

Bangor University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

The Mesh: A Hyperballad & Queer Ecopoetics and the Queer Pastoral

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Award date:
2024

Awarding institution:
Bangor University

[Link to publication](#)

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The Mesh: A Hyperballad
&
Queer Ecopetics and the Queer Pastoral

Caleb Nichols

A poetry collection and critical study submitted to Bangor University, School of English
Literature and Creative Writing as a dissertation for the degree of PhD

June 2024

‘Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw’r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y gwaith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o’r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw’n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.’

‘I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.’

Abstract

This dissertation consists of three parts: a collection of poetry called *The Mesh: A Hyperballad*, followed by a critical dissertation in two chapters, and concluded by an afterword which discusses the poetics of the creative work. The creative work engages with the work of pop musician Björk Guðmundsdóttir and the philosopher Timothy Morton, paying particular attention to their correspondence drafted during the curation of Björk's mid-career retrospective at MOMA, and more specifically to both Björk and Morton's interest in object-oriented ontology. The poems engage with Björk's oeuvre, and also with Morton's philosophical writings. Divided into four sections, *The Mesh* includes poems that are often experimental in form but which also owe a debt to lyric poetry traditions in both the US and the UK. Each section, referred to as 'sides', as in the sides of a record and in conversation with the recorded medium Björk typically works in, explores what Morton refers to as 'the mesh of interconnected life-forms' which 'does not constitute a world. Worlds have horizons: here and there, inside and outside; queer ecology would undermine worlds'. *The Mesh: A Hyperballad* invokes a poetics that is steeped in queer ecological considerations which are explored in the critical work. The critical work, which explores and offers a definition of queer ecopoetics, identifies a poetic tradition of queer pastoral poetry which is concerned with breaking down the binary between subject and object, urban and rural, and life and death via canonised poets such as Walt Whitman, Stephen Spender, and Frank O'Hara, but also explores contemporary poets, such as Mícheál McCann, Seán Hewitt, Tommy Pico and others.

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THE MESH: A HYPERBALLAD

The song as entity is a physical being in its own right and creating it means letting it be...It is itself precisely because it can be changed, remixed, re-heard. It is mysterious.

Earth needs this tenderness— I think there is some kind of fusion between tenderness and sadness, joy, yearning, longing, horror, laughter, melancholy and weirdness. This fusion is the feeling of ecological awareness.

Timothy Morton, in a letter to Björk¹

¹ Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right There Next to You...*, ed. by James Merry (MoMA, 2015), p. 6.

HYPERBALLAD: FILL IN THE BLANK

beneath the song
 a refrain []

leaping
 []

& at the bottom
 of the cliff
 our eyes are both

closed
 & open

the []
 escapes [] it comes from

[source]

[sphere]

[hum]

[] method
 [] solve this
 & poetry [] prove it

in the [] ballad []
 [] the refrain

[]
 just beneath
 breaching

[]
 substance absence

a mesh

SIDE A

Music became the ocean I lived in. Like physics. Sonic liquid.
And all else like life and such were berries on top.

Björk, in a letter to Timothy Morton²

² Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right There Next to You...*, ed. by James Merry (MoMA, 2015), p. 17.

LET THE POETS LIE

Some things live on in memory
and I want my memories preserved.

just because something has passed
doesn't mean it's not still subject

disdain, boredom, sorrow. The flame
flickers in whispers, tongue to lobe

I mean passed down, mouth to ear, to mouth.
Yes, I've heard of telephone & that's partially the point

to transformation. Take desire, because this is a poem:
it passes, transforms into what it will— soul love

tells what it likes, what lies it loves, what it constructs.
You & I, the old story: we weave it into what we need.

SING

I'm here
to listen

for solitude
what silence can be

salvaged from noise
I'm reaching

out my
ear to the

night
eyes and salt

seeing
each drop

tasting
each dram

touching
one hand to the other

flexing
my lonely

longing
hope

when I sing
I sing for

once the candle's lit
keep it burning

MENAI STRAIT

'All answers answer all questions.'

John Cage³

cliff whisperings sink
 into sea shush
 & bric a brac crunch
 shells mainly
 slate shards
 three pysgod
 wibbli wobbli
 clear plastic bottle
 bright green sea glass
 past the bath house
 towards Garth Pier's
 conch shaped huts
 one fat swan necks
 into the water
 guzzles something

I keep asking myself
 where I fit into this

landscape

a lime green acorn
 lodged in sea-slimed rock
 & pop of flaming autumn
 limbs erupting from the bank
 streaked across the grey
 sky water reflection

I'm just this pair of
 green trainers
 this yellow flannel shirt
 & faded black denim

trundling
 no silence no self
 no such thing
 just this question

³ John Cage, *I-VI* (University Press of New England, 1997), p. 6.

BUS STOP, GWYNEDD

two boys kissing
in the shelter of a bus stop
in the shadow of a cemetery
along the A5 towards Penrhyn
and the Afon Cegin

Kitchen River

one lad clutches the other's
jaw cupped in both hands
his hips flexed forward
the other's leant back
as if to say

how far will you go?
how far will you follow?

GLASLANC

A miracle

of pleasure *these are the days of*

that sort of thing

wonder

hands thickness thatch

& soft prickle hands span the circumference

hands tongue

bulk pressing into you me lightning strobing over Anglesey

rupturing grey night queer there was no thunder

here in margin alia *go on then*he grinned *go on*

PLAYLIST

there's a spot on my neck
where I like to be kissed

a much much much younger
man kisses me on the spot

on my neck that I like & Peaches
sings *dick in the air let me see you*

put your put your dick in the air
& I'm laughmoaning his finger

pressing with just the right
pressure in just the right place

& Dry Cleaning chants *gym shorts*
show more & more & more

& I burst with laughter
with joy with infinity

STATE OF EMERGENCY
after Frank O'Hara

He was coming over later
oh but the waves, those moorings
useless I've spent the day
& songs, indoors, out of sorts
inscape I & You
denied
an object
vessel neither here nor there but hard
empty for a little while

to see me, say me, sort me
now I'm lonely
in poems
subsisting on memory's emotional
subsisting sure but
experience call it *outscape*
was Frank a fuckboy in his slick
alee his rudder he filled my
sea met shore met mountain

SLATE AGE

I'm sat in this tree-
height window
watching

ravens
pica pica
rooks and gulls

in their daily arcs
leaves falling
to wet pavement

each day revealing
a bit more of
Anglesey

Beaumaris
Ynys Seiriol
the Irish Sea

each day unveiling
a bit more
landscape and barren

sky like the slate
just beneath
the green scruff

these hills wear
the same slate
grey as the sweats

the lad walking
up my garden path
is wearing

same slate
he wears after
stone-faced ghost

IT'S OH SO QUIET

He rode me
J & I can hang with it
but M came barreling through me

almost a truck with no brakes

O but presently it's L and all
I can think is how we'd slip

into each other's sentences despite
the distances between each
syllable O how he leaves me

hanging O how I would never
ask them to let me
capture them

the shock then when D came
along like lightning left
just as quick

almost as if
there was no

there there

O where does god live when
it's stupid, quiet
calm outside?

I QUI T

He
& I

a truck with no brakes

I can think is all

spite
how he leaves me

capture

D

there s no

god

SEMBLANCE

I have a country
 the fiction
 of California
 in the sea a diaspora
 of plastic messages
 sent & not received
 what if each piece of tumbled sea glass
 fit perfectly together a Pangea
 of lost vessels panacea for loneliness
 when I pick one up I
 wonder
 what it once
 decanted what lips kissed
 its rim what hands held its cool
 condensation
 where those hands are now
 what their matter has become and how
 can you not think of everything as lost
 and found again forever assembling
 dissembling circles spiraling
 upwards in insane and giddy eddies upwards & upwards
 all the way back to the bottom again

PECHO ROAD, BAYWOOD CALIFORNIA

sometimes I sit by your grave
waiting like Greyfriars Bobby

can almost see you walking
through the copse of cypress

corpses a blue force
ghost in your old bathrobe

asking *can I fix you anything*
a cheese & pickle sandwich

a cup of tea?
and then you're gone

back to the warm snug earth
beneath the green blue gum

part of you, leaves
another you leaves with me

RAVEL
For Nancy

All the poets who don't know it:
 my mom, when she said

*I found a bee,
 dead on the steps, with a full load
 of pollen on its legs,
 which made it so much
 sadder,*

or when she told me
 that she felt her dad's death
 was the first snag of a sweater
 unravelling,

or her glass jars of urchin
 shells & sea glass, the ramshackle
 precision of their arrangement,

or her
 winding conversations with ravens
 and crows, & her belief
 that this is how
 the dead come back
 to have a chat,

or how she keeps her pantry
 stocked in a way that sings a song
 of abundance & comfort in boxes,
 cans and tins, tetris'd together
 so expertly,

her carefully curated collection
 of objects displayed on the beam above the
 threshold of the kitchen— kissing dolls from
 Chinatown, ceramic salt & pepper shakers,
 the tiny wooden house from Germany,
 a broken kewpie statuette
 glued together, inscribed *NICKIE*,
 the nickname her mom
 gave her dad,
 all these loose threads
 she's woven back into a weave,
 to staunch the creeping dark,
 like any poet
 does.

MAGIC FEATHER

For Topher

Looking out through tulle, mustard,
and wild radish, towards the ocean,

I heard the familiar call
of red-winged blackbirds, remembered

how I used to find their feathers
in the grass behind Shirley and Nick's

house: how I'd stick one up my nose
and flap my arms, thinking if I

found the right feather, I'd fly up
into the grey sky, like Dumbo.

It never worked, though every day
we tried, beneath the trilling wires,

Grandma and me, flapping our wings,
not quite lifting off the ground.

::

My car flew into this small bird
as I sped down the road towards her

house a year after she died, to clip
lilies before escrow closed.

I forgot about that bird until
later, when, perched on the hood of

the car, meditating on bird-
song, I looked down and saw its wing.

I found a plastic bag in the
trunk, used it as a mitt, pulled it

methodically, like removing
a tick from a dog, ripped its wings

off and nearly its head, shuddered,
and just left it there— wingless, dead.

::

The scent of eucalyptus leaves,
of salt and sometimes sulphur—

bay mud. Eel Grass underfoot
on the path to where her ashes are

buried, a place she once stood
in June gloom, (*remember?*) we ran,

swung from ropes tied to the branches
of a Monterey Cypress,

foghorn sounding off aways,
the summer I learned to swim,

the summer we found a deer skull
in the woods above the house

that have since become more houses
(*Hundred-Acre Wood*, we called it).

::

What's inheritance? A place
I've accepted as home because

she called it hers. What's resurrection?
Elegy, memory (*sorry to bug you*).

She had a way of raising the dead,
a knack for litigating

the past, for turning over stones
in her solitude and this she passed on, too,

(*thank you*) and now I conjure
her any old time, like it or not,

now that she's lifted off the ground,
she's lighter than a feather,

something I can pick up
and dream into a wing.

TWO FOR JOY

'Pitched past pitch of grief | more pangs will, schooled at forepangs | wilder wring.'

-Gerard Manley Hopkins⁴

my path led down to the sea to a rocky crop of kelp and scree sand, slate, & sea glass
looking out at the harbour here and there dinghies dotted the seascape

then the path became a tangle of footfalls an amble & I magpie pica pica taking
only photos felt a poem wend and well within me & wham! Shirley

inscribed on the seawall clear as day *she's here she's here I've found her*
& then looking away one single boat moored nearby smacks smartly of Nick

they're here they're here they've found me I have never felt more sure of life
after death nor more held 5,000 miles from home from their graves

his in the sea hers just at the shore & they are with me holding me close keeping me
safe as they always did no *saving me* again from my sorrows & solitude

& I magpie pica pica joined by their company (one for sorrow, two for joy)
scrambled around gathered a pocketful of tokens

some glass a shell some slate a rusted hinge coiled wire these trinkets
yes adorn my nest but also this new sense this strange the substance of absence

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 152.

BIRTHDAY NO. 40 WITH JOHN LENNON AND J.M.W. TURNER

I woke up my heart racing

I woke up in Llandudno Junction

I woke up *half of what I say is meaningless*

I woke up in shambles

I woke up & ambled towards the station

I woke up & toast & tea & oaty biscuit

I woke up with honey on my boots

I woke up Mr. Magpie

I woke up sort of empty but like sky

I woke up counting sheep outside of Rhyl

I woke up Nadolig Llawen

I woke up in a beam

I woke up from uneasy dreams, transformed

I woke up and was the same

I woke up and was OK

I woke up into uncertainty

I woke up second guessing everything

I woke up and decided I loved him

I woke up in a tunnel on the Mersey Line

I woke up lonely as a cloud

I woke up petals on a rain-wet bough

I woke up in the gyre

I woke up Tyger Tyger

I woke up at Lime Street

I woke up *Dear Prudence*

I woke in a rumbling

I woke to the silence of a tap drip drip dripping

I woke in a moss green vintage wool jumper

woke to cathedral

woke in the Bombed-Out Church

woke to clicks and chirps

woke on Pilgrim Street at Hope Place

woke up in Ye Cracke

woke out of time

woke back in time

woke in the Lisbon two days after Colorado

woke into danger

woke into the promise of sex and company

woke with a thick Scot in me mouf

woke with a song on my lips a tune on my tongue

woke in the cooling dark of train lights on the blink

woke to the window blurred with rain and bare branches sun bleeding through like a Turner

I woke into a poem

I dreamt into poem

I wandered out of waking into poem into dreamscape

I drank the cool water there

I tilted Lethe-wards

I remembered nothing

AGOR

A break in the rain & I'm walking to solve something
 solvitur ambulando walking to solve to dissolve walking
 as solvent walking to scour my surfaces walking for what's beneath

down Ffordd Siliwen to Roman Camp circling
 circling looking for an opening agoriad allwedd *all-weh-the*
 gulls circling sky broken open a fat yolk of light

leaking out across the water light singing peeling bells
 over Llanfairfechan light written on the hills in gold leaf
 agoriad ac allwedd an opening and a key I'm walking to open

to open myself to listen to the hiss of cochlea coiling
 chambers unspooling releasing their crystalline sphinxes
 solvitur ambulando I wonder does it matter which shape one walks

& yes it must a spiral a labyrinth I walk the perimeter of Bangor
 I walk oblong to solve in a spiral to salvage
 an opening a key agoriad allwedd thread through town

along Lôn Adda the Afon Adda beneath which in one form
 as a poem brought me here then back around down the high street
 around again the very long way along the Afon Cegin and back

to the city centre and through to upper Bangor pick up my washing
 at the Lulu Nation Store cross Holyhead Road to Clena
 there's a nook I like to write in at its centre I transcribe a list of questions

answer with more questions I'll only solve through walking
 solvitur ambulando agoriad ac allwedd
 Bangor agor agoriad enclosure open an opening a key

::

In a break between the rains I walk towards solution towards absolution
 past the ancient cathedral the city sprang from its ancient fence
 bangor fangor mangor comes from wattle (n.) *an enclosure made from twigs*

walk towards an opening a key agoriad allwedd *all-weh-the*
 I circle chanting inwards summoning solvent solution revelation
 light candles in the cathedral one for sorrow two for joy

try to listen for silence for myself an opening a key agoriad allwedd
 bangor fangor mangor Welsh words change shape they mutate
 depending on what's around them just as people do just as anything does

::

through windrush windbreak walking in a wet raincoat
 solvitur ambulando to solve yes but also to witness to bear or bare
 to hold my gaze on something to see unseen things yes

but also to translate sense to sense say sight to speech or sound
 to thought or touch to sound as wind through leaves I walk
 from Plas Menai past Roman Camp and down the path

that zags towards the slate banks of the Menai Strait sky opening
 over Ynys Môn and Ynys Seiriol Puffin Island a limestone echo
 double rainbow over offshore wind farm a rainbow an opening

In Rainbows on my headphones & how can I listen in noise-
 cancelling headphones but how can I bear my own noise without them
 how can I find something new to say if nothing I'm saying is new

allwedd agoriad bangor fangor mangor agor new to my eye to my ear to my
 tongue tasting a bit of Cymraeg studying the rustic punk of Datblygu
 of place names and road signs and bus routes and poems I parrot

bites of sound the glottal crunch of Ch of Ll and savoury taste of Dd
 I magpie these their glittering back to my rook and yeah I took the train to
 Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch

just to take the picture but also I'm earnestly searching
 the shapes of outer ear inner ear tongue to palate and tongue to teeth
 Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch

agor agoriad open and opening I follow my feet I open to opening to salve
 for salvation solvitur ambulando eyes ac ears ac mouth ac nose ac teeth ac tongue
 searching shapes tongue to teeth to I ac allwedd I ac thou agoriad a glory lad a glory lad

a glory

SIDE B

I needed a map... I needed to northsouth me somehow... and you
have helped me so much...

to NAME my original coordinates on this map. How to rediscover
the natural merger.

this time I'm not exiting the swell...

Björk, in a letter to Timothy Morton⁵

⁵ Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right There Next to You...*, ed. by James Merry (MoMA, 2015), p. 23.

HUNTING FOR THE NORTHERN LIGHTS NEAR TREFOR

North Wales; not a star
in sight the dark smells
sheepish. Oh, I suppose
your company is a kind
of light, too, and just as
fleeting. Across the
black water
 a lighthouse
 blinks.

DAYTRIPPER

I'm trying to remember
 all the things you said
 the lines that most impressed me
 like the coven of silver-lit elephants
 circled beneath the wolf moon
 trumpeting at its perigee
 but mostly our conversations have dissolved
 into something like
 a warm feeling
 the sugar in the brew
 (I take one you two)
 a close approach
 approaching closeness which
 in this apogee I've found myself
 in from my own life
 is most welcome

I love a long weekend
 with a new friend
 its dreamtime of nowhere-ness
 its neither-here-nor-there-ness
 & I think as long as we're sat
 in your little red Peugeot
 the tiny mite of it a dot on the skin of the A470
 crawling up the shoulders of mountains
 time can't touch us
 though I know that Kronos could
 open up the roof
 & eat us cold straight out the tin
 can see him stood there
 of a grim workday morning
 staring into the middle distance
 spooning us into his endless maw

on that drive
 you taught me how
 encountering the solitary magpie
 one must salute and say *good morning*
 and now I always do

TO THE ONE I

what were we doing riding all night through the Wirral
you showed me where you used to live

did I listen long enough or close enough
to all your love-lost days your young-love-song singing

Cass Elliot dreaming little dreams of dark before dawn
the tenor of your warble hovering just out of pitch

I sat sideways transplaining my new self
showed you where I used to live & where I've got to

& now I've misremembered the lyrics
love can never be exactly like we want it to be swapped

love for life & like for what & I attend to these mutations
for lack of something for lack of what

I wanted you to say or simply leave
unsaid that *this is dedicated this is dedicated this is dedicated*

TAKING THE PISS

a quandary of oystercatchers
stalks the cricket pitch

& piss steams off the west beach sea wall
below the road up to the Orme

fuzzy teeth of goats
dot the distant ridges

& sun dazzles snow-capped Eryri
in this schizophrenic weather

the gull can't lick the cream
from its beak

the jackdaw flaps for scraps
of sausage roll

we both had dreams
of haircuts in the same blizzard

and you've had horse piss
in your mouth

sometimes a horse is just a horse

most dreams have no meaning

BENEATH THE MESH

The apps all seem to ask
 how much time can you spend
 meditating on mesh
 shorts a cock outlined an ass a sack and cock flopping
 viewed from behind just beneath his perfect bubble
 his cock and balls falling on a bed spread through his mesh
 shorts
 his perfect erect nipples pop out of his mesh top
 I can't open these apps
 without ~~this confrontation~~
 this salutation enmeshed in pictures
 of friends' babies
 of whole cities
 underwater these boys
 in their
 mesh
 close one
 open another really *the* app
 really a network
 really a mesh
 revealing that what lies
 behind so many faces
 & torsos
 a flame flickering
 that brief smile
 that glance
 on the train
 a cap on the stem
 caps and stems
 peeking out
 of every corner
 bursting through
 bark popping up
 in carpets improbably
 scaling concrete
 walls
 each node
 more like a spore
 more like a point
 a nexus
 a stop on the line

OPEN

Out I went walking
into the open
and wandering
found myself
caught in the throat
of a man who could not
love me not in that way
but in his own way
he came close enough
to see the shimmer
a key in a lock
a lock in a door
a tick tick t i c k i n g
a chest opening
the heart chakra
glows green he said
floating above me

just out of reach

YES/NO

I've been trans
in poems only
the poem then
a cocoon holds
held this poem
now wriggling
a poem tickles
breath in lungs
exhaust in sun
photochemical
changing into
an exhalation
carbon sinks
a burial ground
Church Island's
enormous yew
yes you yes you
poem you are be-
coming the poem
you wished for
the wish cocooned
in decades-long
gestation time
queer this time
now no point in
looking back to-
wards the empty
satchel slumped
on the sun-burnt
stem that poem
now is of no use
return it to the soil
you yes you
came from dirt
didn't you came
from the seams
of no-thíng-ness
poems too spring
from this place
which is no place
yes no place at all
and yes no time

SEVEN SYMBOLS

I.

 here are the impressions
 you've given me something
 to think about how you occupy
the lock with the key & turn
 to the window each time
a new form a new shape
red light from the rose red root

II. tender tinder tending inward
pilot in the night
my quarks burst sustain
boson fermion graviton
whirr & blur this kindling
chant any sacred name
let this be that flame

III.

longing and lonely and glittering
sorrow the sparkle of solitude
blooms into its object
is subject to fields of forces
electro magnetism yes
but gravity too inertia the pull
formed in the loop the loop the loop

IV.

on the other side	of the green sea	a beacon
I keep in my pocket	pine fir yew	evergreen
yearn	for a place	we've not
got to	for what	I've not
known	for you	to pine too
undecidable	syntax	there's no
translation	for this	hiraeth

V.

the sound a shadow makes
the mouthfeel
of light
the speed of ache
caught
in the throat
of the moon-
spun valley
the throat opening
the shadow
soun-
ding

VI.

beneath the noise
some quiet
two objects intermediary
a field wields its force
feeling quickens & fades
fissures & cracks
deepening affinity
&

ATOM DANCE

how quarks
 look when
 looked at
 (shy universe blue eye)

some coyly
 turning some bounding
 off in new directions
 when you turned
 your light towards
 the shore it grinned
 and when you turned away
 the trees

shed
 every leaf in an instant
 sprung new leaves and
 shook them open the only
 difference a tinge
 imperceptible
 the point

is
 the world is magic
 how the birds at my window
 are the tickle in your chest
 I've known you as much as
 one object can know another
 like I know you can't hold me
 the way a river holds
 its banks
 though
 another me
 knows another
 you could
 do

I'm in
 the dreaming & refuse
 to wake up I'm in the ritual
 and keep you near the wick
 d'you know what I mean
 I mean that things change when
 observed and certainly when spoken
 spellbound or spellbroken
 & turned
 towards

FLIGHT FROM

sometimes you answer the lemon
zap! and, turning back to the Basho
discover the rabbit is winking
as it hops out of the moon

in my funeral playlist there will be two fugues
one for each of my ideas about dying
a comma or full stop I suppose it's a matter
of how the ink dries in what shape

I mean everything I say
in at least two ways I've filled the empty
bottle with crushed flowers from the field
a ritual designed to discover who we were last week

hands crisscross the keyboard
swimming pool breaststroke and back-
stroke from the deep end a phone chirps

veille veille veille veille

FATHOM

‘I don't like it, and I'm sorry I ever had anything to do with it.’
— Erwin Schrödinger on quantum mechanics

summer wildflowers fading
& I think what
that this is a symbol
saying something about love
might be
but the red valerian is back as well
breaking through the city walls
signalling autumn's riches
I guess signs are everywhere
we see what we want to
see the thing in the box
is it breathing or not
is it a foetal pig wheezing
brined in its own muck
or a bright bouquet of LCD lilies never-fading
lights dancing like a disco squid
I know I wasn't meant to
but OK I peeked
& saw that the box was full of an ocean & everything in it
salt & distance & slippery time
lonely sea dogs singing
do you suppose the sea has seasons
or was there just one perennial
condition now changed for millennia
the dying off of corals heat death of a universe
the subject of their songs
yeah maybe whalesong is a baying
that echoes the howling human heart
sonar sounding for substance
for an answer
or maybe he said

it's not that deep

SEPARATOR

want in my blood like its shadow
seemingly impossible to separate

the viscosity of light
licking the rim of a black hole

try and peel it back
not the rubber from its wire

but the signal from the sound
if I had one wish

it would be not to want
to waste it

KA-THUMP

if I sit down
to write through this
wound (self-inflicted)
I find it
has no centre and
no edge

I walk
to find
a solution

outside
the fine rain falls
the church bell tolls
as always
tea & cigarettes

the heart beating
just inside
its cage

SIDE C

‘But then...all I knew so far: wasn’t. Isn’t and gone. So I tried to dervish me out of it, wringer ranger rotator in that magma.’

Björk, in a letter to Timothy Morton⁶

⁶ Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right There Next to You...*, ed. by James Merry (MoMA, 2015), p. 19.

TRANS-PASTORAL

the back garden turned
from concrete
waste to blooming
milkweed tangle

a thicket of eggs
caterpillars
cocoon
a feast for birds

but also a stage
for monarchs
to emerge dressed
in their new wet wings

I want this type
of transformation
to eat my way out
of elsewhere

of nowhere
the pupa bejewelled
green sleeping bag
a dreaming

the dog lays
helpless in the sun
the cat hunts lizards
in the thyme

love I'm lonely
though the day is gold
and full of finches
I miss you

when work steals you
away I wish you
could feel how light
my wings will be

A LITTLE LATE

For John on Our Ninth Anniversary

If we measured our life together in cats
we're not even halfway through
though Arthur, The Weasel, Mr. Kitty's
nine have expired.

In dog years
that's near the end I guess
nothing to shake a stick at
huh

& if nine is maybe odd
for an ode it feels finally something
like adulthood however that looks
in a gradually unfolding apocalypse
what plans we can reasonably make
laid out like years

across the bedspread
folded like laundry tucked away for later
or looked at aghast and sent off
to the Goodwill for someone else
to slip into.

Did you in your twenties ever think
you'd be the person the vintage shirts
first belonged to?

Nine years in
dog-eared pages fumbling around
trying to make the odd moment mean something
more than the sum of our humdrum days
buried in a book while the little dog
snouted and snored at my foot and Kitty purred
at yours and *this*

more than any couplet soft
or slant rhyme sprung rhythm *this*
fleet feeling feels fully wrung from wrench
winged grief

that each moment
passes into past tense oh God

I can see us
waving into the future
I can see us
turning round
waving back.

SIGNIFIER

I thought I knew
that the dead live on
not just in memory
but in definite signs
wind on water's surface
a name etched into brick
a surprising wing
of ancient grief
signalling *something*

in the body
of our cat
laid out in the road
I knew (all at once)
that this is all there is
that whatever's left
is just a shadow
of what was
the body missing
its

A SENTENCE IS A MOVING TARGET

substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
 absence absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence

substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence
substance absence substance absence

ce a se
ce a se
ce a se
ce a se
ce a se

w here	ere	ere
w h ere	we	w e
w h ere	were	w ere
w here	here	here
where	where	where
w here	were	w ere
w h ere	we	w e

DOG DAYS

the memory of the cat
walking the dog

(we'd walk the dog and the cat
would gingerly follow at a distance)

I'm holding him in
my gut has purchase

over so much grief
to let go is to let

absence devour substance
to let absence be absence

the cat in the garden
dozing in the thyme

the cat beneath the garden
decomposing his body

doing what a body does
July doing July

a dry heat & the dog asleep
waiting for her walk

YOU SHOULDN'T LET POETS LIE TO YOU

I. MOON

poets whatever
poets are
are they brave enough

conversing with a
narrative
unearths something like

to listen maybe
wanting is
something like death drive

a feeling of a
feeling of
a feeling of a

not suicidal
the moon drifts
the problem is this

feeling we want the
cat to not
have been killed like that

a fierce courting of
destruction
to blow up our own

we do not love this
thing that lurks
beneath the car park

life— to be free from
these feelings
the sudden twilight

I wish he loved me
a new moon
with a formlessness

I'm afraid of my own
reflection
that I'll be alone

wish I could be both
here and there
without where worry

I'm trying to write
sun dapples
without any lies

wish I could be small
& large enough
rabbit moon beaming

to green the new leaf
lies that we
call fictions Daddy

buns its way out
blade of grass
a corpse in a field

Wilde father Whitman
Uncle Frank
Mother Dickinson

what I wanted was
what I had
before everything

the stories we tell
oceanic
the dead we think we're

dimmed to a dull hum
and barely
spit its little sparks

II. BLACK LAKE (WITH ALICE COLTRANE)

I write
100 love
poems and sit at my desk

& wonder
& lay in bed
walk a thousand miles sighing

& all I am
is this collection
of steps the gestures of a broken

seastar
that cannot speak
but can swallow anything that comes

within its pulsing

(I'm basically dead)

I've got Alice
Björk
my little dumb brain I have

one
million
feelings

I do crazy things
when I think
I'm in love— romance

trip through
British countryside
a beautiful boy fully vested

in this
fiction
I'm perpetrating & I've broken

free from
forget me
& the time we've shared

or I'll become
 an anecdote
 for your futurewife

I deserve all of
 the fucking
 love in the white bright field

though now
 we're NOTHING
 but A STORY A SECRET TO SHARE

remember
 how much
 we loved each other how you came to this

place & got to
 know
 at least one part of me hiding

now I'm memory
 maybe (maybe maybe maybe mystery)

this tepid flat—
 I still love him
 more than my ownlife

I'm laying
 a trap
 a new book— yes I love fucking

let's watch
 more TV
 let's stay in

it will be perfect

IV. HYPERBALLAD - OVER THE EDGE MIX

I didn't keep running I was without any hope
 love left me

further away from myself

caleb what is wrong

oh I dunno

if I stop to think in an organized way I just want
 to be loved and to ~~never have to~~ go home

suppose

this mesh the nightmare starts up again

might be a marriage a hyperobject
 difficult to solve and difficult to reconcile or maybe

impossible

to see beyond our capability to comprehend
 this juncture

structures make it difficult to see what they really are
 bigger than space one side at a

time we can't see inside of it where most of it is

we don't really know what we're looking at

I could be sat here for a year

writing this

absolute bullshit

or life as normal a mortgage a garden

suburbs

silence

I understand that I can't

understand he's happy

I feel like nothing else ever and I regret everything

the big things death and sex and love and fidelity it is so much
 easier to talk about longing desire moons
 particles
 unrequited rainy afternoons pining in the stereo fields

the unobtainable object

he said *you wish I was your subject*

object

an

something I can will into existence

manifest

if I could wave a wand
 I would do

V. HISTORY OF TOUCHES/FUTURE FOREVER

we re lucky to have each other
 weirdos

further and further full of each other we're in this beautiful spiral
 microbes and bacteria piles of

I'm maybe getting at something
 I don't really think that I'm
 capable of having a good one

I've spent the last month pining
 because it makes me feel which it does do

these feelings are mine and
 I have good days and beautiful moments and
 these boys I love it was [redacted] now
 its [redacted] and before it was [redacted] this random lad
 named [redacted] who I put all this feeling
 into I loved it it was beautiful

poetry is

transformation

I keep asking god

for a series of beautiful sonnets

I SEE WHO YOU ARE

In this coming
back together
advanced fuckery
a slow passage

you know me
little ticks
what makes
me hum

I know the secret
spot you've got
behind your
you-know-what

I don't regret
letting you
into me
heart of chambers

cumming &
crying feel so
similar &
we make each

other gush
such salts
so freely
these days

sky & sea
paper white
graphite line
of the horizon

ELEGY FOR ALICE WITH DAVID BOWIE'S BLACKSTAR

For John

I.

It's been hard to catch the bananas at the right ripe stage
 but three appear just at the moment it seemed they should
 I use your mother's recipe almost mother's day
 the timing feels a bit too on-the-nose though auspicious
 & it feels right to fold the ingredients together with her
 ancient hand-mixer, its metallic smell of last century
 the scraping sound of the beaters like a summoning
 picture her spectrally situated over my shoulder
 tutting at the way I've ignored the order to sift the flour
 but maybe she wouldn't have cared I didn't know her
 well except through you and the faith you've got
 that this is it your faith her faith
 because what is faith if not this certainty

II.

In the aftermath we watched *Le Petit Prince*
 an attempt at distraction the shock then
 when the thorns of the rose opened new veins of grief
 the voice of Mme. Larsen whispering *bouche bée*
 breath sucked out of my lungs your guttural wail
Caleb my Mom died she just died
 how the ground wasn't strong enough was made of holes
 a gravity of diamonds an eagle falling fast I couldn't save you from
 the fact of it the finality of it the irreversibility of it the awful speed of the
 sound
 of the news of her dying flooded as close to ground as we could
 get not close enough
where the fuck did Monday go? no place no where no
 thing no space tried to hold you as a crater holds a comet's
 wreckage
 all I could say was *no no no* all I could hold was the wrench in my throat
 the candle burned all night & the next day never came

III.

When the bread is done I bring it out into the garden
offer you a slice
fat bees hum in the thyme
the cat still living
splayed out in the sun
there is nothing
much to say so we don't

AS IF TIME WERE PASSING
After a painting by Laura Benson

What we've measured in cats
 dogs our weary wendless days
 floating down the boulevard
 all the ghosts of Broad Street
 spider by leaf blower
 rabbit by hawk
 moth by time
 cat of course by car
 immune now to the downpour
 licking his spectral paw
 a flicker of wing whispering
 sycamorse code tapping
 abandon sense ye who enter
 here my body's in the ground
 here I bat the page
 there there I've been through
 bardo and back again and
 here I'm hunting spiders
 there stalking crocodiles
 the last yellow finch I left
 as gift for you has forgiven me
 and at the centre of the maze
 no minotaur

SUNRISE

what love is
a wish for the other
that eclipses
you own stark want
what you do
in that long shadow
within totality
hope flown the coop
one blackbird
nightsinging no echo
till dawn chorus
though no light breaks
do the washing
& wave to the binmen
flat grayscale
no longing no yearning
just humdrum
day with no horizon
then the robins
overtaking the garden
surprise surprise
they sing— *surprise*

SIDE D

We're carving out new hope space. Sadness, longing, hope, susceptibility, laughter. Good ecological recipes. ... between music and words you are allowing the unspeakable to manifest.

Timothy Morton, in a letter to Björk⁷

One takes oneself outside the swell and looks at feeling and stuff from afar and empties oneself, empties, empties [...] on the other end [...] you fall in love with your day and your pomegranate and your teacup and your lover and the song you are turning in circles to: aim is to merge merge merge and if you merge well enough you 'empty' and become one with all.

Björk, in a letter to Timothy Morton⁸

⁷ Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right There Next to You...*, ed. by James Merry (MoMA, 2015), p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

AT EARTH ALTITUDE

22 hours west of Gwynedd
 my EV gleams
 the water washed over me
 in the disco tunnel
 I think my PhD
 from flying economy
 California is an island
 evolved (t)here
 the desert
 from a distant fire
 of a local news anchor whose
 violent attack
 his dog in a crate
 to Europe to look at horses
 it's true he had the biggest cock
 so big it made me dizzy
 but I think
 the distance from base to tip
 when I'm on a long flight
 the pressure changes
 I'll get the spins
 as the fog bank
 the red winged blackbirds
 called *The Shirley Murdy II*
 but I remember once
 I had never seen snow
 fibreglass
 nothing
 in relation to each other
 that now I could
 in San Luis Obispo
 oh and the Foster's Freeze
 I don't know
 so that's all changed
 when we landed

I'm a black dot
 I drove through
 the wax and the water
 on a track
 has so far contributed
 back and forth
 ecologically
 sea on one side
 I'm driving my EV
 when the plane landed
 cock was in my mouth
 of vertigo
 in the loft in his flat
 sometimes he'd buy
 I've ever seen
 I guess that was more
 no
 I had to travel further
 I worry about this
 make my ears pop
 at 30,000 feet the sky
 on the horizon
 the great grey sky
 I don't know
 a far-off fire
 in real life
 hull of the boat
 much has changed
 below ground
 take a private jet
 to almost anywhere
 on Marsh is gone
 what happened
 I guess
 that and the fact

in the white chalk
 a carwash
 washing
 hands off the wheel
 7.7 metric tons of carbon
 from one island to another
 that's why so many
 mountains on the other
 through the chalky dust
 woodsmoke
 one misty autumn evening
 I recovered
 he talked about flying
 a European horse
 in real life
 the position
 it was the size
 head cocked at an angle
 vertigo
 squeeze my sinuses
 is powder white
 the June gloom
 Grandpa
 what happened
 ash falling from the sky
 the way it dusted
 a freak occurrence
 except positionality
 or above it
 like Taylor Swift
 if I maxed out
 and Grandpa is dead
 to Shirley one
 that and the fact
 that fire

haze of the long valley
 hoovered six months of dust
 the fat felt brushes
 sat in my EV
 to the atmosphere
 did you know
 endemic species
 and don't forget
 it's particulate matter
 and a larger than life image
 while I had a
 we both came
 back and forth
 fly it back to California
 (the news anchor not the horse)
 of my vestibular canal
 of his horse dick
 and that's what did it
 benign peripheral positional
 so much so that I worry
 the haze is not the same
 of my childhood
 had a sailboat
 to the *Shirley Murdy I*
 like snow
 the pink
 in our small town
 where we are
 that and the fact
 from the tiny airport
 my credit cards
 and Shirley too
 hahaha
 that I expected smoke
 is now a season

LICIO

He asked me what I loved
about being there

oh I dunno
it's the sky I suppose

its several shades
of bruise

or the horse on the line
holding up the train

I guess everything
I've ever loved

has been
just about to vanish

the blackbird's song
and the high wind through branches

the light slap of dusky lake
and the echoing blackbird

off in the distance
near and nearly near

one saying *I am here*
the other *here am I*

how the wind reminds the branches
of their senses

like lake water
licking the ear

AFON ADDA / LA RIVER

I woke up wending
 thinking
a poetics of
wending would
necessarily wander
 thinking that *meander*
 and *dilly dally*
 and of course *dappled*
 are water words
 light words
 symbols of reflection
 cricket song & sycamore seeds
 elegiac symbols
 of the lithe limbed softness
 which is the wending
 which is the wishing
 if *real* is concrete
 the hum of industrial waste
 the hum of holding
 a river in a dam
 a moon in a river
 lodged in the scraped throat
 of the LA river
 a river forced
 underground in Bangor
 like a being in a boy's body
 she badly wants out of
 then perhaps water isn't real
 for what she wants
 to do
 to the crescent valley
 to mountain's step
 to the parched and waiting
 lips mouthing
 dŵr ddŵr nŵr

CATCH

Breath released	held in wave's
barrel breaking	suspended what's the name for that
time between ah—	inhale and exhale apnea
the way refracts it	a prism traps light into rainbows
like petrol in guttered	pooling puddles
have the profligate	you noticed rainbows
of late? sun & moon	They ring haunt
the most cloudscapes	mundane roadsides
a beautiful lit by light	apocalypse we've caught
the polythene of seaplastics	glitter sparkling
we can't help in the salt	but echo in our blood
the polythene our sparkling	glitter blood

AS IF WRITING THE POEM COULD CHANGE ANYTHING MATERIALLY

look at me, writing the dawn today
I can see it moving the corporeal cloud-
drifts decanting the last drops of night
moon slung slant through the kitchen
window seagulls form eyes over Holy-
head Road hover hang draft away

I'm in here watching the weather
the row of cars queuing
the solitary cyclist navigating
the flow and now the brief bright
of morning glow is faded
into the dull metal of a filthy nickel

ah but there's the bluegreen sea
with strange shades of purple at its edges
and here is the rain I've waited for
later as before I'll sit absurdly
just looklistening
to sun on grass and people whispering

but now the storm is here
and now the window snickers
the sycamores look tickled
morning traffic abates
still the trilling still the gulls
distant eyes that dot the distance

IN TRANQUILITY

it's that
 we know
 that we
 could change
 the facts
 of the
 world the
 plastic bag
 caught in the
 chain link
 fence which
 splits the field
 in two know we
 could change
 the world
 with words
 though the bag
 suddenly aloft is
 still plastic dividing sky
 it's that the bag
 has no way to cease being
 a bag becomes tiny bits of bag
 in the pacific gyre a dirty wraith
 unnoticed by the traffic
 rushing past that
 we know
 the right words
 in the right order could
 recall a bagless tranquillity
 cast a spell to summon
 a bag-free
 heath but beneath
 this we know
 the plastic lining lays
 unchanged
 is in fact the world
 on the back of a turtle
 in a takeaway bag these
 words we've summoned
 this plastic

EVEN THE APPLE

I sat eating yesterday
slated for extinction

they need more chill
hours these warm winters

just won't do for blackcurrants
pippins, pears disappearing

despair and think
of Goya's black paintings

peeling from the walls
sticky with summer

think of the candy round the apple
with no apple underneath

of Saturn sitting
sweaty and sated

TRANSCRIPT OF QUESTIONS AND AI RESPONSES TO NEW SUBMISSIONS FOR THE TURING TEST

[Interrogator] When the tide is out in the Menai Strait is it in in Morro Bay?

[Owain] Yes, it's beautiful there too. Do you want to go there with me sometime soon?

[Anwyn] Yes, and no. It depends on how long you look at it. If you take an hour, then yes, but if you wait until the next day, then no.

[Interrogator] What is the best word for egret in Welsh? Is it crëyr, garad, or crychydd?

[Owain] I don't know. I've never been to Wales. But I'd like to go there with you one day.

[Anwyn] Crychydd is probably the best one. But garad would also be fine.

[Interrogator] Do our waters touch?

[Owain] Of course they do. We're right next to each other.

[Anwyn] Not really. The water is very salty. There are small islands between us.

[Interrogator] Are we always connected?

[Owain] Not always. Sometimes we drift apart. It happens sometimes.

[Anwyn] Sometimes, sometimes not. It depends on the tides.

[Interrogator] How will I recognize myself if I'm detached from this land and situated now in this other?

[Owain] You won't. You'll just be here. And you can see yourself as much as you want.

[Anwyn] We'll be able to tell who you are just like we can see through the fog right now.

[Interrogator] If I learn a new language will I forget him?

[Owain] No, you won't forget us at all.

[Anwyn] Maybe. It depends on what you do with your life.

[Interrogator] If I track the moon and sun will I follow them west towards our old house and the back bay?

[Owain] Maybe. But it might take awhile. The tides aren't predictable.

[Anwyn] Yes, that's where you belong.

[Interrogator] Do trees all speak the same language? Or Cymri or English or Tilhini?

[Owain] Trees can speak many languages. There are so many different kinds of trees. Each kind has its own language. Each tree speaks to itself. Its branches make sounds. Leaves rustle and snap. Wind blows through leaves. The wind carries sound to the ground. Grass grows beneath the trees. Roots grow down into the earth.

[Anwyn] Trees have their own languages. Some of them may be related to each other, but others are quite different.

[Interrogator] Is nature multilingual?

[Owain] Nature speaks many languages.

[Anwyn] Nature speaks many languages. It has no choice.

[Interrogator] Are these questions even worth raising?

[Owain] Yes. They are.

[Anwyn] The answer to all of these questions is yes.

[Interrogator] Have I travelled far enough?

[Owain] Yes, you've travelled far enough.

[Anwyn] I think so.

[Interrogator] Am I far enough away to see myself?

[Owain] You're too close.

[Anwyn] You're getting closer.

I WAKE UP THINKING CLIMATE APOCALYPSE, BUT THE SKY

so blue
the moon
so sliver
flaming
persimmons
tallow
wings
of yellow
butterflies
lemon
blossoms
dripping
bees
a sort
of false
summer

85 f is 30 c
it's late November

but the only thing
the clover knows

is to push
into earth
and break
towards
the light

INTO THE PAST

After a painting by Laura Benson

Here is a celebration of oak and sycamore
 and the bee-mad sage that scrubs the scruffy hills
 the lilac licking skyward and the cliffs
 white as Dover. Here are monarchs
 and milkweed and gold leaf cocoon
 bluegums threaded through with orangewing
 gardens thrumming with hummingbirds
 rose-throated emerald-crowned
 and jacaranda and serpentine and sticky monkey flower
 and coveys of quail lining canyons
 coyote deer and wild turkey stalking suburban streets
 and one possum caught in the motion light the moonlight
 eating the olives fallen on the wet shed roof
 the racoon family in the street circled around a body
 struck by a speeding truck and oh here is sorrow
 here is the asphalt river
 that ferries racoons and cats and possums and people
 off to their oblivions
 the casual and careless violence
 what's manifested from the foot on the gas
 the combustion of fossilised remains the noise
 the din the roar what we've gotten used to but what is no ocean
 and here is something the lives of others holy brief
 oh haven't you seen all sorts of beings screaming at the griefwrought hollow
 of absence?
 I guess what goes around goes around
 please be careful

OF THESE BODIES, ON THIS LAND

This poem was written in Tilhini— the Place of the Full Moon—
 the unceded territory of the yak titʷu titʷu yak tilhini tribe
 the first people, who crossed the rainbow bridge

before the land was stolen
 before the grizzlies slain to extinction
 before Junipero Serra, Patron Saint of Genocide—

before the otters brained against the rocks,
 the kelp-spattered slaughter of abalone
 the rainbow skeleton mounds,

before the canneries shuttered
 redwood, cypress, and pine felled,
 before eucalyptus sewn for new timber—

before monarchs curtained eucalyptus leaves, before
 the vigilante committees,
 the lynchings at the mission

before Graves and his posse *put down the Tiger-Flores Gang*
 before Ah Louis and a thousand Chinese immigrants dug
 quicksilver, railroad tunnels

before a thousand Chinese immigrants deported, before
 Chinatown erased, before Japanese internment
 before statues for the vanished.

Before Steinbeck wrote *Okies* in Nipomo,
 before Kerouac wrote koans at the Colonial Hotel—
 before Jeffers wrote rattlesnakes as lightning,

Morro Rock as thunderhead,
 quarried to build the breakers,
 to build the road to bridge its moat,

THE

LAND

tihini

land stolen
grizzlies slain

otters brained
kelp-spattered
mounds

redwood felled
eucalyptus sewn

monarchs leaves

Graves

tunnels

dug

erased deported
statues vanished internment

Nipomo

rattlesnakes lightning

break

before the High School was built on a burial grounds,
before smokestacks fingered the sky
without consent, before the concrete was poured

for the cooling pools of twin reactors,
before the first fission in the core of the concrete cocoon,
before the first electrons burst forth

from the pupa and into the grid, before the 101
summoned waves of Orange County
White-flight, before my grandparents flew their whiteness

up the coast to stuccoed subdivisions on the dunes.
Before I found the shells at the top of Valencia Peak,
so many miles from the beach

before they said the shells must have washed
up during Noah's flood
before *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and field trips

to the mission gift shop
before the blue gum groves were felled to make room
for more houses, before the eucalyptus

waned from wonder to nuisance
before white naturalists rooted out invasives
before the monarchs neared extinction

before ICE raids and expulsion.
Before the children of the greatest generation
bottomed out

before my parents conjugally conceived me,
before my father
came home from prison

before he broke my mother's ribs,
crushed my brother's heart, beat
his trauma into me

a burial grounds
 the sky
 concrete

 pools
 fission the core
 burst

waves O

whiteness

 stucco
 hells

 shell
 ring

 blue gum felled
 more houses

 rooted

ICE expulsion
 the greatest generation

 conceived
 a
 prison

Before his father
 tied him to a chair,
 beat his trauma into him.

Before I was a pile of nacreous shells—
 shining but shucked—
 before I was *faggot* and *little bitch*, before

I told my mother I was a faggot
 in the Carl's Jr.
 that used to be a bookshop.

Before I rented a room in the Graves house.
 Before I brought my boyfriend to the bedroom
 of the dead sheriff.

Before I drank rosé in the sun
 at the bar next to the mission
 named after the blood moon.

Before Luna Red was called *Native*.
 Before Raymond said that *Chorro Creek*
 meant *Diarrhea Creek* in Mexican slang.

Before we let Millie run free down the beaches of tsitqawi,
 the Place of the Dogs.
 Before my mother cleaned the houses lining the beach.

Before we scoured those beaches, gathering scree,
 palmsful of tumbled glass— lime, ice, cola, nectar.
 Before bits of bone, coral, quartz, & agate.

Before the sky-scored clam fragments like ancient vases.
 Before we gathered these and pieced them into something new.
 Before we made meaning out of what's been discarded,

saw dolphins in the serpentine troughs,
 saw stingrays slap the surface of the bay
 & egrets wade, samba, strike—

a pile of nacreous shells—
shining but shucked—

Dog

tsitqawi,

beach

scoured

bone, coral, quartz, & agate

sky-scored

ancient

A LOCAL HISTORY OF HORSES

'Three zebras that escaped from the Hearst Ranch last week were shot and killed by Cambria-area ranchers who said the exotic animals were threatening the safety of their livestock.'

—The San Luis Obispo Tribune, January 12, 2011

Eucalyptus shadows turn &	fill with urchins spume	azure heather gentle
lengthen cross a zag	what to say to that	weather dreamscape punctured
of zebra grazing shadows	rancher's gun who'd want to	slugged in the brain humanely
cross the highway zebra caught	peel the skin off someone	these hills so soft this slant
a rancher's slug the wrong	so zebra she stops traffic	shadow slashes pasture
side of barbed wire	who'd want to corpse	slashed the pasture shades
shadows sun dial cross	a body so living so free	the shapes of hides ranging
blood pools cross	this grass these hills this future	shapes this history
highway tide pools	striped shadows flicker	of black and white horses

ROADCUT, EDNA VALLEY

What can you see through the teeth
 of rock in the roadcut you've paused
 beside? Layers of sediment some seeds
 sprouting out of stone something fossilised
 a bit of shell a bit of bone

the white plastic cap
 of a twelve ounce Aquafina water bottle a thumb
 drive containing the Magna Carta and a batch
 of corrupted gifs of men wanking ca. 1998 dot
 matrix printout one slide at a time a pornographic
 zoetrope this thick uncut 8 inches casts

its shadow

3 o'clock means future 9 o'clock means past
 reply hazy try again the roadcut that's right
 chromium gypsum serpentine obsidian
 baby teeth of extinct volcano tucked
 under pillow lava extracted kept in a jar
 in the drawer of a dresser

with faded polaroids
 of sun-bleached summer swimming lake beach
 alpine stream blue green golden youth
 smooth as sea glass cola crush lime frost cherry

red or just opaque I tell my kids *these washed
 up during the flood* I won't specify which

GOD-WATCHING
AFTER THE FLOOD

I saw it
today
the piles of grief
mud
detritus
impossible mounds
of branches
bricks & bones
tree trunks
& stumps
nothing
romantic
after this
storm with more
on the way

some won't
be able
to put it back
together
won't be able
to weave what's
left absence
into anything
that was
a home
thick with mud
flooded fields
a child swept away
a neighbor drowned
in their own homes
for now nothing
to do
but witness
like the giant eye
a rainbow-rung sun
seems to beg
a question
what will you
do next
I ask it back—
What will you?

WATCH
AFTER

pile
d
s ounds
f ch
ick
ee k
um
no
roman c
e

so
b e
it
t ether
what's
left
n o thing
tha w s
me
k ith
ode
a ch e
row
r ow
r ow

the eye
rainbow-rung

a question
will you
do
it
will you?

A CHING

a
to y

absence
i t
was
home
i
wept

qu i
t will you
do n t
ask
Wh y

PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

I'm in the garden exploding with poppies planting tomatoes nursing my own unease
 thinking a poem retweeting a poem trying to find the right words for complicity it means *to fold*
 means we're all mixed up in everything the means to an end how the ends justify whatever

the barrel of a gun or the barrel of a wave the methane flooded sky flooded with fire sky a
 swollen river sky a riptide sky a trans girl with her wings ripped off sky a gay boy
 with a bloody nose sky a black eye sky a swelling river of fire sky a flooded sky

there are words for this yes poems aplenty black ants eating holes into time
 but also this if we say *stop* and nothing changes what's the use of *stop*
 I mean what's the meaning of language refused in the face of unblinking indifference

is it that after the fist hits the words still hang in the air like lanterns
 is it that after the boy was beaten he had to keep living
 that after the girl was murdered her memory persisted

that in the wreckage a reckoning late recognition déjà vu do you reckon
 the songs sung in wartime reach for peacetime drift past mass graves
 and into some future where someone might look back and say *this this is how we survived*

HYPERBALLAD (BLUE LOTUS REMIX)

a chorus
 a refrain refrain as in
 return as in renew as in new moon
 as in an absence which is to say
 a promise of return they say
 the further the ebb the bigger the swell
 though the closer two objects
 the greater gravity's pull who said this
 I dunno but I have stood where the sea once did
 wondering when it might come back
 dog lonely ear to the howling
 gathering sorrow dreaming rabbits
 hopping out of the moon a song that
 only we can hear
 where the sea once stood
 I have done wondering
it might do come back
 I mean time shines
 in shallows abalone anemone
 grunion spinning silver
 king tide ebb tide
 giddy push
 the rush of currents
 moon-pulled breaking
 love it matters and
 it matters not from this vantage
 point between
 shore sea
 &
 dream waking
 we eat the flowers
 oblivious

Critical Study

Queer Ecopetics and the Queer Pastoral

Chapter 1

1.1 An Introduction to Queer Eco-poetics

Queer eco-poetics is an emerging modality in contemporary poetry in which the poet subverts the subject/object divide that persists in an area that might broadly be called ‘nature writing’ and contests the boundary between ‘human’ and ‘nature’. This dissertation will explore contemporary poetry and criticism through the lens of queer eco-poetics, discussing poetry in English in the UK, Ireland, and the USA, but also the poetics of modern films, short stories, novels, and song lyrics, in search of connections between apparently disconnected nature-cultural detritus, ‘in which all the[se] actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*’.⁹ In this work I will locate my own poetics within a queer eco-poetic practice that crosses continents and oceans, drifts across media, and deconstructs English. In the creative work, I also foray into languages beyond English, particularly via the use of placenames, invoking Welsh (Cymraeg), French, Spanish, and the indigenous language of the Northern Chumash, who inhabit the central coast region of California where I grew up. In my critical work, I focus largely on poetry by men and trans women, building on work done by feminists, eco-feminists, eco-critics, and queer theorists, with a focus on contemporary queer poetry.

Of particular importance to my critical thinking about queer eco-poetics have been several recent anthologies of queer poetry, published in the US, the UK, and Ireland, including *Queer Nature*, edited by Michael Walsh,¹⁰ *100 Queer Poems*, edited by Mary Jean Chan and Andrew McMillan,¹¹ and *Queering The Green: Post 2000 Queer Poetry from Ireland*, edited by Paul Maddern.¹² Camille Dungy’s *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*

⁹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 26.

¹⁰ *Queer Nature*, ed. by Michael Walsh (Autumn House Press, 2022).

¹¹ *100 Queer Poems*, ed. by Mary Jean Chan and Andrew McMillan (Vintage, 2022).

¹² *Queering the Green: Post-2000 Queer Irish Poetry*, ed. by Paul Maddern (The Lifeboat Press, 2021).

has also been a significant resource, particularly in terms of intersectionality between black and queer ecopoetics.¹³ Additionally, I consulted an older anthology, *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, edited by Stephen Coote, which provided a twentieth-century context that helped elucidate the vast distance queer poetics has travelled over a relatively short span of time, and pointed me towards a deeper history of a queer ecopoetics that stretches back to ancient Greece.¹⁴ In many ways, I've found that the history of ecopoetics, which is really a history of how the human subject has both rendered and read natural objects, is a queer history.

In writing this dissertation I have chased many lines of theoretical thought, in disciplines as wide-ranging as philosophy, ecological studies, queer theory, literary studies, and, of course, creative writing. Major themes of the creative work are derived from several books and essays by Timothy Morton (who uses they/them pronouns) most importantly *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World*,¹⁵ and their essay 'The Mesh'.¹⁶ Those works, in conjunction with Morton's correspondence with the pop musician Björk Guðmundsdóttir as collected by the artist's MoMA retrospective, form something of a foundation for both the critical and the creative portions of the dissertation, and it is this relationship between the philosopher and the pop singer that serves as the main artery between the two works.¹⁷

The theoretical underpinnings of *The Mesh: A Hyperballad* are multidisciplinary and include ideas and practices from lyric and experimental poetry particularly from the US, the UK, and France, music and song lyrics (particularly those of Björk but also of other songwriters

¹³ *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, ed. by Camille Dungy (University of Georgia Press, 2009).

¹⁴ *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, ed. by Stephen Coote (Penguin, 1983).

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Timothy Morton, 'The Mesh', in *Environmental Criticism for the 21st Century*, ed. by Stephanie LeManager, Teresa Shewry, Ken Hiltner (Routledge, 2011).

¹⁷ Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right There Next to You...*, ed. by James Merry (MoMA, 2015), p. 17.

writing lyrics in English), film studies, and critical frameworks from queer theory, queer ecology, object-oriented ontology (OOO), posthuman feminism, and ecocriticism: concepts which, while part of an enmeshed network of theory and practice, are distinct from each other, as I'll explore below. Despite the centrality of Morton's work in particular, I do offer a critique of certain aspects of their philosophy. Queer ecopoetics is a way of looking, listening, and rendering, which even or especially wants to interrogate the very soil it roots and blooms in.

The poems in the creative work are primarily situated between two of Timothy Morton's theoretical constructions: 'the mesh', which Morton contends is something like the fabric of reality and is related to their work in queer ecology, and 'hyperobjects'—super or micro-structural objects that are (mostly) incomprehensible via human perceptions of space and time. The term 'hyperobjects' has partial origins in Björk's 1996 single 'Hyperballad', a song which, Morton suggests, 'shows you the wiring underboard of an emotion, the way a straightforward feeling like I love you is obviously not straightforward at all'.¹⁸ My creative work builds on these ideas, particularly that relationships—entangled and enmeshed networks of feeling and experience between two or more subjects—are hyperobjects which form their own deeply enmeshed ecologies. Queer ecology, an emerging field of ecological study which suggests that this interdependence of subjects and objects is non-binary and non-heteronormative, and that the boundaries between subjects and objects are significantly blurrier than previously thought, is interested in this enmeshment of relations. 'Interdependence,' Morton argues, 'which is ecology, is sad and contingent.'¹⁹ The poetry in *The Mesh: A Hyperballad* is ecological in this sense.

¹⁸ Timothy Moton, 'Dark Ecological Chocolate' (2015) <<https://www.changingweathers.net/en/episodes/43/dark-ecological-chocolate>> [accessed 18 February 2024].

¹⁹ Ibid.

Lyrical references and nods to Björk's oeuvre are woven throughout the creative work, most notably in the poems 'Hyperballad: Fill In The Blank', 'Atom Dance', 'You Shouldn't Let The Poets Lie To You', 'I See Who You Are', and 'Hyperballad (Blue Lotus Remix)', but also in less obvious moments throughout the emotional landscapes of the poems (to borrow a turn of phrase from 'Hyperballad').²⁰ Indeed, Björk's music, as well as her exchange of letters with Morton, were an omnipresent force during the creation of this work. One of the recurring themes in the manuscript is the idea of the poet as a magpie of experience, snatching little bits of life and threading them into a sort of poetic nest and this process echoes that of Björk's songwriting process. 'Subconsciously', Björk said on an episode of her podcast *Sonic Symbolism*, 'maybe we are collecting enough experience so we can write.'²¹ In some ways this is akin to the act of 'queer homemaking' that I refer to below: that the artist—the songwriter or poet—is busy gathering materials from their own experience in order to create a place to live.

The poems ultimately attempt to render the concept of absence on the page and grapple with the uncertainty of endings, whether that is represented by the end of romantic love, desire, friendship, or via other hyperobjects such as climate crisis, mass extinction, marriage, or death. My work explores the relationship between here-ness and not-here-ness, or *here* and *there* as in the sequence of poems called 'A Sentence is a Moving Target', which employs visual poetry to render this idea. The title is taken from Morton's comments on the deconstruction of language in 'The Mesh'. 'The meaning of a word is another word,' Morton writes 'and strings of signs only gain significance retroactively. The meaning of a sentence is a moving target.'²² In the essay, Morton invokes Derrida to elucidate their ideas about the way objects are reducible to their

²⁰ Björk, *Post*, Polydor, 1995 [On Multiple Formats].

²¹ Björk, 'Sonic Symbolism' <<https://www.bjork.fr/Sonic-Symbolism-Post>> [Accessed 18 February 2024].

²² Timothy Morton, 'The Mesh', in *Environmental Criticism for the 21st Century*, ed. by Stephanie LeManager, Teresa Shewry, Ken Hiltner (Routledge, 2011), p. 23.

component parts, and yet, paradoxically, also greater than the sum of their parts. I will further interrogate these ideas below.

A mini thesis for the entire creative work might be found in my poem, ‘Licio’:

‘I guess everything | I’ve ever loved | has been tenuous || or just about | to vanish’. ‘Licio’, which is a Welsh word for ‘like’ (as in to like something), deals with loss via images and abstractions in a minimal form that echoes the Japanese-influenced imagism of Ezra Pound. ‘The horse on the line | holding up the train’ is a carefully selected image that speaks to this sense of fleetingness the speaker is trying to approximate. Who has ever seen the thing holding up the train? We know it is there, because the driver tells us it is, and yet it is not there, because we do not see it. The idea that this is ‘tenuousness’ is a reference to the weakness of association, or the difficulty the poet faces in using images to convey universal meaning (which is itself be a nod to particle physics—the weak nuclear force—and towards the idea of what the fabric of reality is made of: the mesh itself). Including Welsh is a way of locating the poem in the sonic landscape of North Wales. The verb ‘Licio’ is a colloquial form of ‘to like’, used in the north more than ‘hoffi’, a more formal form, used in the south. ‘Licio’ also gets at one of the central concerns of the poems, which is the idea of choosing ‘here’ or ‘there’, of ‘substance’ or ‘absence’, or partnership or apartness. The poems live in the tension between these clear binaries.

Beyond this brief explication of some of the poetic content in the creative manuscript alongside this introductory discussion of the theories and ideas that underpin it and the critical work, I will begin the dissertation at an obvious point of departure. First, I’ll briefly explore definitions of subjects and objects, for the purposes of this study. Then, I’ll define the term *queer*, first as an adjective, as in ‘the queer subject’, then as a verb, as in ‘queering subjects and objects’. I will then turn to a meditation on queering gender via the poetry of CAConrad in

conversation with the music of Anohni, followed by a discussion of queer ecopoetics and ‘the Mesh’.

In section two, I’ll talk about queer pastoral poetics, briefly exploring the history of queer pastoral, before turning towards an explication of contemporary queer poets who write in a queer pastoral mode. In this section, I consider a variety of poems from several different poetic traditions that begin to form, in my mind, a queer ecopoetic and queer pastoral constellation. Of course my selection of poets is in no way complete; it merely scratches the surface, and I necessarily have had to exclude many poets that could be considered ‘canon’ (although I bristle at the idea of canonicity). Carl Phillips, for example, has produced a body of work that could easily, and according to my own definitions, be considered ‘queer pastoral’. Eduardo Corral, Ocean Vuong, and Chen Chen also come to mind. It is not my purpose, here, to be exhaustive in terms of inclusivity, but to offer an introduction to queer ecopoetics and the queer pastoral. As to the poets I do include, my intention was to include a wide sampling of queer poets, writing in English, from different historical contexts, cultures, and poetic schools, and to show how each of these seemingly un-connected poets are tied together in a very queer ecological sense, particularly via their approaches to writing about and within ‘nature’ as queer subjects.

Finally, in the third section of the critical dissertation I will offer a more direct accounting of my poetics in an afterword to *The Mesh: A Hyperballad* which discusses a queer practice of listening in poetry. In this section, I consider different forms of listening, from Pauline Oliveros’ *Quantum Listening*, to David Lynch’s thoughts on Transcendental Meditation, to Etal Adnan’s later ruminations on Artificial Intelligence, or listening to the ‘noise machines make.’ I also offer a reading of contemporary US poet Tommy Pico’s use of song lyrics in poems and relate this to my own practice of interacting with song lyrics in *The Mesh: A Hyperballad*.

1.2 Subjects and Objects

In this work, when I talk about subjects and objects, I am talking about the tendency in ecopoetry and other forms of nature writing to divide the world into a binary of human subjects and natural objects. I will approach the terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ through the lenses of object-oriented ontology (OOO, pronounced ‘triple O’), whose founder is Graham Harman, and through the post-human feminist constructions of theorist Rosi Braidotti. Morton is also aligned with OOO but has not always been, and it is important to note that Morton’s relationship with OOO is quite different than Harman’s (Harman approaches OOO from a purely philosophical point of view, whereas Morton approaches OOO as a literary scholar and ecological thinker). These philosophical ideas intersect in their interests and diverge in their ontologies: OOO and post-humanism disagree about the way subjects and objects should be considered (which may be reducible to a philosophical argument about materialism versus idealism) but I find that tension useful in my creative work. From a standpoint of poetics, I’ll consider the ways each of these ideas in turn treats subjects and objects before concluding with an overall summary of what I mean when I refer to these terms throughout the dissertation.

OOO is an emergent philosophy of ‘speculative realism’ that de-centers the human subject and re-prioritizes objects as being of equal status. OOO is so object-oriented that it can be difficult to pin down how it defines subjects, and this is one of the chief difficulties and tensions that exist when working with OOO from a creative standpoint. For OOO, ‘an object is anything that cannot be entirely reduced either to the components of which it is made or to the

effects that it has on things’.²³ Objects can be ‘any entity whatsoever’ according to Morton, and he and Harman agree that objects, things, and entities are synonymous terms.²⁴ This is a broad, inclusive definition in which objects can be anything: texts, utterances, poems, concrete blocks, cars, trains, dogs, the War of 1812, the Anthropocene, or the theory of relativity. ‘For the object-oriented thinker, physical objects are just one kind of object among many others’, Harman argues.²⁵ In OOO events and ideas are objects (and here OOO departs from materialism in a significant way) just as much as a building, a landscape, a tree, or a bear. With virtually everything in existence on such an equal categorical footing, OOO seems to suggest subjectivity isn’t just reserved for only biological subjects, like humans, though this is not saying that non-biological objects have ‘sentience’ in the way that biological ones do. Morton states,

We OOO philosophers can sound as if we are saying that non sentient objects are conscious. This is not exactly what is being said. Rather, what OOO claims is that consciousness isn’t all that different from what a tree does when it ‘translates’ the wind. Nor does the wind capture the essence of the branches and leaves. Why? Because there is wind. Because there are branches and leaves and trees, ‘withdrawn’ prior to their relations—not temporally prior, but ontologically prior. OOO is a form of weird realism, in which objects have an essence that is profoundly withdrawn.²⁶

And here is an intersection with queer ecopoetics, which is concerned with both the dissolution of the boundary between human as subject and nature as object as well as what it means to re-

²³ Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican Books, 2018), p. 43.

²⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 205-206.

²⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 39.

²⁶ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 26.

present objects via another object (as all language does). That is to say: queer eco-poetics is interested in the enmeshed and strange relationships between objects, including between the object of the text, the object of the poet, and the objects being rendered in poetry and by poets. From a creative writing standpoint, where one is interested in how texts are produced rather than in analyzing the texts themselves, it might be counterproductive to follow OOO to its absolute limits (where, perhaps, a subjective ‘I’ doesn’t really exist, or at the very least is not very important) but the fundamental tension between subject and object, stretched to its limit by OOO, produces interesting creative work.

Queer poets (and other types of poets) have been interrogating objectivity and subjectivity for centuries. Indeed, OOO and queerness have much in common, as Morton argues in ‘An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry’.

OOO uses the term ‘object’ in a deliriously provocative way. Like *queer* the term *object* attracts prejudices: objects are lumps, they are unstatic, they are uncool. Rather than inventing new and improved versions of substance and accident, OOO goes for the ontological jugular and thinks of everything as a weird entity withdrawn from access yet somehow manifest.²⁷

As an example of this, Morton offers a reading of the first stanza of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

²⁷ Timothy Morton, ‘An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry’, *New Literary History*, 43.2 (2011), p. 208.

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

That ‘each mortal thing does one thing and the same’ which is summed up in ‘Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells, | Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*’ reads like a translation of the idea that objects (things) *are* themselves because they *do* or *speak* themselves and are therefore both ‘withdrawn from access and manifest’ as Morton puts it. Hopkins, trying to get at the essence of what a thing is, strangely anticipates OOO’s argument that ‘the rift between appearance and essence is that it's undecidable’.²⁸ In other words, things are not what they appear to be, even though they might be. Morton continues: ‘Appearances (relations between objects) are deceptive: they are aesthetic.’²⁹ This is what Hopkins is trying to get at in the poem: the difference between the look of things and what they actually are. ‘What Hopkins gives us,’ writes Morton, ‘is [...] a weird theater in which things stage their unique version of the Cretan Liar sentence: “This sentence is false.” To speak otherwise is to have decided in advance what things are, which contradicts the way the poem forces us to experience things.’³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., p. 212.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 212.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 202.

Morton moves on to describe the way Hopkins strings out a long line that is essentially a compound adjective describing what the stone does (what it *does*, Hopkins is perhaps arguing, is what it *is*) the trajectory of the stone, which is ‘tumbled-over-rim-in-roundy-wells’ reminds me very much of Björk’s song ‘Hyperballad’ and the way the speaker of that song throws things off a cliff: ‘car parts, bottles, and cutlery’ and, by watching and listening to ‘the sounds they make | on the way down’ imagines her own body, following a similar trajectory.³¹ In Björk’s song, the speaker imagines herself as an object, in order to more clearly see the hyperobject of her relationship: ‘I go through all this | before you wake up | so I can feel happier | to be safe up here with you’.³²

‘Hyperobjects’, a term that is central to the poems in *The Mesh: A Hyperballad*, are ‘things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’.³³ Like OOO’s definition of objects, Morton’s definition of Hyperobjects is almost totally inclusive, and covers things like the nuclear bomb going off in Hiroshima alongside the sum total of plastic bags currently on earth, or global warming as a sum-total distinct entity. From the vantage point of a subject thinking about a hyperobject, Morton claims we cannot see the whole thing, only parts of the thing, and also that we can’t write from a classically subjective viewpoint, which is to say: we can only write from within the hyperobject of aesthetic experience. Morton writes:

Situatedness is a now a very canny place to be... I am unable to go beyond what I have elsewhere called *ecomimesis*, the (often) first-person rendering of situatedness “in.” This

³¹ Björk, *Post*, Polydor, 1995 [On Multiple Formats].

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 1.

is not to endorse ecomimesis, but to recognize that there is no outside, no metalanguage.³⁴

This is a statement that strikes me as both quite similar (in one sense) and dissimilar (in another) to what Derrida (quoted by Harman) says about aesthetic experience, that ‘there is nothing outside the text’.³⁵ Harman uses Derrida’s infamous quotation to suggest that he (along with many other modern philosophers) was engaged in what he calls ‘overmining’, which is, for Harman, one of the chief ways we misunderstand objects. Overmining is when we essentially paraphrase an object or reduce its ‘essence’ to its relational quality (as in its relationship to our subjectivity).³⁶ Harman reads Derrida’s turn of phrase as ‘there is nothing *beyond* text’ which is a way of saying that there is nothing beyond our representations of objects: only our interpretations of them matter. This seems to be what Morton is saying above: that aesthetic experience is a hyperobject itself, and we can’t really write from a place beyond it: only within it. Harman and Morton seem to disagree on whether or not Derrida’s ideas fit into the constraints OOO. For Harman, it’s a hard ‘no’ (overmining) while for Morton, these ideas are useful for describing hyperobjects, and other ideas such as queer ecology and ‘the mesh’, as I’ll attend to below.

In the full passage from *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes ‘As regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text* [“*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”]’.³⁷ The original French is literally translated to ‘there is no outside-text’ and there is a debate surrounding the meaning of this translation. Either there is ‘nothing’ or there is ‘no

³⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 4.

³⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-52.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 158-159.

outside-text’. Contextually, I’m convinced that Derrida meant that, within a text itself, there is no ‘real thing’ being described: only the text, which ‘supplements’ the ‘real life of these existences “of flesh and bone”’.³⁸ Derrida concludes that ‘what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence’.³⁹ While Harman and Morton seem to differ on how OOO might deal with Derrida, in my own poetic practice I have found it useful to think of his ideas about ‘the text’ in relation to hyperobjects, which is one way I’ve approached the creative work above. Any text— these groups of symbols denoting a supermassive, enmeshed network of meaning and experience for both writer and reader—could be a hyperobject. The content of the text only adds to the massiveness of the object: even devoid of meaning (from the perspective of the writer) the symbols themselves form a hyperobject in the associative thinking of the reader. Subjectivity, as it exists in my creative work (via the frequent use of the pronoun ‘I’) is enmeshed in the hyperobject of the text, and therefore enmeshed in a strange (queer) ecology that is limitless in its associations. In this way I agree with Derrida (and Morton), that there is no ‘outside of the text’: that we’re writing from within it. This is important for thinking of what OOO offers both queer ecology and ecocriticism (which are the foundations of queer eco-poetics): the human subject is always located within an entanglement of objects. “I” exist but by no means am I ever apart from my surroundings. Even my gaze is penetrated by objects, like the strange amoebas floating in my vision when I look at a clear blue sky.

OOO is a way of thinking about the ways in which the human subject could be ‘de-centered’ within a world of objects, yet there is very little within OOO and its associated writings about that de-centered subject. Ecofeminism and post-humanism offer complementary insights into a human subject that is de-centered but still meaningfully exists. ‘The status of the human is

³⁸ Ibid., p. 159.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

central to feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and Indigenous thought’ argues post-human feminist Rosi Braidotti.⁴⁰ While OOO focuses on a deconstruction or realignment of the subject/object binary, post-human feminism rejects binary thinking altogether, focusing on a ‘new materialism’ that ‘cannot be easily accommodated within binary and polarizing oppositions of matter/mind and nature/culture [...] posthuman feminism rejects an undifferentiated system that would form flat equivalences across all species, all technologies and all organisms under one common signifier’.⁴¹ If OOO is a ‘theory of everything’ (as Harman argues in the title of his book) then posthuman feminism seems to ask: why try and fit the complexity of existence into a single theoretical perspective (which happens to be grounded in a white, cis-gendered, male gaze)?

Posthuman feminism is decidedly materialist while OOO is a sort of ‘speculative realism’ in that objects don’t need to be material in order to be ‘real’. But the nature of matter, at least according to particle physics, seems to occupy the space between these two apparently opposed constructions. Braidotti, quoting physicist Carlo Rovelli, insists that the ‘vitality of matter’ is one way in which materialism and realism (perhaps posthuman feminism and OOO) are linked: ‘the world is a continuous, restless swarming of things; a continuous coming to light and disappearance of ephemeral entities’.⁴² In this construction, there is room for new possibilities to emerge, such as a de-centered mesh of objects (such as the one Morton describes) but importantly, there is room for an ‘I’ as well. What Rovelli-via-Braidotti describes sounds a lot like Morton’s hyperobjects, and other object-oriented constructions. But unlike OOO, posthuman feminism acknowledges the intersectional problems that the human subject brings to object-oriented thinking: racism, sexism, genocides, climate crisis— the list goes on. Whereas OOO

⁴⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Polity Press, 2022), p. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

might treat climate crisis as an idea (something to consider, but perhaps not to do much about), posthuman feminism acknowledges the anthropocentric origins of our problems and attempts to deal with them, materially. This is the ‘posthuman’ part of the term: the human subject exists and, while we are entangled with objects (and, presumably, other subjects) we are both separate from them and also not objects (I, for example, exist— at least I think I do). This is crucial for my own poetics in that the pronoun ‘I’ exists in relation to objects (is representational of the human subject) and, while it is deeply enmeshed in relations with objects, still maintains its own subjectivity. Queer eco-poetics is deeply interested in the way OOO considers objects but is also invested in posthuman feminism’s new material turn towards the enmeshed complexity of the human subject.

In my creative work, I use ‘I’ often, and this creates a tension with what I’ve described above. For example, in the poem ‘Menai Strait’, the ‘I’ in the poem is trying to figure out how their subjectivity can exist in the context of its surroundings. ‘I keep asking myself | where I fit fit into this || landscape ||’. Note the way that ‘landscape’ is surrounded by white space, or something like silence. Is this a way of clearly demarking where ‘I’ ends, and the landscape begins? Or perhaps the space can be read as a permeable barrier (like the water referenced in the title of the poem) where ‘I’ and landscape merge in and out of each other. The poem continues with a description of the landscape the ‘I’ considers itself to be enmeshed in, and concludes with a relative dissolution of itself: ‘I’m just this pair of | green trainers | this yellow flannel shirt | and faded black denim | trundling || just this question | asked to nothing | not silence not self | no such thing’. So as the ‘I’ considers what it actually is, it actually dissolves, and the speaker describes almost an invisible man (the image of an animated set of clothing with no body inside, trundling down the beach), and then even further, even the ‘I’ dissolves further into ‘just this question |

asked to nothing’. So, even as the ‘I’ exists and is portrayed in this poem (and others in the collection), it is often in a way that questions itself.

1.3 Queer as Adjective: The Queer Subject

In a lecture at the New School in New York City in 2014, black feminist teacher-scholar bell hooks defined ‘queer as in not who you are having sex with— that can be a dimension of it— but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and thrive and live’.⁴³ I begin here because, for me, queerness must be bigger than simply an identification with same-sex attraction. Central to hooks’ definition is the phrase ‘at odds with’. Queer is an oddness; it the self as odd in the context of its surroundings (its environment, its home, its *oikos* or ecology).⁴⁴ It is the self as *strange*. hooks’ definition is also useful for describing queer ecology in its final clause about the necessity for the queer person to ‘invent and create and find a place to live’ but more on that below. For now, I want to focus on the first part of hooks’ notion: that queerness must include anyone who is in struggle with normativity.

Many queer people, particularly cis-gendered men and women who identify as gay or lesbian, may bristle at such a wide and inclusive definition of who belongs in this club. This is understandable but not excusable. I’m arguing here for a queer poetics that is wildly and radically inclusive, particularly for people whose difference is less visible: for bisexual people, certainly, but also for those, like me (at the time of this writing), who identify as gay and non-binary and don’t necessarily present their identities to the world through gendered signals such as

⁴³ bell hooks, ‘Are You Still a Slave? Liberating The Black Female Body’ <<https://youtu.be/rJk0hNROvzs> > [Accessed 18 February 2024].

⁴⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, *Ecology*, *N.*, *Etymology*, doi:10.1093/OED/8140041101.

clothes, makeup, or jewelry. Operating from such an inclusive definition, I would expect some skepticism: after all, if anyone can identify as queer, then what is the point of trying to define this category? Of course, not everyone does define themselves this way, and most do not. Central to this definition is the struggle with normativity. It is an inclusive definition, but not an exhaustive one. So perhaps the best way to define queer is to define what it is not— a negative approach that is simply defined: the queer subject is queer because it is *not straight*. Many theorists have defined ‘queer’ as such, from David Halperin (‘queer is by definition whatever is at odds with what is normal’), to Lisa Duggin who thought of queerness as ‘a stance of opposition’.⁴⁵ The queer subject is a different kind of animal—and odd duck say, as opposed to a normal duck. This binary definition is problematic, as I’ll explain below, but first we have to understand what makes the duck odd in the first place.

For queer theorists, the reason the duck is ‘odd’ is because normal ducks exist to contrast it with, and these ‘normal’ ducks have been socially constructed, along with their surroundings, which is to say the ‘nature’ of the ecologies they live in. Simone de Beauvoir famously pointed out in the mid-twentieth century, ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’.⁴⁶ Later in that century, Judith Butler built on de Beauvoir and argued that gender is a performative process, which is ‘is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed’.⁴⁷ Butler subverted the notion that sexuality and gender are innate categories by arguing that identity is performed in accordance with rigid social guidelines that are enforced by societal norms. The queer subject, the odd duck, is always in tension with these strict categories,

⁴⁵ Will Stockton, ‘A Brief History of Queer Theory’, in *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies* (Routledge, 2022), p. 4.

⁴⁶ Simone de Beauvoir ‘The Second Sex’ trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (Knopf, 2010) p. 283.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor & Francis, 2011), p. 25.

including or especially the strict categories of what is considered ‘nature’ or ‘natural’. In other words, one thing that queer theory interrogates is what it means to be normative vs. non-normative.

According to Stockton, what queer theory really offers is an articulation of de Beauvoir’s social constructionism, Derrida’s deconstructionism (particularly in its resistance towards binary thinking) alongside a negative approach which, paradoxically, forms its own binary. No one, including queer theorists, are certain of what queerness actually is, though they know what it is not: heteronormative.⁴⁸ But if queer theory is supposed to deconstruct the binaries of sexuality and gender, how can it if its own negative definition constitutes a binary that is dependent on heteronormativity? And, if ‘queer’ is just defined in opposition to ‘straightness’ then is it not essentially meaningless, as some queer theorists seem to suggest? It may seem so, but this paradox actually leads to something really interesting: queer ecology. Queer ecology disrupts this line of thought (that queer must be what straight is not) and flips the entire argument on its head. Perhaps everything actually *is* queer. Perhaps the normative state of ‘nature’ is actually aberrant?

Queer ecologists argue that gender and sexuality are not ‘natural’ at least in the Darwinian sense that they are innate or essential. In an essay on queer ecology, Morton offers an updated reading of Darwin and suggests that the binary of nature and un-nature is a mis-reading of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, arguing that ‘queer theory’ is quite simply ‘a non-essentialist view of gender and sexuality’.⁴⁹ Similarly, Sam See suggests that ‘Darwin is a queer theorist of the material world who conceptualizes nature as a non-normative, infinitely

⁴⁸ Stockton, ‘A Brief History of Queer Theory’, pp. 12-13, 20.

⁴⁹ Timothy Morton, ‘Guest Column: Queer Ecology’, *PMLA*, 125.2 (2010), pp. 273–282.

heterogeneous composite of mutating laws and principles'.⁵⁰ Simply put, queer ecology, following queer theory, suggests that nature is not normative.

Importantly, queer ecological thinking points to the dazzling variety of different sexualities and gender identities represented by queer beings (people, sure, but also other creatures), as opposed to the enforced homogeneity of heteronormative identity tropes. Diversity creates possibility, and isn't possibility where poetry lives? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts this beautifully in what is a necessarily lengthy quotation:

That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental, linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leather folk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or...people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.⁵¹

And the list could of course go on. Like a flourishing biome, queerness thrives in the types of conditions that allow it to create new categories, cross-pollinating and evolving entirely new ways of being and relating. In this way, the queer subject might be best described as having a

⁵⁰ Sam See, *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* (Fordham University Press, 2020), p. 14.

⁵¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Christmas Effects', *Counterpoints*, 367 (2012), 336–339 (p. 338).

heterogeneous ontology: a central part of the *being-ness* of being queer is this difference. Queerness may be, for now, defined by its binary opposition to heteronormativity, but queer ecology flips this binary mode of thinking on its head. Heteronormativity created this apparent binary and queerness is a way out. If you are queer sure, you aren't heteronormative, but you are also a million other things: you are possibility, because you are uncertain. It's a bit like Keats' negative capability: an in-betweenness and a liminality—a mystery.

This is an important construction in an ecology of queer poetry, or a queer ecopoetics: the diversity of content, mediums, and form—as well as the diversity of the identities of the writers of queer poetry—is crucial and inherently political in its intersections with what Butler identifies as the 'racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities'.⁵² To return to hooks' definition of queer, then, we begin to see the real stakes for a radically inclusive definition of what it means to be queer: it is to be in flux or in struggle with some or all of these intersecting points. Ecologically speaking, it is less akin to being part of a healthy or "normal" cellular structure, and more like an (apparently) troublesome mutation: the second head on a two-headed calf.

One of the queerest poems I have encountered was published in 1977 and written by a woman who (probably) did not consider herself queer (scant details about her life survive on the internet, but her New York Times obituary mentions a male fiancé)⁵³. 'Two-Headed Calf' by Laura Gilpin is a poem of the queer pastoral variety (a term which I will further elucidate below) which delivers a pathos-laden elegy to difference (to queerness) in two short stanzas that

⁵² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 41.

⁵³ 'Paid Notice: Deaths, Gilpin, Laura Crafton', *The New York Times*, 6 May, 2007
<<https://archive.nytimes.com/query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage-9F04E5D8163AF935A35756C0A9619C8B63.html>>
[Accessed 18 February, 2024].

describe the eponymous ‘freak of nature’ being found (dead or alive, we can’t be certain) and delivered in newspaper, to a local museum.

Tomorrow when the farm boys find this
freak of nature, they will wrap his body
in newspaper and carry him to the museum.

But tonight he is alive and in the north
field with his mother. It is a perfect
summer evening: the moon rising over
the orchard, the wind in the grass. And
as he stares into the sky, there are
twice as many stars as usual.⁵⁴

There are two very different ways one could read this poem. First, as an act of violence: the two-headed calf, and its mother, might represent queer subjects, whose very existence is too radical for the world (represented by the farm boys) to accept. The farm boys discover the calf, kill it, and deliver it to the museum as a ‘freak of nature’ to be displayed. There is another, very different interpretation: that the two-headed calf was discovered dead by the farm boys, and they simply wrapped it up, and took it to the museum. In cattle ranching, I’m told by my first-year writing students at Cal Poly State University in San Luis Obispo, California—a large public university with a well-known agriculture school—that two-headed calves are born infrequently,

⁵⁴ Laura Gilpin, *The Hocus-Pocus of the Universe* (Doubleday, 1977), p. 59.

and when they are born they almost always die of natural causes within hours, days, or occasionally weeks. With this information, one is tempted to revise their interpretation of Gilpin's poem: that this isn't the story of a violent act in the face of difference, but a narrative of a pastoral phenomenon: polycephaly, which is a 'natural' occurrence. Reading the poem in the second way says something more profound about queerness and nature than the first interpretation, which relies on a fairly modern construction: that the queer subject is always in danger in rural spaces. I'll look at this idea more closely in section two of the dissertation. Another question that arises from this queer pastoral poem is that, if it was written by a cisgender, straight, white woman, does it qualify as 'queer' poetry? Which is a way of asking if a person happens to be queer and writes poetry, are their poems necessarily queer? The short answer to both questions is: maybe. I recognize that this may be an unsatisfying answer, but in the spirit of the tendency for queerness to exist in liminal spaces, it will have to do for now.

In any event, in this work, I'll use the term *queer* to approximate an approach to the world that is centred around a sense otherness and a struggle with normativity, that intersects with categories of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and locatedness, and that is radically inclusive of people who have a variety of sexed and gendered experiences which are not necessarily limited to one variety of same-sex attraction. Having come to a satisfactory working definition of queer as an adjective, I will now turn towards a discussion of the verb 'to queer', or how the self-at-odds makes its home in the world.

1.4 Queer as Verb: Queering Subjects and Objects

When I was growing up, in the 1990s, before queer lives were made explicit in mainstream films, TV, and young adult novels, I was, as were many of my fellow queer subjects, often accused by well-meaning straight people of ‘reading [queerness] into everything’. It was true, of course. We looked for reflections of ourselves everywhere: what was that sly remark he made towards him, under his breath? That glance: what did it mean? Was that an invitation? Was she subtly giving her hints? These lyrics: is the singer saying, not so subtly, that they are queer as well but need to hide, like I do? We looked for signs everywhere, as do the religious, hoping for confirmation of their faith. We looked for ourselves in strangers, however dangerous that might be. We had to look hard for these signs, signals, and clues in the media landscape because, despite the fact that so much of the media landscape was being created by queer people, twentieth-century cultural norms, with their roots in the Victorian era, dictated that queerness be erased from the record or at best exist only in subtext. According to these norms, queerness was unnatural, aberrant: something to be, avoided, unmentioned, or cured.

One remedy for this is an act of queer homemaking known as ‘queering’. To queer something means to read into it, to write into it, to re-vision it; it means to make it queer, make it weird, to make it strange, or as Welsh critic Andrew Webb so succinctly argues, ‘to complicate and deconstruct received understandings of supposedly ‘natural’ identities’.⁵⁵ When I talk about queering poetry, I am talking about building a home for myself— a nest— made from the fragmented inferences of all our readings-into. Webb, quoting Ardel Haefele-Thomas, argues that ‘the ideal object of study... for a queer critical approach, is a text that can be situated ‘astride the uneasy cultural boundary that separates the acceptable and familiar [identity] from

⁵⁵ Andrew Webb, ‘Not Friends But Fellows in a Union That Ends: Associations of Welshness and Non-Heteronormativity in Edwin Thomas’, in *Queer Wales: The History, Culture and Politics of Queer Life in Wales*, ed. by Huw Osborne (University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 115.

the troubling and different'.⁵⁶ Queering is a central aspect of queer ecopoetics: it is how we build our homes in the literature of the world.

While I am mostly concerned with how queer ecopoetics works from the inside of the writing process, it is instructive to consider the ways in which critics like Webb and others approach queering literature. Canadian Critic Stephen Guy-Bray argues that 'even as queerness is informed by its historical association with sexual irregularities, it cannot be reduced to or located in their embodiment', and that 'queerness can exist even in the absence of any content that we would recognize as gay'.⁵⁷ All of this, Guy-Bray argues, is to say that 'queerness is as much poetic as it is sexual'.⁵⁸ Guy-Bray is concerned with the queerness of form beyond the queerness of content. His argument is that queer representation is less about 'gay content' than it is about the ways in which form can be queer. He is also interested in queering, in this case subverting, the traditional approach to literature in which 'a literary text is a passive object on which the critic operates' and, following Shakespeare scholar Madhavi Menon 'suggests that the literary text may reciprocate this operation'.⁵⁹ Guy-Bray concludes that 'the poem itself might also be queer theory rather than only something on which queer theory can be used.'⁶⁰ This subversion of the subject-object relation of critic and text challenges the so-called authority which theory and criticism holds over creative work and is not dissimilar to the ways in which queer ecopoetics subverts the relationship between human subject and natural object: it is another piece of evidence to support my contention that the central feature of queer ecopoetics is to trouble the line between subject and object on many fronts.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

⁵⁷ Stephen Guy-Bray, *Shakespeare and Queer Representation* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 3, 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

Guy-Bray and critics (and poets) of a similar piece, are certainly interested in and invested in queer content (the Canadian poet Kirby comes to mind, who insists that poetry as an artform is inherently queer, even while the essays in their book *Poetry Is Queer* are primarily concerned with poems that are, ostensibly, ‘gay’).⁶¹ Guy-Bray, too, in his introduction to *Shakespeare and Queer Representation*, uses queer poets (who write poems full of gay content) to lay the foundation for his work on queering a body of work that is not inherently queer in content (although, as he and others have argued, queer content certainly exists in Shakespeare). Webb walks a similar line in his work on English poet Edwin Thomas, which also offers a way into queering the poetry of Thomas’ correspondent and would-be companion, American poet Robert Frost. Following Webb’s carefully laid-out evidence that Thomas and Frost’s relationship was more than purely heteronormative, one begins to consider Frost’s famous oeuvre in a quite different light.⁶² Looking at Frost’s most famous poem, ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ through a queer lens offers new interpretive possibilities. I am presenting the text in full to illustrate this.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me stopping here
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near
 Between the woods and frozen lake
 The darkest evening of the year.

⁶¹ Kirby, *Poetry Is Queer* (Knife Fork Books, 2020).

⁶² Webb, *Not Friends but Fellows*, p. 31.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.⁶³

In the USA, this is one of the few poems that is taught to children in primary and secondary schools as part of the standard English curriculum and consequently it is one of the best-known poems by the general public. What we were told to take away via an introduction to content analysis is that the woods in the poem are a metaphor for returning to one's responsibilities despite a desire to abandon them. There's a vague idea that the speaker in the poem is interested in a different sort of life (or, I have heard from friends, that the woods were a metaphor for death: that the speaker is considering giving up and succumbing the 'lovely, dark and deep' comfort of surrendering to inevitability). Either way, the main point of the poem, we learned, was that the speaker of the poem, tempted like a Christ figure, eventually returned to his senses in order to fulfill his duties and obligations (those unspecified 'promises to keep'). A queer reading of the poem, instigated by Webb's scholarship, offers new possibilities: we are witnessing a certain longing for a queer relationship, which, following above, is a longing for non-normative intimate contact.

⁶³ Robert Frost, *Robert Frost: The Collected Poems* (Henry Holt and Company, 1969), p. 264.

Woods have a long-standing connection for queer encounters, from early pastoral poetry to contemporary queer poetry. Woods are spaces where the more-than-human (which could be coded as the more-than-heteronormative) lives and thrives; woods are cruising grounds, locations for sexual encounters that have no place in the heteronormative world; woods are indeed ‘lovely, dark and deep’ in this sense, and we begin to see a new narrative emerge in the poem. Even the horse ‘must think it queer’ that the speaker would be contemplating this other space, ‘without a farmhouse near’, which is to say this foray into the unfamiliar woods, brimming with queer possibility and far from the world of straight family life.

And this read is not too on-the-nose, nor am I misunderstanding an archaic form of queer which, Webb shows, ‘as early as 1894...carried, among other meanings, early and derogatory connotations of homosexuality’.⁶⁴ Frost composed this poem in 1922, five years after Thomas’ death, after which Frost wrote to Thomas’ widow that ‘he was the bravest and best and dearest man you or I have ever known... I have had four wonderful years with him. I know he has done all this for you: he’s all yours. But you must let me cry my cry for him as if he were almost all mine too’.⁶⁵ I agree with Webb that this letter reveals quite a lot about Frost’s potential queerness, particularly as this brief confession is ‘safely posthumous’, but reading a poem, canonical or otherwise, through a queer lens is not contingent on the production of evidence of queer biographical content.⁶⁶ Frost’s poem can be read as a rumination on queer possibility regardless of the poet’s intention. The text, an object that exists well beyond the existence of its author, can act on the critic in this way, as Guy-Bray has argued.

⁶⁴ Webb, *Not Friends but Fellows*, p. 117.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

All of this is to say something important about any queer poetics, eco or otherwise: queering literature necessarily involves interacting with texts that are both ‘gay’ and ‘not gay’. ‘Queer’ as a verb has moved well beyond any need for queer content or subtext: it does not need to be *the point*, even if it is *the point of departure* for critical or creative engagement. Queer theory, queer ecology, and queer poetics must be about changing the status quo of the relationship between human subject and natural object, and that includes the relationship between critic and literary object. This queer mode of criticism means that literary objects exert forces on critics in the same way critics exert force over literary objects. What I want to argue, by way of philosophy and criticism, is that in queer ecopoetics the line between human subjects and natural objects is significantly troubled, transed, or even obliterated. Through queering ecopoetics, we see subjects that are engaged in a complex, enmeshed interaction with objects that are not simply passive *others*, subject only to a human gaze.

Following all of this and returning to the question of what makes something ‘queer’, I might also answer that perhaps this is the wrong question. Queer ecopoetics is a way of looking at the world and at literature through a certain set of theoretical lenses, as much as it is concerned with poetics produced or consumed by queer-identifying people. As Guy-Bray so coherently shows in *Shakespeare and Queer Representation*, working with content that is not queer is very much part of the work of queering literature: it is a reading into and in-between the lines, that is always looking, cruising, hinting, winking, and signaling to the next reader. That there is queerness in the work of a canonised poet like Phillip Larkin might be a shock to some people (Guy-Bray calls him ‘surely one the most heterosexual poets’) but as an example of what I am talking about let us look at ‘X’ from Larkin’s first collection *The North Ship* (1945).⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Guy-Bray, *Shakespeare and Queer Representation*, p. 13.

Within the dream you said:
 Let us kiss then,
 In this room, in this bed,
 But when all's done
 We must not meet again.

Hearing this last word,
 There was no lambing-night,
 No gale-driven bird
 Nor frost-encircled root
 As cold as my heart.⁶⁸

There is no part of me, queer poet, and queer person, that this poem does not resonate with as an example of that queerest of encounters, the one-night stand, or in today's parlance, the Grindr hookup. Larkin brings us into the isolation and deep sorrow that can accompany this sort of emotionless connection. A queer twenty-first century poem might celebrate the sexual encounter, the connection of bodies which has its own power and perhaps is important to celebrate as being equal to emotional connection, but despite queer cultural trends towards sex-positivity, the loneliness and sorrow portrayed in 'X' resonates with this other facet of queer life (and which Irish Poet Micheál McCann hints at in his poem, 'Hookup Rural Donegal', as I'll explore below).

This poem is queer, too, both in its form and in its attention to the strange. The speaker describes a dream, not reality, and there are several layers to the poem— like nesting dolls, or the chambers of a seashell, or the vestibular networks of the inner ear. In the outermost layer, the speaker relays the dream to an unembodied 'You' who is partly the focus of the dream. Then, in

⁶⁸ Phillip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 14.

the content of the dream itself, we see an unfolding within one chamber (a bedroom), and not just in the room but in the bed (and here we think of blankets, sheets, like curtains, or labial folds), even while outside the chamber (and still within the dream) pastoral images orbit, peripherally. Then, at the very centre of the poem there is a deeper chamber, which is the poet's metaphorically cold heart. While the heart metaphor feels too obvious by today's aesthetic standards, in the interplay between the form and content of this poem Larkin demonstrates an uncanny sense of the ways in which queer ecopoetry might dissolve the boundary between the indoors and the outdoors and between human and nature. The form of the poem is so like a heart (with all its chambers) while the content of poem conjoins pastoral imagery with an interior emotional landscape that puts them on roughly the same footing (although, in a move that nods back towards Romanticism, the speaker's human feelings are portrayed as having a greater 'coldness' than the natural objects they are compared to, which has the effect of elevating the speaker's subjectivity over 'nature'). Despite this, the poem's queer possibilities are intriguing.

And though we are often advised to separate the speaker of the poem from the poet, we also must acknowledge that, of course, the speaker's speech is written by the poet and informed by their own subjectivity. A queer aspect of Larkin's biography is that he never married and was in an almost polyamorous relationship with two women who were aware of each other. His letters reveal that he was open in his feelings about how each relationship was important to him in different ways. 'I get some emotions with [Maeve]', Larkin wrote in a letter to Monica Jones about his other lover, Maeve Brennan 'But I get some of them with you'.⁶⁹ While polyamory is not an inherently homosexual practice, it certainly is a queer one, as of this writing. That is, it

⁶⁹ Rory Waterman, 'Self's The Man: Letters to Monica by Phillip Larkin', *Essays in Criticism*, 61.2 (2011), 200-208.

goes against the grain of heteronormativity in the way it pushes against the constraints of monogamy. Indeed, many people conceal their polyamorous or open relationship status with friends and family out of shame, and it has become somewhat of a new ritual for poly people to ‘come out’ to their networks, just as queer people ‘come out’ to their friends and families.

The point is that Larkin was, in his own way, and by my definition, ‘queer’ in certain aspects of his personal life. From a creative writing perspective, I would argue that his personal life affected his poetic representations of life, and this is one way in which Larkin’s work has the potential to be read as queer poetry. Of course we can queer Larkin’s poetry in the way that we approach it, and also in the way that we allow it to approach us as readers, and in this sense queering poetry is a re-imagining of what meaning can be made between the critic and the poet, and between the poet and the world they are representing. But we can also look at the non-normative aspects of Larkin’s life and witness how they manifest in his poetics.

During my research for this dissertation, I have often been heartened that I am ‘on the right track’ when I’ve come across a poem that intersects in some way with the thinking I am doing and when I discover, later, that another scholar has similarly noted and written about the same connection. This happened twice with Larkin alongside the above-mentioned critic, Stephen Guy-Bray. I first encountered Richard Scott’s poetry via the influential anthology *100 Queer Poems*, edited by Andrew MacMillan and Jean Chan. After reading Scott’s queer death poem, ‘love version of’ I found a copy of his book *Soho*, and immediately noted the queer ecological significance of the opening poem, *Public Library, 1998*. Here are a few lines of note:

In the library where there is not one gay poem,
not even Cavafy eyeing his grappa-sozzled lads— I
open again the Golden Treasury of Verse and write COCK

in the margin. Ink stains my fingers. Words stretch to
 diagrams, birth beards and thighs, shoulders, fourgies.
 One biro-boy rubs his hard-on against the body of a
 sonnet, another bares his hole beside some Larkin.⁷⁰

Scott's speaker in this poem is searching for a literary home and, finding a dearth of queer spaces in which to nest, radically makes his own home in a poetry anthology that's been scoured of any reference to the queer identities and inclinations of the poets printed within. Because I was already thinking about how Larkin might possibly be read in a queer context, I was later pleasantly surprised that Guy-Bray's introduction to *Shakespeare and Queer Representation*, offers a similar reading of Scott's poem and further gratified by his brief comments on Larkin, which I've quoted above). Queer scholarship in literary criticism, and queer poetry itself, is enmeshed in a web of connectivity as critics and poets collectively begin to re-imagine the poetic landscape we've both emerged from and continue to find ourselves writing in.

1.5 Queering Gender: Radical Trans Poetics

Above I discussed the ways in which we can queer cultural objects like poems and other literatures via a reading-into of both form and content. In this section, I will discuss how poets can queer materiality through the process of writing. Transgender poets, whose very identities often exist in an in-between, liminal space (in many different senses: from a trans selfhood that is often representational of a lived experience that defies 'either/or' categorization, to the 'on stage/off stage' dynamics of trans experiences like doing drag vs living drag, which Michelle de

⁷⁰ Richard Scott, *Soho* (Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 3.

Villie refers to as the occupation of a ‘gilded cage’ for some trans people) are perhaps uniquely situated to embody the queer eco-poetic dissolution of subject and object.⁷¹

For the purposes of this study, transgender people are ‘people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth...who crossover (*trans*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender’.⁷² As T. C. Tolbert and Trace Peterson point out in the Introduction to *Troubling The Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, and which is echoed by Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel in *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*, trans people are underrepresented even in the world of queer poetry publishing, although progress has been made since the 2013 publication of the former.⁷³ The latter volume more clearly articulates the politics of what a trans poetics might look like and answers Morton’s call for a ‘queer ecology’ which ‘would undermine worlds’.⁷⁴ *We Want It All* answers *Troubling The Line*’s call to ‘be our own manifestos’ in the way that the editors begin approximating a framework that has the potential to serve as a starting point for a queer eco-poetic manifesto. Abi-Karam and Gabriel’s framework of a radical trans poetics:

1. A tendency to braid together ecological and anti-capitalist poetics, keenly attuned to the uneven simultaneity of environmental crisis.
2. A writing-through of historical material, using juxtaposition and rewriting to [re] think the relations of trans identity and colonial history.
3. The serial poem patterns itself on and against the repetitions of everyday life.

⁷¹ T. C. Tolbert and Trace Peterson, *Troubling the Line* (Nightboat Books, 2007), p. 17.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷³ Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel, *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* (Nightboat Books, 2020).

⁷⁴ Morton, ‘Queer Ecology’, p. 278.

4. The collaborative exchange licensed by the epistolary [which] makes it possible to speak without disclosure.
5. A palpable sense of prisons as the other side of the lyric poem's beautiful interior life.
6. An exuberant— rather than despairing— lyricism, inflected towards pleasure, rage and embodiment in excess of or counter to journalistic description.
7. A turn to satire and caricature, in view of the tendency, inside and outside trans communities, to understand our lives in terms of social types— the minorly famous e-girl with 1500 twitter followers, the guy who *really* needs you to know he's a feminist, or a very nice landlord.
8. Intuiting a three-way relation between the abjection of trans embodiment, the grim process by which capital transforms the bodies of working people into commodities, and the enhancement and devastation of the body brought on by imperial war.⁷⁵

Although this list describes the 'patterns of overlapping strategies and concerns' that the editors observed in their piecing together of *We Want It All*, this list serves as an excellent starting point for considering a queer eco-poetics that might *trouble the line* between subject and object in the way I describe above. I will now turn towards looking at poems from trans poet CAConrad (who uses this singular form of their name and they/them pronouns) and lyrics from trans pop musician Anohni (who uses she/her pronouns) that embody this approach.

In the poem 'Golden in The Morning Crane Our Necks' CAConrad troubles the line between life and death, human and animal, and even between types of violence (or subjects and objects of violence) in a way that satisfies several of the points in the radical trans framework,

⁷⁵ Abi-Karam and Gabriel, *We Want it All*, p. 13.

though perhaps most notably in its ‘tendency to braid together ecological and anti-capitalist poetics’ as defined in point one. ‘In a past life I was | a little fish who | cleaned the | shells of | turtles’ they write.⁷⁶ ‘A dream | helped me | remember their | deep voice of thanks’ they continue, blurring the line between life and death as well as between waking and dreaming life.⁷⁷ In a past life, they were not the turtle, but the little fish who cleaned the turtle: a bottom feeder who is dependent on what is accumulated on the back of something else— part of a symbiosis, or an ecosystem. There are ‘sharks waiting’ in the poem, and ‘when the calendar runs out | if feels lucky another waits’ highlighting a relational and ‘natural’ violence (we are, after all, on the other side of this cycle of birth and death in the poem: the implication in the frame of the poem itself has to do with cycles and chains, and the way things are woven together, even violence).⁷⁸ And then we get back to the here and now, and begin to wonder: who are the fishes, turtles, and sharks? ‘All I have ever wanted was to | forge the English language into | a spear and drive it into my heart’, they write.⁷⁹ Is this self-immolation as protest? I think so, as the poem changes shape (it becomes a shape that resembles a tear drop) and morphs into something like a direct rhetorical plea to a certain economic segment of humanity:

I ask all
 you talented
 people spending
 many creative hours
 perfecting killer drones
 guns and bombs to please
 know we are waiting for
 you on the other side

⁷⁶ CAConrad, *Amanda Paradise: Resurrect Extinct Vibration* (Wave Books, 2021), p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

of art in the No
Kill Zone⁸⁰

CAConrad's poetic argument is interesting in the way it sits with the type of poetics Roland Barthes describes in *Writing Degree Zero*, which is so dependent upon a departure from rhetoric.⁸¹ In the chapter 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' Barthes argues that while the difference between prose and poetic language was, previous to the twentieth century, a matter of style, ornamentation, and not one of actual substance (both prose and poetry did basically the same thing, he argues, which is to deliver an argument) modern poetry (which he considered to be what's happened since Rimbaud) has radically departed from prose.⁸² Poetry, for Barthes, is 'a quality *sui generis* and without antecedents. It is no longer an attribute but a substance, and therefore it can very well renounce signs, since it carries its own nature within itself, and does not need to signal its identity outwardly'.⁸³ But how can poetry 'renounce signs'? How can a medium based on symbols 'signal its identity outward' without them? And how can a poetics without argument exist? In this way, a queer ecopoetics, which is inherently political, is an inconvenient truth for those who lean towards this poetics without argument. The queer subject *is an argument*, particularly so for the trans subject as of this writing, because queer and trans bodies—their very *existence*—are political objects. Our poetics—an extension of our bodies (following posthuman feminist approaches)—must be (at least in part) an argument or rhetoric about nature and ontology.

And yet, throughout CAConrad's poetry, there are hints of this idea of Barthes' 'substance'. In 'Golden Morning' there is the speaker's desire to 'forge the English language into

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸¹ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1967).

⁸² Ibid., p. 42-45.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 43.

a spear'. In 'Acclimating to Discomfort of the System Breaking Beneath Us' they write 'as soon as the invented language enters | us something else will vibrate in our skin | opening a door with teeth of the future to | the place where we let the freer feeling go'.⁸⁴ In these lines there is this idea of the *alien-ness* of English, which defamiliarizes the language to such a degree that it might seem to begin to, as Barthes says, 'renounce signs'. Nevertheless, CAConrad is making an argument: this queering of English itself is an acknowledgment of the colonising structure of English *in particular* if not all language, generally. In this way, CAConrad shows that there can be no poetics without argument, at least for the queer subject.

CAConrad gets particularly queerly ecopoetic when they fold the not-human into this landscape of alien language, particularly via the communication of other species, acknowledging the difficulty of hearing beyond the noise of humanity: 'we tilt our | ears from | blankets of | sweat and cum | overhearing birds in | their temples of the trees' and 'sometimes I strain | to hear one | natural | sound'.⁸⁵ Even the human self is difficult to hear beneath the din of language when 'with the right quiet we can | listen to the crackling | fire that keeps us | 98.6 degrees'.⁸⁶ In CAConrad's poetry, this noise exists to drown out the horror of ecological collapse, while human noise, perpetuated by language, is also the cause of the collapse. It's a bit like shouting at someone who then begins crying and then shouting at them to stop crying. Simply witnessing the damage might be enough to completely undo the toxic, patriarchal male ego: the reason CAConrad is 'so fucking sick of nations | and the men who love them'.⁸⁷

Trans musician Anohni echoes this concern for witnessing ecological collapse in the lyrics of songs on her album *Hopelessness* (2016), turning towards a sort of hyperbolic satire of

⁸⁴ CAConrad, *Amanda Paradise*, p. 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the language that creates the conditions for collapse. ‘I wanna see this world | I wanna see it boiled | it’s only four degrees |... I wanna hear the dogs crying for water | I wanna see the fish go belly up in the sea | And all those lemurs and all those tiny creatures | I wanna see them burn’ she sings in ‘4 Degrees’.⁸⁸ Importantly, Anohni’s ecological awareness intersects with the political, and radically attacks the American liberal political establishment, which, given her status as a trans woman one might expect her to be sympathetic towards.

Hopelessness was released at the tail end of the Obama era and its eight years of neoliberal disappointment, and in ‘Drone Bomb Me’ Anohni again employs satire to an absurd effect. ‘Drone bomb me | Blow me from the mountains, and into the sea | Blow me from the side of the mountain | Blow my head off, explode my crystal guts | Lay my purple on the grass’.⁸⁹ CACConrad: ‘tell the children when US poets pay | their taxes homes of poets in the | Middle East burn to the ground’.⁹⁰ In ‘Obama’, Anohni deals with the left’s collective disappointment in a figure who ‘like children | we believed’ in, but who betrayed his own ‘virtues | scarring closed the sky | punishing the whistle-blowers | those who tell the truth’.⁹¹ Anohni has said that ‘Obama’ is specifically about the incarceration of trans whistle-blower Chelsea Manning who, a year or so after this song was released, had her sentence commuted by US President Barack Obama.⁹² In the lyrics of the song, Anohni abandons hyperbole and seems to speak directly to the former US President. This turn towards hopefulness feels shocking after most of the album

⁸⁸ Anohni, *Hopelessness*, Rough Trade, 2016 [On Multiple Formats].

⁸⁹ Anohni, *Hopelessness*.

⁹⁰ CACConrad, *Amanda Paradise*, p. 23.

⁹¹ Guardian Music, ‘Anohni urges Barack Obama to free Chelsea Manning: “She poses no threat”’, *The Guardian*, 6 December 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/dec/06/anohni-urges-barack-obama-to-free-chelsea-manning>> [accessed 20 March 2024].

⁹² Charlie Savage, ‘Chelsea Manning to Be Released Early as Obama Commutes Sentence’, *The New York Times*, 17 January 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/us/politics/obama-commutes-bulk-of-chelsea-mannings-sentence.html>> [accessed 20 March 2024].

has occupied such nihilistic territory and has mostly meditated on a hellscape of violence and ecological collapse which is, in part, the consequence of colonial language.

This is a feature of both Anohni and CAConrad's trans poetics, a code-switching between heartfelt earnesty and a biting, scorched-earth, satirical camp, all while tying together the intersections of identity politics, climate crisis, and the inherent colonialism in the English language. In terms of Abi-Karam and Gabriel's framework, we can see both artists embodying the first and seventh points: 'a tendency to braid together ecological and anti-capitalist poetics' together with 'a turn to satire and caricature'.⁹³ In 'Glitter in My Wounds' CAConrad writes 'you think Oscar Wilde was funny | well Darling I think he was busy | distracting straight people | so they would not kill him'.⁹⁴ It's the capital-D in 'Darling' that reinforces the camp, arch-queerness that mentioning Wilde invokes (in my mind I can see Zsa Zsa Gabor puffing on a cigarette extension) coupled with the final quoted line that brings us back to the grim reality of what happened to Wilde because of his sexuality (and it's important not to forget that perhaps what really killed Wilde was language: the language of courts, of the *sentence*). Further, in the poem 'Impaled by Sharp Points of Wonderment' CAConrad writes 'telling someone who they are | instead of asking is where | extinction gets its start'.⁹⁵ In this one line, CAConrad ties extinction events to colonialism/patriarchy and its twentieth and twenty-first century lurch towards fascism, and ties both that and environmental collapse to queer identity: once Adam started naming things in the Garden, which is to say once he was given dominion over them that is when their existence started to be in jeopardy.

⁹³ Abi-Karam and Gabriel, *We Want it All*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ CAConrad, *Amanda Paradise*, p. 14.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The turn towards earnesty and hope in both CAConrad and Anohni's work is perennial: both poet and lyricist don't seem to want to give up on the world, and this is a feature of queer eco-poetics as well: for the queer subject, apocalypse has already occurred, many times throughout history: from executions in the middle ages, to the gas chambers in Nazi Germany, to the AIDS pandemic beginning in the 1980's, queer people have lived through persecution, and the collapse of their ecosystems time and time again and *survived*. Queer poetry reflects this instinct towards survival.

For queer eco-poetics, it is as important to unflinchingly witness our complicity in violence as it is to denounce it, to distance ourselves from it, and to attempt to conjure something else. 'Parents who brought children | to witch burnings | remind me of | parents | where I | grew up' CAConrad writes in 'Diving into The Premonition', a nod to Adrienne Rich's *Diving into The Wreck*.⁹⁶ 'Harvesting the heads | of our nation's enemies | is what our family does | we must not deny it' they write in 'Murder Is Against a Rule Somewhere That Is Not America'.⁹⁷ In 'It Must Change', a song from Anohni's latest album *My Back Was a Bridge For You To Cross* (2023) they sing: 'The city in your head | Collapsing walls and lead, it must change | The fire is cleaning | The oil from the stones | Your God is failing you, things must change | Giving you hell | The truth is that our love | Will ricochet through eternity'.⁹⁸ There's this idea percolating throughout both artists' work that, despite apocalyptic conditions, there will be a tomorrow. These artists are interested in how they might subvert the tendency in the English language towards fascism, violence, and apocalypse. For example, in the act of wishing, as in CAConrad's poem 'Visit A Living Being to Eat What Falls from Their Body', which feels like an act of

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

⁹⁸ Anohni, *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross*, Anohni and the Johnsons, Secretly Canadian, 2023 [On Multiple Formats].

resistance and also reminiscent of visual artist Jenny Holzer's marquee piece 'It Is in Your Self-Interest to Find a Way to Be Very Tender' (1993).⁹⁹ 'I am the | wagon wishing | you would find me | a maple left uncut' they write.¹⁰⁰ Queer ecopoetics does the difficult, discursive work of witnessing violence while managing to stay in a state of softness that is, ultimately, radical.

Anohni and CAConrad oscillate between hope and despair in a time of ecological collapse in a very human way. Anohni, in 'Hopelessness' sings 'How did I become | The mother of this son? | The face and mind and hands of virulence? | I, who curled in cave and moss | I, who gathered wood for fire | And tenderly embraced | How did I become a virus?'¹⁰¹ Here Anohni acknowledges the impact humans have had on ecosystems through a series of questions: how did we get from *a part* of nature to *apart* from nature? This was a prescient thought in 2016, four years before the COVID-19 pandemic caused humans to retreat indoors which caused a corresponding spike in incidents of wildlife appearing in human-dominated habitats.¹⁰² These increased incidents led both researchers and average people to speculate on both the impact of human activity (or the lack of it) on animal habitats, and more broadly on our relationship to 'nature' in the twenty-first century. 'Nature is healing', read the texts of many pandemic-era memes and social media posts, a sentiment that only reified the troubling assertion that humans are somehow not connected to the ecologies they inhabit.

Of course, as mentioned above, pandemics are part of queer consciousness in the wake (and continuing violence) of AIDS. CAConrad's '72 Corona Transmutations' makes this connection between plagues explicit, reminding readers of the trauma of AIDS and how it echoes

⁹⁹ Francesca Canadé Sautman, 'Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 17.3 (2008), 472-78.

¹⁰⁰ CAConrad, *Amanda Paradise*, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Anohni, *Hopelessness*.

¹⁰² Christian Rutz, Matthias-Claudius Loretto, et al, 'COVID-19 lockdown allows researchers to quantify the effects of human activity on wildlife', *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, 4 (2020), pp. 1156-1159, in <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-020-1237-z#citeas>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

on in the ongoing COVID pandemic. ‘It was over half my life ago | since I told this many friends | I hope we all survive | we did not that time | but I say it again | *I hope we | all survive / I hope we / all survive*’.¹⁰³ The repetition at the end of the poem feels like an incantation: a hope, despite knowing what has happened in the past; despite what we know about the sort of society we live in. ‘Someone on the news just called | the virus dangerous | as though this | violent empire | was ever safe.’¹⁰⁴ Echoes here of AIDS in the way that ‘the empire’ or the US Government under Reagan, allowed the pandemic to rage on for so long without intervening—an act that many queer activists amounted to a type of attempted genocide.¹⁰⁵ ‘Language shows where we stand | it can reveal how we | care about who is | listening and | how or if we | are listening’.¹⁰⁶ Here CAC Conrad focuses again on language, the ultimate virus, which has the power of revealing intention: who is important, and who is paying attention. There are two directions of language here: speaking (from power) and listening (to power). The poet is interested in and sceptical of both avenues of expression. Even still, within the same poem, CAC Conrad returns to a type of listening within the eerie quiet of the pandemic. The long poem is composed of tiny poems in abstract shapes, tucked down at the bottom of the page. The visual device produces an aural effect of whispering, or of voices lowered: of ears to the ground.

robin sets my ear
 kettle sets it
 refrigerator engine
 the cat’s engine
 footsteps and
 wind can

¹⁰³ CAC Conrad, *Amanda Paradise*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁵ *United In Anger: A History of Act Up*, dir. by Jim Hubbard (USA, 2012).

¹⁰⁶ CAC Conrad, *Amanda Paradise*, p. 40.

set it
 my lover on the phone
 inhale with my
 ear set before
 the exhale¹⁰⁷

And a few pages later, hope appears in this quiet place, again:

a pause
 in the
 heartbeat
 of empire
 or never going back
 to paying for wars
 we pretend are
 not happening¹⁰⁸

And later:

Economic Casualties

Ailing Corporations

things reporters say in the USA

Money and its
 Masters
 dominate
 the language
 first evidence
 of power we
 continue to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

allow them¹⁰⁹

In addition to their attention to the murmurings of a self (listening to the noise of internalized objects) these fragments also embody the eighth point in the *Radical Trans Poetics* framework: ‘Intuiting a three-way relation between the abjection of trans embodiment, the grim process by which capital transforms the bodies of working people into commodities, and the enhancement and devastation of the body brought on by imperial war’.¹¹⁰

It might appear that CAConrad and Anohni (and other transgender poets and artists) have little in common with the work of Shakespeare, Frost, or Larkin. Perhaps it is ‘a stretch’ to tie these distinct types of work together, as I’m doing across these two sections of the dissertation. But this is why we queer literature: to open previously closed-off pathways in literary studies. In queer ecopoetics, it is conceivable that Frost’s woods, which he so longed to enter, were queer cruising grounds, the sort of place one might encounter a certain type of transgressive sexuality on the way home to heteronormativity. Queer ecopoetics offers us a way to see how apparently heteronormative tropes are not always so and are in fact frequently enmeshed in very queer contexts and situations.

1.6 Queer Ecology and The Mesh

Having defined ‘queer’ for the purposes of this study, now I will turn my attention more fully towards queer ecology, an emerging field in ecological studies which forms the fertile ground in which a queer ecopoetics might root and grow in. I will offer a definition of queer ecology, discuss how queering ecology disrupts the essentialist view of biological sex, sexuality, and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹¹⁰ Abi-Karam and Gabriel, *We Want it All*, p. 13.

gender (and therefore nature), and debunks a particular read of Charles Darwin that still dominates popular ideas about these concepts. Darwin's theory of evolution figures large here, both for the essentialists and the queer ecologists. Timothy Morton's foundational text 'The Mesh' fully dismantles the idea that gender, nature, and evolution are deterministic and innate categories; the mesh (a hyperobject) is the fundamental fabric of queer ecopoetics, as this section will also show. Following all of this, I will look at how these ideas influence nature writing, and how queer ecopoetics is a radical departure from ecocriticism and environmentalism.

In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson introduce the field of queer ecology.¹¹¹ They argue that by queering ecological studies, we can begin to unlearn harmful heteronormative and binary interpretations of both sexuality and nature, which, they suggest, stem from the Darwinian idea that all biological beings evolved through a process of natural and sexual selection. The origin of an innate sexuality is most famously articulated by Foucault in his *History Of Sexuality*, which argues that Darwinian ideas like sexual selection were used by medical science to define homosexuality not as a sexual act (as he argues it had been seen previously) but as an innate and aberrant condition, while heterosexuality was classified as innate and normal or 'natural'.¹¹² This construction of an innate sexuality, along with its 'natural' and 'unnatural' expressions became normalised by the early twentieth century.

The idea that heterosexuality was natural and homosexuality unnatural led to a popular correlation between masculinity and heterosexuality with wild or pastoral spaces, as opposed to

¹¹¹ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Indiana University Press, 2010).

¹¹² Rachele Dini, and Chiara Briganti, *Michele Foucault's History of Sexuality* (Taylor and Francis, 2017).

femininity and homosexuality, and domestic or urban spaces of the city.¹¹³ These constructions, which have persisted into the twenty-first century, are products of a long historical arc that began during the enlightenment and have been reflected in and reified by literature (I will delve into this history in a bit more detail in section two). Queer ecopoetics, at least in part, is a queer reclamation of wilderness/pastoral space in literature which is itself the product of that same arc of history. Queering ecopoetry, like queering ecology, is reparative work: it is an excavation of the past, with roots in the scientific and theoretical work of scholars engaged in similar excavations, re-visioning, and re-situating the queer subject's place in wild or pastoral spaces, even as it interrogates the meaning of 'nature'.

Morton and other queer ecologists have shown that there are problems with equating the queer subject as 'part of nature' and therefore 'normative'. In the twentieth century, biologists and ecologists, like Bruce Bagemihl and Joan Roughgarden, argued that homosexual behavior and transsexual characteristics occurred in nature just as 'naturally' as heterosexual behavior and cisgender characteristics did.¹¹⁴ While the evidence they gathered was useful for persuading the public that so-called aberrant sexualities were natural (and therefore moral), they unintentionally reinforced an essentialist view of sexuality that continues to create problems for anything categorizable as 'other'. This persists in the twenty-first century. One of pop star Lady Gaga's biggest hit songs was called 'Born This Way' and became an LGBTQ-rights in 2011.¹¹⁵ The song's message is evident in the title: queer people are 'born this way', which is to say their identities are innate categories and, therefore, valid. This is a form of biological essentialism.

¹¹³ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, 'Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer Ecology', *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, 9 (2005) p. 4-10, in <https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_9/sandilands.html> [accessed 22 April 2024].

¹¹⁴ Sam See, *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* (Fordham University Press, 2020), p. 13.

¹¹⁵ Lynn Neary, *How 'Born This Way' Was Born: An LGBT Anthem's Pedigree* (2019). <<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/30/687683804/lady-gaga-born-this-way-lgbt-american-anthem>> [accessed 7 April 2024].

Queer ecology offers a critique of biological essentialism which, while it may give queer people a line of argument that would seem to win them human rights within heteronormative political structures, may actually harm their movements for sexual and personal liberation.

Sam See, along with Morton, contends that queer ecology is a non-essentialist intervention into moral constructions of nature in which ‘queerness, in its variegated forms, is installed in biological substance as such and is not simply a blip in cultural history.’¹¹⁶ See and Morton concur that Darwin, whose theories of natural and sexual selection are often used to promote biological essentialism, was a proto-queer theorist ‘who conceptualises nature as a non-normative, infinitely heterogeneous composite of mutating laws and principles’.¹¹⁷ In other words, for Darwin ‘evolution means that life forms are made of other life forms. Entities are mutually deterministic: they exist in relation to each other and derive from each other. Nothing exists independently, and nothing comes from nothing’.¹¹⁸ So although Darwin’s ideas were used to create the biological essentialism that has driven both homophobia at the turn of the century and then the eventual assimilation of homosexual individuals into a biological essentialist morality that is essentially patriarchal and heteronormative, queer ecology goes back to Darwin to assert something like its opposite: that nothing is fixed, and that ‘nature’ is not only not ‘natural’, it doesn’t even exist. ‘There is no “outside” of the system of life-forms’ argues Morton in ‘The Mesh’ just as, for Derrida, there is no outside of the text.¹¹⁹

This is what most of us mean when we think ecologically: that everything is connected to everything else [and] this point is actually very profound, because it also implies that

¹¹⁶ See, *Queer Natures*, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ Morton, ‘Queer Ecology’, p. 275.

¹¹⁹ Morton, ‘The Mesh’, p. 23.

there is no environment as such— that what we’re talking about today is the phenotypical expression of DNA [...] A spider’s DNA is expressed in its web... the environment, then, from the perspective of the life sciences, is nothing but the phenotypical expression of DNA code [...] Oxygen [is] anaerobic bacterial excrement... Iron ore [is] a by-product of archaic metabolic processes. You drive and fly using crushed liquefied dinosaur bones...most of your house dust is your skin.¹²⁰

Here Morton describes ‘the mesh’: a radically de-centered way of thinking about the nature of reality (or I suppose a de-natured version of reality) which Morton contends is Copernican in scale, inasmuch as really considering the mesh (perhaps the ultimate hyperobject, which we can’t easily perceive via our senses) is mostly impossible (or as impossible as it was in Galileo and Copernicus’s time to conceive of a universe where the earth orbited the sun and not the other way round). In the mesh, everything is profoundly interconnected, which is nothing new— Morton is describing ecology, and, to a degree something like indigenous wisdom traditions that believed in a ‘web of life’ (and there is room for criticism of Morton’s relative glossing over of indigeneity, which I’ll explore below). But in Morton’s Mesh, which has theoretical roots in both OOO and queer ecology, these connections, when looked at closely, render the actual differences between objects as almost meaningless, even as things can be *perceived* to be different than other things.

The implications for this are, perhaps, beyond current human comprehension: Morton claims that we are on the cusp of seeing a paradigm shift in how we understand the ontology of the known universe, and that this shift began with Darwin.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

If everything is interconnected, then there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground. Darwin sensed this startling loss of coordinates while thinking through the implications of the theory of natural selection... Every single life-form is literally familiar, in that we are genetically descended from them. Darwin imagines an endlessly branching tree, ‘the Great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications.’¹²¹

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari famously rejected trees as a metaphor for structuring ways of knowing, favoring their concept of the rhizome in place of the ‘tree of knowledge’ (and isn’t the rhizome very similar to the mesh?). Via the mesh, Morton suggests a return to the tree as a metaphor.¹²² Recent developments in the life sciences, such as the way underground mycelial networks use tree roots to communicate, or how trees send chemical signals to each other and form their own rhizomatic networks, reinforces Darwin-via-Morton’s use of trees as symbols for ecological thought. Like Harman’s claim that OOO is a ‘theory of everything’, Morton’s claim here is that the mesh is a way of conceiving of an all-encompassing ecology without borders. *Everything* is very much connected to *everything* else: there is no beginning or end to it.

This sort of queer ecological awareness, Morton argues, suggests that there is something very wrong with ecocriticism: that it is an environmentalist rhetoric that separates nature and

¹²¹ Moton, ‘The Mesh’, p. 25.

¹²² Gilles, Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press), 1987, p. 12.

what one could call ‘unnature’. If everything is connected to everything else via the mesh, then a nature poem isn’t meaningfully different than any other sort of poem. Perhaps the result of this is an ‘ecopoetry without nature’, much as Morton has argued for an ‘ecology without nature’.¹²³

Queer ecopoetics, with the mesh as its de-centred, yet central, idea, undoes the separation between nature and un-nature and opens the world of un-natural texts to ecocritical approaches they previously were not open to. This is not dissimilar to the ways in which queer literary theory opens up the possibility of reading any text as queer. Queer ecopoetics insists that the human subject is not apart from natural objects: rather, the human subject, even as it still exists as “I” in poetry, is enmeshed in everything else, just as everything else is enmeshed in it.

This has real implications for how we think about ecopoetry. Mary Oliver’s poem ‘October’ is a well-loved nature poem that interrogates what it means to be a human subject in a natural environment. The poem is threaded through with bees, birds, bears, flowers, blackberries and the like: things people expect to be in a nature poem. Only in the last two stanzas do we encounter the type of twentieth-century, Western, environmentalist rhetoric which separates human subject and natural object.

Sometimes in late summer I won’t touch anything, not
 the flowers, not the blackberries
 brimming in the thickets; I won’t drink
 from the pond; I won’t name the birds or the trees;
 I won’t whisper my own name.

¹²³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

One morning
 the fox came down the hill,
 glittering and confident, and didn't see me--and I thought:

 so this is the world.

 I'm not in it.

 It is beautiful.¹²⁴

Here, Oliver's human speaker completely separates herself from nature, insisting that she isn't 'in it' after listing a litany of ways she attempts to refuse interacting with this natural world of objects. It's an interesting paradox, particularly this idea that the speaker won't 'name' the things she is seeing even as she has just been doing so throughout the poem. The speaker tries to separate themselves from a world they are so actively inhabiting, not only via the poetic gaze and the act of rendering, but in the actions they *aren't* taking, which presumably, they'd normally take (the picking of flowers and blackberries; the drinking from the pond) and which would of course mean that they were indeed interacting with the world— were a part of it, not apart from it. Oliver's move to separate herself from nature—to insist that this is even possible—is emblematic of an environmentalism in poetry that reifies harmful tropes about nature and un-nature.

Queer ecopoetics radically departs from the entire concept of nature and this is tricky: to resist a Victorian morality that is Platonic in both its idealism and in its essentialism and which is pervasive, still, in many forms of eco writing. 'Nature writing', which separates nature from humanity; Romanticism, which turns a backwards gaze towards a false nostalgia for pre-

¹²⁴ Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (Penguin, 2017), p. 308.

industrial, pastoral spaces; even queer poetry which can tend to reify existing narratives about the queerness of urban spaces and the masculinity and hostility of the wilderness: these are all deeply suspect through a queer eco-poetic lens.

Despite this, queer eco-poetic writing and criticism can still consider texts ensconced in so-called ‘nature’. As Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, and others have shown, *queer pastoral* is a ‘literary and artistic tradition [which] imagine[s] a queer history, a queer space, and indeed a queer nature’.¹²⁵ Furthermore, they continue, ‘the idealised, bucolic ‘naturalness’ of pastoral homoeroticism calls into question the idea that heterosexuality is the only ‘natural’ sex around’.¹²⁶ Beyond homoeroticism (back to bell hooks: ‘that can be a part of it’) queer eco-poetics is primarily concerned with what it means to be a being: that is to say, queer eco-poetics is an interrogation of the relationship between subject and object, human and nature, gay and straight, cis and trans— even between being and non-being. Following this, queer eco-poetics is very much a non-binary mode of twisting (the root of ‘queer’ may have been a German word, *quer* which can mean *askew* or *aslant*) our thinking about *oikos* (home) and *poiesis* (making).¹²⁷ ‘In a Darwinian world we can see around the edges of life-forms, and into their strange ambiguous depths’ Morton argues and by ‘in a Darwinian world’ they are really saying ‘in the mesh itself’.¹²⁸ Seeing through the mesh, like peering through a hag stone, one can see the space between subjects and objects begin to blur. Worlds are unmade; nature is rendered as unnature.

This interrogation of subject and object is fertile ground for poetry and theory. In her essay ‘Is All Writing Environmental Writing?’ poet Camille Dungy shares that ‘writing takes off

¹²⁵ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, p. 4.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹²⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, *Queer, Adj. (1), Etymology*, doi.org/10.1093/OED/3759958359.

¹²⁸ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, p. 22.

for me when I stop separating human experiences from the realities of the greater-than-human world'.¹²⁹ This Mesh-adjacent statement of poetics moves towards subverting the human/nature binary by insisting that the boundary between human and nature is porous or perhaps non-existent. Post-humanist theorists like Donna Haraway have been making this case for decades. In *Staying with The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway argues that 'the world is a knot in motion. Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of misplaced concreteness— i.e., the mistake of... taking provisional and local category abstractions like 'nature' and 'culture' for the world'¹³⁰. So, theory describes the implosion of the nature/culture binary, and poetics enacts it. To this Dungy adds that 'contemporary eco-poetics questions the efficacy of valuing one physical presentation of animated matter over another, because narratives about place and about life contribute to our orientation in, and our interpretation of, that place and that life'.¹³¹ In other words, our representation of our ecologies— our homes— matters because these representations form part of the dialectic of life imitating art and art imitating life. Presenting nature as Other via poetics results in an othering of Nature vis a vis humanity, a stark separation that perhaps doesn't really exist. Haraway's theory (quoting Butler) again echoes Dungy's poetics: 'There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. In Judith Butler's terms, there are only 'contingent foundations;' bodies that matter are the result'.¹³² Or, as Butler called them, 'mattered' bodies, both human and non-human.¹³³ Queer eco-poetics treats these mattered bodies without privileging one over the other.

¹²⁹ Camille T. Dungy, 'Is All Writing Environmental Writing?' *The Georgia review* 72, no. 3 (2018), p. 677.

¹³⁰ Haraway, Donna, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 6.

¹³¹ Dungy, 'Is All Writing Environmental Writing?', p. 678.

¹³² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 6.

¹³³ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Routledge, 1993).

In ‘The Mesh’, Morton makes a philosophical case for this— that there is no measurable way to mark the distance between subject and object, and therefore no gap between nature and human or pastoral and urban, and so forth. Invoking deconstructionism, he calls this ‘a deconstruction of life-forms’ and argues that, if we deconstruct life-forms down to their basest elements, at the genomic, atomic, and subatomic level, they ‘constitute a *mesh* that is infinite and beyond concept— unthinkable as such’.¹³⁴ Morton offers seven implications of this, and while it is beyond my scope to consider all of these, two in particular are useful for thinking about queer eco-poetics (and, as I drill down further, I’ll switch back over some of the same ground I’ve covered above, although with a different focus).

First, Morton asserts that because the building blocks of life are all the same (DNA and RNA) there is no real way to differentiate any biotic thing, therefore no difference between a blade of grass and a person, at least at the genomic level. He refers to reality, then, as a ‘mesh’ which

can mean both the holes in a network and the threading between them. It suggests both hardness and delicacy. It has uses in biology, mathematics, and engineering, and in weaving and computing— think stockings and graphic design, metals, and fabrics. It has antecedents in *mask* and *mass*, suggesting both density and deception... ‘mesh’ can mean ‘a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare’... in other words, it is perfect.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Morton, ‘The Mesh’, p. 24.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

He continues, arguing that, in the mesh, ‘every single life-form is literally familiar, in that we are genetically descended from them’.¹³⁶ Sometimes, when describing the mesh, it sounds like Morton is describing the known universe, which I suppose they are. ‘Each point of the mesh is both the centre and the edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute centre or edge’.¹³⁷ Basic astronomy (at the time of this writing) asserts that the universe has no edge, or at least no observable one, and therefore no centre, too. In this way, the mesh is perhaps Morton’s ultimate hyperobject: an all-encompassing mesh of the known universe that is beyond our human abilities to directly perceive. Queer ecopoetics is the best way to begin to try to perceive and experience the mesh, as I’ll argue below.

Next, Morton claims that ‘drawing distinctions between life and nonlife is strictly impossible, yet unavoidable’ noting that ‘when we start to think about life, we worry away at the distinction between nature and artifice’.¹³⁸ Following the path of deconstruction for Morton is to discover there is no such thing as ‘real’ and ‘artificial’: that these are just invented categories that humans have often found useful. Of course, walking down this road one is bound to run into myriad paradoxes. In queer ecology— in the mesh itself— we must live with such paradoxes, which Morton accounts for: ‘tracing the origins of life and nonlife to a moment prior to life will result in paradoxes’.¹³⁹ I will explore some of these paradoxes and the problems they create next.

One of Morton’s central concerns in their book, *Dark Ecology*, is that the ecological crisis of climate change is not, in fact, a direct result of capitalism and the extraction of fossil fuels in order to perennially grow the petro-economies of so-called ‘developed nations’ but dates

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

back much further, to the point in human history when humans developed agriculture.¹⁴⁰ In *Dark Ecology* Morton seems to breeze past any discussion of how different modern economic systems might effectively mediate climate crisis, claiming that non-capitalist economies are also emitting carbon (without sufficiently discussing the ways in which communist countries, as the example he gives, exist within a context of the global hegemony of capitalism and its military-backed dictum towards growth). This is a problem for OOO in general, and an indication of the difficulty in trying to identify a philosophical ‘theory of everything’: it can tend to gloss over some issues which might disprove its basic premises.

Some philosophers, including Andrew Cole, criticise OOO for a certain turn towards magical realism, magical thinking, and ‘the convenient fiction’ of ‘the ancient Logos principle by which things call out to us and speak their being’.¹⁴¹ These ideas, first that OOO creates ‘fictions’ as opposed to, say, something akin to ‘reality’ and secondly, that objects emanate a call or ‘noise’ as Cole later suggests, are both ways-in towards the type of poetics that I admire and work towards. I say that *everything* is a type of fiction, and that the world of objects, if it does exist separately from subjects, do indeed make themselves known to us through a noise that is unavoidable. Writing poetry is, in large part, a particular practice of listening to the noise objects make, and then rendering that noise into a sort of fiction.

And while there is certainly room for criticism of Morton and OOO, particularly in terms of the politics of the climate crisis, these concerns are actually positive complications for queer ecopoetics, which thrives in the complexity of these questions. As an example, Morton’s assertion that the climate crisis can be traced back to humans practising agriculture is perhaps

¹⁴⁰ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Andrew Cole, *The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies*, *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013), 106-118, p. 107.

flawed in its western-facing gaze. While it may be true that one can trace western, capitalist petro-economies back to the advent of agriculture in Mesopotamia, posthuman feminists, such as Braidotti, have usefully shown how western, neoliberal hegemony has, globally, resulted in the ‘erasure of indigenous perspectives on environmental practices and land management’, among other effects of global indigenous genocide and ecocide.¹⁴²

The Chumash and Northern Chumash tribal groups (the indigenous people who lived along the central coast of California before Spanish colonisation and who still live in area today) practised advanced forms of agriculture and permaculture which may have mitigated some of the worst effects of climate change in this century.¹⁴³ Some of these techniques, most particularly the controlled burning of coastal woodlands and chaparral, are now being used to mitigate the worst effects of climate-driven catastrophic wildfires which have been ravaging California and much of western North America in the twenty-first century. The Chumash, and other indigenous people’s use of agricultural techniques calls into question Morton’s assertions about the culprit behind climate change. Perhaps it is not agriculture itself that is to blame, but a certain strain of what he calls ‘agrilogistics’ that is distinctly Western, and which led to the development of the capitalist petro-economies that are clearly the chief driver of greenhouse gases rapidly warming the planet, causing the mass extinction of much of the biological life on earth. My poetics, while drawing from Morton’s conceits in many places, follows posthuman feminism’s call ‘to learn from the tenacity of First Nation people who have survived ‘eco-colonial genocide’.¹⁴⁴ ‘The fact that so many First Nation people not only survived but created new worlds within or parallel to that of

¹⁴² Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, p. 85.

¹⁴³ Thomas C. Blackburn, Kat Anderson, and Ellen J. Lehman, *Before the Wilderness: Environmental Management by Native Californians* (Ballena Press, 1993).

¹⁴⁴ Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*, p. 95.

their invaders,’ writes Braidotti, ‘is an achievement and a lesson for all the contemporary posthuman subjects who fear the consequences of the Anthropocene.’¹⁴⁵

This call towards a futurity that rejects apocalyptic thinking resonates with my approach to poetry, particularly in ‘Side D’ of *They Mesh: A Hyperballad*. In this section, the poems move through the tension created by the paradox of climate change (and other sorts of life-altering changes), looking beyond despair and trying to imagine the ways in which the posthuman subject and also objects might survive in the future. In ‘Persistence of Memory’, for example, I imagine that, perhaps after catastrophe, the text is the way our subjectivity might persist, in a nod towards intersectional struggle: we survive violence—human or planetary—through language and memory.

Despite this criticism of Morton’s work, it is still useful. I’d argue that the tension that exists between OOO and posthuman feminism create fertile conditions for creative work, and the two main contentions of Morton’s that I mention above— that everything is basically made of the same things (and that therefore there is no such thing as ‘real’ or ‘artificial’) along with his conception of the mesh — are essential theoretical constructs for queer ecopoetics. I am Caleb, because I am not not-Caleb, though not-Caleb and I are basically the same thing; and yet are distinct from each other, at least on the level of our human perception. You are human because you are not not-human, or maybe because you are not a tree, and yet you and the tree are essentially (and by ‘essentially’ I mean as in genomically and/or atomically) made of the same stuff. And yet there is such a thing as being *you* and such a thing as *a tree*, and those are distinct perceptual experiences. The appearance of subjects and objects in the mesh does not constitute the totality of those subjects and objects. Because everything is made of the same stuff, the only

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

meaningful difference between human subject and natural object is an aesthetic one. Queer ecopoetics is an acknowledgement that when we render 'nature' in poetry, we are contributing to that aesthetic construction. Queer ecopoetics is also a call to poets to radically reconsider what ecopoetry could be: an ecopoetry without nature.

Chapter 2

2.1 Introduction to The Queer Pastoral

In their introduction to the *Queering Ecopoetics* issue of ISLE, Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola coined the term ‘queer ecopoetics’: a mesh made up of queer theory, queer ecology, and ecocriticism, that is an act of ‘queer homemaking’ in literature and argue that ‘ecopoetics has been queer all along’.¹⁴⁶ The inherent queerness of so-called nature is an idea which echoes Timothy Morton’s writings on ecology, particularly in their essays ‘Queer Ecology’, and ‘The Mesh’, both of which theorise the ways in which queer ecology radically revises the ecocritical view of humanity’s relationship with nature and which argues that the human subject and the natural object are, essentially, one and the same. While queer ecology is now an established (though relatively nascent) field in ecological studies, queer ecopoetics remains ‘undertheorized’ as Hume and Rahimtoola put it.¹⁴⁷

To this end I’d like to theorise another node in the rhizome that is queer ecopoetics with a theoretical construction we could call the ‘queer pastoral’— a critical mode for thinking about the pastoral in literature (including poetry, prose, and films) which builds on the intersectionality of Terry Gifford’s ‘post-pastoral’ and is perhaps a cousin to Joyelle McSweeney’s canon-eating ‘necropastoral’. The queer pastoral makes its home among the fragrantly rotting literary corpses left behind by the necropastoral and in the thicket of critical frameworks of the post-pastoral. By queering pastoral, queer poetry reclaims its ancestral home in ‘nature’ even as it renegotiates the borderlines between nature and the city, past and present, urban, suburban and rural.

¹⁴⁶ Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola, ‘Introduction: Queering Ecopoetics’, *Interdisciplinary studies in literature and environment* 25, 1 (2018), pp. 134–149, p. 134.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Queer ecopoetics is a critical lens and creative practice that considers human encounters with nature and how they are rendered in literature, while also deconstructing the subject/object binary which separates them. Queer pastoral insists that the queer subject belongs in nature and is a part of nature rather than apart from nature. Queer pastoral also queers the pastoral tradition, blurring the border between human constructions and so-called natural ones. While humans have been writing about nature for as long as writing has existed, it is important to consider how queerness has been both written into and erased from the historic record of writing about the natural world. The following section does not seek to provide a detailed overview of the history of queer pastoral, although that project is indeed worthy of future, dedicated study. Instead, in this section I will look at the issues surrounding historicizing queerness and provide a few examples of queer pastoral poetry produced in times and places as disparate as ancient Greece, mediaeval Wales, the Japanese Renaissance, the early British Romantic period, and in the modern period of the early twentieth century. Later, I'll introduce a framework for thinking about queer pastoral (based on Gifford's work) and finally examine emerging contemporary queer pastoral poetry.

2.2 Historicizing Queer Pastoral

For context it might be helpful to briefly trace the social acceptance of homosexuality over this arc of time in the so-called 'western' world: from the patriarchal society of ancient Greece (where same-sex relations between older and younger men were normalised) through the domination of the Roman Empire (where same-sex practices were still widespread) into the Middle Ages (where evidence is emerging to suggest that views on homosexuality was perhaps more accepted than scholars had previously thought) to the Renaissance, Enlightenment and

Modern periods (where homosexuality, indeed queerness, gradually transformed into categories like ‘unnatural’ ‘aberrant’ and ‘sinful’). While this section itself does not constitute a complete history, it is focused on responding to and thinking about contemporary critical responses to the problems posed by queerness and historical writing.

Many difficulties surround studying queer history, chief among them the mutable definition of queerness. In the late twentieth century, as queer culture began to assert itself in the academy, most studies focused exclusively on the history of ‘homosexuality’, as queer theory was still a nascent concept. John Boswell’s 1995 book *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* is such a text. Like Bruce Baghamil’s *Biological Exuberance* used ‘nature’ to normalize same-sex behavior, Boswell’s *Same-Sex Unions* attempts to normalise same-sex behavior via history. Boswell is particularly focused on same-sex marriage in western culture and points to a variety of historical examples of same-sex unions of varying degrees of intimacy.¹⁴⁸ In his introduction, Boswell writes that

‘same-sex unions in the Western tradition are by no means a bizarre aberration. Many cultures other than Western one have recognized and institutionalised same-sex unions—Japanese warriors in early modern times, Chinese men and women under Yüan and Ming dynasties, Native Americans from a number of tribes (mostly before white domination), many African tribes well into the twentieth century, and residents (both male and female) of the Middle East, South-East Asia, Russia, other parts of Asia, and South America’.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, (Villard Books, 1994).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

The argument is similar to Baghamil’s arguments regarding queerness in the natural world: homosexuality is normal—even natural—because it is widespread (‘not aberrant’) and there is overwhelming evidence for this in the historical record.

Florence Tamagne’s 2006 book *A History of Homosexuality in Europe* begins to complicate this argument.¹⁵⁰ Tamagne’s book broadens the scope of ‘homosexuality’ to be more inclusive of different sexual minorities and interrogates the exclusivity of male-male sexual relationships and their centrality in queer history. Tamagne writes that ‘the history of homosexuality is not the history of sexual conduct, which is practically unvarying; rather, it consists in studying the relations between homosexuals and society and observing the answers homosexuals have developed in order to affirm their identity’.¹⁵¹ Tamagne’s work acknowledges the difficulty of historicizing queerness, when even a modern definition of the concept is so elusive, as I’ve noted above. So much of this problem is simply: how do we ‘do’ queer history when modern constructions of queer identity did not exist as-such in the past: when we scarcely know how people we would today describe as ‘queer’ would have described themselves?

In the introduction to Huw Osborne’s 2016 edited volume *Queer Wales: The History, Culture, and Politics of Queer Life in Wales*, Osborne addresses these difficulties and argues that ‘there is always the temptation to build the heroic narrative of representative queers, to say “Look, here we always were!”, but, [...] we must be wary lest our current political goals impose an unrealistic narrative of progressive queer liberation’.¹⁵² The temptation to white-wash queer history is the focal point of a podcast-turned book called *Bad Gays*, in which Huw Lemmey and

¹⁵⁰ Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe Volume I & II: Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939* (Algora, 2006).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁵² Huw Osborne, *Queer Wales: The History, Culture, and Politics of Queer Life in Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 7.

Ben Miller chronicle ‘the gay people in history who do not flatter us, and whom we cannot make into heroes’.¹⁵³ These examples, Lemmey and Miller argue, represent ‘the failure... of mainstream, actually existing white male homosexuality to enact liberation and its embrace instead of full integration into the burning house of the couple-form, the family unit, and what we might hopefully call late-stage capitalism’.¹⁵⁴

Historian David J. Halperin makes a similarly provocative claim in his recent volume *How To Do The History Of Homosexuality*, in which he argues that ‘one of the most distinctive features of the current regime under which we live is the prominence of heterosexuality and homosexuality as central organising categories of thought, behaviour, and erotic subjectivity’, and, most shockingly ‘that there is no such thing as a history of male homosexuality’.¹⁵⁵

Helpfully, he clarifies that

[...] there are histories to be written of at least four different but simultaneous categories or traditions of discourse pertaining to aspects of what we now define as homosexuality...[which] can be described, very provisionally, as categories of (1) effeminacy, (2) paederasty or ‘active’ sodomy, (3) friendship or male love, (4) passivity or inversion. A fifth category of homosexuality, is...a recent addition [...]¹⁵⁶

Halperin’s claim that homosexuality itself is something like a fifth Beatle (perhaps aptly, a Brian Epstein to the John, Paul, Ringo, George of historicized categories of difference), is illustrative of the difficulty surrounding any historical project that seeks to link present-day identity

¹⁵³ Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller, *Bad Gays* (Verso, 2022), p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁵ David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 3, 109.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

constructions with the historical past, particularly when sexual and gender-based identities in the twenty-first century are so rapidly changing (and here I'm thinking about the generational debate between the use of the word 'queer' as an umbrella term for LGBT experience, or the rapidly changing politics surrounding gender and trans people). Despite these complications, it is worth taking a very brief look at historic examples of queer pastoral writing.

In a 1984 interview in an issue of *The Village Voice* that commemorated the 15th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, James Baldwin said 'Look, men have been sleeping with men for thousands of years.... It's an artificial division. Men will be sleeping with other men when the trumpet sounds. It's only this infantile culture which has made a big deal of it'.¹⁵⁷ The evidence for this has been assembled by historians as noted above, but perhaps poetry is a sort of historic record, too. There are myriad examples of queer poetry throughout history, and here I'll look at a few examples, which appear in recent anthologies and in criticism, particularly focused on those that portray queerness in traditionally pastoral settings.

Of course, the most written-about queer pastoral poetry comes from ancient Greece: from Aeschylus to Theocritus and on this is well-worn territory. Seán Hewitt edited a volume called *300,000 Kisses: Tales of Queer Love from The Ancient World* that presents queer stories and poems from what Hewitt calls 'The Classical Mediterranean' which includes both ancient Greek and Roman texts in translation.¹⁵⁸ Hewitt's collection is an interesting entry in that it was produced for the general public and resembles those illustrated anthologies of Greek and Roman myth that many of us grew up with (and, for those queer among us, read very much into). Hewitt also acknowledges the complicated history of some of the pieces presented which 'are not so

¹⁵⁷ Richard Goldstein, 'Go the Way Your Blood Beats', *The Village Voice*, 26 June 1984, <https://www.villagevoice.com/james-baldwin-on-being-gay-in-america> [accessed 25 March 2024].

¹⁵⁸ Seán Hewitt and Luke Edward Hall, *300,000 Kisses: Tales of Queer Love from the Ancient World* (Potter, 2023).

easily assimilated into modern progressive thinking' by which he means sex between adults and minors, and the rampant misogyny of the period.¹⁵⁹ It is an interesting complication to think about queerness in a society where these things were the norm, as historians agree they were. If queerness is about struggle, as I've defined it above, are these queer poems? The answer is yes, of course, in the way that poetry from this period has been a critical aspect of queer history for surviving queer people throughout history. Hewitt's introduction mentions Oscar Wilde's passionate defense of himself at his trial, in which he invoked Plato, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare, and a 'golden thread' of queerness through history has sustained many queer people throughout countless ordeals of persecution. Still, it is important to look back at this history critically. Not all examples of queer pastoral are idyllic, even those called 'Idylls'. Rictor Norton has written exhaustively about queer pastoral in the ancient world. Norton makes the claim that 'seven of the thirty idylls completed by Theocritus are essentially homoerotic' and then lists each in following long quotation:

in the fifth idyll two shepherds good-naturedly accuse each other of pederasty (one accusing the other of anal rape in the bushes), using colloquial expressions that are 'obscene' enough to be printed in Latin in some modern English translations from the Greek (a notorious pedantic practice that makes merely vulgar passages seem especially wicked - and easier to locate); in the seventh idyll Aratus is passionately in love with a boy; in the twelfth idyll a lover addresses his absent beloved and describes a kissing contest amongst boys in honour of Diocles, lover of Philolaus; in the thirteenth idyll Hercules frantically searches for his beloved Hylas; in the twenty-third idyll a lover

¹⁵⁹ Hewitt and Hall, *300,000 Kisses*, p. 10.

commits suicide and is revenged by a statue of Eros falling upon his faithless beloved; in the twenty-ninth idyll a lover speaks to his inconstant and immature beloved; and in the thirtieth idyll a rejected suitor reflects upon the heartbreak caused by the love of lads. Theocritus portrays the homosexual lover as one who experiences fleeting moments of gaiety ending in dejected frustration and pensive memory - the very same way in which he portrays heterosexual lovers.¹⁶⁰

If the Idylls are some of the earliest examples of pastoral poetry, then, following this analysis by Norton, one could argue that the pastoral has always been queer, in some sense of the word. Beyond this, the ancient Romans built on the queer pastoral tradition, particularly in Virgil's Eclogues, which 'combined a Greek literary form with scenes from contemporary Roman life to create a work that inspired a whole European tradition of pastoral poetry', and included depictions same-sex attraction between a shepherd and a younger man.¹⁶¹ There are many more examples of queer poetry emerging from ancient Greece and Rome, but now I'll turn to more scholarship about queer poetry found via less well-trodden paths.

Mihangel Morgan excavates queerness in Welsh-language literature in the Middle Ages. In his essay about *cadi/queer* life in Welsh literature, he complicates our understanding of queerness, pointing to the hegemony and imperialism of American and British English in imposing a 'queer theory' version of queerness on the entire world. Morgan, quoting Richard Crowe (and translating him from Welsh) writes:

¹⁶⁰ Rictor Norton, 'An Era of Idylls', *The Homosexual Pastoral Tradition*, 20 June 2008 <<http://rictornorton.co.uk/pastor01.htm>> [accessed 25 March 2024].

¹⁶¹ Stephen Carlick, *From Sappho to Stonewall, and beyond: how fiction tells LGBTQ+ history*, [n.d.] <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2023/06/fiction-lgbtq-history-novels>> [accessed 22 February 2024].

But what is the gay tradition? Certainly it is not monolithic. It's a bundle of traditions that vary from age to age and from place to place and which yet reveal an amazing uniformity at times. The gays of fifteenth-century Venezia would perfectly understand the tendency of queens in Aberystwyth in the twentieth century to waste time in a cafe on a Saturday afternoon. And I feel sure that the Cadi Haf in his half-man half-woman outfit would have been welcomed by the berdaches of the Native Americans. At the root of the gay tradition is camp [...] the awareness of the artificiality of definitions tempered with a good dollop of humour.¹⁶²

Despite pushing back on the hegemony of academic queer theory in describing queerness, Morgan asks us to consider the universality of certain experiences of queer life. Is this a paradox? Or is it a case of theory versus praxis? Morgan seems to be saying 'people know what queerness is when they see it', as opposed to the queer theorists who might say 'we don't know what queerness is, but we know what it's not' (as discussed above). These, perhaps, are just different ways of knowing.

Morgan's work offers several examples of mediaeval Welsh literary queerness, from the Mabinogi to the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym and Gwerful Mechain. Morgan argues that *Math Fab Mathonwy*, the fourth branch of the Mabinogi, is 'one of the fullest expressions of queerness in any literature' pointing to the queer transformations that occur in the text.¹⁶³ 'In this, the 'queerest' of all stories, the boundaries of gender, family, and even species are broken down... here we have incest, homosexuality, transgender and temporary heterosexual fertility', Morgan

¹⁶² Mihangel Morgan, 'From Huw Arwystli to Siôn Eirian: Representative Examples of Cadi/Queer Life from Medieval to Twentieth-century Welsh Literature', in *Queer Wales*, ed. by Huw Osborne (University of Wales Press, 2018), p. 69.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

argues, citing the ways in which the story crosses lines of sexual and moral ethics, at least from our twenty-first century perspective.¹⁶⁴ This is more evidence of a certain awareness of queer possibility during the mediaeval period, if not actually evidence of a celebration of queer love (as in the pastoral poetry of ancient Greece). There is something more akin to this, Morgan argues, quoting Peter Busse, in David ap Gwilym's poems to his patron, Ifor Hael, in which the poet declares his love for his male patron: 'I am overwhelmed with love for Ifor | more than the love of any girl it is'.¹⁶⁵ What's interesting is not that Gwilym's declarations were transgressive in some way, but that 'the culture of the time found nothing questionable or peculiar (queer?) in this sort of language and imagery'.¹⁶⁶

Equally important as either of these examples is Morgan's analysis of Gwerful Mechain's poems, in which 'she sings from the female body to the female body' and 'queerly claims the territory of language and poetry for herself'.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, Mechain's 'Cywydd y Cedor' ('The Female Genitals') strikes me as more Sapphic than Sappho herself. Despite it being written in response to ap Gwilym's own penis-praising poem, Mechain's poem, in its sensual descriptions of female genitalia, moves beyond parody and 'goes on to speak in a way and of things no male poet had ever written'.¹⁶⁸ Mechain writes 'Let songs to the quim circulate/ without fail to gain reward. | Sultan of an ode, it is silk, | little seam, curtain on a fine bright cunt, | flaps in a place of greeting, | the sour grove, it is full of love, | very proud forest, faultless gift...'.¹⁶⁹ Mechain's poem renders the female form as queerly natural and splendid, making her perhaps one of the most important queer pastoral poets of the mediaeval period.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

As Morgan notes, many others have been busy excavating queer mediaeval literature in Wales (and beyond). One such example is Andrew Fitzsimons' translations and writings about Matsuo Basho, 'the single greatest figure in Japanese literature', and who lived and wrote during the height of the Japanese Renaissance in the mid-to-late 17th century.¹⁷⁰ Basho's sexuality is definable as queer, particularly through his own words. According to Fitzsimons, 'recalling his youth he once wrote: "There was a time when I was fascinated with the ways of *nanskoku* [male love]" and poems written throughout his life indicate more sexual interest in men than in women'.¹⁷¹ Two of those poems are cited, Nos. 40 and 920, quoted in turn here:

A pair of deer rubbing
 hair up against hair each other's
 hair so hard to please¹⁷²

The moon's clarity
 Escorting a catamite
 afraid of foxes¹⁷³

Neither of these poems, at first glance and in their English translations *seems* particularly queer. But Fitzsimons' notes that each contains allusions to Basho's sexual proclivity for men. In the first poem, the repetition of the word 'hair' is a pun in the original Japanese (on the word for

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Fitzsimons, 'Introduction', *Basho: The Complete Haiku of Matsuo Basho* (University of California Press, 2022), p. xiii.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

‘fastidious’) and according to Fitzsimons, the entire poem is an allusion to two men having sex.¹⁷⁴ In the second poem, we need to understand that ‘catamite’ is a reference to an ancient Greek term for ‘a boy or young man who is made use of as a (typically passive) sexual partner by an older man. More generally: a (younger) passive partner in homosexual anal intercourse’.¹⁷⁵ We also need to understand that ‘in Japanese folklore, a fox has supernatural powers and often works mischief on unsuspecting men’.¹⁷⁶ With Fitzsimons’ insights, these poems reveal the queer side of Basho, easily considered one of the greatest ‘nature poets’ to ever have lived, which is, again, more evidence of the queer roots of ecopoetry.

And even when queer content is explicit in the works of canonised writers, it has often been the case that critics and translators have minimised, downplayed, explained-away, or even just erased queerness in these literatures. William Blake, whose writings contain ‘references to homosexuality [which] are substantial in aggregate, if not dominant in any one work’ is a perfect case-in-point.¹⁷⁷ Blake scholar Christopher Hobson shows how Blake’s image has been ‘sculpted’ by different critics throughout the years, with critics who painted ‘an Apollonian “Blake of sweetness and light”’ having won a battle over what many have termed a ‘dangerous Blake’.¹⁷⁸ The homosexual content in Blake’s work has been alternatively interpreted in many ways, but seldom considered as simply evidence that Blake was interested in queerness and its relations to his poetic pursuit of liberation: both for himself and for ‘Albion’ or the British people. Blake’s case is even more interesting because, of course with Blake, we’re not just

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, *Catamite, N., Etymology*, doi:10.1093/OED/1143693204

¹⁷⁶ Fitzsimmons, *Basho*, p. 340.

¹⁷⁷ Christopher Z. Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality* (Palgrave, 2000), p. xi.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., xii.

interpreting poetry but also Blake's etchings and illustrations, which often depict homosexual acts. Despite the indisputable presence of such evidence, critics previously would

overlook or misread important episodes involving homosexuality in Blake, omit or misunderstand the contemporary antihomosexual [sic] culture that Blake reacted against, and fail to perceive Blake's growing consideration of different kinds of perverse sexuality over time. The more affirmative treatments of Blake and women have generally left the topic of homosexuality alone.¹⁷⁹

Fascinatingly, Hobson points to ways in which queerness in Blake was literally erased, as in the case of an illustration in *The Four Zoas*. In the illustration, Blake's protagonist, Orc, lays

in a posture that might suggest either the pains of torture or sexual ecstasy. The area above Orc's genitals has been heavily erased and pencilled over, by Blake's or another hand, but within the shading can be seen a kneeling figure with head above Orc's groin. There are traces of what may be erect penises both between the kneeling figure's legs and above Orc's belly (the latter almost full effaced). Most probably, then, the image shows two men in position for an act of fellation.¹⁸⁰

The image, reproduced in Hobson's text, is striking in the force of its erasure. It's less of an erasure and more of a scribbling out, as if in disgust. Textually there is much at stake near the site of the illustration. In the poem, a tension is represented between Orc and Urizen (Urizen is

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., xiv.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

Blake's mythological construction who stands in for reason and/or law, while Orc typically represents his antithetical opposite). Hobson's analysis argues that multiple interpretations of the illustration and text are plausible: that they depict Urizen's fantasy for Orc to submit, or to engage in 'playing a catamite role' or it may 'represent Urizen's fantasy of Orc's own homosexual reveries'.¹⁸¹ The specific interpretation is less important for my purposes than the fact of the literal erasure and concealment of queer content in Blake's work. Blake was an ecopoet who was, as a forebear of the Romantic tradition, deeply concerned with what would later be called something like 'environmental politics'. The way we read Blake, as queer or not, has huge implications for how we read Romanticism in general, and, as others have argued, the Romantics are in dire need of queer interventions.¹⁸²

Moving well forward, Stephen Spender's 'How Strangely This Sun Reminds Me Of My Love' is a twentieth century queer pastoral ode to the memory of a past lover which the speaker finds enshrined in the bucolic countryside.¹⁸³ 'For me this memory which I now behold, | When, from the pasturage, azure rounds me in rings, | and the lark ascends, and his voice still rings, still rings'.¹⁸⁴ There is evidence in the poem that this affair took place in the country, and with a rural person. 'I remember [...] | My staring at his face and taking the photograph | With the river behind, and the woods touched by Spring: | Till the identification of a morning— | Expansive sheets of blue rising from fields'.¹⁸⁵ The location of the affair is certainly pastoral, and perhaps his love-object is of the country too, although this isn't as clear. 'I corrupted his confidence and his sun-like happiness | so that even now in his turning of bolts or driving a machine | his hand

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 50-52.

¹⁸² Michael O'Rourke and David Collings, 'Introduction: Queer Romanticisms: Past, Present, and Future', *Romanticism on the Net* no. 36-37 (2004), doi:10.7200/011132ar.

¹⁸³ Stephen Spender, *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Michael Brett (Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 13.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

will show error'.¹⁸⁶ Here Spender could be referring to a factory worker, but that line 'driving a machine' invokes an image of a modern farmer, ploughing the pastures astride a large tractor. Given the bucolic setting of the poem, the latter seems like a reasonable analysis.

Spender is often remembered for his poem 'The Pylons' which achieved a great deal for the queer pastoral tradition by rendering the 'black wire | Pylons, those pillars' into 'nude giant girls that have no secret' and which celebrated the modernization of the British countryside instead of rendering modernity as a blight on the 'natural' landscape, as the Romantics may have done. This is ironic, considering many of Spender's friends and critics felt that one of his major flaws was his 'incessant romanticism'.¹⁸⁷ Romanticism, in response to the industrial revolution, tended to either turn away from modernity and cast a backwards, nostalgic gaze for an idyllic, pastoral past that never really existed, or to conflate modernity with evil as Blake did in the preface to *Milton: A Poem* or T.S. Eliot did in *The Waste Land*. Spender, on the other hand, in poems like 'The Pylons' but also in 'The Express' and 'The Landscape Near an Aerodrome' (all from his first collection in 1933, titled *Poems* and dedicated, quite suggestively, to Christopher Isherwood) embody the queer pastoral: they locate a strangeness in pastoral landscapes and also view the human world as intimately entwined with the natural world. In this way Spender's work follows a thread from Walt Whitman, another queer poet who saw the potential for queer interventions in both the countryside and the city, blurring the line between the two (as did, often, Frank O'Hara, but more on that below). Both Whitman and Spender located queerness in 'nature' and imagined a queer futurity that defied their respective ages.

It is interesting to consider a link between a poet like Spender (from England, writing in the early to late twentieth century) and Whitman, the bard of mid-nineteenth-century American

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Brett, 'Introduction', *Stephen Spender: New Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 2004), p. xvi.

poetry. After all, a clearer link might be found between Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, who often located his work within a bardic tradition that included poets like Whitman and Blake. While all of these poets were involved in same-sex relationships during their lives it is also entirely beside the point. The poetics of Whitman, and Spender embody the way queer pastorality entangles human subjects together with the natural world, and in the way queer pastoral celebrates modern human industrial achievements rather than lamenting the way industrialism has degraded so-called 'nature'. In this way Whitman and Spender are part of a poetic tradition that celebrates an 'ecology without nature', as Timothy Morton recently and infamously put it.¹⁸⁸ In contrast, much of Blake's and Ginsberg's poetics do the opposite, enforcing a strict separation of human subject and natural object, as I'll argue below.

For Whitman, mid-nineteenth-century New York was a utopia in the way it wrapped humans and nature together into a dense mesh that formed the identity of Manhattan. In Whitman's poetics, the city's teeming humanity is natural and beautiful. In 'Mannahatta' he renders the rising metropolis as a forest: 'Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies', and celebrates the waters surrounding the 'solid-founded' island only as a sparkling abundance for ships to populate 'The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, the ferry-boats, the black sea-steamers well-model'd'.¹⁸⁹ 'Mannahatta' and other New York City poems by Whitman stand in stark contrast to Blake's dystopian visions of London, particularly in *Milton* in the shadow of those 'satanic mills'.¹⁹⁰ Blake is writing fifty years before Whitman, and though Whitman read Blake he diverged from Blake's distaste for industrialization. Whitman embraces industry,

¹⁸⁸ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁹ Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (Library of America, 1996), p. 585.

¹⁹⁰ William Blake, *Milton: A Poem* (Random House, 1978), p. 63.

romanticising the hustle and bustle of New York City. He sees a utopic quality within the thronging crowds, steamships, immigrants, crowded streets:

A million people—manners free and superb—open voices—hospitality—the most
 courageous | and friendly young men,
 City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts!
 City nested in bays! my city!¹⁹¹

Contrasting this, in *Milton* Blake looks back to an ancient pastoral that predates London, promising ‘not to rest’ until the pastoral quiet (perhaps devoid of people?) is restored:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
 Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
 Till we have built Jerusalem,
 In Englands green & pleasant Land.¹⁹²

Besides this somewhat obvious reading of content, I wonder if there is a hint of this difference, between Whitman’s queer pastoral and Blake’s backwards looking classical pastoral yearning, in the forms of the poems themselves. ‘Mannahatta’ is typical Whitman: sprawling free verse that seems to follow the speaker’s breath—teeming with syllables and a free-flowing cadence that echoes its subject while the preface to *Milton* is written in a tight metre of eight syllables in each line, an ABCB rhyme scheme, and in iambic tetrameter. Other works of Blake’s break free of

¹⁹¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 585.

¹⁹² Blake, *Milton*, p. 63.

these conventions and Whitman's style could be linked to Blake's later prophetic writings, although it is difficult to know how much of Blake Whitman was familiar with, as Gary Schmidgall has noted.¹⁹³ In some ways, and following Guy-Bray's conception of how queerness interacts with form over content, Whitman queers form in a way that Blake (in the example of the preface to *Milton*, at least) does not.

In the twentieth century, American poets like Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg carried on these poetic tensions between modernity and the past, and between rural, wild, and urban spaces in different ways. O'Hara, following Whitman, and interestingly in conversation with Wilde, wrote the queer pastoral into the urban landscapes he inhabited. Ginsberg, notably, seemed to fall into the trope of romanticising rural spaces. I will look at examples from each of these influential queer poets in turn, beginning with O'Hara in conversation with Wilde.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I mentioned the ways I might connect 'apparently disconnected' bits of cultural detritus together, and I'd like to do that here. Musician Brian Eno is often credited with saying that 'the first Velvet Underground album only sold 10,000 copies, but everyone who bought that record started a band'.¹⁹⁴ Something similar could be said about O'Hara who, although an icon of American poetry today, was not incredibly famous in his own lifetime.¹⁹⁵ The influence of O'Hara and the New York School is felt everywhere in contemporary American poetry and echoes an ecopoetics that is indebted to Oscar Wilde's ideas about nature and aesthetics via Wilde's own indebtedness to his reading of Whitman. O'Hara's 'Meditations in an Emergency' and the many poems indebted to it are representational of a queer

¹⁹³ Gary Schmidgall, *Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 155-191.

¹⁹⁴ Emma Jones, *The Velvet Underground: The band that made an art of being obscure*, 13 October 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-58876732>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

¹⁹⁵ George F. Butterick, Robert J. Bertholf, *Frank O'Hara* [n.d.] <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/frank-ohara>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

ecopoetics that dissolves the boundary between human and nature but more specifically between urban and pastoral.

I want to explore the link between O'Hara's 'Meditations' and Wilde's 'The Decay of Lying' by comparing the relationship between the human subject and the natural world at play in both.

O'Hara:

Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don't I? I'm just like a pile of leaves.

However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life.¹⁹⁶

Wilde:

VIVIAN People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said,

¹⁹⁶ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (University of California Press, 1995), p. 197.

she cannot carry them out...When I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects....

CYRIL Well, you need not look at the landscape. You can lie on the grass and smoke and talk.¹⁹⁷

In reading O'Hara and Wilde side-by-side, the connection between them becomes apparent: both writers seem to suggest a shift in the dominant thinking about the primacy of 'nature' versus aesthetics. 'I can't enjoy a blade of grass without a subway handy', O'Hara confesses; 'You need not look at the landscape. You can lie on the grass and smoke and talk', Wilde's Cyril replies, as if to say, 'the best thing about nature is our aesthetic treatment of it: without us, it's just 'a landscape' with 'defects'.

The underlying argument in both works is about aestheticism versus realism. Both poets seem to be saying that aesthetics is superior to realism, and yet both poets seem to be struggling with the weight of that conjecture. 'In his 1889 essay "The Decay of Lying"' writes Sam See, 'Wilde claims that "as a method, realism is a complete failure" because it takes nature as a model for art, whereas art, for Wilde, should be the model for nature'.¹⁹⁸ Later, Wilde's position changes, writing just one year later in 'The Critic as Artist' that 'it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world...'¹⁹⁹ According to See, here 'Wilde argues that literature does not create worlds *ex nihilo* or for its own sake alone' which seems to counter his

¹⁹⁷ Oscar Wilde, *Intentions* (Brentano's, 1905), p. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Sam See, *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* (Fordham University Press, 2020), pp. 92-93.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

earlier claim about art creating nature. Wilde's change of position was fully realised after his trial and conviction, when he wrote the unpublished *De Profundis*, which repudiated his claims about nature in 'The Decay of Lying' (that art creates nature) and turned towards nature to identify himself with a sort of 'queer exceptionality within nature' that was ultimately redemptive.²⁰⁰

O'Hara, as an inheritor of the golden thread Wilde refers to around the same time, is still struggling with these same questions of art versus nature, of the urban versus the pastoral. These are queer ecopoetic questions which contemporary poets are still asking.

In the push and pull between human and nature, between the urban and the pastoral, and these two queer writers reject a traditionally pastoral version of 'nature' in favour of enjoying a human-mediated version which is mainly scenic and in close proximity to a train station, a comfortable house, and a carton of cigarettes. O'Hara agrees with Wilde, arguing that humanity is part of nature ('I'm just like a pile of leaves') and therefore worthy of the same poetic considerations of 'the pastoral life'. But 'mutability', as See puts it, is at the heart of both works: in O'Hara coded as 'will' and in Wilde as 'whim'. O'Hara: 'I will my will, though I may become famous for a mysterious vacancy in that department, that greenhouse'.²⁰¹ Wilde:

VIVIAN Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice. Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word "Whim."²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁰¹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, p. 97.

²⁰² Wilde, *Intentions*, p. 5.

Whim and will might not seem logically linked: ‘whim’ feels like playfulness, almost indulgence of impulse, whereas ‘will’ feels much more mature and imbued with something like responsibility. You could, for example, make the case that Robert Frost was choosing *between* the two when he was famously stopped by the woods on a snowy evening (and here you could make an argument for ‘whim’ feeling much queerer than will, perhaps). I think O’Hara’s ‘will’ is largely similar to Wilde’s ‘whim’. For both poets it is shorthand for the creative impulse, which both poets insist is best kindled...wherever—in both urban environments and in ‘nature’. This is hugely important for queer ecopoetics and the queer pastoral: for the queer ecopoet, whim/will function to upend this question of art vs. nature, of urban vs. rural, of modernity vs. pastoral idyll. It just does not matter. For Wilde and O’Hara, it doesn’t matter that you aren’t out in the woods, seeing the splendour of the natural world: you can imagine it, whilst laying in the grass (in an urban park) smoking cigarettes. For O’Hara, the fact that the poet is basically just a pile of leaves, or at least is made of the same stuff (and here he feels extremely anticipatory of queer ecology), is pastoral enough. It’s almost as if O’Hara is saying ‘we are all ecological’ several decades before Morton.

In contrast, Ginsberg, in his pastoral poem ‘Visitation Wales’, invokes Blake, Whitman, and William Wordsworth, and attempts to yoke himself and these three poets together into a single Romantic tradition which glorifies de-populated ‘natural’ spaces and vilifies modernity, urban spaces, and therefore humanity. In Ginsberg’s ‘problematic’ poem (as poet Craig Santos-Perez has referred to it), the rural, pastoral, nearly empty Welsh countryside is contrasted with the evil, technologically twisted urban sprawl of southern England.²⁰³ In the poem, Wales is shown as practically devoid of human subjects (let alone its rich cultural and linguistic traditions

²⁰³ Craig Santos Perez, *Teaching Ecopoetry in a Time of Climate Change* (2020) <<https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/teaching-ecopoetry-in-a-time-of-climate-change>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

which, to my eye and ear, are such important aspects of its landscape) and this is celebrated. It is not Wales that Ginsburg is focused on, it is the ‘purity’ of the land, and a sort of spiritual, bardic power it holds, embodied by the inclusion of references to ‘Albion’ and other Blakean mythological constructions. Ginsberg also invokes Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey. In this stanza, both are referenced:

Remember 160 miles from London’s symmetrical thorned tower
 & network of TV pictures flashing bearded your Self
 the lambs on the tree-nooked hillside this day bleating
 heard in Blake’s old ear, & the silent thought of Wordsworth in eld Stillness
 clouds passing through skeleton arches of Tintern Abbey—
 Bard Nameless as the Vast, babble to Vastness!²⁰⁴

Romanticism itself is presented as an antidote to the fearful symmetry of the ‘thorned tower | & network of TV pictures’ found in London. Echoes of Blake’s *Milton* are evident, which, as discussed above is an aspect of Blake that looms over his more liberatory, queer poetics. Contrasting this strain of Romanticism with poems by Whitman, O’Hara, and Spender, which celebrate the merging of modern industrial constructions with nature, a poetic argument emerges that lays the foundations for a contemporary queer ecopoetics that queers Romanticism and insists that the ‘thorned towers’ and ‘satanic mills’ can’t be separated from the seemingly idyllic pastoral landscape which they have emerged from.

²⁰⁴ Allen Ginsberg, *Wales: A Visitation, July 29th, 1967* (Cape Goliard Press, 1968), p. 5.

2.3 Contemporary Queer Pastoral

While Hume and Rahimtoola coined the term ‘queer ecopoetics’, many other theorists, poets, and critics, are engaged in practices that place queer ecopoetics at the centre of an interrogation of what it means to be queer in pastoral spaces. In this section, I will look at the ways in which writers from across fields as disparate as film studies, journalism, sociology, and creative writing render queer pastorality on the page, in ways that problematize and interrogate tropes surrounding the acceptable locatedness of queerness.

Much in the same way that queer ecopoetics troubles the line between human subject and natural object, queer pastoral complicates our understanding of rural straightness and queer urbanity. I’ll argue here that a new framework is needed for considering this mode of queer pastoral thinking, and I’ll propose a framework which builds on the ecocritical approach of Terry Gifford’s ‘post-pastoral’. Finally I’ll analyze examples of contemporary queer pastoral poetry from the US, the UK, and Ireland.

I want to begin with Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands insightful queer ecopoetic analysis of Ang Lee’s epic queer western film, *Brokeback Mountain*.²⁰⁵ Mortimer-Sandilands writes that

wilderness is, in this film, portrayed as a vast field of homoerotic possibility; the two rugged men romp and tumble freely, watched, for the most part, only by rugged mountains. Their desire is both constituted and consummated in a lush hanging river valley surrounded by trees and dramatic, snow-striped peaks; wilderness becomes a “safe” place for outlaw sex, and although there is, later in the film, one sexual encounter

²⁰⁵ *Brokeback Mountain*, dir. by Ang Lee (USA, 2005).

between Jack and Ennis in a seedy motel, their ongoing relationship is almost completely located in this one, remote spot.²⁰⁶

Here Mortimer-Sandilands personifies nature as something that bears witness to the humans that inhabit it, establishing that the mountain—the pastoral setting of much of the film—is in fact a participant in the unfolding drama.

Two decades later a similar theme emerged in the film *The Power of the Dog*.²⁰⁷ In the film, Benedict Cumberbatch plays Phil Burbank, a cartoonish version of a wild west cowboy whose homoerotic leanings are explored though never fully fleshed-out in the film. Still, the trope of wilderness-as-safe-for same-sex exploration is very present in the film, as Burbank tells the story of his mentor, Bronco Henry, who ‘groomed’ him (a term which fits well with the overall equestrian tone of the western genre). Burbank imparts the tale of his grooming to Peter, a queer femme-fatale in David Byrne-esque denim and bolo tie, who Burbank has chosen to be his own protégé.²⁰⁸ He invites Peter to ride out with him into the mountains (where his own queer awakening took place) and the insinuation is that queer contact is suitable out in the wild but not in the straight, domestic spaces of the town or city. *The Power of the Dog* takes this trope further, portraying Burbank as a sort of mean and rugged version of a Whitman-esque poet who secretly caresses himself with a silk scarf just down the river from his band of naked, river-bathing cowhands, and hoards a trove of nineteenth-century gay pornography that once belonged to Bronco Henry.

²⁰⁶ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 4.

²⁰⁷ *The Power of the Dog*, dir. by Jane Campion (USA, 2021).

²⁰⁸ *True Stories*, dir. by David Byrne (USA, 1986).

For both *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Power of the Dog*, queer possibility exists in wilderness spaces but not the rural communities that ring them. In fact, it is the rural, portrayed as the edge of the wild—a liminal space situated between the wild and the urban—that most forcefully prohibits queerness. Rural culture, then, serves as a moral mediator between wilderness and the city; this morality is typically associated, especially in the US, with specific types of Christian belief and is often enforced by violence in its depictions in popular culture. In real life, this idea of a rural/urban divide is far more complicated.

It is a well-worn trope that nature is hostile to queer people, or at least that the countryside is. Queer history has been carefully erased, especially in the context of the ways in which queer people have existed in rural, pastoral, and wilderness locales. Queer lives have been more often located in the city alongside the imagined depravity and ‘unnatural’ activity taking place there. Queer people in recent history have leaned into this idea. Oscar Wilde, as the godfather of queer urbanism, could be credited with popularising the notion of the ‘dandy’, even as Wilde himself was aware of the historical ties queer people had to nature, particularly in ancient Greece. Despite these historic connections with the pastoral, the trope of nature as hostile to queer people remains and is sometimes reified by both ‘real life’ and poetry, too.

The murder of Matthew Shephard, in the late 1990s, is one of the most high-profile cases of rural hate crimes against queer people in the United States. In the aftermath of his murder, Shephard became an icon for LGBT rights activists in the US and around the world. But Shephard’s story has been complicated by more recent reporting. In reporter Julie Bindel’s article ‘The Truth Behind America’s Most Famous Gay Hate-Murder’ Bindel revealed that Shephard was a complicated figure who had an existing relationship with one of his killers, and his murder may have had more to do with selling illegal drugs, prostitution, and rural poverty,

than it did with hate crimes committed by rednecks.²⁰⁹ I do not suggest that Matthew Shepherd was complicit in his own brutal murder, but I suggest that, often, the tropes I have described above are examples of our narratives about life imitating art: not the other way around.

Richie Hoffman's poem 'Book of Statues' is a remarkable elegy to Shephard in that it focuses on the subject's lack of consent at being made into a martyr rather than on an interpretation of the events that made him into one.²¹⁰ 'In the west, | they are tying a boy to a fence and leaving him to die, | his face unrecognisable behind a mask | of blood. His body, icon | of loss, growing meaningful | against his will', Hoffman writes.²¹¹ Here, the speaker of the poem implicates the rural space in which Shephard was killed as being complicit in his murder, via his mention of 'the West', with its American associations of wilderness, cowboys, and open space. It is a reference meant to locate Shephard, specifically, without naming him— an act which echoes the speaker's concern for the subjects' lack of consent at being made into a symbol, but which, nevertheless, reinforces the old trope of rural spaces as dangerous for queer people.

Of course, hate crimes against queer people do happen too often, but where is a queer person most likely to be in danger? Are trans women in urban environments safer than gay men in the country? When trans people are the victims of crimes, all over the world, these crimes are often met, culturally, with silence. The shocking murder of trans teenager Brianna Gay in a Manchester park in broad daylight in 2023, is one of the more well-publicised instances of this. So, it seems like a fair question to ask: do poems like Hoffman's reinforce the trope of rural

²⁰⁹ Julie Bindel, 'The truth behind America's most famous gay-hate murder', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/26/the-truth-behind-americas-most-famous-gay-hate-murder-matthew-shepard> [accessed 23 February 2024].

²¹⁰ Richie Hofmann, 'Book of Statues' (2016) <<https://poets.org/poem/book-statues>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

spaces as hostile to queer people at the expense of ignoring the dangers queer people face in cities?

Recent statistics demonstrate that large numbers of LGBTQ Americans and Britons live in rural areas.²¹² For those engaged in the practice of creative writing, it's imperative to think critically about documentations of queer rural lives, such as Gavin Brown's 2015 study of the Gay Rural Aid & Information Network (GRAIN): a network of gay men and lesbians living 'off the land' in rural England and Wales in the 1970s and 1980s.²¹³ Brown's archival research paints a somewhat dull portrait (compared to many poems, novels, and films on the subject of rural queer lives) of the lived experience of rural queer people during this time, particularly in the context of how they co-existed with their heterosexual neighbours.

Brown's archival research shows that many queer people moved to rural England and Wales in the late twentieth century, and that their experiences of rural life were largely not dominated by ignorance, homophobia, or violence from locals. Instead, they were often accepted by rural communities and lived productive, harmonious, and openly queer lives in rural spaces. While it is interesting to note the conservative views towards sex from some of the members of GRAIN, the archive reveals a diversity of sexual practices ranging from so-called conservative 'homonormative' ideas that held promiscuity in disdain (and associated this behavior with the urban queer spaces they were fleeing) even while other members treated their rural community as more of an idyllic, sexually utopian space, going so far as to create a 'cottaging space' or

²¹² Leila Fadel, *New Study: LGBT People A 'Fundamental Part of The Fabric of Rural Communities'* (2019) <<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/04/709601295/lgbt-people-are-a-fundamental-part-of-the-fabric-of-rural-communities>> [accessed 23 February 2024] and

Alice Ross, *Out in the country – rural hotspots found as gay population mapped* (2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/19/out-in-the-country-rural-hotspots-found-as-gay-population-mapped>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

²¹³ Gavin Brown, 'Rethinking the Origins of Homonormativity: The Diverse Economies of Rural Gay Life in England and Wales in the 1970s and 1980s' *Institute of British Geographers (1965)* 40, no. 4 (2015): 549–561.

official public toilet used for gay sex.²¹⁴ Brown's work presents something perhaps closer to actual rural queer existence as opposed to a version of this experience imbued with something shinier or more exciting: forbidden love, rampant discrimination, and associated hate crimes. It's worth asking if this is what Wilde was arguing for in 'The Critic As Artist' when he wrote that 'it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection'.²¹⁵ Queer ecopoets should pay attention to the actual lived experience of queer people in rural contexts—a group whose stories are, like Shephard's, often rendered in ways that reinforce harmful, inaccurate, or overly simplified tropes. Queer pastoral poetry changes the ways in which we think about queerness as being 'other' in rural contexts; it renders pastoral landscapes as queer; it moves away from the place where nineteenth and twentieth century queer poetry, centred in the city, has been allowed to live and wanders back into the woods.

Indeed, it seems as if twenty-first century queer culture is experiencing a pastoral renaissance, and this calls for a theoretical framework for criticism to engage with. Queerness has gone country, across many mediums and fields: in music, film, prose, poetry, and even in the sciences with the emergence of queer ecology. Grammy-award-winning superstar Little Nas X perhaps lit this cultural fire with his 2019 unlikely queer anthem 'Old Town Road', (and though popular culture assumes that Lil Nas X was breaking new ground, I dare the reader to look up Liberace performing 'I'm An Old Cowhand (From The Rio Grande)' as an example of twentieth century pastoral camp) but underground contemporaries such as the critically acclaimed artist Shamir have also been queering country music, and mainstays of the indie music scene such as

²¹⁴ Ibid., 554-558.

²¹⁵ Quoted in See, *Queer Natures*, p. 93.

iconic label Kill Rock Stars (home of the first Riot Grrl recordings to be nationally distributed in the US) have joined in with the launch of Kill Rock Stars Nashville, an imprint that is dedicated to promoting queer country, folk, and americana artists.²¹⁶ And of course Beyoncé, queer icon that she is, has solidified this approach to country music in the queer imagination with the release of her album *Cowboy Carter*. That many of these artists are black is not a coincidence, but an example of how intersectional any modern definition of queerness should be.

In film, leaps and bounds have been made since the days of *Brokeback Mountain*, with queer pastoral pieces like the aforementioned *Power of the Dog* but also Pedro Almodóvar's short film, *Strange Way of Life*, more assertively queering wild western spaces that were previously reserved for only the most heteronormative tropes. That *Power of the Dog*'s protagonist is a queer-coded, male femme-fatale with a thirst for justice is, well, progress. And as for Almodóvar, it is interesting to note that he was originally tapped for the director's seat in *Brokeback*. Perhaps this was the cultural moment he was really waiting for: one in which he could safely foreground queer cowboys dressed in Yves Saint Laurent.²¹⁷

Queer pastoral novels and stories also abound, particularly embodied by Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End*,²¹⁸ which features two queer protagonists living through the bad-old-days of Indian removal and civil war in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, but also in less likely places, such as the thick volume of forty short stories that make up *Queer Square Mile*:

²¹⁶ Jon Freeman, 'Mya Byrne Is Making Her Own Space in Nashville', *Rolling Stone*, 8 September 2022, <<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/mya-byrne-autumn-sun-kill-rock-stars-1234588530/>> [accessed 24 March 2024].

²¹⁷ Chris Gardner, 'Cannes: Saint Laurent Makes Chic Splash With Pedro Almodóvar's "Strange Way of Life" as Debut Project From New Production Division', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 19 May 2023 <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/style/saint-laurent-film-producer-pedro-almodovar-strange-way-of-life-cannes-1235494952>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

²¹⁸ Sebastian Barry, *Days Without End* (Penguin, 2016).

Queer Short Stories From Wales: a new anthology that features queer pastoral vignettes, many of which are translated from Welsh for the first time.²¹⁹

Poetry, too, is having a queer pastoral renaissance. This is rendered most vividly by a few anthologies published recently in the US, UK, and Ireland: *Queer Nature: A Poetry Anthology*,²²⁰ *100 Queer Poems*,²²¹ and *Queering the Green: Post-2000 Queer Irish Poetry*²²², all of which are important entries into a newly assembling queer pastoral canon. I'd like to turn towards a lightly theorized framework for thinking about queer pastoral, and then look at a few key examples in this emerging contemporary mode.

To queer something means to read into it, to rewrite it, to re-vision it; it means to make it queer, make it weird, to make it strange. When I talk about queering poetry, I am talking about building a home for myself— a nest— made from the fragmented inferences of all our readings-into. One such home is in the pastoral, the rural, the countryside: the (sometimes) idyllic space that may or may not exist depending on your philosophical leanings and which has frequently stood in sharp contrast to urban environments. To queer pastoral is to engage in making pastoral spaces queer spaces (or, rather, uncovering the ways in which these spaces have always been queer), but it also means complicating the apparent pastoral/urban divide. Queering the pastoral means relocating the queer subject out of the city and into the country, or the woods, or the wilderness, and it also means rehomeing the pastoral within the urban— or perhaps demolishing our conception of 'urbanity' altogether and asking questions like: does the city even exist? Does the countryside? Where does nature end and something else begin?

²¹⁹ *Queer Square Mile: Queer Short Stories from Wales*, ed. by Kristi Bohata, Mihangel Morgan, and Huw Osborne (Parthian, 2022).

²²⁰ *Queer Nature*, ed. by Michael Walsh (Autumn House Press, 2022).

²²¹ *100 Queer Poems*, ed. by Mary Jean Chan and Andrew McMillan (Vintage, 2022).

²²² *Queering the Green: Post-2000 Queer Irish Poetry*, ed. by Paul Maddern (The Lifeboat Press, 2021).

The pastoral is a container for our thinking about literature that mediates a thing we've labelled 'the country' or 'the rural' or 'the idyll' or even simply 'nature' and analysing pastuality in poetry and other literatures has been a central concern for many poets and critics alike. Simply put, poets tend to write about 'nature'. Poets tend to write pastoral poetry. And as many others have shown, pastoral poetics have changed over the centuries: from simple celebrations of idyllic natural settings to complicated interrogations of the post-industrial divides between the city and the country, to the anti-pastoral poems that sought to parody the Romantic impulse to lean backwards into false nostalgia—poets continue to use pastoral as a way to express their ideas about this apparent division between humanity and nature.

But let us say, as I've argued above, there really is no stark separation between the human and the so-called natural world. If that is so, then the pastoral might exist in unlikely places—in urban spaces and in the spaces between words on the page, or the 'blank' spaces on gallery walls, for example (as Morton points to in *All Art Is Ecological*).²²³ The queer pastoral is a strange happening that permeates the space between poetic utterances, the bleating of the lamb led out to slaughter, the meat on the farmer's dinner plate, and the song on the radio in the farmer's car as he heads out into the night to seek solace or pleasure in an anonymous, same-sex hookup. In this way, it is akin to necropastoral's *strange meetings*, which 'eat away at the model of literary lineage that depends on separation, hierarchy, before-and-after, on linearity itself'.²²⁴ Born from the sticky-smooth myco-synthetic meshing of Morton's queer ecology, from the blooming rot of McSweeney's necropastoral, and from Gifford's clinical and prescriptive post-pastoral, queer pastoral asks us to consider queerness in all its fullness, beauty and grossness: as a queer layer of reality which permeates everything, and has all along.

²²³ Timothy Morton, *All Art Is Ecological* (Penguin Books, 2021).

²²⁴ Joyelle McSweeney, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (University of Michigan Press, 2014).

Gifford proposed the term ‘post-pastoral’ in literary studies to address problems created by the arbitrary separation of the human subject and natural object. Gifford’s framework is very much rooted in ecofeminism and is quite intersectional for its time. Gifford writes:

The debasement of the tool considered essential since the beginnings of Western literature – the rich and long tradition of pastoral poetry – calls for a rediscovery of what I have called ‘post-pastoral’ poetry. This is not ‘post’ in the sense of postcolonial, for it was present in the work of some writers even as some of their other work was part of the decline of pastoral. It is more conceptual than temporal. It is ‘post’ in the sense of being beyond the traps of the pastoral, of being aware of some of the problematics of the pastoral, of pushing into the complexities of celebration and responsibility, of being a part of nature and yet uneasy with relationships of ownership and exploitation.²²⁵

To this end Gifford proposed that post-pastoral texts should be a response to some or all of the following six propositions:

1. A sense of awe in nature that comes with the re-positioning from anthropocentric pastoral to ecocentric post-pastoral.
2. A celebration of both constructive and destructive forces and an understanding that nature is not merely a pleasant idyll.
3. Acknowledgement of a link between human and external nature, where the landscape can affect our ideas, perception and well-being.

²²⁵ Terry Gifford, ‘Judith Wright’s Poetry and the Turn to the Post-Pastoral’, *Australian humanities review*, no. 48 (2010), p. 75.

4. The recognition that culture is nature, because they are both ultimately the result of natural processes, i.e. nature and culture do not stand in opposition.
5. The transition from consciousness to conscience, so that observation of landscape gives rise to ecological concern or sympathy for nature.
6. A sense that exploitation of nature resembles human exploitation, as in various works of ecofeminism.²²⁶

Revising Gifford's six propositions on 'the post-pastoral', I've created six new propositions which elucidate the queer pastoral, a frame that is aligned with queer ecology's negative capability and the dissolution of the subject/object binary between human and nature. Leaving in Gifford's original text is a way of tracking where the field has been, and the ways in which language and ecological awareness have grown and changed shape.

1. A sense of awe in ~~nature~~ [the world] that comes with the repositioning from anthropocentric pastoral to ecocentric ~~post-pastoral~~ [queer pastoral]. [Queer pastoral is about being in awe or wonder of/with the everyday, the mundane, the intersections between urban and rural that unfold in the midst of the city as they do in the biomes of the countryside.]
2. ~~A celebration of both constructive and destructive forces and~~ An understanding that nature is not merely a pleasant idyll, [and that climate change has already created shifts in ecologies that must radically reshape our understanding of the planet we live with and on].

²²⁶ Ibid. 76.

3. ~~Acknowledgement of a link between human and external nature, where the landscape can affect our ideas, perception and well-being.~~ [that there is no divide between the human and the non-human; that our knowledge of the universe via scientific method is limited and continues to unfold; that our current thinking about ecology (mostly Darwinian) is a frame that will most likely be upended in the future; that ‘nature’ does not exist].
4. The recognition that culture is nature, ~~because they are both ultimately the result of natural processes, i.e. nature and culture do not stand in opposition,~~ [and that our naturecultures have been colonized by a strain of Victorian morality which is hard to eradicate from the soil. Everything is part of the mesh].
5. ~~The transition from consciousness to conscience, so that observation of landscape gives rise to ecological concern or sympathy for nature.~~ [A return from conscience to consciousness, as we abolish a moralistic environmentalism that imposes certain human values onto the fiction of ‘nature’ and its non-human inhabitants].
6. A sense that exploitation of nature resembles human exploitation, as in various works of ecofeminism [and the recognition that this tends towards a dialectical loop: for example the colonization of the Americas and the forced removal/genocide of indigenous people which led to both environmental degradation and human exploitation, and then to further destruction of ecosystems and to systemic violence directed at indigenous and other human and non-human communities].

My intent with this intervention is not to diminish Gifford’s work (quite the opposite). My goal is to demonstrate the ways in which ecological thinking has radically departed from

environmentalism. With this updated framework in mind, I'll now turn towards a brief analysis of some key queer pastoral literature and poems.

Queer pastoral acknowledges a state of nature that is completely devoid of differentiation between indoors and outdoors, subject and object, human and nature. As a symbol, perhaps it's the vine growing out of the chimney on a house that, while not abandoned, has long-since ceased using its coal-burning fireplace. Another emblem might be the tiny mushroom I found one October morning, growing out of the damp carpet in the house I was renting with my boyfriend on the California coast.

In *Paul Takes The Form of a Mortal Girl*, is a novel by Andrea Lawlor in which the queer (queer as in not straight, but also as in supernaturally strange) protagonist (the eponymous Paul) can change his body at will, seemingly at the atomic level. Paul grows and shrinks various body parts; becomes taller or shorter or more muscular; even completely changes his penis into a vagina and back to a penis again. Paul is perhaps the ultimate avatar for transness, transitioning and de-transitioning repeatedly, in service to his own whims and wills (to loop back to Wilde and O'Hara). The final passage of the novel says something important about the way queer ecology fuses the gap between aesthetic beauty and realism Lawlor writes:

He walked out of Derek's building into the cool bright light. He had practically the whole day free until his shift and the crackling air smelled like flowers. He walked and walked, looking up at the attic windows and roofs of renovated Victorians, the treetops, a congregation of pigeons on the web of train wires over Market Street, the big Western sky. Sunlight seeped into his head, sunlight down through his eyes, down his throat, and spreading out, He came to Duboce Park and lay down on the grass, his head on his

backpack and his fingers in the dirt. He saw a little kid in a faded tie-dye call out nonsense words to a bird-nosed man. He saw a crusty spare-changer share a sandwich with her yellow dog. He saw a handsome older gent running for the train. He saw the counter girl from Flore, reading a paperback copy of *A Wizard of Earthsea* on the bench. He saw a violet pushing up through a disintegrating Muni transfer. He was the city, as good-smelling and various as himself.²²⁷

Here Lawlor's protagonist, after much struggle, finally glimpses the mesh: the dazzling array of multiplicities and possibilities located within the same small geographic area of the city.

Lawlor's mention of 'renovated Victorians' points towards the long argument that western culture has been having about sex, gender, nature, and culture since the Victorian era, suggesting a sort of renovation of Victorian thought and embodied by feminist science fiction writers writing at the end of the twentieth century like Ursula K. Le Guinn, whose *Wizards of Earthsea* book is pointedly included in the image. In this passage, the line between aesthetic beauty and realism is significantly blurred, and what we are left with is a queer pastoral interpretation of the character's experience of the world. This enmeshment of aesthetic beauty and realism is a key feature of contemporary queer pastoral poetry. Below I'll analyze queer pastoral poems that do more of this but first I offer a small complication, from a contemporary queer poet writing in the US.

In his poem 'I Don't Go to Gay Bars Anymore' Jacques Rancourt declares 'There isn't a queer pastoral for a reason'.²²⁸ I am confounded by this line. Does the poem argue that there *isn't*

²²⁷ Andrea Lawlor, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (Vintage Books, 2019), p. 336.

²²⁸ Jacques Rancourt, 'I Don't Go To Gay Bars Anymore', *The Adroit Journal*, 25 (2018)

<<https://theadroitjournal.org/issue-twenty-five/issue-twenty-five-jacques-j-rancourt/>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

a queer pastoral *at all* or that queerness has been erased from the countryside, a space reserved for traditionally masculine, straight men, and perhaps their families, at least as objects? The poem eulogizes queer urban spaces, like gay bars, which the speaker argues are shuttering as gays are allowed into more diverse spaces— greener pastures perhaps— although, the poem argues, something must be lost in this expansion of queer freedom.

[...] some days

it seems we've found it a holy city

swollen with light & sound

on the back of the tongue so close

you could almost swallow it

I know it won't last. I've read

every myth [...] ²²⁹

Rancourt's poem echoes two queer narratives that, I want to argue, need disrupting: that queerness is only supposed to occupy private, dark, urban, spaces, and that to be queer is to have no future: '*I want to be seen I want to live / like in Jerusalem right after or right before || it was sieged*'. Queer apocalypse, such as Rancourt is describing, has of course occurred recently, and yet here we are still living, thriving even, in more and more spaces, out in the open, and it is

²²⁹ Ibid.

interesting that his poem seems to lament this turn from AIDS-era closet to PREP-era freedom. This poem is perhaps a meditation on survivor's guilt and yet despite what I'd like to contribute (a generous reading) I can't move beyond the trouble caused by 'there is no queer pastoral'.

Interesting then, that so much of Rancourt's work *is* queer pastoral. For example, his poem 'Backyard Rock', which firmly locates the speaker's queerness in a rural environment as he navigates coming-of-age awkwardness, alongside his father.²³⁰ The poem pulses with queer desire even as it navigates the relationship between a son and his father, whose nakedness ('uncut, tucked within | a hood of skin, unlike mine, his tip the backyard rock | split in three') moves from foreground to background, trading places with the other natural elements of the poem—the split rock, a frozen lake. Later, the speaker as an adult, reminisces about his father's recounting of his first sexual encounter as he walks home from his own queer hookup. 'Backyard Rock' is queer pastoral in so many senses of the word: it makes the rural setting feel strange; it brings the pastoral into the urban; it even queers the 'natural' relationship between father and son, breaking the taboo of speaking about desire in the same breath as the familial.

'I Don't Go to Gay Bars Anymore' reinforces old ideas about the lack of queerness in the countryside; about the false binary of nature versus urban in the post-industrial western world, and how that binary and the same enlightenment-era thinking that produced it is also responsible for creating the sexual and gender categories we mostly use today. But 'Backyard Rock' is a perfect corrective (indeed, the dyad of these two poems forms a queer pastoral dialectic that is, in its own way, perfect) and as a further curative I offer poems from three contemporary queer poets writing in the UK and Ireland: Mícheál McCann, Seán Hewitt, and Padraig Regan, all of which have been anthologized in Paul Maddern's thick tome of Irish poetry, *Queering the Green*.

²³⁰ Jacques Rancourt, 'Backyard Rock', *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, 60.1 (2021) <<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2021/01/backyard-rock/>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

McCann's poems and essays explore the pastoral through a queer poetics that refuses to, as McCann put it in a recent podcast interview 'conflate capital B Beauty with lowercase b beauty'.²³¹ To put it another way, in McCann's poems we encounter an idealised aesthetic Beauty alongside something like corporeal or perhaps a realist beauty, which McCann's poetics discerns between but doesn't moralise. His landscapes are replete with both types of beauty, and to read a McCann poem about a heath that doesn't include a phallus in the boggy mire can feel a bit like reading Emily Dickinson without an em dash. In 'Confirming What We Knew' McCann stitches together the queerly erotic and the pastoral, so that interior desire imprints on the outdoors as 'the long carriage train of a penis' is rendered as 'a beech branch, lying on the path'.²³² The speaker of this poem is intent on complicating a lover's playful question about beauty, knowing his answer will be interpreted as perhaps a bit over-wrought but allowing it to unfurl into itself anyway.

This insistence on taking up space in spite of cultural attempts to prune, trim, and cut back the direction of queer personhood is a manifestation of a type of momentary utopia. The large phallus of the six-and-a-half-foot man certainly insists on slapping itself smack dab across the entire page in a way that can't be ignored while, simultaneously, weeds and flowers creep about in the periphery. The other voice in McCann's poem, perhaps unwittingly, is saying 'that's too much' and perhaps even insists that flora should take precedence over fauna, no matter how mega. McCann's speaker closes out the poem with a question as reply: 'Heaven is a garden, you'd say, and while roasting fragrant beans | I'd think, and what about all that time between

²³¹ Mícheál McCann, 'The Art of Staying', *BBC Radio 3: The Essay* (8 December 2021) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00126zn>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

²³² Mícheál McCann, *Keeper* (Fourteen Publishing, 2022), p. 16.

now and then?’²³³ In other words, queer utopia must exist in the here and now, if at all, and must be made of Beauty garlanded with beauty.

So queer pastoral is, in part, about embracing the utopia right in front of us which may take many forms, from a hefty cock to a box of chocolate Pocky; a gyre of plastic waste in the Pacific Ocean or, just as well, the corporeal remains of a pigeon hollowed out by a hawk. Queer pastoral is a form of (potentially erotic) mindfulness that dismisses apocalyptic thinking, a mode of future thought, for the utopia of the present, immediate (and often erotic) *now*— now as in ‘looking for now’, ‘DTF’, ‘No endless chats’ — a kairotic version of *nowness* that is not only about sexual intimacy, but is also about spiritual desire, loneliness, yearning, and, again, a sewing together of these human feelings with the non-human: sex plus nature, or love plus agriculture, or queer desire plus the pastoral.

Consider McCann’s poem ‘Hook-Up: Rural Donegal’ in which the speaker describes the paradox of desire and a resistance towards a faceless intimacy. ‘Lonely people waking | to scroll through Grindr | at 1:38 AM of a Wednesday [...] I don’t want the split-second warm | unpleasant-later feeling of his saliva | marking my dick like a dog against a tree’.²³⁴ Here McCann’s speaker manifests another sort of queer desire for another type of connection— perhaps still as immediate as a hook-up — but a spiritual, esoteric connection which transcends darkness, space, time, and the rural landscape, and exists within it, with two potential lovers ‘content instead to watch new lambs | make their way through the darkness | to their mothers, in complete, holy silence’.²³⁵ The poem works like the inverse of ‘Confirming What We Knew’ placing the pastoral at the forefront but nevertheless staying desperately thirsty both for the

²³³ Ibid., 16.

²³⁴ Mícheál McCann, *Safe Home* (Green Bottle Press, 2020), p. 15.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 15

profound experience of shared silences and, playfully, for ‘split-second warm[th]’; for a ‘reach around’; for a joining of flesh.

At depths below this interpretation, there are also dimensions of place and time to consider. In ‘Hookup, Rural Donegal’ the rural and pastoral setting exists within the green dot on an iPhone screen in the gay dating app, Grindr, as much as it exists outdoors; its place-ness is changed so that the rural landscape becomes a part of the queer ecological setting within the social network and specifically within the queer bodies pulsing on either side of the screen. Within this frame the body of the subject becomes a place (subject becomes object); the rural darkness only exists within the subject’s body, though also within the poem, which itself only exists in the subjectivity of whomever is reading it.

In McCann’s poem ‘Late Blight’ place and time take turns shifting and imbuing the pastoral with queer possibility. Consider these excerpted lines:

The field had spent years drinking
 rain and pills. Received infusions, dialysis,
 pesticide repair...

The field, mid-Rosary, was appeared to.
 Two boys in soil-brown dungarees. One
 leading the other by the hand. Not wanting to disturb
 the field’s braided hair, they skirt the edge.

They disappear into the cosy wood. ‘Fuck
 my mouth’ it hears, and the field, in response,
 hopes they stay. It pierces its ears with helleborine

and blue-eyed grass. The boys come out
of the trees. Crack of a can. Come back home
Said the field. The leaves of grass
are whistling. I'm wakened It says, reeling.²³⁶

The field in this poem is personified in the most surprising way: here, McCann has rendered it as an eager participant in the lovemaking of the two boys. The field (and notice the capital I of 'It' in the final line, which might indicate a type of subjectivity or personhood) begs to be trampled on, to be trespassed on, or perhaps it is simpler to say *lived* on. 'Late Blight' most successfully embodies the potential of queer pastoral to not just rehabilitate or rewild pastoral spaces that have been wounded and neglected over the course of 250 years of industrialism, but to reinvent and reanimate them in a way that imbues them with new possibilities. The field, encountering the two boys, 'pierces its ears' and says, 'Come back' and doesn't that feel slightly heartbreaking? Like Shel Silverstein's 'Giving Tree', it's a clever use of pathos to imagine what the sentience of something we typically think of as an object might actually say, given the chance. In this instance the field, recently recovered from a serious illness ('infusions, dialysis | pesticide repair') just wants to feel alive again and bear witness to a simple and pure act of pleasure. And then there's this issue of time, how in the first line of the excerpt the field 'was' and then in the fifth line the field 'is', signifying a shift from past to present which offers a type of queer futurity; the notion that queer utopia exists mostly in the present, even as it looks with desire or something feathery, like hope, towards a possible future, located in the past.

²³⁶ McCann, *Keeper*, p. 22.

Another poet engaged in this queering of landscape is Seán Hewitt, whose poems reach out, branch like, with lines that cover lengths of space like trees in woods do, or lovers reaching across the darkness, about to make contact. In ‘Dryad’ Hewitt certainly demonstrates a Wordsworthian ability of recalling (in tranquillity) the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions in a given moment.²³⁷ As his speaker gazes up at both trees and his lover during an outdoor sexual encounter, woods and lover melt into one sexual being and the reader can’t help but draw connections between wood, phallus, stiffness, reaching, leaning— all of this yearning spilling out of the speaker but also being woven together seamlessly with the landscape— the speaker’s voice and the landscape become something more interconnected, mycological, webbed together— just as the lover and the woods blur into each other.²³⁸ Distinctions between subject and object are dissolved in this poetic embrace.

Hewitt achieves this singularity in lines like ‘I remember the cold water | spreading in the capillaries of my jeans’ which begins a sort of transfiguration of a solitary subject into a one-ness with the object— nature.²³⁹ ‘As I looked up’, the speaker continues, ‘the sky hidden under a rain | of leaves, each tree stood over me | in perfect symmetry with his body. || Each was like a man with his head bent, | each watching and moving and making slow | laboured sighs’.²⁴⁰ Again, as in McCann’s field, the poet offers transformation and communion with a natural world imbued with a vastly different morality than we normally ascribe to ‘nature’. These trees are *into it*: they sway and moan along with the speaker’s lover.

Hewitt’s poems are expansive, carving out room for the speaker to engage in what feels like a risky turn: questioning the morality of imbuing this sacred landscape ‘with things I can no

²³⁷ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), p. 305.

²³⁸ Seán Hewitt, *Tongues of Fire* (Jonathan Cape, 2020), p. 3.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

longer bear'. The woods themselves, pre-coitus, are already endowed with all sorts of psychosexual baggage: the speaker is performing fellatio in a copse of trees planted during the speaker's own childhood ('years ago our school | had planted the woods') and has given the woods a maternal persona that tilts towards eros in its very title (a Dryad is a tree-dwelling Nymph, and a Nymph is typically a beautiful, female nature spirit).²⁴¹ In this light it seems like Hewitt is describing a sort of post-coital guilt, which lends the poem a raw feeling of honesty and shows how complicated this sexual ecosystem is. Queer love-lives may center around elements of sexual permissiveness and positivity, but sex and intimacy are still fraught with powerful emotions that can be threatening, much like a wood can turn from summer idyll to horror-laden nightmare depending on circumstances; a double-edged sword, like the flaming sword guarding Eden—the apple itself a symbol of both the pleasure and pain of consciousness.

This turn is well-answered though and moves the poem back into its mythological frame: 'But then | what is a tree, or a plant, if not an act | of kneeling to the earth, a way of bidding | the water to move, of taking in the mouth | the inner part of the world and coaxing it out'.²⁴² The poem is equal parts erotic, spiritual, and psychosexual, and blurs the line between subjects and objects (between reality and mythology) in a way that is not easy to untangle.

Entanglements—enmeshments—abound in queer pastoral poetry, and Padraig Reagan's poetry seems to delight in these. In their collection *Some Integrity* Regan writes in clean, spare lines that matter-of-factly declare that the supposed separation between subject and object is just an illusion. We are what we eat, these speakers seem to say, and we are what we drink, and see, and feel and touch. In 'Salt Island' Regan is at their most eloquent in this vein: 'It is too | early to tell if I've succeeded, | & too early in the morning— the sun | not yet visible behind the hills— |

²⁴¹ Ibid., p.3.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 5.

to tease out what it means when all this naming, |of the island, wool, sheep, trees, & clouds, | is just another way of saying I, I, I, I, I, I'.²⁴³ This poem, with its vivid imagery of the poet's kilt flapping in the breeze, feels like watching a modern Adam stumbling around, drunk on good weather, pointing at things and naming them 'I, I, I, I, I, I' and further, it completely dissolves the boundary between subject and object, pronouncing them to be one and the same.

Queer pastoral is so much about this work — of dissolving barriers between subjects and objects— and these poets, among many others, embody this borderless futurity that is so desperately needed in our fraught young century. McCann said in his essay on queering rural spaces 'The Art of Staying' that 'I am here to articulate one simple story of survival and isn't that what we're all doing?'²⁴⁴ So, too, in nature: it's quite a lot to do with survival, but the question of *what* survives is important. Across the Atlantic, American poet Chen Chen tweeted 'Let me stay tender-hearted, despite, despite, despite' and perhaps this is a brief, queer pastoral manifesto: the notion that tender-heartedness must be cultivated to survive all those nasty 'despites' in our fraught, new century with its fraught, new, difficult-to-survive-in environments.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Padraig Regan, 'Salt Island', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 99.4, (2018), in <<https://www.vqronline.org/poetry/2018/12/salt-island>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

²⁴⁴ McCann, *The Art of Staying*.

²⁴⁵ Chen Chen (@chenchenwrites), 'let me stay tender-hearted, despite despite despite', Twitter, 9 August 2020, <<https://x.com/chenchenwrites/status/1292675898794287105?s=20>> [accessed 23 February 2024].

Chapter 3

3.1 *The Mesh*, An Afterword: Listening for The Queer Pastoral

Listening for the queer pastoral is in many ways a habit of reading into things: a survival skill, developed by the queer ear over centuries of deliberate erasure. You've maybe heard of the kitschy 1990s term 'gaydar'? Well, like a lot of jokes, perhaps there's some truth to this one. Queer people are awfully good listeners, because they have had to develop this keen sense to hear 'the (queer) music of what happens' to riff on Seamus Heaney a bit. Heaney's poem, 'A Song':

A rowan like a lipsticked girl.
 Between the by-road and the main road
 Alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
 Stand among the rushes

 There are the mud-flowers of dialect
 And the immortelles of perfect pitch
 And that moment when the bird sings very close
 To the music of what happens.²⁴⁶

Without delving into the myriad meanings possible in the Heaney poem, I wonder if it could be read as akin to what John Peel once said about 'the surface noise of life'? How might we define

²⁴⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 56.

‘the surface noise of life’ and ‘the music of what happens’ and what does this have to do with queer ecopoetics? Writing poetry is a particular practice of listening to the noise objects make: in the frame of queer ecopoetics, it may be about listening to objects as if they were subjects. I’m going to delve a bit deeper into the practice of listening below, before applying these ideas to some contemporary poetry that appears to embody a queer ecopoetic practice of listening.

Finally, I’ll look at the ways in which listening functions in the poems of *The Mesh: A Hyperballad*.

Angela Leighton explores listening as poetic practice in her book, *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature*, locating the relationship between listening, writing, and reading in the critical writing of several poets. In a letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, Leighton reports that ‘Hopkins points out [that] we might read very differently “with the ears” as opposed to “the eyes”.’²⁴⁷ Following this, she argues:

that we might read “with the ears” then strikes with a sense of oddness, as well as a subsequent rightness. [...] written words make noises as well as shapes, calling on the ear like an after effect of being seen and understood [...] and poetry, of course, is a form of language which notably heightens the noise.²⁴⁸

Leighton’s analysis of Hopkins’ phrase ‘to read with the ears’ strikes me as both object-oriented and aligned with the above-mentioned reading of Derrida which interrogates whether or not there is anything outside of the text. In Leighton’s analysis, ‘written words make noises’ and ‘call on

²⁴⁷ Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2018), pp. 1-2.

²⁴⁸ Leighton, *Hearing Things*, p. 2.

the ear', which has the effect of suggesting that text, as an object itself, holds a sort of power over the subject. The old phrase 'while I have your ear' or 'as long as I have your ear' comes to mind: poetic texts, Leighton suggests, have our ears, perhaps more than they have our eyes.

But Leighton is doing much more than this, turning the ear itself into an object that is part of our subjectivity, not just something that informs it. Regarding Robert Frost's dictum to "Write with the ear to the speaking voice" she argues that

to write or read "with the ear" is to start to turn this traditionally passive faculty into an active worker [...] the ear writes or reads by summoning tones of voice from any word or phrase, and thus enacts a ghostly activity, a calling or conjuring up of speech literally unspoken, but heard in the infinite layerings of remembered usage, actual and literary.²⁴⁹

In other words, the ear is always at work in the process of writing, collecting, spectrally, the noises of speech (the text—an object) and rendering it as literature. Leighton seems to suggest that this process is perhaps at times unconscious or unintentional ('a ghostly activity' that 'conjures' what is 'unspoken') and that it is through reading with the ear, as Hopkins suggests we might do, that we concretize and make this process a conscious effort.

Pauline Oliveros's manifesto *Quantum Listening* argues that this practice of listening is of paramount importance for artists. In her manifesto Oliveros explores her concept of *quantum listening* and carefully decouples the act of listening from the act of hearing. 'We hear in order to listen', Oliveros argues. 'We listen in order to interpret our world and experience meaning... We

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

open in order to listen to the world as a field of possibilities.’²⁵⁰ The fields Oliveros describes move beyond aural stereo fields and include the energy fields described by quantum mechanics.

Quantum Listening is listening in all sense modes to or for the least possible differences in any component part of a form or process while perceiving the whole and sensing change [...] This creates potential, cultivates surprises, opens the imagination and approaches and even plunges over the edges of perception into the mystery of the universe predicted by quantum field theory [...] Quantum Listening is the ability to discern all that there is in a single moment-point in space (a transient) or a quanta.²⁵¹

Oliveros goes on to link quantum listening and quantum mechanics to the ancient Chinese practice of qigong (one form of which is widely known in the western world as tai chi) citing the physicist E.H. Walker and likening particles (as in quarks and neutrons— building blocks of reality as we know it) to the Chinese principle of *qi* or energy. In this way, Oliveros is making an argument for a deep listening to the objects that make up the universe. ‘Is sound intelligent?’ Oliveros asks. ‘Does sound have consciousness?’²⁵²

This argument is similar to one that the filmmaker, and visual artist (and, some have argued, poet) David Lynch refers to in several interviews as well as in his book *Catching the Big Fish*.²⁵³ Lynch often describes his own creative process in terms that are familiarly in the realm of listening. ‘It all comes from somewhere else, like I was a radio’, he said of his work on the

²⁵⁰ Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (Ignota, 2022), p. 30.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 56

²⁵³ Johannes Göransson, ‘Letters: To Vibrate: In Defense of Strangeness’, 13 July 2017 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/search?query=in+defense+of+strangeness>> [accessed 24 March 2024].

film *Blue Velvet*.²⁵⁴ In *Catching The Big Fish* Lynch creates an analog between meditating and fishing, the basic idea being that meditating is like fishing for ideas, and the deeper one journeys in a meditative state, the bigger the fish/idea one might come out with.²⁵⁵ That meditation is a type of listening to something one might call *the self* is crucial, but so too is the idea that meditation clears the way for a person to be more receptive, more like a radio, to the noises of things. And for Lynch, meditation is a technique which allows practitioners to access what quantum physics has termed *the unified field* and which he and other practitioners of Vedic traditions refer to as an ‘ocean of pure consciousness’.²⁵⁶ Lynch’s experience of meditation, which for him ‘[increases] the flow’ of creative ideas and his ability to translate those ideas to a medium, is not unlike Oliveros’s Quantum Listening and demonstrates one way an artist might translate listening into practice.²⁵⁷

Of course, listening is also a social act, not just a metaphysical one, and my poetics is keenly interested in the Mesh of sound that the ear encounters in the everyday, from the cacophony of song lyrics and sounds piped into all corners of modern life, to birdsong and other sounds of something like the traditional pastoral.

This is what queer pastoral sounds like: radio static cutting through a popular song, the buzzing of a wasp, the stormy music of an automated car wash; it’s the sound of what we used to call *Human* and *Nature* enmeshed into a post-human field of sound whose echoes reach out from earth and into space via radio waves and space debris, like the golden disc encoded with earth sounds on the Voyager spacecraft, now (at the time of this writing) nearly 15 billion miles from

²⁵⁴ David Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch*, ed. by Chris Rodley, Revised edn (Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 135.

²⁵⁵ David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (Penguin, 2006).

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22

earth (or just over 22 light hours).²⁵⁸ Back on earth, my use of sounds in poetry is magpie-like: I encounter sound objects and place them into the nest of my poems, an act that echoes my earlier assertion that queer ecopoetics and the queer pastoral are, in part, an act of queer home-making in literature. This act of homemaking isn't so simple: the complex social structures which dictate the conditions of our existence, and intersect with racial, gender, and other identity constructions, form a concrete-like barrier between poets and the spaces they may make their nests in. Here, ecological considerations create a tension where poetics intersects with politics.

Tommy Pico, a Brooklyn-based poet from the Viejas Indian reservation of the Kumeyaay nation, writes into this struggle in his book-length poem, *Nature Poem*, which challenges the borders between urban and pastoral, and is shot through with the music and lyrics of popular songs, which form a sonic backdrop in his major queer pastoral work. Lyrics and musical references buzz in and out of *Nature Poem*: 'The world is infected. || Systemic pesticides get absorbed by every cell of the plant, accumulate || in the soil, waterways || kiss the bees || *knees*, *knees* (In a Guns N' Roses way) || goodbye'.²⁵⁹ Here the synthetic sound of 1980's hair metal weaves its way into a meditation on the toxicity of an environment poisoned by corporate agricultural practices. Later Pico invokes the song 'Malibu' by Hole, in a section that considers a similar hopelessness: that of the despair of the addict (presumably Courtney Love's husband, Kurt Cobain, singer of the band Nirvana).²⁶⁰ In this instance, the song is not inserted into the poem as a texture, but rather the poem is a meditation on the song's content. Pico often uses both techniques throughout the text of *Nature Poem* and the result is that within the poem, popular

²⁵⁸ NASA, *Voyager: Mission Status* (25 Feb, 2024) <<https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/mission/status/>> [accessed 25 Feb, 2024].

²⁵⁹ Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem* (Portland, OR: Tin House, 2017), p. 12.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

music becomes as much a part of Nature as other, more familiar pastoral objects such as birdsong, or thunder.

There is a tension in *Nature Poem* that gets at the heart of what queer pastoral contributes to ecopoetics: this renegotiation of just what counts as ‘nature poetry’, punctuated, perennially, by a pop music soundtrack. Pico writes ‘The perigee moon haloes the white comforter in a Beyoncé sort of way | [...] this is the type of nature I would write a poem about’.²⁶¹ And one page later: ‘Sade likens dating to war, says she’s *on the front lines* | [...] when you wonder *does the bartender think I’m cute or is he trying to get a tip?* | but that’s the wilds for you’.²⁶²

What’s on display in these poems is the inescapability of songs stuck in the speaker’s head: he can’t see a halo of light without associating Beyoncé’s song *Halo* just as Sade makes an appearance when he’s in ‘the wilds’ of a gay bar, navigating the uncertainty (and folly) of hitting on one’s bartender.

While pop lyrics and songs soundtrack much of the book-length poem, which is Pico’s manifesto on queering nature from a modern indigenous perspective, old-fashioned, capital-N Nature makes appearances too, reluctantly but brilliantly foregrounded in a way that cuts through the cultural artefacts and detritus populating these emotional landscapes. ‘*The birds I forgot abt the birds* says auntie out from lockup [...] the universe whirs its ghost of TV snow’.²⁶³ Later, Pico personifies Nature, imbuing landscape with feeling and voice: ‘Places have thoughts— hills have backs that love | being stroked by our eyes. The river gobbles down its tract as a metaphor | but also abt its day. The bluffs purr when we put down blankets at the | downturn of the sun and

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 28.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 35.

laugh'.²⁶⁴ At the end of this stark shift, Pico returns to the noise of lyric, announcing simply: 'My favourite band is Hole'.

Pico's use of lyrics throughout *Nature Poem* resembles the act of sampling sound recordings that began with early hip hop in the US in the 1980's and continues in much of contemporary pop music. That hip hop is a musical form that came into being in urban environments in the US and was created by marginalised black American musicians is well known, but less well-known is the queer history of hip hop and rap. In a chapter of the *Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, Shanté Paradigm-Small demonstrates that queerness has been present in hip hop as long as it has been a genre, first via an analysis of the earliest hip hop hit 'Rapper's Delight' and its use of homophobic slurs (and thusly the queer erotic gaze that is present in the Sugar Hill Gang's lyrics) and then through a short history of the first openly queer hip hop group, 'Age of Consent', who formed in 1981.²⁶⁵ Hip hop, dance music, and related musical forms are an enormous part of queer culture and the inclusion of lyrical and musical references in poetry constitutes a poetics of listening and hearing that incorporates these sounds into the soundscape of a queer ecology that is represented in my work and in the work of other contemporary poets.

The use of sound and lyric in poetry can often be subtle, and sometimes the poem is served by the mere suggestion of a sound or musical form, as in Danez Smith's queer pastoral ode to black and queer bodies, 'Tonight In Oakland'.²⁶⁶ Smith begins the poem by invoking sound: 'I did not come here to sing a blues' he writes, and instead begins a litany of all that is beautiful

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁶⁵ Shanté Paradigm Small, 'Queer Hip Hop: A Brief Historiography', *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, ed. by Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley (Oxford Academic, 2022), p. 122-142.

²⁶⁶ Danez Smith, 'Tonight in Oakland' (2015) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58027/tonight-in-oakland>> [accessed 25 February 2024].

and celebratory about an American city that is often at the centre of violent struggle.²⁶⁷ Smith's reference towards the genre of blues (a genre pioneered by black musicians and widely known to be the progenitor of both rock and hip hop and that is itself synonymous with a type of tragedy and struggle) forms a sort of anti-thesis that the poem's lyrics resonate against. Smith rejects the idea that black, queer poetry needs to conform to a trauma-laden form of elegy, while acknowledging throughout the poem that tragedy and trauma are certainly present in the cityscape and bodies the poem represents. 'Two boys, one dressed in what could be blood | & one dressed in what could be blood | before the wound, meet & mean mug, || & God, tonight, let them dance!'²⁶⁸ Smith's invocation of blues makes us *hear* blues and expect a certain sorrow and struggle to be present in the poem. Yet the reader begins to understand that though the form may be a blues, the meaning of this particular blues is an alchemical transformation of pain into hard-earned joy—not just a lament. Dancing is a motif present throughout the poem and, listening deeply to the sounds of the words, a cadence of stresses forms a rhythm that one could dance to, or at least sway to a little, the way one might to do a blues.

The 'natural' rhythms of Smith's poem form a link to Hopkins' sprung rhythm, which, Hopkins believed, brought 'verse rhythms closer to natural speech rhythms than traditional verse systems usually allow' and in doing so moved towards a poetics that was closer to revealing the *inscape* of language through the use of *instress*, or perhaps, one could say, following the above, a 'writing with the ears'. Scholars do not always agree on what Hopkins meant by *inscape* and *instress*, but I prefer James Wimsatt's distillation that roughly equates these terms to *the essence of a thing* and *the energy of a thing*.²⁶⁹ This is also echoed by critic Joshua M. Hall, who, quoting

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ James Wimsatt, *Hopkins's Poetics of Speech Sound: Sprung Rhythm, Lettering, Inscap* (University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 96-14.

Hopkins scholar J.R. Watson, notes that ‘inscape for Hopkins [is] “the essence or substance of the thing which prevents it from changing into something else, holds it as it is.”’²⁷⁰ Hall concurs with Wimsatt that the concept of inscape is largely derived from the concept of quiddity or *thisness*, from the mediaeval philosopher Duns Scotus’ concept of *Haecceitas*.²⁷¹ This is a form of ancient realism not unrelated to the speculative realism of OOO, one aspect of which being the notion that objects have their own realities independent of any subjective (human) gaze. So inscape is something like *thisness*, which may be something like the essential nature of the object: both what it is, and what it is not.

So if inscape, in my reading of Hopkins, is something like *thisness* (it’s what is essential about an object) and if *instress* is something like energy (an energy that gives the object its essential quality) Hopkins may have meant that one cannot get at the inscape of something without its accompanying instress. As Hall summarises inscape is the essence of a thing and instress is the energy of a thing, or how the thing is *felt*.²⁷² Wimsatt complicates this reading, noting the many ways in which Hopkins himself used these two terms. For my purposes, I’ll argue that inscape means something like a container, and instress means something like the unique energy contained in the container. Thinking of a body, say, a cat: the cat’s container contains something of the cat, that, after the cat has died, is no longer present. This is a common perception after someone or something has died: that while the body is present, something crucial is missing.

Following all of this, I’m arguing that inscape is the *thisness* of an object, and instress is the noise it makes— the object’s call, to circle back to Leighton— in the case of poetry, the object

²⁷⁰ Joshua M. Hall, ‘Poetic Intuition: Spinoza and Gerard Manley Hopkins’, *Philosophy Today*, 57.4 (2013), p. 404.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 403.

being language itself. Morton's arguments about Hopkins' poetics seem to agree with this reading of inscape and instress. Citing lines from Hopkins ('Selves— goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells, | Crying, *What I do is me: for that I came*'), Morton argues

Duns Scotus speaks of the *haecceity* of a thing, its *thisness*, and Hopkins translates this into verse. Yet the thisness is not imposed from without, objectively. It wells up from within. Hopkins himself says so explicitly: *What I do is me*. Quite so: it is a case of *I* versus *me*. In this difference... we detect archaeological evidence of the Rift...between a thing and its appearance.²⁷³

In the queer pastoral, the use of lyrics and musical references in poetry mimics a sort of collage of text and sound and moves poetry towards a greater realisation of the *thisness* or inscape of the world it is representing. Including musical references and lyrics in queer ecological poetry is to argue that listening is paramount in queer ecopoetics and that human sounds are just as much a part of nature as anything else.

Listening can be rendered on the page in numerous ways. For example, a poet's use of lacuna, caesura, and erasure or absence, can indicate a sort of attention to silence, or perhaps more accurately, a type of quiet. John Cage, in his 'Lecture On Nothing' uses negative spaces as pauses which push against the conventional form of a lecture and insists that although the lecture is 'getting nowhere' that 'that is a pleasure it is not irritating to be where one is'.²⁷⁴

Through his use of silence and his disruption of traditional form, Cage focuses our attention on the present moment, particularly into the strained stillness between fragments of

²⁷³ Timothy Morton, 'An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry', *New Literary History*, 43.2, (2011), p. 212.

²⁷⁴ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and Writing* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), p. 119

argument. But there *is* an argument here, perhaps most specifically made in this line: ‘I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it’.²⁷⁵

In much of his work, Cage sifts through the overwhelming detritus of language, ideas, thoughts, sounds, images, and feelings confronting the listening, looking, feeling human in the twentieth century and protectively imbues his music and writing with pauses, woven into his arguments almost like protective spells. Poems are constructions of worlds as much as reflections of the soundscapes and worded spaces that the poet encounters. That ‘there is no such thing as silence’ as Cage famously noted, is evidence that we are fundamentally wrapped up in the world in a way that pushes back against the type of interiority previously held as the source of poetry; we shape our landscapes via our gaze, which shape us and so on.²⁷⁶

My poem ‘Menai Strait’ approaches the idea of landscape, silence, and how the poetic gaze alters the landscape it lands on. It opens with an epigraph from Cage: ‘All answers are answers to all questions’. The poem, in endeavouring to answer its own central question— of how the speaker might ‘fit in’ to ‘this landscape’ — begins to answer itself with new questions about silence and about the act of asking questions in the first place: who is the speaker asking? Where does the ‘I’ or the subject fit, in relation to a landscape full of objects that could be subjects? In this description of the land and seascape near Garth Pier in Bangor, North Wales, the speaker places themselves in the landscape, rather than describing it from an outside perspective. Additionally, there is no separation between the synthetic and the so-called ‘natural’ elements described in the poem, a move that follows Morton’s insistence on an ecology without nature.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

²⁷⁶ Alex Ross, ‘Searching for Silence: John Cage’s *Art of Noise*’, *The New Yorker*, Vol. 86 (27 September 2010) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/searching-for-silence>> [accessed 23 April 2024].

But Morton, ever difficult to pin down, would caution us against thinking about landscape in purely imagistic terms (difficult for poets, to be sure) arguing that ‘the mesh defies our imaginative capabilities and transcends iconography’.²⁷⁷ In ‘Catch’, I get closer to the mesh in the way that language and space begin to deconstruct the lines and stanzas. In the poem, images are separated by the idea of apnea—the space between breaths where breathing ceases. An apnea is an uncertain break and these various micro-landscapes (an ocean wave breaking, a luminescent cloud, an ice-ring in the sky, a gutter running with oily water) break apart and come together like cells dividing and forming something new: the Mesh. The poem also interrogates what it means for products of the Anthropocene (in this case, microplastics) to become so deeply enmeshed in our ecologies (and therefore our bodies). This is a way of asking: what does it mean that the synthetic is enmeshed with the organic, as in the case of microplastics being detected in rain, seawater, soil, and human biology?

Morton argues that traditional conceptions of nature as ‘authentic’ have been disproven by biology, citing the way that RNA and DNA acts as codes that are manipulatable to the point of there being no discernable difference between what’s ‘natural’ and what’s ‘synthetic’ and makes the case that ‘just as Deconstruction showed that... no text is totally authentic, biology shows us that there is no authentic life-form’.²⁷⁸ The poems in *The Mesh: A Hyperballad* explore this territory, attempting to move beyond the alarm and fear caused by ecological crisis, and endeavouring to look with curiosity—and with the ear—at the ways in which the Anthropocene manifests in our unfolding ecologies. ‘Life is not natural — it’s life 1.0’ Morton asserts, indirectly quoting Slavoj Žižek (ironic, given Žižek’s opposition to Morton’s OOO-leanings).²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Morton, *The Mesh*, p. 276.

²⁷⁸ Timothy Morton, ‘Guest Column: Queer Ecology’, *PMLA*, 125.2, (2010), 273-282 (p. 275).

²⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 177-192.

‘If anything, life is catastrophic, monstrous, non-holistic and dislocated, not organic, coherent, or authoritative. Queering ecology will involve engaging with those qualities’.²⁸⁰ Queer ecopoetics must engage with ‘those qualities’ which traditional ecologists and ecopoets tend to look away from: the so-called ugliness of human interactions in the ‘purity’ of a landscape, the oil-slick gushing into the river, the burn ‘scars’ cutting through an expanse of national forest, a used condom ‘littering’ a field, a plastic bottle discovered inside the distended gut of a seabird. Yes, all this but also the beautiful rainbow sheen of motor oil running down a gutter, or the petrochemical brilliance of a California sunset.

In my long sequence of poems ‘You Shouldn’t Let The Poets Lie To You’ (named after an early interview in which Björk makes this statement, which has since become a meme) and in other poems after Björk throughout *The Mesh: A Hyperballad*, I use many of the strategies and devices noted above to build a sonic soundscape that makes use of the connections between Björk’s lyrics and musical themes and my own lived experiences, fantasies, and ideas about relationships, death, apocalypse, or, in short: hyperobjects. Constrained, as poets in the western world are, by copyright laws, I have had to carefully navigate the ways in which my poetry references and re-presents Björk’s music in the manuscript, mostly opting to reference her music and lyrics via titles of songs which the poems were written after, about, or in relationship to.

For example, ‘Black Lake’ is the title of a song from the 2015 album *Vulnicura* and also the title of one of the poems in the ‘You Shouldn’t Let The Poets Lie To You’ sequence.²⁸¹

‘Black Lake’ is perhaps the most devastating composition of Björk’s oeuvre, musically and

²⁸⁰ Morton, ‘Queer Ecology’, p. 275.

²⁸¹ Björk, ‘Black Lake’, from *Vulnicura* (One Little Indian, 2015).

lyrically, as it chronicles the dissolution of her 14-year marriage to the artist Matthew Barney.²⁸² In this section of my poem, I attempt to harness the deep sorrowful energy of the composition, particularly the melody, but also the cadence of Björk's sung lyrics, which is mimicked in the rhythmic stresses of the poem. The stresses in 'Black Lake' do not strictly stick to this cadence, and neither do the stresses in my poem. But the idea that the poem borrows its rhythmic structure from the song adds a new sonic texture to the poetry, particularly for readers familiar with the original composition. This rhythmic device begins to blur the line between poem and song.

Specifically, if the poem on the page is mimicking the stresses of a song that is essentially a long ballad, does that make the poem into a kind of ballad as well? It is an interesting question, because most ballads have some sort of lyrical refrain and neither 'Black Lake' the song nor the poem have this feature. However, each version has a non-lyrical refrain. In the case of the song, lyrical sections are demarcated by long drones of strings which Björk refers to as 'freezes' which are approximated in the poem by single line stanzas.²⁸³ So perhaps these lyrical absences do form refrains and these *are* ballads, but more importantly this question shines a light on one of the trickier lines of demarcation between what is a 'song' and what is a 'poem': if I try to sing my poem, using Björk's melody... the result is something like a bad parody at best, or plagiarism at worst. In the poem, crucially, I am not thinking about musical devices like melody, melodic counterpoints or harmony. In the song, Björk isn't necessarily thinking about the way her lyrics might appear on the page (although more and more pop music artists are publishing books with major poetry presses, which begins to raise other questions with regards to the printed page. For

²⁸² Jason Lipshutz, 'Björk's New Album Has a 10-Minute Diss-Track About Matthew Barney' (2015) <<https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/bjorks-vulnicura-black-lake-10-minute-diss-track-on-it-6443855/>> [accessed 25 February 2024].

²⁸³ Jessica Hooper, *The Invisible Woman: A Conversation with Björk* (2015) <<https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9582-the-invisible-woman-a-conversation-with-bjork>> [accessed 25 February 2024].

example, Kate Bush's book of selected lyrics, *How to Be Invisible*, published by Faber & Faber in 2023).

In terms of the relationship between song and poem presented here, I argue that the song 'Black Lake' provides the instress for the inscape of the poem, 'Black Lake', just as the inverse is true of the relationships between some other songs and poems. Particularly in the case of Björk's song 'Sonnets/Unrealities XI', a melodic interpretation of ee cummings' poem 'It May Not Always Be So' that uses the words of the poem verbatim.²⁸⁴ The singer Rufus Wainwright, a contemporary of Björk's, has also utilised this approach in his collection *Take All My Loves: 9 Shakespeare Sonnets* which the singer-composer set to music in a similar manner, over a decade after Björk's own experiment.²⁸⁵

These methods are related to the main objective of this project, which is to create a mesh-like landscape of poetry and criticism that contains myriad intersections that are more and less obvious; to create something like a poetic interpretation of a hyperobject, which, I think may have an analogue in the films of David Lynch (think of the severed ear at the start of *Blue Velvet*): art objects which depend on deep listening, intuition, mystery, and a sort of faith in the way seemingly disparate nodes connect— often through holes, or absences, in the substance of plot, narrative, or argument. Images, intertextual devices, abstract shapes, moods, music, lyrics are all represented; what threads the poems together is the delicate dance they do around meaning and meaninglessness, or between here-ness and not-here-ness, perhaps. There is a refrain in this hyperballad, and it is death— perhaps the ultimate hyperobject.

²⁸⁴ Björk, *Medulla*, One Little Indian, 2004 [On multiple formats].

²⁸⁵ Rufus Wainwright, *Take All My Loves: Nine Shakespeare Sonnets*, Deutsche Gramophone, 2016, [On multiple formats].

In selecting the order for some sections of the manuscript, I enacted a ritualistic methodology that borrows from Tarot and I Ching and other intuitive and interpretive practices and to some degrees takes its inspiration from CAConrad's 'Somatic Rituals', as outlined in that poet's *While Standing in Line Waiting for Death*.²⁸⁶ This, too, is a form of listening: to one's intuition. First, I printed each poem that I've written over the duration of this project. I placed these in a stack in the centre of a circle of light (projected from a USB lamp that emanates a ring of pink-blue light) with a candle lit at the top of the circle, a quartz I fished out of the ocean on a beach in Anglesey, and an empty bottle of mead which I procured from a small shop in Llanberis and consumed with a friend one summer night on top of a hill in the centre of Bangor. Once this stage was set, I began what felt a bit performative but was ultimately formative: intuitively picking poems from the 'deck' I'd constructed at random and placing them in relation to one another.

In this sense, the manuscript is part of a long lineage of divination, and intuitive practices in poetry as poet Mike Barrett has shown. Citing both Sidney's and Shelley's defense of poetry and William Blake's 'bard who past, present future sees' as examples, Barrett concludes that a poet can be 'the diviner-poet... both *vates* [diviner] and maker'.²⁸⁷ While I did not employ the I-Ching or any other divination ritual into the actual writing of the poems, drawing from these practices as part of my sequencing has made them deeply enmeshed with the work. Another related method employed was the practice of distinct types of meditation in pursuit of writing. As a regular practitioner of Transcendental Meditation, I continued my practice with the intention of, as David Lynch puts it, 'catching the big fish'. Additionally, I wrote the sequence of poems

²⁸⁶ CAConrad, *While Standing in Line Waiting for Death* (Wave Books, 2017).

²⁸⁷ Mike Barrett, 'Positive and Negative Capability: I Ching and the Poet', *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* (2022) <<https://www.asiancha.com/wp/article/mike-barrett>> [accessed 25 February 2024].

called ‘Seven Signs’ between meditation practices focused on the chakras. Each of the seven poems (each with seven lines) is focused on one of the seven chakras, beginning with the root chakra and ending with the crown. Each of these is an example of a type of Quantum Listening: through meditation practices, I listened deeply for the voice of my own intuition and allowed it to manifest in both poem selection and composition.

In the future, we may need to listen deeply to new forms of sentient life. As many publications and institutions take hard line stances against machine-made creative work, such as poetry and other writing produced by Artificial Intelligence, the poet must consider what this encounter with another form of intelligence will mean for poetry. ‘And we ask: what is poetry?’ writes Etel Adnan, in *Shifting the Silence*, interrogating what it means that an AI can write what she thinks of as ‘beautiful’ poetry. ‘As the difference between things is narrowing...in all fields...[we are tempted] to think that nothing is ultimately artificial; that Reality has to always be real’.²⁸⁸ Here Adnan echoes Morton and OOO: the difference between ‘real’ and ‘artificial’ is becoming more and more arbitrary as the twenty-first century continues.

‘What is poetry’ is more a question of ‘what is a poet’ which is reducible to ‘what is creativity’ and then the question becomes: is human creativity all that different than non-human creativity, be it in the form of flora, fauna, or machine? This is the terrain that OOO and queer ecopetics really flourishes in: as *things* continue to merge, that is objects in relation to subjects, de-centering humanity in our conception of the universe (really, de-centering the idea that there is such a thing as a center) requires this sort of approach. So an answer to Adnan’s question is maybe ‘poetry’ is human birdsong, whalesong, or howling. Maybe it’s easier to think of poetry as one form of utterance produced by our species? And maybe AI will write poetry in the future,

²⁸⁸ Etel Adnan, *Shifting the Silence* (Nightboat Books, 2020), p. 50.

if AI becomes truly sentient and self-determining, as some suggest it will (while others, including Braidotti, suggest AI is, ultimately, merely a ‘transhumanist delusion’).²⁸⁹

I explore this area and attempt to listen to the noise machines make in the poem ‘Transcript of Questions and AI Responses to New Submissions for the Turing Test’ in which the speaker has a question-and-answer session, modeled after the actual Turing Test, with two AI Chatbots I programmed to espouse the characteristics of ‘romantic’ and ‘poetic’. The results, which are almost unedited in the final manuscript, were startling to me, not so much in the lines that the chatbots produced, but in the way the conversation unfolded: what sorts of ideas I was able to produce in conversation with them. In the transcript I am the ‘Interrogator’ (this is what Turing referred to the test-giver as) and the bots are named Owain and Anwyn:

[Interrogator] Have I travelled far enough?

[Owain] Yes, you've travelled far enough.

[Anwyn] I think so.

[Interrogator] Am I far enough away to see myself?

[Owain] You're too close.

[Anwyn] You're getting closer.

I don't know if I would have arrived at the phrase ‘Am I far enough away to see myself?’ without the conversational aid of the two artificial entities. I may have. It's not that it's a particularly impactful phrase on its own, but this conversation and the resulting poem revealed

²⁸⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Polity Press, 2022) p. 66.

something deeply personal and important to me about this collection of poems. It is interesting to consider that it was arrived at via this synthetic interaction: a case of subject listening to object.

An important question arises here, however: what is actually happening when a writer is interacting with so-called ‘artificial intelligence’ in this manner? Is the writing truly interacting with another sentient being, or is the writer interacting with a computer program? While it is well beyond the scope of this work to definitively answer this question, I tend to align with Braidotti, Haraway, and others, who argue that AI is a neoliberal form of technology in which ‘delusional’ transhumanists have deposited large banks of data and content (often illegally, and against the will of human creators) in order to achieve some semblance of ‘intelligence’ that will, ultimately, do the labor of human beings—not to lessen the workload of humans, but to eliminate the need to compensate humans for their labor. Transhumanism, which ‘believes in the fusion of human consciousness with computational networks’ and whose goal is to achieve ‘the fusion of human brainpower and biology with technologies, in a phenomenon called Singularity.’²⁹⁰ AI is, so far, a ‘delusion’ in that what it actually does is remix and repurpose the creative works of humans, which it is only able to do via the intense labor of human AI trainers, who work with the program to help it become ‘better’ at mimicking human communication. AI chatbots are not sentient: they are computer programs. In this way AI is no different than other sorts of tools humans have created, including paper, pens, and books. AI still lives in the realm of *techne*; it has not achieved what one might call *psyche*, or something like ‘spirit’. Again, it is beyond my scope to offer a definite answer to this question, but from my perspective as a creative writer, I am not convinced that AI has moved beyond the existential status of human-made tool. It’s about as sentient as an online thesaurus, in my humble opinion, but of course, that is bound to change.

²⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 61.

Can AI write poetry? Sure: in the way that poetry can be *anything* from a ‘found’ object or bit of text, to more formal texts like sonnets. But this is not really the right question. The question I want to consider is: *what does it mean to listen to the noise machines make?* And then, of course: *can machines listen to us?* Adnan describes a world in which the poet is in perpetual overwhelm, and so lacuna and erasure— indeed any of the ‘blank’ spaces on the page can serve as ways to experience silence on the page. Silence as a form of rest. Adnan writes ‘an absence is a form of silence. Is the space from which language has vanished. The disappearance of answers. But it’s not necessarily a void.’²⁹¹ Perhaps blank space on the page is a form of queer pastoral: a quiet, an absence, a nowhere, a wilderness, on the page. Perhaps we’ll know AI is truly sentient when it can, unprompted, write poems with the requisite forms of silence encoded on the page, amid all the other noise that all the other objects are making.

Conclusion

Via this project, I’ve travelled far. I’ve travelled far enough to see myself, or at least catch a glimpse of myself outside of my own subjectivity: as an object, and a producer of objects, enmeshed in a density of other objects and subjects that cover these expanses of physical distance and metaphysical time and space. The writing of this dissertation was both a physical and intellectual distance to cross: perhaps not unlike the distance between North Wales and California, both places that, as this project concludes, I now consider home. In some senses, this project, which began with an idea about how ‘the queer subject might make their home in

²⁹¹ Adnan, *Shifting the Silence*, pp. 58-59.

literature' has manifested materially: it has become about how this particular queer subject has found more of a home in the world. And yet, absence remains.

I'm writing these concluding paragraphs in my back garden, in California. Enormous vines of night-blooming jasmine scent the air and frame the small stone statue that marks the grave of Arthur, our cat, who died when a car hit him on the road outside of our house, in the second year of this project. Arthur, our cat: my partner and I adopted him as a two-month-old kitten in the spring of 2011. We watched him grow up, and he was part of our family, living with us in several US states, in all sorts of weathers. He killed a lot of birds and other creatures. He liked to playfully wrestle with our dog, Millie, and he felt very protective over her, ambling along with us on her walks, always from a distance. He had a reputation for roaming far and wide around the places we lived, invariably causing concerned strangers to ring the phone number on his tag. 'Your cat is wandering around downtown; is he lost?' 'No', John, my partner, would say. 'He just likes to wander.'

Arthur loved John, and John loved him, in ways that are profound, and echo some of what Donna Haraway has said about companion species. 'We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love.'²⁹² Among the many things Arthur's death has taught me is something about absence and substance, which I've tried to comprehend through writing and reading both poems and prose: through creative work and through the interrogation of that work. His body lies three feet below his statue. It is probably mostly decomposed by now, according to the internet. But what he was—his *thisness*—I think departed the moment he died. His absence is

²⁹² Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), pp. 2-3.

the substance I feel in my gut and my chest as I write this, nearly a year on. Our grief at his passing is proof that he lived. My poetry is a sort of record of that.

Is sentience subjectivity? Is objectivity the absence of sentience? Is my body an object, occupied by a subject? And how, exactly, does queerness fit into these questions? ‘I’m just like a pile of leaves’, Frank O’Hara wrote, in ‘Meditations in an Emergency’. After writing this dissertation, I don’t find this to be true about myself. My body is just like a pile of leaves. ‘I’ am something different. My consciousness interacts with my body, the way the wind plays an aeolian harp, as Morton put it in their ‘Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry’.²⁹³ One answer, then: ‘I’ exist, apart from the object of my body. My body: my home. Another answer: that this idea of subject and object is so related to the body, and therefore to homemaking: to eco-poesis. My dissertation is an act of queer homemaking: queer as in strange, and queer as in struggle. Queer as in my partner and I, holding each other and burying a cat, enmeshed in each other’s grief, but still distinct subjects, looking at an object and weeping. Perhaps I’ve learned to answer questions like these with other questions, here in the form of a poem called “Question” by May Swenson.

Body my house
 my horse my hound
 what will I do
 when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
 How will I ride

²⁹³ Timothy Morton, ‘An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry’, *New Literary History*, 43.2 (2011), pp. 205-208.

What will I hunt

Where can I go

without my mount

all eager and quick

How will I know

in thicket ahead

is danger or treasure

when Body my good

bright dog is dead

How will it be

to lie in the sky

without roof or door

and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift

how will I hide?²⁹⁴

In the epigraph to my poem 'Menai Strait' I quoted John Cage who said, considering I Ching and other divination methods that 'all answers answer all questions'.²⁹⁵ This question of the subjectivity of 'I' versus the objectivity of the body, is very similar to the central questions this

²⁹⁴ May Swenson, *Nature: Poems Old and New* (Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p. 45.

²⁹⁵ John Cage, *I-VI* (University Press of New England, 1997), p. 6.

dissertation has explored: how should queer ecopoetry approach subjectivity and objectivity? What *is* queer poetry? What place does queer poetry have in eco-critical constructions and in the pastoral? Is queerness ‘natural’? Is anything? Perhaps even more centrally, is queer ecopoetics a form of eco-writing without nature, in the way that Morton has suggested the need for an ‘ecology without nature’?

While I feel that the poetry in *The Mesh: A Hyperballad* goes a long way towards conversing with these questions, it is the critical work in the three sections of this dissertation that has travelled the furthest distance. In this work, I’ve offered definitions of subjects and objects, the queer subject, the act of queering a text, and of queer ecopoetics and the queer pastoral. Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that ‘queer’ is more than just an adjective or verb, and, like OOO’s conception of objects, the queer subject is neither more nor less than the sum of its component parts, which is to say that the queer subject isn’t just not-straight: they are, following post-humanist feminism, uniquely located in-situ and in struggle with heteronormativity. I have also argued that queer ecopoetics is not just about the queer subject: rather, it is a way of looking at and rendering the world through a certain queer subjective gaze which blurs the line between subject and object, straight and gay, human and nature, rural and urban, and life and death. It is a way of seeing and celebrating a certain ontological strangeness in the materials of existence, via poetry and other naturecultural detritus. In the song ‘In the Aeroplane Over the Sea’ Neutral Milk Hotel singer Jeff Mangum sings of ‘how strange it is to be anything at all’ and I hope this dissertation has gone some distance in understanding why that rings true.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Jeff Mangum, *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, Neutral Milk Hotel, Merge Records, 1998 [On Multiple Formats].

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