feminist studies of science,[24] environmental

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[22] See David Bell and Gill Valentine's edited *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (1995); Paul Cloke and Jo Little's edited *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalization, and Rurality* (1997); Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter's edited *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (1997); Michael P. Brown's *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (2000); Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton's edited *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* (2000); and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006). For a specifically *literary* approach to queer geography, see Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), and a special issue of *ELN: English Language Notes* on "Queer Space" (2007), edited by Jane Garrity.

[23] See Debra Journet's "Ecological Theories as Cultural Narratives: F.E. Clements's and H.A. Gleason's 'Stories' of Community Succession" (1991), Randy Allen Harris's edited *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science* (1997), and Phillip Thurtle's *The Emergence of Genetic Rationality: Space, Time, and Information in American Biological Science, 1870-1920* (2007).

[24] See Nancy Tuana's edited *Feminism and Science* (1989), Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in Modern Science* (1990), Vernon A. Rosario's edited volume *Science and Homosexualities* (1997), Myra J. Hird's *Sex, Gender, and*

rhetoric,[25] and non-analytic philosophy of science.[26] The practical scope of this dissertation, the geographical and historical terrain, is America during and after the time of Darwin, from the 1850s to the 1930s. This historical period is important in the consolidation, and dissemination, of information concerning evolution, a biology of time, and its essential counterpart, ecology, a biology of space. The period also, and thus, marks fertile ground in exploring pressing questions about queer environmentality. My geographical purview, America, is likewise conducive for the theoretical aim of the dissertation. Since at least the time of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), a prominent set of research questions in American Studies has involved the concept of nature—especially wilderness—and its effect on national consciousness. Major studies in this vein include Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Roderick Frazier Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975), William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983), and Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt*

Science (2004), and Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird's edited *Queering the Non/Human* (2008).

[25] See Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown's *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* (1996), Craig Waddell's edited *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and the Environment* (1998), Kevin Michael DeLuca's *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (1999), Waddell's edited *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's* Silent Spring (2000), and Frederick Buell's *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (2004).

[26] For a general introduction to the field, see Evelyn Fox Keller and Elisabeth A. Lloyd's edited volume *Keywords in Evolutionary Biology* (1992) and Kim Sterelny and Paul E. Griffith's *Sex and Death: An Introduction to Philosophy of Biology* (1999). For more detailed—and more experimental—work, see Luciana Parisi's *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology, and the Mutations of Desire* (2004) and Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007).

and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990 (2000). My work in this dissertation benefits from, and contributes to, this pronounced trend in Americanist criticism.

The term "queer," as noun and adjective, comes from the Latin verb *torquere*, or to twist, producing "bent" as opposed to "straight," and connotes strange, abnormal, and deviant. Because queer has been used historically as a derogatory term, comparable to dyke or faggot, "queer," as a term of self-identification and affirmation, also has a confrontational quality. The verb "to queer," then, is to destabilize, to present a discursive rupture, to defamiliarize, on the one hand, but also to seek compatibility, *relative* and qualified understandability. But what would the term mean in an environmental context?

In "Biologically Inspired Feminism" (2002), Elizabeth Wilson discusses Darwin's fascination with a species of barnacles that exhibited a wild array of sexual configurations. She writes:

> to characterize Darwin's barnacles as queer is too glib—if by this characterization we mean that the barnacle simply mimics those human, cultural, or social forces now routinely marked queer (the transgender barnacle! the polyandrous barnacle!). This characterization has more punch if it is used, contrariwise, to render those familiar human, cultural, and social forms more curious as a result of their affiliation with barnacle organization. The queerness of Darwin's barnacles is salutary not because it renders the barnacle knowable through its association with familiar human forms, but because it renders the human, cultural, and social guises

> of queer less familiar and more captivated by natural and biological forces. (284)

To queer nature is not to anthropomorphize nature nor is it to naturalize queers, but instead to take seriously the strangeness, and incessantly innovative quality, of the world. In the human context, it refuses the predetermination of essentialist accounts of sexual identity while also refusing the *tabula rasa* theories of the social constructionists, and its Lockean foundations, without disparaging its historical importance for certain political exigencies. This position is not the "cutting-edge equivocation" that Barbara Herrnstein Smith warns us against in *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth, and the Human* (2006), but a rethinking of the alleged nature/culture opposition. In the other-than-human context, it allows room for a spacious appreciation of variety and diversity in the world, a variety and diversity that is often muted by simplistic and reductionist claims that the essential purpose of life is survival and reproduction.

5. The Trajectory of the Text

In order to conclude this introduction, I would like to summarize the trajectory of the following chapters.

- Chapter 2: Thoreau's Queer Environmentality

In the mid-1840s, Thoreau begins his experiment in deliberate living at Walden Pond, and thus begins his work on what would become a classic of American literature and environmental philosophy, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Although there are important precursors to Thoreau's environmental writing, his legacy remains a major force in the history environmental thought. This chapter, then, sets out to explore the

philosophical and political questions associated with this legacy by looking closely at Thoreau's language of environmentality, of sensuality, and, not least, of language itself.

Although I address the greater constellation of this thought, I try to focus on Thoreau's language, his sense, of sensuality. For Thoreau, sensuality is associated with the animal component of human being. It may seem odd or contradictory that this lover of nature, this great theorist of *Homo sapiens* as a natural species embedded with other species in an ecosystem, would say something like, "Nature is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome" (498). Or, "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established" (497-498). The bulk of this chapter looks carefully at this inherent contradiction in Thoreau's thinking: the simultaneous celebration of nature and its overcoming in the realm of sensuality. I argue that this contradiction is not a failure; nor should we dismiss his remarks on the issue as evidence of repression, shame, or self-subjectification (although undoubtedly these affective structures influence his thinking). Rather, I ask, how does Thoreau imagine the sensual within the animal-human-divine matrix? How is it simultaneously traditional and avant-garde? And how, on this question in particular, does Thoreau, together with Melville, produce two threads in the convoluted web of environmental thinking?

- Chapter 3: Melville's Apples of Sodom

In 1856, Melville publishes *The Encantadas*, an eclectic mix of travel narrative, natural history, and short fiction, based upon his voyage to the Galapagos Islands, those islands that Darwin charts the decade before in his *The Voyage of the* Beagle (1845). Like Darwin, Melville is fascinated by what he sees. Unlike Darwin, however, Melville is not interested in formulating a pure ontology of speciation. His chief concern is the

subjective experience of being-in-the-world, the interaction between environment, mind, and body. Where Darwin sees an ideal laboratory, Melville sees a "special curse" coinciding with "emphatic uninhabitableness," and writes, "in no world but a fallen one could such lands exist" (768-769). Noting the specifically reptilian quality of the islands, Melville, always attuned to the seductive spell of the symbolic, says, "No voice, no low, no howl is heard; the chief sound of life here is a hiss" (768). In his summation, "Apples of Sodom, after touching, seem these isles" (770), I see an entrance into his queer imagination of other-than-human life on those Enchanted Islands.

My primary argument in this chapter will be that Melville illustrates the central issue at stake in queer environmentality and signals the two, related, philosophical concepts to which the term points: 1) ontology, the question of being, and 2) epistemology, the question of knowing. My goal, together with Melville, is to call into question a heteronormative ontology grounded in an objectivist epistemology. I will argue that Melville dramatizes a conjoined epistemological disruption and ontological revision of the matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual. Here, I will pay particular attention to Melville's crafting of a queer nature—in other words, an erotic, taxonomically problematic world just outside of human comprehension. I will contextualize this argument in terms of Melvillian criticism, especially of the queer and ecocritical sort.

Melville has been a significant presence in both American queer theory and ecocriticism. His exact position, though, has been the subject of much scholarly contention: how queer was he? and how environmental? Unlike Thoreau, who ecocritics like Lawrence Buell hail as an undisputed founder of American environmental literature,

Melville represents a problem of categorization. In this chapter, I will argue that the Melvillian problem in ecocriticism, Melville's delinquency, locates the roots of an environmental counter-tradition, a perverse version of Thoreau, which will circulate through Cather and Barnes. The problem that Melville represents, I will further propose, is intimately connected with his queerness, or a kind of orientation that is distinct from both his alleged homosexuality and heterosexuality.

- Chapter 4: Cather's Onto-Theology of *Oikos*

The human story that frames Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), an early novel that sets the tone and presents the questions that will occupy the entire life of her thinking, involves two childhood friends, Alexandra Bergson—an allusion to the French Henri Bergson, author of *Creative Evolution* (1907)—and Carl Linstrum, who eventually become lovers on the plains of Nebraska near Hanover. This little town, "trying not to be blown away" (139), consists of tiny human dwellings. Of them, Cather writes, none "had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them" (139). While Alexandra and Carl's relationship is heterosexual, it is also emphatically non-procreative in the conventional sense; indeed, it is "ridiculous" in the minds of their friends and family. Their relationship, contextualized by the Nebraska landscape, occasions more philosophical speculations on the nature of desire, the impermanence of form, and the non-opposition between life and death.

Like Melville, Cather occupies an indisputable niche in both queer theory and ecocriticism, but—again like Melville—her position is far from certain. Cather's attention to the environment seems to be unfortunately matched by her inattention to economic injustice and racism, at least in her most famous novels. Furthermore, her

surprising heteronormativity seems to extend well beyond her human characters, causing many queer literary critics to wonder how to characterize her: was she a self-hating lesbian? a resentful proto-transsexual? The work of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jonathan Goldberg has attempted to complicate the question and to free Cather's aesthetic sensibility by "suspend[ing] determinate categories in order to allow resonances to sound" (Goldberg xi). Here, I will address these questions, and build on these answers, by examining Cather's queer imagination not only of human beings, but of other life forms and their environments, as well.

The main thrust of this chapter will be to position Cather as continuing the Thoreauvian-Melvillian tradition of queer environmentality, especially in her conception of *oikos*, the Greek root of "ecology" meaning "house," and the onto-theological status she grafts onto the concept. The more particular argument will be that for Cather *oikos*, in all its multifarious expressions, is queer, escaping the gender neuter, sexually anodyne sensitivity conventionally applied to the term. In an onto-theology of *oikos*, ecology becomes a species of theology, and one, for Cather, of radical immanence. What's more, and more important for my purpose here, is that a queer sensibility infuses these onto-theological meditations on the varieties of sensual experience, on life and death, and on reproduction and its discontents.

- Chapter 5: Barnes's Queerly Nietzschean Nature

My focus here will be on *Nightwood* (1936), Barnes's most famous novel. *Nightwood* tells the story of "*la somnambule*" Robin Vote and the disastrous relationships she has with her lovers: her husband Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood, and "the squatter" Jenny Petherbridge. Following these characters and the path of Robin's destruction, one of the

major themes that surfaces in the novel is that, as Bonnie Kime Scott (1995) has put it, "evolution has not safely or permanently delivered human beings to civilization" (73). In this chapter, I will argue that the root of Barnes's difficulty lies in her understanding of nature, in her queerly Nietzschean philosophy of life, a philosophy of life that seems to be so alien to our own, so disjointed—almost grotesquely so—from typical narrative models of life, whether these models are evolutionary, theological, legal, literary, economic, artistic, or ecological. In the space of this queer nature, in the strange, the excessive, the unnecessary, the abnormal, the absurd, there exists a form of life, a disruptive charge, a creative energy that is productive—not ultimately of viable offspring, or the *next* generation, in the traditional sense, it's true, but productive along alternative axes of time, and thus according to unconventional axiological adjudications.

Unlike Melville and Cather, Barnes cannot claim to have equal influence on both queer theory and ecocriticism. In fact, she is virtually ignored by ecocritics. Her difficult, modernist aesthetic certainly rubs against the grain of many ecocritics' interest in transparent, nonfiction nature writing. This dissonance in literary taste, coupled with Barnes's very explicit interest in queer gender and sexuality, decadence writ large, prevents her easy assimilation into mainstream—that is to say, heteronormative—ecocriticism. I turn to Barnes in my final literary exegesis in order to unpack more fully the function of aesthetics as "first philosophy," a term traditionally applied to ontology. In a sense, this chapter will serve as the climax of my philosophical argument, that one's aesthetic sensibility guides, consciously or unconsciously, both ontological descriptions of nature and epistemological problematizations of those descriptions.

- Chapter 6: Conclusion

As I have suggested above, my interest in queer environmentality is not a tactic to adjudicate the nature versus nurture (essentialism versus social constructionism) debate surrounding the ontological genesis of human sexual desire. I believe Sedgwick here: "any such adjudication is impossible to the degree that a conceptual deadlock between the two opposing views has by now been built into the very structure of every theoretical tool we have for undertaking it" (*Epistemology* 40). Choosing a side is fraught with perils—logically, politically, ethically—and negotiating between them sounds like "cutting-edge equivocation," to borrow a term from Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Defeated from the start, the question of cause is a false problem, and it is false primarily because "the cause of sexual orientation" relies on two concepts—nature and nurture—that have no ontological substance, no actual truth to begin with. Instead, what I hope to accomplish is more modest and more expansive: to bring the question of other-than-human life into the orbit of the queer project and to bring the question of queer life into the orbit of the environmental project. In my conclusion, I will treat specifically the question of the *environmentalism* of my queer approach, in other words, how such a position would affect other-than-human life, how sexuality—queer and otherwise—fits into contemporary ecological and evolutionary thinking.

Grouping *Walden*, *The Encantadas*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Nightwood* together does present some difficulties. Set in profoundly different times (1854, 1856, 1913, 1936) and places (the woods of Massachusetts, the mountains of the Galapagos, the plains of Nebraska, the streets of Paris), the texts illustrate not only the ways in which *the environment* changes, but also the ways in which *sexuality* does so, as well. To

complicate matters further, this change in the environment is both ontological and discursive, and this change in sexuality is both behavioral and symbolic. Thoreau, Melville, Cather, and Barnes represent the tension, the precariousness, of a literary critical practice with large philosophical questions, historical awareness, and political ambition.

Chapter II

Thoreau's Queer Environmentality

> We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well yet not pure.
>
> — Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854, page 497)

This chapter and the next deal with two major figures in the American literary tradition: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Herman Melville (1819-1891). The first question must be: why begin a study of queer environmentality with these two? If, as I argue, queer environmentality points to both scientific and literary innovations, then the answer must come from those two directions. In the previous chapter, I began to suggest that the mid-nineteenth century was a crucial time in the consolidation and dissemination of knowledge concerning evolution, a biology of time, and ecology, a biology of space. Now, I would like to delve deeper into that claim, beginning with Charles Darwin (1809-1882).

On 27 December 1831, Darwin set sail from England for what would become a five-year voyage aboard the *Beagle* that would take him around the world. His most famous landing—the most important for his development of a theory of speciation—was on the Galapagos Islands, where he stayed from 16 September through 20 October 1835. For a little over a month, Darwin observed the flora, fauna, and geology of the islands

and later published these observations in his travel narrative, *The Voyage of the* Beagle, in 1845. The theoretical implications of these observations Darwin would later develop in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), two other key texts that would secure his position in the history of science.

While traveling on the *Beagle*, and in formulating his theory of speciation, Darwin was heavily influenced by Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833), a three-volume text that revolutionized contemporary understanding of the physical features of the earth and, perhaps more importantly, the immense time involved in the creation and development of these features as we can observe them today. Lyell's geological principle rested upon a temporal assumption not of days, especially not six of them, but of eons. Based upon Lyell's principle, Darwin understood the Galapagos Islands, formed through volcanic matter jutting up from the seabed, to be relatively new land mass and, in a sense, a blank canvas for evolutionary illustration. These islands offered Darwin a glimpse into "a little world within itself" (69) brought about by their extreme isolation from South America—about 650 miles west of Ecuador—and, to a much lesser extent, from each other. The small scale of the organic system on each island, a kind of ecological microcosm, allowed Darwin to observe, cognize, and articulate a set of principles that he would later call "natural selection" to describe evolutionary change. Even today ecologists and evolutionary biologists are drawn to islands for exactly the same reason Darwin was: there is an organizational awareness, an observational grasp, that is lost, or at least proportionally complicated, as the ecosystem grows in scale.

"Most of the organic productions," Darwin writes, "are aboriginal creations, found nowhere else; there is even a difference between the inhabitants of the different islands; yet all show a marked relationship with those of America, though separated from that continent by an open space of ocean" (69). Darwin theorized that the islands should be understood as a "satellite" of America, the continent from which the islands have "derived a few stray colonists" (69). The inhabitants of the islands, then, were not *wholly* new sets of beings, not "aboriginal creations" in its strictest sense, but rather were *related* to sets of beings on the American continent. Darwin's task, as he understood it, was to describe the nature of this relationship, and even more specifically, to describe how isolated populations of beings could change to such an extent that they could be considered to form a new species. This self-appointed undertaking began a double breakthrough that included 1) the refutation of pangenesis, or the belief, widely held at the time and still uncommonly held today, that each species was created separately, and 2) the formulation of a theory of evolution, or the belief that the formal qualities of a species change over time due to a variety of forces, that these changes can intensify to such an extent over long periods of time within specific portions of the population to cause the species to diverge and form new species, and that similar species as we know them today can ipso facto be traced back to a common ancestral species. This theory of evolution Darwin would later describe with wonderful linguistic economy as "descent with modification."

Darwin, furthermore, would give scientific credence to a philosophical tradition in the Western tradition, dating at least from Heraclitus in the fifth century BCE, that stressed the illusion of permanence and the processual constitution of reality—certain

ontological uncertainty—and with it the profound displacement or deferral of essence, including human essence. In a famous passage, Heraclitus says one can never cross the same river twice; Darwin polishes this aphorism to reflect the crossing of species. What marks the specificity of human being now, henceforth after Darwin, is neither stable nor resident within human being. What marks human being now is outside of human being, a significant irony, and any attempt to describe the human as such is not only illusion, but scientifically unverifiable, and consequently theological.

Darwin's non-essentialist, anti-Platonic conceptualization of species is particularly important to note here. "We shall have to treat species," he writes in *The Origin of Species*, "in the same manner as those naturalists treat genera, who admit that genera are merely artificial combinations made for convenience. This may not be a cheering prospect; but we shall at least be freed from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of the term species" (172). The scientist can only describe the processual constitution of what we conveniently—or better, pragmatically—call species. In the case of *Homo sapiens*, if our focus is on the evolutionary past, it must be the *becoming* human rather than *the* human. Today, to be properly scientific, we speak repetitively of *Homo sapiens sapiens* to identify the current state of our species, but perhaps *Homo sapiens*$^{N+1}$ or maybe *Homo* $\overline{sapiens}$ or just simply *Homo sapiens*$^{\infty}$ would be more accurate.[27] Without the mark of infinite progression, any designation in Linnaean binomial nomenclature will always in a sense be way too late, and thus would always appear to contradict the validity of the classification's Latin etymology, *wise human being*.

[27] Thanks to Josh Stevens and Edward Menashy for notational advice.

My assertion here, however, should not suggest that the species becomes completely new every nanosecond, for there is indeed a certain continuity (Bergson will call it *durée*) through evolutionary time. Instead, it should suggest that the classification of species through time is problematic to the extent that it is through time, or to put it more mathematically, in proportion to an increase in variable *t* time. In other words, I agree with David L. Hull who in "The Metaphysics of Evolution" (1967) argues that Darwin rejects both essentialism (i.e., the idea that individuals in a species share a transcendental essence) and nominalism (i.e., the idea, associated with medieval scholasticism, that the only thing individuals in a species share is a name).

How does Darwin's breakthrough—a breakthrough anticipated of course by other important thinkers, such as Darwin's own grandfather Erasmus, Denis Diderot, and Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, but brought up to the level of *event* in the writings of Darwin—relate to the literary question of Thoreau and Melville, and to the more general question of queer environmentality? Like Darwin, Thoreau and Melville participate in this revolutionary breakthrough, this paradigm-shift in the way humans understand their relationship with other beings and with themselves.[28] For all three, though in different

[28] Much has been written on Darwin's influence on literature, especially on Victorian fiction. Path-breaking studies include Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983), Margot Norris's *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (1985), George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (1988), and James Krasner's *The Entangled Eye: Visual Perception and the Representation of Nature in Post-Darwinian Narrative* (1992). For more recent work, see Richard A. Kaye's *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (2002), especially the second chapter, "The Flirtation of Species: Darwinian Sexual Selection and Victorian Narrative," Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007), and Jeannette Eileen Jones and Patrick B. Sharp's edited volume *Darwin in Atlantic Cultures: Evolutionary Visions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (2009).

ways and with different philosophical results, it is not just that humans are "part of nature" as categorical affiliation, but that human beings and every single other living being from whales to beans to microbes—the life-world writ large—are equally engaged in persistent co-evolutionary transfiguration. For them, it is not just that human history is implicated in natural history in the sense that the species *Homo sapiens* depends upon plants and animals for survival, but that human being—if we can even say such a thing exists as certain ontological substance—is constantly changing and being changed by other parts of the whole.

Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), asks a particularly poignant question that illustrates his sense of this human capacity to affect and be affected by other-than-human forces. In contemplating his labor in the field, he writes, "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" (446). In this pithy question about beans, a seemingly inconsequential legume, there is an acknowledgment of dual transmutation (in his transcendental optimism, Thoreau calls it a sanguine moment of reciprocal education) that shifts the investigative emphasis from the stability of ostensibly discreet ontological entities to the transformation of an evolving network that includes *at least* persons and beans in perpetual and mutually reinforcing relationship.

Although Thoreau alludes to Darwin only once in *Walden*,[29] the Darwinian *Weltanschauung* forms a foundation for all of Thoreau's thinking. Although it is not cast within the terms most prominently associated with Darwin's legacy—that is, struggle and

[29] In discussing clothing, and the slippery slope from luxury to necessity, Thoreau quotes from Darwin. He writes, "Darwin, the naturalist, says of the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, that while his own party, who were well clothed and sitting close to a fire, were far from too warm, these naked savages, who were farther off, were observed, to his great surprise, 'to be streaming with perspiration at undergoing such a roasting'" (332-333). The Europeans, once accustomed to the luxury of clothing, become, in a sense, addicted.

competition—and thus may get obscured in the discourse of ease and cooperation that stocks the text, Thoreau demonstrates a remarkable sense of the Darwinian revision of temporality and ontology. "The very globe," Thoreau writes, "continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit" (567). Globular reorganization and translation leads Thoreau to ask another striking question: "What is man but a mass of thawing clay?" (567).

With Darwin and Thoreau, Melville too is embedded within the fold of this scientific innovation, and includes a quotation of Darwin, on whales, in the preface to his *Moby-Dick* (1851).[30] A biographical fact is also important to note here: Melville traveled to the Galapagos Islands, those islands so important in the development of evolutionary theory, during the 1840s and, like Darwin, was struck by what he found there.[31] In *The Encantadas* (1856), a major work in his corpus that unfortunately receives little critical attention today, and one that I will try to read very carefully in the next chapter, Melville records his experience on these islands and the doubleness of excitement and terror involved in witnessing such stark life—bare life, naked life—profoundly other-than-human.

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[30] For the definitive study of Melville's influences, see Merton M. Sealts Jr.'s *Melville's Reading* (1988). For an extended discussion of Melville's scientific context, see Eric Goldman's "Bringing out the Beast in Melville's *Billy Budd*: The Dialogue of Darwinian and 'Holy' Lexicons on Board the *Bellipotent*" (2005), D. Graham Burnett's *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century New York Case That Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature* (2007), and Sam Halliday's *Science and Technology in the Age of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James: Thinking and Writing Electricity* (2007).

[31] For much of the biographical information on Melville's life, I rely on Andrew Delbanco's *Melville: His World and Work* (2005), Robert Milder's *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (2006), and Hershel Parker's *Melville: The Making of a Poet* (2007). For an influential study of the cultural context during this period, see David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988).

The principal difference between Darwin, on the one hand, and Thoreau and Melville, on the other, a difference I will come back to again and again in the following chapters, relates to the question of God, or supernatural force, and how this question structures the cognition of organic and non-organic life on earth and in the universe at large. This difference between the scientist and the poets—perhaps crucial, perhaps not—leads the Thoreau scholar Lawrence Buell to describe Thoreau as more Emersonian than Darwinian, a contention I share as well, at least in part.[32] Darwin, of course, is a strict naturalist; he believes all explanation of reality must be intrinsic to that reality. There can be no supernatural, extra-natural, explanation. It is true that in his writings Darwin does admit an invisible hand that may do the selecting in natural selection, but this numinous realm does not concern his scientific imagination; it simply cannot. Thoreau, on the other hand, certainly influenced by Emerson in his philosophy of spirit and matter, cannot be said to be a naturalist, properly speaking, and neither can Melville.[33] For Melville, like Thoreau, ecological and evolutionary transformations take on immense mythical significance in both their causes and effects. In this way, Thoreau and Melville offer an important critical rejoinder to M.H. Abrams's classic study, *Natural*

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[32] See his important ecocritical study, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995).

[33] One wonders even today if the suspicion directed towards scientific explanation is a revelation of real concern with the ethico-political ramifications of scientific discourse, or if this suspicion reveals instead a more general—or rather, persistent—romantic sensibility, a sensibility that understands both the self and the self-in-the-world as irreducible to explanation as such, as unexplainable, as always exceeding the boundaries of comprehensibility. In other words, there is the question: does the hermeneutics of suspicion in the scientific context, and its ethico-political import, assume a self and self-in-the-world that can never and/or *will* never condense itself into hypothesis, theory, or law? And to put it even more bluntly, is the suspicion—and, at times, rejection—of scientific explanation even in the most secular of quarters symptomatic of the anxiety produced by the threatened dissolution of the grammatical function of God?

Supernaturalism (1971), which argues that the key attribute of this time period is "the *secularization* of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking" (12, my emphasis).[34] For Melville, furthermore, again like Thoreau, co-evolution between *Homo sapiens* and another species—*Phaseolus vulgaris*, kidney beans, or *Physeter macrocephalus*, sperm whales, let's say—is as much metaphorical as it is literal.

Scientific innovation, brought to a head in the writings of Darwin, though, is not the only context for Thoreau and Melville that I would like to explore here. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, queer environmentality points to both scientific and literary innovation. This second innovation, the one that also develops, at least in the American context, in the early to mid-nineteenth century, is the advent of Romanticism. Isaiah Berlin locates the "roots" of this Romantic revolution in Germany during the 1760s and 1770s, especially in the work of Johann Georg Hamann, in Kant (ironically) and Herder.[35] Although Berlin's intellectual history is far too nuanced to do it any justice here, a few words on the subject of Romanticism will suffice before moving on to a close reading of *Walden*.

Talking about Thoreau and Melville in the context of Romanticism threatens to contradict my earlier claims about Thoreau and Melville in the context of Darwinian thought. Why? Romantic literature and philosophy seems to be inherently at odds with the scientific objectivity operative in the writings of Darwin. Indeed, a common

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[34] Abrams focuses mostly on the British scene, which may help to explain his reasoning. He makes an important qualification here, as well, writing, "Despite their displacement from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference, however, the ancient problems, terminology, and ways of thinking about human nature and history survived" (13).

[35] See *The Roots of Romanticism* (1999), the edited text of a group of lectures given by Berlin in March and April 1965 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. All references to Berlin's work on Romanticism refer to this text.

understanding of Romanticism is that it is a movement that reacts *against* Enlightenment faith in science, in objectivity, in knowledge, in certainty, all of which Darwin is a part. Romanticists have long been keenly aware of the Romantics' critique—or rather perhaps, deconstruction—of Enlightenment epistemology. In a foundational study in the field, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), M.H. Abrams begins by explaining the significance of his title:

> The title of the book identifies two common and antithetic metaphors of mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives. The first of these was characteristic of much of the thinking from Plato to the eighteenth century; the second typifies the prevailing romantic conception of the poetic mind. (vi)[36]

One could, and perhaps should, argue that Darwin would reflect Abrams's mirror metaphor; Thoreau and Melville, on the other hand, would illuminate the lamp. Berlin, in his work on Romantic thought, echoes the claims Abrams makes in his intellectual history. For Berlin, as for Abrams, there is a certain way of thinking, of formulating philosophical problems, that dates from at least Plato and intensifies to its limit in the

[36] Richard Rorty addresses a similar question, and explores similar metaphors, in his important work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). "Philosophy's central concern," Rorty begins almost caustically, "is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so)" (3). In the body of the text, Rorty examines twentieth-century anti-Cartesian philosophies, especially in the work of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, in order to formulate a "philosophy without mirrors," or, in Abrams's terms, a philosophy with lamps.

Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. This philosophical orientation undergoes a radical transformation with Romanticism.

For Berlin, the essential feature of the Enlightenment is the equation of knowledge, especially universal knowledge, with virtue. Like Abrams, Berlin too begins with Plato, and the "geometrical or mathematical model" that looms over his philosophy. In Plato's thought, writes Berlin, "there are certain axiomatic truths, adamantine, unbreakable, from which it is possible by severe logic to deduce certain absolutely infallible conclusions" (2). This universal knowledge, these attainable truths, can then serve as the organizing principles for our lives. Once we are able to ascertain universal truth and organize our lives according to its principle, "all suffering, all doubt, all ignorance, all forms of human vice and folly can be expected to disappear from the earth" (2). Universal ethics, in other words, can be derived from universal knowledge of reality and can yield universal good.

For Berlin, this conception reaches its climax with the absolute valorization of science in the Enlightenment. Science, understood as an unchanging "body of facts" (119), becomes the basis for discerning universal knowledge of reality, and hence universal ethics. In this way, science begs if not total *submission* to both knowledge and ethics, at least substantial regulation. Romanticism comes to challenge that central proposition.

Romantic thinkers, according to Berlin, make this challenge in two particular ways. The first Berlin identifies as "the notion of the indomitable will" (119). As opposed to a conception of universal knowledge and universal values that we must struggle to apprehend in unison, Romanticism insists that the human will entails the

creation of that knowledge and those values, much like an artist creates a work of art. "The heart of the entire process," Berlin writes, "is invention, creation, making, out of literally nothing, or out of any materials that may be at hand" (119). The creation of knowledge and values, in Romanticism, extends to the creation of the self; or rather, the creation of knowledge and values is enabled through the capacity to create the self.

"We are all sculptors and painters," Thoreau writes, "and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones" (499). For Thoreau, the self itself becomes a work of art, and indeed the *highest* work of art. In comparing traditional works of art—*videlicet*, beautiful objects—to the human self, Thoreau writes, "it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look" (394). "To affect the quality of the day," Thoreau continues, "that is the highest of arts" (394). For Thoreau, and for the Romantics at large, there is a connection between the generation and fashioning of self, knowledge, and value.

The second challenge, related to the first, is that "there is no structure of things" (120). For Berlin, this means:

> There is no pattern to which you must adapt yourself. There is only, if not the flow, the endless self-creativity of the universe. The universe must not be conceived of as a set of facts, as a pattern of events, as a collection of lumps in space, three-dimensional entities bound together by certain unbreakable relations, as taught to us by physics, chemistry and other natural sciences; the universe is a process of perpetual forward self-thrusting, perpetual self-creation. (120-121)

Although this conception can yield a profound sense of freedom through embracing one's own participation in this universal self-creation (a sentiment that infuses the writings of Thoreau), Berlin also identifies a darker interpretation. One can also conceive of it "as hostile to man, as by Schopenhauer or even to some extent by Nietzsche [and I would add Melville], so that it will overthrow all human efforts to check it, to organize it, to feel at home in it, to make oneself some kind of cozy pattern in which one can rest" (121). The universe, on scales both large and small, can generate in its creative formlessness either recurrent release or persistent alienation in the mind-body of the individual.

Darwin's exact position within Berlin's theory of the Enlightenment-Romanticism matrix is an interesting problem for intellectual history. As I mentioned above, Darwin saturates all ontological questions with profound uncertainty (a very Heraclitan position), but he reaches this conclusion through precise scientific reasoning. In other words, even though Darwin is anti-Platonic in his conception of species and assumes the constant flux of organic and non-organic life, he does remain firmly in the Enlightenment tradition of scientific objectivity. Ontological uncertainty does not yield a Romantic conception of the universe for Darwin, but spurs the creation of better science and the development of instruments that can better measure this uncertainty. It is also unclear to what extent Darwin shares the Platonic-Enlightenment equation of knowledge with virtue, of epistemology with ethics. Unlike the eugenicist Herbert Spencer, the actual coiner of the phrase "survival of the fittest" in *Principles of Biology* (1864), Darwin is hesitant to derive ethical determination from ontological description.

Thoreau and Melville are more obviously on the Romantic side of the divide, although they both demonstrate a perceptive understanding of the scientific insights of

their contemporaries. My aim in this chapter, and the next, then, is to understand Thoreau and Melville—and through them, queer environmentality—in the context of the scientific and literary innovations I have sketched above. More specifically, in this chapter I would like to situate Thoreau within these contexts by looking closely at his language of environmentality, of sensuality, and, not least, of language itself. I will therefore divide the remainder of the chapter into these three parts, though there is much porosity between them:

1. Environmentality
2. Sense of Sensuality
3. Philosophy of Language

1. Environmentality

At the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau offers an explanation for his decision to experiment with deliberate living at Walden Pond. "I went to the woods," he explains in the famous passage, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (394). He continues:

> I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness out of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (394-395)

For Thoreau, this experiment demands economical living with constant attention to the consumption and exertion—indeed *excretion*—of energy. As is well known, by simplifying his life to the most elemental of elements, Thoreau's goal is to reach a higher level of consciousness, enlightenment or satori, when cosmological principles appear as such.

Towards the end of *Walden*, he sums up this ascetic aesthetic and its theological implications. Speaking of the experimenter in deliberate living, Thoreau writes, "In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex" (580). These laws conjure an absolute metaphysics of presence. "Men esteem truth remote," Thoreau diagnoses, "in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and the last man" (399). With the remedy, he continues, "In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages" (399). Thoreau's environmentality, in its simplest form, springs from an immanent theology in which God-Presence-Being-Reality become one.

What is interesting is that Thoreau's desire for simplicity—and more than that, Thoreau's representation, or inscription, of his desire for simplicity—is highly complex. Barbara Johnson (1987) notes, "It is paradoxical that a writer who constantly exhorts us to 'Simplify, simplify' should also be the author of some of the most complex and difficult paragraphs in the English language" (50). This paradox though is not lost on Thoreau. Indeed, if one literary term best describes Thoreau's style, and his philosophical positioning, it is paradox.

Let us look more closely at this paradox, this intense oscillation, between economy and excess, simplification and complication, in Thoreau's thinking and writing. Thoreau desires to live economically, like those Spartans who directed all of their energy into a single purpose, but his understanding of nature—human beings, other animals, vegetation, geological movements, weather patterns, etc.—is characterized by remarkable excess. Richard Grusin (1993) calls it a "symbolic economy of expenditure that differs radically from classical, utilitarian-based accounts of nature's economy" (32). If Grusin is correct, Thoreau's allusion to Sparta is curious here. The famous *polis* becomes a model for Thoreau's deliberate and deliberative living. Sparta, here and nearly always, signifies classical utility. The human body itself is reduced to bare life, *la nuda vita*, in Agamben's terms, organized as a superorganism into a single direction of attack, like a colony of ants. This formicidaen analogy is important since ants are one of Thoreau's favorite animals to observe, and to compare. In a less Spartan moment—that is to say, in a more Athenian moment—Thoreau writes, "Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men" (395). Spartans, the quintessence of human ants, serves as Thoreau's model for "putting to rout all that was not life" and thus to discover the meanness or sublimity of the world.

Like the ants that populate Walden and *Walden*, owls too are "beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts" (503). They, unlike Thoreau's Spartan ants, but like many of the other animals, plants, and physical matters of the text, illustrate Grusin's "symbolic economy of expenditure." In a striking passage, Thoreau describes the "dismal scream" of the owls, those "wise midnight hags" (422). He writes:

> I love to hear their wailing, their doleful responses, trilled along the wood-side, reminding me sometimes of music and singing birds; as if it were the dark and tearful side of music, the regrets and sighs that would fain be sung. They are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy forebodings, of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did the deeds of darkness, now expiating their sins with their wailing hymns or threnodies in the scenery of their transgressions. (421)

Thoreau begins with an indication of his gratitude for the owls, but this gratitude does not spring from a cheerful or encouraging source. It is the "wailing," the "doleful responses," of the animals that spark Thoreau's love for this "different race of creatures" (422). The initial irony (owls remind Thoreau of singing birds because they are indeed birds) is followed by other instances of hermeneutic indeterminacy. For one: "Regrets and sighs […] would fain be sung." By "would fain be sung," does Thoreau mean *happily* be sung? Or *must* be sung? Or *feign* be sung? Thoreau, furthermore, gives to his owls from the beginning the capacity to respond, to *re-spondere*, from Latin "to pledge again," a historically human capacity, denied to the other-than-human.[37] This supposed capacity to respond leads to a more serious question about anthropomorphism. Throughout this passage there is a tension between *they are* and *they sound like*, a deeper tension, in other words, one that Thoreau never fully addresses, between onto-theological description and anthropomorphic figuration. They either *are* the spirits of fallen souls, or

[37] In a recently published text, based upon a group of lectures given in 1997, Jacques Derrida also takes up the question of speaking, and even more particularly *responding*, in other-than-human life. See *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008).

they "*represent* the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have" (422, my italics).

Thoreau continues with his appreciation of the owls for their ability to give him a "new sense [of the] variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling" (421-422). Thoreau's sense of "variety and capacity" takes a strange turn when he begins to attribute human language to the animals. In the next sentence, he writes:

> *Oh-o-o-o-o that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* sighs one on this side of the pond, and circles with the restlessness of despair to some new perch on the gray oaks. Then—*that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* echoes another on the farther side with tremulous sincerity, and—*bor-r-r-r-n!* comes faintly from far in the Lincoln woods. (421-422)

Thoreau attributes to the owls not only a desire for non-existence, but also the clear articulation of that desire. This desire for non-existence should not be understood as a suicidal desire, but a desire for the negation of being. *Oh that I never had been born!* is not a wish for death; in fact, it is not grammatically a wish at all. The *oh that*, similar to an *if only*, indirects the desire. The repetition of *born*, the echo of *bor-r-r-r-n*, the suspension of sound, all participate in an ironic reverberation and performativity of negation. This passage illustrates Thoreau at his most decadent, and at his queerest, if we take queerness to indicate the generativity of melancholia, the allure of Thanatos, as Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004) has suggested.

Commenting further on this "most melancholy sound in Nature," Thoreau contemplates whether Nature, considered here as a feminine agent, wanted to "stereotype and make permanent in her choir the dying moans of human beings" with the howls of

the owls (422). The howls of the owls, "stereotyped," or made into solid impression, become

> some poor weak relic of mortality who has left hope behind, and howls like an animal, yet with human sobs, on entering the dark valley, made more awful by a certain gurgling melodiousness,—I find myself beginning with the letters *gl* when I try to imitate it,—expressive of a mind which has reached the gelatinous mildewy stage in the mortification of all healthy and courageous thought. (422)

In this difficult passage, Thoreau seems to be saying that the owls' soundings sound like dead human beings sounding like animals. When Thoreau tries to imitate this imitation, he comes up with a peculiar sound, the *gl*, which would be quite a surprise for anyone who is used to listening to owls. *Gl* is all tongue, panglossian, and quintessentially human. It is *lingua*, language.

In *Dark Thoreau* (1982), an unusual text in the secondary literature for its dedicated interest in Thoreau's melancholic imagination, Richard Bridgman explores the tension between Thoreau's "temperament and his acquired idealism" (x). These moments of darkness—Thoreau might call them moments of "meanness" as opposed to sublimity—present a more complex and interesting Thoreau than is often assumed of the founder of American environmental literature. "Throughout his life," Bridgman continues, "the mutilated bodies of men, animals, birds, and reptiles, the battered remnants of destroyed life, repeatedly absorbed Thoreau's attention and evoked a response that might be curious or excited but never compassionate" (xi). Decomposing

horses, limbless ants struggling after an attack, owls howling in the night, all point to the complexity of Thoreau's thinking.

In order to ease the paradoxical complexity between darkness and optimism, in order to pass through the impassable, the ostensibly *aporos*, Thoreau explains himself. He writes:

> We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast. There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. (575-576)

Thoreau begins with his oscillation between cheer and disgust in witnessing a vulture feeding upon dead flesh. The darkness, the melancholic framework, of death becomes enlightened through the production of life, health, and strength. Future life gains momentum through the repast, both *meal*, intensive feeding, and *the past again*. The stench of a decomposing horse forces the author to divert his walk, but his diversion leads into a recognition of "the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature."

This recognition culminates in an ecological awareness of energy flow:

> I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that

> sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. (575-576)

This passage, and many similar ones, does not resemble the Saint Thoreau of the environmental movement, especially his description of the untenability of compassion. Ecological and evolutionary science would verify this conception of life as the mutation of Being, the generation and dissolution of beings. Still, there is a mystical, and ethical, dimension to Thoreau's thought.

In *What Thoreau Said:* Walden *and the Unsayable* (1991), William C. Johnson Jr. addresses "the apparent paradox of Thoreau's appearing alternately as scientist and mystic" (29). "In factualizing spirit and spiritualizing fact" (33), Johnson Jr. argues, Thoreau attains a freedom of movement between the two ostensibly discreet pursuits. Although he often employs the rhetoric of scientific certainty, in other words, Thoreau also understands "the universe [to be] wider than our views of it" (577). He writes, "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable" (575). Thoreau here is identifying two conflicting desires: 1) the desire to learn all things, and 2) the desire to have all things be unlearnable.

In order better to understand Thoreau's thinking here and elsewhere, we must consider his education and philosophical influences. An admirer of Hindu and Buddhist

philosophy,[38] German *Naturphilosophie*, and British and American natural history, Thoreau read widely and deeply from his time at Harvard until his death in 1862. For instruction in the Asian classics, he read Friedrich von Schlegel's *Lectures on the History of Literature* (1818) and certain translations of these texts published in *The Dial*, the influential literary journal edited first by Margaret Fuller, then by Emerson. For instruction in Western thought, he read Goethe, and was heavily influenced by *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) and Carlyle's translation of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1828), by Emerson's *Nature* (1836), and by Coleridge's *Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* (1848). In his courses on natural history at Harvard, he read William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), William Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History* (1799), Thomas Nuttall's *An Introduction Systematic and Physiological Botany* (1827), and Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833).[39]

These texts, important in both their scientific and literary innovation, laid the groundwork for Thoreau's interest in the intersection between the sciences and the humanities. In ecological and evolutionary theory, much of the work at this time—Paley's *Natural Theology* is the representative text—helped to develop the "argument from design." According to Robert Sattlemeyer in *Thoreau's Reading* (1988), this

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[38] In discussing his diet, Thoreau writes, "It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who loved so well the philosophy of India" (370). For a more detailed treatment on this topic, see Kamala Bhatia's "Thoreau and India" (1972). For an illuminating discussion of Transcendentalism and Buddhist pedagogical thinking, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "The Pedagogy of Buddhism" (2003).

[39] This list of course is highly abbreviated. For the essential account of Thoreau's reading interests, see Robert Sattlemeyer's *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History* (1988). For one of the standard biographies that also details important influences on Thoreau's thinking, see Robert D. Richardson's *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986). And for an exhaustive study of Thoreau's scientific thinking, especially his relationship to Alexander von Humbolt, see Laura Dassow Walls's *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (1995).

eighteenth-century "argument" was that "the operations of the natural world provided evidence of a divine and benevolent plan for the cosmos" (10). Today, we call it intelligent design.

Although it is difficult to know exactly Thoreau's evaluation of the "argument from design" since his texts are purposely contradictory on the subject, one thing is sure. The historical context within which these "arguments" were being made was profoundly different from our own. Sattlemeyer reminds us about this context and its impact on Thoreau's reading practices. "Theory in the natural sciences," he writes, "was in such a state of flux that it was doubtless to his advantage later as a writer and naturalist to be relatively unencumbered by preconceptions" (11). This flux, before consolidation and specialization, and, in a sense, before scientific falsification, would allow Thoreau to "evince a catholic taste in natural history writing that would range from Aristotle and Pliny to Agassiz and Darwin [and to] sample approvingly many writers in between" (11).

Like Darwin, Thoreau believes in reconsidering the human as a natural species that occupies a particular niche in ecological space and evolutionary time. In one of his many celebrated formulations, Thoreau asks, "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (432). I would like to turn now to the ways Thoreau answers these two questions and aligns himself with ecological and evolutionary theory. In order to begin this "intelligence with the earth," Thoreau addresses a more particular question about habit and habitation, about habitat and dwelling, a cognitive awareness of environment.[40] "Man," writes Thoreau, "is an animal who more than any other can adapt himself to all climates and circumstances" (372).

[40] On cognition, see H. Daniel Peck's *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in* A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the Journal, and* Walden (1990).

Diverging from the Aristotelian notion of rational animal and political animal, Thoreau identifies the mark of the human in human being as *more adaptable* in comparison with other animals. What is important to note here is that this mark is not a mark of uniqueness or separateness or difference, but a mark of degree, a quantity of adaptability, rather than a quality. The striking *an animal who* instead of *an animal that* emphasizes this point further.

For Thoreau, adaptable animals must confront the paradox of their adaptability. Consider first Thoreau's description of digging his cellar at Walden Pond:

> I dug my cellar in the side of a hill sloping to the south, where a woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow, down through sumach and blackberry roots, and the lowest stain of vegetation, six feet square by seven deep, to a fine sand where potatoes would not freeze in any winter. […] I took particular pleasure in this breaking of ground, for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable temperature. Under the most splendid house in the city is still found the cellar where they store their roots as of old, and long after the superstructure has disappeared posterity remark its dent in the earth. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow. (357-358)

By writing of his reinhabitation of a woodchuck burrow, Thoreau connects human habitat with animal habitat. Like the woodchuck, he burrows. He goes down, through the burrow, through the roots, to hit the sand, and a good temperature. Like the woodchuck burrow, the cellar remains a mark, a dent, on the earth even after the inhabitant moves

away. Posterity remark upon this mark, and remark this mark. The mark, in other words, persists in both physical space and the social imagination.

In this image, and others of burrowing and digging, Joseph Allen Boone (1981) suggests, Thoreau "reverses the concept of ascendant movement generally associated with Transcendentalism" (164). This image helps to bring into focus Thoreau's precarious relationship with Transcendentalism, and more generally, with transcendental theology. For Thoreau, Truth (and we could add God-Presence-Being-Reality) is not up there in heaven, but down here on earth. "The intellect is a cleaver," Thoreau writes, "it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things" (400). He continues, "My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills" (400).

Burrowing into the earth, creating a habitat, essential though it may be, cannot help but to generate its own problems. Thoreau understands the habitual need to create a habitat, to dwell, and to burrow into the earth, but at the exact moment of breaking ground we become trapped, both literally and metaphorically. "It is remarkable," Thoreau writes, "how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves" (579). Habit can be a direct assault on freedom; it can lead unfortunately into addiction; the burrow can easily become the grave.[41] Thoreau calls for an escape from habit, whether those habits are intellectual or physical, abstract or concrete. He writes, "The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men;

[41] Thoreau reiterates this point, in variation, a number of times: "Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward its tomb only. It buries itself alive. As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs" (368).

and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!" (579).

The solution to this dilemma, according to Thoreau, is an escape from habitual domestication through a life of voluntary simplicity, or the ascetic aesthetic. Thoreau turns to "the primitive ages" for instruction. He writes:

> The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain tops. (352)

The disintegration of this Edenic state occurs in the modern world. "But lo!" Thoreau exclaims, "Men have become the tools of their tools" (352). Thoreau's project, then, becomes one of retooling human consciousness to consider larger processes of Being, to be simple and naked.

And poetic: "The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied chiefly by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth" (568). Thoreau's romantic environmentality denies fragmentation and death, at least in their negative guise, and encourages a mind-body fully attuned to erotic life.

3. Sense of Sensuality

Nudity, especially in poetic form, occupies a particular, and peculiar, place in Thoreau's writing. Thinking toward truth, especially in relation to the "living poetry" of the "living earth," is often figured as a disrobing. In Thoreau's writing, one common manifestation of this disrobing is the stripping away of material things, and thus the stripping away of various forms of anxiety. In one of many discussions of clothing, Thoreau writes, "It is desirable that a man be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark, and that he live in all respects so compactly and preparedly, that, if an enemy take the town, he can, like the old philosopher, walk out the gate empty-handed without anxiety" (341-342). The laying of the hands can suggest both a blessing, a self-blessing in this case, or an onanism, both of which have biblical precedent. Thoreau begins, in fact, with the question of desire, the word "desirable," and the entire philosophical proposition is fantastical.

Thoreau continues, addressing the erotic nature of philosophy:

> In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian and Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. (402)

Thoreau begins by distinguishing between two types of human effort, one mortal, the other immortal. With "accumulating property," Thoreau adds generating children, both of which designate mortality, a considerable irony. The other, "dealing with truth," designates immortality. The old philosophers approach the divine, and begin to unveil the truth of its nature. The veil, a facial covering, becomes the robe. The gaze descends from the face to the body, from the veil to the robe, the trembling robe because the body is trembling. Here is the erotics of touching another, as opposed to the laying of hands on oneself. If the previous passage described the philosopher as simply clad, with access to his own body, capable at all times of touching himself, this passage offers a different orgasmic epistemo-theology, and a revision of onanism.

The Onan of *Genesis*, we must remember, is not alone. Tamar is with him, and he is in her. His transgression is pulling out, spilling his seed onto the earth, rather than into the vagina. Fertility is interrupted, diverted, distracted. Onan's punishment, symbolic retribution, is death. Thoreau, Onan's modern savior, revels in the laying of hands, on oneself and on divine statues, as *the* source of philosophical daring. The boldness of disrobing, the trembling of the body undressing, quickly, perhaps prematurely, becomes a meditation on time, Transcendental time. The old philosophers and Thoreau, the modern philosopher, are one and the same. Time, truth, disrobing and nudity, all exist outside of past-present-future.

Literary critics have long been interested in Thoreau's sex life. Although popular reviewers of *Walden* when it first appeared found the author strange, not least because of his "selfishness" in rejecting family life, scholarly admirers since have promoted a different evaluation. The earliest scholarly work on the subject identified Thoreau as

unproblematically asexual, virginal and saint-like. More recently, critics have begun to explore in detail the psychology and philosophical implications of Thoreau's sexuality by moving away from a cursory theory of asexuality. The literary critics that I will explore here—Richard Lebeaux, Walter Harding, Michael Warner, and Henry Abelove—each present a fresh, though highly speculative, analysis of Thoreau's sex life. My point will not be that these analyses uncover the truth of Thoreau's sexuality, that they completely and accurately reflect Thoreau's life, but instead that they provide an important and suggestive framework for understanding Thoreau's writing. They speak, furthermore, to contemporary issues, issues that may or may not been perceived in the same way in 1854. This hermeneutical time gap, coupled with the fact that Thoreau's texts are highly stylized, if not openly fictional, creates a particular problem, a problem, I should note, that will resurface in Melville and Cather, and even to some extent in Barnes.

In *Thoreau's Season's* (1984), Richard Lebeaux dwells for substantial time on Thoreau's sexuality, especially as it surfaces in his journal. For Lebeaux, Thoreau's sexuality is characterized by an intense fear of emasculation and infertility; Thoreau was keenly aware of a "vacuum left by his childlessness," and turned to the other-than-human world in order to discover "alternative forms of fatherhood" (40). Specifically, for Lebeaux, Thoreau "began turning to organic facts and analogies in an ongoing but ever more urgent effort to test out and reimage just what claims he might stake to alternative forms of generativity" (141). As part of the evidence for such a claim, Lebeaux quotes from a journal entry by Thoreau, dated April 1851, in which he writes that he thinks of his life-goal as "not the propagation, but rather the maturation, of the species" (141). Lebeaux interprets this comment as Thoreau's understanding of a distinction between

qualitative and quantitative growth. Thoreau's constant attention to animal and plant life springs from, according to Lebeaux, "the fervent wish that her [Nature's] fertility would rub off on him" (142).

In "Thoreau's Sexuality" (1991), Walter Harding echoes Lebeaux's general position, although Harding is more celebratory of Thoreau's celibacy. For Harding, this celibacy is not the result of a general asexuality, but a latent, and perhaps consciously disavowed, homosexuality. With sustained scholarly attention, Harding presents a thorough examination of the textual evidence of Thoreau's homoeroticism, and concludes that Thoreau's "intense love of nature may have resulted from sublimation of that homoeroticism" (23). Harding and Lebeaux have a point, certainly, but both essentially assume a foundational frustration for which Thoreau then tries to compensate with more or less success.

In "*Walden*'s Erotic Economy" (1991), Michael Warner argues for a different interpretation of Thoreau's sex life and its relation to his philosophy.[42] "Thoreau's writings," Warner contends, "circle around conspicuously unsatisfied desires" (157), but this dissatisfaction is not figured as a lack, or a frustration, that then must be ameliorated. For Warner, Thoreau desires "a new sensuality, a new body, and for as yet unimaginable libidinous relations with others, especially other men" (157). Eroticism is not primarily frustration, but a reimagination of social relations. "Erotics," in Warner's interpretation of Thoreau, "stands for an unrealized liberation from the productive economic orientation" (173). This critique of economic productivity comes from two directions: "narcissistic reflection and luxurious anality" (173).

[42] See also Warner's "Thoreau's Bottom" (1992) for a further elaboration on the 1991 article.

In "From Thoreau to Queer Politics" (1993), Henry Abelove offers another version of an erotic Thoreau as "the seducer, the arouser, the awakener" (23). Like Warner, Abelove's interpretation is explicitly political. "What *Walden* figures as valuable and vivid," Abelove suggests, "is life outside the discourses of domesticity, romantic love and marriage, and the white bourgeois family" (23). *Walden*, as nineteenth-century "anti-novel," refuses again and again to cater to the narrative expectations of reproductive heteronormativity. The text, Abelove writes, "tells of no family news, no marriages, no engagements, no elopements, no inheritances, no births, no fraternal rivalries, no sororal solidarities. It remarks on none past, and it imagines none future" (23-24).

In the following close readings, I will argue that Thoreau's sense (that is, his *meaning* and *sensation*) of eroticism, and what he specifically calls "sensuality," is embedded within his sense of theology and, more particularly, within his understanding of the animal-human-divine matrix. With Lebeaux and Harding, I agree that Thoreau looks to the other-than-human world for alternative, queer models of reproductivity. With Warner and Abelove, I agree that Thoreau's turn to "queer nature" is motivated more by political commitments than by the affective structures of lack and frustration. Here, I would like to explore the *theological* implications of this political turn to the queerness of the other-than-human world.

Thoreau strives to imagine an immanent theology. When Thoreau says that "There is nothing inorganic" (568), he is extending organicism to include both materiality and divinity. The problem with an immanent theology, for Thoreau and those like him, is that shit exists in the world. One at this point has two options. One can either say *holy*

shit and mean it, or one must appeal to some kind of transcendence. In "Scatology and Eschatology: The Heroic Dimensions of Thoreau's Wordplay" (1974), Michael West identifies this "recurring preoccupation" as the question of "how to preserve an immanent divinity from pollution" (1047). This theological question of "preservation," in West's words, or "purification" relates to a more general preoccupation with the human body in general, and Thoreau's own in particular.

Biographical detail may help with this particular critical juncture. Thoreau was deeply concerned with his health during his writing of *Walden*. His family had a long history of tuberculosis, and throughout his life he experienced an intense fear and fascination with the disease, which he initially contracted in 1835, at the age of eighteen, and which eventually killed him in 1862, at the age of forty-four. For Thoreau, the care of the self, of which the regulation of libidinal energies (sensuality) must certainly be a part, could have sprung from his understanding of the natural history of his own body. But biographical detail alone cannot solve the critical problem at hand. Sensuality, though always and unambiguously negative in Thoreau's philosophy, does not generate physical disease. In fact, sensuality can signify health; the sensual body can function just fine. On this subject, Thoreau reminds us, "we may be well yet not pure" (497). What, then, is Thoreau's quarrel with sensuality? Why would Thoreau compare such a health, a sensual health, to a worm enjoying "a certain health of its own" (497)?

In Thoreau's thinking, "sensuality" is universally detrimental to human beings, and it is presented in contradistinction to purity:

> All sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one. It is the same whether a man eat, or drink, or cohabit, or sleep sensually. They

> are but one appetite, and we only need to see a person do any one of these things to know how great a sensualist he is. The impure can neither stand nor sit with purity. When the reptile is attacked at one mouth of his burrow, he shows himself at another. (498)

Thoreau begins by dividing all human psychological operations, all "appetites," into two categories: the sensual and the pure. Eating, drinking, and cohabiting all take one of these two routes. It is not the particular "food which entereth into the mouth," Thoreau writes, "but the appetite with which it is eaten" (496). Logically, for Thoreau, the opposite of purity is sensuality (impurity). These two concepts "can neither stand nor sit" with each other, and we can assume pure and impure *persons* can neither do so, as well.

The way out of sensuality—that is, the way into purity—is through chastity, but chastity also presents itself problematically. Thoreau writes:

> What is chastity? How shall a man know if he is chaste? He shall not know it. We have heard of this virtue, but we know not what it is. We speak comfortably to the rumor which we have heard. From exertion comes wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality. In the student sensuality is a sluggish habit of mind. An unclean person is universally a slothful one, one who sits by a stove, whom the sun shines on prostrate, who reposes without being fatigued. If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable. Nature is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome. (498)

Two questions begin: one onto-theological, the other epistemological. Thoreau resists giving a definition of chastity; he insists that what we know of chastity is rumor and

hearsay. We are "comfortable" to speak of such rumors, but what are the rumors? When Thoreau writes, "From exertion comes wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality," we are unsure if Thoreau is repeating the rumor, or revealing the truth. Either way, the set of binary oppositions is worth charting:

purity/sensuality

chastity/licentiousness

exertion/sloth

wisdom/ignorance

cleanliness/uncleanliness

The final term—*nature*, the climax of the signifying chain—is oddly positioned, seemingly on the side of senuality-licentiousness-sloth-ignorance-uncleanliness, and thus must be "overcome." Sensuality is reptilian, Thoreau says over and over again, yet its opposite is left undisclosed; one wonders whether it is mammalian or divine, or indeed divine because mammalian. What is clear is that the work of mitigating sensuality Thoreau compares to the cleaning of the stable, or the interminable task of excising excrement.

For Thoreau, the animal within threatens to overtake the divine within:

> We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well yet not pure. (497)

How does Thoreau arrive at such a conclusion? Immediately following this passage, Thoreau relates a moment at Walden in which he finds "the lower jaw of a hog, with white and sound teeth and tusks" (497). This jaw, the *lower* jaw, removable from the skull, "suggested that there was an animal health and vigor distinct from the spiritual" (497). Thoreau is visualizing two aspects of the head. When eating, it is the lower jaw that moves, that chews, while the upper jaw, bound to the higher realm of the skull, remains still. Thus Thoreau indicts the hog: "This creature succeeded by other means than temperance and purity" (497).

After quoting from the Confucian philosopher Mencius (c. 372-289 BCE) and the Vedas, Thoreau writes, "the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion" (497). By conscious action—that is, through the will, which for Thoreau has divine inspiration and aspiration—we humans can overcome the animal. The spirit, in fact, can have total control over "*every* member and function of the body." Reflecting a Buddhist or Schopenhauerian understanding of desire (i.e., suffering is caused by desire), Thoreau aims to curb suffering through an assault on sensuality. And yet, there is always the threat of complication: the desire for nondesire, the desire to cease desiring, is desire nonetheless.

Specifically addressing the question of reproductivity, Thoreau continues:

> The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the

> like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. (497)

And concludes: "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established" (497-498).

Thoreau assumes complicated linkages between animality, humanity, and divinity. Although these linkages yield a positive potential, that is, a capacity for upward mobility, these linkages also threaten to keep humanity down. "I fear," Thoreau admits, "that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace" (498). Thoreau's statement here is more than analogy or metaphor; it is onto-theological proposition. Fauns and satyrs operate here literally. Based upon the evidence at hand, then, how should we understand Thoreau's sense of sensuality? And how does such an understanding relate to the question of Thoreau's environmentality?

For Warner, "Thoreau's is not just any asceticism" (161). Thoreau, Warner contends, "does not aim to mortify the flesh," but rather to craft, "to reenable a sensual self-relation" which "leads him to the body as much as from the body" (161). This paradox, I would argue, the turn to, and away, from the body, the animalistic, the bestial, the evolutionary and ecological, condenses a, if not *the*, central *aporia* of environmental discourse: the desire for both human naturalness and human exceptionalism. This paradox combines elements of the traditional and the avant-garde. The traditional element consist of the valorization of mind/spirit over body/matter that is centrally located in Cartesian philosophy and Christian theology. The avant-garde element wants to return to the body, to "reenable" the body, the animal nature of human being. These

traditional and avant-garde currents are all bound up in the language Thoreau uses to express them. Before concluding this chapter, then, I would like to turn to Thoreau's explicit philosophy of language, and its relation to larger questions of environmentality and sensuality.

4. Philosophy of Language

Unlike many of his ecocritical interpreters, Thoreau spent much time thinking and writing about the concept of language—both oral and written—and its relationship to our conceptualization of the world. Thoreau writes, "some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day" (451). From the beginning, then, Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond is as much an experiment in deliberate writing as in deliberate living. The goal of fieldwork is the discovery of a language, a mode of expression. In a famous study, *American Renaissance* (1941), F.O. Matthiessen analyzes "the inevitability of the symbol as a means of expression for an age that was determined to make a fusion between appearance and what lay behind it" (xiv). Symbols, tropes, expression, parables—language writ large—are central to Thoreau's philosophical inquiry and thus to his legacy in American environmental literature.

Consider Thoreau's musings on the symbolism of Walden's bottom:

> The greatest depth was exactly one hundred and two feet; to which may be added the five feet which it has risen since, making one hundred and seven. This is a remarkable depth for so small an area; yet not an inch of it can be spared by the imagination. What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was

> made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless. (551)

Echoing Emerson's philosophy of language linking symbols, natural fact, and spiritual fact, Thoreau expresses his gratitude for Walden's depth. The imagination, especially of the infinite, relies on the ability of the symbol to "fuse," in Matthiessen's words, nature and spirit.

I do not share with many ecocritics the contention that Thoreau was a "nature writer," that is, if we take "nature writing" to mean a nonfictional mode of discourse that tries to limit the distance between the text and its outside. In *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), Timothy Morton calls this mode "ecomimesis." Much of the scholarly work outside of the ecomimetic camp on the subject of Thoreau's relation to the act of writing begins with the premise that Thoreau's texts are essentially meta-texts, and self-consciously so. Stanley Cavell in *The Senses of* Walden (1972) can stand as foundationally emblematic for this body of work: "*Walden* is itself about a book, about its own writing and reading" (xiii). For Cavell, the self-reflexive structure of *Walden* is linked to Thoreau's theory of the redemptive power of language, and specifically redemption for spiritual, practical, and political purposes. Frederick Garber in *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing* (1991) shares Cavell's assumptions and argues that, for Thoreau, language, especially writing, is an act of inscription on a metaphysical level. The act of writing, in other words, inscribes the writer and thus cultivates the sense of being in the world. William C. Johnson Jr. is interested in the other end of the writing process: the act of interpretation. For Johnson, taking an explicitly hermeneutic approach to the text,

"*Walden* incorporates the problem of interpretation into its very method and fabric, that it is a book about interpretation, even as it interprets" (xii).[43]

These critical developments are important in our understanding of Thoreau's more general project, and perhaps more importantly, in whetting our appetites for some of the most beautiful moments in the text. Consider for example Thoreau's description of his "daily work":

> Removing the weeds, putting fresh soil about the bean stems, and encouraging this weed which I had sown, making the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper an millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass. (447)

The work of farming is exciting the earth to speech. It is inducing the earth to say one thing instead of another. Thoreau of course is speaking metaphorically here, but not only. The owls, one must remember, sound like human lamentations, but they also, first and foremost, *reply*. Speaking and replying, whether in the context of owls or land, occur always within a specific process of hermeneutic possibility.

Thoreau directly considers the problem of interpretation, especially in the contact zone between philosophical speculation and poetic expression. Of time, he writes, "In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and

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[43] For other studies on this topic, see David Suchoff's "'A More Conscious Silence': Friendship and Language in Thoreau's *Week*" (1982), Michael West's "Thoreau and the Language Theory of the French Enlightenment" (1984), Michael Fischer's "Speech and Writing in *The Senses of* Walden" (1985), and Henry Golembra's *Thoreau's Wild Rhetoric* (1990). For a more general study, see Philip Gura's *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and Literature in the New England Renaissance* (1981).

future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line" (336). Thoreau subsequently addresses the reader: "You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint 'No Admittance' on my gate" (336). Thoreau's "trade," the living and writing of philosophy, and more specifically, a philosophy of absolute presence, generates its own "obscurities." Thoreau is clear to communicate his willingness to speak the truth, but the very act of which produces his fumbling. Herein lies the essential paradox in Thoreau, two competing desires: 1) the desire for simplicity and unselfconsciousness, to be in the moment, and 2) the desire for complexity and selfconsciousness, to analyze the moment. Words bring this paradox to a head for they oscillate between the moment and its outside. They are neither here nor there, now nor then.

"The words which express our faith and piety are not definite," Thoreau writes, acknowledging the above paradox, "yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures" (580-581). The qualified value of words reflects a more general qualified value of thinking, of selfconscious thinking. Thoreau thinks about thinking: "With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent" (429). This leads him to admit a striking conclusion: "We are not wholly involved in Nature" (429). He explains:

> I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my

> experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking not of it; and that is no more I than it is you. (429)

In this moment of abstract proprioception, Thoreau considers the question of thinking of oneself. There is a "certain doubleness," a certain alienation, as Heidegger might say, that occurs in the contemplation of the self. The self thinking of itself creates an altered self, a transformed state of mind, that is both bound to and detached from its surroundings and its sensory perceptions of those surroundings. This altered self, however, must remain unsure if such an ability to engage-disengage with one's immediate reality, to "stand remote," as Thoreau puts it, to spectate and speculate upon one's own scene, is a gift or a curse, or something in between.

Geoffrey Hartman in "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness" (1962) identifies a certain trend in Romantic thought—from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) to Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* (1849)—that links selfconsciousness with psychological disease. The self thinking of itself—Hartman calls it "self-analysis" (298) but it includes the more general proprioception operative in Thoreau—causes profound anxiety and melancholia. Selfconsciousness is a fall from grace, an expulsion from Edenic simplicity and unselfconsciousness. Indeed, the myth of Adam and Eve's eating from the Tree of Knowledge is an important historical precedent for the Romantics in this regard. The question becomes how to come to terms with one's inevitable selfconsciousness. Hartman argues that the Romantics suggest that human consciousness must "separate from nature so that it can finally transcend not only nature but also its own lesser forms" (301).

This phenomenological—and its attendant axiological—question, I believe, has political implications for environmentalism. Like Rousseau who must assume the unnaturalness of society in order to theorize the indetermination of human social organizations, Thoreau must say "we are not wholly involved in Nature" in order to suspend the naturalization of human being. Further in his denaturalization of human consciousness, Thoreau clears the way for a specifically human ethics that is innovative and free from ostensibly natural pressures. Like Darwin, Thoreau believes in reconsidering the human species as an animal species, that is, as a type of being entangled within ecological relationships and evolutionary transformations, and thus subject to the explanatory gestures afforded to other species that populate their biological kingdom. But the nature of our involvement in this system is far from obvious, and its uncertainly brings to light an important debate in environmental politics associated with our ability to know and represent the other-than-human world. In the next chapter, I will turn to Melville as an important figure to be read in conjunction with Thoreau in thinking through the political significance of environmentality.

Chapter III

Melville's Apples of Sodom

> And this apparent fleetingness and unreality of the locality of the isles was most probably one reason for the Spaniards calling them the Encantada, or Enchanted Group.
>
> But not uninfluenced by their character, as they now confessedly exist, the modern voyager will be inclined to fancy that the bestowal of this name might have in part originated in that air of spell-bound desertness which so significantly invests the isles. Nothing can better suggest the aspect of once living things malignly crumbled from ruddiness into ashes. Apples of Sodom, after touching, seem these isles.
>
> — Herman Melville, *The Encantadas* (1856, page 770)

This chapter will begin with a debate between two important American ecocritics—Lawrence Buell and Leo Marx—about the position of Henry David Thoreau vis-à-vis Herman Melville in the history of American environmental literature. This debate, without even addressing the queerness of the two writers, is instructive, for it points to two major currents in contemporary environmental thought related to the question of knowing and representing the other-than-human world. After exploring the ideas of Buell and Marx, I would like to open a focused discussion of the sexual leitmotifs that infuse Melville's descriptions of geological formations and organic life by looking closely at *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *The Encantadas* (1856), a text based upon Melville's voyage to the Galapagos Islands during the 1840s. Finally, I will draw some conclusions about Thoreau and Melville and point the way to the work of Willa Cather, the subject of the next chapter. I will therefore divide the remainder of this chapter into three sections:

1. Lawrence Buell and Leo Marx

2. *Moby-Dick*

3. *The Encantadas*

1. Lawrence Buell and Leo Marx

Thoreau's interest in natural history, his topophilia and biophilia, and his literary genius have secured his position as a central figure in the history of American environmental literature and have produced an enormous body of scholarly criticism.[44] For many ecocritics and environmental philosophers, Thoreau represents "nature writing" at its best. The Thoreau scholar Lawrence Buell can easily stand as a major voice for such a position, and I therefore turn to him first.

Buell begins his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) with a short, condensed, yet radically expansive, proposition. "The environmental crisis," he writes, "involves a crisis of the imagination" (2). Right at the beginning, Buell identifies a link between a social crisis and a personal crisis, an external crisis and an internal crisis, a political crisis and an artistic crisis. The resolution of these two crises, existing on very different scales, but intimately connected, "depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (2).

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[44] I borrow the term "topophilia" from Yi-Fu Tuan and "biophilia" from E.O. Wilson. For recent texts in the secondary literature on Thoreau's position in American environmental literature, see Richard J. Schneider's edited volume, *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing* (2000), David M. Robinson's *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (2004), John Dollis's *Tracking Thoreau: Double-Crossing Nature and Technology* (2005), Philip Cafaro's *Thoreau's Living Ethics:* Walden *and the Pursuit of Virtue* (2006), and Lance Newman's *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (2008).

The imagination, both personal and environmental, that Buell calls on his readers to nurture is what he refers to as an "ecocentric" imagination. The central purpose of *The Environmental Imagination*, then, is to describe and encourage this type of imagination. Ecocentrism, as opposed to anthropocentrism, signals a habit of mind that aims to expand personal consciousness and social consideration to include ecological relationships between species, and to take into account the interests of those beings, rather than to maintain an exclusive focus on human life and interests. In Thoreau Buell finds an ideal candidate and model for ecocentric thinking and writing.

I think most of us would agree with Buell that ecocentrism, in this formulation, is an ethically responsible and politically necessary tool for a global civilization of six billion and rising, a civilization now moving into the twenty-first century and causing irreparable harm to other-than-human life on this planet. The concept gets tricky, however, when we consider the related problems of altruism and self-interest. If one can argue that to protect the environment is to protect oneself, and consequently that altruism is in truth its opposite in disguise, can one also argue that ecocentrism is simply anthropocentrism for an age of environmental crisis? The concept gets even trickier when we also consider the related problem of perspective. If one can argue that it is impossible to escape from one's own mind, and especially during the hyper-selfconscious moments of political decision-making, can one also argue that the ecocentric *perspective* is wishful thinking at best or utterly delusional at worst?

Leo Marx, unlike Buell, is more interested in the complications that produce this latter trickiness, the two questions I just posed. In a *New York Review of Books* article called "The Struggle over Thoreau" (1999), Marx makes a bold intervention into the

debate by calling ecocentrists like Buell "the Puritans of today's environmental movement." He makes this statement because he too finds it difficult to imagine assuming a perspective on the world that is outside of ourselves. He finds it difficult, in other words, to imagine *not* being anthropocentric. To put it bluntly in response to Buell, human beings look "to nature" for different reasons and therefore see different things. Indeed, just as questions themselves are not neutral, but rather active, ideological agents governing the possibility of reply, the perspectival look "to nature" produces in a very real sense what exactly one can see. For Marx, this does not mean that other-than-human beings should not figure into our ethical and political decision-making, but just that the premises guiding the concept of ecocentrism are highly suspect.

Marx, furthermore, links ecocentrism, especially the Thoreauvian ecocentrism that Buell finds so attractive, with a questionable political stance. In fact, since at least the publication of his foundational work in American Studies, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Marx has been an outspoken critic of Thoreauvian environmentalism.[45] In Thoreau, in Romanticism in general, and in the American Romantic pastoral in particular, Marx sees unsettling ideological operations. In order to expose this ideology, he begins by describing this pastoral ideal.

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[45] For a more recent, influential critique of ecocentrism and "deep ecology," see French philosopher Luc Ferry's *The New Ecological Order* (1992). Like Marx, Ferry is disturbed by the misanthropy and nostalgia of certain strains of the environmental movement, and wonders if the only solution to the environmental crisis is "to get 'down to earth,' to return to old-time frugality, to the *wilderness* in which American cinema and German philosophy constantly immerse us" (xxii). He continues, "The question here is whether the civilization of uprootedness and innovation is utterly irreconcilable with a concern for nature, as appears, *initially*, to be the case. And, conversely, whether the latter implies a renunciation of artifice. I do not believe so" (xxii).

The pastoral ideal, Marx writes, "like a number of other conventions used by romantic writers, proves to be a variation upon the contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication, which has been used by writers working in the pastoral mode since the time of Virgil" (19).[46] In the mid-nineteenth century, at least in the American context, pastoral literary conventions undergo a serious transformation spurred by technological innovation and socio-economic change. Marx continues:

> [I]n the stock contrast between city and country each had been assumed to occupy a more or less fixed location in space: the country here, the city there. But in 1844 the sound of the train in the Concord woods implies a radical change in the conventional pattern. Now the great world is invading the land, transforming the sensory texture of rural life—the way it looks and sounds—and threatening, in fact, to impose a new and more complete dominion over it. (31-32)

Romantic writers respond to this change (Marx calls it the "centrifugal force" of urban technology) by creating a transcendent pastoral that escapes from this particular social development. Marx argues that the idealization of the rural life of simplicity "has appeared with increasing frequency [from the beginning of the nineteenth century] in the service of a reactionary or false ideology, thereby helping to mask the real problems of

[46] For more on the relationship between the organic and the technological, see Cecelia Tichi's *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, and Culture in Modernist America* (1987), Claus Emmeche's *The Garden in the Machine: The Emerging Science of Artificial Life* (1991), and Richard White's *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1995).

industrial civilization" (7).[47] So, for Marx, there are two problems with ecocentrism. First, Marx wonders to what extent not being anthropocentric is possible; second, Marx wonders to what extent ecocentrism is the latest manifestation of a more historical form of pastoral ideology.

Buell agrees with Marx that the idealization of the pastoral life has been entangled with an ideologically problematic history, but he nonetheless maintains ecocentrism's power, and the pastoral's valuation of other-than-human life, as axiological alternative to a pure anthropocentricism. This political-philosophical disagreement between the two critics generates another disagreement about literary aesthetics. For Buell, the ecocentric imagination requires a *literary realism* that comes out of the pastoral tradition's sustained topical interest in other-than-human life; that is, it requires a nonfictional mode of nature writing that he finds at its most sophisticated in the work of Thoreau.[48]

If literature, for Buell, is a unique way of articulating and strengthening ecocentrism, many writers all too often fall prey to anthropocentricism. This failure, Buell is quick to note, originates not from an individual character flaw, but from a more

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[47] For a related study, in the case of the English rather than the American experience, see Raymond Williams's *The Country and The City* (1973). Williams famously studies the ideological divide between "country" and "city" as masking a systemic division of labor. He concludes, "The division and opposition of city and country, industry and agriculture, in their modern forms, are the critical culmination of the division and specialization of labor which, though it did not begin with capitalism, was developed under it to an extraordinary degree. Other forms of the same fundamental division are the separation between mental and manual labor, between administration and operation, between politics and social life. The symptoms of this division can be found at every point in what is now our common life: in the idea and practice of social classes; in conventional definitions of work and of education; in the physical distribution of settlements; and in temporal organizations of the day, the week, the year, the lifetime" (304-305).

[48] In *Allegories of Reading* (1979), Paul de Man identifies such a critical desire for nonfictional referentiality in Proust: "Like the grandmother in Proust's novel ceaselessly driving the young Marcel out into the garden, away from the unhealthy inwardness of his closeted reading, critics cry out for the fresh air of referential meaning" (4).

general "cultural failure" (4). Some writers are more successful than others and Buell considers Thoreau as an example of a success, and Melville as an example of a failure. Thoreau embodies for Buell a realist—or rather, an objectivist—epistemology. He therefore strives in his writing to represent the other-than-human world as accurately as possible, to represent the external world as-it-is-in-itself. Melville, on the other hand, embodies for Buell something quite different.

Of Melville, Buell writes:

> Consider the case of Herman Melville. His sensitivity to physical environments was acute, even when one might least expect it, as in the heavily allegorical *Mardi* [1849] and the psychologically convoluted *Pierre* [1852]. *Moby-Dick* comes closer than any other novel of its day to making a nonhuman creature a plausible major character and to developing the theme of human ferocity against animal nature. Yet Melville's interest in whales was subordinated to his interest in whaling, and his interest in the material reality of both was constrained by his preoccupation with their social and cosmic symbolism. (4)

Buell sets up a number of binary oppositions that must be laid bare before proceeding:

> sensitivity to physical environments vs. allegorical and psychological convolution
>
> interest in whales (animals) vs. interest in whaling (human society)
>
> material reality vs. social and cosmic symbolism
>
> reality vs. symbolism

These oppositions signal a more general opposition between:

ecocentrism and anthropocentrism

Thoreau and Melville

Unlike Thoreau, according to Buell, Melville's "preoccupation" with interpreting the world symbolically blurs his vision and prevents him from seeing "material reality," and thus traps him within a cycle of anthropocentric delusion.

In order to underscore this point, Buell continues by comparing Melville and Darwin:

> Thus we should not be surprised by the contrast between the almost concurrent encounters of Melville and Charles Darwin with the Galapagos Islands. Darwin's visit in the 1830s as naturalist of the *HMS Beagle* was an astonishingly rich and imaginative event. His discovery of large numbers of unique but related species on the different individual islands marked the beginning of his discovery of the theory of natural selection. Melville, visiting the islands during his wanderings in the South Pacific a few years later, was equally impressed by them, but as an area of starkness and desolation that he turned to symbolic use in *The Encantadas*, a series of ironically titled sketches about the islands, and in his late poem *Clarel* [1876], which likens the deserts of Palestine to the Galapagos. Melville's environmental imagination was too homocentric [anthropocentric] to allow him to respond as Darwin did. (4-5)

The purpose of this passage is to ally Darwin with the Thoreauvian side of oppositions sketched out above, and therefore to reinforce the divide between the two modes of thinking and being in the world.

Although I am not interested in making universal claims about essential human nature, it does seem that there is an ironic flaw in Buell's logic here. Buell's point is that writers ought to shy away from symbolism and to move toward realism, but it seems *realistic* to say that the human animal is a *symbolic* animal. We necessarily—perhaps *naturally*—interpret "material reality" on a symbolic level. That is to say, we necessarily view the world as meaningful—to us—and very much *not* as-it-is-in-itself. To act against this, then, seems to be to act "against nature."

For Marx, Melville is not the failure that we see in Buell's interpretation, but instead the illumination of what human beings do as they look to the other-than-human world. It is no coincidence, furthermore, that Marx is more drawn to Melville's proto-Symbolist literary aesthetic and looks to Melvillian, rather than Thoreauvian, environmentalism as more politically effective in today's world. Melville understands, perhaps more fully than any other mid-nineteenth century American thinker, the extent to which language, symbol, and cultural representation structure the ability of human beings to comprehend other-than-human beings and systems of beings. Culture, and language in particular, acts simultaneously as a restrictive and generative force. Indeed, Melville begins *Moby-Dick* not with "Call me Ishmael," but with an etymology of the word "whale." His genealogical method is thus to explore the contours of the explosive forces of significance and signification condensed in the word.

Part of my aim in the previous chapter was to complicate this binary on which both Buell and Marx rely. I have questioned the validity of identifying Thoreau as primarily a practioner of realistic, nonfiction nature writing, or what Timothy Morton calls "ecomimesis." I have also questioned the claim that Thoreau sits comfortably

within the pastoral tradition by following the darker currents of the text. Nonetheless, there is a profound difference between the two writers in general—and perhaps even more importantly, in the classical interpretation—that subsequently reflects a rhetorical doubleness in the history of American environmental thought. Part of that difference has to do with the way one knows and represents the other-than-human world: objectively/realistically (as ostensibly in Thoreau) or subjectively/symbolically (as ostensibly in Melville). Another way to put this same claim is that the ostensible difference between Thoreau and Melville leads to two different schools of thought in contemporary environmental epistemology (as theory of knowing) and environmental aesthetics (as theory of representing).

But another part of the difference between the two writers has to do with the broader thematics operative in the corpuses of each. Thoreau is more clearly allied (compared to Melville) with the pastoral tradition, the tradition, we must remember, that Buell finds so attractive, and Marx so suspect. As such, Thoreau can say something like "the indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature" (432) and he sounds like himself; he sounds like our expectation of what Thoreau sounds like. Or consider: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself" (392-393). The cheer, the simplicity, the innocence are all coextensive with the enchanted realm of Nature, that inviting space to which we must go for refuge.

Melville, on the other hand, seems at almost every turn to call the guiding principles and assumptions of pastoralism into question. Like for Djuna Barnes in "There Should Be Gardens," for Melville the other-than-human realm produces a complex

response of horror and affective disidentification. In *Moby-Dick* Melville can say something like "the universal cannibalism of the sea" (317) or "Oh, horrible vulturism of earth!" (353) and he sounds like himself; again, he sounds like our expectation of what Melville sounds like.[49] Or further, of the sea in general, Melville writes:

> But not only is the sea such a foe to man who is an alien to it, but it is also a fiend to its own offspring; worse than the Persian host who murdered his own guests; sparing not the creatures which itself hath spawned. Like a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs, so the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. (317)

It is not just land-loving humans that must suffer within the vast expanse of sea, but the sea itself is the domain of unending and cyclical suffering writ large, complete with infinite variations of infanticidal, and indeed suicidal, urges. The combined forces of nature (biological phenomena) and culture (symbolic interpretation) produce exponential horror. Nature, writes Melville, is "God's great, unflattering laureate" (225),[50] an agent of indiscriminate destruction.

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[49] On cannibalism, see Caleb Crain's "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels" (1994). This question has been particularly important for literary critics working within postcolonial and critical race studies. See Geoffrey Sanborn's *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader* (1998) and Samuel Otter's *Melville's Anatomies* (1999).

[50] The classic study of Melville's theological imagination is Lawrence Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel with God* (1952). In it, Thompson argues, "instead of losing faith in his Calvinistic God, Melville made a scapegoat of him, and blamed God for having caused so many human beings to rebel. In this sense, then, we might say that Melville became an inverted mystic as soon as he began to be angry with god for being the harsh and logical punisher that the Calvinists said he was" (5). I agree with Thompson's general assessment about theological cruelty and am especially drawn to Thompson's description of Melville as an "inverted mystic." However, I would submit that Melville

Melville's pessimism, his sense of the tragic, in stark contrast with Thoreau, comes to a head within his theological imagination. "The gods themselves," Melville reminds us, "are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers" (519). One can trace Melville's tone here, and his presentation of sorrow, back to Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1801), a text that exerted a powerful influence both on him and—it is significant to note—on Djuna Barnes. However, an exclusive focus on this thematic thread in his work—one can call it Melville's literary theothanatology—yields an incomplete picture of his thinking. Comedy and laughter always accompany Melville's darker moments: "a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer" (205).[51] And these comic accoutrements deserve a monograph all their own.[52]

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is haunted more by the threat of a polytheistic universe than by the singular God of Calvinism.

[51] Melville begins his forty-ninth chapter of *Moby-Dick*, entitled "The Hyena," with a strange sort of inappropriate laughter: "There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. However, nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worth while disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints. And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker. That odd sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke. There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object" (265).

[52] See John Bryant's *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (1993).

My point is that Thoreau and Melville represent two points of departure in the history of American environmental thought, but like that history itself, Thoreau and Melville are not stable figures that always conform to our expectations of them. Perhaps a metaphor is in order: one can think of the history of American environmental thought from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day as a constellation of thought that orbits around two celestial bodies (Thoreau and Melville). However, as contemporary astronomy teaches, all celestial bodies and thus orbital centers are themselves in motion. As such, in contemporary environmental rhetoric (both environmentalist and anti-environmentalist) there are many logical complexities, contradictory positions, and argumentative realignments.

In the remainder of this chapter, what I hope to emerge during my readings of Melville is a critique of objectivist epistemology, especially in its relation to heteronormative ontology. I will argue that Melville dramatizes a conjoined epistemological disruption and ontological revision of the matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual, and in the process crafts a "queer nature," that is, an erotic, taxonomically problematic world just outside of human comprehension. As Melville says of the Encantadas, "Apples of Sodom, after touching, seem these isles" (770). Together with Melville, I would like to engage the titillating strangeness of the other-than-human world, its "polymorphous perversity," its sexual abundance and deprivation, its biological exuberance, and, at times, its utter *lack* of purpose, life, and meaning.

Sensuality will be for Melville something quite different than it was for Thoreau. Melville is certainly more "liberal" than Thoreau (or at least the Thoreau that writes about sensuality in certain passages of *Walden*). Indeed, one of the frequent complaints

one finds in the contemporary reviews of *Typee* (1846), Melville's first novel, is that the book, based upon his experience on the Marquesas Islands, reveals too blatantly the sexual relations of the natives.[53] This is not to say, however, that sexual convention, especially Biblical precedent, does not haunt his thinking on the subject; like Thoreau, sensuality is not unaccompanied by darker shadows. My contention will be that Melville's delinquency (delinquency, that is, in the critical context I have explored with Buell) locates the roots of an environmental counter-tradition, a perverse version of Thoreau, which will circulate later through Cather and Barnes.

2. *Moby-Dick*

One of the chief preoccupations of Melville in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, one that is duly noted in the criticism, is the problem of hermeneutics and its relation to epistemology. *Moby-Dick* is undoubtedly a book about interpretation and its relation to truth, and, therefore, it revolves around tropological variations of doubt and doubting. "Leviathan is the text" (509), Melville writes, and as such must be interpreted; however, for Melville, "clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter" (385). Only a special type of creature, amphibious beings with access to two worlds, can interpret the text correctly and access "clear Truth," but these "salamander giants" may or may not exist. Doubt and certainty, veiling and unveiling, text and (mis)interpretation all come to the fore through reading *Moby-Dick*. In this way, Melville can be considered to operate very

[53] See John Bryant's *Melville Unfolding: Sexuality, Politics, and the Versions of* Typee (2008).

closely to his friend and mentor Nathaniel Hawthorne,[54] to whom *Moby-Dick* is "inscribed."

"Truth, for Melville, is a question, not an answer" (10), writes John Seelye in his 1970 study *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*, while Bryan C. Short in *Cast By Means of Figures: Herman Melville's Rhetorical Development* (1992) argues that "Melville's thinking about basic issues of truth and creativity turns more and more from the philosophical to the tropological as he solves successive crises of artistic faith not by avowing new concepts but instead by putting into play new tropes" (5). Elizabeth Renker in *Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (1996) calls it "the paradoxical problem of telling the truth that can't be told" (xvi), and John Wenke in *Melville's Muse: Literary Creation and the Forms of Philosophical Fiction* (1995) writes, "The book is indeed a 'draught of a draught.' Its premise is that any system—whether cetological, narrative, theological, or metaphysical—must be suspended in a state of becoming" (114). Each of these critics is guided by Melville's constant attention to the difficulty of telling the truth. Short and Wenke see in Melville a proto-postmodernism that revels in the endless play of poetic language and tropological variation. There will be a paradox always, one that Renker articulates quite succinctly: the truth is incomprehension.[55] In other words, one cannot help but to appeal to the concept of truth

[54] For suggestive studies of the relationship between Melville and Hawthorne, see Robert Milder's "'The Ugly Socrates': Melville, Hawthorne, and Homoeroticism" (2000) and, more recently, Jana L. Argersinger and Leland S. Person's edited volume *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship* (2008).

[55] This idea of course will not sit well with analytic philosophers like Bertrand Russell who equate such an epistemology with anarchist politics. For Russell, it is the concept of truth itself that keeps human beings, especially human hubris, in check, and it is the philosophy of logical analysis that comes to strengthen that concept. I will discuss

even when it is truth itself that is called into question.[56] I would argue that this conception of truth and its relation to articulation—that is, to philosophy of language—springs from the particular difficulty of comprehending the other-than-human world.

Let us first examine Ishmael's horror in considering Moby Dick:

> Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awake in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. (223)

In this passage, Melville moves from the obvious to the hidden, but access to the hidden layer, Moby Dick's truth, only reveals another, deeper level of incomprehension. "Another" marks the seductiveness of Melville's style, a stream of abstractions, qualifications, and second thoughts. It is poetic language driven by deferred revelation. "Another thought" morphs into "vague, nameless horror," but not only is the source of the horror horrible, but the articulation of it causes the author "despair." Well almost, "almost despair."

The climax of the passage is the translation of incomprehension into comprehension: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me." Foregrounding "whiteness" ("whiteness of the whale" rather than "the whale's

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Melville's political commitments as this chapter unfolds, but I tend to disagree with Russell on the preeminence of logic in accessing truth.

[56] In analytic philosophy, this claim evidences a logical flaw in constructivist epistemology and therefore justifies its rejection.

whiteness") allows Melville to focus on color as such rather than in its particular manifestation. Whiteness seems to be the absence of color, the emptiness of meaning, but in truth it is the total presence of color, the fusion of all possible pigmentations. This color in its guile, and in its guiding principle of uncertainty, therefore, Ishmael finds appalling. The verb "to appall" is particularly apt here in the context of this passage. "Appall" means "to horrify," but etymologically it means "to make pale." Ishmael is horrified, made pale, by the coloration of the whale. The whiteness of the whale, it would seem, is contagious, bringing all those who gaze upon it into the orbit of its incomprehensibility.

And yet a major aspect of *Moby-Dick* is Ishmael's attempt at "some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera" even though "it no easy task" (163). This project is extremely difficult precisely because Ishmael is attempting "nothing less" than "the classification of the constituents of a chaos" (163).[57] In a related passage, Ishmael's consideration of the tail of the whale, Melville addresses even more specifically this problem of knowing and representing the other-than-human world. He writes:

> The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which, though they would well grace the hand of man, remain wholly inexplicable. In an extensive herd,

[57] In "Speculative Cetology: Figuring Philosophy in *Moby-Dick*" (2001), Elizabeth Duquette offers a useful interpretation of this difficulty in systematization. She writes: "If cetology resists systematization, revealing very little about whales, what do we learn from studying the leviathan? The epistemological skepticism that fills the cetological inquiry forces questions about the practices of reason and knowledge without, however, clearly indicating how answers to such questions might be discovered. Yet I contend that Melville's masterful novel presents what could be called a sidling philosophical methodology that presupposes the nature of truth to be fundamentally antithetical to any process emphasizing intellectual ownership or conceptual mastery" (36-37).

> so remarkable, occasionally, are these mystic gestures, that I have heard hunters who have declared them akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols; that the whale, indeed, by these methods intelligently conversed with the world. Nor are there wanting other motions of the whale in his general body, full of strangeness, and unaccountable to his most experienced assailant. (428)

The tail of the whale occasions a more general meditation on cetological communication, the capacity of whale communication not only within the species—that is, with each other—but also between *Physeter macrocephalus* and another species, an intelligent conversation with the world.[58] The problem for Melville (or rather for Ishmael) in this passage is not that the whale is not communicating, not emitting signs that elicit reply. The *capacity* for communication is not questionable: "there *are* gestures in it." Indeed, there are gestures that "would well grace the hand of man." But the problem surfaces in the human audience's inability to interpret these gestures. It is not that the whale does not speak, but that the human cannot hear. It is not that the whale is unintelligent, but that the human generally fails to appreciate it. Melville's allusion to the Free-Masons, an international order of fellowship, marked by their secret methods of communication, is also important to consider. A significant irony infuses this group, itself a symbol of the symbolic. What makes them comprehensible as Free-Masons is their incomprehensibility; to know a Free-Mason is precisely *not* to know a Free-Mason.

The final sentence of the passage reminds us of the violence that charges these musings on whale communication: those that are attempting to interpret the gestures of

[58] Melville's major source during his research into whales and whaling was Thomas Beale's *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale* (1839).

the whale are the whale's "most experienced assailant." The final sentence is worth reading very closely: "Nor are there wanting other motions of the whale in his general body, full of strangeness, and unaccountable to his most experienced assailant." Melville's choice of "unaccountable," and its double meaning, is particularly important to consider. The gestures are 1) *inexplicable*, unable to be known and interpreted by the whalers. They remain epistemologically-hermeneutically problematic. But the gestures are also 2) *not answerable* to the whalers, or the whalers are not answerable to them. There is an abyss, a space of unaccountability, between the whale and the whalers that releases both parties from any accountability, any liability for the consequences of an action. In this way, in this second meaning, the gestures remain ethically problematic. Melville uncovers an intimate bond between two assertions: 1) the whalers are unable to give an account of the gestures, and 2) they are not responsible for the gestures.

The violent foundation of hermeneutic possibility-impossibility, and its ethical superstructure, continues in the next passage, on the dissection of the dead whale. Melville writes:

> Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (428)

Ripping into the body of the whale, cutting to the core of the animal, even carving the carcass into a thousand pieces does not allow the author to pierce the surface. The

lacerations are but superficial, and the whale remains steadfastly incomprehensible. The author's gaze, defeated, then moves up the body, from the tail to the head, and tries to settle on the face. "Face," repeated five times in the short passage, names a lack, what is surprisingly nonexistent. Anticipating Levinas's suggestion that it is the face of the Other that engenders the demand for ethical consideration, Melville repeats, it is the facelessness of the animal that directly causes his disidentification. The whaler and the whale cannot come face-to-face.

The repetition of the horrible reality that the creature is without face begs an important question: is it true? "I say again he has no face." Why say again? If there were any doubt as to the existence or non-existence of the face, one would not have to be so insistent. The first time should do, or rather, if true, should go without saying. The lady doth protest too much, methinks. The passage could be read, then, not as constative assertion, but as performative *de*facing. Utilizing the political benefits of remaining ignorant,[59] the whalers, Ishmael himself, and perhaps even Melville do not or cannot see the face of the whale. If they would or could (for there is indeed a difference, though hazy, between choice and capacity), they might terminate, or at least consider terminating, the hunt. In other words, defacing circumvents the push and pull of ethical deliberation. Further, such a defacing must not be enacted once or twice, but over and over again, as if to remind oneself, even more so than anyone else, of its validity.

And yet Melville does not relegate the animal, as does Descartes, to automata, machines bereft of rationality (something that was so important for Kant) and the ability to suffer (something that was so important, in a different way, for Bentham). For

[59] I borrow this insight from Sedgwick's discussion of knowing and unknowing in the context of homosexuality. See *Epistemology of the Closet*, especially pages 4-8.

Melville, the whale retains a "genius" even though this genius lacks face, and its gestures are cryptic. He asks, "Genius in a Sperm Whale? Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech?" (394). "No," Melville answers, "his great genius is declared in his doing nothing in particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidical silence" (394). Later Melville asks a similar question, "what has the whale to say?" (421). And answers: "Seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say to this world" (421). The ironic performative *declared in silence* invites a certain hermeneutic ambiguity. We could fault Melville here with inattention. Indeed, one would not have to work very hard to hear that the whale does say something (*leave me alone* or *don't kill me*) even if this communication does not sound the depths of its profundity or explain the meaning of its being.[60]

Any discussion of the dead body of the whale is not complete without analysis of a chapter that follows from it that Melville titles "A Squeeze of the Hand." The famous squeezing of *Moby-Dick* has delighted critics, especially those with a queer bent, for some time now, but this chapter brings into focus the tension—or rather, a *potential* tension—between queer and ecocritical exegesis.[61] In "A Squeeze of the Hand," the

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[60] My point has been that ethical deliberations are difficult, and that they are necessarily threaded together with epistemological problems. I do not believe that epistemological objectivism is necessary for "correct" ethical deliberations, as does Plato, many Enlightenment thinkers, and today's analytic philosophers. Bertrand Russell in *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945) writes succinctly on this topic: "With subjectivism in philosophy, anarchism in politics goes hand in hand" (xxi). I do not believe this is true; I believe, instead, that the pragmatist epistemology of William James, James Dewey, and Richard Rorty makes good sense while always holding in mind attendant ethical reflection. Such a defense, though, must be the topic of another paper.

[61] An early "outing" in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* in 1982 by Jonathan Ned Katz, on *Redburn* (1849), Melville's fourth novel, can signal the beginning of a pro-queer reevaluation of Melville. Before this event, Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) had uncovered in Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship an

whalers, after killing the whale, must harvest the oil by squeezing the lumps of sperm into liquid. The scene, in contradistinction to the previous ones centered around the visual perception of color and face, relies on tactile experience, the feeling of hands, as a source of knowledge. Melville writes, "I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules" (469). Ishmael begins by almost collapsing the distinction between himself and the other, a melting into externality. This experience leads to a "sort of

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undisputable homoeroticism, but Fiedler identifies this relationship as a "peculiar American form of innocent homosexuality" (531), and ultimately indicative of Melville's "failure […] to deal with adult heterosexual love" (xi). In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is more hesitant about finding a queer-affirmative hero in Melville. She focuses on *Billy Budd*, Melville's final novel, left unfinished at the time of his death in 1891, and argues, "*Billy Budd* is a document from the very moment of the emergence of a modern homosexual identity. But already inscribed in that emergent identity seems to be, not only the individual fatality that will metamorphose into the routine gay suicides and car crashes of the twentieth-century celluloid closet, but something more awful: the fantasy trajectory toward a life *after the homosexual*" (127). In *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's* Pierre (1993), James Creech follows Katz's precedent and argues, "One function of contemporary criticism can thus be understood as the construction of a critical apparatus capable of rendering audible what was forcibly silenced, thus restoring that which nineteenth-century surveillance labored so successfully to prohibit" (22). In Melville, and especially in this novel *Pierre* (1852), Creech reads the silences and caesuras not as evidence of some intrinsic quality of literature, but as politically enforced repressions.

Approaching the text through the lens of gender, rather than sexuality, Neal L. Tolchin in *Mourning, Gender, and Creativity in the Art of Herman Melville* (1988) finds in Melville a typical misogyny, arguing that "Melville largely obeys the cultural codes which assign women the social symbolization of grief: his representations of women are often mourning figures shaped by the genteel odes prohibiting excessive grief" and that "when his male figures express a sense of bereavement, they are also often feminized" (xii). Elizabeth Schultz and Haskell Springer's edited volume, *Melville and Women* (2006), offers an important rejoinder to Tolchin's study by offering a more generous reading of Melville's writing on women. Schultz and Springer argue, "Cognizant of the limitations placed on the family women by the Cult of True Womanhood, which prescribed a life of purity, piety, domesticity, and submission, Melville was also aware of nineteenth-century women's transgressions of these boundaries" (4).

insanity" in which he "finds himself" squeezing the hands of the other men. Melville's reliance on the adjective "unwittingly" to describe the performance, as well as his use of the oddly non-agential yet self-reflexive construction, "I found myself," suggests a pre-intellectualized form of sensuality, a sensuality free from the constrictions of conceptual elaboration. In *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (1986), Robert K. Martin describes such an experience as "the transformation of primal, unformed (oceanic) sexuality into a world of pure copulation" (4).

Ishmael identifies the outcome of this emotional encounter:

> Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (469)

In this passage of love and kindness, it is important to remember that its whole queerness springs from the killing of a whale, and subsequently a lubricated massage within the corpse. The erotic foundation is necrobestiality, but Melville's focus on the human exchange, the social communion, distracts the readers' attention from this foundation.

In the following paragraph, Melville curbs his enthusiastic squeezing:

> Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases

> man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country. (469).

Melville's qualification here is important, for it is a political qualification of phenomenological experience. The question—the *political* question—becomes the curbing of personal joy and freedom in order to accommodate the social necessities of wife and family, home and nation. But Melville does not make another qualification; he does not ask the other political question, the one that adequately addresses the foundational irony of the passage. Melville apparently has no regard for the life of the whale that lets the men squeeze each other's hands and feel the overwhelming sentiment of universal harmony. He has no concern for the contemporary whaling practices that brought the species to the brink of extinction. Indeed, in a chapter on just that question, he concludes, "we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality" (516). Melville's representation, in short, though queer in its delineation of homoerotic bonding, is not environmental in its disregard for the fate of the animal species, and we can therefore understand Buell's concern.

Melville seems to be more interested in the nobility of whaling, and the social bonding, especially the erotic bonding between men, that springs from its pursuit than in the actual living beings that must be sacrificed for its attainment. "The more I dive into this matter of whaling," Melville writes, "and push my researches up to the very spring-head of it, so much the more am I impressed with its great honorableness and antiquity" (410). At the same time, though, some descriptions of whaling in *Moby-Dick* should give

us pause. For example: "whaling may well be regarded as that Egyptian mother, who bore offspring themselves pregnant from her womb" (139). This analogy of unnatural pregnancy, of grotesque reproduction, is accompanied nonetheless with a profound mythological power and cosmic gravity that can only boost the rhetorical grandeur of the hunt.

In "'Leviathan Is a Skein of Networks': Translations of Nature and Culture in *Moby-Dick*" (2004), Philip Armstrong makes a particularly relevant comment about Melville's ambivalent attitudes toward the whalers and the whales by contextualizing the industry in American history. The whaler, according to Armstrong,

> was praised as a harbinger of American values and vilified for his immoral relationship with the 'innocent savages' of the Pacific. He was both a romantic adventurer into wild space and a prototype of the industrial laborer, farmer, and meat processor. His experience routinely alternated between dangerous encounters with the vast materiality of the living animal and its reduction to dead and partial resources, a commodity to be measured by the barrel, reified by the factory ship's technological procedures and its specialization of labor. No wonder that *Moby-Dick*, like its sources, oscillates so vigorously between apparently opposed attitudes to the whale: wonder and contempt, mundane nonchalance and transcendent awe, humanized fellow feeling and the calculus of market value and profit. (1040)[62]

[62] The whaling industry of course was part of a larger system of global capital and imperialism, which also yielded ambivalence in nineteenth-century America. In *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (2000), John Carlos

This oscillation that Armstrong identifies is nowhere more apparent, and more queer, in the chapter immediately following "A Squeeze of the Hand." In "The Cassock," Melville describes, albeit with sufficient camouflage, a man climbing inside the large penis of the whale, "the grandissimus" (472).

"Had you stepped on board the Pequod at a certain juncture of this post-mortemizing of the whale," Melville writes, "and had you strolled forward nigh the windlass, pretty sure am I that you would have scanned with no small curiosity a very strange, enigmatical object, which you would have seen there" (472). The "unaccountable cone [is] longer than a Kentuckian is tall, nigh a foot in diameter at the base, and jet-black as Yojo, the ebony idol of Queequeg" (472). After stretching, drying, and cutting the penis skin, the whaler "lengthwise slips himself bodily into it" (472).

Melville explains the reason for the strange ritual: "this investiture alone will adequately protect him, while employed in the peculiar functions of his office" (472). "That office," Melville continues, "consists in mincing the horse-pieces of blubber for the pots" (473). I am not exactly sure how such an "investiture" would protect the man while doing his work on the dead whale, and Melville is not very generous with an explanation. Indeed, a reader could very easily pass right over this short, enigmatic chapter, and never know Melville wrote such a strange scene of human-whale interaction. The chapter ends with a joke, one that is equally oblique, and one that is perhaps intended only for Melville himself, and maybe another insider or two. He writes, "Arrayed in decent black;

Rowe articulates this ambivalence: "'Americans' interpretations of themselves as a people are shaped by a powerful imperial desire and a profound anti-colonial temper" (3). For a related study, see Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002).

occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on bible leaves; what a candidate for an archbishoprick, what a lad for a Pope were this mincer!" (473).

How are we to interpret such a scene, especially the "archbishoprick," the climax of the phallic joke? For Robert Shulman in "The Serious Functions of Melville's Phallic Jokes" (1961), "Melville repeatedly uses deceptively understated phallic jokes in order to satirize conventional religious, economic, and social values" (179). William B. Dillingham in *Melville's Later Novels* (1986) concurs. "It is sardonic black humor," he writes, "an indirect but devastating charge against civilization for its treatment of whales" (49). I am not as certain as Shulman and Dillingham about Melville's purpose, his intention in composing such a scene. I take it, with Armstrong, as more of a sign of Melville's ambivalence towards the whale, and towards the whaling industry. This ambivalence, coupled with his sense of the absurd, the comically tragic, generates a queer nature indeed. In the next section, I would like to expand upon this notion through a set of close readings of *The Encantadas*.

3. *The Encantadas*

In 1856, Melville published *The Encantadas*, an eclectic mix of travel narrative, natural history, and short fiction, based upon his voyage to the Galapagos Islands, those islands that Darwin charted the decade before in *The Voyage of the* Beagle (1845). The novella was included in his *Piazza Tales* and made up part of an extraordinarily productive decade in Melville's career. After publishing *Moby-Dick* in 1851, Melville went on to *Pierre* in 1853, *Israel Potter* in 1855, and *The Confidence-Man* in 1857. In addition, between the years 1853 and 1856, he published fourteen stories in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. After the 1850s, Melville began to

publish books of poetry, although he was a practicing poet throughout his career.[63] These books included *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), *Clarel* (1876), *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), and *Timoleon* (1891). At the time of his death in 1891, he left another book of poetry, *Weeds and Wildings with a Rose or Two*, and a novella, *Billy Budd*, in manuscript.

My arguments about Melville cannot encompass such a vast range; one can easily devote a lifetime to the study of Melville. In this chapter, in order to maintain sanity, I focus on *Moby-Dick* and The *Encantadas*. My choice of *Moby-Dick* should be obvious; it is a monumental text of the nineteenth century, and can be taken, perhaps with *Billy Budd*, as most emblematic of Melville's philosophy and literary style. My choice of *The Encantadas* springs from my appreciation of the coincidence of Melville visiting the Galapagos a few years after Darwin, and our ability now to compare their experiences. Further, the text is unique in its focused meditation on life completely detached from human intervention, or so Melville contends. The human life that does spring up sporadically in the cracks of the landscape consists of the lost and the dead—a strange hermit and marooned widow, runaways and castaways—all "signs of vanishing humanity" (820).

In *The Encantadas*, Melville visits the Galapagos Islands and, like Darwin, is fascinated by what he sees. Unlike Darwin, however, Melville is not interested in formulating a pure ontology of speciation. Instead, his chief concern is the subjective experience of being-in-the-world, the interaction between environment, mind, and body.

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[63] See Hershel Parker's *Melville: The Making of a Poet* (2008).

Where Darwin sees an ideal laboratory, Melville sees something quite different. He begins the text with a description of the islands:

> Take five-and-twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot; imagine some of them magnified into mountains, and the vacant lot the sea; and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles. A group rather of extinct volcanoes than of isles; looking much as the world at large might, after a penal conflagration. (767)

In order to communicate to his reader the visual aspect of these islands, Melville begins with a comparison between the islands and piles of cinders in an urban wasteland. The comparison attempts to bring familiarity to something utterly unfamiliar, and this comparison begins a long series of attempts to make sense out of that which resists sense. In this way, Melville is continuing the project of *Moby-Dick*, that is, the struggle to turn the incomprehensible into comprehensible form. The difference here is that these isles lack any touch of humanity; their otherness is intensified to its limit. Moby Dick, due to the pressures of the whaling industry, frequently came into contact with whalers, much to their horror, and became legend.[64] These isles are altogether different.

Melville writes:

> It is to be doubted whether any spot of earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group. Abandoned cemeteries of long ago, old cities by piecemeal tumbling to their ruin, these are melancholy enough; but, like

[64] In fact, this legend was published by J.N. Reynolds as "Mocha Dick" in the New York *Knickerbocker* in 1839 and became one of Melville's sources.

> all else which has but once been associated with humanity they still awaken in us some thought of sympathy, however sad. (767)

Always in the comparative mode, Melville begins with a comparison between the Encantadas and human artifacts left to suffer through natural history. There is a profound melancholia that infuses both, but the comparison turns against itself. These two things—the islands and ancient relics—simply cannot be compared because the melancholia in the second category is tempered by their connection to human being and thus can produce a type of "sympathy," of understanding, *sumpatheia*, a feeling with. The Encantadas stimulate pathos, but desolate, disconnected pathos.

Still, Melville tries to make sense of them through comparison. The next comparison is between the islands and the haunting "solitariness" of "the great forests of the north, the expanses of unnavigated waters, the Greenland ice-fields" (768). These great wildernesses "are the profoundest of solitudes to a human observer," but something prevents the comparison, something "mitigates their terror" (768). That mitigation, for Melville, consists of "the magic of their changeable tides and seasons" (768). Melville writes, "though unvisited by men, those forests are visited by the May" (768). The "special curse" of the Encantadas, then, not only originates in their complete isolation from humanity, but in their changelessness, their lack of seasons that seems to suggest their escape from the push and pull of time itself. This equatorial isolation and static condition generates an "emphatic uninhabitableness" that severs all connection with mammalian life: "Man and wolf alike disown them" (768). "Little but reptile life is here found," Melville writes, "tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes, and that strangest anomaly of outlandish nature, the iguana. No voice, no low, no howl is heard; the chief

sound of life here is a hiss" (768). Almost cognizant of its dejected position, "without fruit and without a name," the vegetation too is "more ungrateful than the blankness of Atacama," the great Chilean desert extending some six hundred miles.

Melville's description of the penguins that inhabit one of the islands is particularly indicative of the general quality of the Encantadas. "What outlandish beings are these?" he asks, and then answers:

> Erect as men, but hardly as symmetrical, […] their bodies are grotesquely misshapen; their bills short; their feet seemingly legless; while the members at their sides are neither fin, wing, nor arm. And truly neither fish, flesh, nor fowl is the penguin; as an edible, pertaining neither to Carnival nor Lent; without exception the most ambiguous and least lovely creature yet discovered by man. Though dabbling in all three elements, and indeed possessing some rudimental claims to all, the penguin is at home in none. On land it stumps; afloat it sculls; in the air it flops. As if ashamed of her failure, Nature keeps this ungainly child hidden away at the ends of the earth. (778)

For Melville, the peculiarity of the penguin stems from its taxonomical ambiguity; it does not fit into one of the three categories of animal life that it seems most to resemble. Standing upright, it mirrors a human being, but the awful things hanging at its side cannot be arms, and its legs are virtually nonexistent. Melville repeats a variation of three terms three times (fin-wing-arm, fish-fowl-flesh, water-air-land) in order to underscore the penguin's exclusion from natural categories, perhaps even from supernal categories, and thus in order to highlight the penguin's failure. Its failure, however, is ultimately a

failure of "Nature," which is why, according to Melville, the penguin must be hidden far away from human sight.

The "as if" in the final sentence is important, possibly the most important phrase of all. Melville writes that it is *as if* Nature is ashamed of her creation. In this passage, and in much of his writing, Melville is aware of his subjective interpretation of animals and plants, and various other creatures, the other-than-human world at large. In the penguin passage, "as if" marks a difference between appearance and reality. To say "it is as if Nature is ashamed" is to say "Nature is not ashamed, but it appears to me that Nature is ashamed." In other words, it is to say "I am looking at this penguin as meaningful to me, and very much not as-it-is-in-itself." It is no coincidence, furthermore, that one of the most pivotal words for Melville is the verb *to seem* and its variations, *seeming* and *seemingly*. An important climactic caveat occurs within this context of appearance versus reality. One of the effects of the penguin's grotesque ambiguity is the question: how do we know when to eat it? "Pertaining neither to Carnival nor Lent," the penguin resists human ingestion, both literally and metaphorically. It is as if the "as if" is the best that Melville can do. It is as if his grasp can only capture the seeming.

This careful description of the landscape, and of the wildlife that dwells within, is all to get Melville to a point of explanation about the origin of the word *Encantadas*, enchanted isles. He goes on to explain why the word "enchanted" is apropos "in still another sense" (770). Concerning a superstition about the native Galapagos tortoise, Melville writes that the sailors "earnestly believe that all wicked sea-officers, more especially commodores and captains, are at death (and in some cases, before death) transformed into tortoises; thenceforth dwelling upon these hot aridities, sole solitary

Lords of Asphaltum" (770-771). This superstition springs not only from the peculiar quality of the Encantada islands themselves—the geological formations, the flora, and the fauna—but also from the peculiar quality of the Galapagos tortoise in particular. Melville writes:

> Doubtless so quaintly dolorous a thought [the superstition] was originally inspired by the woe-begone landscape itself, but more particularly, perhaps, by the tortoises. For apart from their strictly physical features, there is something strangely self-condemned in the appearances of these creatures. Lasting sorrow and penal hopelessness are in no animal form so suppliantly expressed as in theirs; while the thought of their wonderful longevity does not fail to enhance the impression. (770-771)

The magical appearance of the tortoise in particular is one, according to Melville, of dejection and condemnation, oddly self-elected. This curse, furthermore, is timeless, for the tortoises appear to live outside the parameters of aging, and thus move slowly into a seemingly endless future. Three such tortoises are brought aboard the ship from their island habitat. Once removed, Melville comes face-to-face with these creatures unlike any he has seen before.

Melville writes of this experience:

> These mystic creatures suddenly translated by night from unutterable solitudes to our peopled deck, affected me in a manner not easy to unfold. They *seemed* newly crawled forth from beneath the foundations of the world. Yea, they *seemed* the identical tortoises whereon the Hindoo plants

> this total sphere. I inspected them more closely. Such worshipful venerableness of aspect! (773, my italics)

The allusion to Hindu mythology strengthens the mystical aura surrounding them. The creature is moved—or rather, *translated*—from "unutterable solitudes," the non-linguistic and quasi-abject realm of nature, to the "peopled deck," the space of human language, cultural interpretation, and social symbolism. They "seemed" to be this and they "seemed" to be that, but Melville resists telling us what they *are* because he cannot know. This translation, however, may prove deleterious for those translated. Indeed, as the Italians say, *traduttore-traditore*, translator-traitor.

Melville continues:

> The great feeling inspired by these creatures was that of age:—dateless, indefinite endurance. And in fact that any other creature can live and breathe as long as the tortoise of the Encantadas, I will not readily believe. Not to hint of their known capacity of sustaining life, while going without food for an entire year, consider the impregnable armor of their living mail. What other bodily being possesses such a citadel wherein to resist the assaults of Time? (774)

The tortoises inspire longevity, the circumvention of time. Comparable to Thoreau's owls, Melville's tortoises are emblematic of the queerness of the other-than-human world. First, it is their strangeness. What are they? Where do they come from? How can they possibly exist? A certain disbelief, indeed a certain unnaturalness, infuses their being. But second, it is their relation to time, and the movements of time, that inevitably generates questions of sex, sexuality, and reproduction. These beings are *impregnable*.

Reproduction is commonly conceived of as a means to live on into the future; in other words, the reproductive telos relies on a desire of self-propagation into the future. The tortoises seem to circumvent such a telos because they seem to circumvent the inevitability of death. Why reproduce when one is already immortal? The giant tortoises sit in contradistinction to the birds and the bees, and the rabbits, all indices of the hyper-procreative power of nature. The goal of life here is not reproduction, but being, living, getting by, sitting and walking slowly, gathering moss, letting a world gather on one's body.[65]

Interpretations of Melville's tortoises of course are open to debate; what is certain, however, is that they maintain a profound significance in his imagination and in his writing of *The Encantadas*. For this reason, the denouement of this particular sketch, "Two Sides to a Tortoise," is so strikingly strange. I quote the two paragraphs in their entirety in order to demonstrate this strangeness:

> I then pictured these three straight-forward monsters, century after century, writhing through the shades, grim as blacksmiths; crawling so slowly and ponderously, that not only did toadstools and all fungous things grow beneath their feet, but a sooty moss sprouted upon their backs. With them I lost myself in volcanic mazes; brushed away endless boughs of rotting thickets; till finally in a dream I found myself sitting crosslegged

[65] This has been a hard lesson for contemporary conservation biologists who lament the disinterest of the giant tortoises in reproducing after their populations have been decimated by human hunting. See John Tierney's recent *New York Times* article, "A Lonesome Tortoise, and a Search for a Mate" (2007), about "Lonesome George," a giant Pinta tortoise who "prefers a different lifestyle." I elaborate more on this point in my concluding chapter.

> upon the foremost, a Brahmin similarly mounted upon either side, forming a tripod of foreheads which upheld the universal cope.
>
> Such was the wild nightmare begot by my first impression of the Encantadas tortoise. But next evening, strange to say, I sat down with my shipmates, and made a merry repast from tortoise steaks and tortoise stews; and supper over, out knife, and helped convert the three mighty concave shells into three fanciful soup-tureens, and polished the three flat yellowish calapees into three gorgeous salvers. (775)

The juxtaposition of the religiosity of the first paragraph and the *je ne sais quoi* of the second (is it horror? comedy? profanity?) dramatizes the violence of translation: *traduttore-traditore*. The creatures "translated by night from unutterable solitudes to our peopled deck" end up finally in the stomachs of the sailors. The symbolic value of the tortoises, their metaphysical suggestiveness, is ultimately converted into utilitarian value—food and kitchenware—in an economy of practical consumption. Unlike the penguins who pertain neither to Carnival nor Lent, the giant tortoises are digestible on any occasion.

If one wants to understand contemporary environmental discourse, the aspirations and anxieties embedded within environmentality, a good place to begin is a thorough study of Thoreau and Melville. These two nineteenth-century writers bring to light the epistemological and ontological, the ethical and aesthetic issues at stake in environmental thought in the American tradition. In the next chapter, I will consider Willa Cather's conception of *oikos*, and the ways in which she inherits and recommences a queer environmentality in the tradition of Thoreau and Melville.

Chapter IV

Cather's Onto-Theology of *Oikos*

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.
>
> — Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé" (1936, page 837)

In Willa Cather's fiction, characters of all sorts abound. Some are presented with much affection, others with haste and coldness. "Crazy Ivar," one of the most interesting and affecting characters of *O Pioneers!* (1913), is part of the former menagerie. Living alone, far from other humans, Ivar has a reputation for having a special relationship with animals, wild and domesticated alike. In the novel, the protagonist Alexandra Bergson and her family visit Ivar, seeking advice on how best to care for their hogs. There is an outbreak of disease in the county, and Alexandra would like to practice some preventative medicine. As the family makes its way to Ivar's home, Cather is keen on enfolding Ivar within the landscape itself. "But for a piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod," Cather writes, "you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation" (155). The sod home, "the unescapable ground in another form," sinks into the sod land, and it is only a piece of metal that signals human intention (147).

Ivar's architectural design, typical of prairie life at the time, epitomizes Thoreau's description of the house as "a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow" (358), and effectively marks the character as Darwinian human animal. When other prairie residents are trying to move into wooden houses, elevated off the ground, and thus to assert their status as human, as civilized, and categorically distinct from animality, Ivar remains content to live in his way, enfolded within the sod. "Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank," Cather continues, "without defiling the face of nature any more that the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (155).

Like Thoreau, and unlike Ivar's neighbors on the prairie, Ivar does not have faith in a literally hierarchical theology; that is, he does not endorse a theology of having to look up to heaven to find God. For Ivar, there is no hierarchical division between lowness and highness, between animal and divine, between dirt and firmament. Cather writes, "He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, […] one understood what Ivar meant" (156). In his oxymoronically specified "wild homestead," theological truth takes on a greater power, a power that influences Ivar's orientation of respect and reverence for the other-than-human world.[66]

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[66] Hegel's comments on architecture may be important to note here in relation—but ultimately in contradistinction—to Ivar's understanding of dwelling: "It is architecture that pioneers the way for the adequate realization of the God, and in this its service bestows hard toil upon existing nature, in order to disentangle it from the jungle of finitude and the abortiveness of chance. By this means it levels a space for the God, gives form to his external surroundings, and builds him his temple as a fit place for concentration of spirit, and for its direction to the mind's absolute objects. It raises an enclosure round the assembly of those gathered together, as a defense against the threatening of the storm, against rain, the hurricane, and wild beasts, and reveals the will to assemble, although externally, yet in conformity with principles of art" (*Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* 90-91).

"Crazy Ivar," however, is not an environmental saint. While he can represent a certain "back to the land" ethos of environmentalism, or a precursor to the "deep ecological" philosophies of Arne Naess, Bill Devall, George Sessions,[67] Cather does not, or cannot, fully endorse his lifestyle. Make no mistake about it: *he is insane*. His insanity manifests itself during his "fits" in which he is utterly uncontrollable, and in his unconventional veterinary practice of taking the tranquilizers himself and praying over the animal. There is also something not quite right about him sexually. A kind of queerer version of Thoreau, he emblematizes a peculiarly Catherian mode of environmentality, but one, I should be quick to note, that grows out of the Thoreauvian-Melvillian tradition I have charted in the last two chapters.

In order to explore this queerer aspect of Ivar's character, let us look to his feet, his bare feet. In the warmer months of spring and summer, Ivar walks about the

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[67] "Deep ecology," coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, and developed by the American philosophers Bill Devall and George Sessions in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (1985), is a movement in environmental philosophy that attempts to tease out the metaphysical and ethical implications of the science of ecology. In "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" (1988), Naess argues that the aim of deep ecology is a realization of an "ecological self," a self that sees itself as non-separated from, and identifying with, other beings and Being, the parts and the whole. This realization, according to Naess, will automatically lead to a virtuous environmental ethics. Deep ecology has of course generated much debate, critical elaboration, and critique. Val Plumwood, for example, in "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism" (1991) has faulted Naess and, by extension, the deep ecologists for the fuzzy thinking surrounding the concept of "identification." The metaphysics of identification—Plumwood calls it "the indistinguishability account"—does not automatically produce a definite and definitive environmental ethic. In order to make her case, she cites John Seed's famous assertion that he is part of the rain forest protecting himself. Plumwood writes, "What John Seed seems to have in mind here is that once one has realized that one is indistinguishable from the rain forest, its needs would become one's own. But there is nothing to guarantee this—one could equally well take one's own needs for its" (247). The ethics of care, on the other hand, which Plumwood advocates—and I think she is right—relies upon a metaphysics of separation, initial disidentification, and ontological difference.

countryside without any shoes. When asked if his decision to do so is a form of penance, Ivar responds in the negative. He says:

> It is for the indulgence of the body. From my youth up I have had a strong, rebellious body, and have been subject to every kind of temptation. Even in age my temptations are prolonged. It was necessary to make some allowances; and the feet, as I understand it, are free members. There is no divine prohibition for them in the Ten Commandments. The hands, the tongue, the eyes, the heart, all the bodily desires we are commanded to subdue; but the feet are free members. I indulge them without harm to any one, even to trampling in filth when my desires are low. They are quickly cleaned again. (274)

Ivar's decision to walk barefoot, without mediation between his flesh and the earth, is important. What appears as a penance, a self-punishment for past sins, is actually Ivar's favorite pleasure, almost just the opposite. Ivar, in other words, inverts or queers the ascetic impulse: what appears as self-denial is actually his highest self-indulgence, the most palpable form of pleasure. Deleuze takes up exactly this same issue, "the mystery of a philosopher's life," in the context of Nietzsche and Spinoza, and helps to approach the character from an alternative angle. He writes in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1970), "The philosopher appropriates the ascetic virtues—humility, poverty, chastity—and makes them serve ends completely his own, extraordinary ends that are not very ascetic at all, in fact" (3).

In the passage above, Ivar begins by confessing to his "rebellious body," although the exact contours of that rebelliousness are left undisclosed, but Ivar, the good

pragmatist, finds it necessary to "make some allowances." In the feet Ivar finds freedom, a kind of freedom that is denied to the other parts of the body, the other locales of the flesh. In this way, the character of Ivar condenses a Catherian queer environmentality, or a habit of thought that conceptualizes human beings, other life forms, and their environments as finding pleasure in an exuberant deviation from a *telos* of reproductivity. Ivar's feet break out of an assumed biological functionality (i.e., the feet are for walking) in order to stimulate their erotic potentiality. This erotic potentiality, this "wonderful metamorphosis in function," to borrow a phrase from Darwin (*Origin* 146), will echo throughout Cather's writings.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will continue a reading of *O Pioneers!* and will then move into a later novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In my readings, I will focus on Cather's conception of *oikos*, the Greek root of "ecology" meaning "house," and will argue that for Cather *oikos* is infused with onto-theological significance. Further, *oikos*, in all its multifarious expressions, is queer, escaping the gender neuter, sexually anodyne sensitivity conventionally applied to the term. In a queer onto-theology of *oikos*, ecology becomes a species of theology, and one, for Cather, of radical immanence, and one that offers innovative and idiosyncratic meditations on the varieties of sensual experience, on life and death, and on reproduction and its discontents. I will divide the chapter into three parts:

1. Critical Context
2. *O Pioneers!*
3. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

1. Critical Context

Willa Cather's onto-theology of *oikos* is never named as such. It, like her description of the essence of poetic language in "The Novel Démeublé," quoted in epigraph above, has an "inexplicable presence." It is "divined by the ear but not heard by it." Part of my aim in this chapter, then, will be to amplify this divination, to name "the thing not named." Accomplishing this objective is difficult, however, partly because the operative terms "onto-theology" and "*oikos*" are so difficult to pin down, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because Cather herself is so difficult to pin down. Traditionally, Cather has been understood as a writer of wholesome American values and practicality, famous (or infamous, as the case may be) for her optimistic and nostalgic musings on prairie life and pioneer heroism, on individuality and the supremacy of the will. Thematically, she is celebratory of the beauty of the American landscape, of artistic and biological fertility, and especially of strong women overcoming profound, and often life-threatening, obstacles. Stylistically, she is sober and sensible, straightforward and grounded, economical and very readable.

This traditional understanding of Cather, however, has been problematized more and more by contemporary critics. Janis P. Stout in *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (2000), for example, identifies Cather as "a writer of conflict and ambivalence, doubtful of even the possibility of knowing truth, whose apparent nostalgia for a simpler pioneering time disguises a complex engagement with the present" (1). This complexity, "disguised" consciously or otherwise, illuminates the darker shadows of Cather's artistic vision. "Affirming as they are in many ways," Stout continues, "her books are also sown with doubt and discouragement, terror and violence, and she often did not at all know

who she was or what she thought" (2).[68] This uncertainty manifests itself through a number of different currents that will surface during the course of this chapter: the tension between politics, especially identity politics, and literary expression, the ever-haunting specter of ethics within the realm of art, and the powerful ambivalence of a life devoted to writing. These three uncertainties, as well as many others, I would suggest, originate in a more profound uncertainty, a more fundamental apprehension, that can best be described as onto-theological anxiety: the friction between the desire to feel at home (*en oikos*) in being (*en ontos*) and divine (*en theos*), on the one hand, and the knowledge of alienation, on the other, the knowledge, that is, that the self is forever under the threat of erasure, that it is neither at home in being, nor divine.

These combined thematic and stylistic elements place Cather in an odd position vis-à-vis American romanticism, naturalism, and modernism.[69] Cather matured as a writer during the 1890s, and was very much affected by this decade and the debates surrounding aestheticism, tradition, and literary innovation for the rest of her career. An early imitator of Henry James, Cather began in the first decade of the twentieth century to follow the advice of her friend Sarah Orne Jewett, author of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), and to write from her own experience on the Great Plains of Nebraska. Thus, between 1912 and 1913, Cather published two novels: the first, *Alexander's*

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[68] Stout continues, "In that respect, as much as any other, she was a woman of her time, in literary terms a modernist, in sociohistorical terms a New Woman, in almost every way a member of the disillusioned post-World War I generation that would be reduced from disheartenment to despair by the realization that war not only could but did come again, within their own lifetimes" (2).

[69] For extended treatments of these literary categories, see also Susan Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (1986), Jo Ann Middleton's *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* (1990), and Jaime Hovey's *A Thousand Words: Portraiture, Style, and Queer Modernism* (2006).

Bridge, which she later denounced for its Jamesian derivation, and the second, *O Pioneers!*, which afforded Cather the reputation as a unique and significant American author, and seemed to suggest a return to a nineteenth-century romantic spirit.

The sentence structure in Cather's early writings was quintessentially Jamesian—long and complex, multi-capillaried and multi-climactic—and very much in the modernist style. As Cather developed and individuated as a writer, however, her sentence structures became more straightforward and concepts, characters, events, and feelings all became crystallized in increasingly succinct language. This transformation Cather articulated in an important 1936 critical statement, "The Novel Démeublé" (*démeublé* meaning *unfurnished* or *unfurnitured*), in which Cather writes, "The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification" (836). Consider this process of simplification, for example, in the first sentence of *O Pioneers!*: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away" (139).[70]

Cather's critical statement and its practical application in the fiction, however, should not suggest that Cather escapes from the modernist category and is better aligned with American naturalism or realism. In fact, "The Novel Démeublé" is prompted as a reaction against realism and the overfurnishing of realistic detail. Nonetheless, Cather is not completely detached from this category either; in her "process of simplification," Cather actuates a communicable and lucid reality. For this reason Cather has been a major figure in the history of American environmental literature, a literature that has

[70] Compare this sentence to the first one, after the prologue, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and notice the fairytalesque tone, the *once upon a time* quality: "One afternoon in the autumn of 1851 a solitary horseman followed by a pack-mule, was pushing through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico" (285).

traditionally been figured—and valued—for its transparent revelation of other-than-human reality.[71]

If stylistically and thematically Cather presents herself as a problem, and thus becomes notoriously difficult to place within literary categories, politically she fares no better. In *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* (1992), Deborah Carlin explores Cather's troubled history in American literary criticism, the multiple Cathers that have been invoked since the publication of *O Pioneers!* Carlin writes:

> Cather, because she 'belongs to no school,'[72] is especially subject to the revision, reification, and renunciation of widely disparate readerly contingents. Whether viewed as an American icon, a woman writer, a lesbian, a cosmopolitan Midwesterner, a conservative Republican, a scathing journalist, an antimodernist, or an embittered elegiast, Cather remains an anomaly in American literature and her fiction is peculiarly hard to place. (6)

In *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (2000), Joan Acocella concurs with Carlin's assessment and traces the history of literary critics' attraction to and revulsion from Cather, especially since the politically charged atmosphere of the 1930s. It was during this decade that the most vocal critics—Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and Granville Hicks, in particular—lashed out against the author.[73] These critics and others faulted

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[71] See a special issue of *Cather Studies*, edited by Susan Rosowski, on "Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination" (2003).

[72] Carlin's quotation that Cather "belongs to no school" comes from Vernon L. Parington's *Main Currents in American Thought, Volume III: The Beginnings of Critical Realism in American* (1927) on page 383.

[73] For a sampling of these criticisms, see James Schroeter's edited collection *Willa Cather and Her Critics* (1967).

Cather for her political conservatism, or at least her quietism, her unwillingness to confront contemporary problems, her "escapism."[74] They viewed Cather as a nostalgic Rip Van Winkle who awakens after a twenty-year slumber to find the world completely changed and wishes for a return.

John H. Randall III in *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (1960) traces Cather's political conservatism—which is undeniably there in complicated ways—back to the Populist movement of the 1890s. Populist ideology, Randall argues, "can be summed up in three concepts: idealization of the virtuous yeoman tilling an agrarian Garden of Eden, a dualistic view of social struggles as occurring between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, and the idea of history as a conspiracy against agrarian virtue" (7). These three concepts produce the xenophobic and anti-Semitic paranoia that surfaces sporadically in Cather's work.

In the environmental context, critics have been likewise wary of Cather's politics, especially the echoes of the Populist ideology that Randall summarizes. Although Leo Marx does not mention Cather in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), his analysis of the pastoral ideology, and its adjusted reanimation in Populism, have been particularly strong frameworks for discussions of Cather's writing. The pastoral ideology, for Marx, appears as a positive purification and rejuvenation of the self in a pristine countryside, but this rhetorical move in fact disguises a more insidious political agenda. Ecocritic Louise H.

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[74] In "Escapism" (1936), Cather responds to these critics. She writes, "What has art ever been but escape? To be sure, this definition is for the moment used in a derogatory sense, implying an evasion of duty, something like the behavior of a poltroon. When the world is in a bad way, we are told, it is the business of the composer and the poet to devote himself to propaganda and fan the flames of indignation. […] But the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters—except escape" (968).

Westling, for example, in *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (1994) faults Cather for banishing Native Americans from the landscape in her prairie novels, and thus for colluding with a violent frontier ideology. [75] Jeffrey Myers, following Westling, in *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (2005) laments that Cather's "ecological consciousness is marred by a problematic race evasiveness" (33).

For every detractor of Cather's politics there is a defender, and the defense is not waged on conservative grounds. Mary Paniccia Carden, for example, argues in "Creative Fertility and the National Romance in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*" (1999) that Cather does not collude with a racist politics of Manifest Destiny, or at least does not do so unambivalently. For Carden, Cather "exceeds dominant models of gender- and nation-building" (295), but she does not deny that these models are implicit in Cather's writings. "Cather does not simply replace the self-made man with a woman," according to Carden, "nor does she project an uncompromisingly radical break with established concepts of nation-building. Instead, she recasts the starring role in the national romance with pioneering women who are both self-created and subject to history" (295). Unlike Wilson, Trilling, and Hicks in the 1930s and Westling and Myers today, Carden finds a positive side to Cather's political outlook, and tries to reinforce this positivity in her study. Matthias Schubnell too in "Religion and Ecology on the Divide:

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[75] For important studies of American frontier ideology, see Richard Slotkin's classic *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), Mike Fischer's "Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism" (1990), Joseph R. Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995), Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995), Guy Reynolds's *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (1996), and Blythe Tellefsen's "Blood in the Wheat: Willa Cather's *My Antonia*" (1999).

Ivar's Monasticism in *O Pioneers!*" (2002) focuses on the positive and sees Cather, especially her character Ivar, as one of the "early proponents of environmental ethics and social tolerance" (41). Other critics have seen a proto-ecofeminist.[76]

Joan Acocella identifies Cather's foundational irony and sense of the tragic as the reason why critics have been so unsettled about her politics. For Acocella, "Nature was the inspirer of Cather's irony, and of her tragic vision. Nature showed her that the world might be beautiful, and loud with life, yet wholly indifferent to the happiness of its creatures" (89). "Such a view," Acocella continues, "does not accord with any program of political reform, for it gives implicit assent to life's unfairness, the very unfairness that political reform seeks to banish. And that is why Cather has given her political critics so much trouble" (89). I agree with Acocella, although I would, and will, cast the concept of nature in different terms. As I will try to detail during the course of this chapter, Willa Cather's onto-theology of *oikos* is fundamentally capricious and volatile and anxious, and will thus resist any political program that seeks to create stability, that seeks to eliminate caprice, volatility, and anxiety. In other words, Cather's understanding of onto-theological anxiety extends forcefully into her politics, as well into all other aspects of her writing, and her life.

I have dwelled for some time upon Cather's critical reception, her thematic interests, her stylistic methods, and her questionable political positions. This preface to my close readings of Cather's novels is not complete, however, without an analysis of

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[76] See David Laird's "Willa Cather's Women: Gender, Place, and Narrativity in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*" (1992), Cheryll Glotfelty's "A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism, with Excursions to Catherland" (2003), and Patrick K. Dooley's "Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" (2003).

Cather's reception specifically within queer studies. Cather's relation to queer literary studies is particularly vexed, and her sex life has been the subject of much speculation in the biographical and critical scholarship. In her lifetime Cather never revealed the exact nature of her relationship with the three women thought to be romantic: Louise Pound as a student at the University of Nebraska, Isabella McClung as a young adult in Pittsburgh, and Edith Lewis with whom she lived from 1913 until her, Cather's, death in 1947. This speculation has had to confront a number of problems. First, Cather herself was an extremely guarded individual. She burned most of her letters, and requested that her friends and confidantes burn those sent to them. The ones that survive Cather stipulated in her will that they not be quoted. These letters, now housed at various university libraries, can be read, but not directly quoted. One letter in particular, the one to Louise Pound in 1892 questioning the unnaturalness of attachment between women, has been paraphrased and published a number of times, each time with a different interpretation. This letter haunts the critical scholarship, promising to solve the sexual mystery, but remaining always just beyond reach. In this way, perhaps, the letter proves to be an apt metaphor for sexual identity itself, and Cather's in particular.

In this peculiar situation—a situation, I should note, similar to the ones of Thoreau and Melville—queer literary critics have had to turn elsewhere, to the fiction, for evidence of Cather's unusual sexuality. In one of the first articles published detailing the problem of sexuality in Cather, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*" (1971), Blanch H. Gelfant looks to the novels for an understanding of Cather's sexual identity. In the novels Gelfant finds a "reluctance to portray sexuality" that she attributes to the requisites of a "genteel" culture (61). "What should intrigue us," Gelfant

continues, "is the strange involuted nature of her avoidance. She masks sexual ambivalence by certainty of manner, and displays sexual disturbance, even the macabre, with peculiar insouciance. Though the tenor of her writing is normality, normal sex stands barred from her fictional world" (61).

In "The Novel Démeublé," Cather speaks of "the thing not named." Lesbian critics, beginning with Sharon O'Brien, have taken this phrase as their cue to read this "thing" as lesbianism.[77] Deborah Carlin writes of the critical moves of these lesbian-feminist readings: "In order to arrive at a lesbian-centered interpretation of a text that inscribes lesbianism as an unnamable absence, critics have begun to read the fictions as either coded or engaged in an elaborate masquerade that displaces their lesbian nature" (20). Theories of "elaborate masquerade," however, have also had to contend with two aspects of Cather's life that are especially troubling for queer theorists: first, is her masculine identification,[78] coupled with her critical comments about women writers that border on outright misogyny, and a particularly damning review of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), and second, is her condemnation of Oscar Wilde, riddled with

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[77] See Sharon O'Brien's "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" (1984). Other foundational studies in this vein include Judith Fetterley's "*My Antonia*, Jim Burden, and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer" (1986), Joanna Russ's "To Write 'Like a Woman': Transformations of Identity in the Work of Willa Cather" (1986), and Timothy Dow Adams's "My Gay Antonia: The Politics of Willa Cather's Lesbianism" (1986). Katrina Irving (1990), in a slightly different vein, reads ethnicity in Cather as a way to express homosexuality. For more on Cather's relationship with her historical context and within the history of homosexuality, see Carroll Smith Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in the Nineteenth Century" (1975), C. Susan Wiesenthal's "Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Era of Scientific Sexology: A Dialogue between Frontiers" (1990), George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (1994), and Michael Trask's *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (2003).

[78] Sharon O'Brien in *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987) goes so far as to call Cather a "male impersonator" (225).

homophobic undertones, in the wake of his trial.[79] Then, there is also the famous story, "Paul's Case" (1905), one of Cather's favorites, and one of the few that she allowed to be reprinted many times, in which she kills off an effeminate sissy boy.[80]

Was Willa Cather a self-hating lesbian? a resentful proto-transsexual? Marilee Lindemann, for example, in *Willa Cather: Queering America* (1999) sees "the mechanism of internalized homophobia" (6) in "Paul's Case," and especially in the climax of the story when the young man throws himself in front of a train.[81] Or, was Cather content in being closeted and using her fiction as a way to express hidden sexual desires? Deborah G. Lambert in "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in *My Antonia*" (1982) argues that "Cather was a lesbian who could not, or did not, acknowledge her homosexuality and who, in her fiction, transformed her emotional life and experiences into acceptable, heterosexual forms and guises" (676). Or, was she just a straight woman who lived with her best friend? (But who could really believe *that*?)

The problem with the lesbian-feminist approaches to Cather à la Sharon O'Brien—as critics like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jonathan Goldberg, and Scott Herring have pointed out—is that they assume that "the thing not named" is

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[79] Cather's published response to Oscar Wilde can be found in Bernice Slote's edited volume *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896* (1966). For more on this subject, see John P. Anders's *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (1999).

[80] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in "Willa Cather and Others" (1993) writes, "Like Cather's Wilde a decade earlier, it seems as if Paul is to be hounded to exhaustion or death for a crime that hovers indeterminately between sex/gender irregularity on the one hand and, on the other, spoilt sensibility or bad art" (170).

[81] For another interesting, poetic boy with questionable sexual desires who, like Paul, Cather eventually kills off, see Arthur Adams in "The Enchanted Bluff" (1909), a story that serves as a precursor to the more elaborate "Tom Outland's Story" of *The Professor's House* (1925).

namable, and that its name is lesbianism.[82] In "'Dangerous Crossing': Willa Cather's Masculine Names" (1993), Judith Butler writes, "The postulation of an original 'truth' of lesbian sexuality which awaits its adequate historical representation presumes an ahistorical sexuality constituted and intact prior to the discourses by which it is represented" (145). For Butler, this postulation is misguided in two respects. First, as she says, there is no transhistorical lesbian reality that awaits patiently its actualization. Second:

> This speculation rests on a missed opportunity to read lesbian sexuality *as* a specific practice of dissimulation produced through the very historical vocabularies that seek to effect its erasure. The prohibition that is said to work effectively to quell the articulation of lesbian sexuality in Cather's fiction is, I would argue, precisely the occasion of its constitution and exchange. It is perhaps less that the legibility of lesbianism is perpetually endangered in Cather's text than that lesbian sexuality within the text is produced as a perpetual challenge to legibility. (145)

What does Butler mean? What is called the truth of lesbian sexuality is produced through a structure of prohibition. Prohibition, in other words, does not restrict some preconceived ontological substance called lesbian desire, but lesbian desire itself names a process of restriction and "dissimulation." Like Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis, Butler's metacritical intervention seeks to problematize an easy

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[82] In *Willa Cather and Others* (2001) Jonathan Goldberg writes, "If, as I argue, 'the thing not named' ramifies in a number of directions around an unnameable numinosity, further ranges of meaning can be posed" (1). In "Catherian Friendship; or, How Not to Do the History of Homosexuality" (2006) Scott Herring argues that Cather "provokes us to think about something other than closeted cross-identification, and something more than the literary championing of urban sexual identity" (68).

understanding of a sexual truth that is then repressed or prohibited, but instead to highlight the complex formation of sexual identity exactly through the pressures of erasure.

However we ultimately choose to read Cather's gender and sexual identity—and there is indeed value in each of these approaches—my own favorite is Stout's description of Cather as one consciously aware of her own self-fashioning, choosing different roles to face different audiences and theatrical exigencies. In her gender and sexual identity, in her writing style and themes, in her inauspicious political positions, in her attack on Chopin and Wilde, in all of these ways together Cather played "the part of the free spirit in a hidebound world, the rebel against authority, the 'dangerous' person who challenged prevailing assumptions and pieties" (Stout 15). Cather's challenge to the complacent world—cultivated through a careful, but permanently unstable, self-fashioning—connects well with her onto-theology of *oikos*. In the following section, I will try to tease out the meaning of this concept, all the while holding in mind Cather's personal, political, and literary instability. In order to do so, I will turn to two novels—*O Pioneers!* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—two novels that vividly illustrate the oscillation between optimism and pessimism in Cather's writing, between health and decadence, between success and failure, all of which animate Cather's queer onto-theology of *oikos*.

2. *O Pioneers!*

The human story that frames Cather's environmental imagination in *O Pioneers!* involves two childhood friends: Alexandra Bergson, an allusion to the French philosopher Henri

Bergson,[83] and Carl Linstrum. While their relationship is heterosexual, obviously, it is also emphatically non-procreative. It is "ridiculous" in the minds of their family, friends, and neighbors. Emil Bergson, Alexandra's brother, considers their relationship, and of him Cather writes, "There was trouble enough in the world, he reflected, as he threw himself upon his bed, without people who were forty years old imagining they wanted to get married" (225). How could love between two forty-year-olds add to the trouble in the world? Emil's skepticism is more than brotherly jealousy; it stems from a more elementary feeling of offense. What Emil seems to have in mind here is that Alexandra and Carl have missed their chance to be productive in the realm of love and sex. Their love is odd, perhaps even unnatural, and will only complicate an already complicated world. To make matters worse, their desires are delusional: they *imagine* they want to get married.

Cather, of course, disagrees with her character. In fact, Alexandra and Carl, like most of her protagonists, represent a productive value outside of a narrowly heteronormative framework. One could trace such an alternative valuation to Cather's own unconventional love life, as many critics have done, but I would like to situate such an axiology within her onto-theology of *oikos*. As I began to suggest at the beginning of

[83] In "The Music of Time: Henri Bergson and Willa Cather" (1985), Loretta Wasserman cites a letter of Cather's to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, dated 12 September 1912, expressing her admiration for Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (originally published in 1907, and translated into English in 1911), the book she is currently reading. The only published, explicit comment on Bergson that Cather makes is in her "Preface to *Alexander's Bridge*" (1922), but she, like many Americans at the time, was much influenced by his philosophy, especially his rejection of Herbert Spencer's mechanical understanding of evolution. For elaborations on the philosophy of Bergson, see Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism* (1966) and Elizabeth Grosz's *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004). On Bergson's influence on American Literature, see Paul Douglass's *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* (1986) and Tom Quirk's *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens* (1990).

this chapter, Cather's work is marked by an acute onto-theological anxiety: the discordance between, on the one hand, the desire to feel at home (*en oikos*) in being (*en ontos*) and divine (*en theos*) and, on the other, a consciousness of alienation, a hint that the self is neither at home in being, nor divine. Eroticism, or the varieties of sensual experience (as, for example, in Ivar's desire to walk barefoot), will come to the fore in order to alleviate such onto-theological anxiety by promising an opportunity for a radical unification between the self and the *oikos/ontos/theos*. In the characters of Alexandra and Carl, we see such an anxiety-alleviation play out dramatically, and this anxiety-alleviation will always be situated within an environmental framework, will always be, in a word, *oikological*.

Cather begins *O Pioneers!* with a simple sentence: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away" (139). From the very first sentence, Cather crafts a philosophical universe of will and resistance, of desire and obstruction, which operates on both a personal and environmental scale. Cather writes as if all the town's effort went into overcoming the pressures of the wind. The word "tableland" underscores this fragility; tables, after all, like Ivar's feet, are easily wiped clear. How can we understand such a sentence in terms of its historical context? If the novel was published in 1913, and is set "thirty years ago," the novel thus begins in 1873, the year of Cather's own birth, and eleven years after the Homestead Act of 1862. One can understand the novel, then, as a *Bildungsroman* on a number of levels: 1) autobiographically, or at least quasi-autobiographically, 2) in the development of the character of Alexandra, and 3) in the development of the land itself. Each chapter of the novel traces transformations on a

number of geographical scales—from the body, to the house, to the landscape—and lays bare these transformations as part of the narrative action.

Continuing on the theme of environmental pressure, of contextual landscape, Cather writes, "The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them" (139). Unlike Ivar's sod dwelling, enfolded within the land, these elevated, wooden houses lack stability. They are pulled into the open, or at least they seem to be pulled into the open, a distinction that may be no distinction at all. Cather's introductory paragraph to *O Pioneers!* can serve as a thematic framework for the rest of the novel, as well as for the remainder of her writing career. The haphazardness of dwelling, the push and pull of the elements, the impermanence of form all coalesce to illustrate what Isaiah Berlin has described as the Romantic tenet that "there is no structure of things" (*Roots* 120).

Cather's introductory paragraph dramatizes her uneasy relationship with political thinking, a simultaneous condemnation and endorsement of political life. First the condemnation: the nonstructured—not chaotic, but unstable—nature of things produce the possibility of tragedy, and thus the impossibility of utopia, of getting things right once and for all. Then the endorsement: the possibility of tragedy, however, is mitigated by the human will, the strivings of optimistic characters, a history, in other words, of the species *Homo sapiens* committed to a freedom from tragic possibility. In this second mode of endorsement, Cather can be understood to participate in a long philosophical

tradition that identifies History as overcoming Nature, although one would have to be careful in being too optimistic, for there is no categorical differentiation between the two in Cather.

Unconventional love—let us call such a thing *queer love* for the moment—participates in the nonstructure of things, in the transmutation of things. Its driving force and goal is an attempt to ease the pain and anxiety of onto-theological instability, the terror of knowing that not only is the world unstable, but so is God. (In this sense, perhaps, all love will be unconventional, made new again and again, to meet a perennially original challenge.) In *O Pioneers!* Alexandra represents the optimism that is most associated with Cather, an optimism that electrifies the human will struggling, the endorsement of political life noted above. In Alexandra, in other words, onto-theological anxiety is minimized.

Queer love in the context of Alexandra operates in at least two respects: first, between Alexandra and Carl, and second, between Alexandra and the prairie itself. I would now like to turn to this second respect. In describing Alexandra's house, Cather writes, "you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort" (178). The reason for this uneven furnishing—this house *démeublé*—is that Alexandra's sense of home, of belonging, operates on an altogether different scale. In the humanly conceived dwelling she is not effective as a "home-maker." Cather explains, "Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (178). In this sense, perhaps, Alexandra vividly reflects Heidegger's understanding of the human species as world making.

Cather's affirmative thinking in certain passages seems excessive and have been the source of much of the criticisms of Cather since the era of Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling. Consider for example her description of the spring harvest in 1889: "the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness" (174). Today, one does not have to be a sophisticated feminist deconstructionist—or amateur environmental historian for that matter—to view such a description with suspicion. The trope of feminine landscape yielding to masculine agriculture is by now familiar, and familiarly criticized. Likewise, since the Dust Bowl disaster of the 1930s has become a permanent fixture of the American national consciousness such a fantasy no longer seems tenable.

If Cather's description of agricultural optimism may seem absurd, her onto-theology of *oikos* can also in passages slip into the bathetic. For example, she concludes the novel with an ontologically interesting, but somewhat embarrassing, exclamation: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (290). There is something important indeed in such an ecologized vision of life and death, of cycles of matter, transformations of energy and substance, that does not rely on a transcendental realm of human souls, solely welcomed therein. There is something important, in other words, in such a vision of life-after-death, of immortality, not as transportation to extraterrestrial heaven, but as immanent continuation. But one wonders why Cather had to present such an ontological narrative in such excessively hopeful terms, that is, with such grandiose reassurance. I would suggest that Cather's moments

of bathos, and general ridiculousness, may be understood as a compensation—a "reaction formation," to borrow a more technical term from psychoanalysis—for a darker vision of life, although surely these moments are overdetermined and permanently inflected with a question mark. Like Thoreau's reception in the popular imagination as an environmental saint, the great lover of nature, an understanding of Cather as a simple optimist yields an incomplete picture of the author.

While Alexandra's queer love for Carl, and for the prairie, and Cather's description of immanent reincarnation cited above, are decidedly optimistic, *O Pioneers!* may be more deceptive at second glance. The novel traces two human relationships: one between Alexandra and Carl, and one between Alexandra's brother Emil and Marie. It is this second relationship that yields a much queerer vision of the *oikos*. Emil is in his early twenties and returns to the farm after college; Marie is slightly younger, a married woman, though her marriage is unhappy. These two childhood friends fall in love during the course of the novel, and it is in them that Cather expresses best her queerness, her unstable pessimism, and sense of the tragic.

Cather writes of Marie:

> Marie stole slowly, flutteringly, along the path, like a white night-moth out of the fields. The years seemed to stretch before her like the land; spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little trees, the patient lives; always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain—until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman, who might

> cautiously be released. Marie walked on, her face lifted toward the remote, inaccessible evening star. (260)

Cather begins by comparing Marie to a "white night-moth." The analogy is fitting, not simply because it illustrates the delicacy of her appearance, the daintiness of her gait, and the frailty of her character, but because it illustrates something more mysterious, and more ironic, about the instincts of life. The "white night-moth," in its attraction to the flame that will instantaneously kill it, demonstrates the problematic nature of the ostensibly primary law that states that the driving force behind all life is the will to survive and reproduce. The will to live, the drive to survive is exactly that which produces death, effects one's dying.

The next sentence begins with "The years seemed to stretch before her like the land," but these years do not unfold according to linear time. Cather introduces a concept, "the year," only to deny its truth. The next phrase—"spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring"—identifies what one actually means by the concept. Years become seasons. Time does not proceed according to the additive calculus of the calendar, but through the phenomenological experience of a repetitive set of four seasons.[84] Such an understanding, however, does not bring joy, but something else. Living through such temporal circularity requires patience. "Patience," from the Latin *patientia*, the root being *patient*, or suffering, names the virtue of living through repetition without difference, of living attached to the chain of mortality, and never quite sure if one wants

[84] Compare this scene to Cather's description of the Archbishop's death in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: "He observed also that there was no longer any perspective in his memories. […] He was soon to have done with calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible" (453).

to pull hard or run to the source. Like the moth, the passage culminates, Marie "walked on, her face lifted toward the remote, inaccessible evening star." For Marie, the gravitational attraction is obstructed; unlike the moth, she cannot reach the flame; she cannot actualize her enlivened suicidal desires. The image of the night-moth, then, is quintessentially Catherian: deceptively simple, and tragically loaded.

Marie's Icarian sensibility, her desire to fly too close to the heat, is matched by Emil. As the two potential lovers are right on the verge of consummating their feelings for each other, one of Emil's friends, Amédée, falls ill and suddenly dies of appendicitis. The following passage describes Emil's attendance at Amédée's funeral. The "height of excitement" will refer to his sexual desire for Marie. Cather writes:

> [Emil] was at that height of excitement from which everything is foreshortened, from which life seems short and simple, death very near, and the soul seems to soar like an eagle. As he rode past the graveyard he looked at the brown hole in the earth where Amédée was to lie, and felt no horror. That, too, was beautiful, that simple doorway into forgetfulness. The heart, when it is too much alive, aches for that brown earth, and ecstasy has no fear of death. It is the old and the poor and the maimed who shrink from that brown hole; its wooers are found amoung the young, the passionate, the gallant-hearted. (265)

In this passage, Cather takes up the question of the relationship between sexual desire and death, a relationship that is notoriously difficult and complicated, and one that has a long

and tortuous history, especially in French literature and philosophy.[85] It is no coincidence, then, that Amédée, a Frenchman, occasions such a speculative scene for Emil, the young Swede. The young and ecstatic are not simply unafraid of the inevitability of bodily decomposition, of being eaten by the earth, but actually "ache" for that moment from which there is no turning back. Perhaps they are delusional, for the grass is always greener (or the ground always browner, as the case may be) on the other side, but Cather seems to be sympathetic for their desires. In the end, Emil is granted his wish. On the night that he and Marie finally have sex, Marie's husband finds them together under a mulberry tree and shoots them both to death. The chain has secured a dead woman, and Emil can finally slip into the "brown hole."

On the larger scale of the novel as a whole, the question of "the land" or "the soil" structures the characters of Alexandra and Emil in very different ways. Alexandra—and to some extent, Ivar—represents a quasi-nativist attachment to the land, the quasi-reactionary principle of indigeneity, that is, of metaphysical belonging authorized by one's origination from the physical substance of the bioregion. In the character of Emil, this attachment to the land operates according to a very different logic: not as a sign of life, fertility, metaphysical belonging, health, permanence, longevity, and all the rest, but as something more melancholic. Emil's longing for the soil, his craving for the "brown hole of the earth," his queer sense of rootedness, calls into question the guiding principle of indigeneity, of feeling at home (*en oikos*) in being (*en ontos*), represented so illustratively in Alexandra. If metaphysical belonging is what Emil seeks, it is in the

[85] Such a history would include Rousseau on masturbation, *la petit mort*, Baudelaire and Huysmans on decadence, and, after Cather's time, Bataille and Foucault, to name just a few.

minor key, securely tucked into the heavy soil of the earth. "The soil" in the end is not figured as mother's milk, not as "green breast," but as lethal invitation.

Cather's preoccupation with death, and its environmental intonations, is given more elaborative space and consideration in a later novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, published fourteen years after *O Pioneers!*, in 1927. In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to look closely at this later text in order to begin finishing to unpack Cather's queer onto-theology of *oikos*.

3. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Like *O Pioneers!*, the novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is set in the historical past. It begins in 1848, the year the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was ratified which ended the Mexican War and ceded much of the Southwest to the United States. Unlike *O Pioneers!*, this novel takes as its geographical focus not Nebraska but New Mexico, and especially the desert surrounding Taos and Santa Fe, where Cather spent time visiting the ranches of Mabel Dodge Luhan and D.H. Lawrence. It charts the work of Catholic missionaries in the "peculiar horror" of that desert terrain. The French Jean Marie Latour, who will become the Archbishop for whom death will come, expresses this "horror" in the following way: "The very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand" (280). The metaphors of the house (*oikos*) to describe the landscape—floor, walls, roof, windows, and so on—will persist throughout the narrative, but, as in the above passage, they will not always confirm a sense of security and belonging.

After a short prologue set in Rome, the novel opens in New Mexico, with Jean Marie Latour in an increasingly desperate situation, a situation that lays bare the "peculiar horror" of the Southwestern deserts. The character "had lost his way," Cather writes, "and was trying to get back to the trail, with only his compass and his sense of direction for guides" (285). In this initial scene, Latour has been traveling for a year, from his post in Cincinnati, and has encountered a number of setbacks and delays. Now his problems in the desert are of an altogether different sort. I quote the passage in abbreviation:

> The difficulty was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike. As far as he could see, on every side, the landscape was heaped up into monotonous red sand-hills. […] He had been riding among them since early morning, and the look of the country had no more changed than if he had stood still. […] They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare. […] The blunted pyramid, repeated so many hundred times upon his retina and crowding down upon him in the heat, had confused the traveler, who was sensitive to the shape of things. (285)

The monotony, the repetition without difference, of the small red hills plunges the Bishop into a "geometrical nightmare." The feature in excess creates the illusion of featurelessness. The *oikos*, in other words, presses down on the *corpus*, and in the end produces confusion, alienation, and anxiety. The Bishop's hyper-awareness of his environment ironically generates no awareness at all, an inability to distinguish not only geographical location, but also the difference between motion and stillness.

This phenomenological insight yields a related theological rumination. "This mesa plain," Cather writes,

> had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape. (334)

Like the prairie of *O Pioneers!*, the mesa here eagerly awaits its completion, the final stage of its creation in the form of human intervention, in the touch of human labor. Until humans dwell in/on the mesa it will remain in its "incompleteness." In other words, humans must dwell in (inhabit) and dwell on (think about and speak about) in order to finish the work of God. "To be made into a landscape," "the country" must be brought into the realm of human aesthetics; the *oikos* must be brought into the realm of *logos*. "Ecology" names just that transference; it names the final stage of creation, the work begun by God.

The passage consists of two separate statements: one theological ("This mesa plain had an appearance […] as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together"), the other ontological ("The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape"). The theological statement is qualified with an "as if" that begs the appearance-reality question; the ontological statement is unqualified as constative assertion.

In an important passage that extends this onto-theological rumination, Cather differentiates between the landscapes of Europe and the deserts of the American Southwest. Of the "hardships" in the desert environment, she writes:

> A European could scarcely imagine such hardships. The old countries were worn to the shape of human life, made into an investiture, a sort of second body, for man. There were wild herbs and the wild fruits and the forest fungi were edible. The streams were sweet water, the trees afforded shade and shelter. But in the alkali deserts the water holes were poisonous, and the vegetation offered nothing to a starving man. Everything was dry, prickly, sharp. (445)

The European landscape, according to Cather, has become suited for human life through human intervention and creation. The *oikos* has become a supplementary *corpus*. The deserts of the American Southwest, however, are completely unconducive for human life. Unlike in the lush forests of Europe, in the desert *everything is trying to eat you!*

Desert living is difficult not only for its human inhabitants, but for plant and other animal life as well. Like Melville's tortoises, Cather's description of an old grove of trees stand as emblems of more-than-human time—nonhuman temporality—and of queer life lived outside of the hyper-procreative. I quote the passage in full in order to demonstrate the preciseness of Cather style and her admiring tone:

> Beside the river was a grove of tall, naked cottonwoods—trees of great antiquity and enormous size—so large that they seemed to belong to a bygone age. They grew far apart, and their strange twisted shapes must have come about from the ceaseless winds that bent them to the east and

> scoured them with sand, and from the fact that they lived with very little water,—the river was nearly dry here for most of the year. The trees rose out of the ground at a slant, and forty or fifty feet above the earth all these white, dry trunks changed their direction, grew back over their base line. Some split into great forks which arched down almost to the ground; some did not fork at all, but the main trunk dipped downward in a strong curve, as if drawn by a bow-string; and some terminated in a thick coruscation of growth, like a crooked palm tree. They were all living trees, yet they seemed to be old, dead, dry wood, and had very scant foliage. High up in the forks, or at the end of a preposterous length of twisted bough, would burst a faint bouquet of delicate green leaves—out of all keeping with the great lengths of seasoned white trunk and branches. The grove looked like a winter wood of giant trees, with clusters of mistletoe growing among the bare boughs. (412)

The most striking feature of this description of the cottonwood grove is its uncanniness. Eking out a life from a dry riverbed, these trees do not seem to belong within their habitat. They seem out of place not only spatially, but also temporally: "they seemed to belong to a bygone age." Like in Melville's description of the whale, and of the giant Galapagos tortoises, Cather must proceed through descriptive approximation in order to register the uncanniness of the grove. They "*seemed to* belong to a bygone age," "*as if* drawn by a bowstring," "*like* a crooked palm tree." They "*seemed to* be old, dead, dry wood" and "*looked like* a winter wood."

The passage also yields a more subtle description: the nakedness of the trees, and the sexuality of the grove. Like Melville's tortoises, Cather's cottonwoods stand in opposition to the birds and the bees. Their misshapen, almost grotesque, trunks and branches represent an ecology of deviation, of exceptionality and unpredictability, an ecology in which creation sprouts in the most unlikeliest of places.

Willa Cather's writings have increasingly come under critical reevaluation. Part of my aim in this chapter has been to extend such a revisionary reading. My own argument on this front has been that discussions of Cather's position in terms of her gender and sexual identity, in terms of literary categories, and in terms of her political allegiances must confront a more foundational instability: her queer onto-theology of *oikos*. In this chapter, I have attempted to tease out the contours of this particular and peculiar queerness. But I have also attempted to formulate an argument about Cather's position vis-à-vis the history of American environmental literature, that is, as a descendent of a Thoreauvian-Melvillian tradition. In the next chapter, I will continue this literary history with Djuna Barnes. For both Cather and Barnes, there will be a "fracturing" of the self under the pressure of onto-theological anxiety. Cather focuses on this "fracturing" in terms of ecology, a biology of space; Barnes, on the other hand, will focus on this "fracturing" in terms of evolution, a biology of time.

Chapter V

Barnes's Queerly Nietzschean Nature

Bend down the tree of knowledge and you'll unroost a strange bird.

— Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936, page 138)

The power of Djuna Barnes's zoological imagination reverberates from her early short stories, through her novels, and into her later poetry. Everywhere animals abound, and her readers would be hard-pressed to understand her poetic-philosophical vision without them. In *Nightwood*, the unlicensed, alcoholic gynecologist-philosopher Doctor Matthew O'Connor is impressed with the sense—or rather, senselessness—of being an animal, an animal, that is, that is not *Homo sapiens*. "Ah," he says, "to be born an animal, born at the opening of the eye, going only forward, and, at the end of the day, shutting out memory with the dropping of the lid" (135). Matthew's envious musings spring from his evaluation of animal life as incapable of experiencing, in any real way, the past and the future. The animal, of unspecified species in Matthew's account, only knows the present and can therefore live without regret (knowledge of the past) and anxiety (knowledge of the future).

In a related passage, Matthew asks a particularly interesting question, interesting not only for its onto-theological substance, but also for its grammatical structure: "Have I been simple like an animal, God, or have I been thinking?" (133). In order to read this question, we must remember that for Matthew thinking is not necessarily a good thing. In fact, he will later say, quite bluntly, "To think is to be sick" (158). Within the internal

logic of the question, there are three realms of being: animal, human, and divine. One could interpret the question, asked by Matthew and addressed to God, about whether he, Matthew, is an animal (simple) or something else (thinking). If this interpretation is the case, thinking is what marks the separation between human being and animal being. But Matthew is never so simple, and the form of the question is rife with syntactical uncertainty. One could also interpret the question as not addressed to God, but about God. The question could ask if the asker is like an animal, like a God, or like a thinker. In other words, the question could ask: does human being share a likeness with the animals or with the divine? Or, does human being occupy a different category entirely? Although it is impossible to know exactly to what extent Matthew's philosophy, or rather, his framing of the philosophical question, echoes Barnes's own, I would suggest that a particular philosophical framework does persist in her work. Taken as a whole, Barnes's work seems to suggest that human being is banished from animal being by self-consciousness, but is also barred from divine being by incomprehensible lack. "Neither one and half the other" (136) may be an appropriately enigmatic way to describe the situation.

Louis F. Kannenstine's lucid remarks on the subject are particularly worth repeating here. In *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (1977), Kannenstine writes:

> Figures of animals and saints proliferate in Miss Barnes's books, but the human creatures are either more or less dog or saint, beast or angel, at any moment tending toward or away from either condition. Their lives are struggles to become one unqualified whole, either one thing or the other,

> but they are blocked by the recognition of their duality, their inescapably fractured being. (xv)

This "fractured being" may be just what the poet Emily Coleman has in mind when, a year before *Nightwood* appeared in England, she writes in a letter to her friend, "You make horror beautiful—it is your greatest gift."[86] Coleman is impressed with Barnes's ability to transform one thing into its opposite. By this "gift" Coleman surely means "talent," but perhaps, too, she means that "it," the making beautiful of horror, is Barnes's greatest gift to us, to the world. This chapter will attempt to grasp this beautiful horror, the contours of this "fractured being," Djuna Barnes's queer zoological imagination, triangulated through twenty-first century evolutionary theory (represented by contemporary science writer Nicholas Wade) and nineteenth century evolutionary theory and philosophy (represented by Darwin and Nietzsche). I will divide this chapter into four parts:

1. Evolutionary Theory
2. Friedrich Nietzsche
3. Djuna Barnes
4. Aesthetics and Evolutionary Theory

1. Evolutionary Theory

Let me begin this section with an extended quotation from a short article published recently in *The New York Times*. The article, I hope, will illustrate a crucial problem

[86] The letter is dated 27 August 1935. It is quoted in Phillip Herring's introduction to Djuna Barnes's *Collected Stories* (1996) on page 23.

facing environmental studies, especially with a neo-Darwinian bent,[87] and will provide the seeds, so to speak, of the problem's resolution. In "*Pas de Deux* of Sexuality is Written in the Genes" (2007), Nicholas Wade writes his first three paragraphs:

> When it comes to the matter of desire, evolution leaves little to chance. Human sexual behavior is not a free-form performance, biologists are finding, but is guided at every turn by genetic programs.
>
> Desire between the sexes is not a matter of choice. Straight men, it seems, have neural circuits that prompt them to seek out women; gay men have those prompting them to seek other men. Women's brains may be organized to select men who seem likely to provide for them and their children. The deal is sealed with other neural programs that induce a burst of romantic love, followed by long-term attachment.
>
> So much fuss, so intricate a dance, all to achieve success on the simple scale that is all evolution cares about, that of raising the greatest number of children to adulthood. Desire may seem the core of human sexual behavior, but it is just the central act in a long drama whose script is written quite substantially in the genes.

[87] I use "neo-Darwinian" to signal a scientific paradigm in which all life processes are explained through a logic of utility. Key neo-Darwinian texts include E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975), Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* (1989), Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1996), and Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997). The synthesis to which Wilson refers in his title is the synthesis between Darwinian evolution and Mendelian genetics. This synthesis attempts to explain the adaptive purpose and inheritability—and thus, the genetic nature—of human behavior. All human behavior, according to the neo-Darwinists, appears as if it is acquired during the course of one's life, but, in fact, has genetic foundations and evolutionary functions.

In reading this excerpt, one should find, at first, that there is nothing surprising or unique about these three paragraphs. Indeed, the "sex and science" section in the popular press is as ubiquitous and conventional as the weather report on the nightly news.[88] We find in this article all the exacting nonchalance of excessively grandiose claims, the tired guilt of not presupposing "the other side," the quasi-absurd attempts at qualification; in short, we find the complete denial that the primary claim is *questionable* even in spite of all the talk of "it seems" and "it may." The passive tense "written in the genes," further, allows for a more fundamental and persistent evasive ethos. I would like to pause for a moment, however, and try to unpack this truly unique grouping of epistemological, ontological, and ethical elements and positions condensed in these few short paragraphs in order to stretch out and magnify a portion of the philosophical problem I will address in this chapter, a problem with profound political repercussions.

In his article, Wade quite obviously rehearses the rhetorical protocol of his professional craft and begins, in the introductory "narrative hook" at least, with the bravado characteristic of "Darwinian fundamentalism," to borrow a term from Stephen Jay Gould.[89] The first few moments of the text—and especially the title itself—do not allow room for disagreement from either the sources consulted or the reader him or herself. The entire, complex, and intricately toned realm of human life is explained in a

[88] Here I take Wade's article to be representative of a much larger body of work. One would be hard-pressed *not* to find on the newsstand similar publications employing similar rhetoric and sharing similar assumptions. Most recently, I discovered a special, double issue of *Time* on "The Science of Romance: Why We Need Love to Survive" (2008). The front page features a cartoon of a man and woman, unsurprisingly attractive and white, kissing. She says, "I think we've got *chemistry*!" to which he rejoins, "I feel my evolutionary *biology* kicking in!"

[89] Gould uses this term in a *The New York Review of Books* article by the same name. His particular targets are John Maynard Smith, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett.

cliché, figured scientifically of course, that is careful to mystify any evidence of itself as such. And once again, as is typical in this type of article, freedom versus predestination, choice and chance versus fate and destiny, the perennial philosophical and theological problem, is condensed—or rather, transferred to and answered—in the gene.[90]

What is more, and more important for my purpose here, is the quietly spectacular slippage between various modern gender and sexual identities. Wade begins by identifying "the human" as his subject. This general subject, then, is divided and specified—perhaps *species*fied—into three sub-subjects: straight men, gay men, and women. Lesbians, of course, are completely elided; indeed, as are bisexual, transgender, and numerous other modes of queer beings. But this article is not really about them, but about "human [read: straight] sexuality," a kind of sexuality that produces the only thing that "evolution cares about," that is to say, more straight children.[91] The slippage, in the end, allows the author to pretend that he is talking about everyone when, in fact, he is talking about someone.

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[90] In this vein, one could even argue that "written in the genes" performs what in an earlier era was "written in the stars," and that thus contemporary evolutionary psychology, in spite of all its atheistic commitments, remains faithful to its onto-theological roots.

[91] Note, too, the odd personification of evolution here as caring. Although I will return to this point later, here we should remember Nietzsche in "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873) asking himself and responding: "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" (46-47). For a reading of this passage, see Paul de Man's "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric" (1983). De Man writes, "Tropes are neither true nor false and are both at once. To call them an army is however to imply that their effect and their effectiveness is not a matter of judgment but of power" (242).

In the more condensed, philosophical language that I detailed in the introductory chapter I am arguing that Wade's article articulates a heteronormative ontology grounded in an objectivist epistemology and that this articulation coincides very clearly with a certain tendency in contemporary environmental studies.[92] The initial questions that compel Wade and similar writers have a long history, extending well beyond scientific discourse and into literature and philosophy. The answers to these questions in literature and philosophy, however, often disrupt the truisms of contemporary neo-Darwinian thought, and it is to them that I would like to turn.[93]

My explanations—or rather, *interpretations*—of Wade's article lay a foundation and serve as a springboard for my project here in this chapter, a chapter which ultimately will consider, under various shades of light, Djuna Barnes's queerly Nietzschean notion of life, of *sexual* life, of *natural* life, in all its productively perverse manifestations.[94] My main argument will be that for these thinkers—Nietzsche and Barnes—ontology, or "first

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[92] Catriona Sandilands in "Desiring Nature, Queering Ethics: Adventures in Erotogenic Environments" (2001) calls this tendency the "the heterosexualization of nature" (179).

[93] One could, at this point, say that the conclusions reached by philosophers and poets about evolution are invalid because there are categorical differences between science, philosophy, and poetry. In other words, this "disruption" of evolutionary theory is philosophical or poetic, not scientific and, therefore, not real. Although I do recognize the differences between the methodologies operative in each, I wonder if it is wise to give any one field a monopoly on truth.

[94] Although I do not have the chance here to consider the vast secondary literature surrounding Nietzsche's naturalism, I would like to acknowledge Christa Davis Acampora and Ralph R. Acampora's edited volume *A Nietzschean Bestiary: Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal* (2004), Christoph Cox's *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation* (1999), David Farrell Krell's *Infectious Nietzsche* (1996), Gregory Moore's *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor* (2002), Margot Norris's *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (1985), and John Richardson's *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (2004). For an exchange on Nietzsche's philosophy of science more generally, see Nadeem J. Z. Hussain's "Nietzsche's Positivism" (2004) and Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick's "Nietzsche's Post-Positivism" (2004) in the *European Journal of Philosophy*.

philosophy," is always already implicated in epistemology. Ontology does not necessarily come "second," but instead emerges as epistemology. Or, as Henri Bergson in *Creative Evolution* (1907) succinctly puts it, "*theory of knowledge* and *theory of life* seem to us inseparable" (xiii).

Before moving on, it would be wise for me to explain my understanding and use of the terms "ontology" and "epistemology." Ontology, from Greek *ontos*, or being, concerns the nature of being, existence, and reality, the relationality of being. It is being *qua* being, and I understand modern ecology and evolutionary biology as a branch of practical ontology. Epistemology, from Greek *episteme*, or knowledge, concerns the nature of knowing, and I understand modern cognitive science as a branch of practical epistemology. It is knowledge *qua* knowledge.

To repeat the main argument: for Nietzsche and Barnes, ontology is always already implicated in epistemology. With this in mind, it is no coincidence that a text like *Beyond Good and Evil*, a text that can easily represent Nietzsche's life-work, begins with "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," a chapter in which the author unmasks philosophers' ostensibly innocent will-to-truth as indicative of a deeper will-to-power. This textual moment and philosophical position contains the quintessential Nietzschean epistemology, the contours and effects of knowledge. But Nietzsche does not stop there: will-to-power becomes, in the end—or maybe, in the beginning—his ontology, his theory of life, his strange anti-foundational essence of all beings and becomings. "*Theory of knowledge* and *theory of life* seem to us inseparable." For Bergson, this inseparability describes the persistent necessity of a double revision in human thinking. The question of the nature of life, of being and the interactions of beings, cannot be separated from the

question of the methods of gaining insights into that nature. How do methods and technologies—microscopes and telescopes, for example—produce both insight and blindness, to borrow some terms from de Man,[95] into the nature of life?

My purpose expands on Bergson's position here, in thinking about Nietzsche and Barnes—and even, as we shall see, Nicholas Wade—and attempts to add *aesthetics*[96] as a third term to this inseparability. *Beyond Good and Evil* begins with "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," as I have noted, but its conclusion is equally important to the structure of the overarching, philosophical argument. The text ends with a poem, an aftersong, that Nietzsche titles "From High Mountains." *Beyond Good and Evil* originates in epistemology, transforms into ontology, and culminates in poetry.

To focus my argument here even further: the aesthetic comes to the fore in both Nietzsche's philosophy and Barnes's poetic fiction to solve, heuristically if not pragmatically, the contradiction between epistemological (constructivist) problematics and ontological (evolutionary) description. In other words, the desire for ontological description, the desire for truthful ontological description, is always accompanied by nagging epistemological questions of the profound incompleteness, at best, or utter failure, at worst, of those descriptions. Aesthetics comes to alleviate this tension by offering an alternative mode of judgment, one outside of a pure binary logic of truth and

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[95] See Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1983).

[96] Aesthetics, from Greek "perception," is the branch of philosophy, and the everyday practice, conscious and otherwise, involving beauty and ugliness. My use of "aesthetics" implies constant attention to the dual sensations of attraction and revulsion. Aesthetics does not imply a universal truth of beauty, but instead the subjective experience of beauty *qua* beauty. In fact, both Nietzsche and Barnes are famous for their inversion of aesthetic adjudication: what is conventionally ugly is beautiful and vice versa.

falsity, of scientific verification and falsification. Theory of knowledge, theory of life, and theory of beauty seem to us inseparable.

How, then, does this proposition relate to Charles Darwin himself, the figure to whom this chapter—through Wade and Barnes, through Bergson and Nietzsche—ultimately refers? As is quite clear in reading the primary texts, Darwin's approach to knowledge is firmly rooted in nineteenth century objectivism. For example, let us consider the elegant conclusion to his *The Origin of Species* (1859):

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. (174)

For Darwin, there are laws governing the formation of life on earth. What appears as an "entangled bank," as chaos, beautifully anarchic, has, in essence, an underlying order that the scientist can untangle, can grasp and explain.

Darwin describes this underlying order in his next sentence:

> These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. (174)

This single sentence, heavily punctuated, sums up the law of evolution according to Darwin in 1859. If he has epistemological doubt, he is careful to erase such a tone from his ontological theory. He presents the law as certain, as fact. Although it is difficult to maintain such a faith in the concept of law after so many critiques of objectivism even *from within* the scientific community in the twentieth century (the most famous example may be Heisenberg's uncertainty principle), one can nonetheless be sympathetic with the general ethos of Darwin's project. So, I am less interested in Darwin's epistemology than with the *ultimate* conclusion of *The Origin of Species*. Like Nietzsche, Darwin will end with an appeal to the aesthetic:

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (174)

Without "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful" one would be unable to understand the full force and meaning of Darwin's work. Although one could argue that Darwin here is pandering to his audience, that he is cunningly anticipating religious backlash, I believe his conclusion is more than "mere rhetoric," as some would say.

Evolution, for Darwin, means the production of beauty. It emphasizes the super-saturation of life—human and otherwise—with desires and aims, with indeterminate geneses and inexplicably deferred endpoints, with the virtually incomprehensible and vast creation of differences and innovations. Such ontological claims, however, cannot be crafted independently of the author's own aesthetic taste and adjudication. At the very

end of the quotation, the shift in verb tense from "have been" to "are being" suspends the action ("evolution") and the verb ("to evolve") in a temporal limbo and suggests a contingent reconciliation of the past with the present. But Darwin intentionally omits the future tense, the "will be evolved," thus underscoring its ontological unpredictability and openness. He does not write "are evolving" in simple present progressive form, but instead "are being evolved," a more complicated tense harnessing the rhetorical power of both the progressive "being" and "evolved," the past participle of the verb "to evolve." The entire grammatical structure highlights the push of the past and suggests the pull of the future, but remains sitting in the present, however complexly compounded that present tense ultimately is. I am suggesting that this stylistic element or quality is an under-valued legacy of Darwin's project, that Nietzsche and Barnes recommence this project, and that through them we may get a better sense of the way epistemology (theory of knowledge) and ontology (theory of life) must ultimately answer to aesthetics.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche

In a crucial section of *Beyond Good and Evil*, a section that lays a contingent foundation for his thoughts on the topic, Nietzsche discusses nature as text and interpretation. Nietzsche's thoughts on interpretation most clearly separate him from Darwin in the realm of epistemology, but also may reveal his connection to Darwin in the realms of ontology and aesthetics. He prefaces this section with a direct address to his reader: "Forgive me as an old philologist who cannot desist from the malice of putting his finger on bad modes of interpretation" (30). These "bad modes of interpretation" that Nietzsche sees operating spring from those philosophers with "democratic instincts" (30) who

interpret the text of nature as dramatizing the fundamental equality of all beings. He continues:

> But as said above, that is interpretation, not text; and somebody might come along who with opposite intentions and modes of interpretation, could read out of the same "nature," and with regard to the same phenomena, rather the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of claims of power—an interpreter who would picture the unexceptional and unconditional aspects of all "will to power" so vividly that almost every word, even the word "tyranny" itself, would eventually seem unsuitable, or weakening and attenuating metaphor—being too human—but he might, nevertheless, end by asserting the same about this world as you do, namely, that it has a "necessary" and "calculable" course, *not* because laws obtain in it, but because they are absolutely *lacking*, and every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment. (30)

The primary ontological claim here is that Nietzsche sees—or rather, says one may see—in nature not an order of equality, but instead a chaos of inequality, an excess, a magnificent seizure of the immediate present, a denial of economical attention to the future, an orgasmic response, in other words, to the now.[97] He also expands and qualifies this interpretation in an earlier discussion of the Stoics and their desire to "live according to nature." Unlike the Stoics, Nietzsche assumes nature to be "wasteful beyond measure,

[97] Although it is difficult not to, I do not want set up a binary opposition between "use" (procreation) and "pleasure" (orgasm). In neo-Darwinian theory, pleasure is useful in achieving the ultimate goal "that evolution cares about," i.e., the chances of pregnancy are higher if the woman has an orgasm. This position effectively brings pleasure back into the orbit of an obvious heteronormativity. For a very different analysis of pleasure's use, see Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure* (1984).

indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time" and he asks us in thinking about nature to "imagine indifference itself as a power" (15). Nietzsche's notions of life—in both its evolutionary and ecological sense—is characterized by waste, indifference, uncertainty, and perhaps most importantly, a profound anti-teleology.

As is quite clear in the primary texts and duly noted in the criticism, Nietzsche fully adopts the major thrust of Charles Darwin's breakthrough while simultaneously faulting Darwin and his followers for their conservatism. This conservatism in Nietzsche's attack, however, is not a political conservatism—though Nietzsche does understand Darwin's own origins to lie in the bourgeois political economy of Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus—but rather an organic or ontological conservatism. Like Darwin, Nietzsche believes in reconsidering the human as a natural being, as a species that occupies a particular niche in the order of things. The human, then, becomes an animal not in the sense of *reduced* to an animal, but rather in the sense of being subject to the explanatory gestures afforded to other species, other types of beings, that also constitute and populate this particular biological kingdom. The conservatism surfaces for Nietzsche in Darwin's attempt to explain all life as essentially reserved rather than explosive.[98]

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[98] Whether or not this interpretation of Darwin is an adequate one is a different story. Indeed, as John Richardson tells us in *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (2004), most of Nietzsche's quarrels with Darwin are actually quarrels with Spencer. Richardson notes, "he has Spencer but not Darwin in his library" (16). My purpose here, however, is to describe Nietzsche's self-understanding in relation to what he took to be contemporary Darwinian theory. I should add, furthermore, that Nietzsche's understanding of evolutionary biology extended beyond both Darwin and Spencer. Another thinker who exerted a substantial influence on Nietzsche in this respect was his friend Paul Rée (1849-1901). See Robin Small's introduction to Paul Rée's *Basic Writings* (2003).

This critique of Darwinism and the attendant ontological claim about nature is grounded, though, in an epistemological claim, again in relation to the question of text and interpretation. Essentially, Nietzsche is saying that people look "to nature" for different reasons and therefore see different things. Just as questions themselves are not neutral, but rather active, ideological agents governing the possibility of reply, the perspectival look "to nature" produces in a very real sense what exactly one can see.[99] The relationship between text and interpretation in this process of looking and seeing, furthermore, is not as straightforward as one would usually assume. Indeed, there are cases in which "*the text finally disappeared under the interpretation*" (49, italics in original) and this moment of nature as a philological problem may, in fact, be just that situation.

Nietzsche concludes this foundational section on text and interpretation by again directly addressing the reader: "Supposing that this also is only interpretation—and you will be eager enough to make this objection?—well, so much the better" (30-31). This conclusion is not only a recognition of self-reflexivity, but also a very specific value judgment on that recognition. Understanding one's ontological claim about nature as interpretation, for Nietzsche, *is better* than understanding that claim as ultimate, capital *t* Truth. But what exactly is the logic behind this particular evaluative judgment? Why, in other words, is a self-conscious theory of life better than an unselfconscious theory of life?

[99] I make this point more fully, but in a different context, with Edward Menashy. In a special issue of *Watershed: Environment and Culture* on the question "what is natural?" after Katrina, see our "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Hurricane" (2005).

Elsewhere, Nietzsche describes himself as "a scientific man" (121).[100] As a scientist, then, he understands himself to be following the scientific method, a cornerstone of which is the idea that hypotheses can only be proved relatively true, that physical phenomena are always open to new *interpretations*, and that the work of the scientist is therefore never complete. Furthermore, Nietzsche understands that "all philosophers so far have loved their truths" (53), so he does not advocate *abandoning* the notion of truth totally, but again, he makes clear that the philosophers of the future "will certainly not be dogmatists" (53).

Dogmatism equates with an objectivist epistemology, in the sense that dogma discovers the truth of the world, that it has uncovered ultimate knowledge that forecloses further investigation and interpretation. Nietzsche continues about the future philosophers, "It must offend their pride, also their *taste*, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman—which has been the secret wish and hidden meaning of all dogmatic aspirations" (53, my italics).

Nietzsche is infamously identified as a relativist and the above passage certainly does give credence to such a position. At the same time, though, he does make clear that not all interpretations and truth claims are created equal. So, what makes one interpretation of physical phenomena better than another? What, in other words, should be the criteria for judging judgments? Nietzsche's Darwinism may help answer the question. He writes, "The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to

[100] More specifically, Nietzsche describes *his memory* as "the memory of a scientific man" (121).

what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating" (11). He continues on this theme:

> without accepting the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world by means of numbers, man could not live—that renouncing false judgments would mean renouncing life and a denial of life. To recognize untruth as a condition of life—that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil. (12)

The criteria for evaluating the importance of an interpretation, then, becomes the extent to which the interpretation is pragmatically effective in ensuring the preservation of the human individual and the human species.

What's more is that the claim is even further qualified—perhaps contradicted—shortly thereafter:

> Physiologists should think before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being. A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*. […] In short, here as everywhere else, let us beware of *superfluous* teleological principles—one of which is the instinct of self-preservation. (21)

In this passage, we see Nietzsche's divergence from Darwin. Life is not, in Nietzsche's conception, a reserved process that seeks to preserve itself indefinitely, but is

characterized instead by sudden orgasmic discharges. "Will to power," in all its perverse naturalness, becomes an articulation of the queerness of the world in its taxonomical problematics and sexual charge. It seems to answer the question of what life is essentially, to "get to the bottom" of things, but ironically, it exposes the chaotic complexity of all organic composition. It disrupts thinking, especially the evolutionary thinking of his contemporaries. As Elizabeth Grosz writes in *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004), "Nietzsche elaborates a small space of excess that functions outside of natural selection, where life does not simply fulfill itself in surviving in its given milieu successfully enough to reproduce, but where it actively seeks to transform itself, where it refuses reproduction and instead seeks transformation" (11). And for Nietzsche, such transformation has everything to do with an aesthetic sensibility. In the following section, however, I would like to excavate these issues of ontology and epistemology in Barnes before picking up again this aesthetic thread in my argument.

3. Djuna Barnes

Like Nietzsche, Djuna Barnes is interested in the inherent falsification of all ontological description, in the ways in which we make sense of the world when the categorical differentiation between truth and falsity breaks down, but—again like Nietzsche—Barnes does not hesitate to detail her own substantive, ontological models. In *Nightwood*, Barnes responds to Nietzsche's Darwinism and fictionally crafts her own unique version of what I will call "queer nature." How well acquainted Barnes was with Nietzsche's writing is difficult to answer. By the time of Nietzsche's death at the beginning of the twentieth century, 25 August 1900 in Weimar to be specific, Nietzsche was, as Walter Kaufmann puts it, "world-famous and the center of a growing literature, of controversies

in periodicals and newspapers—an 'influence'" (14). At the time of Nietzsche's death and in the midst of his "influence," Barnes would have been eight years old and living in Cornwall-on-Hudson, a small town fifty miles north of New York City. Later as an adult, during the 1920s when she was living in Paris and the 1930s in England, she would have inevitably come into contact with his thought, especially through her associations with figures like T.S. Eliot and James Joyce.[101] The extent of his direct influence on her, though, must remain a question.[102]

In the various scholarly studies of Barnes, especially of *Nightwood*, her most famous work, all of the critics are in agreement: she is difficult. Disagreement arises from the divergent hypotheses explaining the reason for this difficulty. I will suggest that the difficulty does not lie in the narrative itself or in characterization. It takes effort, but we know what's happening to whom and when. The root of the difficulty lies, rather, in understanding this queer nature, Barnes's philosophy of life, a philosophy of life that seems to be so alien to our own, so disjointed—almost grotesquely so—from typical narrative models of life, whether these models are evolutionary, theological, legal, literary, economic, artistic, or ecological. In the space of this queer philosophy of life, in

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[101] For extended discussions of the Eliot-Barnes connection, see Miriam Fuchs's "Djuna Barnes and T.S. Eliot: Authority, Resistance, and Acquiescence" (1993) and Georgette Fleischer's "Djuna Barnes and T.S. Eliot: The Politics and Poetics of *Nightwood*" (1998). Both Fuchs and Fleischer detail the changes Barnes made in the manuscript based upon the advice of Eliot and her friend Emily Holmes Coleman. For alternate versions of the text, see *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts* (1995), edited by Cheryl J. Plumb.

[102] Barnes's familiarity with Darwin and especially the deep time involved in human evolution is also open to debate. In the short story "The Perfect Murder" (1942), Barnes displays a remarkably abbreviated sense of human history. She writes, "*Sound*, that great band of sound that had escaped the human throat for over two thousand years" (439). On the other hand, in *Nightwood*, Barnes demonstrates clear familiarity with evolutionary theories of phylogeny. She writes, for example, "in man's body are found evidences of lost needs" (52).

the strange, the excessive, the unnecessary, the abnormal, the absurd, there exists a form of life, a viability, a disruptive charge, a creative energy that is productive—not ultimately of viable offspring, or the *next* generation, in the traditional sense, it's true, but productive along alternative axes of time and thus according to unconventional axiological adjudications.[103]

In an Afterword written for a 1990 edition of *Ryder*, Djuna Barnes's first novel originally published in 1928 and in many ways a poetic study for *Nightwood*, Paul West describes Barnes's authorial intention: "She wanted to *undo* all readers, to deflower them in one way or another, to stop them from expecting fiction to behave like some well-bred social organism" (243). This undoing, her poetic deflowering,[104] runs throughout her baroque—or "neobaroque" as Monika Kaup (2005) calls it—stylistic sensibility. West continues, offering a textured gloss on Barnes's writing process, "Writing fiction, she was a woman applying lipstick again and again to the same place, varying the hue or the emphasis, the shape and the size, but larding it on thick whenever she got the chance" (244).

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[103] I use queer here to designate a figural presence that represents a resistance to reproduction. This figural presence may or may not have relations with actual gay and lesbian subjects. I am well aware that 1) many gay and lesbian individuals do have children, whether by choice or accident, and that 2) many Darwinists, such as environmental ethicist Dale Jamieson, have posited the evolutionary necessity of—and moral justification for—non-procreative individuals as "fitness-enhancing" in the process of *group* selection within the species. This procreative power, whether direct as in #1 or indirect as in #2, of gay and lesbian individuals in actual practice is, and will be increasingly, an important component of twenty-first century evolutionary theory. My use of queer is much more modest and alludes to an important exchange between Lee Edelman and John Brenkman in the pages of *Narrative*.

[104] For a consideration of the supposed obscenity of the novel, see Dianne Chisholm's "Obscene Modernism: *Eros Noir* and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes" (1997).

In order to understand better this style, and its connection to Barnes's philosophy of life, let us consider the brilliant, opening paragraph of *Nightwood*. The novel begins, appropriately enough, with a birth:

> Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people, Hedvig Volkbein—a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valence stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms—gave birth, at the age of forty-five, to an only child, a son, seven days after her physician predicted that she would be taken. (1)

And then: "with the gross splendour of a general saluting the flag, she named him Felix, thrust him from her, and died" (1). Barnes begins here by directly alluding to the evolutionary discourses circulating within her social and intellectual milieu, specifically, the perpetuation of the race amidst competitive struggle. The European *fin-de-siècle* is marked by an acute anxiety surrounding racial impurity and "degenerative decay" that extends well into the twentieth century (if not the twenty-first).[105] But the tone of Barnes's prose gives rise not to terror, but to parody, not to tragedy, but to comedy.[106] This dramatic scene of life and death, of reproduction and extinction, that begins the

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[105] See, for example, the German Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) and the Italian Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876). I explore this social context further in "Unnatural Predators: Queer Theory Meets Environmental Studies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" (2008).

[106] Elizabeth Pochoda (1976) has an interesting description of the comedy, calling the novel "a tremendously funny book in a desperately surgical sort of way" (180).

narrative is set against a backdrop of Viennese aristocratic grandeur. We encounter in the baroque style of this paragraph (a single sentence!) chains of signifiers, not without content, forming like crystals. The skeleton of the grammar—Hedvig Volkbein gave birth—is layered with descriptive phrases branching out at each step. The climax of the micro-narrative—a son—is cordoned off with commas isolating the textual moment, the biological upshot. In reading the paragraph, one is caught between Huysmansian decadence and Bergsonian *durée*.[107]

Giving birth, doing one's duty, participating in the survival of the species, takes on a darkly comic tinge. The comparison between the saluting of a flag and the thrusting of the baby from the mother's chest that ends this introduction also begins Barnes's long meditation on the social and biological nature of existence. Following Kenneth Burke (1968) who believes the novel to be "ultimately designed to make lamentation a source of pleasure for the reader" (241), I would argue, more specifically, that the novel unravels a queer ontology crafted alongside a parody of objectivist epistemology with aesthetics (pleasure) as the "ultimate design."

Nightwood tells the story of "*la somnambule*" Robin Vote and the disastrous relationships she has with her lovers: her husband Felix Volkbein (whose birth is described above), Nora Flood, and "the squatter" Jenny Petherbridge.[108] Following these

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[107] Barnes's familiarity with Bergson would have come primarily through her familiarity with Proust. She has Matthew allude to the latter's famous novel: "the wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future" (91). For an impressive analysis of Bergson's transatlantic influence, see Tom Quirk's *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens* (1990).

[108] For a study of "bisexuality" in the text and the way in which it relates to Barnes's own sexual identity, see Frann Michel's "'I Just Loved Thelma': Djuna Barnes and the Construction of Bisexuality" (1993). As all of the biographical studies demonstrate, the character of Robin is based upon Barnes's lover Thelma Wood. Their relationship lasted

characters and the path of Robin's destruction, one of the major themes that surfaces in the novel is that, as Bonnie Kime Scott (1995) has put it, "evolution has not safely or permanently delivered human beings to civilization" (73). When we first meet Robin, she is lying unconscious in her room, after overindulging in alcohol, "surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds" (34). This entangled bank, this organic confusion begins the long, unrelenting, even excessive, description of Robin as hyper-natural.[109] Even the way she smells suggests this hyper-nature: "The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil or amber, which is an inner malady of the sea" (34). Capable of embodying every possible state of nature, she is the earth both damp and dry; she is the sea and she is the sky.

Barnes pushes Robin's total immersion in the category of nature when she writes that Robin "seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as

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throughout the 1920s when both women were living in Paris. See also Phillip Herring's "Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood: The Vengeance of *Nightwood*" (1992).

[109] For a related, though quite different, reading of Robin's "naturalness," see Dana Seitler's "Down on All Fours: Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire from Frank Norris to Djuna Barnes" (2001). In this article, Seitler places the character of Robin in the scientific discourse of "degeneration" at the beginning of the twentieth century. For a further examination of this scientific context, see her "Queer Physiognomies; Or, How Many Ways Can We Do the History of Sexuality?" (2004). Carrie Rohman in "Revising the Human: Silence, Being, and the Question of the Animal in *Nightwood*" (2007) reads Robin's silence as a sign of her animality. She writes, "it is this openness toward alterity that defines her and, in my reading, redeems her, while those around her are doomed to suffer the disappointments of symbolic systems that repress, constrict, and ossify experience" (81). While Rohman's reading is an interesting one, in its optimism, almost totally unfounded, it fails to consider the paradoxical and parodic foundation of Barnes's philosophy and aesthetic sensibility.

their ration" (35). Here, Robin has become part of the ecosystem in a seemingly violent, or excessively natural, way. She inhabits the jungle in her bedroom that is no longer her bedroom; even the walls of culture have escaped and in this jungle she will eventually be consumed by flowers. The danger that Robin presents to her lovers, to herself, and later to her own son Guido stems from her animal nature:

> The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a "picture" forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger. Sometimes one meets a woman who is a beast turning human. Such a person's every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey. (37)

Robin's animal nature—or rather, her animality becoming human—though, is far from easily interpreted. While many critics have approached this passage and similar ones through psychoanalytic researches into fairytales,[110] I am suggesting that Barnes's queer sense of evolutionary theory should occupy the center stage in the exegetical operations

[110] Indeed, much criticism of Barnes, especially from a feminist perspective, deals with psychoanalytic explanation. See, for example, Carolyn J. Allen's "Sexual Narrative in the Fiction of Djuna Barnes" (1993) and "The Erotics of Nora's Narrative in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" (1993). Allen expands this project and connects it to the writing of Jeannette Winterson and Rebecca Brown in *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss* (1996). See also Victoria L. Smith's "A Story beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" (1999).

of the critic. At this strange, mythopoeic juncture, Barnes continues, "Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers" (37). Extending her description of Robin being fed to the "carnivorous flowers" in her bedroom, Barnes chronicles the next stage of the life cycle after consumption: "eaten death returning." With this extraordinary, quasi-excremental characterization, Barnes will reinforce her constant attention to the cycles of life and death, of reproduction and extinction.[111]

What exactly, though, does Robin represent? Animality, certainly. She "carried the quality of the 'way back' as animals do" (40). She "was outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin" (146). But there is also a vagueness that surrounds her. She has an understanding of some past moment in human evolutionary history that most of us have lost. As her husband Felix describes her, Robin "had an undefinable disorder, a sort of 'odour of memory,' like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall" (118). In her we can locate, not only a biotic primitivism, but the very genetic genesis of *Homo sapiens*.

At the same time, though, Barnes's queer sense of evolution—like Nietzsche's—is couched in a more general appreciation of constructivist epistemology. Although this appreciation is ubiquitously manifest, such as in Felix's father's attempts to escape his

[111] For an interesting article discussing "history as an excremental production [that] determines the construction of national and personal identity" (82), see Catherine Whitley's "Nations and the Night: Excremental History in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" (2000). For more on the question of history in the novel, see Merrill Cole's "Backwards Ventriloquy: The Historical Uncanny in Barnes's *Nightwood*" (2006).

Jewish heritage[112] and Felix's own love of the circus and its "splendid and reeking falsification" (11),[113] it is perhaps most apparent in the character of the good doctor, Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, chief investigator of "that priceless galaxy of misinformation called the mind" (150), philosopher of the night, and sometimes transvestite. Matthew says, as if in refrain, "there are only confusions" (22). His quarrels with objective knowledge often come in the form of questions—"Do things look in the ten and twelve of noon as they look in the dark?" (85)—and usually with a stunning literary flair—"how can one tell truth when it's never in the company?" (86).

When Nora comes to Matthew for advice about Robin, who is leaving her for Jenny, he says, "There is no truth, and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (136).[114] The creation of a formula, the disguising of the unknowable in the

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[112] The question of Jewishness in the text has sparked much scholarly debate. See Mairead Hanrahan's "Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*: The Cruci-Fiction of the Jew" (2001) and Lara Trubowitz's "In Search of 'The Jew' in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*: Jewishness, Antisemitism, Structure, and Style" (2005) for extended analyses of this issue. Both critics explore the fundamental indeterminacy of Barnes's representation of Jewishness. Hanrahan argues, "Barnes's writing undermines the very distinction between Jew and non-Jew it proposes" (32-33). Following Hanrahan, Trubowitz suggests that Barnes "duplicates and resists the antisemitic rhetoric of the 1920s and 1930s" (312).

[113] On the politics of the circus in *Nightwood*, see Sheryl Stevenson's "Writing the Grotesque Body: Djuna Barnes's Carnival Parody" (1991) and Jane Marcus's "Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic" (1991). Marcus argues that Barnes constitutes "a kind of feminist-anarchist call for freedom from fascism" (221).

[114] Garments and dressing play a major role not only in Dr. O'Connor's transvestism, but also in the novel as a whole. In his article "Ladies of Fashion/Modern(ist) Women" (1999), Alex Goody argues for the importance of fashion as both adornment and performance in the social construction of gender and for the ways in which fashion necessarily is deconstructive: "the blurring of essential with contingent, of truth with performance, of reality with construction" (267). See also Goody's *Modernist Articulations: A Cultural Reading of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Gertrude Stein* (2007). Identifying Barnes as a modernist, rather than a postmodernist, is a question that Donna Gerstenberger takes up in "Modern (Post) Modern: Djuna Barnes among the

appearance of the known, reiterates the Nietzschean epistemology: "O *sancta simplicitas*! In what strange simplification and falsification man lives!" (35).

Like Nietzsche, however, Barnes also puts pressure on this epistemological position. There is a point, or perhaps a value, in simplification and falsification. Barnes writes, "Felix thought to himself that undoubtedly the doctor was a great liar, but a valuable liar. His fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten but imposing plan; some condition of life of which he was the sole surviving retainer" (30).

The value of falsification lies, too, in an aesthetic self-creation: "One's life is peculiarly one's own when one has invented it" (118). This approach to an aesthetic epistemology, however, is not without its dangers. Matthew says, "When a long lie comes up, sometimes it is a beauty; when it drops into dissolution, into drugs and drink, into disease and death, it has at once a singular and terrible attraction" (137). On the other hand, while Dr. Matthew O'Connor does pride himself as an impressive charlatan, he also carries himself in a way that suggests he knows too much. About Robin and her two female lovers, Matthew concludes with tragic finality, telling Nora, "you'll all be locked together, like the poor beasts that get their antlers mixed and are found dead that way, their heads fattened with a knowledge of each other they never wanted, having had to contemplate each other, head-on and eye to eye, until death" (100).

Matthew's description of the fatalistic horror of death calls into question the fundamental principle of "the science of romance" that explains romantic attachment as an evolutionary function to ensure the survival of the species. Here, the "locking together" is not in the holy bonds of matrimony, not in the scripted *telos* of the nuclear

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Others" (1993).

family that can raise the child to reproductive maturity, but in a bestial form of supreme claustrophobia. Barnes's impressive technique of defamiliarization—the *wrong* part of the animal has become fattened—asks the reader to rethink associated questions of the ostensible function of romance. The outcome of being "locked together" is not reproductive success, as the theory of sexual selection would have it, but destructive despair of almost mythic proportions.

For Darwin, sexual selection names the competition within the species, intra-species competition, for the opportunity to reproduce.[115] Sexual selection, in the end, explains how the differences, in terms of physical characteristics and habitual tendencies, between the males and the females of the species come to be. Like the larger theory of natural selection, sexual selection is an explanation of the production of difference. In Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), it assumes that the primary drive of all beings is to attract a mate for the express purpose of ensuring not only the propagation of the species, but more specifically, the propagation of the species *in one's own image*. With the character of Robin, and especially Matthew's interpretations of Robin's relationships, however, Barnes can effectively queer the evolutionary theory. Queering is not a rejection, but a layering, a dramatization of exception. Unlike Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* (1915), for example, Barnes is not interested in science fiction or fantasy in working out her substantive models of life. Indeed, Barnes seems to be totally unsympathetic with the utopian impulse. Human children result from the joining of ontological sexual difference, the sperm and the egg. But this "struggle" is punctuated with variation at every step, underscoring the "mismatch" of identifications and desires,

[115] See Helena Cronin's "Sexual Selection: Historical Perspectives" (1992) and Hamish G. Spencer and Judith C. Masters's "Sexual Selection: Contemporary Debates" (1992).

and (re)producing all kinds of comic and tragic effects independent of "the child." At the same time, though, offspring, or the *next* generation, is an indispensable component of the novel, both thematically and poetically.

In a chapter entitled "Where the Tree Falls," an ironic allusion to the old adage, the apple does not fall far from the tree, Barnes explores the character of the young Guido Volkbein, the son of Felix and Robin. She writes of the child:

> as time passed it became increasingly evident that his child, if born to anything had been born to holy decay. Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death; at ten, barely as tall as a child of six, wearing spectacles, stumbling when he tried to run, with cold hands and anxious face, he followed his father, trembling with an excitement that was a precocious ecstasy. (107)

This young boy, the biological product of heterosexual union, does not participate in the conventional narrative of evolutionary progress. This child calls into question *the Child*, the symbolic embodiment of a bright Future.[116] He is not the grand hero of heterosexual advance; he is not, to return to Wade, a "success on the simple scale that […] evolution cares about." Instead, he is a symptom of decadent atavism. He is "mentally deficient," psychologically strange, and physically weak. We are left, finally, not with the image of

[116] Children occupy a complicated position in all of Barnes's writing from her early short stories to her late poetry. Kathryn Bond Stockton explores the character of Robin herself, not Guido, as the child in *Nightwood*, and connects this to contemporary stereotypes of lesbian relationships—i.e., one woman is the child and the other is the mother. See her "Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal" (2004).

the fit, virile, straight boy-man, but with the image of the sickly young queer.[117]

Then why "holy"?

Considering this son of his, Felix tells Matthew, "I have become entangled in the shadow of a vast apprehension which is my son; he is the central point toward life and death are spinning, the meeting of which my final design will be composed" (117). Here Barnes crafts a very effective parody of the gloom and doom tone of *fin-de-siècle* "degenerative decay." The bio-symbolic investment in the next generation, the future of the species, gives rise to, or yields, the pseudo-redemptive power of the procreative pursuit. In other words, Barnes is unmasking the narrative of evolutionary struggle to be just that, a narrative, with its intrinsic connection to literary form—specifically, tragedy and comedy—and its affective effects on a participatory audience. But the young, queer child Guido, "trembling" in his "precocious ecstasy," is holy for another reason. He, like Robin, has access to another moment in human evolutionary history, a past that has been lost to our current biotic form. He is a creature out of sync with the present—"untimely" in the Nietzschean vocabulary—manifesting a vestigial atavism from the deep past, yet acting with a sagacious precociousness, an uncanny understanding of the future. For Barnes, in this mess of a child, there is a beauty, and a value, far outside of conventional evolutionary notions of fitness.

During this conversation, in which Felix and Matthew are discussing the young Guido, Barnes makes a striking allusion to evolution:

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[117] An alternative interpretation here would be that Barnes uses the young Guido to harness anti-Semitic paranoia that Jews will cause the degeneration of the race. Although I do acknowledge that Barnes can be understood as perpetuating dangerous Jewish stereotypes, especially in 1936 when the novel was first published, I would like to focus on the ambiguity of the character, the inverted "holiness" of the child.

> "Animals find their way about largely by the keenness of their nose," said the doctor. "We have lost ours in order not to be one of them, and what have we in its place? A tension in the spirit which is the contraction of freedom. But," he ended, "all dreadful events are of profit." (119)

According to Matthew here, the moment of separation between human and animal is marked by the shrinkage of the olfactory sense, the increase of spiritual tension, and the diminution of freedom. This separation, "fractured being" in Kannenstine's words, echoes Thoreau's understanding of the animal-human-divine matrix, and will prefigure the recent philosophical work of Giorgio Agamben.[118] For Barnes, however, this "dreadful event [is] of profit." Can Guido himself be placed within this description? Is he a dreadful, profitable event?

The decadent aesthetic, as we have seen in Djuna Barnes, takes great joy and sees great beauty in organic decomposition, psychological deterioration, metaphysical decay. With an axiological equivalent in Nietzsche's inversion of values—what appears bad is good, and vice versa—Barnes's aesthetic also pushes the limits of epistemological certainty. But this pushing does not leave us with *ressentiment*. Dr. Matthew O'Connor concludes, highlighting Barnes's auspicious denouement here, with a genealogy, a genealogy of the birth of music from the spirit of tragedy:

> I, as good a Catholic as they make, have embraced every confection of hope, and yet I know well, for all our outcry and struggle, we shall be for

[118] In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002), Agamben writes, "In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical or political mystery of separation" (16).

> the next generation not the massive dung fallen from the dinosaur, but the little speck left of a humming-bird; so well sing our *Chi vuol la Zingarella* (how women love it!) while I warble my *Sonate au Crépuscule*, throwing in *der Erlkönig* for good measure, not to mention *Who is Sylvia?* (154)

The tragedy—if indeed it is a tragedy—does not dissolve into silent defeat, but into song. In the end, what we leave for the next generation, our children, is the same as the birds: shit and the echo of music.

4. Aesthetics and Evolutionary Theory

In order to conclude, let me return to Wade's "*Pas de Deux* of Sexuality is Written in the Genes," the central problem facing Darwinian thinking, and what I take to be the seeds of the problem's resolution: his guiding metaphor, the ballet. Why does Wade use the metaphor of the ballet to illustrate his heteronormative ontology grounded in objectivist epistemology? Why, in other words, is desire cast in *aesthetic* terms at the exact moment when it is presupposed to be *natural*, outside of the culturally contingent?[119]

Pas de deux, or literally "step of two" in French, is a technical term in ballet that refers to a duet, traditionally between a female ballerina and her male partner, in which the ballet steps are performed together. Using this metaphor, then, allows Wade a chance to naturalize not only heterosexuality, but also, and more specifically, heterosexual monogamy. Indeed, he utilizes the technical term *pas de deux* rather than the more inventive, eccentric, and unruly *pas de une ou trois ou*, for that matter, *quatre ou cinq*. But his metaphor reveals too much and, in fact, seems to work against his primary

[119] Wade would probably answer my question here by saying that aesthetics and, more generally, cultural evolution should be understood as natural evolution defined narrowly in terms of Spencerian "survival of the fittest." I do not have space to respond adequately to this hypothetical response, but suffice it to say I do not agree.

argument, i.e. that sexuality is "written in the genes" and "guided at every turn by genetic programs," that our sex lives *are not* part of a culturally contingent and discursively produced performativity. As a sublime object of aesthetic refinement, the ballerina asks to be interpreted in purely aesthetic terms. Ballet, the embodiment of artifice, seems the antithesis of "natural" bodily movement. Indeed, the entire point of ballet is to underscore the vast abyss between the natural and the artificial. The ballerina would never twist and turn like she is doing "in the wild" where ostensibly she is or must become either predator or prey. In ballet, then, we experience a kind of ontological incredulity; we are asked to suspend our disbelief of the limits—and, therefore, to expand our notions of the possibilities—of what the human form is and what it can do.[120]

The constellation of thought that includes Wade, evolutionary psychologists, sociobiologists, and even some literary critics,[121] is right in bringing the aesthetic back into the orbit of biological evolution, but is wrong in conflating the two. As we say, the devil is in the details. Genetics, broadly construed as *bios*, does provide a powerful interpretation, if not explanation, of aesthetic capability in human—and for those who are serious in this project, other-than-human—life, but the content, result, or even

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[120] We should remember here Spinoza's influence on Nietzsche. When Spinoza in his *Ethics* (1677) says with acute laconism, "no one has yet determined what the body can do" (71), he asks us to think about the forces of the body in profoundly different ways. See also Deleuze's important expansion of Spinozian corporality in his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1970).

[121] See, for example, Joseph Carroll's *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1994), Carroll's more recent *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (2004), and Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson's edited *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (2005). The most amusing part of this body of work is the conversion narrative that often structures the scholar's move from the enchantment of post-structuralism to the reality of evolutionary science. For an example of a more broadly aesthetic study, see Ellen Dissanayake's *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (1992).

significance of this capability should never, because *can never*, be interpreted or explained in this way. A step of ballet is precisely *not* written in the genes, nor is the *pas de deux* of sexuality. There is no use arguing with those who would characterize all life as form and function,[122] as a *telos* of reproduction narrowly construed, I know, but for those of us who do find value—intellectual, pedagogical, spiritual, sexual, political—in the profoundly multiple descents of Darwin, we can only hope that we can continually open ourselves up to the creativity, the aesthetic capabilities, of our creaturely existence.

To return, finally, to Nietzsche: "basically and from time immemorial we are—*accustomed to lying*. Or, to put it more virtuously and hypocritically, in short, more pleasantly: one is much more of an artist than one knows" (105).[123] Hidden behind every constative utterance, every claim to truth, is the shadow of simplification and falsification, of untruth, of—to put it bluntly—the will to ignorance. But simplification and falsification, we should remember, are not necessarily failings, but are instead beyond good and evil. They are the very conditions of human life.

What, then, is the upshot of such an epistemological position? As I have tried to illustrate, Nietzsche and Barnes subject themselves and their work to aesthetic taste and

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[122] See, for example, Michael Levin's "Why Homosexuality is Abnormal" (1984). In this paper, first published in a special issue of *The Monist* on sociobiology and subsequently anthologized in various readers intended for college courses on ethics, Levin "defends the view that homosexuality is abnormal and hence undesirable—not because it is immoral or sinful, or because it weakens society or hampers evolutionary development, but for a purely mechanical reason. It is a misuse of bodily parts. Clear empirical sense attaches to the idea of the use of such bodily parts as genitals, the idea that they are for something, and consequently to the idea of their misuse" (251). We could, of course, respond to Levin, with sufficient passive-aggression, by asking him if he has ever read Darwin. Indeed, misuse of parts seems to be the very engine of evolutionary change, and one could make a strong case for natural history as the history of misuse. In *The Origin of Species*, see Darwin's discussion of "wonderful metamorphoses in function" (146).

[123] For an extended discussion of this issue, see Brian Leiter's "The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche" (1998).

adjudication, not because of artistic hubris, but because it is the very nature of the endeavor. Aesthetics guides human thought—whether that thought is scientific, philosophical, or literary—and evolutionary theory itself is no exception to the rule.

Chapter VI

Queer Environmentality:

A Conclusion

> As "posthumanists," we have begun to chart the costs and limits of the classic effort to maintain an essential species barrier and have sought to diminish those costs and to press against those limits in our own conceptual and other practices. The *telos*—aim or endpoint—of these developments is conceived here, however, not as the universal recognition of a single, comprehensive order of Nature or Being but, rather, as an increasingly rich and operative appreciation of our irreducibly multiple and variable, complexly valenced, infinitely reconfigurable relations with other animals, including each other.

— Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge* (2006, pages 166-167)

I began this dissertation by identifying a fundamental tension between the queer project and the environmental project, and by arguing that this tension originates in a divergent rhetoric of "the natural." For the environmental movement, the deployment of nature and its variations promises to solve certain political exigencies by appealing to a largely understood, and viscerally felt, tropology. The opposition to the nuclear waste site at Yucca Mountain, for example, takes on greater gravity and political urgency when environmentalists introduce the concept of unnaturality into the discussion. The problem, as I understand it, of environmental discourse lies in those moments when the term is used uncritically, when the concept of the natural, and especially its opposite, the unnatural, is used as if to signify ontological fact, on the one hand, and as if detached from its rhetorical associations, on the other. From a queer perspective, what is most

troubling in this discourse is that the most popular terms to describe environmental crisis—unnatural, diseased, pathological, risky, contaminated, suicidal, etc.—are exactly those terms that have been used historically to stigmatize sexual misfits and to instigate social panic and apocalyptic threat.[124] The terms of environmental ideal, furthermore—health, beauty, permanence, futurity, etc.—are exactly those terms that have been used historically to celebrate heterosexual union. Without blowing such terminology out of proportion by suggesting that queer and environmental politics will eternally be at odds, how should we understand this rhetorical development? And further, how has queer politics fit into this rhetorical matrix?

Originally stigmatized for crimes against nature, for sex acts and sexual bodies *contra natura*, queers in the Huysmansian-Wildean tradition have found in the rhetoric of their stigmatization the exact modus operandi of their release. In other words, embracing their status as unnatural—albeit often through ironical technique—queers have found a powerful potentiality for self-validation. Des Esseintes's desire in Huysmans's *A Rebours* (1884) for "natural flowers imitating the false" (84) and Wilde's famous dictum that life is an imitation of art has formed a foundational sense of artificiality in certain queer subcultures for over a century. The effect of such a philosophical and discursive

[124] The Anthropocene, a term coined by chemist Paul Crutzen to describe the past two-hundred years of geological history, has tended to be figured in terms of illness, and especially in terms of the human species as a virus or a cancer feeding off the superorganism that is Earth. This figuration demonstrates the ways in which environmentalism as a political position arises under loss, under threat and potential harm. For a critique of this kind of discourse, see Wendy Brown's *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995). Brown sums up her project: "Working heuristically from Foucault's relatively simple insight that political 'resistance' is figured by and within rather than externally regimes of power it contests, these essays examine ostensibly emancipatory or democratic political projects for the ways they problematically mirror the mechanisms and configurations of power of which they are an effect and which they purport to oppose" (5).

formation has generated a reputation for queers, especially for gay men, as urban fashionistas, materialistic and self-centered, egotistical and narcissistic. The reputation of environmentalists, on the other hand, as tree-hugging, uber-natural, and "organic" makes for a tense political alliance between the two groups.

At least ostensibly.

Lesbian separatist communities, the Radical Fairies, and other queer groups have been actively seeking to make connections between their politics and environmental politics for decades. Likewise, the environmental justice wing of the environmental movement has been committed to social peace and equality for all, including for queer identities, and has understood human diversity as a sign of biological diversity. My chief objective here has been part of this effort at forming an alliance between these two projects. More particularly, I have argued throughout this dissertation that the queer project and the environmental project are always already connected, that is to say, that the questions and politics of human sexuality are always entwined with the questions and politics of the other-than-human world. I have assumed throughout this dissertation that a queer-environmental conjunction yields productive possibilities for each political movement and academic field. Coordinating this conjunction is difficult only to the extent, on the one hand, that nature signifies reproductive heteronormativity, that biology requires rigorous ideological corrective, that ecology and evolution collude with social evil, and on the other, that queer theory deals in mere rhetoric, that deconstruction, especially of nature, is devoid of value, that criticism has no goal. Coordinating this conjunction, more simply, is difficult only to the extent of the distrust directed against the ostensibly opposing side.

Largely through inventive close readings of literary texts, I have tried to coordinate this conjunction by formulating two broad sets of arguments: one about literary history, and the other about scientific paradigms. Reading environmental literary history from a queer perspective reveals a common collection of concerns in Romantic and post-Romantic American literature—namely, a concern with the matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual—and generates many valuable and surprising insights into the nature of human relationships with their environments, and the representations of those relationships in literary form. About scientific paradigms, my argument has been that we need not think of evolution in a strictly heterosexual framework; the equation of heterosexuality and evolution need not be compulsory. I have tried to demonstrate various ways of valuing life—human and otherwise—outside of a pure logic of reproductive heteronormativity. In this sense, one of my motives has been reparative: a reevaluation of a specific population as unnatural, diseased, sick, maladapted, unfit, and impotent, among other condemnations. I have presented a revisionary ecology, the biology of space, and an adapted evolution, the biology of time, not from a scientific perspective, but from kernels of insight in philosophy and literature, from aesthetics and literary form. In the remainder of this chapter I would like to reconsider further this second set of arguments, the one about scientific paradigms, beginning with the question of posthumanism.

Although the *Weltanschauung* to which the term points goes back hundreds of years, "posthumanism" as a consolidated presence on the philosophical scene coincides

with a political enlightenment of the environmental crisis.[125] In the modern Western tradition, we can find traces of posthumanism in Hobbes and Rousseau, to some extent in Spinoza, certainly in Darwin and Thoreau, in Bergson. In other traditions, the Buddhist tradition, for example, the fundamentals of posthumanism have been an abiding orientation from its inception. In the twentieth century, especially the second half of the twentieth-century, with the increasing awareness of the human impact on other-than-human life and the concomitant movements in environmental politics, literature, and philosophy, posthumanism has gained more urgency and intellectual poignancy.

What exactly is posthumanism? And what is its relationship to queer environmentality? If "humanism" assumes an ontologically stable and epistemologically verifiable substance called "the human," posthumanism calls into question that stability and that verifiability. I associate the genesis of posthumanism with the mid-nineteenth century, the event of Darwin, and the crucial moment in the consolidation of knowledges concerning evolution and ecology. In a suggestive article for posthumanist theory entitled "Biologically Inspired Feminism" (2002), Elizabeth Wilson addresses Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and the philosophical implications of the text. She writes:

> When *The Origin of Species* was finally published, what it contained was a remarkable account of differentiation of form. There is no pre-given identity of form or function to be found anywhere in nature, [Darwin] argues; rather there is mutation, inconstancy, and radical interconnectivity

[125] For work on pre-modern post-humanism, see Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert, and Susan Wiseman's edited volume *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies, and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (1999).

> that produces the identities and differences we recognize as individuals and species. (284)

Eternal innovation—form incessantly overcoming function—is the key to Darwin's theory, and to posthumanist philosophy. Such an ontology, however, does not solve all philosophical problems, but opens up an entirely new set of them. The first of these problems should include: To what extent does the time scale of evolutionary change obfuscate our ability to recognize such change? Darwin's revision of ontology—and contemporary posthumanist philosophy more generally—takes the Heraclitan position of mutation and the quasi-Derridean notion of *différance*, but the human mind, a creature of solids, as Bergson suggests, actively works to create the illusion of permanence and stability. The second of these problems is concerned with the political aspects of such an ontology: Can and/or should a politico-axiological system be yoked with an evolutionary ontology whose goal is to uncover connections between *Homo sapiens* and other species?

After Darwin, intellectual interest in some of the oldest philosophical questions becomes Janus-faced, negotiating between two seemingly contradictory assumptions: 1) that human existence should be theorized in terms of animal behavior, and 2) that human existence should be theorized on its own terms. Rousseau's breakthrough in dislodging human society, especially human inequality, from its supposedly natural foundation seems to be trounced in Darwin, and indeed, in the most insidious branches of Darwin's legacy it has unfortunately been. But a "biological turn" need not result in dogmatic interpretations of society or literary texts in terms of the crudest form of evolutionary theory like in Joseph Carroll or Glen Love. If a "biological turn," especially in the field of ecocriticism, has value in contemporary literary studies—and I think it does so

indeed—it is in its researches into the ontology of life on this planet, and thus in its active reengagement with ecological and evolutionary science.

Ecocriticism's question is a good one. In a *PMLA* review essay "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism" (2006), Ursula K. Heise succinctly articulates its question: "In what ways do highly evolved and self-aware beings relate to nature? What roles do language, literature, and art play in this relation?" (504). Ecocriticism's question points to the fundamental problems of literary studies—consciousness and selfconsciousness, the self's relation to the other, text and interpretation, aesthetics and affect—but pushes, through the compound adjective "highly evolved," into the realm of scientific research. In response to Heise, I have suggested, however, that when ecocritics turn to this scientific research their critical faculties should be brought to bear on the tropological representation of that research, even if they ultimately work through the hermeneutics of suspicion into a Ricoeurian "second naïveté."

Feminist studies of science, it is important to note here, have mutated in methodology from rhetorical exposé of ideological inflection in scientific texts, exposé of sexist bias such as the active sperm and passive egg, in the 1980s to powerful and engaging reinterpretations of biological knowledge in the 1990s, a species of doing science in its own right.[126] Often spurred by Deleuzian or Jamesian-Deweyan sensibilities, these two projects—ideological detection (the hermeneutics of suspicion) and scientific improvement—are, of course, not mutually exclusive and their connections

[126] See Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), Luciana Parisi's *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology, and the Mutations of Desire* (2004), Myra J. Hird's *Sex, Gender, and Science* (2004), and Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's edited volume *Material Feminisms* (2008).

further illustrate the inextricability of epistemological and ontological threads of thinking. To repeat Bergson: "*theory of knowledge* and *theory of life* seem to us inseparable" (xiii).

The crucial work of science studies has not been without its difficulties. In the wake of the so-called Science Wars, and especially the Sokal hoax,[127] attempts to call into question the authority of science as objective knowledge are often met with hostility from "actually practicing" scientists. In these debates, scientists often misconstrue the other side by characterizing anyone critical of science—in fact, anyone who does not endorse a strictly objectivist epistemology—as either insane or the most aberrant effect of academic Leftism. Although the Sokal affair generated many interesting and important exchanges, one in particular stands out as particularly significant for my purposes here in the context of queer environmentality. Ellen Willis, writing in the *Village Voice* in 1996, identifies herself as generally sympathetic with the aims and methods of the social study of science, and of constructivist epistemology, but warns that the Science Wars issue of *Social Text* "contains one entirely serious example of social constructionism run amok" (136). The unfortunately serious example? A study written by Ruth Hubbard that calls into question the assumption of sexual dimorphism, and that attempts to rethink a strict male-female binary opposition. Instead of engaging with Hubbard's thinking on the subject, Willis rejects it tout court. What is it about the critique of a two-sex system that causes so much anxiety? We should begin with Hubbard's argument, an argument that can be found in elaborated form in the historian Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* (1990) and the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body* (2000).

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[127] See *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy* (2000), edited by *Lingua Franca*, the journal in which Sokal's confession appeared on the day his faux article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" (1996) was published by *Social Text*.

If one to two percent of human infants are born with ambiguous genitalia—that is, if one to two percent of humans are intersex—and there are six billion human individuals on earth, that makes between 60-120 million individuals that do not conform to the supposed fact of a strict sexual dimorphism.[128] Since the vast majority of individuals do conform more or less to some ideal anatomy, these millions of cases are identified as "abnormal conditions" requiring medical intervention. Since anatomical irregularity is construed as a developmental failure, rectification will require advances in reconstructive cosmetics. Indeed, the medical community maintains by and large that genital ambiguity will cause irreparable psychological harm for the person later in life that will outweigh the immediate physical harm of surgery. Although the intersex are culturally illegible, they are not unwritable.

If the presence of the intersex exposes a cultural failure to recognize a range of sexes hovering between an ideal male and an ideal female, rectification will require advances of an altogether different sort, a rethinking of the anatomical binary that Willis finds so disturbing in Hubbard's social study of science. Hubbard's analysis is concerned primarily with human anatomy, but her argument has equal import for other-than-human life at large. The questionable ontology of sexual anatomy, of male-female opposition, pushes the limits of epistemological constructivism—does it go too far?—even in the most sympathetic contexts because it is so foundational to our understanding of the world. This questionable ontology often travels under the heading "sexual difference," but the operative term, "difference," is misleading for difference implies differences in multitude, diversity, whereas what is meant is categorical contradistinction, dimorphism.

[128] See Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000).

The notion of sexual dimorphism—male and female bodies—springs from an understanding of human reproduction in its most elemental form: the sperm and the egg. These elemental forms become microcosmic emblems, condensations in miniature of larger organic structures: genitalia, and on a grander scale, the body. The sperm and the egg, figured in their ideal form, in other words, represent the male and the female, figured in their ideal form. Bodies—and let us be specific, *correct* bodies—come to be figured as carriers of either sperm or eggs, as vessels for the seeds of life.

My point is not to suggest that corrective surgery is without doubt unethical, or to suggest that a revision of a two-sex system will be an easy task, but instead to suggest the way in which the question of value dictates what is figured into the analysis of fact. Reproductive heteronormativity—or rather, a presumed hetero-ubiquity—produces through synecdochic thinking (sperm equals man, egg equals woman) a sexual dimorphism in which what counts as life only counts in relation to its reproductive capacity.

In order to conclude I would like to turn to the case of "Lonesome George," the Pinta Galapagos tortoise, one of the last of his species, and now a conservation icon. Lonesome George dramatizes what is at stake in reproductive heteronormativity for other-than-human life on this planet. Since Darwin's voyage to the Galapagos Islands in the mid-nineteenth century, the Pinta tortoises have been over-hunted not only for their meat, but also as specimens to be shipped back to museums of natural history. Their species now sits on the edge of extinction, and with only a few individuals remaining, conservation biologists have taken it upon themselves to harness each one's reproductive capacity, to put each one's reproductive capacity into conscious use. Lonely George,

however, has proven an unwilling participant in their endeavors. Uninterested in sex acts with the females of his species, with any members of his species for that matter, Lonesome George, in the words of *New York Times* writer John Tierney, "prefers a different lifestyle." Undeterred by George's disinterest, however, conservation biologists have begun to lube George up and rub him down in an attempt to extract semen that can then be used for artificial insemination. These attempts have also misfired. Although the tortoise does achieve an erection, he has yet to reach orgasm. The case of Lonesome George raises an important ethical question. Should the conservation biologists leave the animal alone, or extract semen to reproduce the species by any means necessary, including cloning? On the one hand, is an ethics of manipulation and control indicative of a larger human hubris, a larger and potentially-misplaced faith in science and technological innovation? And on the other, is an ethics of letting be indicative of a larger will towards death, a larger aesthetics of ephemerality?

The jump between a critique of human sexual dimorphism to a discussion of tortoise sexual disinterest may seem fallacious, but I would maintain that both are different manifestations of the same central problem of reproductive heteronormativity. In this dissertation, I have attempted to come to terms with this problem, a problem that has been central to intellectual life since at least the nineteenth century. In his introduction to *Sexual Inversion* (1897), Havelock Ellis explains the reason why he has been so preoccupied with sex. "Sex lies at the root of life," he writes, "and we can never learn to reverence life until we know how to understand sex" (x). Ellis's statement consists of two kinds of claims: the first, ontological, the second, axiological. While I believe Ellis's latter assertion, I wonder at the former. Reverencing life does require our

coming to terms with the many issues associated with the concept of sex, but the ontological claim that occasions such axiological adjudication may be faulty. That sex lies at the root of life may be in fact a lie.

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