

“something that would have shed itself in nature”
Ecological Politics, Ecocriticism, and the Poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham

by

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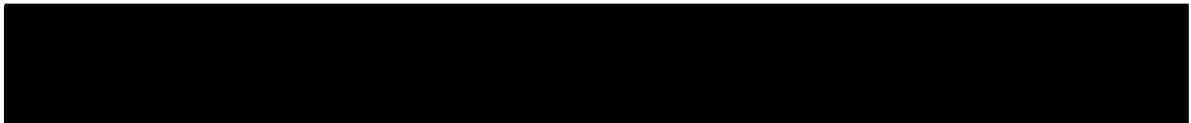
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ABSTRACT

This thesis reads the unconventional “nature” poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham in relation to ecological politics by means of a critique of the emerging field of literary ecocriticism. I argue that ecocriticism’s elaboration of the relationship between ecological politics and poetics is limited by its relatively underexamined commitments to the particular version of eco-politics known as radical ecology. This movement’s identity politics paradigm limits ecocriticism’s ability to reveal the political dimensions of poetry which problematizes the idea of transparent experience and knowledge of nonhuman nature. I suggest that an ecological politics of performativity which emphasizes the instability and contingency of both the meanings that we assign to nonhuman nature and our relationships to it offers a context for considering as profoundly ecological the comedy of Don McKay’s poetry and the phenomenological bent of Jorie Graham’s *Materialism* (1993).

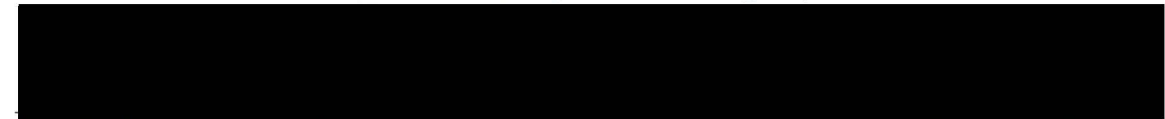
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Preface

This thesis deals with the relationship between poetry and ecological politics. It asks how poetry whose concern is our relationship to the nonhuman “natural” world can be read in the light of the renovations in thought and, to a lesser degree, in practice introduced by the ecology movement into the social and political realms over the last four decades. I take the poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham, respectively, as case studies for my argument that poetry which significantly problematizes the idea of transparent experience and knowledge of nonhuman nature – at first glance a liability for a politics seeking to make claims on behalf of “the earth” – may in fact be closely linked to ecological politics.

The link between ecological politics and poetics has been elaborated most explicitly in the relatively recent and self-defined field of literary ecocriticism. Unfortunately, this criticism’s potential to illuminate the complex relationship between literary explorations of human/nonhuman interactions and a politics committed to rethinking and altering the social means by which we organize those interactions has so far been hampered by its commitments to a fairly narrow eco-political agenda, as well as by the fact that it has tended to leave its theoretical bases relatively undertheorized. In order to read McKay and Graham in the context of ecological politics, then, I begin with a critique of ecocriticism as it is currently practiced by most of those who call themselves ecocritics, arguing that its normative and, in the main, theoretically unexamined promotion of literary mimesis, and its related mistrust of the “figurative,” are directly linked to a problematic ecological identity politics. I suggest that an ecological politics of performativity may provide the basis for an ecocriticism capable of supplying a more sophisticated account of the nexus of issues surrounding ecological politics and poetics.

A skeptic could argue that McKay’s and Graham’s unconventional “nature”

poetry may be profitably read outside of the context of ecological politics and ecocriticism (whether or not renovated in the way that I suggest) – that, indeed, such a context adds little to discussions of the central features of McKay’s and Graham’s work. A devil’s advocate might even argue that my own readings of their poetry in this thesis owe little to that specific ecocritical and eco-political context, but rather participate in a broader tradition of literary criticism grounded in epistemological issues, with a particular focus on human/nonhuman relations. While such arguments may have some validity, they don’t sufficiently acknowledge my attempts here to bring together poetry and politics – not in a one-to-one correspondence wherein reading poetry becomes a direct political action comparable to introducing legislation or attending a protest rally (the attempt to theorize literature as such political action has been one of the factors hitherto limiting ecocriticism), but through complimentary conceptions of both politics and poetry as repeated performances of ultimately undecidable relationships (in this case between human and nonhuman participants), relationships whose instability is predicated upon the radical contingency of human meaning-making. From this perspective, poetry and politics are arts of the possible rather than of the “given.” What ecocriticism’s deficiencies obscure is the possibility for understanding poetry as political without reducing it to a relatively simple didactic role wherein it effects in humans the recovery of a supposedly lost identity with “nature.” Once questions of epistemology begin to impinge on politics, as they do in an ecological politics of performativity, poetry addressing those questions takes on new political significance as a parallel exploration of the ways in which the subjects of representation are made intelligible through the very process of representation.

McKay’s and Graham’s poetry is particularly interesting to examine in this context, not because ecological politics is indispensable for interpreting it, but because

the poems' own formal properties enact a stance towards the nonhuman realm that calls attention to its performative character. Specifically, McKay's use of comedy and Graham's phenomenological approach both expose our understanding of, even our interactions with, nonhuman nature as a performative human construction and thus, in a sense, model the human linguistic "dance of non-discovery" (Graham, *Dream* 159) by which "nature" is made culturally intelligible. These poetic strategies do what recent theorists suggest is one of the central tasks of ecological politics: they continue to make and disrupt and remake orienting fictions about our relationship to the nonhuman realm. If established literary criticism provides the tools for elucidating McKay's and Graham's poetic maneuvers, it lacks the capacity to link them to the specific social and political interventions of the ecology movement, to provide a context in which McKay's highlighting of the range of conventions by which we make meaning of the nonhuman realm and Graham's troubling of the subject/object dichotomy which informs much of that meaning-making process can be seen as participating in a political project whose aim is to rethink and revise the ways in which we live.

This thesis therefore undertakes that linking task, and to that end is organized as follows. In the introduction I give an overview of the field of ecocriticism, outlining its relations both to the movement known as radical ecology and to poetry. The first chapter examines the ways in which radical ecology participates in the version of representative politics known as identity politics, the critiques that have been made of that model, and the alternatives offered by a politics of performativity. My account of eco-politics, based on the distinction between "radical" and "reform" ecologies, is necessarily schematic and heuristic, in order to set up a framework for my analysis of ecocriticism. In a limited amount of space, I forego a more fully nuanced overview of such internally diverse movements as ecofeminism, identifying some broad trends common to the different

versions of radical ecology. In the second chapter, I link mainstream ecocritical practice to certain of these trends, arguing that ecocriticism's commitment to environmental mimesis in literature derives primarily from its alignment with the identity politics of some radical ecologies. Finally, the third and fourth chapters operate as case studies for the argument that, read in the context of an ecological politics of performativity, even (and possibly especially) poetry whose subject is not the nonhuman world itself but our difficult relationship to that world may be seen to contain a highly ecological dimension. My analyses of Don McKay's and Jorie Graham's poetry show that their work is deeply political insofar as, through its disruptions of conventional narratives of human/nonhuman interactions, it suggests a model for human thinking now being recognized as a necessary component of any ecological politics.

Introduction

Literary ecocriticism has been called everything from the hippest new mode of literary criticism to an integral part of the contemporary environmental movement. Most broadly defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii), ecocriticism covers an array of critical approaches to a potentially broad range of literary texts. As Patrick Murphy notes, “Ecocriticism can be employed in studying any literary work insofar as that work reveals or reflects something about nature and humanity’s place in, with, or against it” (*Farther* 1).

But despite the openness suggested by these definitions of ecocriticism, its partisan codification is well under way, allowing for the rough distinction between mainstream and dissident ecocriticism. Mainstream ecocriticism has set a clear agenda for literary study: among other things, to promote a focus on nonfiction nature writing, to plead the superiority of literary realism in fiction dealing with human/nonhuman interactions, to condemn “theory” on the basis of its interest in “abstraction” rather than material “reality.” The work I’m calling dissident ecocriticism challenges this mandate for environmental mimesis, both directly and implicitly, claiming that it’s both limiting and misguided. One of the most vocal dissidents, Dana Phillips, argues that mainstream ecocriticism’s commitment to a particular form of philosophical and scientific realism, and thus to a conventional literary realism, contributes to a knee-jerk anti-theoretical bent, displays philosophical naiveté, and finally implies the irrelevancy of the literary critic’s professional behaviour. Mainstream ecocritics, however, dismiss such challenges as reflecting the depth of academe’s enthrallment with “nihilistic” and environmentally apathetic postmodern and poststructuralist theories. And here the argument stalls. Ecocritics continue, for the most part, to trade accusations – of philosophical naiveté and political conservatism, on the part of mainstream ecocriticism, and of philosophical

solipsism and political apathy, on the part of dissident ecocriticism

As the two sides become further entrenched in their respective positions, the question of a means to overcome this impasse, beyond simply choosing a side and sticking with it, becomes more and more pressing. At stake is not only the question of which faction may claim to be the “true” ecocriticism. There is also the risk that antagonism will lead to an unnecessary and unproductive polarization of the two positions, as well as the related danger that ecocritics, unhappy with the prospect of being inevitably aligned with one or the other camp, will choose to curtail their investigations. The possibility of forestalling such an eventuality seems to hinge on exploring questions of politics that ecocritics, mainstream and dissident alike, have thus far chosen to skirt. Most generally, we must ask how the study of literature and politics are related, more particularly, whether a critical commitment to postmodernism/poststructuralism, which resists understanding literary mimesis as a neutral copy of empirical reality, precludes political, specifically environmental, engagement.

Literary Ecocriticism and Ecological Politics

Ecocriticism is overtly political. One of the earliest book-length works of self-designated ecocriticism, Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991),¹ begins its argument for relating literature to current environmental concerns with the comments, “Literary criticism has never been a pure discipline. Ever since Plato and Aristotle argued over whether poets are harmful or beneficial to the state, political and moral concerns have borne in upon the discussion of literature” (1). If, as Patrick Murphy claims, “the field of ecocriticism really began with teachers calling for, and including in their own courses, critical attention to works of nonfiction [nature writing], which, they thought, had literary merit” (*Farther* 5-6), it soon became a matter of arguing that those works were relevant to the

environmental crisis. Murphy quotes Glen Love's definition of ecocriticism as "the response of literary study and analysis to the ecological consciousness of the last two decades and to the recognition that human culture is inextricably involved with, and ultimately subordinate to, the physical, natural world" (qtd. in Murphy, *Farther* 15). The ecocritical focus, it seems, quickly shifted from bringing a marginalized category of literary production – nonfiction nature writing – into the literary canon, to scrutinizing both canonical and non-canonical works for ecological value in order to produce a new environmentally-friendly canon. This orientation is most explicit in the comments of ecocritics offering an overview of the field. For instance, Cheryll Glotfelty asks, in her introduction to the influential *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), how we can "contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature" (xxi). The ecocritical question, then, becomes one of political, rather than literary, "merit." Or perhaps more accurately, the question of particular works' literary merit is subsumed under the question of their political merit, such that the two terms often become interchangeable in ecocriticism.

It is true that this genealogy is deceptive insofar as it implies a critical move from neutral literary to ecological values, and thus portrays ecocriticism as muddying the literary waters by introducing politics into the seemingly nonpartisan field of aesthetics. I fully agree with ecocriticism's point that neither literature nor criticism is politically neutral, and that the appeal to literary values has masked, and continues to mask, varied political agendas. But ecocriticism reproduces this fault insofar as it doesn't specify its own political orientation beyond a vague, often moralistic, gesture towards the ecology movement as a beacon of ethical and political responsibility. Ecocritical logic is deceptively simple. We are, this logic asserts, in a state of material crisis due to at least some of our modern interventions in the physical world. If physical interventions in

general are determined by consciousness, which is itself determined by cultural products, then altering our interventions requires a change in cultural products. Things get considerably more complicated, however, when we try to determine which particular interventions, and thus which cultural changes, are appropriate responses to the material environmental crisis. Mainstream ecocriticism, for the most part, fails to acknowledge its own endorsement of a particular and partial mode of political intervention, suggesting that where traditionally-defined “literary” values (of beauty or truth, for instance) pose as being universal and objective, “ecological” values actually are. Ecocriticism’s tendency to imply its transcendence of politics, through the moralistic introduction of universal ecological criteria, exposes its political self-portrayal as a feint, rather than an honest admission.

To be honest, and to truly live up to its self-confessed political partiality, ecocriticism would have to admit that its fundamental authority, the ecology movement, contains a range of positions, many of which are at odds with each other. The unified ecology movement to which mainstream ecocriticism blithely appeals for justification is a myth, ecocriticism overlooks the fact that the ecology movement is deeply fractured on exactly the question of what green politics are: proponents of sustainable development vie with deep ecologists, who in turn vie with ecofeminists, and so on, to corner the market on the “right” response to the environmental crisis. Because they don’t bother to address the question of exactly *which* ecology movement ecocriticism is aligned with (or if they do, like Lawrence Buell, they don’t bother to address problems with that ecological faction), the most influential ecocritics operate, albeit tacitly and often inconsistently, on the assumption that the cosmologies and strategies of a particular strand of green politics exhaust the green political spectrum.

Mainstream ecocriticism subscribes to and universalizes the strand of ecological

politics often called radical ecology² Its most cherished (from a dissident perspective, most objectionable) dogma – commitments to nonfiction, realism, an anti-theoretical stance – derive from that orientation One might argue that these are problematic not so much in themselves, but when presented as normative – when ecocriticism and literature are judged to be “ecological” and “anti-ecological” on the basis of their conformity to the precepts of what is, after all, but one facet of a broad and diverse movement for social change Is the solution then for mainstream ecocriticism simply to expose its commitments to radical ecology, but otherwise continue along the same lines? Unfortunately, it isn’t so simple The normative impulse so strong in mainstream ecocriticism turns out to be a derivative of certain forms of radical ecological politics, rather than a hazard of politically motivated criticism in general

The political paradigm of much radical ecology may be described most generally as the politics of representation, more specifically as identity politics, itself a radicalized version of representative politics Radical ecological politics, that is, often participates in a model used in different ways, and to different degrees, by many of the “new social movements” of the twentieth century, in which an essential identity shared by members of a collectivity is seen to become both the subject and the instrument of a representative politics From a postmodern perspective, identity politics’s emphasis on the recovery of fundamental universal essences or identities as the key to political change is profoundly problematic While the proliferation of social movements has been pronounced characteristic of the postmodern political condition (on account of the de-centering of political authority, and a shift in social/political space), the identity politics that often govern these movements remains committed to a fundamental principle of modernity – faith in the transparency and universality of basic social and individual identities Although, as some theorists argue, identity politics may be understood to stem from a

radically democratic moment – the desire to challenge relations of oppression and domination – they also contain, insofar as they fail to disengage themselves from a focus on an exclusive identity, an antidemocratic or conservative moment. Social movement literary criticism may, in turn, be understood to inherit the same political ambivalence³

I will argue, then, that challenges to mainstream ecocriticism may be more effectively mounted from the perspective of current critiques of ecological identity politics, critiques loosely connected by their commitments to various aspects of postmodernism, than by poststructuralist literary criticism. Rather than jumping directly into the ecocriticism versus postmodernism literary fray, I will enter the debate by means of the incursions of postmodernism into identity politics in general, and some of the radical ecologies in particular. The fact that from this perspective, postmodern approaches to ecology may be seen as more, rather than less, environmentally responsible than some radical approaches helps subvert the mainstream ecocritical insistence that postmodernist literature and criticism are inherently nihilist. This approach shows how, on the contrary, ecological identity politics and, in turn, mainstream ecocriticism overlook the fact that, in Catriona Sandilands's words, "in the very act of formulating politics around a core idea of identity [in this case, a "natural" identity], the potential for an antidemocratic sectarianism looms large insofar as the desire for difference [from the dominant oppressing identity] overshadows the desire for political challenge" (43). Such an analysis suggests that an ecological politics and an ecocriticism cognizant of the perils of identity politics may move beyond conservatism to fully develop the democratic moments of both ecological identity politics and ecocritical realism, further "reconceiving power away from technocratic and invasive forms of social control" (43).

Because this approach takes certain forms of ecological politics, rather than

ecocriticism, as its starting point, it has the advantage of meeting ecocritics on their own ground, that of politics. It highlights the fact that mainstream ecocriticism's insistence on the possibility of accurate transcription of a transparent natural world – an easy target for poststructuralist attacks – is made not as an end in itself, but *in service of* an assertion of activism, of political resistance. If ecocriticism's trump card is its practitioners' sense of vital engagement with a pressing political issue (often pronounced the most pressing issue, since "the fate of the earth" is seen to hang in the balance), then a response that doesn't address this, but is content merely to demonstrate the naivete of mainstream ecocriticism's preoccupation with environmental mimesis, misses the root of both ecocriticism's problems and its promise. My examination of debates occurring in the ecology movement is thus not a digression from the subject of ecocriticism, but an attempt to reach its very foundations.

Ecocriticism and Poetry

Of course, not all ecocriticism shares the prescriptiveness that dogs ecocriticism rooted in ecological identity politics. Many ecocritics succeed in exploring the varied visions of human/nonhuman interactions without submitting to the temptation to "take a particular subset of nature-oriented literature, such as the nonfiction prose essay of nature writing, and define that genre as the starting point for the rest of literature" (Murphy, *Farther* 2). Unfortunately, because these dissident ecocritics haven't bothered to thoroughly address their own work's connections to ecological politics, ecocritics influenced to some degree by radical ecologies have used a spurious moral pull (derived from their claim to be "politically engaged" rather than "nihilist") to set a fairly narrow literary agenda. This agenda leads to the ecocritical marginalization and misreading of literary texts that don't conform to the criteria of nonfictionality, literary realism, and concreteness rather than

abstraction

Two cases in point would be the unconventional “nature” poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham. Taking interpretive cues from the dominant ecocritical approaches would produce at best a misreading of McKay’s and Graham’s work as overly concerned with human experience, at worst a denunciation of it as unecological – that is, as work that fosters the alienated human consciousness identified as a source of the environmental crisis. Yet, both poets see themselves as engaging, in their subject matters as well as through formal elements of their poetry, various dimensions of the current ecological crisis (McKay) as well as aspects of modernity often deemed responsible for the former (Graham). The fact that mainstream ecocriticism can’t accommodate their work is symptomatic of its limitations.

It is true that mainstream ecocriticism’s relationship to poetry remains ambiguous. As I’ve mentioned, its focus on realism has led it to privilege nonfictional genres, particularly the literary nonfiction essay, while generally dismissing novels as too oriented towards interactions between humans, an approach which has occasioned some dissatisfaction. Ecocriticism’s stance towards poetry is less clear-cut, and thus not often explicitly addressed. On one hand, ecocriticism suspects a genre whose motor has traditionally been such slippery (non-referential) techniques as metaphor, symbolism, and analogy. For example, in her essay “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Reading the Orange,” Josephine Donovan champions Dorothy Wordsworth’s prose journal entries over her brother William’s poetry, claiming that by “her ability to resist figuration of the literal,” Dorothy “corrects [William’s] tendency (and indeed the tendency of much Western literature) ... to impose a symbolic order upon the literal, the natural, denying its ‘thouness’, killing it in order to exploit it for the signifying purposes of the author” (Gaard and Murphy 78). A poststructuralist argument would of course counter that the

“nonsymbolic discourse” Donovan claims for Dorothy is an oxymoron, and that Donovan’s argument is undermined by a naïve positivism. But what is more pertinent here is Donovan’s implied denigration of poetry as a genre. What is poetry if not the more or less overt “imposition” of a “symbolic order” upon the literal? From a poststructuralist viewpoint, poetry like William’s merely dramatizes more overtly than Dorothy’s prose the figurative nature of all language. From Donovan’s perspective, however, there is a clear line of demarcation between language that “circumvent[s] figurative domination by remaining faithful to the literal” (76) and language that doesn’t, and that line corresponds, first and foremost, to the distinction between prose and poetry.

On the other hand, because traditional nature poetry often lacks an explicitly narrative frame, and, as Patrick Murphy points out, contains an “I” that “is generally identified as no more fictional than that of the naturalist essay” (“Women” 37), it often qualifies for ecocriticism’s project of “reading realist texts realistically” (Phillips 586). In addition, some mainstream ecocritics have tried to rescue less tractable poetry by arguing that its formal dimensions, rather than its specific content, fulfill its mimetic task. That is, the poetic form itself, as a linguistic structure, reflects the workings of a healthy ecosystem. In William Rueckert’s pioneering ecocritical essay “Some Principles of Ecocriticism” (1978), he argues that

The concept of the poem as stored energy ... frees one from a variety of critical tyrannies, most notably, perhaps, that of pure hermeneutics, the transformation of this stored energy directly into a set of coherent meanings. What a poem is saying is probably always less important than what it is doing and how – in the deep sense – it coheres. Properly understood, poems can be studied as models for energy flow, community building, and ecosystems. (Glotfelty and Fromm 110)

While Rueckert here indirectly attacks later ecocriticism’s faith in literature’s ability, through mimesis, to straightforwardly disclose “a set of coherent meanings,” he does so for a noble purpose – to appropriate more territory for the realist approach. By shifting

the focus from content to form, at least in the case of poetry, Rueckert extends the dominion of ecocritical mimeticism to poetry that transgresses the generally realist conventions of traditional nature poetry. From a mainstream ecocritical perspective, then, while all nature poetry might be judged insufficiently realist due to an inevitable preponderance of “figurative” rather than “literal” imagery, it is paradoxically redeemed because the operation of those figures is judged to imitate the dynamics of interconnection allegedly at work in a healthy ecosystem. As nonfiction nature writing contributes to ecological identity politics by its ostensible “uncovering” of nature’s true identity, nature poetry contributes by offering a linguistic ecosystem, as it were, a model of words and images whose interaction mirrors that of the various interdependent elements of nature.

But creative as mainstream ecocriticism can be in subsuming unlikely poetic approaches under the rubric of realism, it tends to offer a generic reading of them, since it must focus on their formal mimesis, to the exclusion of content. It falls particularly short when faced with the poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham. Since both poets write definitively non-traditional nature poetry, mainstream ecocriticism – supposing it didn’t simply denounce them, as Donovan does Wordsworth, for “killing” and exploiting nonhuman nature for their own purposes – would be obliged to take the route of studying their poems as “models” for ecosystems. But this almost immediately proves a dead end, since it addresses neither their subject matter (often the nonhuman world), nor the impact of their formal innovations. Seeing the poets’ formal techniques as reflections of an ecosystem’s physical innovations, its creative distribution of energy, entirely misses the point. McKay and Graham both explicitly argue that the formal properties of their poetry produce a model *for human thinking* rather than a model *of the physical ecosystem*. It could be argued that this model for thinking is in fact a deeply ecological one, although

not in radical ecological or mainstream ecocritical terms McKay's and Graham's poetry demands an alternative approach. I hope, through my critique of mainstream ecocriticism, to show how the context of an ecological politics of performativity highlights the political dimensions of these poets' work

The Politics of Radical Ecology

Ecocriticism's commitment to literary mimesis has been criticized as an agenda drawn from an ill-understood ecological science and a misunderstood ecological politics. Dana Phillips (1999), for instance, points out that mainstream ecocriticism can only defend its emphasis on environmental mimesis, through the championing of nonfiction and literary realism, by wilfully ignoring both the decline of the ecosystem concept within the discipline of ecology¹ and the fact that ecological politics can be undertaken only by environmental activists and working ecologists (580-82, 599n10, 584). But while this assessment is at least superficially accurate, its problematization of ecocriticism can be considerably deepened if it assumes more respect for, and so anticipates more complexity from, the criticism. Ecocriticism is not simply misinformed. In fact, its tendency to be neither comprehensive nor entirely accurate in its appropriations of green critiques of modern industrial capitalist society masks the fact that it draws largely on one broad strain of ecological politics, the set of movements called radical ecology. Like many of the other "new social movements,"² radical ecologies often operate with a particular version of the modern politics of representation, known as identity politics. Rather than being understood merely as naïve missteps, ecocritical appeals to the values of realistic representation can be seen to be consistent with the identity politics of radical ecology. Making sense of the ecocritical focus on mimesis requires, above all, a look at the politics of the ecology movement.

Like all social movements, the set of political programs grouped under the heading "ecology movement" is unified in neither its philosophical bases nor its political strategies. As Timothy Luke points out, ecology movements often begin as critiques of various aspects of modernity and then expand to become critiques of each other, as different groups accuse one other of remaining too closely allied with particular features

of modernity (x1-x11). For example, deep ecology arises as a critique of “shallow” resource-management ecology (itself at least somewhat critical of modern industrial capitalism), and is in turn criticized by ecofeminism for its masculinist bias. The latest ecocritiques, to use Luke’s term, are those of a postmodern bent³. These share an insistence that some anthropocentrism is unavoidable in our dealings with the nonhuman world, since all our knowledge and experience of that world is inevitably filtered through linguistic and cultural practices, and thus is culturally and historically specific. Postmodern critics claim that the assumption, made in various ways by many ecological movements, that nonhuman nature may prescribe human social organization derives from the premise that we have unmediated access to that nature, particularly through science (mainstream ecology), but also through such means as mystical/psychological experience (deep ecology) and, in many versions of ecofeminism, “a common [female] experience of oppression, including relations to nature” (Sandilands 27). These critics see such assumptions, like any arguments “from nature,” as both epistemologically suspect and politically dangerous.

Popularly cast on the culture side of an oversimplified nature versus culture debate, postmodern approaches are often dismissed out-of-hand as inherently unecological. For instance, most summaries of the various forms of green politics ignore postmodern approaches altogether. The major distinction, between radical and reform approaches to the contemporary environmental crisis, leaves out the possibility of a postmodern ecological politics. Two influential books which undertake the task of outlining the field of green politics both focus on arguing for the superiority of the radical “ecocentric” position over the reform one. Andrew Dobson’s analysis (1990) divides ecological politics into two broad approaches: a reformist “environmentalism,” and a radical “ecologism.” The first “would argue for a ‘managerial’ approach to

environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption” (13), while the second sees the environmental crisis as bespeaking the necessity of a fundamental re-ordering of social, political and economic structures – of overturning many of modernity’s central projects, in particular industrial capitalism, and mechanistic science and technology. These approaches are, in turn, based on two different philosophical positions: reformist environmentalism makes the “instrumentalist” and “anthropocentric” argument that “human beings ought to care for the environment because it is in our interest to do so” (19); radical ecologism claims that “the environment has an intrinsic value that entitles it to existence regardless of the interest of human beings” (19). Arguing in favour of the latter approach, Dobson overlooks the postmodern objection that any politics grounded in a belief in the intrinsic value of the environment will necessarily succumb to at least a “weak” anthropocentrism, since it will always be human beings who contend over what best serves the interests of “the earth.”

John Dryzek (1997) takes a somewhat different approach to organizing the variety of green programs. On the basis of a “discourse approach” that compares the ways in which different environmental discourses apprehend the world, Dryzek organizes ecological movements according to whether their responses to the terms of industrialism are radical or reform, prosaic or imaginative. Radical responses diverge far more from the terms of industrialism than do reformist ones, imaginative responses seek to redefine the political-economic structure of industrial society, while prosaic ones work within that structure. These two dimensions combine to produce four main environmental discourses: the reformist and prosaic discourse of *environmental problem-solving*, the reformist and imaginative discourse of *sustainability*, the radical and prosaic discourse of *survivalism*, and the radical and imaginative discourse of *green radicalism*. In terms of

Dobson's scheme, reformist environmentalism corresponds to environmental-problem-solving and sustainability, while radical ecologism corresponds primarily to Dryzek's green radicalism, although it also picks up elements of survivalism. But despite the subtlety of Dryzek's diagram, it too omits postmodern ecologies.⁴ Although Dryzek's own discourse approach and his concluding suggestions for the development of an "ecological democracy" have much in common with postmodern approaches, Dryzek insists on keeping the central issues of postmodern ecocritiques on the periphery of his analysis.⁵

Those issues appear in particularly sharp relief in postmodern critiques of some of the radical ecologies, those Dryzek gathers under the label "green radicalism." Although these attacks are sometimes explicit, they are often implicit. Claiming to take aim at environmentalism generally, they actually target the premises of realist radical ecologies. Take, for example, the work of William Cronon, editor of *Uncommon Ground* (1996), a controversial book of essays on environmentalism broadly informed by the postmodern contentions that "we can never know at first hand the world 'out there' – the 'nature' we seek to understand and protect – but instead must always encounter that world through the lens of our own ideas and imaginings" (25), and thus that "environmentalism is as much a cultural prospect as a 'natural' one" (22). When Cronon comments that "popular concern about the environment often implicitly appeals to a kind of naive realism for its intellectual foundation, more or less assuming that we can pretty easily recognize nature when we see it and thereby make uncomplicated choices between natural things, which are good, and unnatural things, which are bad" (25-26), he's referring to a "popular" perspective informed primarily by green radicalism. Certainly, postmodern critiques find the technological, administrative and economic rationalism associated with the Dryzek's reform approaches (environmental problem-solving,

sustainable development, and ecological modernization) troubling. But they are equally, if not more, disturbed by the radical ecological premise that unmediated access to pristine “nature” is not only possible, but a necessary foundation for all environmentalist efforts. In his essay, Cronon critiques the idea of wilderness, an idea most closely associated with the green radicalism of deep ecology. He argues that

the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the *tabula rasa* that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world (80)

In the end, Cronon claims, the ideology of wilderness as pristine taken to its “logical extreme” leads to the proposition that “if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves” (83). At a less extreme level, Cronon sees the wilderness/culture dualism set up by radical ecology as promoting a transcendent category of “nature” whose protection is conceived of as “a crude conflict between the ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman’ -- or, more often, between those who value the nonhuman and those who do not. This in turn tempts one to ignore crucial differences *among* humans and the complex cultural and historical reasons why different peoples may feel very differently about the meaning of wilderness” (85).

Although Cronon’s essay is primarily concerned with historicizing our modern notion of wilderness, in doing so, it attacks the basic structure of green radicalism’s politics – its underlying demand that “the voice of the earth” be heard. That underlying political structure is not unique to green radicalism. Like the other new social movements, radical ecologies often adopt a particular, and sometimes controversial, form of political logic, identity politics, itself a version of the broader tradition of the politics of representation. To explicate the particular dimensions of radical ecological

politics requires situating it in the broader traditions of both mainstream representative politics and identity politics. Insofar as they are identity politics, radical ecologies inherit the political paradigm of modernity: representative democracy. Thus, critiques of radical ecology will dovetail with postmodern critiques of both traditional liberal democratic politics in general and identity politics in particular.

The Politics of Representation

Both the explication and the critique of radical ecological politics begin with the fact that, in general, the politics of representation presumes

a political subject or identity (e.g., will, opinion, and agency) that exists fundamentally independent of and prior to the representative process, which at the same time is a process that has been predominantly viewed as an instrument – an often abused instrument – in the service of this political subject. (Seitz 4-5)

This political paradigm is a decidedly modern, and Western, one. Although the earliest institutions of political representation, such as advisory councils of kings and popes which included “persons sent from the various subdivisions of the realm or church” (Pitkin, *Representation* 2-3), arose in Europe in the Middle Ages, these hardly embodied our contemporary sense of representative democratic institutions. Gradually, however, as commoners began to attend the English Parliament regularly, and “to use the threat of refusing consent to taxes as a lever against the king, to force him to consider their petitions and grievances” (3), the idea arose that they spoke for the people against the king. Pitkin observes that “the final steps toward the birth of our modern idea of representation, linking the concept with agency and acting for others, and linking the institutions with democracy and matters of right, were taken in the seventeenth century” (4), in England. Theories of the relation between the representative and the political subject to be represented proliferated from the beginnings of the representative model.⁶

What tended not to be questioned in these debates, except obliquely, was the ontological and chronological priority of the identity to be represented. Brian Seitz points out that in almost all of the debates occurring over the centuries,

the existence [of the independent identity to be represented] – interests or will, etc., of the represented – is assumed to be something prior and semi-objective (e.g., “natural”), something given, something that unobtrusively but clearly justifies or “grounds” representation, i.e., which functions as representation’s source and the source of its legitimacy. (121)

In fact, this premise may be seen as the very condition of the emergence of representative politics. As Judith Butler suggests, “the prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject before the law might be understood as the contemporary trace of the state of nature hypothesis, that foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structures of classical liberalism” (*Gender* 5). In the state of nature hypothesis, as developed by both Hobbes and Rousseau, the subjects to be represented in politics are *presocial*, preceding the mythical social contract which initiated the political realm and, to a certain extent, history. This hypothetical founding model simultaneously creates and justifies the liberal conception of the political subject in history. While the political subjects of representation are understood to inherit the original social contract, and thus to be always already out of the state of nature and in that of culture and politics, their subjectivities (identity and interests) are simultaneously seen to precede the realm of organized juridical and administrative politics – to be *prepolitical* or, synonymously, *pre-representative*. The “ontological integrity ... before the law,” or prepolitical nature, of the modern political subject is inextricably tied to the hypothesis that a presocial subject existed in the state of nature. Whether the state of nature was seen as barbaric and the life of man “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” as in Hobbes, or as prelapsarian, as in Rousseau, was of little importance for the theory of political representation, opposed as they were on other counts, Hobbes and Rousseau agreed that the subject in the state of

nature was possessed of an integrity, based on his capacity for rational choice, that both preceded and initiated the political and/or social realm

One of the most important consequences of this paradigm, for my argument, is that “the problem of representation tends to be addressed as one of translation (e.g., ‘good’ or ‘bad’ translation), ... of how to translate the originary political subject into a consolidating, effective, *true* representative, or, more simply, how to get government ‘to stand in the place of’ the people in order to accurately reflect or express society” (Seitz 5). With this model, theories of political representation often find themselves “oriented around something like the problem of unity/disunity or the dialectical conflict of identity/alienation” (130). These theories continue to address the question of how best to achieve the unity or identity of that which is represented with that which represents it. But, as Seitz points out, this kind of reasoning verges on the tautological, since “in order for the possibility of political unity offered by representation to exist – in order for there to be representation, whose alternative would seem to be conflict, possibly chaos – there must necessarily be a difference between the terms of representation” (123). So, representation implies difference as its very condition of operation. It is, however, a particular form of difference, one that gives the illusion that it may be collapsed “it is an instrumental, mastered, hierarchical difference” wherein “the term that represents must remain subservient to the sovereign term, to that which is represented” (123). It is, then, a difference whose optimum form would be identity. Thus, this political model is destined to continue the same unsolvable debate – how to collapse a difference (between represented and representative) that it has built into the system. If the exemplary representative is understood as a mirror-image of the originary subject, and yet simultaneously as a mere instrument of that subject which remains both distinct from it and distinctly lesser than it, then a complete resolution to the problem of the optimal

relation between them seems unlikely

For the most part, the new social movements inherit the aspects of representational politics I've just outlined. At first, this claim may seem counter-intuitive. Certainly, the denomination of these movements as "oppositional," "resistance," "liberation," or "emancipatory" political movements suggests that they contest the paradigms of modern liberal representative democracy. But while these movements are highly critical of, and do indeed break away from, the mainstream Western political tradition, they are often recaptured, to varying degrees, by elements of its logic. One might argue that this is simply a function of the movements' internal diversity: with each containing such a range of subsets, of course there will be less radical groups under the banner of an overarching social movement like feminism or environmentalism that are fundamentally allied with the mainstream. But in fact the politics of even the ostensibly most radical wings of the new social movements is closely intertwined with the logic governing the official juridical and administrative apparatus of the modern Western representative model.

Radical social movements generally see mainstream politics as foreclosing the expression of identities⁷ that differ from traditional subject of representative politics – an identity that is human, white, male, heterosexual, and able. Their response is to struggle for the legitimation of other identities: this version of liberation politics, known as identity politics, involves "claiming, legitimating and valuing identities commonly suppressed or devalued by mainstream culture" (Calhoun 15). As in mainstream representative politics, however, this struggle takes for granted the independent prepolitical "natural" character of the identities it presumes to both liberate and represent, a maneuver that disempowers even as it enables. As Peter Quigley notes in his essay "Rethinking Resistance: Environmentalism, Literature, and Poststructural Theory,"

“it is important to recall that the qualities associated with the [particular] suppressed voice are produced by the manipulations of the dominant structure” (Oelschlaeger, *Postmodern* 178) In addition, Quigley claims that resistance based on the integrity of prepolitical identities “partakes of what it opposes” in a more general way

The positing and centering of a unique and transcendent being that is linked to a natural realm is the structure employed by power systems, more immediately, it is also the basis for a free market society The illusion of a free and unencumbered individual is currently at the center of power The use of it as an imagined force of resistance demonstrates the degree of its dominance Proposing a better metaphor, a better version of the free and unencumbered individual misses the point, to echo Rowe, this approach allows the forces of the dominant ideology to take cover within the system of resistance (178-79)

Clearly, Seitz’s analysis of representative politics shows that the starting point of identity politics, the claim that identities have been suppressed, maintains the tendency to consider the relation between the representative and the represented “primarily – almost exclusively – in terms of the identity of the representative” (Seitz 120) The crucial question in identity politics is the same as the orienting question of representative politics in general whether or not the representative is assuming its mirroring function The new social movements’ argument that representation has failed in modern liberal democracy doesn’t automatically exclude them from that paradigm, the fact that their denunciation of that failure remains within the traditional terms of the argument (that they continue to assume that translation is a viable and worthwhile goal) implies that they too often participate in Seitz’s model of politics oriented around a “dialectical conflict of identity/alienation ”

In fact, the emphasis on distortion of identities grounds identity politics very firmly in the traditional problematic of representative politics What is seen to precede distortion is an original that has been ill-served by current mechanisms of representation As these original identities are *recovered* from a morass of historically conditioned

The fact that recovered identity plays the role of both represented and representative in identity politics – that it is simultaneously *subject* and *instrument* of representation – explains the centrality of a particular form of “consciousness-raising” in that political model. In order for the poles of the representational model to be collapsed, the members of an oppressed group must “realize” within their individual selves a universal essence (or at least one universal to their group). In a sense, this kind of consciousness-raising is the mass internalization of an identity which is retrospectively cast as a spontaneous emergence of commonality. This, in turn, allows for the dissolution of the distinction between subject and instrument of representation. If all individual differences are supplementary to the basic structure of the group identity, then the need for their reconciliation in the representative, and thus the possibility of distortion in the representation process, disappears. The problem of translation, as Seitz puts it, is solved by the assimilation, through consciousness-raising, of the representative to the represented, or, equally, the represented to the representative.

Ecological Identity Politics

Various sectors of the ecology movement have participated in different ways in the politics of representation. Most straightforwardly, the species of ecological politics that Dobson and Dryzek label “reformist” have worked primarily through mainstream representative politics. As Dobson notes, “liberal-democratic politics and the spaces in which it allows one to act constitute the parameters for the majority of ecological political action” (132). Because reformist politics accept the fundamental assumption of the politics of representation, that representative structures basically reflect the general interests of the human population, they believe that the human concern for environmental degradation (premised on the assumption that it will ultimately have detrimental effects

on humans) will be reasonably faithfully mirrored by liberal-democratic political structures. In reformist circles, in other words, “It seems to be accepted that even if a Green party is not elected to government then sufficient pressure can be brought to bear on the incumbents to bring about [the] sustainable society” (133) which constitutes reform environmentalism’s primary (human-instrumental) goal. Radical ecologies, on the other hand, reject liberal democratic representative politics as the primary avenue for change, arguing that because of its imbrication in industrial capitalism, the system precludes the inclusion of the interests of nonhuman constituents. But despite their anti-instrumentalist insistence on the inherent value of the nonhuman world, independent of human needs and wants, some radical ecologies, like other social movements governed by identity politics, remain within the problematic of representational politics.⁸ My analysis will examine, in particular, the ways in which the identity politics of deep ecology and some versions of ecofeminism,⁹ trying to do away with an instrumentalist view of the nonhuman world, fail to exceed political instrumentalism.

Although a relatively small movement, deep ecology is disproportionately represented in the popular imagination. Dryzek’s comment that “Sometimes the term deep ecology is used to describe radical environmentalism in its entirety” (156) speaks to the fact that deep ecology’s most distinctive and best-known feature – its emphasis on the integrity and independence of the identity of the nonhuman world¹⁰ – threads through the other radical ecologies. This feature is captured in deep ecology’s two main principles: self-realization and biocentric, or ecocentric, egalitarianism. As developed by the Norwegian eco-philosopher Arne Naess, deep ecology’s self-realization constitutes the self’s wider identification with nature. Dryzek summarizes Bill Devall and George Sessions’s explanation: “Self-realization means identification with a larger organic ‘Self’ beyond the individual person, or ‘self-in-Self’, as they put it. The idea is to cultivate a

deep consciousness and awareness of organic unity, of the holistic nature of the ecological webs in which every individual is enmeshed. Along these lines, Warwick Fox (1990) describes a ‘transpersonal psychology’, a psychological condition of identification and care for other beings, ecosystems, and nature in its entirety” (156). Biocentric egalitarianism, the valuing of all entities in the ecosphere as equal to one another, both as an ontological position and a political program, in turn, follows from the realization of Naess’s “ecological self”. As Bill Devall explains, “As we discover our ecological self we will joyfully defend and interact with that with which we identify, and instead of imposing environmental ethics on people, we will *naturally* respect, love, honor, and protect that which is of our self” (104-05, my emphasis).

In deep ecology’s version of identity politics, then, consciousness-raising is a central element. In order for humans not to act (as in reformist politics) as mere representatives of a nonhuman realm figured in terms of its relation to human interests, they are instructed to recover their primal identity with it, and in doing so, to discover a prepolitical unity between it and themselves. The conscious realization that, as Arne Naess says, “We may be said to be in, of and for Nature from our very beginning” (“Self-Realization” 14) and that “we are part of what really is” means that “The expanded, deepened self is not impersonal but transpersonal” (Devall 104) – that is, it encompasses both human and nonhuman realities. The main premises of identity politics are here met in spades: the “natural” identity of humanity, suppressed by social and political structures (Devall claims that the culprits are our “rigid social identities” [103]), is liberated through a consciousness-raising process, the distinction between represented and representative dissolves, as the “self-in-Self” plays both roles, the instrumentalism subtracted from our view of the nonhuman realm is paradoxically displaced onto a political process in which “natural” identity becomes its own instrument, as individual

actions reflect or mirror interests of the ecological self, and thus the nonhuman realm at large. Explaining the politics of self-realization, Freya Mathews claims, “my identification with the wider wholes of nature entails that I will defend them when they are under attack. Conservation is in this way seen to be purely a matter of self-defense” (“Conservation” 130).

Timothy Luke’s critique (1997) of deep ecology as a political philosophy particularly highlights the mechanics of its entanglement in a problematic politics of representation. Luke points out that in order for humans to identify with the nonhuman realm, “Nature” must first be granted a mythical subjectivity, such that its essence “would appear to be a projection of an idealized humanity onto the natural world. Nature is ‘humanized’ in a myth of subjectivity to change human behaviour” (15). Far from recovering the identity of Nature, “deep ecologists construct Nature as an active subject that can teach people, if they cultivate their intuition or introspective consciousness, a special redemptive ‘Earth Wisdom’” (11). The goal of collapsing the gap implicit in reformist ecological politics, between human representatives of the nonhuman realm and that realm itself (a construction that is problematic enough in itself), must

implicitly [assume] its own myth of man’s fall. Once upon a time or elsewhere in this world, it is claimed, humanity lived in a state of innocence or grace. But, now or here, due to human technological domination over Nature, humanity mainly lives in a state of corruption or alienation. However, redemption is possible, in accord with the examples set by primal societies, *by attaining correct moral consciousness* through individual acts of will made imperative by the destruction of Nature. (10, my emphasis)

Consciousness-raising will, deep ecology suggests, return us to the prelapsarian moment before representation of the earth’s (rather than our) interests was necessary, because all things were in organic accord. The advent of technology, alienating us from our “natural” identities, initiated the split between represented and representative of

ecological politics, between earth and human. Reformist ecologies are seen to fail because they buy into the alienation implicit in a representational model. But deep ecology will save the earth by radicalizing that model such that distortion or alienation is made impossible. Unfortunately, its efforts to do so are premised on the basic assumption of the model itself, that stable identities ontologically precede their expression in language and politics.

Luke's suggestions of the problems with an ecological identity politics are confirmed and explored in detail in Catriona Sandilands's *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (1999), which presents an especially thorough-going assessment of the shortcomings of radical ecological identity politics and the possibilities for a postmodern environmentalism. Discussing the concern that postmodernism may derail environmentalist efforts, William Cronon asks,

Can our concern for the environment survive our realization that its authority flows as much from human values as from anything in nature that might ground those values? And if the answer to that last question is yes – as surely it must be – then how can a more self-critical understanding of what we mean by nature enhance our efforts to protect the environment in ways that are both sustainable and humane? (25-26)

Sandilands's book may be read as a response to the latter question. But where Cronon's tone is defensive, one of persuasion in the face of protest by conventional environmentalists, Sandilands is blunt. She argues not so much that our concern for the environment *can* indeed survive our realization that its authority flows from human values, but that, paradoxically, its survival *depends precisely on that realization*. For Sandilands, a defense of postmodern environmentalism that pleads that our efforts to protect the environment are "enhanced" by "a more self-critical understanding of what we mean by nature" misses the point, she claims that those efforts *require* that self-critical understanding in order to be effective. The conventional environmentalist stance

(and particularly that of radical ecologies), which tends to take the identity of nature as unproblematic, is ultimately inadequate to the environmental crisis.

While Sandilands is concerned particularly with examining ecofeminism as a form of identity politics,¹¹ most of her comments are applicable to some other radical ecologies. The contention of some versions of ecofeminism that women are the agent of environmental change due to “an uncreated and prepolitical natural identity that locates women and nature closer together” (Sandilands 71) can be seen as a variation on the radical ecological theme that the earth will be best represented in the political sphere by collapsing the gap between it and its human representative, through the recovery of a human prepolitical environmental identity (in deep ecological terms, the ecological self or self-in-Self). For the bulk of her critique, Sandilands presses into service Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s analysis of Marxism in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). She claims that Laclau and Mouffe read the history of Marxist politics as a history of identity politics (although they don’t use that term), as they trace the movement of class-based politics from an ideology of scientific socialism to a democratic practice of hegemony in which the working class “transform[s] itself into the articulator of a multiplicity of antagonisms and demands stretching beyond itself” (Laclau and Mouffe 58).¹²

Sandilands applies this analysis of Marxism to the ecofeminist movement, arguing that the desire that Laclau and Mouffe identify in Marxism, for a political actor whose revolutionary identity precedes its signification and participation in politics, is matched in “many ecofeminists’ tendency toward the use of natural identity as a ground for epistemological privilege and political legitimacy” (93). In its collapse of the poles of represented identity and representative instrument, this form of ecofeminism bespeaks the impulse for a naturalization, and thus a stabilization, of the political process.

The desire for a revolutionary gendered [or classed or raced or ecological] subject is an intervention into the messy world of empirical gendered [or classed or raced or ecological] people, socially organized in conflicting ways through multiple and often oppressive social and political relations. The intervention, while it certainly collects and represents real and nonarbitrary power relations (Laclau and Mouffe call them nodal points), creates a coherent collective actor – “woman” – that is necessarily re-signified as historical, as objectively given in social relations and not at all a construction born of political desire. The identity also represents more than itself, the movement in which it is organized must negotiate between the specific and messy needs and interests of the gendered actors who are understood to belong to the identity, and it must fulfill the feminist transformative and utopian desire from which the identity was born (39-40)

Like Seitz, Sandilands points out that identity (Seitz’s subject of representation) does not precede the process of its representation, it is rather “an *achievement* of political representation, but one that must mask its constructive traces in order to appear authentic” (29, my emphasis). Representation, in this reading, is a field of conflict, rather than a moment of passive reflection. It “intervenes” in order to “create” a political subject which is simultaneously naturalized. In both Seitz’s and Sandilands’s analyses, the logic of representative politics in general and identity politics in particular is reversed: the identity ostensibly represented in the politics is seen not to initiate political conflict (in the form of its instrumental representative’s actions in the formal field of parliament in traditional representative politics, and in the form of individual actions and group claims in social movement identity politics) but to be produced by political struggle itself.

Why, then, the continued misrecognition of identity as prepolitical? Sandilands argues that “the misrecognition of [identity’s] origins bespeaks a process of looking beyond the social for solidity, beyond the political for a form of legitimacy and certainty to act as a guarantor of rights or truths previously denied” (45). She emphasizes Laclau and Mouffe’s argument that what is in fact embodied in the creation of identities “necessarily re-signified as historical, as objectively given in social relations and not at

all a construction born of political desire” is a radically democratic impulse. In the process of new collective identity formation, Sandilands notes, “Decision making and sense making are pluralized, collective demands are formulated in a broader array of social spaces, new identities mark alternative sources of strength and legitimacy to some extent outside (or at least on the margins of) the reaches of dominant codes of meaning” (42). In a sense, the democratic moment of representative politics is here shifted in accordance with a re-figured view of representation. Rather than signifying the moment in which the people are authorized to voice their concerns *through* a representative in a mutually agreed-upon forum, it now signifies the moment in which those concerns create the supposedly represented identity itself.

But despite their radically democratic moment, identity politics run up against their limit, for “insofar as identity is seen to be based on a difference whose origins reside outside the political world of its antagonistic construction, that difference will be exclusive” (47). If the subversive potential of the creation of identity constitutes identity politics’s democratic impulse, identity as an end in itself constitutes its defensive and exclusionary thrust, and the death of political struggle proper.

Although it represents a democratizing moment, political identity tends to view itself as originating outside processes of democratic representation. It must be portrayed as “an infrasocial and natural force” if it is to have meaning. For feminism (and especially ecofeminism), the charge of essentialism has cast a significant shadow over its democratic theorizing for precisely this reason. As Touraine notes, identity is not instrumental, yet is used instrumentally, in the process of politicizing identity, the politics must be put in parentheses so as to appear to reveal the origins of the struggle in some organization of concrete “being” (43).

Sandilands observes that radical ecologies in general share feminism’s and ecofeminism’s failures to convert the democratic moment implicit in their politics, for “the radical ecological project of creating or discovering an identity for nature is both the

apex of the democratic desire of identity politics *and* its final limit” (76). The limits of identity politics, in fact, become particularly clear in the struggles, especially of deep ecology, to locate the “authentic” presocial voice of nature. In a more obvious way than feminism’s and ecofeminism’s category of “woman,” deep ecology’s realization of ecocentrism, a knowledge of the essence of the nonhuman world, cannot escape being fictional, for

It can never be a presocial nature that speaks in a democratic forum... The nature that we may find in ecological searches for a subject is always a construction of that Other from the point at which we appear to ourselves as natural or natured, not nature itself, finding the subject of environmentalism is always a project of language, of the Symbolic order, of creating images of likeness in the context of a structure that emphasizes certain elements defining similarity. What we may find in our quest is a permanently social product apprehended through a certain filter defining some elements as representing nature to ourselves. This is not to say that the rest of the world does not exist except as a human construct. It does suggest that members of the human species cannot know nature except through, and in the context of, specifically human social and natural relations. (88)

Ultimately, Sandilands suggests, the identity politics of radical ecologies become irresponsible, insofar as discourses posing as natural, but created as part of a political struggle, “carry important implications for the prescribed relations between humans and nonhuman nature” (77-78).

An Ecological Politics of Performativity

How, then, might we begin to conceive a post-identitarian ecological politics? As Sandilands shows, the theorization of such a politics must begin from the premise that, in Seitz’s words, “representation was never simple replication... *Creation embedded in conflict is what representation is about*. It is creation not just of a ‘form’ but, simultaneously, of a ‘content’, of both representative and represented” (163-64, my emphasis). Sandilands herself suggests as a theoretical base Laclau and Mouffe’s radical

democracy, a “politics based on the articulation of democratic subject positions rather than on an a priori empirical subject” (89). These theorists’ Lacanian vision of the subject, Sandilands points out, as “the point of failure of subjectivation” (89), leads them away from a politics of representation. Their radical democracy

shifts the basis of politics away from a quest for a speaking subject, a bearer of revolutionary consciousness, toward an understanding that this subject cannot possibly exist and that social change is based on this impossibility, an inherent self-limit. This recognition means that political actors cannot rely on a speaking subject to produce a new truth, be it a truth of nature or one emanating from any particular set of experiences, but must instead shoulder the responsibility for constituting a society that validates plurality as permanently unfixed and that recognizes ambiguity (92)

While Sandilands describes in some detail Laclau and Mouffe’s vision of a democratic politics (particularly in the second and fourth chapters of her book), I would like to look briefly at two other theorists in whose work she finds resources for an ecological politics consonant with radical democracy, Judith Butler and Hannah Arendt.

Sandilands raises Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in her chapter on the politics of coalition. Noting that, from Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective, the process of linkage and articulation of interests that occurs in coalition politics “has the effect of temporarily fixing the identities of the actors thus made equivalent” (98), she suggests that ecological politics requires “a transgressive or ironic parody of its own subject position” in order to resist “the desire toward the reinscription of a solid identity” (99). This transgressive element would, in turn, transform a somber politics of representation into a politics of performativity in which the identities and categories necessarily invoked are never reified: as Sandilands puts it, “the point is not to forget the gap [between the subject position and the impossible subject] in order to do politics but to widen it as a political act . . . , thereby exposing the internal limit of representation” (106).

Judith Butler's understanding of gender identity as a series of performative acts governed by a rigid regulatory code (the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality) offers for Sandilands "a mode of political attachment most suited to this sort of [equivalential and partial] discursive production" of identities (108). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues, against a metaphysics of substance, that "There is no gender identity behind expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). Rather than being a biological or cultural given, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43). The fact that gender thus understood occurs as "corporealization of time," rather than as a "ground" in space, in turn, opens possibilities for subversion. Butler claims that "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in ... the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (179). Sandilands endorses this parodic repetition, which Butler claims is exemplified by the practice of drag, as a valuable resource for a politics that would remain aware of the radical contingency of any position taken on behalf of "the earth." Such a practice permits a proliferation of alternate identities while simultaneously reminding us of the pervasive constitutive power of regulatory social frameworks because we cannot step outside them, "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat" (Butler 189).

Butler explicitly addresses the contrast between identity politics and the post-identitarian politics to which her work points in the conclusion of *Gender Trouble*. She claims that where identity politics associates political agency with the stable prepolitical subject, assuming "that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to

be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken” (181), her analysis posits that agency is “located within the possibility of variation on that repetition [that creates the gendered subject]. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, ... then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (185, her emphasis). In contrast to a politics of representation, “understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects,” Butler’s politics of performativity “establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (189). As such, it adds much to an ecological politics seeking to responsibly examine the complex relationships between humans and the nonhuman world, to deconstruct the ways in which “the environment” is made culturally intelligible.¹³

Sandilands finds equally valuable Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the performative aspect of politics. Although, as Sandilands is quick to note, Arendt’s performativity cannot be conflated with Butler’s, the two may be seen as somewhat complementary, since both suggest “the need for politics as a space to begin, not to suture, identities” (161).¹⁴ While Arendt’s insistence on the necessity for people to shed their “private” interests and identities upon entry into the “public sphere” constituted by the specifically human “action” of debate is, from Laclau and Mouffe’s and Butler’s positions, an impossible, even dangerous, demand, it also suggests the production, rather than the expression, of identities as the basis of politics. For Arendt, “action is characterized by its ability to transcend the inevitability or predictability of any other [naturalized] human activity, it is unique in that it is a new beginning, a collective intervention where the outcome is not known in advance and where the actor is undetermined. In other words, this public realm is performative” (159). Politics, in

Arendt's view, must be guarded against precisely the instrumentalism upon which a representative politics of "translation" is predicated.

Arendt is also invoked as a guiding figure in Douglas Torgerson's discussion (1999) of ecological politics. Like Sandilands, Torgerson qualifies his use of Arendt, taking advantage of the elements in her work that counter a politics of representation. Although Torgerson doesn't explicitly discuss the politics of representation as problematic, he situates himself clearly in opposition to it in his rejection of instrumentalism in politics. He notes at the opening of his book an irony I've already mentioned, that "Even though a key element of the green critique of modern culture is to reject instrumentalism as a prevailing orientation, desperate green concerns markedly reinforce an instrumentalist conception of politics" (x). One of Torgerson's main aims is to suggest an alternative to "a view of political action as [merely] strategic, as an instrument, a means to an end" (14). Arendt's "public sphere," the forum for performative debate, offers such an alternative. Although, as Torgerson notes, "the very idea of a performative green politics valued for its own sake ... seems bizarre – virtually a contradiction in terms, a denial of all that makes green politics important" (154), without it the other two instrumental aspects of politics which he outlines, the functional and the constitutive, become less *politics*, understood as debate (Seitz's "creation embedded in conflict"), than social *management* prone to authoritarianism. Indeed, one of the main criticisms of deep ecology has been its propensity towards potentially totalitarian (not to mention misanthropic) solutions to the environmental crisis. Torgerson argues that a "green public sphere" informed by Arendt's understanding of the necessity of the performative aspect of politics may exceed the instrumentalist approach to politics that marks both reform and radical ecology movements. "The openness needed for debate could in principle be driven out of a green movement – or even out of a green community

– but not out of a green public sphere” (158)

Torgerson also links an open-ended performative politics to the irreverence of specifically comic performances in which “instrumentalism is often attenuated, at least momentarily displaced by a joy of performance” (155). While I’ll discuss Torgerson’s view of comedy in more detail in relation to the poetry of Don McKay, I wish to here note a convergence with Butler’s discussion of comedy in relation to practices of subversive repetition. Butler notes that because the normative gender positions offered by heterosexuality are impossible to embody, and so are shown, through the failure to repeat perfectly, to be contingent, heterosexuality is revealed as “an inevitable comedy” (155). The parodic repetition that Butler suggests as political action reminds us that heterosexuality is “both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself” (155). The repetition encourages a laughter which, she says, “emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived” (176). Torgerson sees Arendtian performative politics as comic for similar reasons. If “Debate is a language game that, to be played well, cannot simply be instrumentalized for the services it can render but must also be played for its own sake” (155), laughter emerges in the realization that the performance doesn’t aim to translate a final answer, but to continue highlighting the contingency of whatever new ground we “discover”¹⁵

Radical Ecology and Ecocriticism

As I mentioned in the introduction, mainstream ecocriticism's two most striking aspects are its assertions that it constitutes a form of environmental activism and its commitment to achieving mimesis through literary texts. While much critical attention, both positive and negative, has been lavished on the latter feature of ecocriticism, little has been paid to the former, or to the relationship between the two aspects, a relationship which explains the strongly normative thrust of much ecocritical practice. Certainly, ecocriticism's emphasis on the political dimensions of literary criticism, its basic contention that cultural production and criticism are politically neutral in neither motivation nor effect, is not controversial. Its political thrust becomes problematic, however, when some ecocritics begin to trace a normative ecocritical practice to a generalized ecological politics, claiming that their critical focus on a set of techniques and modes clustered around literary mimesis is the "natural" outcome of their commitments to ecological politics. In fact, the critical practice of mainstream ecocriticism results from allegiance not to a vaguely described unified and utopian (and non-existent) "environmental movement," but to certain trends in the particular subset of green politics analyzed in the previous chapter: radical ecology. Much of mainstream ecocritical doctrine may be traced to the ecological identity politics that often surfaces in radical ecologies.

Identity Politics and the Concept of Mimesis

Literary mimesis, the concept with which ecocriticism is so enamoured, has a long and complex history in Western culture. Although ecocritics like Lawrence Buell tend to invoke it as though it signifies a unified approach towards literature as *expressive* of reality, standing in opposition to poststructuralist views of literature as *productive* of

reality, in fact the concept is both far more ambiguous and variously-defined than this contrast suggests. The concept of literary mimesis not only permits the apparent contradictions to be found in ecocriticism itself (the main one being the conflict between its view of literature as a neutral instrument and as a didactic force), but also becomes a key idea in poststructuralist theories of literature. Ecocriticism's version of literary mimesis, however, is shaped by the influence of ecological identity politics such that it draws together several of the theories of mimesis that have evolved over the centuries in order to argue for an environmental mimesis that effects political change.

Denoting imitation, representation, or portrayal, the concept of mimesis has historically assumed a number of different guises. At first glance, ecocriticism seems to draw most heavily on early Enlightenment theories of art as the imitation of nature. As Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf explain in their history of the concept of mimesis (1992), this version of mimesis reacted against the binding of literature by "the combinational schemata of rhetoric and its descriptive conventions," proposing that authors should no longer say "what one is obliged to say about specific natural objects, but derive their descriptive expressions from the objects themselves" (155). The feasibility of such an approach was premised on a correspondence or similitude theory of reference which assumed that "a correspondence pertains between things external to observation and things internal to the observer: the objects of external reality correspond to specific representations in the mind of the observer, which, in turn, make reference to the objects. The truth of observation lies in the possible correspondence between the world existing outside the individual and the ideas evoked by the examination of that world" (156).

This model of mimesis shares the basic structure of the politics of representation. The subject of literary representation, the empirical world "existing outside the

individual,” is translated into text by means of corresponding mental representations in the same way that the subject of political representation is translated by a mirroring representative. Literary and political mimesis are both understood as “a neutral reproduction, a copy of the world” (157) by means of either language or a political representative, both of which are seen, in turn, as instrumental. This structural resemblance, however, is not enough to cement ecocriticism’s commitment to the literary mimesis of the natural world. As we’ve seen, identity politics radicalizes representational politics such that the distinction between subject and instrument of representation is dissolved in political subjects bearing a universal identity. Similarly, ecocriticism radicalizes an Enlightenment understanding of mimesis such that literary expressions of “the objects themselves” are understood to present not merely the particular objects of observation, but also the essence of nature itself. Subjects reading such a purely expressive text, in turn, are put in direct contact with that essence, discover (through a similitude theory of reference) their own identity with nature, and the goal of ecological identity politics – the representation of the earth through political subjects identified with it – is achieved.

In a sense, this version of mimesis marries Enlightenment correspondence theory with elements of the Platonic and Aristotelian views of mimesis. Both Plato and Aristotle suggest that mimesis functions not merely to imitate the empirical world, but to give access to a more “real” reality. Plato sees a philosophical mimesis as providing access to the realm of Ideas from which empirical “phenomenal” reality, itself a “fallen” imitation, is derived. Although his belief that “the ideas and images are not copies, rather, they stand as *mentally constructed images* of something [i.e., truth] to which it is assumed they are similar” (36, Gebauer and Wulf’s emphasis) suggests that he views mimesis as productive, rather than expressive, of reality, in fact for Plato the ideal

mimesis is still primarily representational: the mimesis of philosophy seeks some kind of expression, through approximation, of the reality of the eternal Ideas. Similarly, Aristotle's view that "mimesis produces *fiction*" (Gebauer and Wulf's emphasis) insofar as "The poet creates something that previously did not exist and for which there are no available models" (55) doesn't mean his theory of mimesis isn't primarily an expressive one. The fiction created by mimesis refers to a hyperreality which "previously did not exist" (55) in the sense that universal essences and truths do not exist in naked form in the empirical world. Aristotle's contrast between poetic writing and the writing of history is based on precisely this distinction between partiality and universality.

The Platonic and Aristotelian emphasis on expressivity combined with universality is closely linked to the structure of ecological identity politics. While radical ecology's (and ecocriticism's) emphasis on the "real" world as the "natural environment as empirical reality" (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 21) might seem at odds with Plato's vision of the phenomenal world as itself mimetic, in fact the two views are in accord insofar as radical ecology simply conflates Plato's "real" world of forms with his phenomenal world of objects, and applies his valuation of the mimesis achieved by philosophy (a mimesis which accesses truth, or the core of being) to the representation achieved by identity politics. Artistic representation, to which Plato objected on the basis of the argument that artists will, in their focus on the phenomenal being of things, overlook "the breach between model and image" (44) (a breach which must remain intact in order for them to see the phenomenal world itself as separated from the world of Ideas), becomes, in turn, a powerful political force. Once the radical ecologies replace Plato's realm of Ideas as the ground of reality with an empirical ecosystemic object world, and assume a correspondence theory of reference, the tendency of aesthetic mimesis to elide the gap between reality and mimetic image becomes a strength. It

provides precisely the approximation of, and thus access to, the “real” world that Plato’s philosophical mimesis sought. Following on this logic, ecocriticism praises a literary mimesis which, in a twist on both Platonic and Aristotelian mimesis, extracts from Plato’s phenomenal world the hyperreality of a universal natural identity.

The Green Radicalism of Mainstream Ecocriticism

The ecocritical allegiance to radical ecology is perhaps most easily seen in the mainstream ecocritical commitment to “consciousness-raising,” a commitment closely connected to the push for environmental mimesis. The didactic and normative thrust evinced by the call for consciousness-raising, through literature, may be understood to echo Plato’s understanding of the relationship between pedagogy and mimesis. Insofar as mimesis in the social realm is “*the imitation of role models*, whereby the goal is to become like the models” (Gebauer and Wulf 34), Plato believed that the literary mimesis to which people were exposed must be severely scrutinized. Only those representations which were responsible to the needs of the state were to be permitted. Following ecological identity politics’s precept of a representation in which particular political subjects become the bearers of a universal natural identity, itself contained in the concrete particulars of the natural world, ecocriticism too seeks to limit the scope of literary mimesis to those works which provide precise and accurate imitations of features of nonhuman nature. From this perspective, Plato’s is the more honest normativity, since he makes it clear that the basis for decision as to what constitutes appropriate mimetic material is “subject to control in the ideal state, a state based on an ethical principle derived from the collective goals of the community” (35). Ecocriticism’s prescriptiveness, on the other hand, claims to derive from none other than the original (and originary) of all mimesis, the nonhuman world itself.

Calls for ecocriticism as consciousness-raising may be fairly innocuous. Richard Kerridge, for instance, claims that “An ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness-raising is its most important task. For how can we solve our environmental problems unless we start thinking about them?” (xxiv). So far so good. But such a straightforward statement often slides into one that, while ostensibly just as forthright, in fact orients the consciousness-raising process in a particular, moralized, way. In “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism” (1990), for instance, Glen A. Love hails ecocriticism as essential to the development of an “eco-consciousness,” a consciousness-raising process far more specific than Kerridge’s ecocritical mandate of “thinking about environmental problems.” Where Kerridge leaves the possibilities for ecocritical practice fairly open (at least in the statement quoted above), Love shuts them down. The achievement of “eco-consciousness” depends on a much more prescribed stance towards the nonhuman world than Kerridge’s mere attention to it.

In his essay, Love argues that while traditional pastoral literature would seem to be environmentally-friendly, since it turns its gaze on the nonhuman world, it is in fact anti-ecological because “the terms by which pastoral’s contrastive worlds [of society and nature] are defined do, from an ecological viewpoint, distort the true essence of each” (Glotfelty and Fromm 231). What is required is a literature that transmits, rather than distorts, those “true essences.” Love claims that Western American literature fits that bill, providing us with “some appropriate versions of new pastoral” (231). Because this literature tends to dramatize “The tug of eco-consciousness as a corrective to ego-consciousness” (233), Love declares it ecologically sound. Although he never says so directly, his analysis is guided by the premise that literature in which the nonhuman world “asserts its greater significance to the main character, despite the intrusion of

societal values and obligations” (235) – that is, literature which models the recovery of humanity’s “natural” identity, its “true essence” as a part of “nature” – is the only kind that adequately responds to “ecological catastrophe” (266). Ecocriticism’s mandate is to engage and promote those texts that help us to sufficiently “outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone” (229), texts that raise our consciousness of “natural” identity.

As I’ve said, those texts are ones which enact an environmental mimesis, in which the phenomenal world of empirical reality yields a universal natural identity, which in turn provides a model for the human recovery of that identity. Ecocriticism follows radical ecology in depending on the view of mimesis as expressive of some ontologically prior, or “higher,” reality. A more poststructuralist approach to literature follows the postmodern political problematization of the independence of the represented term, focusing on how literature conditions, articulates, and so, in a sense, “creates” the so-called represented – not as an pseudo-Aristotelian mimesis creates a higher truth “that previously did not exist,” but as categories of identity forged through conflict “create” the ostensibly prepolitical subjects of politics. Ecocriticism confines itself to seeking the best means of (literary) translation for a prepolitical Nature seen to precede the process of representation. Ironically, considering ecocriticism’s emphasis on political *activism*, one of the outcomes of this strategy is that it assumes, and so constructs, a fairly passive reader. Mainstream ecocriticism’s ideal reader is not the active suspicious reader of many postmodern criticisms, but a kind of sop whose mere exposure to traditional nature writing’s depiction of both the natural world and the individual’s revelatory engagement with it effects the political intervention of recovering natural identity.

But the ecocritical alignment, through the ideal of environmental mimesis, with radical ecology doesn’t have to be contrasted only with a poststructuralist criticism

connected to a post-identitarian politics, it can also be contrasted with the kind of criticism, underdeveloped as yet,¹ that might align itself with a reform ecology. For instance, a green reformist position might easily argue that Patrick Murphy's founding ecocritical move – of getting nonfiction nature writing onto course syllabi and into the literary canon (*Farther* 5-6) – is an environmentally indifferent achievement, since that literature's depiction of idealized interactions with nonhuman nature (and Love's Western American pastoral still falls into this category, despite his distinguishing it from the Arcadian pastoral) is more likely to lead to nostalgia for a prelapsarian agrarianism, or to the wilderness mythology of deep ecology, than to constructive rethinking of relations with nonhuman nature in a (post)industrial age. From a reform perspective, in which the instrumentalism of representative politics is accepted rather than radicalized and mystified, the achievement of an identity of/with "nature" is of little advantage. Literature is liberated from the constraints of consciousness-raising, at least the identity politics version of that activity. It may instead carry out a variety of approaches, more and less mimetic, whose value lies in its imagining of a broad spectrum of responses to, and possibilities for, human relationships with the nonhuman world. Curiously enough, the reform position here finds itself allied with the poststructuralist one, insofar as both lack mainstream ecocriticism's interest in delimiting the scope of ecologically "appropriate" literature.

Lawrence Buell's Environmental Mimesis

Mainstream ecocriticism has established measures of appropriateness in two broad areas of literary analysis: the domains of genre and style. For much of this criticism, the genre of nonfiction and the style of literary realism comprise the main conditions to which nature-oriented literature (those texts that either have nonhuman nature itself as a

subject, character, or major component of the setting, or deal primarily with human-nonhuman interaction [Murphy, *Farther* 1]) must conform in order to be considered truly part of the “ecological” effort. Taken together, these conditions create an “environmental mimesis” supposed, as we’ve seen, to contribute to an ecological identity politics. My main exhibit for this argument will be Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995).² Hailed as “a standard work on the subject, and a pioneering example of what is being called ‘ecocriticism’” (Parini 52), Buell’s book is, as yet, the most ambitious self-conscious attempt to outline and defend the theoretical underpinnings of the body of work that I’ve termed “mainstream ecocriticism.”

Despite appearances, the vexed issue of ecological politics is not absent from *The Environmental Imagination*. In fact, its shadowy form presides over much of the discussion, particularly the sections explicating Buell’s rationale for promoting particular genres and styles as more ecological than others. Appropriately, considering mainstream ecocriticism’s tendency to pose as a nonpartisan and all-encompassing mouthpiece for “the voice of the earth,” the question of ecological politics is addressed most specifically in the book’s footnotes. If Buell reveals his political allegiances in his very first paragraph, with his admission that he is pursuing “the consequences for literary scholarship and indeed for humanistic thought in general of attempting to imagine a more ‘ecocentric’ way of being” (1), he saves a description of ecocentrism as a political position for the footnotes (425n1). There he both glosses the term and refers to some historical studies of “ecologism” as a political force, however, by his elision of its relationship to other forms of ecological politics, he fails to truly contextualize it. From Buell’s version, one receives a sense of neither the vitriol with which proponents of rival ecological camps contend nor the cogent criticisms to which the “ecocentrism” of the

radical ecologies has been subjected

Returning to the main text, Buell follows his first vague political reference with an even more oblique one, as he claims that “environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it” (2). As is often the case with Buell, the specific dimensions of these “better ways” aren’t communicated directly in the text. The footnote appended to this comment goes some way towards clarifying what Buell envisions as an improved image of the human/nonhuman relation. In it Buell claims that he is interested in the

eclectic pursuit of the idea that a reinvention of vision and values is the key to environmental amelioration (or failure). My own arguments do not derive from any one school or model of ecocentric thinking. Some would consider my emphasis on environmental crisis as a crisis of “vision” or “attitude” a version of “deep ecology” ... but I see my approach rather as broadly humanist and eclectic, and I shall not for the most part classify the literature I discuss in terms of categories taken from this or that branch of environmental studies, “conservationist” or “preservationist,” for example. (426n2)

But Buell’s insistence on his “eclecticism” is belied by his comment in the preceding sentence, that his arguments “do not derive from any one school or model of *ecocentric thinking*” (my emphasis). Again he elides the distinction between an ecocentric approach in particular, and ecological politics, or environmentalism, in general. Environmentalism is assimilated to ecocentrism.³ Following this logic, Buell sees his approach as nonpartisan, since he doesn’t align himself with a particular strand of ecocentrism, say, for instance, Dryzek’s bioregionalism or cultural ecofeminism or even, as Buell himself insists, deep ecology. He thus falsely portrays himself as representing the environmental position in general.

Buell’s arguments for the value of environmental mimesis confirm his oblique admissions that he is, in fact, committed to the identity politics of radical ecology. His

opening question, “Must literature always lead us away from the physical world and never back to it?” (11), expresses in its broadest terms the concern of a literary criticism informed by identity politics that political subjects be brought into direct contact with the identity requiring representation. That contact is necessary primarily because it is understood to inspire a “bonding” between the natural world (the subject of political representation) and a reader who will, through that identification process, become its representative. Against the current “emphasis on disjunction between text and world” (84), Buell argues that nonfiction and literary realism may produce a mimesis that will promote readers’ discovery of their own natural identities.

Buell’s commitment to a politics of representation appears perhaps most clearly in his insistence on a bedrock “nature,” what he calls the “natural environment as empirical reality” (21). Although he argues that there are “several filters through which literature sifts the environments it purports to represent” (84), beginning with “the human sensory apparatus itself” and extending through various “ideological” lens, he appears to maintain the idea of an “pure” environment preceding representation, an ontologically prior entity which suffers subsequent distortion. For instance, he claims that “nature has been doubly otherized in modern thought. The natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interests, and one of these interests has been to make it serve as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups—nonwhites, women, and children” (21). If “our reconstructions of environment cannot be other than skewed and partial” (84), they are still grounded in a prior entity, the abiding “empirical reality” to which we may be more or less attuned. Buell’s goal—“to extricate oneself from these [ideological] biases, to arrive at a more ecocentric state of thinking than western culture now sustains, without falling into other biases like environmental racism” (21)—is fundamentally ecological identity politics’s goal of the recovering the

identity of the earth

In perhaps the most theoretically significant chapter of his book, "Representing the Environment," Buell argues that an environmental nonfiction aspiring to environmental mimesis constitutes a healthy response to the environmental crisis. He begins with an extended critique of current critical "discrediting of realism as an attempted transparency" (87), claiming that literary criticism has been fixated on a "fictionalist" reading of texts which "marginalize[s] literature's referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual 'reality'" (86), allowing even nonfiction to be "subsumed by poesis, textuality, ideology, the unconscious" (92). Buell argues for reversing this critical movement, such that both nonfiction and fiction are read with "the recuperation of natural objects and the relationship between outer and inner landscapes as primary projects" (88). This would constitute a "nonfictionalist" reading, which

presupposes that the persona's most distinguished trait is environmental proficiency – not the professional scientist's command of data and theory but a working knowledge of someone more knowledgeable than we, who seeks to communicate what he or she knows in a shareable form. It presupposes that the person's chief rhetorical resource is exposition, that the metaphorical and tonal and meditative complications enriching exposition cannot be distinguished as the sole or even chief ways in which the text becomes artful, that the text's outer mimetic function is as important as its intertextual dimension, and that its selectivity is an instrument for promoting knowledge rather than suppressing it (96-97)

This "knowledge" that environmental nonfiction is charged with transmitting has, for Buell, deep political significance. Buell concurs with nineteenth century writers John Burroughs and John Ruskin that "the potency of the environmental text consists not just in the reader's transaction with it, but also in reanimating and redirecting the reader's transactions with nature" (97). Buell further describes the "transaction" effected by environmental mimesis as "put[ting] the reader or viewer in touch with the environment"

(97), developing what he repeatedly calls “responsiveness” to the nonhuman world. Specifically, this responsiveness is developed when the artist fulfills the mimetic task of “establish[ing] a counterpoint between inner and outer landscapes” such that readers find the objective world “realized” (110) through their identification with it. Buell makes the point that mimesis serves the development of an ecological identity in no uncertain terms: mimesis enacts “the project of evoking the natural world through verbal surrogates and thereby attempting to bond the reader to the world” (102). His claim that “the attenuation of mimesis might threaten nature itself” (103) makes sense only in the context of a radical ecological politics seeking depictions which will awaken the ecological identity of political subjects so that for them, as for Freya Matthews, environmental conservation becomes “purely a matter of self-defense”.

In the second part of the book, Buell discusses “a series of imaginative structures in terms of which responsiveness to the natural environment has been cogently expressed in western and more especially American writing” (145). His argument for the importance of literary mimesis moves into the background, as he identifies, among other things, plot structures (of both fictional and nonfictional works) which promote a radical ecological vision of the merging of the human and natural realms. He argues that both literature which critiques the legitimacy of human assertion, achieving an “aesthetics of relinquishment,” and literature which ascribes “something like human subjectiveness to the nonhuman world” are “carriers or agents of ecocentricity” (145). In a sense, these two modes are complementary. The first disperses the human subject into nonhuman nature, as it calls into question the “illusion of mental and even bodily apartness from one’s environment” (144) and so “opens up the possibility of a more ecocentric state of being than most of us have dreamed of” (145). Buell claims that through its illustration of “the effect of environmental consciousness on the perceiving self” (179), this

literature of relinquishment tends to show the equality of all beings. The second kind of literature, which constructs “nature’s personhood” (180), completes this task by both humbling the human observer and reconstructing human consciousness such that he or she feels a deep sense of “the neighbourliness of nature” (211). Buell attempts to reconcile the contradiction between his earlier promotion of a mimesis of empirical nature and his support for the ascription of subjectivity to the nonhuman by noting that “The rhetoric of nature’s personhood speaks merely to the nominal level, what counts is the underlying ethical orientation implied by the troping” (217).

Although this justification itself seems to precipitate, rather than to forestall, the unraveling of Buell’s argument for mimesis – on what basis do we determine when a text “speaks merely to the nominal” and when it achieves true mimesis? – the rhetorical personification of nature and the goal of environmental mimesis may comfortably coexist in the context of ecological identity politics. As we’ve seen, ecocriticism’s promotion of literary mimesis is based on the assumption that it fosters a social mimesis whereby humans identify with the universalized natural identity transmitted through the text (Buell’s “bonding”). If the literary personification of elements of the natural world mobilizes that same mimetic “responsiveness,” then it too may enter the canon of literary practices approved by ecocriticism.

Critiques of Mainstream Ecocriticism

Critics of mainstream ecocriticism have so far tended to overlook the connection between what they identify as its objectionable features and radical ecological politics. In doing so, they fail to make an argument against that species of ecocriticism that might be genuinely persuasive to its practitioners, as well as genuinely productive of an alternative, yet still politically grounded, ecocriticism. To take two important cases,

Dana Phillips and Patrick Murphy have both offered valuable critiques of mainstream ecocriticism's literary mandate, yet have also both overlooked the question of ecological politics, ascribing ecocriticism's mandate to its dislike of theory (Phillips), and to its participation in a sexist cultural context (Murphy). Instead of looking at ecocriticism as fulfilling the positive task of participating in a particular version of the ecology movement, Phillips reads mainstream ecocriticism as consisting mainly of the negative task of denouncing theory. In a related vein, Murphy sees ecocriticism's foci as passively reflecting the norms of a patriarchal Western culture. While this argument has its merits, it deflects attention from the particular ecological politics with which mainstream ecocriticism is allied, in favour of an analysis of sexism in ecocriticism, suggesting that ecocriticism may be "cleaned up" simply by adding women to the mix of literature and environment. Neither Phillips nor Murphy examines the connection between mainstream ecocriticism's normative claims and the ecological politics that it cites as its fundamental motivation and authority.

Despite much excellent analysis, in reading ecocriticism as a backlash against (mainly postmodern and poststructuralist) theory, Phillips fails to address the positive appeal of ecocriticism, and so cannot make an argument compelling to the ecocritics whose work he discusses. Phillips's claim that "many ecocritics have elected to spend their efforts to date in addressing the issues raised for them by their disgruntlement with theory and celebrating a spuriously conceived 'ecology' bearing little resemblance to the science that goes by that name" (582) suggests that ecocritical focus on ecology and the environment is almost incidental – it is simply a forum for venting their irritation with the current emphasis on theory in literary studies. This suggestion simply doesn't stand up. While "disgruntlement with theory" may be an important feature of much ecocriticism, it nevertheless should be seen as a secondary response, logically following

from, rather than preceding, the attempt to engage politically with environmental struggles

Phillips takes the fact that ecocritics' ecology often "[bears] little resemblance to the science that goes by that name" as evidence that the ecology movement is for ecocritics an empty container, functioning as a signifier for the shortcomings of theory. In fact, if we think of the ecocritical project as primarily a positive political task – as an attempt to participate in ecological identity politics – ecocritics' use of a "spuriously conceived 'ecology'" makes perfect sense. Ecology is indeed something of an empty container, in the same way that the identities of all identity politics movements – Woman, the proletariat, Blacks – are empty containers insofar as they are filled with an essentialized universal identity that often "[bears] little resemblance" to any particular (embodied) subject. This is certainly problematic, but not for the reasons implied by Phillips. The emptiness of the signifier "ecology" in ecocriticism is symptomatic not of its construction as an adversary of theory, but of the limitations of the ecological identity politics in which mainstream ecocriticism participates.

Similarly, while Phillips is right to criticize Lawrence Buell's focus on literary realism, his criticisms do not respond to the root of that focus, its linkage to a particular politics.⁴ Again he criticizes effects of the linkage: ecocriticism's naivete insofar as it seeks in literary realism "deliverance from the constraints of culture", the fact that a focus on realism implies "the possible irrelevance of [literary critics'] professional behavior" (585), and the tendency for criticism to become "referee work" (586), the fact that literary realism's development as a "metropolitan" form suggests that realist environmental literature must become "a middlebrow literature of nature informed only by middle-class values, and too much contemporary nature writing is already like that" (587). Phillips's conclusion is that ecocriticism, as it has been practiced, is

philosophically naïve and bad for literature. While this observation is valid, Phillips's argument is unlikely to convert any ecocritics to a more sophisticated practice. Phillips closes his essay with a convincing attempt at an alternative, non-realist, ecocriticism. Unfortunately, because he hasn't explicitly addressed the limitations of the politics underlying the ecocritical emphasis on realism, he can't suggest an alternative politics to which his alternative ecocritical practice might contribute. He thus leaves himself open to the ecocritical charge that his analysis doesn't meet ecocriticism's basic demand for political engagement or resistance.

Patrick Murphy's analysis initially appears to succeed where Phillips' falls short. Murphy's application of an "ecofeminist critique" to the premises of mainstream ecocriticism, in his *Nature, Literature, and Other* (1995), seems to indicate an engagement with its political foundations. Unfortunately, Murphy skirts the issue of ecological politics, confining himself to the broader argument that mainstream ecocriticism is "codifying a patriarchal definition of nature writing" (35). Be that as it may, it is simultaneously codifying something more problematic – an identitarian definition of nature writing that is tacitly linked to the cosmologies and strategies of ecological identity politics. But Murphy doesn't acknowledge that the mere influence of (eco)feminism in general is not enough to overcome ecocriticism's tendency toward prescriptiveness. Murphy in fact does break this mold in his criticism, but his work is weakened by the fact that he tends to misidentify his critical maneuvers, as he grounds his approach in ecofeminism rather than postmodernism.

Murphy argues that the ecocritical emphases on nonfiction, the essay, and prose are based on the masculinist assumption of the author's "alienation from the object of attention and alienation within the authorial subject" (31). He contrasts the "encoder-code-decoder mode of communication" from which this assumption derives with a more

feminine “Bakhtinian utterance-based conception of participatory discourse” (34), suggesting that the “prescriptive closing down of the genre [of nature writing] is structured in such a way that it excludes the insights and challenges of feminism to the ways in which knowledge and narratives are constructed” (34). Murphy argues that so long as ecocritics remain entrapped in a masculine model of alienation from nonhuman nature, nature writing will act as an ecologically regressive force.

Having posited human alienation from the rest of nature as the fundamental non-identity (in the form of a loss), the nature writing codifiers appear bent on denying any other forms of otherness. They deny also the relation between such otherness and determining ways of negotiating the interanimating non-identity of humanity/nature and the potential for *transgression* that such interanimation provides, preferring lamentations of the loss of identity or paeans to moments of transcendence (34).

What Murphy doesn't address is the “masculinist” model's connection to some forms of radical ecology. While the premise of alienation from the natural world seems, at first glance, at odds with ecological identity politics's project of recovering natural identity, in fact it provides the very precondition of those politics's operation. That is, much radical ecological politics requires the shoring up of a prediscursive identity for the nonhuman world. As David Mazel shows in his study of “American literary environmentalism,” “the fundamental non-identity (in the form of a loss)” is in fact what guarantees the existence of a stable pre-linguistic Nature, the wilderness “as intrinsic and prediscursive, an original inscription whose legibility is prior to and uncorrupted by any cultural marking” (60). Mazel makes this point in reference to the trope of the killing of natural entities as a perverse kind of preservation. “inasmuch as destroying a target implies the previous existence of that target, shooting powerfully reifies the notion of a prediscursive body” (64), but it applies equally to the radical ecological narrative of primary loss, the expulsion from Eden. For the writers Murphy targets, inasmuch

invoking alienation from nature implies the previous existence of that nature, it powerfully reifies the notion of a prediscursive body of nature

Unlike Phillips's critique, Murphy's is grounded in politics: he argues that mainstream ecocriticism is shaped by patriarchal norms, and puts forth the politics of ecofeminism, combined with Bakhtinian dialogics, as an alternative starting point for ecocriticism. But this analysis falls short insofar as Murphy fails to see how an ecofeminist criticism might become equally prescriptive.⁵ Normativity, essentialism and exclusivity are not tendencies unique to patriarchy, but a function of identity politics in general. An ecofeminism based on identity politics is equally prone to a normativity based on the assumption that women have a privileged perspective on human/nonhuman relations. The fact that Murphy's own analysis tends to be reasonably open doesn't prove the adequacy of an ecocriticism informed by feminism: what makes Murphy's alternative ecocriticism viable is not so much his use of feminist and ecofeminist perspectives, as the fact that they become a conduit for postmodern insights about the dangers of assuming the givenness of a particular version of "nature." Murphy's own work tacitly suggests that mainstream ecocriticism is limited by its commitments to identity politics, the "ecofeminism" that he claims will provide an alternative starting point is a particular form of that movement, one which is emphatically not aligned with identity politics.⁶

Murphy comes closer to acknowledging this in his more recent *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (2000), which includes a chapter on ecofeminism and postmodernism. Here Murphy argues for an ecofeminism informed by the postmodern critique of essentialism as the basis for an inclusive ecocritical practice. Because such an ecofeminism is "highly dialogical through its eschewing of ungrounded universal truth claims and master narratives, and because it calls for including as many

speaking subjects as possible in positing the truth of any situation and determining a healthy and sustainable direction for human-nature ecoregional interaction” (91), it suggests a literary criticism that would also be open to myriad genres and styles, emphasizing the processes by which a nuanced variety of positions in the ecological debate are staked out, rather than limiting its scope to those deemed “appropriate” to the recovery of natural identity.

Un-grounding Ecocriticism

In the context of my analysis, the evocation of Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian take on the environmental crisis in the introduction to the British ecocritical anthology *Writing the Environment* (1998) is promising. A theorist of Lacan, Žižek is far from a proponent of a liberation politics based on essential group identity. His comments on the environmental crisis cited by Kerridge⁷ are made in aid of popularizing Lacan’s view of the subject as a linguistically produced entity, eternally lacking a given identity. Richard Kerridge’s citation of this analysis as a means of introducing ecocriticism would seem to suggest an ecocriticism that has come to terms with the Lacanian notion that representation – that which produces the subject, that of politics, that of literature – is always inadequate to the real, and thus is freed from the strictures of literary realism. This kind of ecocriticism could also be loosely linked to a post-identitarian environmental movement, one committed to Žižek’s Lacanian subjectivity and thus to some version of the postmodern politics he endorses. Here, perhaps, is an ecocriticism that, at least in its broadest outlines, responds to Phillips’s and Murphy’s calls to go beyond advocating a return to realism.

But in fact Kerridge misreads Žižek’s comments, appropriating them for a view of ecocriticism much like the one Phillips decries. Žižek’s is not an analysis compatible

with the latter, much less a foundation or premise for it. In the work cited by Kerridge, Žižek follows a survey of psychological reactions to the environmental crisis with the argument that in order to engage the reality of it, we must remain attentive

to the irreducible gap separating the real from its modes of symbolization. The only proper attitude is that which fully assumes this gap – without endeavouring to suspend it through fetishistic disavowal, to keep it concealed through obsessive activity, or to reduce the gap between the real and the symbolic by projecting a (symbolic) message into the real (qtd. in Kerridge 3)

Kerridge continues, ‘By ‘the real’, Žižek means that which defies, and is not contained by, representation. It is a ‘non-symbolic kernel that makes a sudden appearance in the symbolic order, in the form of traumatic “returns” and “answers”.’ The real is that which disrupts representation” (3). The environmental crisis is of the real order, and so defies the symbolic. Žižek’s caution that “The only proper attitude is that which fully assumes this gap” warns us against literalizing not only those narratives that minimize and/or anthropomorphize the non-human world, but also those that take the opposite tack, narrating the natural world “as it is” in order to prescribe social organization which will be environmentally sound. Paradoxically, for Žižek, “engaging the reality of the crisis” means above all accepting the fact that we can only deal with it in a provisional fashion – something very different from not being able to deal with it at all – since our actions must depend on representations which, no matter how “environmentally correct” we understand them to be, will be inescapably social and terminally susceptible to interruption by “the real.”

Kerridge, however, uses Žižek’s comments as the basis for a definition of ecocriticism at odds with Žižek’s argument. He seems to interpret the warning against collapsing the gap between the symbolic and the real as only applicable in cases where the representations neglect the “real, material ecological crisis” (4). Representations which dramatize that crisis, on the other hand, are exempt from Žižek’s caution – indeed,

they're praised as environmentally responsible. Kerridge claims that

Often, literature, especially narrative, is regarded as the cultural space reserved for the "personal" viewpoint, as opposed to an impersonal or highly informed one. This notion of the personal tends to exclude the large-scale perspectives, political generalities, narrative time-scales and scientific vocabularies used in the environmental debate. So the challenge environmentalism poses to literature is this: show how it feels, here and now. Dramatize the occurrence of large events in individual lives. Make contact between the public and the personal, in accordance with the Green maxim: "Think globally, act locally." (6)

Kerridge misreads Žižek's argument, seeing it as outlining "good" and "bad" forms of representation. For Kerridge, assuming the gap between the symbolic and the real doesn't mean, as it does for Žižek, living with consciousness that the real will never be identical to *any* of its modes of symbolization, it means representing "an impersonal or highly informed" viewpoint characterized by "large-scale perspectives, political generalities, narrative time-scales and scientific vocabularies," rather than the "'personal' viewpoint" supposedly promulgated in most narratives. Kerridge thus stakes out a moral high ground for those literary representations that conform most closely to "the real" as non-symbolic kernel, erroneously casting Žižek as a proponent of environmental mimesis in literature. Kerridge seeks an environmental literature which, because of its ostensible *incorporation* of the real into the symbolic, would embody Žižek's "proper attitude." From Žižek's perspective, however, this attitude is patently improper, manifesting just the psychological tendency his remarks warned against – that of concealing the gap between the real and the symbolic.

As we've seen, a politics of performativity is one response to Žižek's mandate. An ecocriticism consonant with such a politics, however, is in its infancy. Alternative critical models have come mainly from the field of cultural studies, where such theorists as Andrew Ross and Donna Haraway⁸ warn against using an ecological critique to instate a new orthodoxy of "natural law" rather than to examine the complex social, political,

and linguistic structuring of our relations with the nonhuman world. The most notable example of dissident literary ecocriticism yet, David Mazel's *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000), is a convincing attempt at the latter.

Mazel frames his analyses of a series of American texts, including the National Park Service's "interpretations," two seventeenth century colonial texts, and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, with a discussion of recent debates surrounding "the problematics of nature and the cultural politics of environmentalism" (xiii). Situating himself on the postmodern side of the debate, Mazel invokes Judith Butler's critique of "sex" as "the politically indispensable ground for feminism" (xiv), and says that his ecocriticism understands environmental discourse as Butler understands gender, "as a set of performed relations between 'nature' and 'culture' (or 'civilization') within which is constituted the 'we' of an 'environmentalized' subjectivity" (xvi). Like Butler, he sees such an interpretive move as altering, rather than foreclosing, the possibilities for political action. "Agency and resistance in this formulation reside most fundamentally in the way people revise and retell the nation's environmental narratives" (xvii).

Indeed, Butler's work suggests understanding texts as mimetic in a completely different way than ecocriticism has. Rather than providing an imitation of the prediscursive body of nature, they "mime" the practices that make that body culturally intelligible. They repeat the codes that regulate our understanding of the nonhuman in ways that may both reinforce and subvert the ways that we construct ourselves in relation to "nature." Literature understood thus is productive rather than expressive of what we understand as the natural world. It joins a politics of performativity in seeing identities, in this case those invoked by texts, as provisional, incomplete, defined not in terms of an impossible "original," Žižek's non-symbolic kernel, but in terms of each other. An

ecocriticism informed by a politics of performativity would be able to carry out the mandate I quoted at the beginning of the introduction, of being useful for examining any text concerned with the nonhuman realm, rather than narrowing the scope of ecologically acceptable literature to that which provides an environmental mimesis meant to awaken a prediscursive natural identity. Specifically, it offers a framework for analyzing the non-traditional nature poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham as profoundly ecological.

Don McKay's Comic Anthropocentrism

While ecocriticism has yet to turn its gaze on Canadian Don McKay's self-designated "nature poetry," the results of such a critical endeavour may well be eerily predicted in a social realist review of McKay's second book of poetry, *Long Sault* (1975).¹ A sequence of poems meditating on the damming of the Long Sault rapids near McKay's hometown of Cornwall, Ontario, *Long Sault* imagines the rapids as, among other things, a series of characters – one moment, they are a woman who "gets too intimate, too fast" (136), the next, a boxer in "challenge bout" with Maalox (152). In his review, Dale Williams derides *Long Sault* as "a book of fantasy" and claims that the "discrepancies between McKay's vision [of the historical event of the damming] and local history, whether it be written or oral" (22) condemn the book to failure. If the tone and content of Williams's review predict the likely response of contemporary ecocriticism, Stan Dragland's review of the same book, written in response to Williams's, predicts that of the poststructurally-inclined critics of ecocriticism. Defending McKay's poem as, among other things, a meditation on "words and what they can do for good or ill, and how they may either support or stand in the way of identity" (28), Dragland argues that

The pragmatic materialist reality-in-what-we-touch world out of which Defoe made Crusoe is still the dominant reality of our time, as for example reflected on TV ... and in much popular fiction. And some people with critical aspirations have got [sic] stuck in the groove of realism. So realism becomes interchangeable with reality and writing is condemned as false or unbelievable (fantasy, in Williams' review, becomes a pejorative word) if it doesn't make a world easily identified with. Our ordinary selves, our everyday worlds surely good places to be unless we say that eyesight makes the only sort of vision. (31)

Adapting Dragland's claim that "Williams' commitment to social realism got between him and his reading of *Long Sault*" to the current environmental orthodoxy, one sees how the contemporary ecocritic's commitment to environmental mimesis could easily get between him and his reading of McKay's off-beat evocations of the natural world

McKay's playful personifications of the natural and naturalizations of the manmade could raise accusations that his work is anthropocentric, glorifies technology, and lightly dismisses the seriousness of the environmental crisis

What this kind of dogmatic ecocritical reading would miss, of course, is McKay's passionate engagement with precisely the same "natural world" so beloved of environmentalists and more conventional (realist) nature writers. McKay himself has suggested where he might stand, as a nature poet, in the poststructuralist/ecocritical debate, and, at first glance, it's not what the reader of his poetry might expect. In an essay on his brand of nature poetry, McKay claims that his "own reasons for failing to postmodernize are merely empirical: before, under, and through the wonderful terrible wrestling with words and music there is a state of mind which I'm calling 'poetic attention'," attention "to the grain of experience" (24). But McKay modifies this apparently empiricist epistemology with his subsequent distinction between poetic attention and romantic inspiration. He argues that "The romantic poet (or tourist, for that matter) desires to be spoken *to*, inspired by the other, so that perception travels into language (or slide show) without a palpable break" (24). Poetic attention, on the other hand, "is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness, it leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of the other, but a *translation* of it" (25). McKay's choice of terms is initially confusing, since he associates the romantic with something like an empiricist viewpoint (perception may be accurately transcribed by language, this transcription is reliable as a vestige of the other), while labeling himself an empiricist. In fact, McKay's romantic mode corresponds to ecocriticism's ideal of environmental mimesis, in which the reader is "spoken *to*" by the natural world through the text. And McKay's is, at the least, a heterodox empiricism, for if it "acknowledges some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output, or both" (24), it also holds that the extra-

linguistic, the “radical otherness,” is transformed through linguistic composition and thus “our epistemological dilemma is not resolved – but ritualized and explored” (26). It is, in fact, more poststructuralist than empiricist.

Despite his disclaimers, then, McKay’s perspective fits nicely with at least one version of postmodernism – that which, recognizing the risk of lapsing into nihilism and political inertia, desires to move beyond focusing on the sheer enormity of the gap between culture/language and the so-called “real.” While proponents of this perspective accept the insight that we will not be able to achieve an unmediated knowledge of the nonhuman realm, and so cannot take our cues for action solely from the models (particularly scientific ones) which claim to offer a comprehensive view, they temper its suggestion of political paralysis by exploring, in turn, the various possibilities for grounding action in a non-essentialized universe. Theorists like Seitz, Sandilands, and Torgerson, and ecocritics like Phillips and Mazel, all weave critiques of politics which argue “from nature” with suggestions for an alternative, inevitably “anthropocentric,” performative politics. Their work, rather than that of radical ecologists and mainstream ecocritics, provides a useful framework for examining the work of a poet who claims that “nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully” (26).

The Eco-Comic Connection

One of the most prominent and, from a mainstream ecocritical perspective, potentially problematic aspects of McKay’s work is its use of comedy. From his early comic depiction of the Long Sault rapids (1975) to his most recent musings on the force of gravity, variously understood (2000), McKay combines lyricism with an offbeat humour whose effect might be seen by mainstream ecocritics as gross distortion of the nonhuman

world and trivialization of the threats posed to it. In fact, entry into the “Droll Zone” (“Baler Twine” 18) is one of McKay’s major means of “ritualizing and exploring” “our epistemological dilemma” the human condition of being imbricated in, yet separate from, the nonhuman realm.

At first glance, mainstream ecocriticism appears to be fairly open to the genre of literary comedy. In fact, Joseph Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974) is, Lawrence Buell claims, “the book most often taken by ecocritical insiders to be contemporary [mainstream] ecocriticism’s first major statement” (“Ecocritical Insurgency” 704). Meeker’s “attempt to theorize comedy as an ecological as well as a literary mode” (704) has even been endorsed by Glen Love, one of the more doctrinaire mainstream ecocritics. Love claims that Meeker “produced the first sustained reading of literature from an ecological evolutionary perspective,” and praises Meeker’s argument for “the inseparability of literature from nature and the ecological whole” (“Ecocriticism” 564). Yet Love’s ecocritical focus on reducing “distortion” of the nonhuman world by engaging with scientific knowledge seems incompatible with the kinds of playful, often fantastic, and above all light-hearted, visions that most often issue from the comic impulse. How may a book arguing for the ecological importance of literary comedy stand, for Love, at the inception of an ecocritical tradition based on the indisputably serious model of evolutionary biology?

As it turns out, Meeker’s views are more ambiguous than Love makes them out to be. Rather than presenting a vision that clearly belongs in the mainstream ecocritical camp, Meeker oscillates between the models of radical ecology and mainstream ecocriticism, and those of a poststructurally-inclined ecological politics and ecocriticism. On one hand, his text promotes a normative approach, which judges works of literature on the basis of their environmental mimesis. Meeker states at the outset his assumption

that “literature is essentially an imitation of the actions of men” (19). His argument for the ecological value of comedy is based on a contrast between the imitation provided by literary tragedy and that provided by literary comedy. While tragedy “imitate[s] man insofar as he is a creature of suffering and greatness,” comedy “imitates man’s innate stupidity and ignorance and emphasizes the triviality of human passions by reducing them to the level of street-corner disputes” (21-22). Tragedy emphasizes human mastery of greater forces for the end of human transcendence, comedy emphasizes human adaptation to greater forces for the end of survival. Although Meeker’s focus on the literary depiction of the human element differs from Love’s, and mainstream ecocriticism’s, emphasis on the nonhuman element, his argument is essentially the same. Insofar as the comic pattern mimics ecology’s vision of the “natural ecosystem” as “accomodat[ing] not only the complete life of every species within it, but also provid[ing] for relatively harmonious relationships among all its constituent species” (29), it provides “a model for human behaviour” (39) in regard to the nonhuman world. In Meeker’s view, as in that of mainstream ecocriticism, literary texts play the political role of raising consciousness through their modeling, or mimesis, of the “natural order.” Through comedy, humans become aware of their “natural” identities.

But a divergent approach also lurks in Meeker’s vision of the comic mode as ecological. From this perspective, comedy constitutes not so much environmental mimesis as a dramatization of McKay’s “epistemological dilemma.” In its deflationary attitude toward humanity’s pretensions, it explores the options for living in a suspended state of provisionality or contingency, a state marked by continuing irresolution. This assessment of the value of comedy appears particularly clearly in a passage that also shows Meeker’s allegiance to the mimetic approach. Meeker claims that

The comic point of view is that man’s high moral ideals and glorified heroic

poses are themselves largely based upon fantasy and are likely to lead to misery or death for those who hold them. In the world as revealed by comedy, the important thing is to live and to encourage life, even though it is probably meaningless to do so (26)

If Meeker argues here that comedy imitates the (radical) ecological injunction “to live and to encourage life,” he also nods, contradictorily, towards a more poststructuralist epistemological posture with his qualification “even though it is probably meaningless to do so”². Meeker thus initiates both the mainstream/normative and the dissident/poststructuralist traditions of ecocriticism. If in the end he leans more heavily toward the mainstream, that move doesn’t nullify the poststructuralist strands in his work. Meeker remains an important resource for postmodern ecological politics and ecocriticism.

One theorist who draws on him to advance a postmodern approach to the ecology movement is Douglas Torgerson. He claims that green politics has thus far operated primarily in a tragic mode. For environmentalists,

No matter what human beings do, their domination over nature is to be remarkably short-lived: progress is coming to an end less than a cosmic blink after it was first hailed as humanity’s great mission. . . . The consequences of failure are unthinkable, but the possibility of success often seems remote, a remorseless destiny unfolds despite heroic action. The tragic mood is intensified by the frequent moralism and desperation of some green discourse, in which the undeniably high stakes mix with a crusading sense of high purpose. The human forces threatening nature and the human niche within it are denounced while counterforces are called to heroic resistance (84)

Arguing for a green politics more comic than tragic, Torgerson invokes Meeker’s vision of literary comedy as mode of irreverence and irresolution in contrast to the tragic mode’s depiction of the violation and restoration of a cosmic order. Torgerson highlights the comic view of humanity as the lynchpin for a comic green politics. Because “Tragedy treats humanity in heroic, ideal terms” (87), it falls prey to the arrogance of

assuming that humans are given a place in, as well as access to, the cosmic order of things. As we've seen, Meeker argues that tragic literature and philosophy "undertake to demonstrate that man is equal or superior to his conflict [with forces greater than he is, such as nature, the gods, etc]. The tragic man takes his conflict seriously and feels compelled to affirm his own mastery and his greatness in the face of his own destruction" (Meeker 22). Tragedy, then, celebrates "man's potential strength and greatness" (23). Comedy, on the other hand, "focuses on human frailties, deflating pretenses and mocking excesses. The comic mode subverts the tragic hero, cutting humanity down to size and dispelling human delusions of grandeur" (Torgerson 87). Insofar as in comedy the focus "shifts from the transcendent to the finite, foolish notions, ridiculous situations, the less than exalted functions of the body, the inexhaustible range of human foibles" (87), it emphasizes something that, according to postmodern thinkers, cannot be dismissed: the limitations on human knowledge, the lack of transparency of the world around us.

I've mentioned that Meeker also contains a strong normative approach, as he frames the comic emphasis on deflating human pretensions with the claim that comedy imitates human adaptation to the "natural order." Torgerson recognizes the contradiction in Meeker. While he finds Meeker's vision of the comic very useful, he claims that Meeker ultimately missteps in his invocation of "comic integration" (89 ff.) as the end of both literary comedy and the evolutionary process. Torgerson notes,

There is a difficulty in the very notion of comic integration. Taken too seriously, too literally, the ideal of integration has the capacity to stifle comic action. Comedy is irreverent, disintegrative, exposing and disrupting settled patterns of conduct, belief, power, and authority. A comedy might well conclude with a happy ending, but that is precisely where comedy *ends*. . . . By making comic integration the final resting place for his comedy of survival, Meeker implicitly advances the possibility of what might be called comic suicide. Comic integration, that is, ends comedy – kills it – unless further comic gestures are in play to unsettle the integration. A comic green politics could not fail to create parodies of a cherished ecological cosmos, to keep it incomplete if only not to kill

it (89-90)

The comic mode, Torgerson says, doesn't so much guarantee a stable "reconciliation," as it guarantees that humans will be constantly thrown back on the fact that they are both in and out of nature – that, as a species lacking a completely biologically-determined existence due to their capacity for language and, thus, self-consciousness, they are both a part of nature and unable to have direct unmediated access to it and its supposed "dictates." This, Torgerson argues, and not Meeker's model of adaptation to environment, is a thoroughly comic mode, for "When advanced with cosmic aspirations ... [Meeker's] ecocentric conception of human/nature has a propensity to erect a new scaffolding for tragedy, leaving out or marginalizing the comic" (98). Dystopian and utopian ecological visions participate equally in the tragic mode.

I'm not trying to claim that Torgerson's, rather than Meeker's, version of comedy is the "truly" ecological one, for to do so would be to fall back into identitarianism and prescriptiveness. Rather, I would return to the distinction between representation and performativity that I outlined in the first chapter, and frame my argument in terms of Torgerson's introductory observation of the irony that "Even though a key element of the green critique of modern culture is to reject instrumentalism as a prevailing orientation, desperate green concerns markedly reinforce an instrumentalist conception of politics" (x). When Torgerson says that the focus of his book "is not what it means to be green, but the meaning and value of politics" (x), he makes a move which strikes against all forms of argument from nature. If Torgerson's approach risks being dismissed as a typically postmodern elision of content in favour of form, it also attempts to come to grips with what is, more and more, being recognized as the central issue for politics in general, as well as for green politics in particular: the "nature" of representation itself. Torgerson endorses the comic mode not because it is "ecological" *per se* (i.e., it imitates

the cosmic ecological order), but because its emphasis on the finitude of humans and the paucity of their vaunted knowledge make it a space in which the (often tragically-posed) questions surrounding representation, both political and literary, may be taken up. It is, as both Butler and Torgerson point out, one of the spaces where the performative character of identities becomes evident. And it is in this space of comedy that Don McKay raises the issues, central to green politics, of the interactions between human and nonhuman worlds and of the possibilities for knowledge therein.

The Poetry of Irreverence

I begin with a short poem noteworthy for its succinctness in capturing McKay's typical model of approach to engagement with the nonhuman world. Like many of McKay's poems, "High Noon on the Pre-Cambrian Shield" (*Birding* 110) dramatizes a moment of perceptual and linguistic recording, as the speaker tries "get down" his surroundings. The poem thus enacts an exchange between outer and inner worlds. The first two stanzas describe the scene through a series of striking metaphors: granite is "the last word, / sun's drum, / one hundred thousand tombstones in the rough," while "Obvious cicadas buzz / the way crazy people talk too loud / God is clean." The last two stanzas shift attention to the observer, apparently the speaker of the poem (impersonalized as "he"), attempting to "steal a penful of permanent blue-black ink / and pivot at the edge," the border between language and experience. The poem closes with a pithy expression of one of McKay's guiding principles in his efforts to negotiate the nonhuman world: "If his sense of humour goes / he knows he will know nothing / and too well."

The paradox that "knowing nothing too well" presents is resolved by observing that McKay's sense of "knowing nothing" is a qualified one. For McKay, as we'll see, to "know nothing" is often not sheer ignorance of a thing's existence or qualities, but the

effect of knowing it “too well,” of the pretension that we humans can get to the bottom of the matter (which, in the case of ecology, includes matter itself). McKay concurs with Meeker’s and Torgerson’s (differently charged) emphases on comic deflation in green politics. Lacking humour, the tragic hero presumes to nail down the cosmic order, expelling chaos. But, as Torgerson notes, “Any order cuts itself off from disorder, but brings disorder into itself by the very act of imposing boundaries on an unfixed indefinite terrain, the conditions for the order’s possibility, as is often said, become the conditions for its impossibility” (90). It is the tragic hero who “know[s] nothing / and too well.” The rogue or picaro of comedy, on the other hand, fumbles his way through his world, taking setbacks and unexpected reversals as par for the course. Because “His world is plural, rather than polar” (Meeker 114), he cannot help but maintain his sense of humour, and thus (to reverse McKay’s formulation) he knows some things and not too well: he makes “relatively modest assumptions” (Meeker 37) about his ability to know and master the world. The comic posture encourages continual openness and revision, for “Comedy is irreverent, disintegrative, exposing and disrupting settled patterns of conduct, belief, power and authority” (Torgerson 89).

Despite the foreboding expressed in “High Noon,” McKay’s sense of humour, thankfully, doesn’t “go.” McKay’s poems span the spectrum of comedy, ranging from a more purely comic punning and clowning humour to the satire and black humour of a more tragicomic mode. M. H. Abrams defines the comic as “evok[ing] laughter mainly as an end in itself” (187). In terms of Torgerson’s analysis, this impulse pursues a fairly simple deflation of human presumptions and pretensions, it delights in poking fun at the ways in which the human mind makes sense of the world. As such, it involves a kind of joyous play of language, a linguistic clowning around. At the other end of the continuum of comedy lies the black humour of satire, a comedy that opens onto outrage, even

tragedy Abrams claims that satire “uses laughter as a weapon against a butt that exists outside the work itself” (187), against “what the author conceives of as the widespread condition of social chaos, cruelty, or inanity” (189). Here the deflation that evokes laughter is a means to the end of outrage or protest. To a certain degree, then, the comic submits to the tragic in satire, insofar as, through comic deflation, satire negatively resurrects an inherently conservative utopian vision. But if the satiric form can be seen as instrumentalist, and thus operating on the assumption of human knowledge of the correct or true order of things, it also exceeds the paradigm of a purely tragic politics (in Torgerson’s terms) because laughter itself may never be simply *used*. McKay makes this point by quoting Emmanuel Levinas: “The inverse of language is like a laughter that seeks to destroy language, a laughter infinitely reverberated” (“Baler Twine” 27). Even if the laughter evoked by satire is harnessed for a particular transcendent end, it cannot be completely domesticated, for McKay, as for Torgerson, the moment of laughter is the moment when language undercuts itself and, simultaneously, the whole human edifice.³ It is the moment when, as Butler argues, the (deliberate) failure of perfect repetition reveals simultaneously the performative character of identities and the “intrinsic comedy” (*Gender* 155) of our continued conviction that they are “natural” or “given” to us when we are constantly, in practice, granting their existence.⁴

McKay’s oeuvre is replete with examples of poems leaning towards both the comic and satiric ends of the spectrum of comedy.⁵ My analysis, however, will focus on those poems which span the middle of the comic continuum, achieving the delicate balance between evoking laughter as an end in itself and using humour to criticize aspects of social organization, in particular the ways in which we organize our relationships to the nonhuman world. Such an approach is fully present in McKay’s breakthrough book, *Birding, or desire* (1983).⁶ The companion “Field Marks” poems

are a particularly apt example of the way McKay uses humour to raise questions of the cultural practices we've developed to gain knowledge of the nonhuman. In those two poems, McKay pokes fun at the way birders use field guides to identify and figuratively capture their prey. In the first, which opens the book, he parodies a field guide entry, imagining himself as the specimen being described. The birder, he says "Wears extra eyes around his neck, his mind / pokes out his ears the way an Irish Setter's nose / pokes out a station-wagon window" (15). The highlighting of the conventional nature of field guides achieved by McKay's comic depiction is strengthened by clever reversals which call attention to the figurative nature of language itself. When McKay says of the birder that "He would be a bird book full of / lavish illustrations with a text of metaphor," that "He would eat crow," and, in the poem's final line, that "He wings it" (15), he turns our human metaphors back on themselves, making their figurative character visible, and pointing to the impossibility of a transparent language for describing birds in particular, and the nonhuman in general. Both the birder and the poet "wing it" insofar as they can only connect to otherness by means of figurative reference.

"Field Marks (2)" continues this line of thought with another comic field guide description of the birder: "Distinguished from the twerp, / which he resembles, by his off-speed / concentration *shh* / bursting with sneakiness / he will tiptoe through our early morning drowse / like the villain in an old cartoon" (75). McKay isn't content to leave the depiction there, however. While he claims of the birder that "Later on he'll come back as the well-known bore / and read his list (Song sparrow 5 / Brown thrashers 2 / Black-throated green warblers 1)," he also doesn't aim, with this comic deflation, for a simple critique of the bird-watching practice as inescapably artificial. Rather, he suggests that it opens onto other kinds of contact with the nonhuman which, if not of the unmediated variety, are nonetheless rich with the possibility of relationship. The birder,

in his public account, will omit “all the secret data hatching on the far side of his mind // that birds have sinuses throughout their bodies, ... / that soaring turkey vultures can detect / depression and careless driving / that every feather is a pen, but living, // flying” (75). If this is anthropomorphism at its worst (in the sense of ascribing specifically human traits to the nonhuman), it is also anthropomorphism at its best as an act of both mediation and meditation, providing a self-reflexive bridge between the human and the nonhuman.⁷ McKay shows, through poems like these, that birding (a signifier for practices that seek points of contact with the natural world) *is* a specifically human desire, one that performs a relationship which makes “nature” intelligible to us

“But Nature Has Her Darker Side” takes the comic elements in the “Field Marks” poems to the extreme, pushing the boundaries of the outrageous. In this account of the sighting of a Great Horned Owl, the comedy is also based on deflation of the human. The more gentle humour of the poem’s second section, which describes crows mistaking a diurnal for a nocturnal owl (“They flock and caw around an unfamiliar Snowy Owl, recently arrived from tundra, who wakes, discovers herself in a fancy southern restaurant, spreads wings like a linen tablecloth—” [120]), gives way to a parody of the conventions of televised nature programs. This section, complete with parenthetical camera directions such as “shots of scrawny owlets like brainy bespectacled three-year-olds,” becomes the centre of the poem. In particular, the statement “Well, nature has her darker side” (120) becomes a lightning rod for a series of issues. As a commonplace of human commentary on so-called “natural” activities, it participates in the age-old convention of figuring Nature as a mysterious and irrational woman. It patronizes both the audience and the nonhuman world, simultaneously suggesting that the audience is incapable of seeing the action in question (the owlets eating a meadowlark) from the “objective” perspective of the scientist and, contradictorily, that the nonhuman world itself need not

be respected as overly complex, but can be captured in a few simple human concepts. Despite its “no seriously folks”⁸ tone, the sentence that follows, “Actually, the owls are great conservationists because they eat their prey entire (a whole wing disappearing down an owlet) including the feathers, fur, bones and beaks. Later they disgorge the indigestible bits in neat pellets” (121), is a pseudo-scientific version of “Well, nature has her darker side.” It too casts explanation in terms patronizing to both audience and subject, for to describe owls as “great conservationists” smacks of an attempt to make their behaviour humanly defensible, conforming to our idea of the “ecological”!

The following section, which initiates the birder’s fantasy of becoming an owl’s prey, and finally an owl himself, confirms this reading. As he searches for the owl he heard calling from his yard, the narrator comments,

As we know, owls eat their prey entire, including jeans, boots, wallet, watch and delicate intelligence. Later they disgorge the indigestible bits in neat pellets, which are saved and used to build the parthenon of nature’s darker side. (121)

In this parody of a parody, McKay turns the phrase, “Later they disgorge the indigestible bits in neat pellets,” which had served as an example of scientific discourse in the preceding section, into a signifier for the scientific world-view itself. Repeating the phrase in the context of the birder’s fantasy of being eaten by an owl, and declaring that the “neat pellets” “are saved and used to build the parthenon of nature’s darker side,” McKay wittily implies that far from being the neutral pursuit of the “truth” of the material world, science is a cultural formation governed by its own set of inescapably human conventions. In its darker moment, the passage is a comic suggestion of the kinds of paranoia, mystification, and narrowness that may follow from the all-encompassing world-view promoted by purely scientific approach to the nonhuman.

But McKay is far from straight critique here, for as he points out how the impulse to dramatize nature infects even the “objective” description of scientific and educational

studies, he also admits that impulse in himself with his whimsical vision of the birder becoming an owl and thus achieving genuine entry into the nonhuman realm. This figure, in turn, may stand in for the poet himself, seeking “victims” who “have no warning but the sense that *something’s missing*, into which they fall” (122). With this narrative, McKay reminds us that the poet’s craft is akin to that of the documentary-maker. “No one,” neither documentary-maker nor scientist nor poet, “stands a chance” (120) when faced with the owl itself because the only way to deal with the uneasiness the nonhuman world can instill, “the sense that *something’s missing*” from our experience, is to translate it into human terms. In a sense, the poem performs the very paradigm it pokes fun of. The difference between the documentary-maker and the poet (or at least this poet) is that McKay, having created a hall of parodic mirrors, may sign off with a crazy flourish (“If the shadow of an owl should cross a poet’s roof he wakes up, wild, often with moths in his pyjamas, his pecker pointing to the north star” [122]) which is not so much the establishment of a new credo for interaction with the nonhuman as it is a call for continual displacement and revision of knowledge gleaned – an exposure of performativity here achieved through comedy – in order not to “know nothing and too well.”

The comedy of “Le Style,” in *Sanding Down This Rocking Chair on a Windy Night* (1987), while considerably muted, has a similar effect. Structured as the narrator’s attempt to define a mysterious quality designated “le style,” the poem unfolds as series of additions and revisions that circle around the opening image of a spider web caught in sunlight. While McKay’s use of the French article “le,” as well as the fact that he later indicates that he intends an allusion to the famous phrase “le style c’est l’homme même,” suggest that “le style” is a signifier for high culture, McKay rings a set of changes on the term over the course of the poem, such that “le style” becomes not a quality of human

artifacts, but a feature of the moment of interchange or interface between the human and the nonhuman. It is a moment which, while often lyric, is also comic. If *le style* is “the colour of air,” “the theft of energy in which // I whistle for the dog” (75), and something “metastasizing inward as an itch // attacks the heart” (77), it is also a quality

of Mrs. Henry Zavitz when she told the meeting how she
 wrapped ordinary tinfoil round a chicken, sent it
 scurrying through last week’s thunderstorm
 and wound up with Celestial Fried
 glowing in the drive shed like a holy grail
 We just don’t understand the wonderful power of nature
 Mrs. Zavitz said. Tea
 was served and the meeting ended with The Maple Leaf Forever (76)

Although the narrator is poking fun at Mrs. Zavitz’s need for an pseudo-apocalyptic, even grotesque, display of the “power of nature,” he also sees her as a kind. She, too, possesses *le style* insofar as she acts as an (albeit unwitting) illustration of the sense of disproportion, incongruity, and sheer incomprehensibility of our encounters with the otherness of the nonhuman.

The fact that this mini-narrative has as its centre a death, bizarre as the chicken’s death may be, is not incidental. As the poem proceeds, the enigmatic signifier “*le style*” becomes more and more tied to human mortality. As a force “that’s scrupulously / cruel, eats our efforts easily / receding as the far / horizon swallows falcons” (76-77) *le style* is both the indifference of the nonhuman and human awareness of that indifference. The narrator says that it is with *le style* that “you walk blind through a spiderweb and feel that / tickle smear your cheek a tender / intimation of the grave / where you will be kissed and kissed / into its clay” (77). The encounter with the nonhuman, McKay suggests, is inevitably an encounter with one’s own death. But the encounter is also not without its comic side, as the narrator immediately turns *le style*’s grim sentence into another morbid joke, saying that *le style* is “a memo from exhaustion / like a birthday card from

your insurance agent no one else remembers mais le style / n'est pas l'homme même but what / the man is not" (77). This moment of black humour hinges on the fact that the insurance agent remembers his clients' birthdays only because he is literally invested in their living longer. A birthday card from one's insurance agent, then, has a subtext which overwhelms the text: if the agent genuinely celebrates the life, it is life as measured in dollars, and so a perversion of life, another kind of death. As a representative of *le style*, the insurance agent becomes a figure who may, in comedy at least, approach "what the man is not" – that is, indifference, ultimately death. As in the chicken anecdote, McKay uses comedy to stake out the limits of the human without assuming a presumptuous philosophical height (and thus initiating a tragic plot-line) in order to do so.

McKay doesn't spare the poet the fate of both encountering and possessing *le style*. In a characteristic self-reflexive turn, the narrator notes that *le style* is "a long / performance of the poet's o / dear ones" (77). The poet, in fact, is the exponent extraordinaire of *le style*. Embodying a moment of simultaneous connection, misconnection, and disconnection with the nonhuman, the poet's "dashing strokes of brain brush / pen o so unable to keep up beautifully / commemorate their execution" (77). The pun here on "execution" appropriately conflates its two significations, of the strokes' actualization and their putting to death of the perception/experience they ostensibly transmit. Under the auspices of *le style*, poetry is commemoration rather than conjuration of the living thing. This parodically articulated *ars poetica*, in turn, prevents McKay's use, throughout the poem, of the convention of comparing "works of nature" to works of art from ringing false. Once again he creates a poetic hall of mirrors which confounds any attempt to "discover" therein a straightforward relationship to the nonhuman world. Although the tidiness of the poetic frame McKay constructs, with his

opening comparison of a spider's web to "a frozen fugue complete / with trills and mordents" (75) and the closing comparison of a hummingbird's nest, bound with the broken threads of the web, to "the least / haiku" (78), suggests a certain complacency in that it dispels anxiety surrounding the relationship of poetry to the nonhuman realm, the poem in fact deeply disturbs the stasis of a conventionally Romantic view of art and nature as organically corresponding to one another

If the work of art and its nonhuman subject "reflect" each other in some way, it is only in the sense that they are constitutionally bound to mutual indifference. McKay's final image of the nest as poem is not the naive assay of one seeking to paper over the gap discovered between the human and the nonhuman, to turn from the encounter with death, it is a knowing gesture which suggests artistic redemption through awareness of the inevitable gap – the poem, like the nest, is made from the "broken threads" (78) of the failure to connect. Again, the poet is envisioned as a bird who "wings it," making the poem out of whatever scraps he can scrounge up. But the image of the poem as nest is also a gesture which, following such a rigorous critique of the desire for an untroubled connection with the nonhuman, cannot help but be self-mockery. The specter of Mrs. Zavitz must preside over the end of the poem.

The black humour that animates "Le Style" reaches its peak in the "Materiel" sequence in *Apparatus* (1997). If the former uses comedy to dramatize the dialectic of connection and indifference that structures human attempts to know the nonhuman world, the latter uses it to explore what McKay calls "one pole of our relations to material existence" ("Baler Twine" 20), the approach that takes objects, human and nonhuman, as "materiel." In his essay on nature poetry, McKay explains,

In its limited sense materiel is military equipment, in a slightly larger sense it is any equipment owned by an institution. But I'm taking the term to apply even more widely to any instance of second-order appropriation, in which the first

appropriation is the making of tool, or the address to things in the mode of utility ... To make tools into materiel we engage in a further appropriation. This second appropriation of matter may be the colonization of its death ... the nuclear test site, the corpse hung on a gibbet or public crucifixion. On the other hand, materielization could be a denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition, their return to elements ("Baler Twine" 20-21)

Because "Materiel" thematizes an orientation to the world that has proven destructive, it, more than the other poems I've looked at, tends towards tragedy. Indeed, one reviewer calls this section the "bitter centre" of *Apparatus* (Goulet 291). But McKay stops short of biting satire, preferring a comedy that, while dark, points too many fingers (including one back at itself) to become merely instrumental.

A series of snapshots of instances of materielization, the sequence traces the colonization and/or denial of death from the Biblical story of Cain, through Achilles's degradation of Hector's dead body, to the warfare of the twentieth century. The predominant image of materielization presented here is that of inscription, or "tattooing," which McKay suggests is both the impetus for and result of an orientation towards matter, human and nonhuman, as materiel. In the first poem, "The Man from Nod," McKay shifts the emphasis in the Biblical creation story from Adam to Cain, claiming that Cain should not be remembered only

for his first bold steps in the areas of sibling rivalry and land use. It should not be forgotten that, although Adam received God's breath, and angels delivered his message, it was Cain who got tattooed – inscribed with the sign which guarantees a sevenfold revenge to be dished out to antagonists. Sometimes translated "Born to Lose" (39)

If, following this curse, Cain, "the first displaced person," "wants to leave his mark," that desire is not without cause. Both the joke that Cain is "Born to Lose," and McKay's comic depiction of Cain's confusion at God's rejection of his vegetable offering ("Was [God] already in the pocket of the cattle barons? Cain must have scratched and scratched

his head before he bashed in his brother's" [39]) make the point that violence engenders violence. God's unexplained rejection, marking Cain as less favored, less individual, even less human, leads him to leave his own mark by killing Abel, God's tattooing of him so that he cannot even seek the relief of death leads him to "liv[e] as a virus in the body politic: the wronged assassin, the antifarmer, the terrorist tattooed with the promise of sevenfold revenge" (40). God's materialization of Cain transmits that impulse to Cain himself, and we, McKay implies, are as much children of Cain as of Adam.

Following a fairly straightforward depiction of Achilles's materialization of Hector, the third poem in the sequence, "The Base," moves us into the twentieth century, which figures Cain's land of exile as a military base. With modern warfare, materialization has become mass-produced and, as such, is the Arendtian spectacle of "banality" rather than evil (43). This landscape, too, is inscribed, with "Black wires like illegible writing" and "Plastic vials tied to trees at intervals, containing / unknown viscous liquid." Despite this colonization, however, "blueberries grow, creeks / sparkle, and an early robin / sings from the scrub" (44). How to reconcile these two landscapes? McKay uses comedy.

During hunting season,
claims the Base Commander, moose and deer
take sanctuary in the impact areas, since no personnel
may enter. Often, late September, you may
see a moose, Jean Paul L'Orignal, perhaps,
sitting on a stump along the border of the base,
huge chin resting on a foreleg,
pondering alternatives: cheerful psychopaths
in psychedelic orange, or a moose-sized replica
of the absurd, ka-boom? (44)

Underlining the irony that wild animals on the base "take sanctuary" by making themselves the prey of sport hunters, rather than of the routinized killing exercises of the base's "personnel," this passage comically suggests the absurd pass we've reached.

While the speaker later reiterates this point in straighter terms, saying that he's "unable to identify the enemy's position or / sort the evil geni from fallen / farmers, victims and assassins / interpenetrate with vendors and *vendus* in long / chromosomal threads" (45), the comic version's figuring of the moose as Rodin's "Thinker," specimen of human contemplative reason *par excellence*, adds something the straighter version cannot achieve: a moment of utter ridicule of the human pretension to higher reason than the nonhuman world.

The final poem of the sequence, "Stretto," ups the ante even further, mingling comedy with horror. As employees of "Unmortality Incorporated," where "All day / it is noon it is no one," we are instructed to make explicit our materialist motivation, to "Tattoo this extra letter / on the air / *This is what we can do*" (47). But our position, if dire, is also darkly funny: we desire "to transcend / the food chains we have perched upon and hover – hi there / fans from coast to coast – to beam back dazzling / shots of the stadium ... everywhere the charged / particles of stardom winking and twinkling, o, exponentially / us" (46). The strings attached to this extravagant desire appear in the last section of the poem, where, in what one reviewer pejoratively but accurately labels "sub-Joycean gobbledygook" (Greene 27), the manic side of materialization personified comes to collect its due. "You fancy me far from your minds," the voice intones,

wandering lonely as a clod in longlost brotherhood, while your door's locked and your life's grammatically insured, yet (listen) *scurry scurry* (Is-that-Only-A-Rat-In-The-Basement-Better-Phone-Dad-Oh-No-The-Line's-Dead, Mandatory Lightning Flash) yup, here I am with the hook old chum. Hardly Fair, what? (48)

In a world where the reality of death is denied, where immortality reigns supreme, mortality is a cheesy yet sinister horror-movie villain come to topple human complacency. Its appearance is "Hardly Fair" only to those, including artists, who thought they could escape the encounter with death, an encounter which, as McKay

suggests in “Le Style,” is vital to maintaining a relationship to the nonhuman that doesn’t “appropriate” it. While a review critical of McKay has called the “Materiel” sequence “a piece of intellectual dishonesty on the part of a poet who loves the exaltations of language, but knows it is more fashionable to pose as a debunker of the big claims of art” (Greene 28), I would argue that McKay’s comic debunking is precisely what keeps him honest. Even addressing the horrors of the hydrogen bomb, he refuses to be seduced into a singularly “grand style” (28), and so rejects an easy moralism. In this sequence, as in the other poems I’ve discussed, McKay’s comedy achieves something like Butler’s subversive repetition, a practice of politics from within. As such, it may be linked to ecological politics of performativity whose central mandate is the human assumption of responsibility for our continued participation in an inescapable, uncertain, yet always potentially deadly, process of meaning-making.

The Nature of Metaphor

Much of McKay’s comedy depends on his use of incongruous metaphors to explore the possibilities for engagement with the nonhuman world. And, like the use of comedy, metaphor is a literary technique which arouses the uneasiness of doctrinaire ecocritics, who suspect it of “lead[ing] us away from the world, and never back to it” (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 11). Their misgivings, in turn, echo those of a radical ecological politics of representation. Because, as we’ve seen, identitarian ecological politics understands the representative term as primarily instrumental, performing the task of mirroring a given represented term (in this case, the empirically given ecosphere), it tends to conceive metaphor as obfuscation, a distortion of the true “nature” of the entity represented. Mainstream ecocriticism translates this mistrust of metaphor in general into a mistrust of figurative, rather than so-called literal or descriptive, language

in literature

Significantly, Torgerson follows his argument for a comic politics with a discussion of the uses of metaphor for the ecology movement. Torgerson connects the tragic impulse “for a completed whole, perhaps some organic harmony of human/nature” (98) to the collapse of an awareness of the metaphorical character of a given “cosmos,” whether industrial or ecological. Torgerson draws on the work of John Rodman, particularly his concept of “metaphoric mirroring of psyche, polis, and cosmos” (Torgerson 99), to argue that the value of ecology “comes not from the shifting ground of [ecological science’s] particular findings, but from orienting metaphors [of holism and interdependence] that challenge the presumptions of the administrative mind” (100). To reify ecology’s metaphors is, to Torgerson’s mind, to lose what is most powerful about it: its exposure of a metaphorical orienting context for human actions. He claims that one of the central questions facing the ecology movement today “is whether the green orientation will keep alive a play of metaphors, or will end this play by transforming its orienting metaphors into fixed organizational and ethical principles of a cosmic order” (100). A green politics that does the former, Torgerson says, will be more comic than cosmic. Working from the premise that ecology, like comedy, “suggests human limits, particularly the limits of the human capacity to comprehend and model the world” (102), such a politics will use metaphoric mirroring to remind people that the context orienting human action remains “uncertain, ultimately unfathomable” (102). As I noted in the first chapter, for Torgerson this comic politics is also a politics of performativity whose central feature is a debate which, like any game, is played from the fun of continuing to play.

Torgerson’s analysis suggests that the mainstream ecocritical mistrust of metaphor, especially of its zanier moments, is misguided. If anything, it is precisely the

more outlandish metaphors for the nonhuman of a poet like McKay that provide a resource for a comic and performative ecological politics. The more disjunct the two entities proclaimed by metaphor to be alike, the more likely becomes a reader's recognition of the performative nature of metaphoric constructions. Rather than convincing us of Aristotle's "essential similarities between things" (qtd. in Bushell 37) in the external world, such metaphors remind us that we are not *discovering* but, rather, *making* meaning of the world around us. The only in-depth analysis to date of McKay's use of metaphor, however, by Kevin Bushell, reads more like the work of an ecocritic such as Buell than like the poststructuralist criticism with which Bushell aligns himself (37-38). Briefly surveying several theories of metaphor, Bushell concludes that because "the full meaning conveyed through metaphor cannot be articulated literally," metaphor may be seen as a means of "transcendence," as "an attempt to break free from language and thought, to enter a realm of meaning that is extra-linguistic and extra-conceptual" (38), to "expand the parameter of language to provide a more accurate articulation of experience than literal descriptive speech allows" (39). For Bushell, as for mainstream ecocritics, the goal is to *use* language to penetrate the "real" world, Buell's "natural environment as empirical reality" (*Environmental Imagination* 21). Bushell simply follows critics like Rueckert, and goes critics like Donovan one better, by offering a way for metaphor to be brought into the mimetic fold.

Bushell sees McKay as participating in the endeavour to access a material reality outside of language. For McKay, Bushell says, "metaphor is often used as a rhetorical vehicle that stretches language in an attempt to express some aspect of an extra-linguistic realm he refers to as 'wilderness'." Bushell argues that although metaphor in particular, and poetic language in general, can be seen to "present fantasy, or an imaginary world, which is different from our normal, empirical view of how things are" (47), in fact,

within a phenomenological framework, the transcendence supplied by metaphor

does not imply transportation to an alternate alien realm, but rather to new, hidden meaning that exists within our immediate world. We need to get past the view of “reality” as a concrete, objectified entity, to understand that metaphor such as McKay’s uncovers, or, more accurately, *discovers* the world and leads the reader into new areas of experience and knowing. (48)

Not only does this argument fail to grapple with the issues raised by the fact that metaphor *does*, to a large degree, present a “fantasy” of the human imagination, and thus militates against a “discovery” of the world,⁹ it also contravenes McKay’s own poetic as expressed in “Baler Twine,” an essay Bushell draws heavily on. The goal of poetic transparency stands against McKay’s own admission (albeit couched in his claim to be an empiricist) that “poetic attention is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other’s wilderness, it leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of the other, but a *translation* of it” (“Baler Twine” 25), as well as his conviction that “nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully,” that it should not be taken to be resolving our epistemological dilemma, but to be ritualizing and exploring it (26)

Bushell claims that “What makes McKay’s metaphor striking is its high degree of tension: the disparity between its metaphoric units” (43-44). Indeed. But I would argue that the tautness of McKay’s metaphors does not “discover” the world, but, as McKay himself says, “ritualizes” the ways that we make that world into human meaning and so draws attention to that process. One of the examples Bushell uses to make his argument is McKay’s brief lyric “The Great Blue Heron,” from *Birding*

What I remember
about the Great Blue Heron that rose
like its name over the marsh
is touching and holding that small
manyveined
wrist

upon the gunwale, to signal silently—
look

The Great Blue Heron
 (the birdboned wrist) (32)

Bushell glosses the comparison between the heron and the birdboned wrist as “say[ing] something about the ontological relationship of humankind and wildlife. In this reading, physical similarity extends into physiology, genetics, ecology, and that much-feared word in lyrical poetry, politics” (42). For Bushell, entry into “a realm of meaning that is extra-linguistic and extra-conceptual” (38) is apparently achieved when, through a vibrant metaphor, “a relationship is pronounced between species that spills meaning on each of these levels [physiological, genetic, ecological, political] as an expression of love and respect for the natural world—a way of Being without the urge to appropriate what is other” (42-43). Bushell claims that the metaphor gains further resonance from the way it is displayed in the poem. Because the poem’s “colloquial syntax” “gives the impression that the speaker is telling instead of showing” (42), the force of the metaphor, when it strikes, is all the greater. The literal meaning suggested by the narrative, “that, indeed, all the speaker remembers of the heron-sighting is touching and holding the wrist upon the gunwale,” is eclipsed by the poem’s figurative meaning, since “Surely [the literal interpretation] is not what is intended in the poem” (42).

But surely, too, the poem is not so unambiguously ecocentric. Bushell overlooks the first, perhaps tauter – certainly more interesting – metaphor of the poem, the simile comparing the flight of the heron and the bird’s name. In order for the Great Blue Heron to “[rise] / like its name,” the reader must make a series of instantaneous distinctions. The ostensible fusion between “Great Blue Heron” as signifier, signified, and referent unravels as soon as we are called upon to compare the action of the bird to its name. There are two ways in which the phrase “Great Blue Heron” could “rise” phonologically

or graphically, at the level of the aural or visual signifier, and semantically, at the level of the signified (i.e., the adjective “great” could connote a kind of rising). Meanwhile, if the heron-as-referent has become detached from its “name” as signifier and signified, it is also unable to stand independent of them, at least in the speaker’s perception, for the bird’s appearance in the poem is literally circumscribed by them. The speaker’s jump from comparing the heron to its own name to comparing it to the wrist of his companion accomplishes a semantic maneuver which, if less starkly circular, is not substantially different. From this perspective, the literal implication of the poem, that all the speaker remembers of the heron-sighting is his *communication* of it, is certainly at least one of the things intended. The bird/wrist metaphor is not so much the moment of connection that Bushell identifies it as, but a moment of failure (albeit beautiful failure) to make an unmediated connection. As such, it is the moment in which the speaker *negatively* experiences the bird’s “alien being” at the end of the poem the speaker knows that the bird is *neither* “The Great Blue Heron” *nor* “the birdboned wrist.”¹⁰

Like his use of comedy, McKay’s metaphors take us to the edge of, but not into, his “wilderness,” which, as we’ve seen, is also the moment of death (Goulet 291). At their most successful, they ritualize a failure – their own failure to make a transcription, to become a “vestige,” of the nonhuman world. And that failure, like the humour that abounds in McKay’s work, becomes part of a comic pattern of unending subversion of (tragic) efforts to found a new cosmos, efforts which deny the inevitably performative character of all identities. In Torgerson’s words, McKay’s poems, like “the virtuosity of the adroit political actor,” “suggest the kind of playfulness that would be necessary (though not sufficient) for a responsible, reasonable, and civil form of public life in which we would decline to end our discourse” (103). McKay’s poetry is “useless” (Goulet 292) in the most necessary of ways: in its refusal to submit to an instrumentalist

view of either language or the world, it, like any good ritual, declines to end our negotiations with otherness.

Jorie Graham and the Politics of Perception

Despite the great stylistic divide separating the work of Jorie Graham from that of Don McKay, Graham shares with McKay the (happy) fate of being unlikely to garner the praise of mainstream ecocriticism. If mainstream ecocritics are likely to see anthropocentrism permeating McKay's wry lyricism, they would doubtless also find it lurking, in a different guise, in Graham's philosophical bent, her linguistic jumpiness, and her relentless self-interrogation. But, as with McKay, to dismiss Graham on the basis of insufficient mimeticism is to overlook her vital engagement with some of ecological politics's most pressing questions – about the reliability of perception as knowledge of the outer world, the relationship between perception and language, and the strengths and limits of self-reflexivity in regards to the nonhuman world.

Ecology and Phenomenology

Graham's focus on human consciousness, particularly processes of perception, has led some critics to label her work phenomenological (Longenbach 97-98, Spiegelman, "Rev." 173, Quinn 22).¹ While such a philosophical approach is, in strictly radical ecological and mainstream ecocritical terms, anthropocentric, it has also been recognized as having value for the ecology movement. In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) David Abram argues for a phenomenological perspective, rather than a more traditional scientific one, as the basis for an ecological vision. Drawing on Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Abram outlines a philosophical framework which privileges perception and immediate sensory experience over scientific abstraction as knowledge. Abram claims that, in particular, phenomenology's insight that our experience of the world is embodied may provide a "dawning recognition of Earth as the forgotten basis of all our awareness" (44).

Like Meeker's argument for the ecological value of comedy, however, Abram's argument for the ecological value of phenomenology follows two opposed lines of reasoning. Predominantly, Abram argues for the phenomenological view's superior mimeticism, for the fact that it is actually "more objective" than scientific objectivity. Abram notes that

The fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the "realer" world of quantifiable and measurable scientific "facts." It is a curious inversion of the actual, demonstrable state of affairs. Subatomic quanta are now taken to be more primordial and "real" than the world we experience with our unaided senses. (34)

Abram's phenomenology seeks to displace the scientific world-view by reversing the relationship between the "everyday world" and the "impersonal, objective dimension of pure 'facts'" from which "our direct, spontaneous experience" is presumed to derive (35). For Abram, sensuous experience provides unmediated contact with the surrounding world, doing away with the gap between subject and object, human and nonhuman, by inserting each neatly into the other, to make a single entity, Husserl's "life-world." This, Abram notes, "is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus to which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons. Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity" (34). The paradox of subjectivity replacing objectivity can only be resolved by seeing that subjectivity itself becomes, in phenomenology, a new objectivity, the "real" real world. Like Meeker's comedy, Abram's phenomenology doesn't exceed the mimetic paradigm: the terms are reversed, but the structure remains intact. From this perspective, Abram's use of an ecologically inspired metaphor which likens phenomenology's perceptual gestalt to the "soil," "humus," or "ground" of all other human enterprises is unwittingly apt. With it,

Abram simultaneously inserts both ecology and phenomenology into a represented/representative model wherein such complex institutions as language and science become “expressive” of a pure antecedent content. The fact that such a prominent instance of rhetoric can be used to make such an anti-rhetorical, anti-metaphorical point speaks, once again, to the convergences of an empirical mimesis and an Aristotelian one in identity politics models (see above, 40-43).²

And identity politics Abram’s phenomenology is. If radical ecology is generally suspicious of phenomenology’s emphasis on human consciousness *as* reality (albeit a refigured reality), it shares Abram’s view that change will be achieved through awakening dormant aspects of that consciousness. As we’ve seen, certain versions of radical ecology seek the recovery of our “natural identities”, Abram’s phenomenology seeks a “recuperation of the incarnate sensorial dimension of experience” which “brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded” (65). Like the deep ecologists, Abram speaks of this “consciousness-raising” process as one of “discovery” a human “return to our senses” will lead us to “discover our sensory perceptions to be simply our part of a vast interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies” (65). Ultimately, he says, “to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with the physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth’s animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence” (47). As in other identity politics, the “discovery” of a naturalized and universal identity is seen as the basis for change.

An eco-phenomenological approach, in fact, exceeds radical ecological versions of identity politics in its more sophisticated elaboration of the relationship of consciousness to the surrounding world. Where deep ecology suggests self-realization

through a conscious process of identification with the nonhuman, Abram's phenomenology implies that such striving is unnecessary because our identity with the object-world is the premise for perception, it has only to be awakened from a dormant state. This, in turn, explains phenomenology's appeal to a pseudo-ecocritic like Bushell. If the phenomenological world is "a world founded on the surety of consciousness, but ... also a world in which the sensible and the felt have ontological bearing" (Bushell 48), then the rhetorical function of language may be reconciled with its referential function, such that "a metaphor transports the reader to nothing less than a *Lebenswelt* (a life-world), to use Husserl's term, in a type of Gestalt at the moment of metaphoric apprehension" (47).

But phenomenology also has the potential to open onto an ecological politics, and an allied ecocriticism, of performativity. Although Abram's claim that "phenomenology is the Western philosophical tradition that has most forcefully called into question the modern assumption of a single, wholly determinable, objective reality" (31) overstates the case, it nonetheless suggests the power of phenomenology to contest ecocriticism's and ecocriticism's valuation of the "natural environment as empirical reality" (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 21). As Vincent Descombes points out, Merleau-Ponty's work is open to a double reading: if, as Merleau-Ponty insists, we "return to a 'true *cogito*', namely the 'I perceive' beneath the 'I think'," then "The origin of truth is particular, relative, human" and "the phenomenon is only a semblance", but because Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological premises prohibit distinguishing between beings as objects and beings as subjects, "Although it is human, the origin of truth is 'the absolute source'" (68). Abram chooses the second reading, which constitutes "the search for a more ancient origin, for a more originary neuter ..., the source common to both subject and object" (Descombes 68). On the other hand, Elizabeth Grosz, a thinker who also

seeks to utilize the resources of phenomenology for social movement theorizing, chooses a version of the first reading. More specifically, Grosz's attempt to theorize a "corporeal feminism" using, among other things, phenomenology offers a model in which that philosophical paradigm is emphatically not pressed into the service of identity politics. Reading Grosz's human body as the "body of nature," we see how her account dovetails with the concerns, outlined in the first two chapters, of a poststructurally-inclined ecological politics and ecocriticism. Grosz argues that while the body cannot not be seen as pre-social,

Nor, on the contrary, can the body itself be regarded as *purely* a social, cultural, and signifying effect lacking its own weighty materiality. The very interaction and engagement of the natural with the cultural, the production of the natural in the (specific) terms of the cultural, the cultural as the (reverse) precondition of the natural – in short, the binary opposition between the cultural and the natural – needs careful reconsideration. It is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature outright, to completely retranscribe it without residue into the cultural. Culture itself can only have meaning and value in terms of its own other(s) when its others are obliterated – as tends to occur within the problematic of social constructionism – culture in effect takes on all the immutable, fixed characteristics attributed to the natural order. Their relation is neither a dialectic nor a relation of identity but is marked by the interval, by pure difference. (21)

Merleau-Ponty is one of the theorists Grosz draws on to reconsider the relationship between the cultural and the natural. She points out that his attempt to overcome Cartesian dualisms (of mind/body, culture/nature, ultimately subject/object) is a highly sophisticated one which, anticipating "Derrida's supplementary readings of dichotomous polarizations, attempts to take up and utilize the space in between, the 'no-man's land' or gulf separating oppositional terms. This impossible, excluded middle predates and makes possible the binary terms insofar as it precedes and exceeds them, insofar as it is uncontainable in either term" (94). In Grosz's reading of phenomenology, unlike in Abram's, perception or experience does not become an unproblematic ground

for knowledge, for it is not “directly” or “immediately” intelligible. If, Grosz points out, much poststructuralism sees experience “as something to be explained away as simply untrustworthy or ‘ideological,’” Merleau-Ponty doesn’t simply oppose this perspective by reasserting the spontaneously articulate character of experience, but rather presents experience itself, in all its complexity, “as something to be explained” (95). His work thus becomes a resource for the ecological politics variously described in this thesis as comic, performative, and postmodern – a politics interested in occupying the “no-man’s land” between the represented and representative terms and thus, as Torgerson and Sandilands, with Grosz, claim, interested in exceeding binarism.

The aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s wide-ranging “explanation” of perception perhaps most relevant to the work of Jorie Graham is his notion of the flesh, “the term Merleau-Ponty uses to designate being, not as plenitude, self-identity, or substance but as divergence or noncoincidence” (Grosz 100). Because “Between feeling (the dimension of subjectivity) and being felt (the dimension of objectuality) is a gulf spanned by the indeterminate and reversible phenomenon of the being touched of the touching” (100) – a phenomenon fundamental to perception – perception itself is understood as flesh, the reversibility or reflexivity of being. But as such, flesh signifies not, as Abram claims, an unabashed animism, a point of unproblematic contact between perceiver and perceived when the subject recognizes that the object of its perception “is a sentient subject like myself, and that I, too, am an object for his [or its, in the case of nonhuman entities] gaze” (67). Grosz notes that “Instead of any anthropomorphism or animism, Merleau-Ponty is claiming not an actual but only an in-principle reversibility of seer and seen or toucher and touched” (101). Because “The subject can at best experience the transformation of one position into another, but never their identity” (102), phenomenology remains at odds with ecological identity politics’s project of a human

recovery of our fundamental identity with the nonhuman world. Merleau-Ponty's dissolving of the subject/object split through his notion of perception as the flesh's reversibility does not entail the subject simply locating itself in the object and vice versa, and thus discovering a basic alignment of interests. Perception as flesh, the reversibility of being, is not a moment of identification, rather, perception is the *differentiation* of the subject from other objects, but a differentiation made possible by those very objects' *interimplication with the subject*. As such, it stands "midway between mind and body [as both the subject's body and the body of nature] and requires the functioning of both," and is "Neither empiricism nor idealism" (94). Or, as Descombes suggests, it is a reformed idealism, for "*the identity of subject and object – the fundamental proposition of idealism – transpires within incompleteness, non-coincidence, penumbra*" (71, his emphasis). A phenomenological account of perception interested in showing how both our and the world's objectivity are conditioned by our subjectivity, and vice versa, is thus broadly consonant with an ecological politics of performativity concerned with pointing out that neither assimilating the self to the objectual dimension of Merleau-Ponty's flesh, nor assimilating the world to its subjective dimension, will yield a responsible ecological mandate. Phenomenology reminds us that in ecological politics neither self nor world are ever simply "given."

Materialism

A phenomenological view of perception particularly animates Graham's fifth book, *Materialism* (1993). Although the limits and idiosyncracies of perception are one of Graham's abiding poetic concerns, here, more than in any other book, she directly confronts the perspectival character of the interaction, through both perception and writing, of mind and world. Gone are the re-writings of myth prevalent in *The End of*

Beauty (1987) and *Region of Unlikeness* (1991). They are replaced by “an intricate meditation on what happens when we try to make sense of the world through description” (Gardner 196). In these poems, Graham slows the perceptual process down to the point the point of stalling, interrogating the very way she uses language to register experience. She thus foregrounds the non-coincidence of the perceiving subject with, simultaneously, itself and the objects it perceives. And herein lies both her similarity to and difference from McKay where McKay tends to engage the subject’s non-coincidence with the outer world, showing through comedy how the subject performs a series of relationships to it, Graham is concerned with the interimplication of both the “unfinished subject” and “the equally unfinished object” (Descombes 71).

Materialism occupies an interesting place in Graham’s oeuvre. If, as Thomas Gardner claims, all of Graham’s books raise in various ways “the issue of the limits of knowing” (196), or, in Willard Spiegelman’s reading, all involve “experiments with looking and describing” (“New Way” 244), *Materialism*’s single-minded exploration of minutely bounded moments of perception of material objects is unique amongst them. Many critics have seen Graham’s shift to a more expansive and open-ended poetic form in *The End of Beauty* as the turning point in her work. But James Longenbach disagrees. Arguing against the conventional narrative that locates *The End of Beauty* as Graham’s “‘breakthrough’ to unprecedented formal and ideological freedom” (101), he casts Graham’s poetic ventures in terms of the tension between a “‘big hunger’ – the formal audaciousness and cultural relevance [Graham] associates with modernism” (101) and the fear of “unearned weight” that troubled the modernists.³ Rather than seeing Graham’s poetic progress as linear, Longenbach links the poetic projects of Graham’s second and fourth books, *Erosion* and *Region of Unlikeness*, and those of her third and fifth books, *The End of Beauty* and *Materialism*. The former two, Longenbach claims,

recover the “big hunger” of modernism by using an analogical or spatial method which causes the poems, no matter how much they may “lament the ethical or political repercussions of aesthetic closure,” to “themselves click shut” (105). The latter two, in contrast, are written in “a more resolutely linear manner” (107) which recovers a “powerful distrust of ‘unearned weight’” (111), a distrust which springs from a poetic and philosophical modesty. Graham herself has made a comment about *The End of Beauty* that applies equally to *Materialism*. “There I basically wanted to say (formally) ‘Look, see these loose threads. Is it responsible to weave them back in? Is it responsible to let you feel like they can be woven back in? Isn’t that sort of like saying, on some level, that the governing deity overseeing this mess has plans?’” (“Interview” 220)

If the poems of these books, like those of *Erosion* and particularly *Region*, sustain a critique of closure, unlike those books, they actually enact the idea that “human freedom lies in errancy and digression,” shying away from the analogical mode’s tendency to “solv[e] the poem’s puzzle before we have a chance to feel its mystery” (104). Paradoxically, Longenbach suggests that the openness created by a linear rather than spatial technique is, among other things, an openness to closure. *Materialism*’s strength, Longenbach claims, derives from its construction of “a compelling critique not only of closure but of openness as well” (107). Its (linear) dramatizations of consciousness suggest “the complexities that lurk between our moments as they pass” (107), the permanence of an “unresolved tension” (116) between self and other, the material and the abstract, closure and openness, and, ultimately, “the twin exigencies of the ‘big hunger’” and ‘unearned weight’” (116). Neither of the two books that follow *Materialism*, *The Errancy* (1997) and *Swarm* (2000), enacts these tensions quite so nakedly. In *The Errancy*, Gardner claims, the “incandescence” that Graham has made of “the distance between the mind’s web and the world’s atomic separateness” (198) in

Materialism is continually “threatened with guttering out” due to the exhaustion engendered by fully registering the wreckage of “the dream of reason” (202). Incandescence, in many ways a comic moment, yields to some degree to tragedy.⁴ This, in turn, may explain Graham’s shift in *Swarm* to a more explicitly theological line of questioning which locates the vicissitudes of perception and experience within the problematic of human mortality. Although these poems do not employ the analogical method Longenbach associates with Graham’s attempt to recover a “big hunger,” Graham’s overt, occasionally facile, engagement with large theological frames similarly tends to make the poems “click shut.” Of all Graham’s books, then, *Materialism* most lends itself to the kind of ecocritical reading I’m trying to develop.

Writing the Visible World

The poems in *Materialism* fall into three crudely defined categories: s and adaptations drawn from a range of philosophers and other poets; ostensibly straightforward “descriptive” poems concerned with narrator’s perception and transcription of a particular experience in “the visible world”; and poems which explore the same terrain using a set of interlaced narratives rather than a single narrative, in a revised version of what Longenbach calls Graham’s “analogical method.” Although Graham’s use of other works has interesting implications for the questions I’m exploring here,⁵ I’m going to concentrate on the latter two groups of poems, discussing specific techniques Graham employs in order to raise some of phenomenology’s central issues.

Poems belonging to the first group are characterized by a single narrative in which the speaker attempts to hone descriptively in on a fairly quotidian experience, trying for perfect transcription, only to find herself running up against the failure of words to evoke not only the so-called objective material world, but even her lived

interaction with it. Graham sets out the poetic, which is paradoxically also an anti-poetic, governing these poems in *Materialism*'s third poem, "In the Hotel": it begins "1) start in the middle and 2) be self- / effacing said the voice—remote and merciful it seemed— / in the dream and then I awoke" (7). These two intertwined directives – to start in the middle is a way of being self-effacing, since it implies a processual view of the world, rather than an ego-centred narrative one – suggest a method which will render "the visible world" as "truly" as possible. Before the sentence is even finished, however, the problem with this poetic rears up, in the form of the "I" who awakes from the dream. These first three lines encapsulate one of Graham's central dilemmas. The question, basic to phenomenology, of how we engage the surrounding world without drowning it in human consciousness replays itself over and over, yielding an array of answers, over the course of *Materialism*.

It appears in particularly sharp focus in the first poem (following a set of the prefatory quotations) of the book, "Notes on the Reality of the Self." Here the speaker starts firmly in the middle, beginning with the lines, "Watching the river, each handful of it closing over the next" (3). Graham's poems often begin with a narrator watching or seeing an object which will become a central image of the poem, but what is unusual here is the highly delayed appearance of a grammatical subject. In many earlier poems, and even in later poems in *Materialism*, Graham begins by specifying an "I" who is both watcher and recorder.⁶ But in the first "Notes," the river and its movement, object of that subject's gaze, take centre stage. While the subject is implied, it is absent as a visible grammatical mark and thus as the contemplating consciousness foregrounded in some of the other poems. Because the "I" doesn't appear until partway through the poem, "watching" is both a present participle, as is "closing," and an active verb in the present progressive. Thus the narrator describes an imagined continuous process – in the

imperfect present – independent of the “watching” “Oaklimbs, / gnawed at by waterfilm, lifted, re-lifted, lapped-at all day”, “Last year’s leaves, coming unstuck from shore, / rippling suddenly again ... and carried ... bobbing, circling”, “The long brown throat of it sucking up from some faraway melt” (3). Through this grammatical pattern, the speaker’s presence in the scene as its perceiver is as “effaced” as possible. Observation and transcription ostensibly make up the whole of her initial activity. Because she is only a consciousness inscribed by the world, “Nothing is virtual”

But this happy state of affairs cannot persist. The narrating self enters the poem midway through, in a simple perfect present declarative (“I let the dog loose in this stretch”) and everything changes, including the complexion of the previous lines. The next statement, “Crocus / appear in the gassy dank leaves” shifts from an imagined portrait of a continuous present to a consciousness limited by time and space. The crocuses are not “appearing” out of the ground “all day” as the oaklimbs were imagined to be “lifted, re-lifted, lapped-at all day.” Rather the crocuses “appear” to the watcher, the “I” introduced in the previous sentence, as she moves around, changing her field of vision. The world is now narrowed to what *is perceived*, as opposed to what *is*, to use one of Graham’s later contrasts, it becomes “a self-portrait of the unmargin’d thing by the margin’d thing” (*Errancy* 9) due to the introduction of the located, limited, eye of the beholder. Accordingly, the subject of the poem shifts from the actions of the surrounding world, to the actions of the watcher: “Many / earth gasses, rot gasses / I take them in, breath at a time, I put my / breath back out / onto the scented immaterial. How the invisible / roils.”

Although the move from world as subject to perceiving narrator as subject seems a loss, it is also, from Graham’s phenomenological perspective, inevitable. The introduction of the narrator’s “I” into the poem immediately casts doubt upon the

objectivity and completeness of the earlier description. When the narrator comments, “How the invisible / roils. I see it from here and then / I see it from here,” she doesn’t repeat herself. Even the “invisible,” the “immaterial,” changes with her movement from “here” to “here.” Or equally, and simultaneously, even the invisible changes with time, with the infinite procession of “thens” which characterizes perception. With this realization, the initial description of the river becomes partial, and the narrator arrives at the central question of the poem and, critics have argued, of both *Materialism* and her work more broadly: “Is there a new way of looking – / valences and little hooks – inevitabilities, proba- / bilities?” Having realized the instability of her initial portrait, Graham’s narrator searches for a way of looking that consists of continuously pausing perception to make guesses, assessments and transcriptions that are not “true,” but rather way-stations, the “hooks” onto which the mind catches the world until it squirms free and “each rightness [snaps] loose.” She uses italics to identify as hooks some of the phrases her mind supplies to the scene (“*The nature of goodness the mind exhales / I see myself. I am a widening angle of / and nevertheless and this performance has rapidly—*” [4]). Her mind is “correct, correct again” only insofar as “each rightness [snaps] loose.”

The new way of looking, then, involves continual revision, a potentially infinite perceptual and linguistic grasping which pins down the world only to let it loose again. In describing the mind’s revisionary action, the narrator returns to the imperfect present tense of the opening of the poem, showing that it is not so much the world that is always in process (although it may be – we must remain agnostic on that point) but our minds, which never cease “nailing each point and then each next right point, inter- / locking, correct, correct again, each rightness snapping loose, / floating, hook in the air, swirling, seed-down” (3). In a radical final move, Graham actually enacts the argument of the poem, submitting its authoritative voice to its own critique and thus forcing it from its

status as foundational narrative. She does this by crossing the narrating voice of the poem and the italicized voice of the mind. The mind supplies the phrase "*the evidence of the visual henceforth*," but, unlike the preceding phrases, this one is not safely contained as a "rightness snapping loose" within the narrative of the poem; rather, we see this "hook" infecting the very voice that domesticated it, as that voice adopts the word "henceforth" to complete its description of way perception is fixed and discarded. The dominant voice of the poem thus loses the innocence it had gained with its admission, mid-poem, of its own partiality, for the entire poem may be seen as yet another "rightness" or "hook" which must snap loose. Graham implies the dangers of self-confessed partiality itself becoming a ground, ending the poem on a note, similar to that achieved by McKay in "The Great Blue Heron," of thoroughly negative knowledge. Like McKay, she suggests that the performative character of our relationships to the nonhuman world means that we are always doing politics from the inside, and must find ways to simultaneously make meaning and acknowledge, *in* that meaning, our shifting location.

Accordingly, this set of "Notes on the Reality of the Self" does not imply that the self *is* the only reality, since that of the world cannot be discovered. Not only is the speaker thrown back on her own perspectival consciousness yet not permitted to make it a new ground, but Graham's question, directly following her query about "a new way of looking," "Is this the body I know as me?" (3) suggests a most phenomenological reason why she cannot: because she inhabits the very divide between subject and object. Since her experience comes through her body ("I take them in, breath at a time, I put my / breath back out", "I see it", "Can you smell it" [3]), the process of constantly revising perception and description cannot become an entirely mental, ideal one. Yet she is also never self-identical with that "perceiving self," exceeding it just as she exceeds the world

(or, equally, as the world exceeds her)

The fear that she will come down on the side of idealism is as real for Graham as her determination, in *Materialism*, not to pose as a neutral vehicle through which matter may express itself. In "Steering Wheel," the speaker again confronts the perceived world as something which won't submit to description, or even to orderly perception. As in the first "Notes," she begins with an attempt at transcription, this time of the experience of looking in her rear-view mirror to back out of her driveway, only to find it breaking down. In this poem, however, the breakdown is more admitted than discovered. Thoroughly aware of what she has been attempting (perhaps it is significant that the "I" doing the seeing and describing is clearly set down in the first line), the narrator follows her first sentence, a 14-line descriptive utterance, with the agitated staccato of three end-stopped lines: "Oh but I haven't gotten it right / You couldn't say that it was matter / I couldn't say that it was sadness" (5). But despite having dismissed her own attempt to render her scene, as well as the choices of strictly objective and subjective interpretation, the speaker again succumbs to the irresistible temptation of the visible, breathlessly pushing on in her attempt to include all elements of the experience, to *get* everything into the poem. Pushing away doubts, which come to her in the form of a remembered quotation, "we have to regain the moral pleasure / of experiencing the distance between subject and object" (5), she suggests that her phenomenological gestalt is a "law" composed of all variables, subjective and objective.

That all-inclusive law is initially an inspired choice of metaphor to comprehend all elements of the event of backing out of the driveway rather than backing up into the leaves, she is now "slowly backing up / the dusty driveway into the law / composed of updraft, downdraft, weight of these dried / midwinter leaves" (5). But the metaphor of a law swiftly becomes a useless descriptive device as her attempt to specify it, to break it

down into parts, returns her to the metonymic technique she rejected as inadequate, to the potentially infinite process of listing elements of the experience as “parts” of the hypothesized “law.” Although this kind of circularity echoes that of “Notes,” the speaker here doesn’t suggest the phenomenological negotiation implied there, whereby she manages to choose neither idealism nor empiricism. The final couplet, set off spatially from the rest of the poem, has a desperate edge to it: “Though there are, there really are, / Things in the world, you must believe me” (6). The speaker believes that not only has she failed to describe those things, she has actually *detracted* from their independent reality (“Though there are” may be glossed as “But despite what I’ve said, there are”). Contrasted with “Notes,” this poem contains a certain dark humour: what degree of self-absorption would be necessary for the speaker to imagine that her halting description would destroy the reader’s “faith” in the material world? Meanwhile, the “But there are” interjection, in claiming poetic failure, actually achieves exactly what the speaker said she couldn’t do. On the other hand, the interjection is also utterly ingenuous, as it expresses what seems to be a genuine concern with the power of description, no matter how jagged, to lull one into a comfortable polarization of speaker and spoken-about, representative and represented, such that the former becomes an instrument for the latter. Graham suggests that whether the thing described is realism’s “empirical” reality, or the ostensibly self-reflexive process of description itself, the slip into trusting the narrative voice as transparent is almost inevitable. From this perspective, the speaker’s “you must believe me” translates as “you must not believe me,” such that it means both at once.

The seduction of description is further explored in the second “In the Hotel,” which, like a handful of other poems, uses direct address to the reader to foreground the relationship on which description is premised. Here the speaker describes – in fractured, implicit fashion – listening to a couple making love in another room of a motel in the

middle of the night. Intermingling details from her own room (a description of the green-glowing clock, the weight of the bed covers) with those of the sounds she hears, her account is in effect stream-of-consciousness, punctuated with long dashes. Following the couple's climax, she rises from bed and refocuses her consciousness on the room which, initially "almost hot with black" (*Dream* 173) has become "Black gorged with absences" (174). She begins to elaborate on a metaphor she created listening to the couple, "the weight of the covers now upon me like the world's shut lid, / shut fast—not opening—," claiming that, in the following silence, the room is

like an eyelid
spanked open
wide, I rip it, I rip it further—as if inside it now the million
tiny slippages could go to work, the whistling
of absence
where the thing *should care for us*—
where justice shifts and reshifts the bits to make
tomorrow—
tirelessly—kingdom of scribble and linger . . . (174)

With this metapoetic sequence, the speaker suggests that her making of the poem is an act of violence, a "ripping" of the metaphorical eyelid of the world, which during the "pure" experience of listening was "shut fast." She cannot simply let it go, but must try to make "the thing," the surrounding indifferent world, "care" for her. In a sense, this passage is dishonest, since it denounces a projected action, "scribble and linger," which has in fact already been achieved in the course of the poem, and thus, like "Steering Wheel," succeeds through its very failure.

But it, too, exceeds that trick, since its turn back on itself springs from a seemingly genuine desire on the part of the speaker to be responsible to herself, to her reader, to the world. Immediately following the passage quoted above, the speaker asks, "What do you / want, *you*, listening here with me now? Inside the / monologue, / what

would you insert? What word? / What mark upon the pleating blacknesses of hotel air? / *What, to open it? To make it hear you To make it hear me*" (174). The reader's impulse, the speaker suggests, is consonant with the poet's to make a "mark." If she breaks the speaker's "monologue," it will not fundamentally change the nature of the poetic enterprise as described here, for the reader's word, the speaker tells her reader, will serve as an attempt "To make it hear you To make it hear me." Both speaker and reader are equally locked in a "singleness" that pushes them to a desperation not unlike that of the speaker in "Steering Wheel" ("Who will hear us? What shall we do?" [174]). The speaker here takes matters into her own hands, claiming to surrender herself to the blackness, turning to the clock, blackness's "green, exactest, / gift / in which you say yourself, in which you say only yourself" (175). In a certain sense, this is another admission of failure, as the speaker takes time as the only reality she can grasp of the perceptual experience she has tried to register. Becoming blackness's "servant," and thus the vessel for experience, is a matter of submitting to time. This is a thoroughly phenomenological moment. Descombes points out that the non-coincidence of the self and, consequently, the world, is a function of time. The speaker's frustrated conclusion, then, that perception *is* time, grasps one of the central aspects of the phenomenological view of reality.

Perception and Possession

The other major group of poems in *Materialism*, those that use a series of narratives rather than a single one, explores the same issues as the more descriptive poems I've just discussed. Longenbach warns against reading these multi-narrative poems like the "analogical" poems of *Erosion* and *Region*, pointing out that although these poems "pull together wildly disparate materials" and so "may resemble the longer poems of *Region*,"

“Their narratives do not match up analogically ... but move steadily if inexplicably forward” (112). Rather than creating, through analogy, “a region of ‘likeness’ in which all metaphors are literalized, all stories are the same story one thing is *likened* to another thing but also *is* that thing” (106), the narrative poems of *Materialism* evoke similarity in tandem with difference, subject and object as “interlaced one with the other, not externally but through their reversibility and exchangeability, their similarity-in-difference and difference-in-similarity” (Grosz 103). I will take as exemplars of this method the linked poems “Concerning the Right to Life” and “The Dream of the Unified Field,” both of which open with a description of the speaker’s perceptual engagement with a material object (a rose and snowflakes) and close with lines adapted from Christopher Columbus’s journal from his first voyage to the New World. Within these similar frames, a set of narratives “linked by the arbitrary repetition of particular words” (Longenbach 112) raises *Materialism*’s characteristic queries regarding the interimplication of subject and object.

“Concerning the Right to Life” begins as the more descriptive poems of the book do, with a subject’s attempt to record in detail a perceptual encounter with the surrounding world, in this case a blooming rose, the poetic flower *par excellence*. Her reactions span the spectrum of epistemological approaches: she alternates between a conviction of its indifference (it stands “tall as a man / on its senseless stem” [*Materialism* 14]), a desire to personify it (“I looked into its face—its authorship—accretion of discardings ... looked for the *living* in there—half-awake— / sultry, a fellow destiny to mine” [14]), an awareness of her own participation in the perceptual process (“My fate // crossed out along my silly white extended arm—five // fingers flared / to somehow prolong desire / out past the sticky glove of matter” [15]), and, finally, the temptation to compare her inability to really “look” at it to the failure of

those who permitted the victims of the Holocaust to be carted away “locked in the cattlecars” (the face of the rose reminds her of “the stiff even rows of faces” behind the shutting doors of the train [15]). Although this vision of the rose is presented last, it is not privileged, as it would likely be in the analogical poems, as Graham’s final statement on perception, perception is not inherently the malfeasance, the iniquity of subject against object, that the metaphor suggests it to be. Rather, the speaker returns to “this one face in the dusk my hand upon it” (15) and, in yet another Grahamian moment of frustrated unknowing, turns to the things themselves, asking them to both “Pity us” and “Judge us” for the spectacle of perception that she’s just enacted, a spectacle that we literally embody.

The next three narratives variously explore this same dilemma. First, the narrator in the waiting room of an abortion clinic tries to correlate the physicality of her fetus, “the immaculate spot within,” to the various concepts that attach to it and the abortion of it – “the freedom of / choice, illustrious / sleep, bloody spot” (16). Her almost child-like request of God, “to make these words have / materiality— / make there be a tiny draft / just beneath them—there—make them displace something to *be*— ... a *subject*— indifferent to rot as matter, / rotting, is / indifferent” (16), is a request that human meaning be made, like matter, “indifferent,” inert, beyond contention. But her following description of the protesters makes it clear that, in a phenomenological world, such a dream cannot come true, as the protesters’ conflict becomes thoroughly embodied: they wear particular clothes, their placards are written in magic-marker, they stand amongst blowing leaves and brilliant acacias, their screams are countered by sirens. The speaker’s concluding questions, “What can happen? / What is the worst that can happen?” (18) have deadly import, since the worst that can happen is, in fact, death (for the anti-abortionists, the death of the fetus, for the pro-choice, the death of a doctor or

woman having an abortion) But they may also be read as less doom-laden, for the second question is often posed as a rhetorical one, to gently ridicule someone whose fears are out of proportion to a situation. In this case, the speaker might well be wondering whether the drama created around both her own and the protesters' struggles is not somehow disproportionate, given the fact that our efforts to gain a solid epistemological footing end in our asking that the nonhuman both pity and judge our stumbling.

The idea of disproportion reappears in the following two shorter narratives. The first presents a mother struck by the contrast between her own desperate attention to her daughter's fever and the ordinariness of her daughter's room, filled with the prized possessions of childhood (18), while the second offers a rather dense reading of the Virgin Mary's physicality tainted by the "red idea" that is the Messiah (19). The sense of incongruity peaks in the poem's final section, which adapts a passage from Columbus's diary. Graham has chosen to revise the passage, addressed to Columbus's royal patrons in Spain, such that it emphasizes his perceptions of the sameness and difference of the new landscape. Although the trees "are green now as in Spain in the month of / May and June / and the same with flower and with everything," still he claims that "*nothing was recognized, / nothing!*" (19). The only thing he does recognize, the "red aloe," he colonizes – he orders "great quantities / brought to the ship / to take to Your / Highness" (19-20). The excerpt ends with Columbus again describing the new in terms of the old: "the day is hot and the nights temperate / as in May in Spain in Andalusia" (20). In a sense the poem has come full circle, as Columbus's perceptual encounter with the flora of the New World echoes the speaker's own encounter with the rose. But we must not seek an easy conflation of the two that reads perception as subjective colonization of the "real" – the detour through the other narratives, all of which explore the intersection of

materiality and ideality, suggests that the invocation of Columbus doesn't operate solely as a critique of the potential "hubris" (Longenbach 114) of the mental dimension of experience. If the "right to life" of the title also signifies a "write to life," Graham's poem also concerns the ways in which signification is vitally tied up in perceiving the other, the nonspeaking material universe, as also "life."

As I've mentioned, an adapted passage from Columbus's diary also closes "The Dream of the Unified Field." There Columbus's desire for possession operates more unequivocally as, in Helen Vendler's words, a metaphor for the "constant human desire for aesthetic [as well as philosophical and scientific] possession of all space and time" ("Excess" 87). Because the framing narrative of this poem, the speaker's errand to deliver her daughter's leotard during a snowstorm, extends across the sections of the poem, the shift to Columbus creates a starker contrast, and demands to be read more rigorously against the rest of the poem. In addition, as Longenbach points out, it caps a series of metaphors, developed particularly in the sixth section, for "the dream that all material phenomena might be described by a single paradigm" as the hubris of colonization (114). The only thing I wish to add to these critics' readings is an emphasis on the narrator's efforts, throughout the poem, to detail her physical surroundings. Although the drama of the poem unfolds in its many equivalencies – the "head" of the tree filled with starlings (the colonizers' colonizing bird) becomes the pocket holding the leotard, then the narrator's own skull, then the "cloud" of the storm itself – it also unfolds in between them, in the speaker's perception of those material objects in all their physicality.

In the first section, she becomes entranced with the way that the snowflakes disappearing as they hit the earth and "The road with me on it going on through" imply that "it really / [is] possible to exist, and exist, never to be pulled back / in, given and

given never to be received" (*Materialism* 176). She notes that the sound of her footfalls, the materiality of her passage, "doesn't stop, doesn't / mean." Similarly, in the next section, she describes the foliage of the tree in which starlings are alighting and departing as being "Of indifference. Of indifferent reappearings" (177). Set against this indifference is the inner world, her own thoughts about her daughter. Yet if these seem in stark contrast to the unintentioned material world, they also realize precisely that indifference insofar as the speaker sees her daughter in all her "magic" (177) as an independent being, corporeally distinct. The speaker's following meditations, on the crow whose cry is "without obedience / yet not without law" (178), run along the same lines. In the fourth section she tries to describe him, only to fall back on the formula of "Steering Wheel," insisting "All of this happened, yes. Then disappeared / into the body of the crow, chorus of meanings, / layers of blacks, then just the crow" (178). But she doesn't stop here, but instead launches into another attempt to describe him only to finish with the exclamation, "Is he now / *disappeared* again?" (179). How can the mental engage the physical, Graham asks, how does consciousness come together with materiality such that we don't end up with the "disappearance" of one into the other?

The unfolding of the rest of the poem, addressed by Longenbach (114-16), is an amplification of this question. The speaker follows the example of her childhood dancing teacher, whose insistence that "*No one must believe in God again*" (179) she links to the woman's confrontation with her own image in the mirrored wall of the studio. As her teacher's "eyes eyed themselves no wavering / ... / each face wanting the other to *take* it" (180), she herself tries to "make [the storm] *mine*" (180) to make it "take" her as she "takes" it, and so to replace the teacher's God with an all-encompassing human reach. But the failure of her attempt to take inside her "The Great Heights" (181) of all space and time is predicted in the teacher's inability to merge with her own mirror

image. The speaker says that she saw in the moment of her teacher's attempt "the light rippling almost shuddering where her body finally / touched / the image, the silver film between them like something that would have / shed itself in nature now / but wouldn't, couldn't, here, on tight, / *between*, not thinning, ... / ... no signal in it, no information" (180). Possession of the object by the subject, or equally, the subject by the object, turns out to be illusory. As Longenbach explains, the shift to the passage from Columbus's diary "fulfil[s] Graham's dream of a 'unified field' even as the passage implicitly criticizes the hubris of the dream" (115). The poem, he claims, finally cautions against both the dream of the unified field *and* "the idealism of the dream of relinquishing all control" (116) of the material world: both assume the possibility of entering "nature" such that the distinction between subject and object would "shed itself." Graham's poem, like phenomenological theory, suggests that although each of these positions implies the other, they cannot coincide.

The self-reflexivity of the poems of *Materialism*, then, enacts not so much an inevitable anthropocentrism, in which the outer object world is unavoidably distorted by the vicissitudes of human consciousness, as the complex interplay of subject and object positions (of both the individual and nonhuman nature) which governs all perception and experience. Like McKay's use of comedy and metaphor, the phenomenological approach of Graham's poems practices a repetition of those governing codes which is both more and less subversive, simultaneously performing and disrupting performances of our engagements with the material world. This approach shows how understanding outer "reality" or "nature" – what Graham calls in one poem the "stern materialism" of the day (*Materialism* 7) – as discursively produced is in no way incompatible with affirming that "there are, there really are, / Things in the world" (6), things whose existence is entirely interimplicated with our own.

Conclusion

The idea that the distance between subject and object, self and other, consciousness and world, would have, or will, in Graham's words, "shed itself in nature" to produce a perfect coincidence is simultaneously radical ecology's most radical and most conservative precept. As this thesis has shown, while such an assumption may be seen to embody a radically democratic impulse, its insistence that the distinction between the subject and the instrument of representative politics will dissolve with the emergence of subjects fully identified with nonhuman nature is fraught with problems, not least of which is the danger that politics itself becomes understood as thoroughly instrumental, something which will also be "shed" once we establish (or return to) a right relation to the earth.

When ecocriticism aligns itself with such a political paradigm, as much of it has implicitly done, it cannot escape becoming highly normative, focusing exclusively on those texts which it sees as contributing, through an environmental mimesis, to the consciousness-raising efforts of an ecological identity politics. This normative narrowing is a loss, for ecocriticism has the potential to make a strong case for a link between literature concerned with the nonhuman realm and ecological politics, based on their parallel explorations of the possibilities that our socio-political context offers for simultaneously invoking and producing "nature." Much of the existing ecocriticism, however, chooses to spend its energy delimiting the boundaries of ecologically acceptable literature in a manner distressingly similar to deep ecology's attempts to define what counts as "truly" deep ecological (Zimmerman 49-56). In the end, this ecocriticism submerges the possibilities for making a more convincing, if more complex, link between ecological politics and literature.

I contend that, contra mainstream ecocritical dogma, poetry like McKay's and

Graham's may be seen to be deeply political, participating in the disruption, carried out by such theorists as Sandilands and Torgerson, of the ecological identity politics model subscribed to by much radical ecology and ecocriticism. Its continual de-naturalization, particularly by means of comic and phenomenological approaches, of established relationships between human and nonhuman participants at once acknowledges their performative character and carries out, to a certain degree, Butler's practice of subversive repetition. Read in the context of an ecological politics of performativity, McKay's and Graham's poetry is seen not so much to be informed by political concerns as to embody the basic eco-political impulse to continue questioning and re-fashioning the fictions that orient human practices in a more-than-human world.

Notes

Introduction

1 Although I'll be discussing larger ecocritical trends, it's important to note that there is a distinction between British and American ecocriticism. Bate's book is one of the relatively few to emerge from the British tradition, which is, as yet, generally less normative than the American tradition. Richard Kerridge offers a brief description of the difference between the two in his introduction to the British ecocritical anthology *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998), noting that "American approaches and debates reflect particular American conditions, such as the persistence of various forms of frontier and pioneer ideology... and, not least, the survival of large areas of land which can be called 'wilderness'," while "a British perspective has to accommodate the densely populated and suburban character of most of the British countryside, and, more importantly, the historical meanings assigned to 'nature' in Britain, particularly the identification of rural life with feudalist traditions and hierarchies, in opposition to urban capitalism and its forms of social mobility" (8). As we'll see, American ecocritical normativity may be loosely connected to a wilderness mythology which seeks a return to a prelapsarian state of harmony with "nature," a mythology absent in Britain.

2 As I mentioned in the preface, I'm employing this term in a fairly schematic and heuristic way, following theorists like Michael Zimmerman and Douglas Torgerson in using it to designate three internally diverse movements – social ecology, deep ecology, and ecofeminism – all of which are distinguished from more mainstream "reform" environmentalists who, in Zimmerman's words, "seek to curb industrial pollution and to use natural resources more wisely, but who do not call for basic alterations in modernity's instrumentalist view of nature" (3). Obviously, I do not mean to reduce any of these movements to any one of their manifestations, or to conflate them with each other. Ecofeminism in particular, as both Zimmerman and Torgerson note, contains a wide range of positions, complexly interrelated and often at odds with each other. Because of this, my claim that radical ecologies largely subscribe to the political paradigm of identity politics should not be taken to mean that every sub-category of each of social ecology, deep ecology, and ecofeminism participates in identity politics, much less that each participates in the very same way. Rather, I'm using the term "radical ecology" as shorthand for those movements which, in their desire to challenge a reformist view of ecological change, tend to invoke what Carolyn Merchant, in her essay "Reinventing Eden," calls a "recovery narrative" (Cronon 154-59) – a narrative of recovering "a relationship of balance and harmony with the natural world" (156) through the recovery of ourselves as "natural" beings. These tendencies exist, to varying degrees and in different forms, in all three of the so-called radical ecologies. One might argue that it would be more accurate to replace "radical ecologies" with "ecological identity politics," since my schematic use of the former term tends to make them interchangeable.

(and, indeed, I often use them interchangeably). I've chosen not to do this because such a move would obscure the ironic relationship I elaborate between a supposedly "radical" non-instrumentalist politics and an instrumentalist politics of representation, a relationship which is, in turn, central to my argument for an alternative politics of performativity (itself the basis of my critique of mainstream ecocriticism).

3 For instance, in her introduction to the anthology *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), Elaine Showalter outlines three stages in the development of feminist literary criticism, a scheme which Cheryll Glotfelty, in turn, draws upon to describe the development of ecocriticism (xxii-xxiv). Showalter notes that feminist criticism moved from exposing misogyny in literary practice to recovering and rereading marginalized literature by women to, finally, "a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study, a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experiences" (8). The latter two phases, while highly productive, have also been the site of disputes over normative attempts to delimit "feminist" or "feminine" writing. Showalter notes that the concept of a "female aesthetic," developed in the 1970s by some American women writers and based on the idea of "of an essential female identity that expressed itself through only one literary style" (7), was a contentious one, as it suggested that only a "lesbian consciousness" was fully engaged, through the female aesthetic, in feminist politics. The French feminist elaboration of "l'écriture féminine," insofar as it holds "that women have an advantage in producing this radically disruptive and subversive kind of writing" (9), similarly evinces the effects of an identity politics model on literary criticism. Glotfelty's use of Showalter's scheme, then, has the (unintended) effect of highlighting the ways in which ecocriticism, like feminist literary criticism, contains both a radically democratic moment, in its questioning of oppressive (patriarchal, anthropocentric) norms, and a conservative moment, in its limiting of the scope of literature understood to be politically engaged.

Chapter One: The Politics of Radical Ecology

1 Although Phillips admits that the problem is not so much with the *validity* of the ecosystem concept, as with the assumption that a theoretical entity could be "the reality that somehow underwrites poetry, even if that poetry is of the good old-fashioned, supposedly 'organic' sort" (582), the discussion preceding this admission, and the footnote appended to it, suggest that he's considerably invested in the charge that ecocriticism fails because it uses ecological concepts that "have not proved amenable to scientific confirmation" (581). For an overview of the argument that similarly uses contemporary ecologists' disproving of the ecosystem concept, by means of chaos theory, to criticize radical ecology, see Michael Zimmerman (12-13). Both of these arguments seem misguided insofar as they permit the basic premise of a fundamental scientific, if not literary, mimesis to remain intact, and thus suggest the possibility of a "discovery" of universal ecological principles which may inform both literature and social organization. For further consideration of Phillips's position on ecological science, see pp 51-52.

- 2 For theoretical accounts of the meanings and functions of these movements, see Jean Cohen, "Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements" (*Social Research* 52:4 [Winter 1985] 663-716), Klaus Eder, *The New Politics of Class: Social Movements and Cultural Dynamics in Advanced Capitalist Societies* (London and Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1993), and Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, ed. John Keane and Paul Mier (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989)
- 3 I'm following the eco-theorists I most rely on, Catriona Sandilands and Douglas Torgerson, in using this loaded term in a rather general way, to signify an anti-essentialist approach suspicious of claims for any discourse that it may grasp the "truth" of nature, "accurately" translating both nonhuman nature itself and our relations with it.
- 4 It should be noted here that certain sub-categories of the radical ecologies, particularly versions of ecofeminism, contain postmodern elements, and Dryzek recognizes these in his individual descriptions. Despite what my analysis so far has suggested, this is not necessarily a contradiction – as both Sandilands and Torgerson point out, ecofeminism in particular has responded in various ways to the critiques of "feminist postmodernists" such as Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Donna Haraway. Dryzek's failure to distinguish these approaches as a distinct category simultaneously suggests that the majority of the movements that make up his "green radicalism" don't go the postmodern route and that, as I claim in the next note, he's somewhat resistant to it himself.
- 5 Although Dryzek admits that his own "discourse approach" is heavily indebted to Michel Foucault, he emphasizes his differences from Foucault. For one thing, he notes that while he sees discourse and power as connected in many different ways, he doesn't subscribe to Foucault's argument that there is no distinction between them, since discourse *is* the operation of power (11). Consequently, he disagrees with Foucault that "individuals are for the most part subject to the discourses in which they move, and so seldom able to step back and make comparative assessments and choices across different discourses" (20). Dryzek counters that "discourses are powerful, but they are not impenetrable" (20). Similarly, while his closing argument for an ecological democracy which "blurs the boundary between human social systems and natural systems" (201) resembles postmodern arguments for politics which take into account the inevitable constructedness of "nature," his claim that "the nonhuman world can communicate, and human decision-making processes can be structured so as to listen to its communications more and less well" suggests that natural, rather than human, "communications" become the bedrock of ecological politics.
- 6 Pitkin labels one of the main theoretical debates the "mandate-independence controversy" (*Representation* 17) and summarizes the question that informs it as "Should (must) a representative do what his constituents want, or what he thinks best?" (17). In other words, should a representative act on the basis of the mandate given to him by

those for whom he acts, or should he act independently, using his own judgment “to adapt and enlarge the constituents’ special, separate needs into the national welfare” (18)? Pitkin makes the crucial point that both positions are oriented around the question of how representation “mak[es] present in some sense ... what is nevertheless not literally present” (19) – the question of what makes the representative the best instrument of an ontologically prior represented. Although the debate has the potential to open onto a reconsideration of the understanding of representation itself as a mirroring process, neither position questions the basic validity of that model. As Pitkin notes, the concept of representation “sets the outer limits, beyond which we will no longer accept what is going on as an instance of representation” (20). The suggestion that the representative may play a productive, rather than an expressive, role in representative politics lies beyond those outer limits.

7 I’m using the term “identity” as Craig Calhoun does, to signify the related “essentialist” notions that individual identity is “self-sameness,” such that “self is integrally and immediately being and consciousness, name and voice” (9), and that group identity is the sharing of a particular self-sameness, and thus the abstracting of essential qualities which both unite the members of the group and distinguish it from other groups.

8 Dobson’s suggestion of a political strategy for radical “ecologism” is particularly telling in this regard. He argues that the political institutions of representative democracies “represent the formal abandonment of notions of mass participation in political life, they are indeed ‘designed’ to *preclude* the possibility of massive regular participation” (135). Dobson’s problem, then, is that representative politics as we know them do a poor job of *translation*, from his perspective, reform ecology relies on a crippled system. Contra appearances, he doesn’t argue against the instrumentalism of representative politics. In fact, Dobson decries the *lack* of instrumentalism, as he distinguishes between “political institutions” and “the principles of representative democracy.” The latter, with their possibility of “massive regular participation” by means of the “neutral instrument” of the representative body, he seems to endorse. He takes issue with political institutions “always already tainted” by their inability, due to their complex relationships with the institutions of industrial capitalism, to faithfully mirror the interests of ecological subjects. Presumably, he believes that political institutions not imbricated in industrial capitalism would remain true to “the principles of representative democracy,” that is, to the principles of translation of the interests of the people, interests which would, in turn, coincide with those of the earth.

Dobson’s alternative political model, the development of a class-based environmental agent, is an overtly instrumental one, designed to recover the universal interests of ecological subjects. Dobson says that ecologism must follow classical Marxism, and “identify and organize a group of people in society whose *immediate* interests lie in living the Green life” (154), a group Dobson identifies as the unemployed. In arguing for a class-based, as opposed to a universalist, approach to ecological politics, however, Dobson doesn’t give up on the notion the general interest will ultimately be represented. The unemployed are, in Dobson’s analysis, the historical agent of Marxism,

those who represent the deluded middle classes' "'genuine' self-interest," rather than "their 'self-interest' as they perceive it" (159) Like other identity politics models, Dobson's class-based strategy is designed to increase the instrumentalism characteristic of representative politics

9 As I've mentioned, deep ecology, ecofeminism and social ecology (under the influence of Murray Bookchin) are the three movements usually gathered under the heading "radical ecology" While elements of social ecology too submit to the critique of radical ecology as identity politics, I've chosen not to examine it mainly due to space constraints, but also because its anti-hierarchical stance is not immediately identifiable as an attempt to (re)establish humanity's natural identity As I've already mentioned, ecofeminism contains much more diversity than deep ecology, and to reduce the entire movement to only one of its trends (its emphasis on connecting the identities of women and nature) is inaccurate Because my point is to show how the identity politics surfaces in the ecology movement, however, I'm relying heavily on Sandilands's argument that despite the fact that "some authors repudiate the idea of the naturalness of women ... there is within ecofeminism a moment that insists on carving out a distinct terrain of womanhood in which connections to nature are made Whether that terrain is defined in terms of experiences of reproduction and hence knowledge of the continuity of life, whether that terrain is formed by different processes of ego development and hence a greater capacity to connect and nurture and less need to separate from primordial natural bonds, whether woman is more distant from male culture and hence closer to nature by virtue of exclusion, or even whether women, differently situated, are the mutual subjects of a naturalized gaze, there is a distinct thread that suggests a unified meaning to femininity" (71).

10 My use of the term "identity" here may seem questionable, given that identity is a social concept I use it to highlight the fact that deep ecology's emphasis on "nature" as a "positive presence" (Sandilands 90) is inescapably social If, on one hand, ecological politics seem to offer the possibility of overcoming the problem of accurate representation of the represented subject, since "the earth," unlike a human constituency, would seem to be a stable prepolitical entity, they also, as Sandilands points out, highlight perhaps more clearly than any other strain of representative politics (identity politics included) the contingent character of the representation process While other versions of identity politics – some radical feminisms, for instance – ultimately face the impossibility of discovering a unified constituency or represented subject pre-existing the political process, and thus show "the impossibility of the project of completed identification, of the completed social, itself" (91), environmentalism's "lack of a speaking subject to give voice to a set of positive experiences" (90) brings it up against this impossibility in a more dramatic fashion I call deep ecology's emphasis on "organic unity" (Dryzek 156) an emphasis on the earth's "identity" in order to underscore the participation of representations of "nature" in Sandilands's Lacanian "impossible project ... of the completed social" (91)

11 Because I'm putting Sandilands's analysis in the larger context of critiques of representative politics in general, and identity politics in particular, as eco-political strategies, my summary of her work is necessarily reductive, eliding many of the subtleties she identifies in different ecofeminist theorists' elaborations of the connections between women and the nonhuman world. I'm trying to sketch out, in limited space, her overall argument that "It is in the context of the proliferation of democratic social movement struggles that ecofeminism appeared as a political vision focused on a particular kind of identification, it is because of ecofeminism's reliance on the language of identity that its political project is currently limited, it is in an interrogation of the democratic desires that lie behind identity that the promise of ecofeminist politics may be formulated; and it is through the kinds of democratic debate that have arisen as a result of critiques of identity politics that a revitalized ecofeminism may be shaped" (XVII-XVIII)

12 For possible problems with using Laclau and Mouffe's "post-Marxist strategy" for ecological politics, see Torgerson, 45-49

13 Although I've chosen (due to space constraints) not to examine the responses, from various quarters, to critiques of identity politics, I'm not unaware of them. Discussing the recent spate of leftist critiques of identity politics in her essay "Anti-Anti-Identity Politics" (1997), Susan Bickford takes issue with "the increasingly common invocation of identity politics as an all-purpose anti-hero" (113), arguing that "That practice of dismissal sets up a frame in which linking identity with politics is automatically suspect, regardless of how we characterize that link" (113). I recognize my analysis is to some degree open to that charge. On the other hand, Bickford's suggestions for an alternative understanding of identity and politics based on a coalition model which sees "identity as noncategorical, as multiple" (121), as well as "created" (123), and her argument that "This insistence on the multiplicity and the incompleteness of identity, with its concomitant refusal of fragmentation, provides an important alternative for thinking about the self-as-citizen" (121) is hardly incompatible with much of Sandilands's analysis. Bickford herself admits that her political vision "chimes in some ways with [Judith Butler's] analysis of the centrality of performance to identity, and it ends up at a vision of democratic politics that is . . . active, argumentative, and oriented toward change" (128). If my analysis has faulted identity politics for its tendency to "claim that identity as a concept means categorical sameness, and thus inevitably produces its Other as the difference that makes that category possible" (119), it does so not in order to condemn any and all political uses of the concept, but to discuss a use of identity that becomes particularly problematic in mainstream ecocriticism.

14 Bonnie Honig argues explicitly, through a Derridean reading of Arendt, for bringing Butler and Arendt together, claiming that Arendt's resistance to allowing the "private" realm to impinge on the "public" is due to the fact that she "mistakes performative effects in the private realm – the constitution of selves into embodied, raced, classed, and gendered subjects – for constative natural facts" (122). For Butler, "The strategy is to

unmask identities that aspire to constation, to deauthorize and redescribe them as performative productions by identifying spaces that escape or resist administration, regulation, and expression. These are spaces of politics, potentially spaces of performative freedom. Here action is possible in the private realm because the social and its mechanisms of normalization consistently fail to achieve the perfect closures Arendt attributes to them too readily, without resistance” (124)

15. Like Sandilands, I’m not trying to conflate Butler’s performativity with Arendt’s. I do want to note that the comic element Butler identifies in her practices of subversive repetition shares something with the comic element Torgerson identifies in Arendt’s political performativity – if Butler’s is a comedy of the absurd, while Arendt’s is a comedy of infinite play, in both cases laughter arises from the sense that we are working without a given, an “original,” a ground for action – the sense that, constrained as we are by various social means, we must always return to the radical contingency that comes with being creatures of language

Chapter Two. Radical Ecology and Ecocriticism

1. But see Bate (1991) and (2000) as examples of criticism which may be classed as such

2. Because Buell’s book is both long and wide-ranging, I’ve chosen to focus on the sections which seem to me to be mostly explicitly oriented towards developing and justifying ecocritical practice (the introduction and chapters 3, 5, and 6)

3. For a more general example of this trend, see the introduction to the recent ecocritical anthology *Reading Under the Sign of Nature* (2000). The editors follow Buell in using the term “ecocentric” to designate literature oriented towards the environment in general (ix, xv), and thus accomplish a similar elision of the differences between radical and other ecological politics.

4. Phillips does, to a certain degree, address Buell’s politics, noting that “The principle to which he appeals most strongly is not a literary one. ‘Environmental praxis’ is the solvent that allows ecocritics to undo the paradoxes engendered by a conflicted world of texts and readers of texts. . . . Appealing to the ‘spirit of commitment to environmental praxis’ allows Buell to reject out of hand certain theoretical notions as either unhelpful or harmful, or both” (584-85). But Phillips doesn’t unravel Buell’s implicit alignment with deep ecology. He wonders, “How does the ‘spirit of commitment to environmental praxis’ on the part of ecocritics link up with the practice of environmental activists and working ecologists? Or is Buell speaking here only of ecocritical practice, in which case the ‘spirit of commitment’ *is*, more or less, the ‘praxis’? Are ecocritics in the unenviable position of cheering on the efforts of those in other fields who are better able to engage directly – that is, professionally – in environmental activism and the production of ecological knowledge? If so, then ecocriticism would seem to be just another variety of

academic agitprop” (584). In fact, as we’ve seen, from the perspective of an ecological identity politics, ecocritics engage directly in political activity insofar as they promote literature seen to awaken the reader’s identity with nature, a “recovery” which constitutes the central political task of radical ecology.

Phillips observes in a footnote that “‘Praxis’ is a term from the Marxist theoretical tradition implying not just practice, but the ideological assumptions undergirding and/or deriving from practice. Whether Buell intends the word to have a Marxist flavor is doubtful, since its theoretical implications cut against his insistence on the grounding of ecocriticism in real-world, nonideological activities” (600n13). If Phillips is right, as seems likely, Buell’s use of the word “praxis” presents a nice irony, as it unintentionally undercuts his radical ecological insistence that literature operates as environmental practice insofar as it puts us “in touch” with the identity of the nonhuman world. Buell thus unwittingly highlights the fact that his environmentalism, like any, both stands on and produces precisely the “ideology” of which he is so dismissive.

5. This possibility is variously realized in the essays in the anthology *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, which range from the strongly normative (Donovan) to the strongly anti-essentialist (Armbruster).

6. As I’ve said, and as Noel Sturgeon makes clear in her study of the development of ecofeminism, *Ecofeminist Natures*, the movement is by no means unified on the character of even its most basic tenets, the connection between women and nonhuman nature and/or between feminist and environmentalist political struggles. Sandilands, too, appreciates the diversity of approaches that cohabit under the banner “ecofeminism” (see, in particular, her third chapter, “From Difference to Differences: A Proliferation of Ecofeminisms”). The ecofeminism that Murphy suggests as a “ground” for ecocriticism seems to be more “constructionist” than “essentialist,” to use Sturgeon’s broad distinction (178-86). In the context of this thesis, the so-called deep ecology/ecofeminist debate provides a useful illustration of the difference between these (admittedly oversimplified) ecofeminist positions. As Sturgeon points out, ecofeminist critiques of deep ecology may be more or less based on an essentialist standpoint. In an early essay, Ariel Salleh argued that rather than “turning to an abstract, transcendentalist view of becoming one with nature,” deep ecologists should ground their arguments “on women’s lived experience of boundarylessness between themselves and Nature” (Sturgeon 43). Salleh here seeks to replace deep ecological identity politics with ecofeminist identity politics. On the other hand, Karen Warren’s and Val Plumwood’s “constructionist” elaborations of political alternatives to deep ecology, which are “grounded on an analysis of women’s experiences as ordered by patriarchy rather than biology” (45), offer a political paradigm that escapes many of the pitfalls of identity politics. It is this latter version of ecofeminism that Murphy tacitly draws on. Insofar as the “essentialist” version shares deep ecology’s identity politics, it will likewise translate into a narrowly normative literary criticism.

7 These are drawn from Žižek's *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT P, 1991)

8 See Ross's *Strange Weather* and *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, Haraway's *Simions, Cyborgs and Women* and *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*, and *Uncommon Ground*, the anthology edited by William Cronon

Chapter Three. Don McKay's Comic Anthropocentrism

1 The connection between social realist literary criticism and mainstream ecocriticism has been noted by Dominic Head, in his essay "The (im)possibility of ecocriticism" (Kerridge and Sammells 27-39). Head observes that the ecocritical objection to "a perceived emphasis on textuality in literary theory, and (notionally) a consequent gap between text and referent in the knowledge produced by literary studies" (29) is "an updated version of Georg Lukacs' attack on modernism as a socially retrograde move away from the achievements of literary realism" (30). The contradiction that Marxism, "a particular target [of a Green critique of the discourses of modernity], condemned for a perceived human-instrumental attitude to nature" (30), bequeaths to ecocriticism its model of literary criticism is resolved by placing that legacy in the context of the affinity between Marxism and radical ecology as social movements to some degree committed to the radicalized version of representative politics, identity politics. As we've seen, Sandilands has shown that despite their different assessments of the central categories of analysis, Marxist and radical ecological political logic is strikingly similar. Versions of eco-politics join the workers' movement as a variant of a politics of representation that appeals to an ostensibly natural or essential, and so static, identity – seen to be objectively verifiable – as an authority for social organization. Ecocriticism, like Marxist literary criticism before it, in turn converts this identity politics into a mandate for realist literature, as well as realistically-oriented criticism. It sees Marxism's (and Marxist criticism's) focus, not its method, as wrong.

2 Note that even this qualification is a qualified one. Meeker doesn't state that it *is* meaningless to pursue life, but that it is *probably* meaningless to do so. If we consider, too, that he's speaking in the context of tragedy as the purveyor of a transcendent metaphysical truth/knowledge, we see that his comment suggests not the nihilism postmodernism is so often charged with, but an awareness of the contingency of meaning – an awareness that is one of the poststructuralist approach's greatest strengths.

3 McKay's desire to "use language in a way that flirts with its destruction" should not be confused with the mainstream ecocritical desire for the destruction, the making invisible, of language as a means to the "thing itself." On the contrary, McKay sees the comic use of language as not so much providing a means of access to Buell's "natural environment as empirical reality" (*Environmental Imagination* 21), as "dismantling itself in a gesture toward wilderness" (27), the phenomenon which McKay defines as "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (21).

4. Significantly, Butler also addresses the question of satire, in her discussion of practices of subversive repetition as parodic. She notes that Fredric Jameson claims that “the imitation that mocks the notion of an original [rather than mocking, in a gesture of protest, something seen to depart from the utopic ‘normal’] is characteristic of pastiche rather than parody” (*Gender* 176). Butler says that “The loss of the sense of ‘the normal’, however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal’, ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody” (176). In Butler’s reading, as in mine, the laughter evoked by satire or parody extends beyond the service of critique, and thus beyond the tragic impulse, it becomes, as the “inevitable” end of human attempts to perfectly embody an identity (sexual, ecological, etc.), an end in itself.

5. For more purely comic poems, see especially “A Toast to the Baltimore Oriole” and “A Barbed Wire Fence Meditates Upon the Goldfinch” in *Birding*, “Catching the Cold,” “Meditation on Shovels,” “Luke & Co.,” and “Recipe for Divertimento in D, K. 136” in *Night Field*, “Big Alberta Clouds” and “Setting the Table” in *Apparatus*. For poems of outrage, see especially “Tuning Up For the Elegy” in *Birding*, “How to Imagine an Albatross” and “Territoriality” in *Sanding*, “Song For Beef Cattle” in *Apparatus*.

6. *Birding* includes poems from all four of McKay’s previous books, was nominated for the Governor-General’s Award for poetry, and won the Canadian Authors Association Award for poetry.

7. For an academic version of McKay’s riffs on the use of field guides, see the third section of Phillips’s essay “Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology” (592-98). For another of McKay’s poetic meditations on classification as a means of engaging the nonhuman, see “Twinflower” in *Apparatus*.

8. McKay actually uses this phrase in perhaps his most outrageous comic poem to date, “Sturnus Vulgaris,” from *Sanding*. Here the startlingly offensive starling speaker of the poem’s second section uses the phrase to launch a devastatingly funny attack on anthropocentrism.

9. My endorsement of a recognition of poetry as “fantasy” may seem confusing here, given that I opened this chapter criticizing Dale Williams’s labeling of McKay’s work as “fantasy.” But in fact I’m just extending Dragland’s response to Williams, which implies that the problem with calling McKay’s work “fantasy” arises when the term is used pejoratively, as the devalued side of a fantasy/reality dualism. While Bushell’s analysis is much more sophisticated than Williams’s, it accomplishes a similar degradation of fantasy insofar as Bushell is at pains to redeem fantasy by making it a form of reality. Although, as we’ve seen, Bushell says that “We need to get past the view of ‘reality’ as a concrete, objectified entity” (48), his insistence on accessing “a level which is extra-conceptual” (48) through the “rhetorical vehicle” (39) of metaphor belies his suggestion that he’s working outside a mimetic framework which sees language as, finally, the

instrument for expressing an extra-linguistic reality. In my opinion, Bushell misreads McKay's "wilderness" when he defines it as "new areas of experience and knowing" (48), it is, rather, a negative moment comprising the (non)experience of *not* knowing, when the mind's mastery is suddenly undermined, the utterly necessary moment of disorientation. Although McKay's suggestion that "in such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy – its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being" ("Baler Twine" 21) may be read as Bushell has done, it cannot, in the context of the whole essay, simply imply a positive experience. If, for McKay, wilderness is "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (21), the "glimpse" of "some thing's autonomy" can only be an utterly peripheral one.

10 See Alanna Bondar's essay, "'that every feather is a pen, but living, // flying' Desire: The Metapoetics of Don McKay's *BIRDING, or desire*," for an analysis of McKay's work which argues that "the motif of flight and migration serves as an elaborate metaphor for the poetic process" (14). Bondar's focus differs from mine insofar as she seeks to show that McKay often uses birds and birding to signify a poststructuralist view of the writing process, while I'm arguing that his very use of metaphor highlights the limits of signification as transcription. Nonetheless, her argument that "McKay's poetics critique his own ability to adequately transcribe life's 'realities' into language" (15) shares my emphasis on the self-reflexiveness of McKay's use of language.

Chapter Four: Jorie Graham and the Politics of Vision

1 While Longenbach doesn't use the term "phenomenological" in his article, his opening reference to Husserl's "thickened present" (97) indicates the importance of that philosophical framework to his argument. Other critics who use the language of phenomenology, without actually using the term, to analyze Graham's work include Willard Spiegelman (1998) and Brian Henry.

2 Abram actually addresses the connections between the empirical scientific perspective and that of New Age mysticism, whose visions of identity with the other echo those of identity politics, in his discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the Flesh. Abram claims that "Although commonly seen as opposed world-views [since the former privileges 'objectivity', the latter 'subjectivity'], both of these positions assume a qualitative difference between the sentient and the sensed, by prioritizing one or the other, both of these views perpetuate the distinction between human 'subjects' and natural 'objects', and hence neither threatens the common conceptions of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use" (66-67). By oscillating between these two views, Abram says, "contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both the perceiving being and the perceived being ... are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*" (67).

But Abram's (Merleau-Ponty-inspired) suggestion for overcoming the dualism

fails to acknowledge its own investment in another “qualitative difference,” itself related to the perceiver/perceived distinction – that between conscious and unconscious perceptual “participation.” Insofar as Abram associates phenomenological participation with a conscious “attending” to a nonhuman world “composed of repetitive figures that *never exactly repeat themselves*,” and contrasts this conscious participation to an unconscious attention to “the mass-produced artifacts of civilization” which “draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*” (64), he sets up a hierarchy of perception. It is on this basis that he claims that “when we identify with our bodies and taste the world with our animal senses,” “so much of our built environment, and so many of the artifacts that populate it, seem sadly superfluous and dull” (64).

Abram comes close opening up the contradiction that an *inherently* participatory perception can become unconscious or nonparticipatory when he poses the question, “if sensory perception is inherently participatory, and if ... perception is the inescapable source of all experience, how can we possibly account for the apparent absence of participation in the modern world” (90)? A poststructurally-inclined answer would be that we in fact *cannot* account for that absence, and because we cannot, the paradigm is flawed. It would argue instead that if participatory perception is the source of all experience, then it never can be “absent”, rather, perception “participates” in different ways in different cultures and in different time periods. Behind this argument, in turn, would stand the poststructuralist claim that there is no unmediated “direct” perception; sensuous experience itself is inevitably structured by conceptual frameworks. The movement is not a shift from “participation” to “nonparticipation,” but from one form of participation to another.

3 The term “big hunger” is Graham’s own. In her interview with Thomas Gardner, she claims that “many poets writing today realize we need to recover a high level of ambition, a rage, if you will – the big hunger. That is why we are so incredibly grateful for the presence of Ashbery and Merrill, why the hugeness of their project seems so central and the aesthetic differences that divide them ultimately so minor” (215-16). The term “unearned weight” is taken from a James Merrill poem, Longenbach contrasts it to “big hunger,” and discusses its significance for the modernists, Merrill, and Graham (99-101).

4 At the risk of depriving the term “comedy” of its semantic edge by over-use, I employ it here to highlight the connections between McKay’s use of humour to bring the reader up against the limits of her knowledge of the nonhuman and Graham’s dramatizations, often through linguistic self-reflexiveness, of the failure to achieve transcription of the nonhuman. If, as Meeker and Torgerson argue, the comic impulse is a deflationary one, Graham’s project in *Materialism*, like McKay’s, can be seen as broadly comic rather than tragic.

5 For discussions of Graham’s use of other works in *Materialism*, see Lisa Isaacson’s “Ad Interim,” Thomas Gardner’s “Incandescence,” 197-98, and Helen Vendler’s “Jorie Graham: The Nameless and the Material,” 122-24.

6 See, for example, “The Geese” in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, “I Watched a Snake” in *Erosion*, “The Tree of Knowledge” and “History” in *Region of Unlikeness*, and “Steering Wheel” in *Materialism*

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“something that would have shed itself in nature” Ecological Politics, Ecocriticism, and the Poetry of Don McKay and Jorie Graham

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