

**At the Centre of the Edge
Contemporary Ecological Poetry and the Sacred Hybrid**

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Declaration of Authorship

I Karen McCarthy Woolf hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a comparatively new and vital discipline that responds to the literatures of an increasingly urgent environmental crisis. Yet, while its remit within the fields of materialist and secular thought is diversifying and expanding to include postcolonial, cultural and queer theories, alongside geography and other earth sciences, there is less conversation with complementary and syncretic disciplines such as ecotheology and religious ecology. This thesis makes the case for a diversification of the secular as a singular epistemological paradigm. It suggests the ‘sacred hybrid’ as an additional transdisciplinary framework through which we can read, critique and write contemporary poetry that demonstrates ecological/environmental themes that connect to emotional and spiritual procedures and content as well as intellectually-driven aesthetics.

Through close readings of Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*, Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and Joy Harjo’s *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* as exemplary texts, the thesis demonstrates the critical amplifications that the sacred hybrid can elicit. Drawing on Mircea Eliade’s explication of the sacred and profane as contingent and contradictory spheres, it shows how each collection contains a sacred yet asymmetric ‘centre’, with the capacity to incorporate diverse notions of Otherness. These expressions include spiritual modalities constructed via strategies of juxtaposition, shamanic chant and interbiotic utterance that correspond to pre-Christian and syncretic indigenous religiosity. Glück’s collection *The Wild Iris* is a starting point because it demonstrates how sacred hybridity may operate structurally within a text. Its content questions the existence and nature of God as a transcendent monotheistic deity, yet conversely, God’s omnipresence is confirmed by an implicit and simultaneously explicit expression of the immanent sacred through a theophanic and animist landscape. Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* follows on. In contrast to Glück’s focus on ontology, this reading uncovers how the poems resituate the terms and conditions under which cultural epistemologies are formed. Both collections share dialogic structures that require the reader to undergo a ritualistic or stated ‘entry’ through a nominal portal. However, while Glück critiques the theological dynamics of the human condition

under Christianity, Miller brings additional nuance to that critique by directing the reader's attention towards the inequities and consequences of colonial biases. In this instance, Rastafarian 'reasoning' as a literary tactic maps onto third and fourth wave ecocriticism in its fluidities and reconstitution of national, gender-based and social identities. Joy Harjo's *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* is the final book under consideration because it consolidates both strands of epistemological and ontological enquiry in its exemplary structures that are formed through Mskoke/Cree sacred numerological architectures. In Chapter 3, the problematics of appropriation, and with it idealised nostalgia, are also addressed. These challenges of representation may be read solely as aspects of the social-cultural flashpoints that occur at the points of juxtaposition in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. However, because *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* is also deployed here as a decolonised, indigenous research methodology, and by extension a conduit for spiritual and political merger and coherence, poetry's potential as an agent of societal healing and knowledge production is revealed and acknowledged.

All of the readings help to determine the critical capacities of sacred hybridity as an additional lens through which ecopoetic texts may be more comprehensively analysed. In the creative component, *Unreasonable Disturbances* responds to a variety of macropolitical pressures, from the refugee crisis and climate change to migration and urban gentrification. It also includes moments of autobiography, elegy (for flora and fauna) and emotional fracture that play out against an ecologically unstable backdrop. The book contains formal interventions and disruptions that characterise its linguistic composition as hybrid: these include the lyric/prose hybrid the 'coupling' (as devised by the author) alongside an interrupted *zuibitsu* and a sequence of found sonnets that explore these thematic territories through strategies of juxtaposition and syntactic subversion, some of which combine to reconfigure aspects of the numinous in contemporary settings. These formal constituents combine as a compositional technique through which the poems explore new ways of writing about nature, the city and the sacred.

Table of Contents

Prologue	8
Introduction to the Thesis	15
Chapter 1 Landscape, Theophany and the Sacred Hybrid in Louise Glück's <i>The Wild Iris</i>	53
Chapter 2 Hybrid Hierophanies: Where Rastafari Meets Religious Ecology in Kei Miller's <i>The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion</i>	87
Chapter 3 Re-iterating the Sacred Centre and Transcending Nostalgia in Joy Harjo's <i>Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings</i>	109
Conclusion	139
Epilogue	150
Bibliography	151
<i>Unreasonable Disturbances</i>	187
Bibliography	259

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.

'Meditation at Lagunitas', Robert Hass

Prologue

It is a rainy Autumn evening in London, 2013. I am part of a procession along the edge of the river Thames, making its way towards and across the Millennium Bridge. The group has been assembled by the ‘mixed blood (Métis/Cree/German) artist and musician Cheryl L’Hirondelle¹ as part of a participatory performance at Ecocentrix: Indigenous Arts/Sustainable Acts² – a strand of Royal Holloway’s five-year interdisciplinary project ‘Indigeneity in the Contemporary World: Performance, Politics, Belonging’³ led by Professor Helen Gilbert from the department of Drama, Theatre and Dance. I’m less aware of the context at this point, though, and more concentrated on what might happen next, as the group segues from passive theatre audience to active, ceremonial co-contributor. It transpires that together we are going to erect a tipi, but with candlelight, torches and burning sage sticks rather than animal hide and wooden poles. It is a performative event that draws on L’Hirondelle’s earlier work ‘Vancouver Songlines’⁴ and, as we point our battery-powered shafts of light skyward, Cheryl directs the beams so that they intersect to approximate the pole framework, each of which represents one of the four directions as a component of the tipi’s sacred architecture. Halfway through, I look up and a small flock of seagulls, perhaps as many as ten or twelve, is wheeling above us, high up in the

¹ Cheryl Hirondelle website <<http://www.cheryllhirondelle.com/about.html>>, and <<http://www.beatnation.org/cheryl-lhirondelle.html>>.

² Indigeneity in the Contemporary World website <<http://www.indigeneity.net/ecocentrix/>>.

³ See Indigeneity in the Contemporary World website for more details on this multi-participatory European Research Council Funded project <<http://www.indigeneity.net/>>.

⁴ See Vancouver Songlines Project website for details of the original <<http://vancouver-songlines.blogspot.co.uk/2008/11/vancouver-songlines-project-will-launch.html>>.

sky, but directly overhead. *We see you. We are part of this. Keep going.* This was the message from the birds. *We carry this energy up to the sky.* This is what I thought. This is what I *felt*.

The question was how would I articulate this interspecies communication in its illogical entirety as research for a theoretical thesis and, along with that, a spiritual belief system I was yet to explore intellectually? That these ideas and, crucially, *feelings* would somehow infuse the poetry was not an issue. I'd spent months on a residency on a boat in the middle of the Thames the year before. I was drawn to the water and the urban wildlife that populates the river and its banks. Being on, in or near it was comforting to me, and part of a healing process that had needed to take place after a full-term stillbirth, which was the subject of my first book, *An Aviary of Small Birds* (Carcenet, 2014). One of the things that surprised me, as a life-long Londoner, was the prevalence of nature, or non-human organic life as one might more accurately describe it, in the collection. On reflection, I realised that these poetic emphases were a response to the shock and trauma of the loss. If the impetus behind *An Aviary of Small Birds* was to make a physically public yet emotionally intimate bereavement broadly accessible, then the inspiration behind *Unreasonable Disturbances* was to make a vast, collective and macro-political grief intimate. In an entry on the Carcanet blog I wrote:

Thinking about it now, this connection with the natural world makes sense. Having experienced a sudden and unexpected bereavement it felt like all the certainties I might have believed in (hospitals are a safe place to have a baby; midwives/doctors know what they're doing; I will, finally, have a family etc ...) were destabilised, if not obliterated. But the trees, the sea, a flock of birds, the moon: for me these things were part of a wider constellation, more profound and mysterious and interconnected than a

human society that so often fails us; these animals and elements were a constant, they wouldn't disappear.

Although of course, they are disappearing. In September [2014] a Zoological Society report⁵ revealed we've killed off half of the world's wildlife in the past 40 years. Marine devastation is equally, if not more acute: as we empty the oceans of fish and sea life we are filling them with hazardous waste, plastic debris, endocrine disruptors and carcinogenic toxins.⁶

I grew up in a politicised family. While she was a single-parent student at North London Polytechnic in the 1980s, my mother involved my sisters and me in a variety of grassroots activism. She took us to Greenham Common, to vigils outside South Africa House demanding Nelson Mandela's release; we camped at Glastonbury when it was still a CND festival organised by Greenpeace; had ramshackle Sunday lunches at home with the women who ran the Wages for Housework campaign and the King's Cross Women's Centre; Mum formed the Feminist Action Group aka FAG (a joke she loved) with her friends and staged sit-ins at the local Department of Health and Social Security office; she helped set-up a peace camp on Hampstead Heath. A lifelong member of the Labour Party, a Garveyite and a Jamaican émigré, my father was a co-founder of the UK's first multicultural national radio station, Spectrum International. He was the only one of its dozen or so directors who refused to be photographed with Margaret Thatcher when she came to visit the initiative as Prime Minister. Our household was neither God-fearing nor atheist; my mother hails from a working-

⁵ Damian Carrington, 'Earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past 40 years, says WWF', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>>.

⁶ Karen McCarthy Woolf, 'A natural hybrid', on Carcanet website, November 2014 <<http://carcanetblog.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/a-natural-hybrid-by-karen-mccarthy-woolf.html>>.

class London family with a Church of England background, where attending a service was an occasional event – weddings, christenings, funerals. My father, somewhat surprisingly for a Jamaican of his era, was sent to the local Catholic secondary school for educational purposes only (his mother and grandmother were Baptists). He considered himself ideologically aligned to Rastafarianism, predominantly as a political movement, although the balance tipped in the direction of religiosity towards the end of his life. Meanwhile, my mother's politics led her to feminist matriarchal paganism, complementary and holistic medicine and associated eclectic spiritually attentive practices, from runes and tarot cards, homeopathy, flower remedies and herbalism to yoga and Alexander Technique. These were not positions or ideologies that we *believed* in, as such, although we did believe in them, but more divinatory activities and medicinal solutions that we *practised*. It is probably also pertinent to note here that my parents met in The 100 Club on Oxford Street at a jazz gig. I was raised on Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Bob Marley, Dennis Brown, Earth, Wind & Fire, Osibisa and Santana. These influences were formative in my tastes in and relationship to music, which stretches from Nile Rogers' New York disco, jazz funk fusion, Studio One reggae, soul, Jah Shaka, ragga, Grace Jones to hip-hop, trip-hop, house, trance, Eno-ambient, minimalist electronica and industrial techno. If there was a god in the house, for us that god was made manifest in music.

These familial particularities did not conspire to create a sense of ease in identifying with what I perceived to be a traditional representation of contemporary 'blackness', an assimilation I was keen to enact in my mid-twenties, when questions of who we are and how we fit in are more keenly felt as we transition from youth to adulthood. I interviewed numerous mixed-race/bi-

racial/black-white people about their experiences of cultural hybridity for *All Mixed Up*, a co-edited anthology (unpublished), and wrote a period drama about the mixed-race daughter of a slave and an aristocrat⁷. It took this writing and research for me to better understand and reconcile these inner tensions and social anxieties.

With these biographical elements in mind, it is small surprise that my response to L'Hirondelle's psycho-geographic First Nations ceremonial theatre as cartographical songline was so accepting. Or that later, in 2014, as part of my research for poems in *Unreasonable Disturbances*, I travelled to Lanzarote as an associate artist to support Exxpedition, an all-female trans-Atlantic sailing mission investigating the impact of micro-plastics pollution on marine animal and women's endocrine systems. Or that the disrupted Pillow Book 'Brixton Hill' celebrates and mourns the presence and decline of the Caribbean community in a residential London area where gentrification has accelerated so sharply it resembles an economic colonialism, where the pre-existing community is on the verge of becoming as locally historical as the town centre's Windrush Square. If I had developed a cynicism over the years, it was directed at a compromised media disseminating fallacious political rhetoric, neo-liberal capitalism dressed up as global enterprise, or fundamentalist a/theism under which guise violent mercenaries, democratic and corrupt governments have justified the exploitation and killing of local, indigenous, black and working-class communities, individuals and environments in the name of profit.

⁷ Dido Belle Lindsay grew up at Kenwood House in eighteenth-century Hampstead, an area local to me as a child. *Dido* was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 as an Afternoon Play in 2006; her story was later made into a film, *Belle*, which was released in 2013.

It is within this ambient and autobiographical field that the notion of sacred hybridity, as a means by which we might read, analyse and write poems that aim to capture and distil these complexities, came into being. The inclusion of this Prologue embodies that idea – where an attention to the numinous might amplify rather than undermine a poem’s semantic and political ecology. Where a communication with a flock of seagulls during an immersive and theatrical rendition of a First Nations religious ritual and a porous, omni-faith approach to the spiritual might not be conflated with creationism and climate-change denial. And where a critical reading of the work might not automatically assume either atheism or mono-denominational religiosity. In the autobiographical essay ‘The Education of the Poet’, Louise Glück writes that ‘The dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden, and the path to the hidden world is not inscribed by will’.⁸ The concept of will is an important one, as it is broadly affiliated: to both the process of writing, to chasing an idea and knowing that ‘illumination’ or creative inspiration is given, never prised; and also to an honouring of the mysterious, the unknown or, as Glück’s statement implies, the hidden. ‘Children love secret paths’, writes Susan Griffin in her introduction to ‘Poetry As Knowledge’.⁹ ‘They trace private ways into a plot of ground sanctified by its separation from the scrutiny of the adult. Secrecy leads the child into a place of freedom where she may commit the outrageous act the soul needs to survive’. Poetry is also a secret path: to the childhood den, the cave in which the voice might echo and ricochet, to the unspoken and the utterance, as the absence and the presence, the ink and the white space.

⁸ Louise Glück, ‘The Education of the Poet’, in *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry*, 3rd edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p.7.

⁹ Susan Griffin, ‘Poetry as a Way of Knowledge’, in *Made from this Earth: Selections from her Writing, 1967-1982* (London: The Women’s Press, 1982), p.245.

Will, in its asymmetric conjugation to freedom, also provokes contemplation on how a poem's textual infrastructure might insulate it from the distortions of political polemic or pious sentimentality. In writing what Carolyn Forché termed a 'poetry of witness'¹⁰ at a time when environmental imperatives and political disquietude are intense, might a collaboration and partisanship between the sacred and the profane be a positive, even hopeful endeavour? Might it not play its part in a larger societal healing? Could it come to constitute what I have come to think of as an activism of the heart?

¹⁰ Carolyn Forché, Introduction, in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. by Carolyn Forché (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), p.40.

Introduction to the Thesis

The 'sacred hybrid' is a term I have coined that describes an integrative framework through which we can read and critique contemporary poetry demonstrating ecological/environmental themes via a relationship with nature, politics, autobiographical elements and the sacred. It addresses a long-standing ecocritical paradox, namely, that by taking nature as our subject, we amplify our relationship with it as 'Other' and inadvertently exacerbate the forces of ideological separation that have fuelled the ecological crisis. It also makes the case for a more sociable approach to culturally diverse and theology-alert contributions to the ecocritical canon in order to capture more nuanced and layered readings of contemporary ecopoetry.

Rationale: Three Close Readings

Rather than applying a broad and, consequently, more cursory overview of contemporary practices, this thesis scrutinises three poetry collections in detail through close reading of the texts.

The first, Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*, is contemporaneous to the development of first-wave ecopoetics. The book is emblematic to the sacred hybrid as an idea because it both confirms and simultaneously queries Romantic nature writing. As a text it allows space in which to question the existence and nature of God as a transcendent monotheistic deity yet, by providing a theophanic platform through which the landscape communicates, it can be identified as existing within an animist framework where the immanent sacred is both implicit and explicit. These ideological and textual contradictions mirror similar themes identified within the development of later iterations of

ecocriticism within which rigorous ontological debate can take place.¹¹ However, the reading of Glück's work as a starting point is also designed to push against an exclusively materialist interpretation of environmental lyric poetry while querying the contemporary validity of Christianity which, it could be argued, as a mainstream Western religion, does not benefit from the gloss of the 'exotic' as do other, less familiar spiritual allegiances such as Buddhism or New Age paganism. Equally, given that Christianity is recognised within religious ecology, environmental ethics and elsewhere¹² as a contributory agent in planetary and biodiversity degradation, it is both problematic and germane to begin with this questioning of Christianity.^{13 14}

Published in 1992, *The Wild Iris* is a landmark turn-of-the-century text in its intense and urgent focus on ecological, intimate and spiritual loss.¹⁵ It comes at a time when literary ecocriticism is beginning to mature and take shape as a more unified, self-aware and coherent discipline.^{16 17} Chronologically, it sits alongside contemporary works such as Adrienne Rich's *An Atlas of the Difficult World*,¹⁸

¹¹ Lawrence Buell, 'Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends', *Qui Parle* 19.2 (Spring/Summer 2011), pp.87-115.

¹² John Grim, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014).

¹³ Holmes Rolston III, 'Environmental Ethics', in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd edn, ed. by Nicholas Bunnin and E. P. Tsui-James (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

¹⁴ Lynn White Jnr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, March 1967, Vol. 155, Issue 3767, pp.1203-1207.

¹⁵ David Baker, 'Kinds of Knowing', *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, 15.1 (Winter, 1993), pp.184-192.

¹⁶ See Cheryll Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); and Michelle Baleav with Cheryll Glotfelty, 'The Formation of a Field: Ecocriticism in America – An Interview with Cheryll Glotfelty', *PMLA*, 127.3 (May 2012), pp.607-616.

¹⁷ Buell, 'Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends', pp.87-115.

¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

Denise Levertov's *Evening Train*¹⁹ and A. R. Ammons' book-length ecological poem *Garbage*, published one year later in 1993.²⁰ Thematically, these books share concerns about the impact of human behaviours on natural and built environments; stylistically they are highly distinct with, for example, Levertov's poems unfolding under steady, numinous light, and Ammons' un-stopped and copious outpourings around the nature of beauty, decay, renewal and sustainability becoming mimetic of the subject itself. However, it is *The Wild Iris* with its structural relationship with absence, silence, a crisis of spiritual belief and emotional pain, juxtaposed with an inherent animism and, by extension, an alternative spiritual cosmology that transcends hegemonic mono/a/theism which provoked my interest. Moreover, that Glück is not predominantly identified as an 'ecopoet', in the same way that writers such as Gary Snyder, A. R. Ammons or W. S. Merwin are, for example,²¹ allows for other strands – in this case the theological dialectic that occupies the heart of the collection – to be considered with equal weight.

In addition to the analytical opportunities, these multivalent tensions were personally resonant and subsequently relevant to the compositional and emotional strategies employed in *Unreasonable Disturbances*, the poetry collection that constitutes the creative component of this thesis. There, the relationships between intimate/autobiographical and collective grief coalesce, a transformative and formal process I was navigating as my attention shifted from mourning the loss of a baby son in *An Aviary of Small Birds* to considering human-instigated, political and ecological violence as another, larger communal loss. Alice Oswald

¹⁹ Denise Levertov, *Evening Train* (New York: New Directions Press, 1992).

²⁰ A. R. Ammons, *Garbage* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

²¹ Leonard M. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*. 1st edn. (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1999). JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130j453>>.

is a British lyric poet, gardener and classicist, whose ventriloquist poems in *Dart*,²² *Woods Etc*²³ and *Weeds and Wildflowers*,²⁴ for example, alongside her editorship of the ecopoetry anthology *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*,²⁵ might suggest her work as a more obvious subject through which to demonstrate sacred hybridity. However, despite Oswald's many compatibilities and confluences, via poems that articulate and enact an immersive ecological stance, ultimately *The Wild Iris* felt more relevant to the project as a work of vigorous ontological interrogation via lyric means.

None of this is to dismiss environmentally resonant writing by Glück's antecedents and contemporaries respectively, including poets such as Wendell Berry, W. S. Merwin and Mary Oliver, all of whom demonstrate a deep and close relationship with the land and its animal inhabitants. But none of these works elicited such a strength of *feeling* which, as stated above, was due in part to thematic continuities and tensions but also, overwhelmingly, to an association with melancholy and loss. Equally Robert Hass, Jane Hirshfield, Chase Twichell and Gary Snyder, all of whom are more closely and overtly self-identified with American ecopoetry as viewed through the spiritual lens of Zen Buddhism, were also considerations. In this instance, rather than considering these strands through the critical component of the thesis, they are explored creatively through the *zuihitsu*, a tenth-century Japanese form that was reintroduced to contemporary poetry audiences by the Japanese-American poet Kimiko Hahn in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*.²⁶ This journal/diary-based form has the capacity to

²² Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

²³ Alice Oswald, *Woods Etc.* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

²⁴ Alice Oswald, *Weeds and Wildflowers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

²⁵ Alice Oswald, ed., *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

²⁶ Kimiko Hahn, *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (New York: W W Norton, 2006).

capture the fleeting immediacy of the physical environment in its quotidian structures, and is used and disrupted in *Unreasonable Disturbances* as a means by which to express and investigate contemporary cultural and ecological fracture in urban nature.

Ontological exploration through lyric means also brought me to my second text, Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* which orbits the meeting point between opposing ideologies. In addition, the reading of it in Chapter 2 corresponds to another node of inclusivity that emanates from my identity as a writer of colour (as detailed in the Prologue) alongside a desire to incorporate postcolonial perspectives, whether ethical, feminist, political and/or spiritual. This has been a relatively under-represented area for a variety of reasons both in terms of literature production and criticism. In a 2001 overview of the field, William Slaymaker discusses the development, or lack thereof, of self-identified ecopoetries in African literature. One issue he spotlights, for example, is an activist and public bias towards the protection of endangered animal populations and habitats with little concern for, and/or at the expense of, local communities existing at the brunt-end of globalised capitalism. These skews, he asserts, are both causal and symptomatic of a disconnect between the concept of what might constitute representational ecoliterature and the complex realities of local populations.²⁷ Elsewhere, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the physical collision between climate change, neo-capitalist economic disparity and resident black American communities prompted a recontextualisation of the ecocritical remit. To this end, Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic identified the beginnings of a 'third wave' of culturally inclusive ecocriticism, 'which recognizes ethnic and

²⁷ William Slaymaker, 'Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses', *PMLA*, 116.1, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies (Jan., 2001), pp.129-144.

national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries'.²⁸ While the incorporation of 'ethnicity' into the ecocritical canon is a step towards a broader notion of what inclusive ecological poetics might look like, it is also potentially problematic as it could be countered that writers of colour are often read primarily against ethnic identity and cultural politics at the expense of other prominent themes. Nonetheless, it is an important and necessary iteration and one which sacred hybridity chimes with in its attempt to reinstate pre-colonial, indigenous and nature-based belief systems alongside materialist theories and concepts. Camille Dungy, in her anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*²⁹ expands the aperture of 'nature poetry' to include poems that register the legacy of slavery as a system which imposed both an enforced relationship with cultivation of the land and the subsequent urbanisation of the free population – an idea that can be extended beyond the volume's geographical limitation to North America to include the Caribbean diaspora. This chimes with other recent developments. In the UK the publication of *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets*³⁰ sought to redistribute the emphasis of collected black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) poetries from the city centres to include rural and suburban locales. Other notable publications include Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *Swims*,³¹ a poetry collection that connects the restorative benefits of swimming to environmental activism. In a future volume which could be developed from the critical part of the thesis, this is a title that could be examined

²⁸ Joni Adamson, and Scott Slovic, 'Guest Editors' Introduction. The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism', *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, 34.2 (Summer 2009), p.11.

²⁹ Camille Dungy, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press: 2009).

³⁰ *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets*, ed. by Jackie Kay, James Procter, Gemma Robinson (Hexham, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2012).

³¹ Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, *Swims* (London: Pinned in the Margins, 2017).

in greater complexity by using sacred hybridity as a means by which to trace and register water as a sacred, revolutionary and emotionally healing element.³²

In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* Miller renders the Caribbean landscape through hybrid strategies that use song, chant, prayer and animal geographies as a form of revisionist mapping of nature, geography and nationhood. Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, like Miller's representation of the Jamaican landscape in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, is another recent collection which could be approached through postcolonial ecopoetics.³³ However, it is Miller's fusion of Western/African spiritual practices and religiosity as embodied in Rastafarianism with a macropolitical version of Jamaican culture, geography and history rendered via an ecopoetic aesthetic that spoke more closely to the varied concerns of my own project: this is the impetus for and emphasis of the reading in Chapter 2.

While Glück and Miller related to different aspects of my own cultural background, I was also concerned that the final section of the critical component should attempt to extend its inclusivity beyond my own limits: I wanted 'sacred hybridity' to include other belief systems and forms of spirituality. Gary Snyder has demonstrated a longstanding and vocal alignment with indigenous First Nations religiosity as an integral and authentic strand within his poetry, prose and life. These associations initially brought his work into the frame. However, Joy Harjo is a 'mixed-blood' Cree/Navajo poet writing from an ecofeminist perspective and these cultural affiliations chimed more closely with my own

³² Richard Lea, 'Elizabeth-Jane Burnett: 'Swimming can give you the optimism to keep going'', *The Guardian*, 16 November 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/16/elizabeth-jane-burnett-swims-interview>>.

³³ Elaine Savory, 'Towards a Caribbean Ecopoetics: Derek Walcott's Language of Plants', in *Postcolonial Ecologies*, ed. by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Hanley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

experience as a mixed-race, woman of colour. I was also keen to examine the work of a First Nations poet directly. This is not to accuse Snyder of cultural appropriation, more simply to acknowledge a greater sense of affinity and pertinence in relation to Harjo's writing. In all her work Harjo has sought to blend and articulate politics, autobiography and a communication with nature and animals through the lens of a contemporary First Nations experience as a vital poetry of witness. In *A Map to the Next World*,³⁴ for example, she blurs the boundaries between poetry and prose as folk tale and alternative cosmogony, while her memoir *Crazy Brave*³⁵ develops and expands on autobiographical strands from earlier collections. These components are consistent and relevant motifs: however, in *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*,³⁶ which is the focus of Chapter 3, there is a development in the structural aspects of sequencing and disruption that resonates with some of the hybrid procedures and formal experimentations in *Unreasonable Disturbances*. So for example, the title poem 'Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings', which interweaves the formal registers of business and management with lyric poetry, may be considered in tandem with poems such as 'Brixton Hill: A Pillow Book' in *Unreasonable Disturbances*, where subject headings from the original text are re-deployed as a means by which to evoke a local and contemporary landscape. Equally, the patterning of longer narratives through dispersed sequencing is also a shared feature. As Chapter 3 asserts, Harjo's textual structures are aligned to an understanding of the work as a composite poetry with contemporary sacred significance, in its forms, content, explication of Mskoke/Cree and other indigenous spiritual practices, alongside its use of sound,

³⁴ Joy Harjo, *A Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

³⁵ Joy Harjo, *Crazy Brave* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

³⁶ Joy Harjo, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

song, music and linguistic techniques. The thesis also privileges Harjo's poetry as a 'decolonised', indigenous research methodology and, in so doing, seeks to acknowledge poetry and music's transdisciplinary conduits for the production of knowledge systems.^{37 38} Here, the merging and juxtaposition of the language of 'conflict resolution' with poetry also coincides with what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as 'mestiza consciousness', where a tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction are a means by which subject-object dualities are ultimately transcended.³⁹ As such, the focus on *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* as the final text in the critical component derives from that fact that it simultaneously defines and enacts many of the principals of sacred hybridity in its structures, ecopoetics and spiritual pedagogies.

One significant exclusion from the current enquiry is British/Welsh poet Robert Minhinnick. His latest collection, *Diary of the Last Man*,⁴⁰ is omitted for reasons of space and time alone, as it was published in the immediate run-up to submission. If there were an opportunity to do so – in, for example, an extension of this thesis in book form – *Diary of the Last Man* is salient for a number of reasons. Most luminous is its relationship to ecological loss via political and ideological negligence and the fluidity with which this coalesces in a taut consideration of spirituality as an agent for change and/or salvation. Although Minhinnick has dealt with ecological issues throughout his career (he was a co-founder of the Welsh division of the environmental campaigning agency Friends of the Earth), there is a particular poignancy in the urgency of this most recent

³⁷ Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012).

³⁸ de Freitas, L., E. Morin, and B. Nicolescu, Charter of Transdisciplinarity (2002), < <http://www.inters.org/Freitas-Morin-Nicolescu-Transdisciplinarity>>.

³⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Robert Minhinnick, *Diary of the Last Man* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017).

collection. This is reflected in the title, for it is the diary of the ‘last’ man: a nomenclature that recalls and addresses the pitfalls of the apocalyptic narrative as a defeatist form of elegy against the pressures of the human impact on the environment in the anthropocene. As a British writer, Minhinnick’s locality is also apposite, bringing the geography of the analysis closer to home and engaging with indigenous aspects of religiosity that predate Christianity.

Ecocritical Contexts

What ecocriticism constitutes exactly has, according to Lawrence Buell, been liable to ‘an imprecision’ of definition as an ‘Unstable Signifier’, whereby its identity and nomenclature oscillates with the swift and exponential movement and processes of its subject(s), ecology, literature and nature as a dynamic, organic and complex entity.

In a wide-ranging chronological survey, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’,⁴¹ Buell spotlights Cheryll Glotfelty’s simple and often-cited definition of ecocriticism in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*⁴² as ““the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment””.⁴³ This definition’s broad scope is not detailed or nuanced but, conversely, this is what makes it useful in accommodating political, spiritual and scientific strands, all of which are relevant here.

The ecocritical discipline has been chronologically categorised into four ‘waves’. According to Buell, the first wave emanated from ‘two semi-coordinated and interpenetrating epicenters: British romanticism, with a genre focus especially

⁴¹ Buell, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’, pp.87-115.

⁴² Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp.xv-xxxvii.

⁴³ Buell, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’, p.88.

on poetry in that tradition (including its Anglo-American filiations) and U.S. nature writing (ditto) [...].⁴⁴ At this time in the early 1990s, the movement Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess had named in a 1972 lecture as ‘deep ecology’ also took hold as a platform for ecocriticism. Its descendants can be discerned in what we now consider to be fourth wave ecocritical thought, as exemplified by deep materialists such as Timothy Morton.⁴⁵

Writing in 2010/11, Buell identified the ‘second wave’ as having occurred at the turn of the century, at around 2000, the same year in which Jonathan Bate’s influential study of romanticism under an ecocritical lens *The Song of the Earth*⁴⁶ was published (as what might be termed, under Buell’s categorisation, as late first wave). A pivotal critique of the first wave, from the incoming generation, was its ‘naively pre-theoretical valorization of experiential contact with the natural world’.⁴⁷ Experiential contact is, however, important to poetry as an art form in which feeling may be privileged. ‘I do think that poetic consciousness is the fullest most complete consciousness,’ writes Li-Young Lee, ‘It gives voice to the fullest of who we are. As I’m walking around in the world, I’m noticing what is around me. I look at the bridge out there and the river, and I think that’s so beautiful, that’s so mysterious. Then I realise it’s my own mystery I’m looking at.’⁴⁸ While intellectual rigour is an essential part of any academic discipline, the discourse may lose power if it has no other methodology or accepted criteria with

⁴⁴ Buell, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’, p.89.

⁴⁵ Arne Naess, ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary’, *Inquiry* 16 (Spring, 1973), pp.95-100.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000).

⁴⁷ Buell, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’, p.94.

⁴⁸ Li-Young Lee, ‘The Subject is Silence’, in *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*, ed. by Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press: 2012) p.127-128.

which to interact. In his essay, *Is Nature Real?*,⁴⁹ Snyder vigorously rejected the notion of categorising nature as a purely social construct, dismissing this new ecocritical approach as ‘the same old occidental view of nature as a realm of resources that has been handed over to humanity for its own use’.⁵⁰

Elsewhere, the second wave sought to redress an ecocentric focus on non-human environmental conservation at the expense of, or with little regard to, local communities, many of which had been repressed by the same exploitative forces of industrial capitalism. ‘This reaction was not merely theoretic and notional but also pragmatic and political’, writes Buell ‘against what was widely – albeit lumpingly – perceived as the quietistic if not retrograde politics of ecocentric ecocriticism’.⁵¹ As stated earlier, it also accounts for, and may be simultaneously a product of, a greater engagement in ecocritical discourse from postcolonial scholars and vice versa.

Overwhelmingly, Buell’s assessment of this second wave is distinguished by greater diversity of input and multivalent threads, and includes more geographically various conversation outside of the occidental remit, an expansion of space-based and sociocentric discourses on the relationships between rural and urban environments, nature and the city as a development of first wave bio-regionalism, alongside an intensification of focus on ‘the compromised, endangered landscape of Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the modern locus classicus of “toxic discourse”⁵² as a book which changed both environmental perceptions and government policy in its blend of science, politics and lyricism.

⁴⁹ Gary Snyder, ‘Is Nature Real?’, *Resurgence & Ecologist*, 190 (September/October 1998), np.

⁵⁰ Snyder, ‘Is Nature Real?’, np.

⁵¹ Buell, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’, p.94.

⁵² Buell, ‘Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends’, p.97.

These asymmetric maturations are consistent with what Serpill Oppermann characterises as a discipline that has developed via a ‘rhizomatic path with multiple theoretical methods and international alliances’.⁵³ In his overview of ecocriticism Scott Slovic offers the term ‘palimpsest’ rather than ‘wave’ to describe the development of the discipline, as a metaphor that denotes a surface which may be re-used or written over, with traces of what has gone before remaining underneath. Semantic nuances are useful in that they remind us that one mode of thinking does not wipe out what has gone before and that these pre-existing fields may still be operative as another school of thought gathers momentum. That there may be organic and productive interaction and overlap between each is also implicit, although not inevitable. To this end, Slovic catalogues a third wave from 2000-present in ‘The Fourth Wave of Ecocriticism: Materiality, Sustainability, and Applicability’,⁵⁴ as including fields such as green queer theory, ecofeminism and multiple gendered approaches as well as animal subjectivity and agency, all components of a fourth wave which extends to capture discourse of material feminism, trans-corporeality and eco-cosmopolitanism as a successor to bio-regionalism.

Buell’s overview is 28 pages long and, given the remit in terms of space (it is within a journal special issue), generous in its inclusions and expressed desire for a greater transdisciplinary conversation in the future. Yet, overall, references to nature and religion or the sacred are scant, almost to the point of omission;⁵⁵

⁵³ Serpill Oppermann, *New International Voices in Ecocriticism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), p.1.

⁵⁴ Scott Slovic, ‘The Fourth Wave of Ecocriticism: Materiality, Sustainability, and Applicability’, *Transatlantic Ecology: Environmental literature / reflux and transformation of thought* <http://sunrise-n.com/transatlantic_ecology/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SlovicThe-Fourth-Wave-of-Ecocriticism.doc.pdf>

⁵⁵ George B. Handley, *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda and Walcott* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007);

failing even to refer the reader to Bron Taylor's two-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Continuum: 2005, 2008), which includes copious related and relevant nodes of enquiry. Of course, this helicopter summary is not intended to be exhaustive but, nonetheless, its gestures towards inclusivity and intellectual co-operation are explicit.

So too are the reconstructive efforts of the materialist, 'deep ecologist' and literary theorist Timothy Morton, who has advocated a radical excision of nature as an aesthetic, literary and theoretical term as a necessary response to an increasingly urgent environmental scenario.⁵⁶ However, while Morton's argument is creative in its language and persuasions, and has been gaining widespread intellectual foothold, the contention here is that, as a manifesto for paradigm shift, it is weakened by the fact that its intellectual compass and ideological heritage do not challenge the secular as an exclusive environment for knowledge production. And, further, that this may result in a mismatch between the thematic scope of ecologically attentive poetics and an emerging orthodoxy of materialist ecocriticism that seeks to analyse them. As the editors of *Wild Reckoning: An Anthology Provoked by Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring'*⁵⁷ contend, if Carson were alive today,

What she wanted to show us was not that everything was interconnected, as in some web or lattice – to use the current, popular cybernetic model –

and Catherine Rigby's *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2004) being notable exceptions.

⁵⁶ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007).

⁵⁷ John Burnside, and Maurice Riordan, eds., *Wild Reckoning: an anthology provoked by Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring'* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2004), p.19.

but that matter is continuous, like a Celtic knot. This continuum, she believed, was the only single narrative that includes all others.

In referring the reader to the Celtic knot, as a symbol that ties both Christian and Pagan religions together across a temporal continuum, the suggestion that a next step in the development of ecocriticism will be an intermeshing of spiritual and sacred religiosity with systems thinking becomes metaphorically implicit.

Ambient Conditions

In 2007 Charles Taylor published *A Secular Age*⁵⁸ – a history and critique of the relationship between religion as belief and practice and materialist thought, spotlighting a shift in Western, predominantly Christian cultures, in which he states:

Our modern civilization is made up of a host of societies, subsocieties and milieux, all rather different from each other. But the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others.⁵⁹

Paradoxically, and not coincidentally, Taylor's assessment comes in an era when a surge in aggressively political fundamentalist theism is testing the competence and robustness of multi-faith, secular societies, whether via the infiltration of creationist Christian evangelism in the United States government,⁶⁰ diasporic

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵⁹ Taylor, p.19.

⁶⁰ Andrew Buncombe, 'Donald Trump appoints creationist college president to lead higher education reform taskforce', *The Independent*, 1 February 2017 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump->

Islamic radicalisation or alleged Hindu mob attacks on Muslims in India.⁶¹ Taylor outlines three key types of secularity: first in the separation of Church and state and how this manifests in an absence/decline of the sacred in public space; second, as a pervading decline in belief and religious practice; and third, as a *condition* under which spiritual faith is now an *option* (as opposed to a pre-Enlightenment inevitability) in a pluralism of choice.

That there are choices in what we believe as a cosmological story, and if and how we might express gratitude or worship around these beliefs, is a valuable endowment of the secular, as a system which aims to keep societal law distinct from a singular religious doctrine. But if, as Taylor asserts, we now operate within a paradigm where there is a ‘presumption of unbelief’, what effect does this have on the biotic landscape and, consequently, on Western society’s ‘cosmic imaginary’? What are the cultural and spiritual impacts when, as religious historian Karen Armstrong contends, ‘we live in a society of scientific *logos* and myth has fallen into disrepute’?⁶² Both authors provide cogent accounts of the primary religious outcomes of these alleged imbalances: specifically, a resurgence of totalitarian monotheism and what Armstrong identifies as a form of ‘secular fundamentalism’⁶³ which, she argues, is a poorly nuanced critique, partly due to its remit as a rebuttal to the crudities of aggressively evangelical creationism, and partly as a result of insufficient inter-disciplinary dialogue – a situation borne of an incongruity between remote and esoteric theology and absolutist rationalism.

creationist-jerry-falwell-jr-liberty-college-higher-education-reform-taskforce-a7558061.html>.

⁶¹ Associated Press in New Delhi, ‘Modi condemns rise in mob violence against beef-eaters in India’, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/29/modi-condemns-rise-mob-violence-beef-eaters-india>>

⁶² Karen Armstrong, ‘The Death of God?’, in *The Case for God* (Oxford: The Bodley Head: 2009), p.3.

⁶³ Armstrong, p.288.

‘Typical of the fundamentalist mindset’, she writes, ‘is the belief that there is one way of interpreting reality. For the new atheists, scientism alone can lead us to truth. But science depends upon faith, intuition and aesthetic vision as well as on reason.’⁶⁴

Situated at the interstices of these continuing and contemporary conditions of ideological dualism is religious ecology and ecotheology, both syncretic and porous disciplines. Jay McDaniel aligns ecotheology to the mathematician–philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s phenomenology of process thought,⁶⁵ wherein he ‘articulated a theory of interrelatedness where internal relations hold all life together in a vibrant web of being’.⁶⁶ Religious ecology is an interfaith and synergetic movement and discipline, initiated by Thomas Berry in partnership with Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, and which gathers world religions together in order to facilitate and grow interfaith dialogue and scholarship on climate change.⁶⁷ These sociable approaches correspond to Gaia Theory, which the earth systems and climate scientist James Lovelock first published with biochemist Lynn Margulis, where they propose that ‘the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity’⁶⁸ and that, as

⁶⁴ Armstrong, p.295.

⁶⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay on Cosmology, Corrected Edition*, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne (London: MacMillan, 1929).

⁶⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the 21st Century*, ed. by Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press: 2009).

⁶⁷ See Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* for an account of this interreligious alliance that brings together occidental and oriental religions, indigenous sacred practice and belief systems.

⁶⁸ See James E. Lovelock, ‘Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis’, *Tellus* XXVI (1974), pp.1-2
<<http://www.jameslovelock.org/page34.html>>.

a ‘self-regulating system, similar to a living organism’,⁶⁹ the planet is ‘understood better as a living being than as a machine. Rock, sea, cloud, tree, animal are, they argue, in continual and complex relation, with each affecting and subtly altering the others’.⁷⁰ The science within Gaia Theory has been variously queried, co-opted, dispersed and amended since its first publication in 1974, notably by Lovelock himself. In 2006 he issued dire warnings about the impacts of global temperature rise in *The Revenge of Gaia*⁷¹ (note the anthropomorphic noun), a consternation he has since modified as alarmist, while controversially supporting nuclear power over sustainable energy as a pragmatic human survival strategy.⁷² In ‘Anthropocentrism and the Argument from Gaia Theory’, Thomas J. Donahue states that, although the Earth’s systemic composition and attributes are sufficient criteria to suggest an organism, its authors never intended this premise to be interpreted literally. Doing so, he posits, would have rendered Gaia Theory ‘too strong’; its claims are ‘metaphorical only, and this is legitimate, since metaphors have an important place in the progress of scientific inquiry’.⁷³ While the science of Gaia may have imperfections as well as currency, it is salient to

⁶⁹ See Philip Ball, ‘James Lovelock reflects on Gaia’s legacy’, *Nature* 9 April 2014 for an interview with Lovelock in which he conservatively revises his predictions on the exponential impact of global temperature increase <<http://www.nature.com/news/james-lovelock-reflects-on-gaia-s-legacy-1.15017>>.

⁷⁰ Patricia Monaghan, ‘Gaia’, in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature: Volume I*, ed. by Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum: 2005, 2008), p.679.

⁷¹ James E. Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why The Earth is Fighting Back and How We Can Still Save Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2006).

⁷² There is a wealth of literature and associated disciplines surrounding the veracity and efficacy of Gaia Theory. See for example the *New Scientist* at <<https://www.newscientist.com/round-up/gaia/>>; Decca Aitkenhead’s piece on James E. Lovelock, ‘James Lovelock: “enjoy life while you can: in 20 years global warming will hit the fan”’, *The Guardian* 1 March 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2008/mar/01/scienceofclimatechange>>; and *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature: Volume I*, ed. by Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2005, 2008).

⁷³ Thomas J. Donahue, ‘Anthropocentrism and the Argument from Gaia Theory’, *Ethics and Environment*, 15.2 (Fall 2010), pp.51-77.

note, as does Patricia Monaghan in her encyclopedia summary, that Lovelock's iteration of non-mechanical earth theory comprised both empirical science and Armstrong's notion of 'aesthetic vision'. It was Lovelock's 'neighbor and friend, Nobel prize-winning novelist William Golding' who named the hypothesis after Gaia the Greek Earth Goddess⁷⁴, and there is a certain irony in the fact that a theory that has underpinned a generation of anti-anthropocentric, environmental positions might have such popular appeal precisely because of its power as an anthropomorphic mythic metaphor. On the front cover of *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*, Lovelock is described in a *Guardian* quotation as a 'prophet who deserves every honour the human race can bestow'.⁷⁵ This accreditation no doubt responds to the fact that many of Lovelock's climate predictions have come to pass – but, nevertheless, the religious proximities are evident. Is there a larger anxiety embedded in this headline, suggesting that, in order to survive on a planet we are making exponentially inhospitable, humanity needs a *saviour*, whose powers stretch beyond the political or the mundane? Lovelock provides an auto-historical chronology of the theory, dating its conception to 1965, and the first citation to 1968. This period coincides with what he describes as 'the peak of the New Age – contemporary with Woodstock and Beatles, which perhaps accounts for why so many scientists still regard it as part of the plethora of New Age nonsense which was around at the time'.⁷⁶ Lovelock does not elaborate on quite what this 'nonsense' involved is, but also attributes initial hostility towards the

⁷⁴ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature: Volume I*, ed. by Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2005, 2008), pp.679-680.

⁷⁵ That Lovelock is afforded the moniker of a 'prophet' indicates not only that Gaia's predictions have largely held, but also suggests the semi-religious status that the theory and its author occupy as 'saviours' of a compromised and volatile ecosystem.

⁷⁶ James E. Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.106.

hypothesis to the ‘reductionist and disciplinary nature of the Earth and life sciences’ in contrast to climatologists and physicists who were more accustomed to responding to dynamic uncertainties.⁷⁷ In addition, Richard Dawkins proved conclusively in *The Extended Phenotype* that Lovelock and Margulis’s original statement in the hypothesis that ‘organisms, or the biosphere, regulated the Earth’s climate and composition’ was incompatible with Darwinian Evolution. While Gaia’s authors accepted this amendment, Lovelock reports that Dawkins ‘vented his scorn on the Gaia hypothesis with the powerful erudition that he now uses to censure theology’⁷⁸ in a critique that, coupled with New Age associations, and a mytho-feminised symbology, left him and his work temporarily exiled from mainstream peer-reviewed journals.

Contemporaneous to these innovations in earth systems science was the 1967 publication of Lynn White Jr.’s influential essay ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’ in *Science*. Lynn White Jr.’s introductory anecdote about being at the ‘receiving end of an unforgettable monologue’ from Aldous Huxley on ‘a favourite topic: Man’s unnatural treatment of nature and its sad results’ is a charismatic opening to what Willis Jenkins describes as a ‘generative thesis’, from which ‘Christian environmental theologies have been especially shaped [...] because they have needed to fashion some response to the elegant power of his complaint.’⁷⁹ Namely, this complaint is that Christianity, ‘especially in its Western form’, is the ‘most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen’, resulting in a negatively aspected ‘dualism of man and nature’. Further, Lynn White Jr. asserts that ‘By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit

⁷⁷ Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, p.110.

⁷⁸ Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, p.106.

⁷⁹ Willis Jenkins, ‘After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems’, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 37.2 (June 2009), p.283.

nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.⁸⁰

That White associates 'feelings' with 'natural objects' is interesting as it intimates animism as much as it does phenomenology, and with it an acknowledgement that there is a realm of belief in which non-human, even non-animal life is capable of emotion. White posits that this dualist distancing from nature can be traced back, beyond the Renaissance, to a moment of agrarian technical innovation as embryonic to industrialisation in seventh-century Northern Europe. Thomas Berry highlights The Black Death (1347-1349) as another pivotal moment, when what is estimated to be two-thirds of Europe's population died in two years. In a world where people had limited medical knowledge, or joined-up systems of communication or literacy, all they *knew* was that people were dying, painful, violent deaths in seemingly unstoppable numbers; there was no science that could explain bacteria and its role in the spread of disease, and 'Since they had no idea of what was happening, they considered that some great moral fault had occurred. The world had become wicked. God was punishing the world'.⁸¹ According to Berry, the result was a sombre, penitent approach to nature and divinity, upon which foundation the austere spirit of Protestant Puritanism would later flourish. While both of these historical 'moments' can be considered as possible and compelling contributory factors to the long history of human relations with the natural world, these are inevitably incomplete accounts and function as ideas rather than provable historical narratives. There is now evidence to suggest that *the* moment of absolute systemic transformation took place as late as the mid-twentieth century, as a phenomenon that has become

⁸⁰ Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', in *Ecology and religion in history* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

⁸¹ Thomas Berry, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature Vol. I*, ed. by Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum: 2008), p.168.

known as ‘the great acceleration’,⁸² when the exponential impacts of industrialisation and technologies gathered pace to unprecedented and profound consequence. It is this identified ‘moment’ that we might consider as a larger, more aggregated marker on the graph of deep, geological time.⁸³

New/No Nature Stories

2007 was also the year in which Timothy Morton published *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, a dynamic and probing critique that anticipates fourth-wave ecopoetics, and which is immersive in its engagement with nature as a post-Cartesian idea and material product. As the title suggests, Morton’s designs on the way we think about what constitutes Nature are seismic. Rather than tweak the definition of the term, Morton’s approach seeks to pull Nature, as ‘an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it’,⁸⁴ out of the collective human consciousness by the root. That I have just used a nature-based metaphor could be what Morton describes as *Romantic irony*, wherein the narrator ‘who is thought to sit sideways to his or her narrative, is actually dissolved in it, part of it, indistinguishable from it’.⁸⁵ The linguistic and semantic reach of Nature as a metaphorical and oppositional abstract, albeit one comprised of multiple concentric circles of physical and etheric things, is deep and, in Morton’s view, insidious. His project is ambitious, profoundly dialectical, painstaking in its

⁸² Global Change: The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme website, <<http://www.igbp.net/globalchange/greatacceleration.4.1b8ae20512db692f2a680001630.html>>.

⁸³ See, for example, Jeremy Davis, *Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) for a recent and comprehensive précis of the development of the anthropocene as a context to macropolitical ecological thought and aesthetics.

⁸⁴ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.22.

⁸⁵ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.27.

pursuit of paradigm shift. To achieve its radical objective, Morton argues that we need to close the aestheticised gap humanity has constructed, so deleteriously, with its most significant Other: 'Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of woman',⁸⁶ he writes, in one of the book's many quotable similes.

Thoreau's physical and ideological retreat into a place he describes in his essay 'Walking'⁸⁷ as 'this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around with such beauty, and such affection for her children' is emblematic of this anthropomorphic impulse. Given that we are living through a period of dramatic environmental turbulence, restorative poetics of praise *or* ecological elegy are compelling. But if, to paraphrase Juliana Spahr, when celebrating the bird, we omit the bulldozer that is about to destroy its habitat,⁸⁸ then we risk an emotional disconnect from the negative effects the intense commodification of land brings about. Pedestal or no pedestal, for Morton it is not just the concept of Nature that needs to change or be systematically 'dissolved' through slow, deliberate and thorny immersion, but also its associated schools of thought. Similarly, in his analysis, postmodernism is a cult so 'mired in aestheticism' that it 'freezes irony into an aesthetic pose'.⁸⁹ But, as he reminds us, the stakes (human extinction) are too high for such posturing, which leaves our existing theoretical modes ill-equipped for the scale of the task ahead. Ecocriticism, with all its associated Romantic ancestry, also comes under fire, as 'a form of postmodern

⁸⁶ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.1.

⁸⁷ Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), p.281.

⁸⁸ See Christopher Arigo, 'Notes Toward an Ecopoetics: Revising the Postmodern Sublime and Juliana Spahr's 'This Connection of Everyone with Lungs'', *HOW2*, 3.2 for a fuller context as to the compass of content in ecological poetry.

⁸⁹ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.20.

retro’, a movement propelled backwards in time, towards ‘an academy of the past’⁹⁰ – as Morton would have it, an ideologically fatal modality that paradoxically overlooks the most ironic of inversions, wherein the ecological catastrophe ‘far from being imminent, has already taken place’. This observation is asymmetrically captured in Jane Hirshfield’s four-line poem, ‘Global Warming’:

When his ship first came to Australia,
Cook wrote, the natives
continued fishing, without looking up.
Unable, it seems, to fear what was too large to be comprehended.⁹¹

Hirshfield illuminates a response to a situation, or cumulative entity, in this case global warming, which Morton classifies as a ‘hyper object’; that is, one that is too large and complex in terms of scale, content and temporality to be easily comprehended.⁹² The possibility that we are post-catastrophe, at least ideologically, is intriguing, not only because it requires us to question the efficacy of current modes of thought and their contribution to environmental decline, but also because, if this is the case, it suggests that an elegiac ecopoetic mode is apt. Not that this is the tone Hirshfield adopts above; her strategy is more reflective and, in the refractions of that mirror, she brings our attention to the *moment* of colonialism, a political manoeuvre that could be considered germane to her

⁹⁰ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.20.

⁹¹ Jane Hirshfield, ‘Global Warming’, in *Earth Shattering Eco Poems*, ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle: Boodaxe Books, 2007), p. 215..

⁹² See Stephen Muecke’s review of Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 February 2014 for a slightly more detailed summary of ‘Global Warming and Other Hyperobjects’.

practice as a Zen Buddhist.⁹³ While refuting the label of ‘Buddhist poet’, her spiritual belief system infuses her process and critical approach, as indicated in an interview/profile with Peter Harris in *Ploughshares*:

‘We are continuous with everything around us.’ Wholeness, in her view is not just an aesthetic category or a psychological state, implying integration. Wholeness is our intrinsic condition, the condition of the world. ‘Poetry’s job,’ she says, ‘is to discover wholeness and create wholeness, including the wholeness of the fragmentary and the broken.’⁹⁴

If we consider the ecological crisis to be a state of ‘brokenness’, and the human–Nature divide as a fragmentation from an incorporated, healthy whole as causal to that brokenness, then poetry, by extension, becomes an agent of a larger, planetary healing. Yes, this language leans towards the anthropomorphic and, as things stand, in this compromised anthropocene era, the pursuit of a biotic position is optimal; but this is only problematic if animal life is the singular quarter to which the concept of healing might be applied. In ‘Alienation’, a 1974 essay in *The Sacred Universe*, Thomas Berry considers the multifarious conditions that have led to this human–Earth fissure. Although feminist critique has spotlighted the gendering of the planet as female as problematic, particularly in terms of a patriarchal annexing of technology and as a procedure of expecting women to clean up the mess as some form of domestic chore,⁹⁵ there is still

⁹³ See Peter Harris, ‘About Jane Hirshfield’, *Ploughshares*, 24.1 (Spring, 1998), pp.199-205 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40354845>>, in which he discusses the relationship between Hirschfield’s religious and poetry practices.

⁹⁴ Harris, pp.202-3.

⁹⁵ See for example Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (London: The Women’s Press, 1984), or Donna Haraway’s transhumanist response in ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

resonance in Berry's assertion around the human need for the spiritual symbology of the Earth as Divine Mother as a form of cosmic reassurance: 'In the Chinese civilization there was the *yin* and *yang* symbol of opposites. The dragon was a feminine figure symbolic of the primordial power of the universe. There was also *Kuan Yin*, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy'.⁹⁶ As such, these symbols have played a part in helping humans relate to larger spiritual concepts and nature-based principles and lifeways that lessen a sense of isolation as integral to the human condition. By extension, we might consider some of the afflictions of modernity, such as mobile phone and device addiction, and other consumer-based rituals and activities that separate us from nature, as paradoxically causal: in the bid to ease uncomfortable feelings of alienation we exacerbate the emotion which, Berry asserts, is 'in some sense, the oldest and most universal human experience'.⁹⁷ Hirshfield's delineation of wholeness as being intrinsically more than an aesthetic category or psychological state is amplified by Berry's thesis, which is fluent in its explication of the sacred as a vital and cohesive element in what could be summarised as the urgent task of systemic planetary renewal. In 'The Universe as Divine Manifestation',⁹⁸ the integrated and acknowledged congruence of religious ecology's spiritual paradigm with that of the community of First Nations socio-religious beliefs is apparent. The essay also associates this sense of communion with the natural world to poetry and, by extension, the theophanies as examined here in *The Wild Iris*:

⁹⁶ Thomas Berry, 'Alienation', in *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the 21st Century*, ed. by Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press: 2009), p.35.

⁹⁷ Berry, 'Alienation', p.35.

⁹⁸ Berry, 'Alienation', pp.141-151.

Not to hear the natural world is not to hear the divine. Part of the difficulty of not hearing the language of the natural world is that we have limited our understanding of speech to persons, not nature itself. Persons speak; nature does not, except to the poets.⁹⁹

The dualist approach to nature and human society that Berry seeks to revise forms part of an epistemological paradox that has been addressed by many cultural, geographical and ecological theorists.¹⁰⁰

The belief systems of First Nation peoples provide a useful alternative to Christian models of human/nature relations. Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*, for example, is an account of gynocratic First Nations societal structures and attendant spiritual cosmologies, ceremonies and theologies, where 'healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole'.¹⁰¹ With this in mind, we might then read this form of interbiotic 'conversation' as an alternative paradigmatic reality that maps on to literature, ecology and nature. And, further, it is also plausible to extrapolate that 'the concept of 'hybridity' – notably the idea that 'things' and specifically 'societies', 'natures' and

⁹⁹ Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the 21st Century*, p.145.

¹⁰⁰ For example see: William Cronon, 'Introduction: In the Search of Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995); Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, eds., *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell: 2001); Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*; Denis Cosgrove, 'Images and Imagination in 20th Century environmentalism: from the Sierras to the Poles', *Environment and Planning*, Vol. 40 (2008), pp.1862-1888; and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁰¹ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), p.60.

‘technologies’ are mixed up and mingled – represents an ever more common way of thinking about society-nature relations.¹⁰²

Edge Effects

The idea of nature as an ‘assemblage’ of objects, that by resisting a dualist notion of nature and society also ‘rejects the idea of that society and people tend to be active while nature and objects tend strongly to be passive’,¹⁰³ was put forward by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*,¹⁰⁴ which builds on Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomic theory that proposes a non-hierarchical and nodal analytical structure, rather than a hierarchical ‘arboreal’ model.¹⁰⁵ However, as David Demeritt asserts in *Being Constructive About Nature*¹⁰⁶ the flip side of recasting nature, and within that wilderness, as a social construction is a susceptibility to a relativist interpretation where even the hard scientific fact of global warming can be claimed as a ‘socially constructed and historically contingent *idea*’.¹⁰⁷

Although Thoreau’s version of nature as a pure(ifying) and pristine wilderness into which an individual might retreat runs counter to ‘the heart and soul of a hybrid scholarship and activism [...] [that exists] to reject the modern constitution whereby nature is over there and society is around here and never the twain shall meet’,¹⁰⁸ his journals and, more generally, the characteristic properties of the journal as a genre, are inherently hybrid. As its etymology

¹⁰² Alan P. Rudy, and Damian White, ‘Hybridity’, in *Critical Environmental Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p.121.

¹⁰³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (London: Longman, 1993), p.125.

¹⁰⁴ Latour, pp.30-31.

¹⁰⁵ Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* Vol. 2 of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia 1972-1980* (London and New York: Continuum, 1980, repr. 2004).

¹⁰⁶ David Demeritt, ‘Being Constructive about Nature’, in *Social Nature: Theory, Practice and Politics*, ed. by Noel Castree and Bruce Braun (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp.22-40.

¹⁰⁷ Demeritt, p.35.

¹⁰⁸ Rudy and White, ‘Hybridity’, p.124.

implies, the journal is, in its structure of daily reportage, inevitably a miscellany of event and reflection with the capacity to juxtapose the profound with the seemingly mundane:

I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another. I have no sympathy with the bigotry and ignorance, which make transient and partial and puerile distinctions between one man's faith or form of faith and another's, —as Christian and heathen. I pray to be delivered from narrowness, partiality, exaggeration, bigotry. To the philosopher all sects, all nations, are alike. I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great Spirit as well as God.

Shoes are commonly too narrow. If you should take off a gentleman's shoes, you would find that this foot was wider than his shoe. Think of his wearing such an engine! walking in it many miles year after year!¹⁰⁹

The impact of the juxtaposition between these two paragraphs is that we receive a fuller and more authentic picture, where the reader is grounded, literally, by the physical reality of footwear. The mode, that of a declarative pronouncement, is the same but, by co-locating a consideration of faith and religion with an opinion piece on shoes, any hierarchy between the import of the subjects is leavened or at least partially diminished. However, under Nature's luminous, aestheticised glow, wilderness is potentially problematic. In his essay 'Notes Towards an Eco-poetics',¹¹⁰ Christopher Arigo shifts the emphasis from ekphrastic relationships with a biologically disrupted environment towards a poetry and practice that occupies and interacts with the 'ecotone' as a:

¹⁰⁹ David Henry Thoreau, journal entry 'After April 26 1850', in *I to Myself: An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 2007), p.148.

¹¹⁰ See Arigo, 'Notes Toward an Eco-poetics: Revising the Postmodern Sublime', which discusses Juliana Spahr's poetry collection *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005). See also Jonathan Skinner, 'Editor's Statement', *ecopoetics* 1 (2001), pp.5-8.

[...] biological term used to describe the area between adjacent ecosystems, which often creates an “edge effect,” that is, the actual boundary between different habitats. So, in a sense, an ecotone exists between the edges of ecosystems – it is *on the edge*, just as eco-poetics is on the edge of numerous disciplines – and hopefully on the cutting edge of poetic innovation and ecological thinking. The word ecotone is derived from the Greek from the word *tonos* meaning tension. So literally an ecotone is a place where ecologies are in tension.

The intercept between hybrid poetics – whose flashpoints substantiate at the juncture between content and form within and without the poem – and eco-poetics would seem to be mutually reinforcing. In a book of prose essays, *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*,¹¹¹ poets Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley identify and explore these ecotonal, liminal zones that are ‘characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plants, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy farmland’¹¹² and situated at the physical moment where the rural and urban coincide. While *Edgelands* is a book that describes an ecotonal hybridity, it is not a linguistic hybrid work, in that it is comprised of the traditional prose essay (albeit one in which authorship is merged by the co-authors remaining anonymous chapter by chapter).

The book is not organised geographically, but rather by ‘type’ of edgeland, object or material, so that the cars, paths, dens, containers, canals, sewage, wire, airports and piers that might constitute a particular component of edgeland have the capacity, when ‘at their most unruly and chaotic’, to ‘make a great deal of our

¹¹¹ Paul Farley, and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys Into England's True Wilderness* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).

¹¹² Marion Shoard, ‘Edgelands’, in *Remaking the Landscape: The Changing Face of Britain*, ed. by Jennifer Jenkins (London: Profile Books, 2002), p.117.

official wilderness seem like the enshrined, ecologically arrested, controlled garden space it really is'.¹¹³ The essay 'Wire' is perhaps most emblematic of the edgeland as ecotone, where the fence as liminal entity is variously constituted:

Here, where a Victorian mill has collapsed under decades of rain, the single strand of wire is less a fence and more a threshold, to mark out for the kids where their territory starts. Years of crossing have given this wire a permanent sag, as if cowed by its own weight. But next door to this ruin is a freight depot, where juggernauts reverse into bays to be filled. [...] The edgelands are a complex mix of fiercely guarded private ground and common land by default, or by neglect. And the history of these places is held in their wires.¹¹⁴

We might then think of Morton's attempt to re-write human–nature relations by dissolving dualistic ideology as an aesthetic event designed to take down the wires that make up the fence. Although positive in intent, this thesis contends that such a 'demolition' is only fruitful if the debate can meander beyond the confines of solely materialist discourse; otherwise the opportunity for truly inclusive transdisciplinary dialogue is missed. Nonetheless, it elicits an unexpected congruence with Berry, who maintains that we are at a specific point, a gap or pause in global history, where the creation stories, myths and narratives of antiquity no longer relate to people's lives as they are lived and so their sense of validity and relevance has diminished proportionately.

¹¹³ Farley and Symmons Roberts, p.8.

¹¹⁴ Farley and Symmons Roberts, p.93.

Berry co-authored *The Universe Story*¹¹⁵ with evolutionary philosopher Brian Swimme. In it they provide an epic recounting of an integrated scientific–sacred cosmology in which the universe itself is an expression of a divine and creative intelligence.¹¹⁶ Berry is explicit in his incorporation of secular, scientific and sacred epistemologies considering, for example, Charles Darwin’s discoveries in evolutionary biology alongside the meta-materialist thought of priest-palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.¹¹⁷ Morton, although open to larger concepts of spirituality, and their presence as ontology, phenomenology and philosophy more broadly, is uncharacteristically and comparatively brief in the attention he pays to theology and spiritual discourse, whether Occidental, indigenous or otherwise:

We could go on splitting hairs infinitely. Our journey to the middle, to the ‘in between’ space, whatever we call it, would go on generating binary pairs and we would always be coming down on one side or the other, missing the exact center. It does not matter whether this is spiritualist materiality, or spiritual materialism.¹¹⁸

Could it be that, in his brevity, Morton, who like Lovelock has also been dubbed a ‘prophet’,¹¹⁹ reveals his own version of *Romantic irony*? Whereby a relatively surface engagement with ecotheological and indigenous sacred belief systems (with which his ideas clearly have affinity) leaves the secular hegemony Taylor

¹¹⁵ Brian Swimme, and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

¹¹⁶ Grim and Tucker, p.59.

¹¹⁷ Berry, ‘The Spirituality of the Earth’, in *The Sacred Universe*, p.76.

¹¹⁸ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.19.

¹¹⁹ See Alex Blasdel, “‘A reckoning for our species’: the philosopher prophet of the Anthropocene”, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher>>.

identifies, with all its counterpoint productions of environmental damage, relatively undisturbed?

Occupying The Sacred Centre

And now the nature of time and of space is wondered at, and it is said there are two spaces, one vulgar, changeable, relative, the other absolute, changeless, eternal. (And that absolute space is the mind of God. And it is cautioned that the vulgar know only vulgar space.)

Such a thing, therefore, as absolute motion is said to exist in absolute space. And time flows universally.¹²⁰

Susan Griffin also sought ideological paradigm change. While Morton enjoys the deployment of analytical granularity, metaphor and neologisms in his bid to surgically remove the subject from the body of the discourse, *Woman and Nature* disrupts patriarchal epistemology and its attendant intellectual canopy by adopting a structure and poetics that require its reader and its writer to feel. 'I found that I could best discover my insights about the logic of civilized man by going underneath logic, that is by writing associatively, and thus enlisting my intuition, or uncivilized self', Griffin explains in the Preface. 'Thus my prose in this book is like poetry, and like poetry, always begins with feeling'. Cows, horses, mules and other non-human organisms speak through similar ventriloquisms to those Louise Glück assigns to plants in *The Wild Iris*. As Griffin writes: '*We are the cows. With our large brown eyes and soft fur there was once something called beauty we were part of. It is this we remember when we bellow*'.¹²¹ These animal utterances are juxtaposed with a parody of the supposedly objective 'dicta of Western

¹²⁰ Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p.21.

¹²¹ Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, p.72.

civilization and science on the subjects of woman and nature'.¹²² By speaking in the flatter, dispassionate and passive register we can hear in the phrase 'it is said', Griffin both satirises and simultaneously establishes a Biblical, cosmological note, reassociating the Christian lexis with pagan nature:

Matter is transitory and illusory, it is said. This world is an allegory for the next. The moon is an image of the Church, which reflects Divine Light. The wind is an image of the Spirit.¹²³

Griffin's description of the wind as 'an image of the Spirit' also refers us to what Eliade describes as hierophany, as a physical manifestation of the sacred. To summarise, in Eliade's scheme, this manifestation may be produced by 'the gods' and is then reproduced by humans, through the building, design and location of a church, for example, as a reiteration of an original miraculous event through which the geographical site was identified and (re)sacralised. An immanent hierophany could be revealed by a particular event involving, say, a stone, where an incident or 'sign' may either be witnessed or provoked: 'Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different'.¹²⁴ A human response to hierophany may be seen in sacred architecture where design and location are orientated towards the sacred centre, a place that by definition must be located in contrast to a fixed point. Perhaps that point may be a mountain which, in its greater proximity to the sky, is closer to transcendence and, by association, a Supreme Being, who is 'revealed by simple

¹²² Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, p.xv.

¹²³ Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, p.5.

¹²⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

awareness of infinite height'.¹²⁵ The home, then, of transcendent deities is the sky and the cosmos, as ' – paradigmatic work of the gods – is so constructed that a religious sense of the divine transcendence is aroused by the very existence of the sky'.¹²⁶ Examples of sky gods are plentiful, amongst them, Olurun 'The Sky God of the Yoruba Slave Coast', The Samoyed 'Num, a god who dwells in the highest sky' or the Ainu's 'Divine Chief of the Sky'.¹²⁷ To move to a different scale: the spider is a creature that knows a lot about sacred lore, by virtue of the fact she may 'traverse the four important planes of Lakota cosmology – the sky, the place between the sky and the clouds, the earth, and beneath the earth –'.¹²⁸ Spiders are also related to the 'thunder beings' and are therefore immune to their lightning bolts and may intervene to protect human friends at risk of being zapped. It is therefore unlucky to kill one. The spider's web can also be the site of a hierophany, where the resilience and sensitivity of the interconnected cosmos is embodied in the web's geometry.

'Poetry has always been about nature', writes Robert Hass in his Introduction to *The Ecopoetry Anthology*:

because we are organic beings and part of the cycle of birth, flourishing, and death that renews all organic life. Trying to get into the right relationship to these cycles is probably the oldest impulse of the kinds of utterance that comes down to us as poetry.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.118.

¹²⁶ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.118.

¹²⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.120.

¹²⁸ William K. Powers, *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), p.152.

¹²⁹ Hass, Introduction, in *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, p.lx.

In *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota*, William K. Powers explores the sacred purpose of song: ‘... for the Lakota as for all other peoples, song is one of the most important means of communing with the spirits’.¹³⁰ Lakota sacred song is sung in sacred language, which shamans and medicine men learn from the spirits themselves in ceremonial vision quests. This holds for non-human life too. Might we not then think of poetry as a literary, ritualised production? Poetry, with its patterns of repetition, its elegies which were traditionally accompanied by the flute rather than the lyre,¹³¹ with its assonance, rhyme, meter, its music and intertwined performative history. Walt Whitman is the first poet to be featured in *The Ecopoetry Anthology*’s chronological selection, and is emblematic of where the borders between poetry and song blur in his anaphoric epiphanies of praise and mourning:

O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!
O troubled reflection in the sea!
O throat! O throbbing heart!
*And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.*¹³²

Yet, if we are to take the formative principles of sacred hybridity to heart, that singing may not be so useless. As the readings of Joy Harjo and Kei Miller show, song is central to their poetics: as a literary device and, more profoundly, as an agent of healing and divine communication, ritual and worship. Equally, as the opening chapter on Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris* demonstrates, the chorus may be

¹³⁰ Powers, *Sacred Language*, p.26.

¹³¹ Scott Brewster, ‘Origins and Definitions’ in *Lyric: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p.16.

¹³² Walt Whitman, ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’, in *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman* (USA: Ferguson Bros & Co., 1881), pp.269-277.

comprised of elemental, mundane and sacred voices as part of an alternative or animist cosmology.

It is not the intention of this thesis to insist on a theist interpretation, although an attention to the spiritual and sacred realms in tandem with material considerations is part of my personal belief system, but, rather, to suggest that any truly inclusive and authentically radical development of contemporary ecopoetics requires its authors to consider both streams with some degree of equilibrium. While the materialist instinct towards, and pursuit of, a new ecological narrative for the anthropocene has resulted in a school of thought that speaks evocatively to ontological and secular thought; sacred hybridity simultaneously orbits the work of the ecotheologian Thomas Berry, whose syncretic approach to multi-faith dialogue and scholarship has defined the field of religious ecology as one that is overt in its acknowledged intersections with cosmogonical systems science alongside materialist, religious and sacred philosophies.

As Audre Lorde put it so eloquently in *Poetry is Not a Luxury*:

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free. [...] Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already.¹³³

¹³³ Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), pp.8-9.

Chapter 1

Landscape, Theophany and the Sacred Hybrid in Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*

In the phenomenal world, only the universe is self-referent. Every being in the universe is universe referent. Only the universe is a text without a natural context. Every particular being has the universe for context. To challenge this basic principle by trying to establish the human as self-referent and other beings as human referent in their primary value subverts the most basic principle of the universe.¹³⁴

How are the *The Wild Iris*'s (hereafter *TWI*) textual structures and dialogic ventriloquisms representative of 'sacred hybridity' as a syncretic poetics through which to address the relationships between nature, ecology, god/the sacred and the self?¹³⁵ This chapter examines landscape as a theophany that represents a theological cosmology where, in the words of the critic Helen Vendler, 'the lessons that the soul was taught in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries have to be rescripted for the late twentieth century'¹³⁶ and, by extension, for the twenty-first century. In so doing, it contends that Glück's strategies of elision, silence and juxtaposition produce an environment in which a contemporary, lyric rendition of the sacred may take place. As it is contextualised here, there is inherent capacity for doubt, ideological collision and reconstitution of a sometimes shaky, often disrupted, emotionally powerful and tenaciously resistant relationship with divinity as manifested in the biological environment of a

¹³⁴ Berry, 'An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality', in *The Sacred Universe*, pp.129-138.

¹³⁵ Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris* (New York: Ecco, 1992).

¹³⁶ Helen Vendler, 'Flower Power: Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*', in *Soul Says* (New Haven, CT: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1995), p.38.

domestic garden. On the surface, religion in *The Wild Iris* is articulated solely as Christian; on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that its argumentative polyvocalisms and multiple ontological stances characterise it as a hybrid work, where the dichotomies of dark/light, life/death, mono/pan-(a)theism, immanence/transcendence are destabilised, reconfigured and ultimately hyphenated.

That the book contains these opportunities for contradiction and paradox is substantiated by the diversity of theological and critical interpretations. For some it is an exploration of the divine through mythic high lyric and ‘epigrammatic utterance, a poetic speech of classical rigor that seeks to transcend historical flux’, which exists as ‘a rewriting of cosmogony that challenges the sacred and makes it new’.¹³⁷ In this review written on publication, Elisabeth Frost acknowledges that the collection achieves a recasting of the sacred in a modern, domestic framework, yet at the same time considers Glück’s resistance to itemising the contemporary as a means of creating a discernible environment as ‘less successful in uniting lyric speculation with the here-and-now’. However, it could be argued that this linguistically minimal strategy is precisely what keeps the text in our sights a quarter of a century later as its consideration of philosophical, psychoanalytic and theological discourse is unhindered by the quotidian. Would the inclusion of a fax machine or a Walkman have done anything other than date the material? The vocabulary rarely refers to manufactured objects and, when they are included, they tend to be things which are either architectural constituents or generic items imbued with the possibility for religiosity (‘window’,

¹³⁷ Elisabeth Frost, Review of ‘Metaphysical Poets’, ed. by Brenda Hillman and Louise Glück, in *The Women’s Review of Books*, 10.8 (1993), pp.24–25 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/4021609>>.

'yard', 'garden', 'balcony', 'doorway') or clothes ('garment', 'cloak') or tools ('rake', 'trowel'). If there are technologies or instruments, they are long-established and emblematic: ('telescopes', 'puzzle', 'rattle'). Only 'Presque Isle' (*TWI*, p.49) gestures towards an assemblage of contemporary objects, with its 'ashtray', 'dish', 'jar', 'iodine' and – at a stretch – 'bureau'. Instead, the vocabulary gravitates towards the abstract, temporal and the botanical, albeit predominantly generic; most of the plants are identified by common rather than Latin nomenclatures. Overall, the diction, as is concomitant with the dialogic, is conversational and idiomatic, although again, this register is hybridised. Biblical allusion is also a consistent feature, both overt and subtle. When the 'Violets' (*TWI*, p.21) have their say, they address god as manifest in 'April' (*TWI*, p.20) as a 'dear/suffering master'. In 'Ipomoea' (*TWI*, p.48) – the only instance of a Latinate horticultural name, a variant that clarifies the speaker as a plant (rather than god) – Morning Glory declares 'my flesh giveth/form to his glory', a theophanic statement that recalls Jesus's 'I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger [...] (John: 6:35). 'John', 'Noah', a fig tree ('Vespers', p.36), various lilies and a reference to Moses and a metaphorical burning bush ('Vespers', p.43) are other examples.

Although ontological discourse plays out in language that is simple and direct, the complexities the book embraces are not achieved through the deployment of an academically nuanced vocabulary but, rather, through allocating non-human voices a place on the soapbox/pulpit. Not that the ensuing debate is evangelical, despite its Christian presence; instead, a cumulative dialectic is produced through a sequential trinity of call and response comprising question and answer, rebuttal and acquiescence.

Other critical responses have identified the work as a poetic treatise on the emotional impact of an absent, distant or transcendent deity¹³⁸ (a theological characterisation confirmed within the text by Glück herself early on in ‘Matins’ (*TWT*, p.30) which addresses an ‘Unreachable father’); as ‘a spiritual conference in the aftermath of the Fall’.¹³⁹ It is also a collection in which the author is irresistibly ‘enticed by the promises of Romanticism’ as an ultimately unstable, narcissistic and paradoxical pursuit of that elusive entity, the anti-confessional confessional or, as Henry Hart puts it in the *New England Review*, a ‘*paysage moralise* that is both beautifully delineated and psychologically compelling’.¹⁴⁰

Glück’s relationship with the aesthetic paradigm of the Romantic sublime and autobiographical or confessional poetics is ambivalent. In the chapter ‘Disruption, Hesitation, Silence’, from her collected essays *Proofs and Theories*, she offers both a defence and interrogation of the lyric, and the ‘I’ of the lyric self, through an analysis of Rilke, Berryman, Hopkins and George Oppen – and via that consideration a suggestion of how the dialogic structures and theological approaches may be read in *The Wild Iris*:

The sound of Berryman is like the sound of Hopkins; both poets are animated by self-disgust. But self, in Hopkins, is a miserable fixity, a pole remote from God. God is other, distant, visible in flashes, abidingly present in the world. In Berryman there is no such sense of abiding presence. What in Hopkins are two separated halves, agonized self and remote God, are in

¹³⁸ Annie Finch, Review of ‘Unrelinquished Burdens’, ed. by Jane Cooper, Louise Glück, and Jorie Graham, in *The North American Review*, 279.4 (1994), pp.40-42.

¹³⁹ David Baker, Review of ‘Kinds of Knowing’, ed. by Eric Pankey, Louise Glück, and Linda Bierds, in *The Kenyon Review*, 15.1 (1993), pp.184-92.

¹⁴⁰ Henry Hart, Review of ‘Story-Tellers, Myth-Makers, Truth-Sayers’, ed. by Louise Glück and others, in *New England Review*, 15.4 (1993), pp.192-206 (p.196).

Berryman conflated. This would seem an advantage, but is not. Hopkins was permitted reverence.¹⁴¹

Glück's speaker can be bleak, maudlin, self-flagellatory, melancholic and judgemental, particularly when considering her own place in the world; but her understanding of god's relative proximity and presence is not fixed. Throughout *The Wild Iris* god exists as both remote transcendent being and as an immanent animist presence, this provision of perspective via physical and imaginative distance and contrast allowing scope for the 'reverence' Glück assigns to Hopkins, alongside intermittent irreverence, recrimination and rebuke. From spring to midsummer, the mode of address shifts from the frustration of trying to communicate with the 'Unreachable father' as a being 'exiled from heaven' ('Matins', p.3) to a tender, yet almost audaciously personable '... Dear friend,/dear trembling partner' in the last of the Matins poems (*TWI*, p.31) in which the speaker confesses to be 'ashamed/at what I thought you were,/distant from us/regarding us/as an experiment'.

Bobbie Su Nadal writes that

Intrinsic to these poems is the assumption of responsibility as it relates to the traditional Biblical view of an ordered universe: the God-head at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, man at the center, and finally nature in its diverse orders and suborders at the bottom.¹⁴²

Glück both distorts and succumbs to this hierarchy, to create a hybrid cosmology, fusing religious ecology, Christianity and animism, where 'nature'

¹⁴¹ Glück, 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', in *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry*, pp.76-77.

¹⁴² Bobbie Su Nadal, *Harvard Review*, No. 3 (Winter 1993), pp.178-179.

refutes its subjugation at the hands of the human and repositions the field *sans* human presence at the centre of events. If ‘Witchgrass’ (*TWI*, pp.22-23) is to be believed, the days of delusional anthropocentrism are numbered:

I don’t need your praise
to survive. I was here first,
before you were here, before
you ever planted a garden.
And I’ll be here when only the sun and moon
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.

I will constitute the field.

However, despite this levelling of the hierarchies between human, animal, nature and deity, *The Wild Iris* is a ruptured volume where the pressures of duality are omnipresent: ‘Look at the night sky:’ god says in ‘Spring Snow’ (*TWI*, p.9), ‘I have two selves, two kinds of power’. These two types of power are the ability to be physically proximate and tender (but not quite immanent, as a god that is ‘watching you react’ must have some perspective with which to do so) and simultaneously impervious. The reader’s attention is initially pulled towards the articulations of the text rather than any implicit meaning its structure conveys. Ironically, however, it is the simultaneous and constant presentation of these ideological fractures and schisms that creates a unified whole.

Although its setting is rural or, more specifically, biotic, the book’s key communication is less conservationist, and more one that calls into question the hierarchical and ecologically compromising conditions on which Abrahamic monotheist interpretations of human stewardship rely.

Glück combines three distinct dramatic voices via numerous speakers who propose subjective, communal and individual versions of reality and fall into three discrete categories. First, the poet/narrator who is also a gardener; second, the flora which inhabit the garden (perennial and annual varieties, some wild flowers, weeds and trees); and third, the Christian god (Glück uses lower case throughout) who is both transcendent creator of earth and matter and simultaneously immanent in the landscape as it is constituted through nature and its seasons, meteorological transitions and temporal cycles. The order of speaker is not as listed above: the book opens with the title poem followed by poet and god poems interspersed throughout, and closes with the symbolically aligned 'White Lilies', in so doing giving the plants the first and last say in the book's chronological passage from birth to death. All three categories of speaker are in dialogue, but not all with each other: the flowers predominantly address the poet who addresses the god who speaks to the poet; while neither the god nor the poet speaks to the plants who, nonetheless, have much to say. We might infer that this mutual exclusivity occurs because there is no quarrel between god (as landscape) and nature (as flora) or, by extension, between god & god when nature (including flora) is an eloquent manifestation of god in material form – although the plants, like the poet, also express dissatisfaction with their lot ('This is the earth? Then/I don't belong here.' declares 'The White Rose') (*TWI*, p.47). Instead, it is the conflict between god (as nature) and the human (as poet) that occupies centre stage, a bias which supports the idea that a new approach to the conversation is required in the ecologically compromised era of the anthropocene. This plays out in a terse yet illuminated dialogue between a depressed, interrogative and sometimes accusatory narrator whose marriage is floundering and a disappointed, frustrated, yet on occasion empathic god,

accompanied by a chorus of plants and flowers who add nuance and exemplar to the supreme being's responses.

LANDSCAPE AS THEOPHANY

The Wild Iris is what the literary theologian L. B. C. Keefe-Perry describes as a theo-poetic text, in that its dialogic structure 'functions in opposing directions, simultaneously pulling the reader further into the text's poetic narrative and pushing the reader into a reconsideration of, and reconnection with, life in the world beyond the text'.¹⁴³ Keefe-Perry further defines the field as one wherein the theopoeist is 'less concerned with correctly arguing the nature of reality and more concerned with expressing how the Divine is sometimes revealed through it'.¹⁴⁴

Whether Glück prioritises theophany over ontology in *The Wild Iris* is a moot point, as the book's numerous theophanies are not mutually exclusive; rather, they combine to provide a vehicle through which ontological paradox may be directly addressed. If the poems are to be considered on their content alone, then the work might successfully be described as overwhelmingly ontological; however, if the poems are analysed as part of a larger structural body, then the hierarchical proportions assigned to the divine suggest the validity of a theo-poetical categorisation. Nonetheless, Keefe-Perry's interpretation of the term here is limited to a Christian reading, which is not quite sufficient to capture *The Wild Iris* as a text that incorporates animist utterance in tandem with Christian theophanic occurrence.

The manifestation of the deity as a speaking, communicative entity occurs in poems with titles that constitute the landscape as sensory and temporal event,

¹⁴³ L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, 'Divine Exploration and Invitation', *CrossCurrents*, 60.1 (2010), pp.89–104.

¹⁴⁴ Keefe-Perry, pp.89–104.

namely: 'Clear Morning', 'Spring Snow', 'End of Winter', 'Retreating Wind' 'The Garden' (which as a man-made space, or at least one that is shaped and altered by human intervention, unusually addresses the reader rather than the poet in direct response); 'April', 'Midsummer', 'End of Summer', 'Early Darkness', 'Harvest', 'Retreating Light', 'Sunset', 'Lullaby' and 'September Twilight'. 'Midsummer' is the moment after which the poet's voice, which occurs principally in poems identified both through their titles and their often plaintive note as prayer, switches from 'Matins' to 'Vespers' – a nominative convention that establishes the principal religious identity of the work as Christian and provides another layer of temporality, from morning until evening. In terms of physical and temporal space, god occupies a larger area than his human and botanical creations, where the individual voice, whether of a poet, woman, daisy, witchgrass, violet or scilla, often combines as part of a larger communal grouping. The (singular) divine is, by extension, afforded greater authority, not simply by the tone and linguistic register of his pronouncements, but also by the proportional hierarchy this quantitative spatial assignment suggests. At the literal half-way point, on page 32 of a 63-page book, the poem and the two-page spread open at midsummer. 'Heaven and Earth', on the left-hand page, is a poem where the human speaker abandons the 'Matins' convention to speak from within a title that circumscribes a dual physical and imaginative space, both literal (planet Earth) and figurative (Heaven); the geographical description serves as both material and ideological coordinates. It is also a moment where the book's aporia is at its most intense:

HEAVEN AND EARTH

Where one finishes, the other begins.
On top, a band of blue; underneath,

a band of green and gold, green and deep rose.

John stands at the horizon: he wants
both at once, he wants
everything at once.

The extremes are easy. Only
the middle is a puzzle. Midsummer—
everything is possible.

Meaning: never again will life end.

How can I leave my husband
standing in the garden
dreaming this sort of thing, holding
his rake, triumphantly
preparing to announce this discovery

as the fire of the summer sun
truly does stall
being entirely contained by
the burning maples
at the garden's border.

At the centre of this central poem (verse 3 of 6), the book's essential thesis is distilled into three lines. The extremes, which in the theological sense could be read as uncompromising, creationist monotheism, and its opposite, as fundamentalist atheism, are 'easy'; the tricky bit is the middle, the complexity, where everything fuses and multiplies in terms of both possibility and meaning. It may also be read as the instance when god and the human coalesce, a suggestion spotlighted in the ensuing single line (unified) verse, where the mortal human is transformed to eternal deity: 'Meaning: never again will life end'. Here,

the tonal certainty, typical of god's voice, is momentarily adopted by the human, in an interpretation that leaves little room for dissent. It is notable too that, in this scenario, the humans occupy both metaphysical and physical realms at the same time. In terms of the mundane drama, this is also the time and place in which the speaker articulates and simultaneously dismisses a desire to leave her husband, an intimacy that is made ambiguous by the line break, as well as the idiomatic title, suggesting that the couple are 'moving heaven and earth' in an effort to stay together. Equally, the 'couple' as a singular unit is at risk of disconnecting to become two individual humans. Will the speaker just leave John in the garden, 'dreaming this sort of thing' (i.e. permanence, continuity), or is the separation of which she speaks more enduring? That the man is 'dreaming' is also significant, as it intimates that a state of blissful and lasting union, of wholeness, or possibly completion, through a merger with nature, god or even one's partner, can only ever be a dream, or at best a puzzle, not an achievable reality.

Characteristically, Glück rejects midsummer at the very moment when it is at its most potent metaphorically and sequentially, instead elevating the moment when the spring-flowering iris ("The Wild Iris", p.1) finds its voice 'from the center' of its being in spring, a time the speaker declares as 'the epoch of mastery' (p.32) (it is interesting to note that Glück was forty-nine when *The Wild Iris* was published in 1992, a chronology that also suggests 'Midsummer' as a response to 'middle age'). What is emitted is 'a great fountain, deep blue/shadows on azure seawater', a metaphorical description that repeats and transforms to another physical reality and extended metaphor at the beginning of 'Heaven and Earth' (*TWI*, p.32) where sea and sky are bisected by the horizon. This pattern of repetition occurs again in 'The Doorway' (*TWI*, p.33), where the initial lines of the collection reference this psychological and physical threshold, when the wild

iris declares ‘At the end of my suffering/there was a door’ (*TWI*, p.1). ‘The Doorway’ (*TWI*, p.33) is a poem in which it is more difficult to discern immediately who is speaking, human or deity, as it diverges from the Matins/Vespers pattern. The voice is revealed as most probably human by the poem that ensues, ‘Midsummer’, which follows the theophanic convention already established. Another clue, apart from the more tentative tone and transitional quandary, is that a doorway is a human construct. Later, the poem ‘Harvest’ (*TWI*, p.46) deviates slightly from this protocol, as it is clearly god speaking as harvest which, like a garden, is a human horticultural event performed outside, as opposed to a door, which operates as a barrier and a conduit between interior and exterior space. Nonetheless, ‘Harvest’ does conform to the usual nomenclatural assignments in that it is a temporal period although, unlike the canonical hours, it is less obviously designated sacred space than it is a pragmatic imperative for agrarian society. Syntactically ‘The Doorway’ (*TWI*, p.33) is a single sentence, divided into six verses, the first two ending in the open em dash, the second verse also concluding with an actual as well as punctuational opening – of early tulips. Its subject is the speaker’s desire to ‘stay as I was/still as the world is never still’: midsummer is too heady, intoxicating, and fraught with sensual overload that renders the speaker wary and reluctant. As temporal and metaphorical event, midsummer also represents the instant where absolute fecundity and death collide, as growth ceases and decline is born; the door, and within that structure, the threshold, being the symbolic totem of this phenomena.

DOORS

That *The Wild Iris* opens with a doorway is no coincidence. The reader must pass through Glück's portal into the polyphonic cosmos she establishes from the outset, as the titular spring flower announces its 'passage from the other world' ('The Wild Iris', p.1): a place that humanity has driven from its memory and consciousness. In his essay 'The Door', Davide Tarizzo traces the theological and philosophical history of the door, and provides a set of what he describes as 'ontological properties' to attempt a definition as architectural artefact, gateway between the sacred and mundane, as well as a delineator between human, animal and spiritual realms.¹⁴⁵ Glück's doors and doorways provide passage and connection between life and death; between 'the end of suffering' ('The Wild Iris': 1) and relief; between heaven and earth, immortal and mortal; they also subvert the notion that the concept of the door is limited to human consciousness, as it is the iris, the plant, which claims the door as central to its existence, in so doing defining its – and by extension the book's – sacred space in contrast to the physiological world of the profane human.

Yet the door, Tarizzo writes, 'always has to do with collective entities rather than individuals [...]it is quite difficult or almost impossible to imagine a door that is simply related to one single person without any connection to other beings.'¹⁴⁶

The Wild Iris is a world where the multiple and the hyphenated is in frequent conflict with the singular (self) on a variety of levels; Tarizzo's definition of the door as inherently collective, as an object that is impossible to imagine as 'simply related to one single person without connection to other beings'¹⁴⁷ is therefore

¹⁴⁵ Davide Tarizzo, 'The Door', in *Filozofski vestnik*, XXXVI.3 (2015), pp.131-145. <<https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/download/4530/4227>>.

¹⁴⁶ Tarizzo, p.142.

¹⁴⁷ Tarizzo, p.142.

apposite. Yet, as would be expected from an object that is in many ways an archetypal symbol of duality, Tarizzo also defines the door as a singular architectural structure, an antonymical factor that is emblematic of the book's ideological tensions throughout. Glück's opening phrase 'At the end of my suffering/there was a door.' – a distorted echo of the Gospel of John 1: 1, 'In the beginning was the word.' – is a bold opener that establishes the book's subversive, contortionist strategies from the outset. The sacred text of Christianity, The Bible, and its synecdochic mouthpiece of truth, the gospel, may refer to a beginning, and a literary, verbalised beginning at that; but in this cosmology we begin with an end that is vitalised by a powerfully significant visual, spatial and non-verbal object. It is not a beginning/end that heralds a liminal transition from innocence to fall either, rather it is an explication of the cyclical, of what it might feel like to be perennial, or immortal even.

Mircea Eliade considers the door to be the physical necessity through which hierophany, the manifestation of sacred space, can take place in the topographical environment. Taking the city church as example, he writes:

The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Eliade, 'Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred', in *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.21.

Once passage through the book's ideological portal has occurred, Glück also establishes the convention of the speaking plant, and the hierophany it represents at the end of the opening poem, by defining the creation myth:

I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater.

(“The Wild Iris”, p.1)

In other words, the plant is operating within a cycle of reincarnation, the plant can speak, the plant speaks through the visual and physical manifestation of its petals, which are in turn a metaphorical echo of the Earth and firmament.

LANDSCAPE

Glück's landscape is animate, transcending its etymology as a sixteenth-century Anglicisation of the Dutch word *landschap* (which was ubiquitous as a painterly technical term employed by the Dutch School to mean ‘natural inland scenery’).¹⁴⁹ As this suggests, the roots of how we understand landscape are to be found in visual art and the development of perspective in painting in Renaissance Italy, which in turn have influenced philosophy and geography as intellectual fields. The distance perspective necessitates mathematically has given rise to a sense of separation between the human as subject (painter, writer, scientist) and the framed topography of the environment (object) that landscape painting

¹⁴⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition* (Clarendon Press: 1989), p.628.

depicts (fields, pasture, hills, mountains, rivers, sky and possibly a house in the foreground). This distancing between subject and object has also become symbolic and symptomatic of Cartesian duality as a removed, and potentially hierarchical and correspondingly elitist, approach to experiencing and recounting our immediate environment, where the visual sense of perception dominates how we think, speak and write about it.¹⁵⁰

The topography of *The Wild Iris* is both constructed and (hu)man-made (as garden/place) and also wild (as elemental and atmospheric/space); it is domestic (as a provincial garden, populated by a family) and yet, via the content of the poems' inter-biotic conversations and their ontological, cosmological debate, universal. It is a landscape energised by prayer, talk and argument, with anger, tenderness and despair – and, as we have seen, it is one where its creator god speaks through and to his physical creations. As a physical entity, the composition of place conforms to traditional notions of what constitutes a semi-rural American domestic landscape (not in a city, outside rather than indoors, amongst flora, in the grounds of a house with a garden); its subversions lie in the assignment of agency and voice to non-human characters in the narrative. Whether we take these articulations to be real or imagined in the mind of the poet, their effect on the qualities and character of the landscape as a physical and ideological setting remains.

In this sense, the world that Glück creates in the text is consistent with the anthropologist Tim Ingold's iteration of landscape phenomenology, where 'the entire world – and not just the world of human persons – is saturated with

¹⁵⁰ See John Wylie's *Landscape* orig. published in 1856 (London: Routledge, 2007) for a summary of the history and epistemology of landscape aesthetics.

powers of agency and intentionality'.¹⁵¹ Ingold extends Heidegger's concept of dwelling and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's critique of the hegemony of perception as a single and therefore incomplete mode of ontological analysis, which captures what Merleau-Ponty described as the 'contradiction of immanence and perception',¹⁵² where to view or experience an environment, whilst being embodied within it and of it, is not a mutually exclusive act. In *The Wild Iris*, the traditional Romantic subject-object relationship between poet and nature is reversed, and it is the flora who view the protagonist with a sense of perspective: '[...]It is very touching,/all the same, to see you cautiously/approaching the meadow's border in early morning' announce the 'Daisies' (*TWI*, p.39) who warn the poet that, in a setting where '[...]The garden/is not the real world. Machines/are the real world', she risks 'scorn' and being 'laughed at again', if she reveals the fact or content of her communication with the field and its flowers. Ingold studied the activities of Cree hunters to illustrate how confining our understanding of landscape solely to a way of seeing is 'cognate with a Cartesian spectatorial epistemology which severs subject from object, mind from matter, culture from nature, and that this is evident in the elitist, proprietorial and imperialist lineaments of Western landscape discourse'.¹⁵³ For the Cree, the fact that caribou communicate with human hunters, and give themselves to death (and the hunter) willingly and as part of a larger, cyclical process, represents a perception of reality and environment that becomes fuller in its dual human and

¹⁵¹ Tim Ingold, 'Culture, nature, environment: steps to an ecology of life', in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.14.

¹⁵² See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, and the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. by James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.13.

¹⁵³ See Wylie, 'Landscape Phenomenology' in *Landscape* for an overview of Ingold's updating of Heidegger's notion of 'dwelling' as practical activity and agency in an animated environment.

animal viewpoints, both of which carry equal status.¹⁵⁴ *The Wild Iris* contains very few references to animals other than humans. In ‘Vespers’ (*TWI*, p.38) the poet declares ‘More than you love me, very possibly/you love the beasts of the field, even,/possibly, the field itself’. There is also reference to ‘white sheep’ and ‘stoic lambs’ as a continuation of the Biblical allusion (John, 1:29); other poems mention birds, generally rather than specifically, and in ‘Matins’ (*TWI*, p.12) the animals we encounter are described in the negative, as ‘the crickets not yet rubbing their wings, the cats/not fighting in the yard’. Consciousness, as evidenced by thought/utterance, in the Cartesian sense, is assigned instead to both biological (plants, trees) and elemental properties (wind, light, season), where the capacity to think or demonstrate agency is physically remote, given that none of these entities possesses a brain. In fact, not only is it assigned, but it is also described as an emotional state, where anxiety and pain can be felt: ‘It is terrible to survive/as consciousness/buried in the dark earth’ declares the wild iris to a plural ‘You’. This ‘You’ is presented as representative of modern Western humanity ‘who do not remember/passage from the other world’. Terrible though it may be, botanical consciousness is stated and overt from the outset, whereas the human inability to recall the birth journey from another realm of non-corporeal existence is framed as a lack that repositions the species at a different, lower level in a presupposed human-dominated hierarchy.

While the concept of formulating and experiencing landscape at a distance creates a corresponding emotional and analytical chasm, the poet Glyn Maxwell argues, via what he describes as evolutionary psychology, that landscape as the

¹⁵⁴ See Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* for an account of how indigenous perceptions of nature, landscape and reality include an acceptance of consciousness as assigned to animals.

open space of ‘the green savannah’ is enduringly attractive to humans, as it fulfils both primal and psychological needs:

[We see] an open space (we can hunt) with trees (we can hide) whose branches spread out near the ground (we can escape) and bear fruit (we can eat). We see a river (we can drink, wash, eat) or path (we can travel) that winds away out of sight (we can learn), beyond the horizon (we can imagine).¹⁵⁵

This conception of landscape is, however, implicit with the potential for human activity. Literary geographer Robert Macfarlane expands on the idea to incorporate a meta-anthropological definition in his book *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*:

I prefer to take ‘landscape’ as a collective term for the temperature and pressure of the air, the fall of light and its rebounds, the textures and surfaces of rock, soil and building, the sounds (cricket screech, bird cry, wind through the trees), the scents (pine resin, hot stone, crushed thyme) and the uncountable other transitory phenomena and atmospheres that together comprise the *bristling* presence of a particular place at a particular moment.¹⁵⁶

Rather than the perspectival ‘landscape’ of Italian and Dutch Renaissance painting, the product of the domination of the eye, Macfarlane inhabits a space permeated with varied sense impressions. The verb ‘bristling’ gives landscape a life and agency that is open to the idea of the human – Macfarlane presents landscape relationship as collaborative, with the writer working in conjunction

¹⁵⁵ Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p.9.

¹⁵⁶ See Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Penguin 2012), p.255.

with the physical environment rather than projecting onto it in an object–subject hierarchy.¹⁵⁷ In his essay, ‘Projective Verse’, Charles Olson talks about ‘open field composition’ and the ‘*kinetics* of the thing’, where ‘A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it’.¹⁵⁸ For Macfarlane, landscape, as a ‘bristling’ entity, is bestowed with a life force which, if interpreted (by poet, sage, walker ...), has the capacity to converse and express opinion. For indigenous communities, this animism is nothing new; rather, it is a consistent presence in the mythology, folklore, cultural and religious traditions and literatures (oral and written), where any assumed distinctions between the multi-species inhabitants of Earth’s physical plane and a universal, non-corporeal spirit dimension are apparent but not perceived as a barrier to communication or relationship. In shamanic, indigenous cultures, ‘spirit, matter, and principles of “peoplehood” are said to reside in the artefacts of material culture, and in animals, plants, minerals, as well as in winds, thunder, mountains, river rapids, caves, and in certain ecosystems’.¹⁵⁹ However, just as the development of perspective accompanied the intellectual revolutions of Renaissance Europe and a cultural shift from pagan nature worship to Christianity, it could be argued that this visual intervention also changed how we (mis)understand cultures (and their associated visual art without perspective) where there is less tangible separation between the sacred, Earth and its elements, and the self.

¹⁵⁷ This is an idea Robert Macfarlane suggested at an ARENA masterclass I attended (06/05/2015) which included a group reading and discussion of *The Old Ways* and its central themes.

¹⁵⁸ Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, in *Charles Olson, Selected Writings*, ed. by Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1967), p.16.

¹⁵⁹ For an overview of the commonalities of animist practice and belief across geographies and cultures amongst indigenous communities, see Elizabeth Reichel’s article ‘Religion, Ecology, and Cosmology Among Indigenous and Traditional Cultures’, in *The Encyclopedia of Nature and Religion: Volume I*, ed. by Bron Taylor (New York, London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), p.422.

John Wylie declares that, above all, ‘Landscape is tension’¹⁶⁰ between proximity/distance; observation/inhabitation; self/other; and culture/nature. This definition suits *The Wild Iris* as its dramatic concerns are built and bolstered by multiple layers of conflict: between poet and self, poet and others (son, spouse, flowers), poet and faith, poet and god, as well as flowers and god. Constructed via a triumvirate of counter dialogues, these tensions occur both as constituents of a physical place, with its house–garden–elemental co-ordinates, and as ideology and debate between the various speakers. While the poet’s domain is domestic (the garden), god inhabits and speaks as place via the elements and the seasons (forces of nature) – and his presence (the gender is stated early on, in ‘Matins’ (*TWI*, p.3)) is scaled accordingly; the garden is an enclosed and physically contained space imbued with a powerful mythological and historical resonance, while the elemental landscape is larger and, if not infinite, certainly stretches further than the eye can discern. The poet speaks either in the morning or the afternoon (via ‘Matins’ and ‘Vespers’ prayers), god responds in the voice of lengthier temporal periods, variously as the ‘End of Winter’ (*TWI*, p.10), ‘End of Summer’ (*TWI*, p.40) and ‘Harvest’ (*TWI*, p.46), for example, or via the elemental manifestation of ‘Retreating Wind’ (*TWI*, p.15) and ‘Sunset’ (*TWI*, p.57). These dimensions of scale produce a hierarchy, with god occupying the larger and implicitly more important elemental space as wilderness, as opposed to the human-orientated garden, where the success or failure of the plants that reside within it is contingent principally on the season and weather (and, by extension, god’s specific agency as materialised in this form), but also on human intervention (planting, weeding). From this distinction we might also infer that Glück’s Abrahamic creator god is transcendent, rather than immanent for, if

¹⁶⁰ Wylie, *Landscape* p.1.

he were truly immanent, then it could be argued he would also speak through – and as – the flora and the human protagonist too. However, throughout the discourse, the supremacy and psychological distance of the deity is continually tested in a paradox that remains unresolved. Regardless of this ongoing dialectic, the flora has its own concerns and explanations to impart, distinct from the utterances of the deity.

The fact that the non-human entities are given any powers of expression, however ‘lowly’ they might seem in a hierarchy that elevates the human endeavour to tame wilderness over wilderness itself, is a resonant comment on these contradictions that is articulated by what the flora observes and says. By giving voice to plants, such as ‘Scilla’ (*TWI*, p.14), the idea that the human is anything other than integrated with (and adjacent to) an environment populated by creatures and objects of equal (if not superior) status is vigorously disputed, at least by the plants:

Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we—waves
of sky blue like
a critique of heaven: why
do you treasure your voice
when to be one thing
is to be next to nothing?

The plural ‘we’ is prioritised, to a point of emphasis in its repetition, over the singular, lyric ‘I’, so that individual existence, which as experienced by the poet is predominantly one of emotional pain and isolation, is reduced to being ‘next to nothing’. This is reiterated in ‘Witchgrass’ (*TWI*, p.22) – where the common weed declares itself ‘a paradigm of failure’ for the gardener and botanical entity

that predates and is set to survive both the garden and its gardener. The physical components of this poem are not man-made things, but larger planetary aspects that signal a continuing and prosperous future without the intervention of humankind (as gardener/creator or otherwise). Here, Thomas Berry's self-referent universe as opposed to an individualised if plural humanity, is the implicit alternative to Protestant notions of control and dominion.¹⁶¹ In this regard, Witchgrass's combative address also challenges monotheism in direct and political terms: 'as we both know', it states, 'if you worship/one god, you only need/one enemy —'.

Multiplicity is echoed in other poems throughout the sequence – most explicitly at the outset, in 'Matins' (*TWI*, p.2), where the poet reports the character 'Noah' (who, in the poet/John/Noah circle, we take to be her son) as saying that it is:

an error of depressives, identifying
with a tree, whereas the happy heart
wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for
the part, not the whole.

And so, the tension that Wylie asserts constitutes landscape is one between the 'part' and the 'whole', although here it is semantically reversed, as the falling leaf identifies, like the witchgrass and the scilla, with its multiplied meaning as synecdoche rather than its individual presence. It is interesting that it is the child figure, rather than the adult, who imparts this wisdom, the implication being that the acceptance of the 'happy heart' as representative of the human condition, and as symbolic of the individual unit, is somehow less adult, or even perhaps

¹⁶¹ Berry, 'An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality', in *The Sacred Universe* pp.129-138.

primitive or naïve, in its interpretation. Rather than existing as a passive, static backdrop against which the action and dialogues take place, the untamed and untameable landscape (weed), as encroaching wilderness, becomes an active, loquacious participant in a metaphysical and philosophical drama where the interconnected multiple prevails.

The landscape as an agent that fulfils what Maxwell quantifies as the need to eat¹⁶² is symbolically satisfied via the amateur vegetable patch (although not quite; Glück's tomato crop is scant enough for the [once anorexic] poet-gardener¹⁶³ to 'have to discipline' herself to share it ['Vespers', p.36]); but even eating is subservient to an ascetic desire to consider, argue with and test the existence of god who appears both on and *as* the horizon ('Sunset', p.57; 'September Twilight', p.60). Beauty, as it is perceived in this semi-horticultural environment, is not a transcendent event on which the poet's gaze alights and hovers in unquestioning, Romantic awe. Instead, the apprehension of the sublime with its simultaneous possibilities of joy and pain becomes a point of contention and critique; Earth as created by god as a physical environment is 'a replica, a place in one sense/different from heaven, being/ designed to teach a lesson: otherwise/the same—beauty on either side, beauty/without alternative—' ('Matins', p.3) and also a situation that becomes a test which humanity (post-Fall) is doomed to continue to fail. Beauty, as an unrelenting expression of god's creativity as manifest in the landscape, is problematic for, if humanity is to embrace physical beauty in its entirety, then the prerequisite is an acceptance of the infinite along with what Shierry Weber Nichol森 describes as the terrifying,

¹⁶² Maxwell, p.9.

¹⁶³ Louise Glück discusses her anorexia and its [paradoxical] relationship to the self, the body and the soul in her essay 'Education of the Poet', in *Proofs and Theories*, pp.10-11.

even violent nature of the aesthetic experience, where we are ‘opened up to the blazing furnace at the heart of the universe’.¹⁶⁴ Glück’s god, however, is losing patience with humanity’s mono-dimensional approach and limited powers of comprehension, when he responds three pages later as ‘Clear Morning’ (*TWI*, p.7), saying:

I cannot go on
restricting myself to images

because you think it is your right
to dispute my meaning:

I am prepared now to force
clarity upon you.

This is followed by a different sensory mode and, given the inherent threat in the preceding poem’s closing couplet (above), a surprisingly gentle and explanatory address in the following poem, ‘Spring Snow’ (*TWI*, p.9). Here, the divine presence is embodied as the white of snow and the darkness of the night sky, as symbolic of god’s stated ‘two selves, two kinds of power’, as a being that is at once with the poet ‘at the window’ and simultaneously outside and present as the landscape she views; where the forces of dark and light and the vitality of earth are compared to the moon, as ‘dead matter crusted with light’ – so that the binary notes of dark/light/, life/death/, absence/presence come into sharper relief.

Then the mood shifts again, as does the season, this time to the ‘End of Winter’ (*TWI*, p.10) where the sensory experience progresses from the visual

¹⁶⁴ Shierry Weber Nichol森, ‘What Beauty Can Tell Us’, in *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p.118.

contrasts of ‘dark and light’ in the opening part of the poem to the sonic, which follows the same pattern of opposites, this time through the absence and presence of god’s voice, which will be audible only in ‘the other world’ as an echo, and not present, as it is on earth ‘in birdcall and human cry’.

These absences and presences correspond to an expression of the sacred hybrid, where the sacred becomes manifest in the space between what is articulated and what is withheld: ‘I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence’, Glück writes in ‘Disruption, Hesitation, Silence’¹⁶⁵, ‘The unsaid, for me, exerts great power’.

The poet’s tone of address also shifts in the subsequent two ‘Matins’ poems (*TWI*, p.12, p.13), where an expression of love is instantly and ironically retracted by the poet, who states that ‘... the powerful/are always lied to as the weak are always/driven by panic’ and that this is because she is unable to love what she ‘can’t conceive’. Here, the landscape’s colour palette broadens too, with the ‘pink spike’ of a foxglove that self-seeds and re-emerges in subsequent years as ‘purple in the rose garden’ replacing the starker duotones of winter – the description serving as example of theophany as an inconstant and therefore unreadable event. The appearance of the foxglove as spring flower also heralds an emboldened demand for a more nuanced theological communication instead of a silence and ambiguity ‘that promotes belief you must be all things’. However, this insistence on clarification and proof is met with more silence. When the deity does speak again, it is as ‘Retreating Wind’ (*TWI*, p.15), as an absence made more pointed by its expression as an ethereal, invisible elemental force. Perhaps this absence, as an action that speaks louder than words or visual proof, is in fact the enforcement of ‘clarity’ as threatened in ‘Clear Morning’ (*TWI*, p.7). God, weary

¹⁶⁵ See Glück, ‘Disruption, Hesitation, Silence’ in *Proofs and Theories*, p.73.

of and distancing himself from his human creation, experiences a reversal of the subject-object relationship that perspective imposes¹⁶⁶ and responds to the speaker's demand for a continuity of proof with admonishment borne of disappointment: 'Your souls should have been immense by now,/not what they are,/small talking things—', ('Retreating Wind', p.15).

THE GARDEN

Glück confirms the literal setting of this garden in a 'Vespers' poem (p.36) as 'Here, In Vermont, country/of no summer'. Situated in the north-east United States, bordering Massachusetts, New York and New Hampshire, Vermont is America's second least populous state and is 75 per cent forested.¹⁶⁷ It is in this cool, mountainous and rainy region that the protagonist tests the existence of god by planting a fig tree. If the tree survives, so does her belief in god, although now the ironic, cynical voice is stronger: 'By this logic, you do not exist. Or you exist/exclusively in warmer climates ... Perhaps/they see your face in Sicily; here we barely see/the hem of your garment'. And in this ironised yet simultaneously sincere and highly symbolic manner the debate between empiricism versus faith continues.

The other characters in this Vespers poem are John and Noah – an autobiographical coincidence (the volume is dedicated to them) and an additional layer of Biblical allusion nonetheless, accompanying the echoes of both the fig

¹⁶⁶ See John Wylie, 'Ways of Seeing' in *Landscape*, and Denis Cosgrove, 'Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol 10, No 1 (1985), pp.45-62 for a contextualisation and historical account of the development of perspective as it relates to cultural geography and subject-object power structures.

¹⁶⁷ See the Vermont Center for Geographic Information website for more detailed topographical data. <<http://vcgi.vermont.gov>>.

leaves which Adam and Eve used to cover their nakedness and also the parable of the barren fig tree (Luke, 13: 6: 9).

Earlier, in ‘The Garden’ (*TWI*, p.16) Glück’s god speaks in the only address that enlists a topographical structure as mouthpiece. Just as the landscape in this poem is intrinsically man-made, the scenario described is correspondingly domestic, leaving ontological debate temporarily aside to present ‘a young couple planting/a row of peas’, who ‘cannot see themselves,/in fresh dirt, starting up/without perspective’. Perspective, as it is contextualised here, hints not just at an emotional distance, where ‘even at the beginning of love,/her hand leaving his face makes/an image of departure’, but also intimates a historicised account of Adam and Eve’s exile, when the separation of humanity from the rest of the world as represented by expulsion from the garden of Eden has not yet taken hold. It also refers the reader chronologically to the advent of perspective as a technical innovation of the Renaissance, so that, as we view the couple who, at the beginning of love, live ‘without perspective’ we see them in a place where ‘the hills behind them’ are ‘clouded with flowers’. The use of the verb ‘clouded’ collapses the sky into the hills, so that the reader envisages a flatter scene reminiscent of Mediaeval religious painting.

The word ‘paradise’ comes ‘from the Persian, *pairidaeza*, meaning simply “park” or an orchard surrounded by a wall¹⁶⁸ and, within the text, the garden as earthly paradise is a counterpoint to the other theophanies that occur via temporal activities. Just as ‘The Garden’ (p.16) surprises our expectations of who might talk in a particular setting (it is god in this case), in ‘Heaven and Earth’ (*TWI*, p.32) it is, ironically, the poet rather than god who speaks, and who, as a

¹⁶⁸ Jennifer Heath, ‘Eden and Other Gardens’, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Vol 1, ed. by Bron Taylor (London: Continuum, 2008), pp.569-572.

human, clearly defines the boundaries, both literally and figuratively, between the sacred and the mundane – first between sky and ground at the outset, and then between the ‘fire of the summer sun’ which is ‘entirely contained by/the burning maples/at the garden’s border’. In this sense, Glück subverts Copernican hierarchy – the sun is contained within the manufactured structure – to present an illuminated vision of a man, the speaker’s husband, struck by the impact of new knowledge (in this case of immortality or, specifically, the idea that ‘never again will life end’), placed, visually at the centre of the poem’s canvas.

SACRED HYBRID

The Wild Iris is hybrid in its fusion of animist ventriloquisms and assignment of consciousness and agency to landscape and its constituent plants with a traditional Christian cosmology. This textual strategy enables a vigorous subversion of the Christian notion of human dominion over nature (Genesis 1:26), alongside the Cartesian idea that beings with minds occupy an elevated hierarchical status in proportion to the size and known capacities of the brain. In the words of ‘The Red Poppy’ (*TWI*, p.29):

The great thing
is not having
a mind. Feelings:
oh, I have those; they
govern me. I have
a lord in heaven
called the sun, and open
for him, showing him
the fire of my own heart, fire
like his presence.

The poppy rejoices in its mindlessness (as compared to the agonies of consciousness initially professed by the iris (*TWI*, p.1)), but paradoxically admits to being able to feel (and, via the action of the poem itself, to talk) – both activities being contingent on neurological function. It also names its god, the sun and, in so doing, further hybridises the book’s identity as a pantheist–pagan text to include sun worship. The poppy also confirms the sun god’s materialisation through fire, in a statement that both acknowledges the sun as a physical ball of burning gases and is redolent of one of the Bible’s most striking moments of theophany, when God speaks to Moses as a burning bush (Exodus: 3). Again, we are confronted with another layer of contradiction, for might we not infer that the ‘mindless’ poppy, governed by feelings, might also be read as a critique of pre-Christian sun worshippers as intellectually inferior adherents. Yet the poppy sees its mindlessness as a ‘great thing’ – ‘the great thing’. The landscape is silent unless it is making a theophanic or animist utterance – and it is this comparative existence as a site of absence that serves as a reminder that the transcendent Christian deity only becomes audible or readable in animist form. The landscape does not speak on its own behalf but is coerced into theophany, where its sole purpose is to communicate with humanity under the ‘restrictive’ (‘Clear Morning’, p.7) guise of the image.

This analysis does not contend that *The Wild Iris* is hybrid *within* the linguistic strategies of the individual poems; they are formed of free-verse lyric ventriloquisms (of humans, plants, god) and are not overtly interested in intratextual tropes or language effects that might more typically characterise modernist experimental approaches. Rather, it is the book’s textual structures, and their juxtapositional and polyvocal techniques, that enable greater simplicity

and directness of address. This in turn supports the formation of an integrated, ecological cosmology via a syncretic theism that operates within a secular paradigm. This secularity allows the possibility of doubt and is intimidated by what Linda Gregerson describes as the poet's strategy of 'anticipating and incorporating the skeptical reader, by fashioning the poetic sequence as a dialogue with disbelief'¹⁶⁹ – a tactic which also, according to Gregerson, gives Glück *carte blanche* in manipulating the reader's literary suspensions of disbelief. However, one might counter that these altercations which occur between a trinity of human–deity–plants are less concerned with theological ontology, cosmology and debate, and more interested in articulating the anger and despair that comes from the narrator's apprehension of spiritual abandonment: 'What is my heart to you/that you must break it over and over/like a plantsman testing/his new species?' the poet asks ('Matins', p.26). That the human poet might be no more important than the subject of any old scientific experiment is posited as evidence of god's almost insufferable indifference, yet any theological ambivalence that the poems might suggest is ultimately destabilised because it takes place within an animist framework or in the form of prayer, with an anthropomorphized (paternal) god made manifest in a landscape he (the 'Unreachable father') is acknowledged to have created:

Unreachable father, when we were first
exiled from heaven, you made
a replica, a place in one sense
different from heaven, being
designed to teach a lesson: otherwise

¹⁶⁹ Linda Gregerson, 'The Sower Against Gardens', in *On Louise Glück: Change What You See*, ed. by Joanne Feit Diehl (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press: 2005), p.30.

the same —beauty on either side, beauty
without alternative — Except
we didn't know what was the lesson. Left alone,
we exhausted each other. [...]

(‘Matins’, p.3)

The existence of heaven, Earth as its replica, a creator god and an abandoned and struggling humanity in exile is asserted at the outset, with the subject of the debate focusing not on *if* these co-ordinates exist, for they are unequivocally stated but, rather, on whether and how the world they circumscribe might continue. Again, the doubling of the mirror image also reflects the book's preoccupation with the binary – and also disrupts what Eliade defines as a crucial differentiator, the contrast between sacred and profane space, where the profane existence ‘maintains the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space’.¹⁷⁰ Here, by contrast, Glück suggests that humanity's lesson is to comprehend universal infinity as ‘beauty on either side, beauty/without alternative’, an idea that undermines both the existence of the sacred *and* the profane as oppositional realities in favour of an integrated experience (albeit one where the impossibilities of apprehending space in this absolute reflection without the distinction of contrast are evident).

The Wild Iris concludes in September and, like its beginning, at a moment of transition, between summer and autumn. Here, the transition is from life to death, as heralded by the funereal symbolism of the ‘White Lilies’ (*TWI*, p.63) of the poem's title. It is a heightened lyric, where the stakes are characteristically exalted:

¹⁷⁰ Eliade, ‘Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred’, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.23.

[...] All, all
can be lost, through scented air
the narrow columns
uselessly rising, and beyond,
a churning sea of poppies—

The ecological note is heightened too, in what could be interpreted as a clarion call to humanity from nature: the ‘narrow columns’ a metaphor for classical civilisation ‘uselessly rising’; its history of war as embodied in the ‘churning sea of poppies’. God, whose patience with humanity finally expires in ‘September Twilight’ (*TWI*, pp.60-61), signs off with a dismissive and incontrovertible adieu: ‘[...] I’ve finished you, vision/of deepest mourning’. Nature is more forgiving, ‘Hush, beloved’, comfort ‘The White Lilies’ (*TWI*, p.63) – life, death, immortality are immaterial, what matters ultimately is the sensual, as experienced in the moment, ‘this one summer’ with the lilies having ‘felt’ the ‘two hands’ of the gardener ‘release its splendor’. That experience, implicitly, being love.

Chapter 2

Hybrid Hierophanies: Where Rastafari Meets Religious Ecology in Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*

Like Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*, which corresponds to sacred hybridity through a dialogic renegotiation of Christianity, ontology and animism, Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*¹⁷¹ (hereafter *The Cartographer*) also expresses the sacred through the creation of a hyphenated paradigm. While Glück disputes the distance and hierarchies between god, humanity and nature from a North American garden, Miller redraws the map of his native Jamaica through a socio-theological debate that takes place between two archetypal opposites: The Cartographer and the Rastaman. As Glück's focus is predominantly (although not exclusively) ontological, Miller scrutinises epistemology and, more specifically, the conflict between spirituality and science, and its political and psychological affects in a contemporary, postcolonial context. In this instance, Miller enlists the textual structures of the collection, which privilege debate, to support a historicised account of Jamaica's religious, cultural and ecological geographies. Unlike Glück, who uses textual architecture to simplify vocabulary in order to sustain a complex dialectic expressed via high lyric, Miller explores socio-cultural religious hybridity via the tensions between the Jamaican landscape and various renditions of the authorial self. In doing so, Creole/patois and 'standard' English are hybridised, alongside the linguistic and semantic subversions in Rastafarian language as sung and spoken. As a localised, theo-political, Abrahamic hybrid, Rastafarian religious

¹⁷¹ Kei Miller, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014).

tradition, rituals and belief systems, intermes in poems that align thematically to religious ecology, indigenous and folkloric traditions and mythological characters. Zion is both physical hierophany and an ideological spiritual metaphor of contested geography and mythical status in both Jewish and Rastafarian theology. *The Cartographer* is a text which seeks to ‘map its way’ to a non-physical, sacred space, through song, incantation, chant and debate and, given that these invocations take place within a textual and literary paradigm, it becomes a hybridised process, through which Miller seeks to reconcile contradictory systems of knowledge and thought.

As Glück opens *The Wild Iris* by inviting her reader to pass through a portal into a meta-human, horticultural cosmos, so Miller establishes the co-ordinates of *The Cartographer*’s ideological, spatial and cultural field from the outset. The book kicks off with ‘Groundation’ (p.9), a poem title that refers directly to the Rastafarian ritual of the same name. According to Ennis Barrington Edmonds, a Groundation or ‘Nyabinghi I-ssembly’ meeting ‘lasts anywhere from three to seven days and is marked by a festive atmosphere, intense activities, and ecstatic emotions’.¹⁷² In addition to drumming, chanting and the smoking of cannabis as holy sacrament, participants also engage in ‘*reasoning*’ as an open-ended, dialogical discourse between two or more brethren, which is aimed at the exploration of intersubjectivity, that is gaining “access to *one visionary stream*, to the condition of I and I consciousness”.¹⁷³ As such it becomes a syncretic force, with union rather than fracture at its heart, emphasising community (I and I) over individualism. As

¹⁷² Ennis Barrington Edmonds, *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.77.

¹⁷³ See John Paul Homiak, ‘The Ancient of Days Seated Black: Eldership, Oral Tradition and Ritual in Rastafari Culture’, PhD Dissertation, Brandeis University (1985), p.372; and Edmonds, pp.74-8 for an overview and definition of these terms.

a form of philosophical, theological and political conversation, reasoning has the capacity to accommodate a dialectical discourse that takes place between the book's two protagonists, where a white, post/colonial hegemony as (reluctantly) represented by The Cartographer is consistently undermined and challenged. These religious activities and rituals are also calendar-specific, corresponding to particular dates in Rasta history, such as Ethiopian Christmas on 7 January and Haile Selassie's visit to Jamaica on 21 April 1966 – an event Miller's opening poem explicitly references. That Miller chooses to initiate proceedings by evoking the Groundation ceremony is no coincidence; in doing so, he confirms not only the book's literal geography, but also evokes a specifically Rastafarian version of Jamaica:

So begin this thing
with an *Abu ye! Abu ye! Abu ye!*
A heartbless. [...]
(‘Groundation’, p.9)

As Glück opens a door for the reader to pass through, Miller's ceremonial entrée acts as a Rastafarian version of shamanic incantation, where ‘The song word is powerful; it names a thing, it stands at the sacred center, drawing all towards it’.¹⁷⁴ Miller compels the reader to ‘stand shoeless’, kneel barefoot and feel the earth, which, in this context, is Jamaican soil and, within the Rastafarian paradigm, Babylon, is profane, rather than sacred ground. The Amharic ‘*Abu ye!*’ establishes Ethiopia as a diasporic presence and Pan-Africanist synecdoche for the entire

¹⁷⁴ See Joan Halifax, ‘Shaman Song’ in *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (London: Pelican Books, 1979), p.33.

continent as indicated by the movement's foundation in Baptist Ethiopianism.¹⁷⁵

It is a location central to the tenets of the movement for Rastafarians 'who see Africa as their original and ultimate homeland, themselves as Black Israel in exile, and the (white dominated) world around them as Babylon'.¹⁷⁶

Establishing this triumvirate space as the book's central setting also creates what Eliade defines as sacred or 'mythical geography', which is intensified by the Rastafarian relationship with Zion as destination – rather than solely location – symbolic of and literal to black people's physical and spiritual salvation. Once the invocation has taken place, Miller offers an alternative cosmology in 'The Shrug of Jah' (p.10), a specular poem, where the opening lines declaring 'In the long ago beginning/the world was unmapped' are ranged right across the page so that the spatial indentations, along with the notion of the 'shrug', give the poem an ethereal, unsubstantiated quality. This is mimetic of the poem's subversive notion that divine creation was a casual rather than a structured and momentous affair. The book's preoccupations with doubling, duality and opposites are also, literally, mirrored here, with the word at the centre on which the specular turns, being 'No' – a declamation that evokes Rastafari's roots as a religion of social and political rebellion while simultaneously confirming terrestrial human existence prior to cartographic containment. 'Establishing the Metre' (p.11) on the opposite, right-hand page is another mirror; the story, incrementally and uniformly indented, of two cartographers, Pierre Méchain and Jean-Baptiste Delambre, who spent seven years walking around the Earth in order to discover

¹⁷⁵ See Edmonds, 'Dread Uprising: The Emergence of Rastafari', in *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* for a summary of Rastafari's roots in Christian Baptist eschatology, Garveyism and Ethiopianism as a response to the subjugation and political and economic repressions of slavery.

¹⁷⁶ See Chris Park, 'Reflections on Religion', in *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.45.

the metric system – ‘Such a pilgrimage!’, the speaker proclaims. The poem also puns on poetic metrics in ironically hefty iambs: ‘And foot/by weary foot, they found a rhythm,/the measure that exists in everything’ – a theme which recurs throughout and is repudiated immediately afterwards in ‘Quashie’s Verse’ (p.12), a concrete poem in the shape of a jar/gourd, which introduces the character ‘Quashie’.¹⁷⁷ Formally, the visual ‘jar’ that ‘Quashie’s Verse’ creates on the page is, like the system it laments, approximate: a “‘just about” measure – for words are like that – /each one carrying its own distance’. As emblematic Jamaican Everyman, Quashie is the guttersnipe offspring of slaves and slavery, whose ‘old measures’ that exist outside the confinement of the colonial paradigm are ‘outlawed’. In this sense, Quashie is simultaneously active, as protagonist/poet, and passive – grammatically, as subject of the author’s textual narrative, and figuratively, as a politically constrained citizen of Empire. These constraints present in the image of the jar, which in its choice of the word ‘jar’ as object nomenclature (as opposed to gourd or calabash, for example), recalls Wallace Stevens’ 1919 ‘Anecdote of the Jar’,¹⁷⁸ a poem which, despite its titular gesture towards the casual, considers (through exemplar rather than analysis) the ideological tensions between modernism and Romanticism, ecology and dominion, wilderness and manufacture:

¹⁷⁷ Dictionary definitions of the word describe ‘Quashie’ as a derogatory, late eighteenth century, generic term for a black person and one which bastardises the West African name ‘Kwasi’ that falls within the tradition of naming children for the day of the week, in this case Sunday. In this sense, Miller’s usage is one of reclamation, in the same manner as ‘queer’ or ‘nigga’ for example.

¹⁷⁸ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p.76.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it.
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground.
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush.
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

In Stevens' poem, the 'slovenly wilderness' rises up around the hill in Tennessee on which the jar is placed; the hill becomes a re-positioned plinth, shifting its allusory locale from Keats' neo-classical European reverie to the rural American south; and 'The Jar, rigid, anachronistic, inharmonious though it is, yet [sic] dominates the scene and shapes it in its own image'.¹⁷⁹ Miller's shaped vessel, itself a hybridised symbol of rigid containment and simultaneous fluidity, revises Stevens' aesthetic assay and, cognisant of its own provenance, announces 'Even this, despite/its best shaping efforts, will never quite be a/jar'. No, Quashie, forever surrounded by and restrained within the strictures of a society that seeks to disempower him physically, spiritually and politically, and with his own methodologies and knowledge systems such as the Ethiopian '*emijja*', which

¹⁷⁹ See Patricia Merivale, 'Wallace Stevens' "Jar": The Absurd Detritus of Romantic Myth', *College English*, 26.7 (1965), p.530.

works on the length of the human stride,¹⁸⁰ rendered intellectually invalid, must either fit in or establish his own independent paradigm. It is in this manner that ‘Quashie’s Verse’ situates hegemonic occidental epistemology (aka Babylon) as unfit for purpose.

Miller’s revisionist strategy continues with ‘Unsettled’ (p.13), where the repetition of the prefix ‘un’, combined with a physical description of the topography of the Jamaican ‘bush’, presents a pre-colonial wilderness. The island’s thorny interior is portrayed as a violent, spiritually and physically deleterious presence, where the domesticated natural environment is forged under the European gaze through enforced African labour:

[...] inside –

the dengue, the hookworm, the heat
and botheration; unchecked macka¹⁸¹

sharp as crucifixion. This is no paradise –
not yet – not this unfriendly, untamed island –

this unsanitised, unstructured island –
this unmannered, unmeasured island;

this island: unwritten, unsettled, unmapped.
(pp.13-14)

As such, the land becomes a template onto which Miller maps an anthropomorphised theological ecology, where the ‘unfriendly’ pre-colonial

¹⁸⁰ For Ethiopian systems of measure, see Abyssinia Gateway website at <<http://abyssiniagateway.net/info/measure.html>>.

¹⁸¹ ‘Macka’ is defined as ‘thorny bush’ in the online Jamaican Patwah dictionary website at <<http://jamaicanpatwah.com/term/Macka/1509>>.

‘bush’ has not yet been ‘tamed’ and the ‘unchecked macka’, as a simile for Christ’s crown of thorns, opens out into a larger historical metaphor. Rebellion and resistance, as personified by the island’s topographical features, are ‘sharp as crucifixion’: an image that amplifies the subsequent notion that nature as wilderness is far from paradise, temporally, mythologically and experientially. Christ, as he is evoked here, is an unreconciled figure, appearing both as martyr and saviour of the slaves who are bidden by their masters to battle with an inhospitable landscape and as an adversarial totem of the Christian colonial mission. As an eco-poetic narration of the biological topography of the island, ‘Unsettled’ follows in Derek Walcott’s footsteps, where the relationship with the Romantic sublime is inevitably complicated. In his essay ‘Postcolonial Romanticisms: Derek Walcott and the Melancholic Narrative of Landscape’, Roy Osamu Kamada contextualises the endeavour, saying:

The landscape he writes about is necessarily politicized; his own subjectivity is intimately implicated in both the natural beauty and the traumatic history of the place; he must directly acknowledge the history of St Lucia and the Caribbean, the history of diaspora, of slavery, of the capitalist commodification of the landscape, and the devastating consequences this history has on the individual.¹⁸²

If one swaps ‘St Lucia’ with ‘Jamaica’, then this analysis of Walcott as a writer of eco-poetic literatures is directly applicable to Miller, although it may in fact be more accurate here to swap ‘St Lucia’ with ‘The Caribbean’ as region, as there are important nuances that align *The Cartographer* to a more specific configuration of

¹⁸² See Roy Osamu Kamada, ‘Postcolonial Romanticism: Derek Walcott and the Melancholic Narrative of Landscape’, in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2002), p.209.

Caribbean hybrid identity. While ‘the cartographer’ as titular protagonist maps on to Walcott via Odysseus as archetypal traveller and explorer, it is the rastaman, whose pilgrimage is a return to Zion, who mirrors Odysseus’s mythological quest for home. As such, *The Cartographer’s* spiritual and religious affiliations with Rastafari, along with its granular geographical approach, characterise it as distinctly Jamaican and, thus, a component of multifarious Caribbean identity rather than a shorthand for the whole.

Poet, critic and diasporan Jamaican Kwame Dawes captures these particular hyphenations in his book *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic*.¹⁸³ Reggae, as Rastafari’s artistically talented, ideological cousin, ‘emerges primarily as a music that speaks in the voice of the working-class community, that speaks first to that community and only then outside of the community’, a facet which, according to Dawes, ‘makes it quite distinctive from the imaginative literature which came out of the Caribbean in the first half of this [the twentieth] century, which has been primarily preoccupied with addressing the Western world’.¹⁸⁴ In this sense, as a text that seeks to privilege a community of voices embodied and expressed in both political and spiritual terms by the rastaman, *The Cartographer* follows Dawes’ reggae aesthetic. Partly because it shares ‘Reggae’s inextricable connection with Rastafarian discourse ... [which] redefines the meaning of deity and recasts the figure of God in terms that are antithetical to colonial representations of the Christian godhead’.¹⁸⁵ And partly because it is sung.

Miller further hybridises *The Cartographer’s* structural methodology through its prolific musicality, where the diction, vocabulary, rhythms and tonal reach of the

¹⁸³ Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mystic: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1999).

¹⁸⁴ Dawes, *Natural Mystic*, p.96.

¹⁸⁵ Dawes, *Natural Mystic*, p.98.

poems makes them as much, if not more, sung as they are spoken. Here, Jamaica's island topography, as 'mapped out by song', is in harmony with the Australian indigenous Aboriginal tradition of songlines¹⁸⁶ where an area's history, physical features and cultural narrative is described and mapped through the voice rather than mathematical co-ordinates.

As noted earlier, there is the repeated refrain of 'un' in 'Unsettled' (p.13) and the incantatory chant of 'Groundation' (p.9); then there are praise songs, such as 'Hymn to the Birds' (p.48) and 'In Praise of Maps' (p.63), a poem in which the speaker pays homage not only to the map's utility in terms of navigation, but also to its pivotal role in the continuation of civilisation and modernity:

hymn then a song in praise of maps, without which
we could not dream the shapes of countries:
the boot of Italy, the number 7 of Somalia;
without which we could not trace the course of rivers –
[...]
without which submarines
would beach themselves like omens –
rusting mermaids on arbitrary beaches;
without which we would walk nomadic distances,
give up the language of men and learn the gekkering
of foxes; we would negotiate with them
each evening a soft space in their dens.

At first glance this song (and it is a song, a hymn in fact) is a paean to the map and all its associated benefits. Yet it is ambiguous; from an integrated, ecocritical

¹⁸⁶ See Bruce Chatwin's anthropological travelogue of the same name, which brought this ancient tradition to popular attention. *The Songlines*, reprint (London:Random House, 2012).

perspective perhaps a beached submarine, always a vessel of war, is a good ‘omen’. Perhaps, as Andrew Motion suggests, ‘The link between poetry and paths is a very ancient thing, as ancient as the hills’¹⁸⁷ and walking ‘nomadic distances’ would be no bad thing if more people, like Wordsworth who is estimated to have ‘walked about 180,000 miles in the course of his long life’, could hear ‘the rhythm of human feet in the movement of feet in a line’.¹⁸⁸ Perhaps by giving up the ‘language of men’ as an instrument of avaricious patriarchy and instead learning to commune with the ‘gekking foxes’, humanity might progress to a more enabling, technologised version of planetary stewardship.

There are also poems that quote folk lyrics, such as ‘Roads’ (p.31) where ‘Our people sing: / *Go dung a Manuel Road / ji go bruck rock stone*’, recalling the blues sung on chain gangs. Or, most appositely perhaps ‘xxii.’ (p.54), a poem in which ‘Them roads was mapped out by song — / mountain roads hold soprano, city lane hold tenor, / them big potholes manage what we call a *Baptist alto* —’. These differentiations in singing scale are consistent with the songline as mapping system, where the landscape is described through melody and rhythm as a universal language rather than a tribal or regional dialect that may not be understood by a traveller of different origin. Running throughout the collection is a sequence entitled ‘Place Name’ which provides a folk history to many of the locations. Some of these offer background information, others an alternative chronicle which, while not available on the map, contain local history and epistemological narrative; some are well known locations, such as ‘Half Way Tree’ (p.46), while others less so.

¹⁸⁷ Andrew Motion, ‘The Poem and The Path’, in *The Hudson Review*, Vol 63.1 (Spring 2010), pp.19-54.

¹⁸⁸ Motion, pp.20, 21.

Song as a manifestation and expression of the sacred is a hierophany integral to the book's structure and poetics. *The Cartographer's* spiritual-musical locale is rooted in the Baptist sermon and the Rastafarian religious chant as an agent of political and religious transformation. According to Ennis Edmonds, Nyabinghi ritual ceremonial drumming emerged from and was concentrated in the ghettos of West Kingston. Although there are a variety of influences including Kumina, Revival and Jonkunu, it is Burru that is most integrated into Rastafari. Burru was very popular during slavery, its survival 'seemingly facilitated by the fact that slave masters often allowed Burru drum corps to play in the fields while others were working', a concession made because it seemed to lift the spirits of the workers and therefore increased production.¹⁸⁹ In the 1940s and 1950s West Kingston was home to both Burru and Rasta communities, and it is this geographical proximity that in part accounts for the integration of the new religion with an old music tradition, which later also incorporated reggae as a popular form.

One might also spotlight parts of the book's central sequence, including the dialogue between the rastaman and cartographer, such as in 'xvi in which every song is singing Zion' (39), which namechecks 'Bob Marley, Luciano, Junior Gong,/Wingless Angels, Delroy Morgan, Buju Banton'. It is notable here, as a socio-political aside, that Miller references Buju Banton, whose homophobic 'anthem' 'Boom Bye Bye' propelled him centre-stage as a target of an international campaign against the incitement of hate crime, headed by UK queer activist Peter Tatchell.¹⁹⁰ Of course 'Buju Banton' scans and half-rhymes with

¹⁸⁹ See Edmonds, 'Bearers of Jamaican Popular Culture', in *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers*, pp.97-115 for a more detailed historical account of the development of African percussive and ritualistic musical forms in Rastafarianism.

¹⁹⁰ See Peter Tatchell's website, 'Buju Banton Says Boom Bye Bye to Homophobia' for a brief account of the campaign and its outcome in which the

‘Junior Gong’, but Miller’s inclusion of Banton, who many readers will recognise not for his musical credentials, but as emblematic of this discourse, is significant. As a gay Jamaican, Miller’s conflation of Banton with Marley is an act of utterance that both reclaims dancehall (as an offshoot of reggae) as a music of *all* Jamaican people and at the same time momentarily shifts the reader’s attention towards the homophobic prejudices within the Rastafarian movement, where homosexuality is viewed through the moral lens of the Old Testament. It is a subtle manoeuvre in terms of the positioning of the (homosexual) self within the sacred paradigm that *The Cartographer* sets up via Rastafarian ritual, chant and ideology; and also is a recognition of the plantocracy-based complications that arise in any reading of black Caribbean masculinity – a complexity that is expressed in Jamaican critic Carolyn Cooper’s contextualisation of the phenomenon in her essay ‘Lyrical Gun: Metaphor and Role Play in Jamaican Dancehall Culture’¹⁹¹, which explores the dialogic and theatrical capacities of dancehall and the relationship to literal and figurative language in oral cultures. By extension, readers might also query the legitimacy of Rastafari as a viable alternative to a white Western patriarchal system, when, in the words of Stuart Hall, women ‘are regarded as second in status to men, and with the duty to look

singer signed ‘The Reggae Compassionate Act’ decrying his former stance <<http://www.petertatchell.net/>>. Miller’s own stance on Jamaica’s ‘anti-gay’ lobby is detailed in his blog ‘A Lion in a Den of Daniels’ on the Under the Saltire Flag website, 11 June 2014: <<https://underthesaltireflag.com/2014/06/11/a-lion-in-a-den-of-daniels/>>. The Jamaican critic Carolyn Cooper brings a cultural perspective to homophobia in dancehall, in her essay ‘Lyrical Gun: Metaphor and Role Play in Jamaican Dancehall Culture’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 35.3/4, pp.429-447.

¹⁹¹ See Cooper, ‘Lyrical Gun: Metaphor and Role Play in Jamaican Dancehall Culture’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 35.3/4, pp.429-447, in which she sets out a socio-cultural and historicised context to the performative conditions and oral traditions under which dancehall operates and how this in turn might illuminate (although not excuse) homophobic posturing and lyricism through a post-colonial cultural lens, so as to ensure that any reading of the event is not exclusively situated through a white, male perspective.

after and support them. They are treated with courtesy, enjoined to dress and behave modestly and with dignity; though respected as the Rastaman's 'Queen' they are also taught to respect the rightfulness of male superiority'.¹⁹² Certainly, this discrepancy in gender equality is problematic, and it is also pertinent to note that similar biases are present in the traditional Christian religiosity expressed in *The Wild Iris*. Miller addresses this ideological fissure in the poem 'Blood Cloths' (59), dedicated to Cooper, and which in its title alludes to her book *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*.¹⁹³ 'Blood Cloths' celebrates the 'ingenuity of women/who, when cornered, fished out/the cloths of their menstruation' and waved them in the air 'like conquering Japanese flags'. The visual imprint of the 'red spot' inaudibly rhymes with the phrase 'blood clart', its 'profanity' as a swear word being neutralised, or even re-sacralised, through reclamation and repurposing as a symbol of public, and (in the use of the flag as motif) even nationalist resistance 'against the dark/corners of cane'. Given that nationalist and military regalia is integral to both Rastafarian symbology and ideology, in this regard the poem's matriarchal reconfiguration of Jamaican women might be considered emphatic, with its anaphoric imperative 'Acknowledge then ...' repeating in three of its four verses.

The sonic incantation continues in 'xvii.' (40) where the rastaman's nyabinghi 'DUP-DUP-dudududu-DUP-DUP beat is phonetically related on the page. 'Ain't nutt'n iambic bout dis' remarks the rastaman, who has begun to wonder if 'dis is what was stolen from Quashie?'. That Miller not only refers to the contrasting rhythms of European iambics but also compels the reader to utter them is

¹⁹² See Stuart Hall, 'Religious ideologies and social movements in Jamaica', in *Religion and Ideology: A Reader*, ed. by Robert Boccock and Kenneth Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp.269-298.

¹⁹³ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

consistent with *The Cartographer's* identity as a work of oral mapping. Dawes articulates this in his definition of the reggae aesthetic, where 'Rasta speech is particularly adept at word play, motivated by the desire to usurp the discourse of western society and the language of the "oppressor".'¹⁹⁴ That the reader is also directed towards reggae as an amplified, populist version of Rastafari is corroborated by the deejay and artist namechecks, a tradition that exists within the music itself and another trope within Miller's scheme of oral cartography.

How we might envisage, interpret and draw a map, as an interspecial, multi-authored, sacred document is a preoccupation made explicit throughout the collection. In part 'vii' (p.22) of the rastaman/cartographer sequence, Miller asks:

[...] for what to call the haphazard
dance of bees returning
to their hives but maps
that lead to precise
hibiscuses, their soft
storehouses of pollen?
And what to call the blood
of hummingbirds but maps
that pulse the tiny bodies across
oceans and then back?

As Glück's *The Wild Iris* gives voice to nature through botanical ventriloquisms, Miller assigns it agency literally via 'the birds and the bees', who act as non-human cartographers in the migratory and navigational patterns. That these are Jamaican bees is embedded in his choice of flora, the hibiscus being a national icon; so too the 'Doctor Bird', a species of hummingbird that lives only on the

¹⁹⁴ Dawes, *Natural Mystic*, p.98.

island and, according to the indigenous Arawaks, is said to have magical powers.¹⁹⁵ The question posed here, i.e. what do we define and name as map, is answered in part by the rastaman on the opposite page, in 'vii' (p.23), whose response refers to Biblical event as large-scale, cosmic theophany:

I & I overstand, for is true that I-man
also look to maps drawn by Jah's large hands
him who did pull comets across the sky
to lead we out from wicked Pharoah's land.

Multi-dimensional forms of map-making are familiar to indigenous cultures, where 'non-visual representations of the human experience of mapping a journey or place may be as important as the visual ones. The drum and its use in the Arctic indigenous cultures provides us with an instance of the shamanistic performance, or ritual, as a form of mapping'.¹⁹⁶ Feminist essayist Rebecca Solnit has co-authored several alternative atlases of American cities, including New Orleans, New York and San Francisco, where the cities are presented through maps, photographs and essays informed through interviews with and research via musicologists, ethnographers and journalists, in representations where 'Adrienne Rich' is the subway stop adjacent to 'Zora Neale Hurston'.¹⁹⁷ Miller's cartographical approach is similar in that he seeks to circumscribe an updated, holistic, postcolonial version of Jamaica; if read as a process of sacred

¹⁹⁵ See Frederic Gomes Cassidy, and R. B. Le Page, eds., *The Dictionary of Jamaican English*, (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2000) (previously published by Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁹⁶ See Jouko Keski-Säntti, Ulla Lehtonen, Pauli Sivonen and Ville Vuolanto, 'The Drum as Map: Western Knowledge Systems and Northern Indigenous Map Making', in *Imago Mundi*, 55 (2003), pp.120-125.

¹⁹⁷ Rebecca Solnit, and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (City Atlas Trilogy 3) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

hybridisation then the text itself becomes a cartographic document, through which the reader can apprehend a sonic incantation of the island, its flora, fauna and its people.

As the dialogic narrative between rastaman and cartographer progresses, the cartographer becomes more immersed in his surroundings and, once the rastaman begins his nyabinghi beat ('xvii.', p.40), his point of view becomes more aligned to those around him:

Amongst the I-drens & I-formants he is smoking a chillum
pipe & learning the ease of flight & what a vantage point to see
this island by!
(‘xviii.’, p.43)

Given that, within the nyabinghi ceremonial gathering, the smoking of marijuana pipes is a sacred ritual, the shamanic invocation that begins with drumming is intensified by intoxicification. In the preface to the 1967 edition of *Technicians of the Sacred*, Jerome Rothenberg provides a glossary of ‘intersections and analogies’ between ‘primitive & modern’ poetries in which he describes:

(5) the animal-body-rootedness of
“primitive” poetry: recognition of a
“physical” basis for the poem within
a man’s body – or as an act of body
& mind together, breath &/or spirit;
in many cases too the direct & open
handling of sexual imagery & (in the
“events” of sexual activities as key
factors in the creation of the sacred;

(6) the poet as shaman, or primitive

shaman as poet & seer thru control of the
means just stated: an open “visionary”
situation prior to all system-making
 (“priesthood”) in which the man creates
thru dream (image) & word (song).
“that Reason may have ideas to build
on” (W. Blake).¹⁹⁸

The modern correlation Rothenberg notates in the opposite column includes
‘individual neo-shamanisms, works directly influenced by the “other” poetry or
by analogies to “primitive art”: ideas of negritude, tribalism, wilderness, etc’.¹⁹⁹
Certainly *The Cartographer* contains many of these elements, particularly around
negritude and, to some degree, tribalisms, although the neo-shamanisms operate
more on a collective rather than an individual level, as is consistent with the
tenets of Rastafari. In the poem (‘xviii.’, p.43) the description of the island shifts
into a personified version of events, where topographical contours morph into a
female figure, ‘her skin is pimpled with green hullocks’ – suggesting that, as the
cartographer enters a shamanic dream state in the communal environment, the
physical geography of place shapeshifts to meet him in a form recognisable as his
own (although as female it can be read as ‘other’ and as a possible projection of
heterosexual desire, where the word ‘hullocks’ evokes the visual curvature of
breasts or sonic echo of buttocks). As an ecopoetic event, the experience of
physical immersion in the environment, as provoked by ritualised intoxication
as a process of initiation, is a loosening of the divisions between self, community
and the non-human as other, where the liminal interstices coalesce into a unified

¹⁹⁸ Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, 1985), pp.xxix-xxx.

¹⁹⁹ Rothenberg, p.xxx.

whole. In that loosening, perhaps the cartographer becomes a little closer to Jah's cosmological 'shrug' and, with that shrug, the elusive destination that is Zion.

Just as *The Wild Iris* may be read either as a conversation between poet, landscape and deity or as a conversation between various aspects of the self, *The Cartographer* too can be considered as an internal dialogue, where the conflicts between two opposing epistemologies play out. Quashie, as an emblematic presence of the Jamaican 'Everyman', is a facet of the poet's multiple representations of Self and Other, renditions that also play out through the two principal interlocutors, the rastaman and the cartographer, each of whom can be read as cultural archetypes. All three characters bear contradictory constituents of the author/speaker as poet, academic (Miller currently holds a professorship at the University of Exeter; the rastaman has a PhD) and migratory Jamaican.

Expression of and for community is an explicit component of Miller's poetics, most recently articulated in a personal manifesto published in 2017 in *The Poetry Review*, at a time of widespread political and ecological uncertainty and disruption:

Almost always, belief, or the assertion of it, springs out of its seeming opposite – disbelief. The soul, under threat, finds its voice. [...] Black bodies, immigrant bodies, female bodies – it turns out, they are as devalued and despised today as they ever have been. It turns out the arc of the moral universe does not always bend towards justice. [...] And so this being a time of manifestos, here is mine: that poetry at its best, does not speak on behalf of the self. It speaks on behalf of the Other. It speaks on behalf of community, It speaks the self only in so far as the self is part of something larger.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ See Kei Miller, 'And This Being the Time for Manifestos', in *The Poetry Review*, 107:1 (Spring 2017), p.33.

Speaking as community, on behalf of the Other, is an act embedded within the language of Rastafari, where puns, linguistic inversions and hyphenations are seen as ‘central to the process of decolonisation and the liberation of an oppressed society’.²⁰¹ Books such as Dale Spender’s [non]-seminal feminist text *Man Made Language*²⁰² make the same case against patriarchy, while Charles Olson’s essay ‘Projective Verse’²⁰³ argues that the kinetic energy of sound has an impact above and beyond poetry’s familiar tropes of image-making and semantic sense. In *The Cartographer*, Rastafari’s linguistic subversions indicate both that the poem’s point of view is the rastaman’s, and also augment the incantatory elements of the text, which sonically produce a hybridised paradigm under which structure the narrative and poetic content (language) sits: ‘Map/was just a land-guage written against I&I/who never knew fi read it’ (‘xix.’, p.44) declares the rastaman. In her 1999 essay ‘American Narcissism’,²⁰⁴ Louise Glück writes against an inwardly focused stance that pulls all poetry towards a central ‘I’, pronouncing that ‘Narcissistic practice, no matter what ruse it appropriates, no matter what ostensible subject, *is* static, in that its position *vis-à-vis* the self is fixed; [...]’. Not that Glück rejects any use of the first person ‘I’, more that autobiography and self-reflection are poetic tropes to be vigorously interrogated: ‘this is not to say the cure for narcissism is the outward gaze. Social agenda, concerns outside the specific self, are not in themselves protection [...]’.²⁰⁵ For writers where self, whether as other or not, has been marginalised in terms of its presence of absence within the Western canon, the pressures of representation, and the

²⁰¹ Dawes, *Natural Mysticism*, p.98.

²⁰² Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

²⁰³ Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950).

²⁰⁴ Louise Glück, ‘American Narcissism’, in *American Originality: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

²⁰⁵ Glück, ‘American Narcissism’, p.12.

responsibility towards communities whose human rights have been and continue to be breached, is heightened. While Miller's 'manifesto' is one which responds to its time, Derek Walcott, in an address published in 1988, contextualises poetry as political response, where he laments:

The death of Joy in this century, a demise that followed closely on that of Nietzsche's God. [...] We make such conceited claims for the cruelty of this century that we have produced a poetry of reason, a poetry of why we cannot sing, because, what is there to sing about?²⁰⁶

If we consider *The Cartographer* as a hybrid between poetry, incantatory chant and socio-political treatise, then we might also read the elevation of language towards a sacred and communal centre as a poetry that speaks for many, as one. *The Cartographer's* final poem closes the circle of the book's religious ceremony, which opened with the 'heart bless' of 'Groundation' with 'xxvii.', in which the rastaman says a benediction' (70), a salutary blessing, where the rhythms and language of the Rastafarian chant leave the reader closer to the elusive destination:

In leaving
the rastaman bids you
[...]
Bids you, Trod Holy
To I-ly, I-ly, I-ly

Mount Zion-I
Trod Holy.

²⁰⁶ Derek Walcott, 'Bright Opposite of Nothing', in *Poetry Ireland Review*, 43/44, Special North American Issue (Autumn-Winter, 1994), pp.1-2.

Chapter 3

Re-iterating the Sacred Centre and Transcending Nostalgia in Joy Harjo's *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*

As Kei Miller's *The Cartographer* is woven through with Rastafari incantation and song, Joy Harjo's *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (hereafter *Conflict Resolution*)²⁰⁷ incorporates religious chant alongside a poetic homage to jazz. Formally, the volume blurs the boundaries between language-based cultural restoration (some of the poem songs include Mvskoke Creek and Navaho), protest lyric, spiritual sermon/blessing/incantation, cosmological blueprint and autobiographical journal. In its association with jazz, the book aligns the equivalences between First Nations American²⁰⁸ and African American postcolonial experience,

²⁰⁷ Joy Harjo, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems* (New York: Norton, 2015).

²⁰⁸ As is often the case with postcolonial and anti-normative nomenclatures, how outsiders describe tribal peoples collectively can shift as political understanding and emphases change over time. Research Methods scholar Dr Helen Kara explains her use of Indigenous and indigenous very simply in her blog post 'On Being an Indigenous Ally', <www.helenkara.com>, saying 'Most allies of Indigenous peoples seem to be non-Indigenous settlers in Indigenous lands. I am an indigenous British woman – the small 'i' denotes that I am a native of a colonising, not a colonised, country.' Writing as an 'ally' this seemed a pragmatic and useful descriptor; however, commentators on the blog have found Kara's methodology problematic. In the online magazine 'Indian Country' (<<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/social-issues/blackhorse-do-you-prefer-native-american-or-american-indian-6-prominent-voices-respond/>>) activist Amanda Blackhorse interviews people from different nations about how they prefer to be identified: some were happy with Native American, native, Indian, i/Indigenous despite their associated controversies. Some suggested 'Original or First Americans' as possible alternatives. Autochthonous is anthropologically accurate, as it describes people who are original to a land and not descendants of migrants or colonisers (although this would exclude mixed-heritage people, of whom Harjo is one), and it does not seem to be a term used to self-identify, which was the most important factor to all those Amanda Blackhorse surveyed. Harjo uses 'Indians' most frequently, and 'natives' or, to be exact, 'we natives', a subtle but important distinction. Although 'Indian' actually *feels* okay to me, as does native, when I read them in the poems and elsewhere, as a cultural outsider I have decided instead to use either 'First Nations' – which,

although the quoted epigraph from Phillip Deere that opens the initial section 'How it Came to Be' also clarifies a distinction:

Only the Indian people are the original people of America. Our roots are buried deep in the soils of America. We are the only people who have continued with the oldest beliefs in this country. We are the people who still yet speak the language given to us by the Creator ...

This is our homeland. We came from no other country.
(*Conflict Resolution*, p.1)

As a poet, memoirist, saxophone player and vocalist of the Mvskoke/Creek Nation, Harjo has produced writing that has enduringly focused on articulating the paradoxes of cultural survival in a society that has denied and systematically sought to extinguish the cosmological and religious paradigm within which First Nations communities historically exist(ed). That these communities may have corresponding, various, contradictory and distinct social and theological beliefs complicates the texture of the analysis, particularly when any attempt to aggregate indigenous knowledge systems in a bid to critique and/or amend the Euro-colonial paradigm is shaped by the fact that most academic discourse is a product of the latter. In astrology, a planetary influence is said to be in its detriment when the celestial body is positioned in the opposite zodiac sign to the one over which it rules²⁰⁹ and this is perhaps a useful metaphor in terms of any attempt to hybridise these perceived ideological polarities, where even a passing reference to astrology, albeit a metaphorical one, is likely to produce a climate of intellectual

although originally only used in Canada, now applies to and is used by tribes across the American continent or lower-case 'indigenous', unless referring to a specific tribe, in which case I will name it specifically.

²⁰⁹ Llewellyn George, *The New A to Z Horoscope Maker and Delineator*, rev. and ed. by Marylee Blytheriver (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1999), p.47.

suspicion. John Grim addresses these skews and exposures in his essay ‘Indigenous Knowing and Responsible Life in the World’, acknowledging that, while conflating First Nations ‘lifeways’ for interpretive convenience ‘is inappropriate and continues essentialist misreadings’,²¹⁰ the ‘obvious differences both within indigenous communities and between different native cultures should not blind us to cultural wholes’ that incorporate ‘shared language, kinship terms, mythic narratives, rituals, subsistence practices, and modes of environmental awareness’.²¹¹

Like Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris, Conflict Resolution* is, as the title suggests, a book where problematic theo-anthropological and ecological hierarchies are resituated and leavened in order to establish an intermeshing between what Jay McDaniel describes as the horizontal and vertical sacred as a state of simultaneous theological immanence and transcendence. In this configuration:

The vertical sacred is God or the Godhead. In the world religions it can be experienced as a higher power that is above us in some way, to which we feel attuned in faith and hope; or as a deeper yet bottomless source from which all things continuously emanate, moment by moment, of which we ourselves are expressions [...]

By the ‘horizontal’ sacred I mean two things: first the intrinsic value of each and every living being on earth, understood as a subject of its own life and not simply an object for others; second the joy of mutually enhancing relationships, in which humans dwell in harmony with one another and with other living beings.²¹²

²¹⁰ See John Grim, ‘Indigenous Knowing and Responsible Life in the World’, in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. by Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp.196-217 (p.196).

²¹¹ Grim, ‘Indigenous Knowing and Responsible Life in the World’, p.198.

²¹² Jay McDaniel, ‘Ecotheology and World Religions’ in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. by Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp.29-31.

According to McDaniel, the vertical Godhead can be discerned in the horizontal, yet the horizontal does not depend on the existence of the vertical. In this sense, the horizontal sacred has the capacity to encompass materialist deep ecologists and phenomenologists such as Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett and Arne Naess, whose approaches are also ideologically absorbent; as a place-based ontology, deep ecology has the capacity to ‘draw from science and [to] remain open to a plurality of conceptions of nature, including sacred and religious ones’.²¹³ *Conflict Resolution* is a book in which the horizontal sacred occurs as a theophanic event, where the essence or ‘spirit’ of the God(head) is made manifest in physical materiality, whether via landscape, earthly or celestial body, animals or through connection with another human being. Harjo’s structural strategies and the cosmology she brings into being acknowledge both forms. Modern Mskoke Creek religion is itself an amalgam of indigenous and Christian ideologies, depending on the community demographic and corresponding pressures to assimilate,²¹⁴ where the Godhead may be expressed and made apparent variously. So, for example, the sun, above, represents both the vertical sacred as a supreme being that is worshipped and communicated with, and is also a demonstration of the horizontal sacred as a physical, anthropomorphic embodiment:

I believe in the sun.

In the tangle of human failures of fear, greed, and
forgetfulness, the sun gives me clarity.

²¹³ Kingsley Goodwin, ‘Knowing Natural Spaces: Reinterpreting Deep Ecology as Phenomenology’, in *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by S. Bergmann et al (Farnham: Ashgate: 2009), p.163.

²¹⁴ See Joel W. Martin, ‘Rebalancing the World in the Contradictions of History: Creek/Muckogee’, in *Native Religions and Cultures of North America: Anthropology of the Sacred*, ed. by Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Continuum: 2000), p.103.

When explorers first encountered my people, they called us
heathens, sun worshippers.
They didn't understand that the sun is a relative, and
illuminates our path on this earth.

After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a
part of a larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us
overhead.

When the sun rises at the apex of the ceremony, we are
renewed.

There is no mistaking this connection, though Walmart
might be just down the road.

Humans are vulnerable and rely on the kindnesses of the
earth and sun; we exist together in a sacred field of
meaning.

(‘Talking with the Sun’, p.31)

That Harjo declares she ‘believes’ in the sun at the outset immediately announces a credo and, with it, an associated religiosity, where ‘The sun, the moon, heaven and thunder may be separate divinities, personifications of natural phenomena, but independently of this they may also be manifestations of a Supreme Being...’.²¹⁵ In this rendition, humans rely on ‘kindnesses’ from planetary bodies overhead; within a ‘sacred field of meaning’ there is an interconnectedness (here exemplified as dance as well as spiritual and practical guidance) between humans and celestial bodies. On a literal, topographic level, the iconic apex/nadir of American consumerism, ‘Walmart’, is an inclusion that encircles the profane together with the sacred as a co-existing, present-day reality; it is also a literary tactic that shifts the relationship with the sacred from one of potential nostalgia

²¹⁵ See Åke Hultkrantz, ‘Gods and Spirits of Nature’, in *The Religions of American Indians*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.45.

to one of contemporary ecological witness. That Harjo's sundance²¹⁶ occurs in both a 'sacred field' as a physical place, and that this is also described as a 'field of meaning' is consistent with other multivalent strands throughout the collection and demonstrates the common indigenous idea of the physical and spiritual as a singular (as opposed to separated) experience.

Elsewhere in 'Talking to the Sun', references to cosmogonical interconnectedness may be read both religiously and, where the earth responds to the imbalances engendered by ecological exploitation with a 'wobble', as an extra-anthropomorphic metaphor for Gaia theory:

The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians: everything is connected dynamically at an intimate level.

When you remember this, then the current wobble of the earth makes sense. How much more oil can be drained, Without replacement; without reciprocity?
(‘Talking with the Sun’, p.32)

Reciprocity between beings, whether celestial or earthly, is a transcultural and fundamental indigenous ethic that infuses belief systems, ritual practice and ceremonies across tribes, temporal zones and geographic area. At ground level, on the earth, this spirit of mutual ministrations flows in multiple directions:

²¹⁶ Grim provides historicised accounts of the sundance as a communal and embodied ritual in 'Indigenous Embodied Knowing: A Study in Crow/Apsaalooke Space, Nature, and the Sacred', in *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. S. Bergmann et al (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp.203-222; and also in 'Traditional Ways and Contemporary Vitality: Absaroke/Crow', in *Native Religions and Cultures of North America: Anthropology of the Sacred*, ed. by Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Continuum: 2000), pp.53-84.

*Our Mvskoke new year is inherently about the
acknowledgement and honoring of the plant world.
We become in harmony with each other. Our worlds
are utterly interdependent. All of our decisions
matter, not just to seven generations and more of
human descendants, but to seven or more plant
descendants and animal descendants. We make
sacrifices to take care of each other. To understand each
other is profound beyond human words.*

This is what I am singing.
(*Conflict Resolution*, p.55)

Alternatively, the Earth itself is personified, in the same way that Abrahamic Gods are personified, as in ‘Spirit Walking in the Tundra’, a poem set in northern Alaska: ‘Up here, we are near the opening of the Earth’s head, the place where the spirit leaves and returns’ (*Conflict Resolution*, p.35). Christianity is present in the collection, but less as a benign, spiritual influence, and more as a malign, historical context: ‘Over six hundred were killed, to establish a home for God’s people, crowded the Puritan leaders in their Sunday sermons’ (‘In Mystic’, p.63).

Inevitably, *Conflict Resolution* is an intrinsically postcolonial project in political terms; theologically it is a syncretic endeavour, which seeks to reposition human relationships with non-human nature and technology as an instrument of capitalist industrialism: ‘Since her earliest poems’, writes J. Scott Bryson, Harjo:

has grappled with the alienation, anger and (at times) hopelessness of living within modern civilization. Her response has consistently been to delve into her tribal heritage and attempt to “go back” to a world where humans

and non-humans lived not as separate entities but as interdependent parts of a symbiotic whole.²¹⁷

The diasporic African experience has provoked both an ideological and literal notion of exile, particularly in the case of syncretic religions such as Rastafarianism, with its ‘millenarian hope of salvation, and its dream of “going back home to the Promised Land” (now Ethiopia rather than [Garvey’s] West Africa’²¹⁸; for First Nations people, cultural and physical displacement has been largely intra-continental, so that the loss of and longing for the restoration of an uncompromised ancestral homeland and, with that, sites of sacred and intimate significance, is centred as much around paradigm and temporality as it is locale.

‘One side of me speaks the sacred language of fire/the other part understands in broken heart’, Harjo writes in ‘Falling, Falling (song)’ (p.59). ‘I looked everywhere for love’, she concludes, ‘I had no place else to go, but home’. Throughout the collection, home may be read as a domestic environment, in which romantic love may or may not take place, and also as a communal domicile, where sacred sites are threatened, compromised or damaged:

*Imagine if we natives went to the cemeteries in your
cities and dug up your beloved relatives, pulled off
rings, watches, and clothes and called them “artifacts,”
then carried the bones over to the university for study so
we could understand you. Consider that there are more
bones of native people in universities and museums for
study, than there are those of us living.
(Conflict Resolution, p.61)*

²¹⁷ J. Scott Bryson, ‘Finding the Way Back: Place and Space in the Ecological Poetry of Joy Harjo’, *MELUS*, 27.3 (2002), pp. 169–196.

²¹⁸ Hall, pp.269-96 (p.285).

IN SACRED TIME

In a contemporary, mundane context, the idea of ‘going back’ in time is physically and empirically problematic; for Harjo, ‘*Time is a being, like you, like me*’, and also an anthropomorphic, Mercurial, super-being, who races horses at lightning speed always arriving ‘*long before it was possible*’. (*Conflict Resolution*, p.12). Time is also essential to the manifestation of sacred space as a differentiated experience from profane space where, according to Eliade, ‘*by its very nature sacred time is reversible* in the sense that, properly speaking, it is *a primordial mythical time made present*’ [Italics original emphasis].²¹⁹ By this account, religious festivals, rituals, rites and ceremonies exist as cosmogonical reenactments of creation, wherein ‘the cosmicization of unknown territories is always a consecration; to organize space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods’.²²⁰ In addition to spatial differentiations between chaos and order, temporal continuity or reiteration is also required for the consecration of inhabited land, so that the ‘*time of origin* of a reality – that is, the time inaugurated by the first appearance of the reality – has a paradigmatic value and function’.²²¹

Mvskoke Cree religious practice, ceremony, architecture and symbolism is consonant with these formative principles. The most enduring traditional ritual is the *póskita* or green corn ceremony, which recalls the shift from hunter/gatherer to agrarian culture around 3,000 years ago and takes place within a square ground architecture wherein a fire is lit at each of the four corners and vital foods and medicines are burnt as symbolic sacrifice and renewal. This space, ‘stomping ground’ or village square was once the centre of pragmatic, religious and mythical

²¹⁹ Eliade, ‘Sacred Time and Myths’, in *The Sacred and The Profane*, p.68.

²²⁰ Eliade, ‘Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred’, p.32.

²²¹ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, p.85.

life.²²² Architecturally, this arrangement as a physical manifestation of the sacred number four, often incorporating the four directions, is also acknowledged to be a common religio-spatial formation across continents and history, which the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan ascribes to various communities:

Like many North American Indian groups (including the Maya, the Hopi, the Tewa, and the Oglala Sioux), the Chinese put man at the center of space stretched to the four cardinal points, each of which corresponds to a color, and often also to an animal.²²³

The green corn ceremony is no longer universally practised by the Mvskoke, a fact which reflects tribal assimilations of Christianity which, although not absolute in contemporary communities, is marked, and ‘points to a dialectical truth about Creek religion: on the one hand it demonstrates remarkable continuity with the ancestral past; on the other it is dynamic, truly historical and continually innovative’.²²⁴ These paradoxical and composite features correspond to Harjo’s own cultural and family background: ‘It has taken me years to divest myself of Christian guilt’, she says in a 1993 publication of an interview in *The Kenyon Review*:

the Puritan cloud that provides the basis for culture in this country or at least to recognize the twists and turns of that illogic in my own sensibility. In that framework the body is seen as an evil thing and is separate from

²²² For a historical summary of Mskogee Cree religion see Martin, pp.85-103.

²²³ See Tuan, Yi-Fu, ‘Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective’, in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience Yi-Fu Tuan* (London: Edward Arnold, London 1977), p.86.

²²⁴ See Martin, pp.85-103 (p.86).

spirit. The body and spirit are not separate. Nor is that construct any different in the place from which I write poetry. There is no separation.²²⁵

Resistance to these dissonant pressures and subsequent amalgamations endure throughout her work and are characteristic of *Conflict Resolution*, where the idiomatic incongruities yet sonic resonances of the title alone are mimetic of a larger, syncretic undertaking. Sheila Hassell Hughes considers this relationship between duality and sacred space, noting that:

Harjo's work further intensifies the spatial element – turning even music and the word into spatial realities. Hers is not a Western re-configuration and preservation of the oral into inert text, however. Rather it is the penetrable qualities of sound – as integrative acts of gathering across space – that Harjo celebrates.²²⁶

As a 'mixed-blood' Mvskoke poet, writer and musician, Harjo's content, strategies and juxtapositions within *Conflict Resolution* reflect a hybrid approach that embraces sacred traditions while simultaneously critiquing historical and political realities. The book is in four parts ('How It Came to Be'; 'The Wanderer'; 'Visions and Monsters'; 'The World'), this structural decision being another echo of four as a sacred number, whereby the work that sits within this configuration is situated at the sacred centre, comprising free verse, lyrical poems interspersed with short, italicised, diary-like prose paragraphs that are variously aphoristic, quotidian and numinous. The opening section, 'How it Came to Be', is not dissimilar in structure and purpose to Miller's *The Cartographer* in that it offers

²²⁵ Marilyn Kallet, 'In Love and War and Music: An Interview with Joy Harjo', *The Kenyon Review*, 15.3 (1993), p.61.

²²⁶ Sheila Hassell Hughes, 'Falls of Desire/Leaps of Faith: Religious Syncretism in Louise Erdrich's and Joy Harjo's "Mixed-Blood" Poetry', *Religion & Literature*, 33.2 (2001), p.70.

a particular paradigmatic cosmography where incantation, song and creation myth blend with contemporary macropolitical, ecological and religious content. It also opens with a ceremonial imperative – ‘For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet’ (p.4) – in which the shared tenets of indigenous spirituality as a whole are juxtaposed with the challenges and impacts of colonial violence and control mechanisms. Glück compels the reader to pass through a symbolic portal in *The Wild Iris*; likewise, Harjo also sets out the book’s ideological imperatives in the poem’s opening verses:

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that
bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth
gathering essences of plants to clean

Give it back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars’ ears and
back.

[...]

(*Conflict Resolution*, p.4)

As *The Wild Iris* gives voice and agency to plants and landscape, Harjo evokes the principles of religious ecology and indigenous knowledge systems in her command that the journeying human ‘Be respectful of the small insects, birds and animal people who accompany you’ (p.5) and ‘Ask their forgiveness for the

harm we humans have brought down upon them' (p.5). Scientific empiricism is relegated from hegemonic absolute to one of many epistemological strands in order to create an ideological paradigm in which the heart, as well as the mind, is the organ with navigational powers that 'knows the way though there may be high-rises, interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and those who despise you because they despise themselves' (5). It is a list that produces a violent and brutal historical and contemporary landscape, and one where the non-First Nations reader is positioned as an individual, empathic human, as opposed to state-instrument/perpetrator, with the opportunity to inhabit the narrative as the allegorical David rather than Goliath. Time extends beyond the physicalities of a single lifetime: 'The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand or even more' (p.5). The ceremonial use of herbs and incense are also required: 'You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant'. Those who love and help the seeker may 'take many forms: animal, element, bird angel, saint, stone, or ancestor', again reiterating a charged and energetic cosmos where, as in *The Wild Iris*, Christianity and animism collide and coexist.

POETRY AS SHAMANIC SONG

*For any spark to make a song it must be transformed
by pressure. There must be unspeakable need, muscle of
belief, and wild, unknowable elements. I am singing a
song that can only be born after losing a country.
(Conflict Resolution, p.7)*

Music is announced and omnipresent: as cartographic songline, as incantatory event and effect, as jazz in its late-night, smoky precincts, as spiritual catalyst,

creative muse, narrative device and vital character in its own right. It is a recurrent, subversive and restorative presence within the text – and its partner is dance, in this case the Mvskoke stomp dance.

Here, and elsewhere, music has transcendent, transformative potential and carries with it a history of oppression, pain and resilience alongside the possibility for emotional and spiritual healing on a communal basis. Yet, there is also ambivalence with regard to music's multiplicities and the speaker's faith – sometimes disappointed, sometimes confirmed – if not in its healing and energetic functions, in our human capability to notice and decipher its sacred messages. Was it a mistake, were we fools, the speaker wonders, to be so lost in the dervish whirl of ecstatic transport as to lose sight of the colonisers' aggressions?

Yes, that was me whirling on the dance floor. We made such a racket with all that joy. I loved the whole world in that silly music.

I did not realize the terrible dance in the staccato of bullets.

Yes. I smelled the burning grease of corpses. And like a fool I expected our words might rise up and jam the artillery in the hands of dictators.

[...]

('No', p.11)

No, she contends, in the following verse:

We had to keep going. We sang our grief to clean the air of turbulent spirits.

(‘No’, p.12)

Like Miller’s ‘Quashie’, Harjo’s speaker in ‘No’ (which, ironically, reveals itself a poem of reconciliation as much as it is resistance) is an archetypal ‘every(wo)man’, whose concerns and lament are shared by the community. Just as African Americans sang the blues to ‘keep going’ in cane fields, on chain gangs and from within a multitude of exploitative, discriminatory environments²²⁷, Harjo’s speaker describes how her people ‘sang our grief to clean the air of turbulent spirits’ (‘No’, p.12). In this regard, song transcends its role as entertainment and becomes a communal form of societal spiritual healing, an energetic force with powers to alter the phenomenological environment.²²⁸

Harjo is a jazz saxophonist and, in the opening incantatory section, she also summons her own musical influences and jazz ancestors as she sets out on this lyrical navigation between poetry, politics and prayer. Her first reference is to ‘*the king of jazz*’ (p.3), Louis Armstrong, and thereafter Lester Young, John Coltrane, Ben Webster and fellow First Nations saxophonist and flautist Jim Pepper, who collaborated with ‘part Choctaw, part Afro-American trumpeter and multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry (1936-95) and the North-Brazilian percussionist Nana Vasconcelos’, who together ‘sought and developed the healing potentialities of improvised music in a manner strongly reminiscent of the Jungian idea of the

²²⁷ See Michael Tucker’s essay, ‘The body electric: The Shamanic spirit in twentieth century music’, *Contemporary Music Review* 14.1-2 (1996), pp.67-97 in which he provides a contextualisation of jazz and blues’ historicity as a music of lament and renewal in response to enslavement and state-condoned brutality and its energetic and structural influences on the intermeshing of shamanic drumming and pentatonic music with electronica, funk, soul and other related contemporary forms.

²²⁸ See Powers, *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* for an in-depth account of the role and differentiations between sacred and secular song and the transformation processes from mundane to sacred language amongst the Oglala Sioux; and also Tucker, pp.67-97.

ego's gradual transmutation into the Great or Cosmic Self.²²⁹ Pepper, Cherry and Vasconcelos were all successful professional musicians who extended their activities to working in community settings, bringing a dimension beyond entertainment to their collaborations and output. Harjo is explicit and implicit in how she relates to jazz as creative muse and also metaphor for a textual strategy within the collection: *'In jazz, a break takes you to the skinned down bones. You stop for a moment and bop through the opening, then keep playing to the other side of a dark and heavy history'* (p.105). As such, jazz's 'skinned down' break also represents the tone, content and cadences of poetic voice, where the individual and the 'Cosmic Self' merge and the centre is at once anthropological and universal, as a 'ritually constructed'²³⁰ sacred space that may contain dual or multiple nuclei. These pluralities are problematic when viewed through a mathematical or geometric lens, yet within indigenous ontology they are inherent and comprehensible. If, for example, a shaman can enter and blend with the consciousness of an eagle flying over a canyon in a vision quest, yet be simultaneously and physically present as a human in a state of trance in a sweat lodge, then the concept of two or more coexisting centres of reality is neither contradictory nor hard to grasp.

At the centre of *Conflict Resolution* is the physical act of song and sublime lyric, from which the poet as spiritual channel and tribal griot connects with a broader community that includes friends and relatives, spirits who no longer inhabit Earth's physical realm, alongside animals and topographical features:

This would be no place to be without blues, jazz—Thank
you/*mvoto* to the Africans, the Europeans sitting in,

²²⁹ Tucker, pp.67-97 (p. 82).

²³⁰ Mircea Eliade, 'Symbolism of the "Centre"', in *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991; originally published New York: Harvill, 1952), pp.39-40.

especially Adolphe Sax with his saxophones...Don't forget that at the center is the Mvskoke ceremonial circles. We know how to swing. We keep the heartbeat of the earth in our stomp dance feet.

(‘Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings’, p.81)

Harjo is explicit in her situation of the Mvskoke ceremonial circle at the ‘center’ and, by association, the planetary ‘heartbeat’. The idea of the earth’s heartbeat as expressed above is not metaphorical as it relates to song and poetry as sacred utterance: ‘This was given to me to speak./Every poem is an effort at ceremony’, Harjo explains (‘In Mystic’, p.63); indicating that the purpose and composition of these collected and individual poems transcends that of literary and artistic production alone. ‘Charged with maintaining the social and spiritual health of the tribe,’ writes Tucker, ‘shamans periodically remind their fellow beings of the most ancient spiritual wisdom concerning the integrated nature of life, of the Cosmos – wisdom from a pre-lapsarian, Paradisal time of all species community and communion’.²³¹

NOSTALGIA

This worldview is susceptible to nostalgia, which is etymologically rooted in the Greek *nostos* meaning ‘return home’, and *algos* meaning ‘pain’, where an idealised version of what home might look or feel like is constructed to act if not as an opiate, then at least as an analgesic. In his book, *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade*, religious historian Carl Olson identifies ‘cosmic Christianity’ as a belief system that sits within a theology of nostalgia, where humanity’s fall from

²³¹ Eliade, ‘Symbolism of the “Centre”’, p.70.

paradise is interpreted not as original sin, but as a painful separation from the sacred centre, the self and an increasingly distant, transcendent God:

From a mysterious unity, human beings have fallen into disunity. Within their condition of dissatisfaction, separation, forgetfulness, ontological fissure and disaster, human beings are nostalgic for their lost paradise, a paradoxical state in which contraries exist in unity.²³²

For Harjo, this pain of separation and nostalgia is simultaneously intensified and fragmented on a larger, historical scale, and also on a more personal basis. What Olson describes as a 'paradoxical state' is manifest in the everyday, where 'The present cultural moment makes it impossible to access a pristine, unbroken authentic indigenous and national past'.²³³ Harjo's heritage is appropriately kaleidoscopic, given that the Mvskoke Cree have a long 'history of intercultural interaction', notably with African Americans amongst other First Nations people, and she was not raised on a reservation but rather in 'a lower-middle-class neighborhood of North Tulsa, an area of mixed races and mixed-race peoples'.²³⁴ As Harjo asserts in 'the appearance of the sacred was not likely', a prose poem/essay on the visitation of a Navajo deity to an elderly blind woman on a reservation, her relationship to philosophical and spiritual ideology is not monogamous:

Though I am not Navajo I am related to many Navajos and two of my granddaughters and grandson are Navajo. I have been as influenced by

²³² Carl Olson, *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade: A Search for the Centre* (London: MacMillan, 1992), p.47.

²³³ Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson, 'Imagining a Poetics of Loss: Notes Toward a Comparative Methodology', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, Vol. 15.3/4 (Fall 2003/Winter 2004), pp.23-50.

²³⁴ Rodriguez y Gibson, p.30.

Navajo thought as I have European thought, though I am a Mvskoke. As a long-time resident of lands near one of the sacred mountains of the Navajo I too am affected by the shape and meaning of the deity and the message.²³⁵

J. Scott Bryson suggests that this non-traditional background is reflected in her approach to spirituality. Specifically, he connects it with the notion of return, which she has previously expressed through the symbology of the spiral, particularly in *A Map to the Next World* where it is thematically and visually present as a non-linear representation of time as it exists within a First Nations spiritual paradigm. Michael York aligns this more broadly to pagan theology, confirming its commonality across tribes, eras and geographic areas:

This complete interpenetration of the physical and spiritual, salient among all Native American worldviews in particular and integral to pagan religiosity, occurs in a fundamentally cyclical timeframe. Linear temporality is at best a spiraling process. While there may be advances, there is also return and perpetual renewal.²³⁶

For the Navajo, everything has an interior and exterior existence; the sacred is a dynamic force whereby the cosmos is enlivened by a vitalising and omnipresent Holy Wind. However,

Unlike the Western concept of the soul, the Holy Wind is not an independent spiritual agency which exists in a unique form within each

²³⁵ Joy Harjo, 'the appearance of the sacred was not likely', in *A Map to the Next World, Poems and Tales* (New York: W W Norton, 2000), p.22.

²³⁶ Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press: 2003), p.52.

individual. Instead it is a single entity that exists everywhere, an all-pervading substance in which all living beings participate.²³⁷

That the manifestation of the deity or supreme being takes the form of a moving, ever-shifting element, the wind, is pertinent to this analysis, not only as a demonstration of the simultaneous vertical and horizontal sacred, but also because the concept of retreating back in time, to a static and thus unreachable moment, makes the concept of nostalgia effectively redundant.

As nostalgia is problematic as a political stance, its literary risk is a temptation towards sentimentality, which Harjo circumvents via a continual recognition and articulation of the violence that colonialism systematically inflicted on the indigenous population. Throughout *Conflict Resolution*, Harjo's association with history emerges both as a revisionist document and as a poetic vision quest with its possibilities for insight and subsequent transcendence, tapping into a collective and biocentric consciousness:

The day went on as it always had, though we fought the government's troops in that crook of the river that had given us much pleasure. The sun kept moving, as did the clouds. The birds were however silent. They could not comprehend the violence of humans.

(Conflict Resolution, p.110)

Harjo's connection to the sacred is as pragmatic as it is reverent. One only has to take a cursory glance at many of the mythical stories and characters within this connected framework to note that not every wolf, buffalo or horse is necessarily

²³⁷ Trudy Griffin-Pierce, 'The Continuous Renewal of Sacred Relations: Navajo Religion', in *Native Religions and Cultures of North America: Anthropology of the Sacred*, ed. by Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Continuum, 2000), pp.121-141.

straightforward, trustworthy, safe or benign. In what might be termed a parable of the anthropocene, Harjo's 'Rabbit' (p.8) is a trickster, who fashions a clay man, shows him how to steal a chicken, corn, then 'someone else's wife' (p.8); soon Rabbit's clay man is out of control and destroying the planet and Rabbit, who has indulged his own frivolities and vanities along the way, must now pay the price when he realises that because he, Rabbit, forgot to add ears, the clay man is deaf to Rabbit's remonstrations as he continues with his avaricious ways, wreaking havoc on the surrounding environment. The Plains Sioux also have a story about Rabbit, but in this version, he is the victim and adversary of a trickster, Ictinike, who is the son of the sun god. Rabbit loses his skin to Ictinike, who uses it to travel the earth in human form. Eventually Rabbit retrieves his skin, but Ictinike must die a violent death, and his father, the sun-god, covers his face for half a day in mourning as a result.²³⁸ The holistic ecosystem may be interconnected, but equilibrium and reciprocity must be maintained and worked for, and along the way there will be ferocities, failure and mistake, often communicated as an opportunity for learning.

As does Glück's poet/gardener, Harjo's speaker also witnesses ecological hierophany:

Yes, I did see the terrible black clouds as I cooked dinner.
And the messages of the dying spelled there in the ashy
sunset. Every one addressed: "mother."
(‘No’, p.12)

In one of the book's italicised sections (16), the speaker/poet is woken from a 'forty-year sleep' by a song, with which 'The singers were singing the world into place, even

²³⁸ Sarah Bartlett, *The World of Myths and Mythology* (London: Blandford Press, 1998).

as it continued to fall apart', with the expressed, transformative purpose of turning 'hatred into love'. In her anthology of interviews with shamans from around the world, Joan Halifax identifies sacred song's transformative function as occurring 'At that moment when the shaman is most profoundly enmeshed in the experience of suffering or joy, at the moment of ecstasy when he or she is transported to a place that is beyond mortality'.²³⁹ This temporal and experiential pinpointing concurs with Eliade's theory of cosmogonical reiteration and with the notion of shamanic initiation being one where pain, physical and emotional is overcome. As a form of psychic healing, this process can also be observed in the diasporic phenomenon of carnival, where the communal experience of colonisation and slavery is re-enacted and spiritually processed via physical exertion, music, dance and narrative embodiment through which a non-textual cultural history is transmitted and retained.²⁴⁰ John Grim refers to Marlene Brant Castellano's categorisation of 'revealed knowledge' which he summarises as knowledge 'acquired through dreams, visions, and intuitions that are understood to be spiritual in origin'. *Conflict Resolution's* initial, cosmological section concludes with two songs: the first 'Reality Show' has its lyrics framed within a transcribed Navaho chant – 'Nizhoniigo no hey nay/ Nizhoniigo no hey way nay' – which Harjo says roughly translates as 'the beautiful is all around'.²⁴¹ 'Reality Show' (p.25) is a protest song that asks many rhetorical questions: 'How do we get out of here?', 'What are we doing in this mess of forgetfulness?', 'What are we doing napping, through war?' and 'What are we doing forgetting love?'. The answers are not

²³⁹ Halifax, p.154.

²⁴⁰ Grim, 'Indigenous Knowing and Responsible Life in the World', pp.196-217 (p.210).

²⁴¹ See Joy Harjo website to view the film 'Reality Show' in which she provides this explanation and translation <<http://joyharjo.com/videos/joy-harjos-reality-show/>>.

articulated through discourse but, rather, through action and, specifically, the action of the Navaho chant, which surrounds the text/lyrics and the ruptured socio-political landscape it describes. Here, Harjo's song, which can be heard in her video of the same name, joins that of the singers in the poem who wake the speaker after four decades of 'napping/sleep' (p.16). Whether this song takes place at the same mundane time is immaterial as, within the paradigm Harjo establishes, its sonic vibration as a transformative energy exists in non-linear sacred time. While questioning what constitutes reality, the poem/song simultaneously strives to amend and create an alternative and shared reality through spiritual means.

Human voices are not the only contributors to *Conflict Resolution*; as Harjo is woken by shamanic song (p.16), the poem that follows is 'Cricket Song' (p.17), which is attributed at its foot to 'MSKOKE NATION, JUNE 23, 2013'. This accreditation provides an additional surface to the reading, as it suggests that this inclusion not only maps out the landscape which the poet occupies, but is also part of an ethnomusicological cartography, where the multi-dimensional contours of the Mvskoke and, by extension, neighbouring indigenous nations, are described by non-human and human voices. Here, as she does in 'No', Harjo both acknowledges this indigenous knowledge paradigm and at the same time suggests a more pragmatic, biological reason for the crickets' efforts: 'mating season'. The idea that animals are not only co-authors of an earthly narrative, but also impervious to, and sometimes wearied by human intrusions on the planetary ecosystem is echoed later, by 'crow', in another of the italicised sections (p.24) in which further explication of the cosmology is articulated:

*This is only one of many worlds. Worlds are beings,
each with their own themes, rules and ways of doing.
Humans in this world fall too easily to war, are quick to
take offense, and claim ownership. "What drama," said
crow, dodging traffic as he wrestled a piece of road kill.*

Like Glück's chorus of flora, the rest of the planet's inhabitants are hardly in awe of current human standards of spiritual and ecological stewardship. This excerpt also exemplifies Harjo's intermeshing of the mythic and the contemporary: a strategy that aligns to the eco-poetic idea. Jorie Graham expands on this sensibility in an interview in the journal *Earthlines*, saying:

A principal organization for eco-poetics has been edge effect: the enriched life along an edge between biomes or habitats. These give one a model for poetics or poeties that work in what we might call 'hybrid' ways, where the hybridity comes from being in a interstitial zone, an in-between place ...²⁴²

Harjo's hybridity operates on multifarious levels: as a poet/shaman reiterating, updating and retaining her cultural heritage as a mixed-heritage Mskoke Creek, as a poet/musician who brings song and chant to what Graham describes as 'the inbetween place'.

Edge Effects

Thinking of 'edge effect' further, the most formally hybrid piece in the book is the title poem, 'Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings', where cultural and political dissonance between First Nations people and an occupying white culture is

²⁴² See Sharon Blackie, 'An Interview with Jorie Graham', *Earthlines*, Issue 2, pp.36-41 (p.37).

sharply juxtaposed. Divided into six numbered sections, each of which has a header set in capitals, the poem issues a series of imperatives amid ‘a heady mix of land contract language, shoutouts to fellow Native poets, broken narratives, and that unique Native feeling of home-not-home displacement and ghostliness’.²⁴³ They are:

1. SET CONFLICT RESOLUTION GROUND RULES:
2. USE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS THAT DISPLAY AND ENHANCE MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT:
3. GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK:
4. REDUCE DEFENSIVENESS AND BREAK THE DEFENSIVENESS CHAIN:
5. ELIMINATE NEGATIVE ATTITUDES DURING CONFLICT:
6. AND, USE WHAT YOU LEARN TO RESOLVE YOUR OWN CONFLICTS AND MEDIATE OTHERS’ CONFLICTS:

That these directives might be followed quite literally is an unexpected and surprisingly radical manoeuvre on Harjo’s part. It is an activist and interventionist literary strategy through which the barbarities of America’s colonial history and the limitations of the ontological paradigm that was superimposed on its indigenous inhabitants are revealed. If, as the first response line of the poem makes clear, the ground rules are to be set, then the reader, whomsoever they might be, will have to ‘Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand’ (*Conflict Resolution*, p.77). They will also need to be ready to consult with animals and spirits, and to acknowledge that ‘The land is a being who remembers everything’. The second section includes italicised text in the voice of the

²⁴³ F. K. R. Cline, Review of *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems* by Joy Harjo, in *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 28.3 (2016), pp.111-113.

colonisers and, in underlined Roman text, the First Nations' communal response; it is a litany of political betrayals, massacres, forcible displacements and systemised brutalities that are both historical and contemporary. Harjo describes a stolen and appropriated landscape, where her people have 'crossed this river to speak to the white leader for peace many times' (*Conflict Resolution*, p.80) and in which "These streets are our old trails, curved to fit around trees" (*Conflict Resolution*, p.80).

Alongside mytho-religious material, Harjo also reveals disturbing contemporary data, citing 'a suicide epidemic among native children' that is 'triple the rate of the rest of America' (*Conflict Resolution*, p.79).²⁴⁴ A reference to a 'child welfare worker in South Dakota' locates the reference to the Lakota Oglala Pine Ridge Reservation. In addition to severely high unemployment and social deprivation, young people in reservations across the continent are coping with the effects of community-wide alcohol, drugs, physical, sexual and emotional abuse as a result of and alongside endemic poverty. Bullying at school and online is as prevalent as it is in the wider community, and copycat suicides account in part for the spikes in numbers that caused Lakota tribal leaders to issue a state of emergency on Pine Ridge in 2009.²⁴⁵ Another reported factor was the influence

²⁴⁴ Suicide rates amongst First Nations teens/young people in Canada and the US spiked to such a degree that a 'state of emergency' was called on the Lakota Oglala Pine Ridge Reservation in 2009. The situation is ongoing and is widely reported. See Shiza Shahid, 'A Malala Fund Co-Founder Wants to Bring Attention to Native American Suicide', *Teen Vogue* 15 April 2016 <<http://www.teenvogue.com/story/shiza-shahid-aspireist-pine-ridge-reservation-suicide-epidemic>>; and Julie Bosman, 'Pine Ridge Indian Reservation Struggles With Suicides Among Its Young', *New York Times* 1 May 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/us/pine-ridge-indian-reservation-struggles-with-suicides-among-young-people.html?_r=0>.

²⁴⁵ See Tom Crash, "'Tribal Suicide State of Emergency" on Pine Ridge', *Lakota Country Times* 15 December 2015 <http://www.lakotacountrytimes.com/news/2009-12-15/Front_Page/Tribal_Suicide_State_of_Emergency_on_Pine_Ridge.html>.

of an online fictional character known as Slenderman or Tall Man, a malignant spirit-character, who features in stories circulated on social networking sites by young people and was said to have issued specific instructions to youths to kill themselves and others.²⁴⁶ Slenderman's inception has been tracked to June 2009 and, although the suicide epidemic precedes this, the circulation of these stories did coincide with a spike in numbers and was cited by friends and community elders as a possible contributory cause.²⁴⁷ In an article 'Slenderman and the Suicide Spirit', Miguel Romera suggests that, as a conflation of pre-existing First Nations spiritual belief and a modern-day monster, the impact of Slenderman/Tall Man could be read 'as something akin to "spiritual malware" propagating on the reservations through cyber-bullying'.²⁴⁸ Pine Ridge Reservation includes within its lands the site of the Battle of Wounded Knee, where a reported 300 men, women and children were massacred. This historic tragedy prompted the subsequent introduction of what became known as the 'Wiping the Tears' ceremony, a ritual that seeks 'to assuage the sorrow associated with the loss of innocent life'.²⁴⁹ Suicide prevention schemes and support services for bereaved families have adopted Wiping the Tears,²⁵⁰ which is performed alongside the Sweat Lodge (called *Initipi* – 'life lodge') or *Oinikagapi* ('place where

²⁴⁶ The Bosman *New York Times* article details responses from community workers and tribal leaders.

²⁴⁷ For the evolution of the mythical figure, see Ian 'Cat' Vincent, 'The Slenderman', *Darklore* Vol.6, pp.8-29 <<http://darklore.dailygrail.com/samples/DL6-IV.pdf>>.

²⁴⁸ Miguel Romera, 'Slenderman & The Suicide Spirit', *Mysterious Universe* website, 24 July 2015 <<http://mysteriousuniverse.org/2015/07/slenderman-the-suicide-spirit/>>.

²⁴⁹ Powers, 'Wiping the Tears: Lakota Religion in the Twenty-first Century', p.106.

²⁵⁰ Mary Annette Pember, 'Native Americans Combat the Suicide Spirit', *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 10 December 2010 <<http://diverseeducation.com/article/14515/>>.

they renew life’),²⁵¹ which is one of the Lakota’s seven sacred ceremonies. In ‘Circle of Strength: A Case Description of Culturally Integrated Suicide Prevention’,²⁵² Jacqueline S. Gray and Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp present a case study of college student ‘Jane’, whose recovery from being at risk is facilitated by the provision of a structured support system with a model that ‘emphasizes a holistic worldview with the Medicine Wheel at its core’.²⁵³ As it is depicted herein, the medicine wheel has four sacred quadrants, spiritual, mental, emotional and physical, and each of these needs to be balanced to achieve a state of health in the individual. In an educational environment, this meant ensuring Jane’s support system included the opportunity for connectivity between First Nations students, university departments, practical resources and indigenous culture and spirituality.

This account of child suicides is pertinent to the idea of sacred hybridity on two planes. First, it indicates that spiritual influence in First Nations community might not always be benign, nostalgic, medicinal or purely historical; the spectral Slenderman/Tall Man presence is one that might play out as a cautionary tale whose protagonist is a real and dangerous trickster – a product of a traumatised collective imagination and manifestation of fear and despair that requires practical *and* spiritual assistance to resist. It also demonstrates the success of integrating sacred ceremony and spiritually attuned knowledge systems with contemporary life, in a world where people have extremely restricted resources to help them survive environments that are so detrimental as to feel ‘like wartime’ (*Conflict Resolution*, p.79). Harjo’s title poem mirrors this approach: the possibilities

²⁵¹ Powers, ‘Wiping the Tears: Lakota Religion in the Twenty-first Century’, p.111.

²⁵² Jacqueline S. Gray & Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp, ‘Circle of Strength: A Case Description of Culturally Integrated Suicide Prevention’, *Archives of Suicide Research*, 14:2 (2010), pp.182-191, DOI: 10.1080/13811111003704852.

²⁵³ Gray & Muehlenkamp, p.183.

for 'conflict resolution' are limited unless there is recognition and acceptance of an alternative cosmological reality, coupled with an openness to reconciliation that is microscopic:

I could hear the light beings as they entered every cell. Every cell is a house of the god of light, they said. I could hear the spirits who love us stomp dancing. They were dancing as if they were here, and then another level of here, and then another, until the whole earth and sky was dancing.

We are here dancing, they said. There was no there.

There was no "I" or "you."

There was us; there was "we."

There we were as if we were the music. [...]
(*Conflict Resolution*, p.82)

The fourth and final section is appropriately titled 'The World' and, within this quarter, there are poems that praise the rain ('Praise the Rain', p.111; 'It's Raining in Honolulu', p.108), songs that honour the season and the sun ('Sunrise Healing Song', p.106; 'Fall Song', p.133; 'Everybody Has a Heartache (a blues)', p.121), and a vision quest ('You Can Change the Story, My Spirit Said to Me as I Sat Near the Sea', p.101) wherein the speaker uses the power of mythical storytelling to subvert a dangerous situation in which she and a friend might be erroneously killed as retribution for the murder of a woman in Alaska, to create a new reality in which the real culprit is exposed and brought to justice by the village community. The concept of changing the story is at the centre of *Conflict*

Resolution and, in this regard, it conforms to Cole Swenson's identification of contemporary American hybrid poetry, in that it:

tolerates a high degree of the restless, the indeterminate and the uncanny, because, like the best writing of any era, it doesn't seek to reinforce received ideas or social positions as much as it aims to stimulate reflection and to incite thoughts and feelings.²⁵⁴

Harjo's ambitions are more radical, in that she seeks to establish a new biocentric ecological environment, cosmology and culture that draws on indigenous belief systems and applies them to a contemporary American experience, so that song and poetic utterance combine to construct a shamanic poetry that operates as an agent of unification and energetic reparation, as means through which we might try to articulate and even fix what she describes as an 'unspeakable:/Genealogy of the broken' ('Speaking Tree', p.118). The book is generous in its spirit of social reconciliation, and uncompromising in its poetics, which aspire to a form of shamanically-induced spiritual activism that both amends and reconstructs the ways in which humanity connects with and cares for the world. 'Some humans say trees are not sentient beings', Harjo contends in 'Speaking Tree', 'But they do not understand poetry—'.

²⁵⁴ Cole Swenson, 'Introduction' in *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, ed. by Cole Swenson and David St John (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), pp.xvii-xxvi (p.xxii).

Conclusion

Happiness

when one locust meets another
the nervous system releases
serotonin, causing a mutual attraction
(a prerequisite for swarming)

(a prerequisite for swarming)
serotonin, causing a mutual attraction
the nervous system releases
when one locust meets another
(From *Unreasonable Disturbances*)

I present this short, extracted poem from my collection *Unreasonable Disturbance*²⁵⁵ as a connective epigraph.²⁵⁶ The poem is mimetic of the locust swarm in its implication of vast numerical repetition and, through its visual presence, which is mirrored in its specular form, exposes the sense of anxiety the swarm provokes and, by association, what Julian Huxley describes in the Preface to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as 'the zeal for exterminating pests, rather than controlling them'.²⁵⁷ It can also be read as an example of sacred hybridity, where the dominant viewpoint is not only insect-centric rather than anthropocentric,

²⁵⁵ *Seasonal Disturbances*, Karen McCarthy Woolf (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017) includes additional and differing content to the text of *Unreasonable Disturbances*, the collected work that is presented here. All the poems as included in the collection that comprises the creative component of this PhD were written within the permitted period of commencement and submission.

²⁵⁶ The text used to create this found specular poem was harvested from Project Gutenberg Self Publishing Press website
<<http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Locusts?View=embedded%27s,%20newfoundland%20and%20labrador>>.

²⁵⁷ Julian Huxley, 'Preface' to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), pp.35-37.

but also one where the possibilities of serotonin-drenched happiness might also suggest an associated, ecstatic animism. Animism, when perceived as a religious belief system, rather than solely as a metaphorical trope, opens doorways into cosmologies that consider ‘other persons, only some of whom are human, as cultural beings’.²⁵⁸ The poem, in its attention to chemical processes, also integrates and embraces science and material fact. At the centre of the poem, structurally speaking, is a mirror and, in this mirroring, a visual reminder of the ecotone, as reflective border, or the wire between one space and the other. In this space there is silence, as in the absence of sound or, rather, the presence of an unarticulated space through which the non-verbal communication may exert its idea: ‘You use the voice to make the silence present. The real subject in poetry isn’t the voice, the real subject is silence’, says Li-Young Lee.²⁵⁹

The possibilities of silence and utterance, of what that space might communicate via thematic and textual juxtaposition, is a preoccupation in Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*. In ‘Chapter 1’, both secular and sacred interpretations of religion and nature come to the fore. Through these investigations it emerged that, although the book’s content, as *articulated* thought, is consistent with a theopoetical reading that shapes its identity as Christian, it is in the interpretation of its structures as theophanic *and* animist that we are able to characterise it as a hybrid work. It is important to reiterate here that this hybridity does not exist principally on the linguistic level – that is, the language or syntax that, in these poems, exhibits traits of ‘conventional’ poetry, which Cole Swenson describes as including ‘coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance and stable voice’, as opposed to ‘those generally assumed of

²⁵⁸ Graham Harvey, ‘Animism a Contemporary Perspective’, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature, Volume I A-J*, ed. by Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2005), p.83.

²⁵⁹ Lee, ‘The Subject is Silence’, p.121.

“experimental” work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open form, and resistance to closure’.²⁶⁰ In this regard, *The Wild Iris* is a work where hybridity resides in its multiple and simultaneous contradictions and perspectives as a form of lyric that aligns to what Aristotle defined as *epideitic* oratory as a ‘poetry of praise, blame and evaluation’.²⁶¹ However, while it is tempting to read Glück solely as the master lyricist, she does also demonstrate other ‘hybrid’ tendencies, as intimated by her stated resistance to closure: ‘All earthly experience is partial’, she writes in ‘Disruption, Hesitation, Silence’²⁶²,

Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than that which we do know. What is unfinished or has been destroyed participates in these mysteries.

In *The Wild Iris* the overarching composition, as demonstrated, is also dependent on multiple perspectives, juxtaposition and immanence, and so in this sense it may also be considered as what Cole Swenson defines as poetic hybrid which, given Glück’s preferences towards clarity, silence and space, is a somewhat unexpected extrapolation. Where silence, as an articulate presence, exists at the juxtapositions or ecotones of *The Wild Iris*, it is song and religious incantatory chant that occupies what we might think of as the sacred centre, in both Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and Joy Harjo’s *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*.

²⁶⁰ Swenson and St. John, p.xxi.

²⁶¹ Brewster, p.17.

²⁶² Louise Glück, ‘Disruption, Hesitation, Silence’, pp.73-85 (p.74).

In Chapter 2, a close reading of the text as an exemplar of Rastafarian ritual chant and dialectic *'reasoning'* enable a deeper understanding of the politics of epistemology. By reading Miller's poem 'Quashie's Verse' against Wallace Stevens' 'Anecdote of the Jar', the contradictions and postcolonial resonances of 'wilderness' as a physical and historical imaginary emerge both as critique and celebration. Song exists as sonic and oral cartography, which can be interpreted as an agent of slave rebellion and resistance, and of transcendence too. There are other correlates that connect it to systems of orality, as songline, and also as an ecotheological activity, in which people, hummingbird and hibiscus all participate in the formation of Jamaica's geographic, spiritual and political identity. In this way, the self as community, as expressed in Rastafarian terms as 'I and I', is represented as part of an active, biotic community and one where the urge to elevate the voice of the poems reaches towards the shamanic in its ritualised privileging of song. The chapter also calls upon Carolyn Cooper's writings around vulgarity in the dancehall lyric, as illuminated by Eliade's definitive explication of the sacred and the profane. Through Stuart Hall's positioning of Rastafari as a cultural–historical religious hybrid I was able to better understand how components of African retention, Orthodox Ethiopian Christianity and Jamaican Baptist traditions are present in drumming and chant. The chapter concludes with a reference to Derek Walcott's lament for the death of joy, which he equates directly to that of 'Nietzsche's God'²⁶³, where he identifies a twentieth-century 'poetry of reason'²⁶⁴ as a threat to the sacred power of song and, specifically, poetry as song that acts as a form of physically transcendent, spiritual communication.

²⁶³ See Walcott, 'Bright Opposite of Nothing', pp.1-2.

²⁶⁴ Walcott, 'Bright Opposite of Nothing', pp.1-2.

Joy Harjo's *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*²⁶⁵ emerges as most emblematic of sacred hybridity. Harjo's poetics are based around the intermeshing of the quotidian qualities of the diary/journal, a politicised expression of community and an ability to speak from a perspective where animals, plants and place are part of a larger, sacred cosmos. In many ways, her poems challenge conventional notions of how language and metaphor operate as a canonical cornerstone; what this reading of Harjo has demonstrated to me, most profoundly, is what a poetry produced under the influence of a different, indigenous cultural and spiritual paradigm might look like in contemporary America. It is consistent with her practice and poetics throughout her career, which distinguishes the work as part of a larger body that may be considered on its own terms not singly as poetry, but also as a work of cultural resilience, protest and religious archive.

In 'Chapter 3', I was able to deepen the reading by exploring how specific aspects of Mvskoke Cree, Navaho and Lakota religious practice and cosmologies correspond with the ceremonies, animal ventriloquisms and political realities as described in the poems. By employing the contexts that combine under the sacred hybrid within the reading, I was able to consider the book as a work of cultural and spiritual restoration where, in the words of Aimé Césaire, 'The only acceptable music comes from somewhere deeper than sound'.²⁶⁶ For Harjo, the boundaries between music and song, jazz and ceremonial drumbeat, the sacred and material, political and ecological are porous. The book itself is not simply a collection of poems. By viewing it as a work that exists as a multi-dimensional and resonant offering in a sacred universal cosmology, it can be acknowledged as

²⁶⁵ Harjo, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*.

²⁶⁶ Aimé Césaire, 'Poetry and Knowledge', in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp.275-287 (p.287).

a restorative energetic work of cultural healing for a diasporic community that persists under genocidal conditions.

The opportunity to explore these issues through interleaved layers of contemporary political realities, shamanic incantation, autobiographical poetry and sacred textual structures enabled me to unpack the work more fully than might otherwise have been possible, if for example the reading had focused on politics and identity alone. I was also alert to potential vulnerabilities in terms of cultural appropriation and conflation; by exploring issues such as the teenage suicide contagion issue across First Nations reservations as referred to in the text, I was able to understand more about the necessity of keeping indigenous systems of holistic medicine and community validation available in culturally isolated and compromised environments, and of the political urgency of exposing the ongoing challenges people face. These deliberations also made me think about why I have not as yet looked in detail at English pagan traditions, which would connect more closely to my own cultural heritage; and, in so doing, provoked a consideration of how this might develop as a further chapter on how these retentions surface in contemporary British ecological poetics.

Loss is a connective tissue between these three books and my own collection, *Unreasonable Disturbances*, as submitted here. For Glück, what the various speakers risk losing is faith, habitat, sanity and a marriage; for Miller the loss sustained is epistemological validity and the spiritual and cultural criteria through which it is constructed; and, on a seemingly more mundane level, the possibility of ‘losing’ the argument, which via the Rastafarian process of ‘reasoning’ has a competitive, rhetorical element intermingled with a simultaneous process of recovery. For Harjo, the text as iteration of religious knowledge juxtaposed with political and historical fact is, as stated, a restorative and ceremonial act; like *The Cartographer*,

and as a postcolonial work, it speaks of many injurious losses already sustained: of land, of paradigm, of people, of habitat/bioregion and the ongoing struggle against myriad adversities. In *Unreasonable Disturbances* it is again the loss of land, or community, which plays out in London and Europe through processes of diasporic migration flows and urban gentrification; as in *The Wild Iris*, the personal landscape of the intimate relationship is also diminished and ruptured. Trees are lost, in seasonal storms and via the impact of climate change, lovers are lost and the homeland, in this case London rather than Zion, is also at risk.

It took many years to realise that my cultural identity and thematic preoccupations often tend to play out through form and structure as much as, if not more, through explicit or thematic focus; this accounts, in part, for my interest in Glück. For me, the restorative process emerges through formal subversions, reversals and interventions. This is evident in poems like ‘*Tatler’s* People Who Really Matter’, written while I undertook a residency at the National Maritime Museum in 2015, in which I was asked to respond to the exhibit ‘Rethink: Migration’. The poem seeks to expose and undermine the language of political rhetoric through a process of reversals. Taking its adjectives and superlatives from the magazine’s power list of the same name and superimposing them onto a migrant narrative, it projects an alternative version of reality.

The residency was also an opportunity to explore my father’s migration from Jamaica to the UK as part of the Windrush Generation and it is a history I was keen to uncover and share, both at the museum and as documented record via publication. In the poem ‘Voyage’, the serendipity of discovering that the ship my father sailed here in, *Irpinia*, was also host to another migrant story, albeit fictional, is something that poem acknowledges, not explicitly, but in the interleaving of the two narratives. It is this same spirit of witness that drives the

disrupted ‘zuihitsu’²⁶⁷ ‘Brixton Hill: A Pillow Book’, which is formally reliant on Sei Shonagon’s founding classic, *The Pillow Book*, from which the *zuihitsu* form was derived.²⁶⁸ My interest in the diary/journal is bound up both in process, as a regular notebooking activity, and in the access to an authenticity and freshness of voice and recollection this might provide, a quality I had also admired in Harjo after reading excerpts from her diary in *The Poet’s Notebook*,²⁶⁹ as a form that privileges the textural capacities of the quotidian. As Charles Simic writes in the Preface, ‘The commonplace is where poetry hides. Every art depends on nuance, detail, and lightness of spirit’.²⁷⁰ I discovered the *zuihitsu* first in the work of Japanese–American poet Kimiko Hahn, who had repopularised the form in her collection *The Narrow Road to the Interior*²⁷¹ which echoes Basho’s haibun of the same title, in addition to the subsequent volume *Toxic Flora*. In an interview with Laurie Sheck, she discusses the unfinished, almost intentionally flawed quality that the form’s narrative disruptions or juxtapositional disconnects endow, saying that her use of the *zuihitsu*, the name of which translates loosely to ‘running brush’, has a ‘sensibility that is hopefully reminiscent of what Louise Glück has called disruption and ruin’.²⁷²

²⁶⁷ Kimiko Hahn, *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (New York: W. W. Norton: 2006).

²⁶⁸ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, notes and trans. by Meredith McKinney, (London: Penguin Classics, 2006).

²⁶⁹ See Stephen Kuusisto, Deborah Tall, and David Weiss, eds., *The Poet’s Notebook: Excerpts from the notebooks of 26 American poets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

²⁷⁰ See Charles Simic’s ‘Preface’ to *The Poet’s Notebook: Excerpts from the notebooks of 26 American poets*, ed. by Stephen Kuusisto, Deborah Tall, and David Weiss (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p.XI.

²⁷¹ Kimiko Hahn, *Toxic Flora* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

²⁷² See an interview by Laurie Sheck with Kimiko Hahn for further information on her use and interest in it as a means of randomising and disrupting narrative, BOMB magazine, no.96 (Summer 2006) <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2834/kimiko-hahn>>.

Disruption and ruin are sentiments that infuse my experience of climate change and also gentrification, as a localised manifestation of the same imbalances of macropolitical forces. It occurs to me now that these formal endowments are imitative of the emotional sensations these phenomena invoke, and my own efforts to recreate the whole from an experience of community fragmentation and displacement. At the time I was more interested in the possibilities of the poetry/prose hybrid, and qualities of accumulation, all of which combine with the diary's temporal structure, as a means by which I was able to use it to consider concurrently the history and contemporaneity of place. By keeping some of the original *Pillow Book* headings, I was also able to embrace (rather than subdue) nostalgia, via an 'imported' 'lightness of spirit', in a bid to counterpoint some of the collection's more consistently serious political qualities and as an act of positive establishment in the face of potential erasure.

Song is also at the heart of many of the poems here, most overtly perhaps via use of the sonnet form. As one of the most enduring poetic forms in the English language (not forgetting its immigrant origins), the sonnet is an ideal template for subversion, whether linguistic, literary, political or historical. For poets writing sonnets today, the decision is not so much *whether* to disrupt its formal qualities, when 'questions about what counts as a sonnet, about how we should use the term, are now centuries old'²⁷³ but more how to do so while still retaining enough identifying characteristics and, by extension, any resulting compositional benefits that the form may deliver. It is also what Edward Hirsch describes as 'an obsessive form – compact, expansive – that travels remarkably well. It crosses

²⁷³ Stephen Burt, 'The Contemporary Sonnet', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by Ad Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.245-266.

between countries and languages. It adapts to different meters and reverberates down the centuries'.²⁷⁴

Despite its inherent suitabilities, the impulse behind this sonnet sequence did not start with the form, nor the three-volume encyclopaedia *The Science of Life*,²⁷⁵ from which the extracted poems take their name, and whose co-authors include H. G. Wells and Sir Julian Huxley.

As I mentioned in the 'Prologue', in 2014 I travelled to Lanzarote as a land-based Associate Artist in support of eXXpedition²⁷⁶ a transatlantic, all-women's sailing mission, to investigate the impact of microplastics on the marine environment and human and animal endocrine systems. I was thinking of plastic, and its origins, as well as of the humument – a visual, collage/erasure form developed by the artist Tom Phillips in his book *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*.²⁷⁷ However, while I did make some humuments, it became obvious that I would bring nothing new to their formal development.

The encyclopedia was written in the 1920s and is surprisingly prescient in some regards, particularly in its chapters discussing ecological disruption and the destruction of biodiversity. However, it is also very much a product of its era, and the tone with which it expresses 'negative eugenics' as an ecological 'solution' reminds us that it is a work that pre-dates World War II. It is the isolation of this authoritarian, chauvinist tone that also provides the 'voice' of the sequence, as the man/creator of a machinistic and sometimes sinister environment. Whether

²⁷⁴ Edward Hirsch, 'Personal Essays on Encountering the Sonnet', in *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2008), p.39.

²⁷⁵ H. G. Wells, Julian S. Huxley, and G. P. Wells, *The Science of Life: a summary of contemporary knowledge about life and its possibilities* (London: Cassells, 1931).

²⁷⁶ See eXXpedition website at <<http://exxpedition.com/>> for further information.

²⁷⁷ Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel, 5th Edition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012).

the sequence is an alternative version of a dystopian present or a putative future is ambiguous; what is clear is that the disruptions and distortions wreaked by climate change and its associated politics are mutated and amplified.

As such, these poems serve as a hyperbolic component of the critique that the thesis makes on the conflation of humanism and materialist thought as an increasingly dominant culture in the development of ecocriticism. A final note, by way of closure and simultaneous introduction to the poetry collection, would be to point towards the ‘coupling’,²⁷⁸ a form I devised which, in its relineation of prose and response line that includes rhyme, repetition or assonance, is perhaps the most overt deployment throughout, via which the lyric (momentarily) casts aside its most spiritual ambitions in favour of disruptive, politicised intervention.

²⁷⁸ See Fiona Sampson, ‘Karen McCarthy Woolf: Making a Poem’, *Mslexia* (Dec./Jan./Feb. 2014/15), p.49 <<http://mccarthywoolf.com/projects/mslexia-interview/>> for an explication of the form in more detail.

Epilogue

The rhizome, with its capacities for the singular and the multiple, the associative and connective, is a botanical, philosophical and psychological metaphor that has resonated throughout, although it did not serve as the most apposite in the end. All the while writing this thesis, I have also resisted my garden, the place in which I am most at ease, distracted by and engrossed in weeding and pruning and planting, digging and shaping. It is there that I enact a creative relationship with the plants, birds, trees, foxes, cats, soil and ivy, the concrete path, collapsing timber fence and temporarily mangled cars and garages, with quietness and with noise, with solitude and sociability, forging a physical, sculptural rendition to accompany the aesthetic and vibrational entity of the poems. Its neglect was, for me, an astringent, melancholic and perhaps unnecessary sacrifice, although in that neglect I discovered distance and, with that distance, perspective, albeit without the particular intimacy of communion. If there is a botanical metaphor for sacred hybridity, it is the dandelion seedhead, that extravagant instrument of propagation, which in its delicacy articulates a subtle and atmospherically provisional cosmos. That its seeds emanate from a central source might tempt a reading that elicits a symbol of essentialist monotheism; rather, though, I see it as another embodiment of paradox, where the singular sacred centre is surrounded and completed by a fuller spherical aura comprised of many uniform yet discrete parts. The dandelion is also a ruderal, a plant that emerges physically and etymologically from rubble, an association that speaks to and from our ecological crisis. Its hybridity resides in an interrelation with the surrounding air, as a literal expression of the spiritual – which, like breath, may be invisible to the eye but is made visible by contrast, giving of its animating sustenance in plain sight.

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Unreasonable Disturbances

Karen McCarthy Woolf

Contents

Acknowledgements

The Hollyhocks	191
<i>The Science of Life</i> 492 Hence	193
Brixton Hill <i>A Pillow Book</i>	
[1] <i>On the left as you go up</i>	194
Horse Chestnut I	195
Still Life with Two Avocados and an Onion	196
[2] <i>Some friends once lived in</i>	197
Up on the Hill	198
[3] <i>At the apex</i>	199
<i>The Science of Life</i> 575 Abyss	200
[4] <i>The Nail Shop</i>	201
On the Thames	202
Gulls	203
Kingfisher	204
To Dover from Calais	205
[5] <i>At the House of Correction</i>	206
Christmas Eve	207
Variation (Untitled)	208
<i>The Science of Life</i> 861 Holes and corners	209
[6] <i>Amongst the pink hyacinths</i>	210
Poem in Which I'm Pleased to Have Opted	211
[7] <i>You set your limits, you decide</i>	212
& Because	213
[8] <i>Yuck</i>	215
<i>The Science of Life</i> 531 Prone	216
[9] <i>When the Olympics were on</i>	217
Happiness	218
<i>The Science of Life</i> 574 The Sin	219
Number 19	220
[10] <i>Things of elegant beauty</i>	221
Tatler's People Who Really Matter	222
[11] <i>A Jacobean chair</i>	223
Day of the Dead	224
[12] <i>Things that are near yet far.</i>	225
Horse Chestnut II – A Coupling	226
[13] <i>Things that are far yet near,</i>	228
<i>The Science of Life</i> 261 Evolution	229
Of Ownership	230
[14] <i>Things that make one feel nostalgic.</i>	231
<i>Voyage</i>	232
Verbs I Have Seen in Relation to Migrants, With Cranes	234
Here	235
True Love	236
<i>The Science of Life</i> 496 Conquest	237
Every new construction	238

<i>The Science of Life</i> 493 A Death	239
[15] <i>Procedures when visiting</i>	240
Outside	241
[16] <i>People who look as though things are difficult for them</i>	242
<i>The Science of Life</i> 388 The CEO	243
<i>The Science of Life</i> 969 The Superfluous	244
[17] <i>I remember</i>	245
The Neighbourhood	246
[18] <i>This prime position is</i>	247
<i>The Science of Life</i> 683 Her Anger	248
[19] <i>When Laura was alive</i>	249
Ars Poetica 101	250
[20] <i>In a city time is expressed</i>	251
The Island	252
[21] <i>It is important to document</i>	253
In 1975 the peacock feather	254
[22] <i>On a bright moonlit night</i>	255
Landay	256
Horse Chestnut III – A Coupling	257
Notes	258

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The Hollyhocks

i)

The hotel is so luxurious and the black walls
are lit by fleshy-armed candelabras
the flame almost dying in the breeze as she passes
and the horse is restless in the stable,
he hasn't been out for days
and when she sees the text it's like

the parcel of cold sky
hanging over fields covered in snow
and studded with blackened Champagne vines.
Then all of a sudden it's —*when you're together
does she crawl on all fours? What does she drink?
Tell me, I need to know, what does she eat?*

ii)

She did it for him
even though she shouldn't
have done it; once it was done
she couldn't undo it.

iii)

O hollyhocks of Ile de Ré
O tunnels of pollen
O wooden boardwalks across the marshes
O pastel petals crushed by bicycle tyres
O seeds planted that won't take
Grow for me again!

iv)

The thing about the hollyhocks was to what degree was it about the hollyhocks?
Or were they a distraction? That time her ovary pinged like an elastic band as he
stood over her in the kitchen insisting on one-inch cubes for the beef.

v)

A skeleton leaf tattooed around a scar.

vi)

Alcea Rosea, family Malvaceae. ORIGIN: Middle English: from **holy** + obsolete *hock* 'mallow', of unknown origin. It originally denoted the marsh mallow, which has medicinal uses (hence, perhaps, the use of 'holy');

vii)

That which obscures
amplifies the cost.

viii)

In this scenario a detective comes to the house wearing a trenchcoat and a trilby with a feather that looks like a fishing fly tucked into the rim. A woman lets him in and offers him a drink. He asks for a glass of water. When she leaves the room the detective takes a pack of Camel from his coat pocket and offers one to the husband who is sitting on the sofa. The husband declines and clears his throat and the man tells him he's here on account of the hollyhocks.

The detective gets out a little flip notebook and a retracting pencil. The woman says the husband wouldn't leave it alone, even when they stood by the French window, his arm looped around her waist, his head bent to her neck. He still pressed her to take action.

There must have been about 30 altogether as she piled them on to a pyre-like mound.

In retrospect she felt this unprovoked attack on their fecundity was a bad omen and one which was made manifest later down the line. The husband interjects at this point to say she has it all wrong. *It was only a suggestion.*

The detective makes a note of this in his notebook, snaps it shut and returns the retracting pencil to his top pocket. Then he stands up, shakes hands with the couple, swigs the rest of the melted ice from his glass and leaves.

Hence*

As the wind blows
 innumerable plump and hideous
landfolk
insignificant in themselves but rich—

It is a strange world

no birds nesting or singing in the trees;
no bellowing, roaring or squeaking savage or small;
no caterpillars to eat the leaves; no bees
or butterflies; no creatures that do more than crawl.

* An Ode

 Another
spasm was being prepared
 and the climate
began to change.

Brixton Hill
A Pillow Book

[1] *On the left as you go up* Rush Common is the first place you arrive at. Set back from the road a tarmac path winds through it.

Thin green rag, remnant from the enclosures—

Horse Chestnut I

Tonally there are two things going on in this poem: the urge towards elegy, to mourn the loss of this tree, as a habitat for a squirrel pair, the parakeets in summer and of course a certain nostalgia that recalls a time when kids collected conkers and bought bags of sweet chestnuts from sellers outside tube stations whose braziers glowed as the nights drew in; and then, inevitably, the bid to resist this lyric gesture. The fact that the tree has fallen and this situation is only apparent to the speaker when she sees the blinking car alarm and realises 'the garages no longer exist' is an important part of the narrative, but perhaps it would be clearer to establish this earlier? Likewise, the transition between this phrase and the epiphany, that without the tree's protective influence, she needs to leave the flat, 'full of your mother's house' is slightly confusing – suddenly we have a 'you'. The idea that 'this chaos is alluring, like setting off fireworks in a small back garden' is indeed 'alluring', but do you really need it? Also, is the verb 'lash' a cliché in this context? The oak table and spindle-backed chair are good details.

Still Life with Two Avocados and an Onion

Perhaps it's the angle, if I turn the dish, the onion
points south-west, root still rooted to the pit
of the hand-painted Moroccan bowl.

Inevitably, the pears mirror each other,
weighted by the stones of their seeds.
Sunlight dapples the sheen of their rough skin.

[2] *Some friends once lived in* a double-fronted Georgian on Brixton Water Lane. Their garden was large and L-shaped and a good proportion of it used to be the car park of the pub now called The Hootananny. Every year these friends had a party and I would go there and bounce on the trampoline with the children. The garden also had a well in it that sunk into the subterranean Effra.

Some other friends lived for a while in a flat on Josephine Avenue, where the back gardens are at the front, separated from the houses by pavement. Some of these gardens had locked gates, many others did not: mostly they were used to park cars in and by prostitutes.

Up On the Hill

A young Bulgarian who comes
to clear the old mattress and carpet
out of the bedroom
asks if Spring
always arrives so early here?
The forsythia's not out yet
so things must be as they should be.

There's an order
to the colours: snowdrop,
daffodil yellow, forget me not,
followed by brash sunset dahlia.

Up on the Hill
by the edge of Rush Common where
tree-fall debris mingles
with bottle tops, a pair of discarded socks
and crows
poke at the mud, the wrens
are nocturnal now, in order that
their song might be heard over
the babble of traffic
rumbling up the hill like a brook
inexplicably flowing backwards;
they sing, these birds
up above the smoke
you can only see from a distance, brown
and insistent as a river,
on nights
when we walk, lips purple
with wine, past the 24-hour shop,
arguing about who said what and
nothing that matters.

[3] *At the apex* of the afternoon, men carry folding Formica-topped tables down from the flats to play dominoes.

- [4] *The Nail Shop* does
Nails £10
Eyelash £10
Shellak [sic] £20
Threading £3
Full set glitter £17
Underarm waxing £5

On the Thames

The houseboat tilts into the water at low tide,
ducklings slip in mud. Nothing is stable
in this limbo summer, where he leaves
his shoes in the flat— She decides to let
a room, the ad says only ten minutes to the tube,
I have a washing machine and a cat. The truth
more of a struggle than anyone cares to admit.
And everywhere progress: an imprint of cranes
on the skyline, white vans on bridges, The Shard
shooting up to the light like a foxglove.

Gulls

Returning to Arrecife after
half a lifetime I notice how
there are no
gulls at the Marina
and wonder
if or where they are now—
Is this the last, on the prow
of a glistening schooner?

Inland, at the vast
malodorous tip
thousands wheel above red
earth, wings cast
to the putrid scraps
on which they must feed.

Kingfisher

The truth is I've a long history of dead birds
and there've been no cadavers since
those first months mourning my baby son, so

when I find her, at the top of some steps
on a ledge leading to a beach, full of tourists
sheltering from the heat under striped *ombrelloni*,

I do what I always do and lean in to take a picture.
I have no idea this fallen star is Halcyon,
immortal daughter of Aeolus, keeper of the winds

and namesake of the Islands shimmering
on the horizon— A turquoise streak
over mottled green suggests a juvenile. I wonder

why she's here, on a beach, rather than by the river.
Empty eye sockets contradict an immaculate plumage:
she's out of place. At least that's what I think.

In truth this is Halcyon's homeland, her story ends
and begins on this iridescent strip
of waves that become her widow's pyre and grave.

The Gods were kinder than expected and resurrect
Ceyx and his grief-struck wife,
turn them into birds (kingfishers to be exact)

but as is the way with these things, there's a catch.
Halcyon must lay her eggs in winter
and when she returns to nest at the water's edge

the chicks are always swept offshore.
Naturally, her sorrow is immense
and she wails and begs until Aeolus is permitted

to hold the winds at bay over the winter solstice,
so the storms are calmed and the fledglings prevail.
Now, even in summer, the crowded boats capsize

and there are no patriarchs with open arms
who protect the young and control weather.
There are no Halcyon Days; the sea itself is dying.

To Dover from Calais

After midnight we drive through Sangatte
on the outskirts, where teenagers rush to the tunnel

In the big-cat gleam of our headlamps
the boys pause for a heartbeat—disappear in a flash

If you're not really a Syrian
is it safer in the Congo, or Afghanistan?

While we all fiddle with our smartphones
sniffer dogs inhale the articulated lorry

Two ferrymen tell me how they feel
okay because they pull up the bridge and sail away

It's only a joke if it's funny
so I don't laugh at 'they weren't exactly *invited*.'

[5] *At the House of Correction* 'A woman is a woman, and whatever her conduct or crimes may be her sex should be held sacred. The flogging of a negress is not one thousandth of a part so degrading and so afflicting as the labour of this torture wheel to an English woman.'

Christmas Eve

When the tree falls in the storm
 three garages are destroyed
and you are not mine anymore

 asbestos swirls in the air
this flat, full only of things
 a detritus of branches, cars

Variation (Untitled)

could one ginger cat really be so different
to another ginger cat? one tall, the other also (if less)
inconstant, both with belly swinging, white chest flash—
who wants the next one

to be like the last? also there are
subtle yet overt differences, such as
in America where the kitchens are unexpectedly old fashioned
with top-loading washing machines
and you thought everything would be equal
because everyone speaks English/ but

the reality is one cat was replaced by another
after an implausibly brief pause
which made the whole thing seem glossy
like a svelte coat on a domestic shorthair or a lie

Holes and corners

The males scurry over the surface
and pop sideways in and out
of the holes
and reproduce themselves
by making dibbles
and in the course of six to eight months
develop a long, solid spike-like
outgrowth, a foot or eighteen inches
long and up to an inch or more
thick, which forces its way.
At last the whole embryo,
now weighing about three ounces
breaks loose from its parent, and falls,
heavy and spear-like.

[6] *Amongst the pink hyacinths* outside Paradise Spice you will find chicken bones (stripped clean), many Dragon Stout and Guinness bottle tops pressed into the earth, a £5 'Talk Home' phone card and an empty Smirnoff miniature. At the newsagents, on a small shelf near the door, there are magazines called *Black Men* and *Irish Tits* that turns out, on second glance, to be *Big Tits*, which then makes sense in a way that *Irish Tits* could not.

Poem in Which I'm Pleased to Have Opted

for the mechanical scales, rejecting the digital set
with lithium battery: they are made in China and cost
five pounds and this weighs on me like a pair of earrings
tugging at the hole. What if I were as efficient as the hollyhocks
that suck all life out of the crack in my concrete terrace,
their tips nudging at the windowsill of the woman upstairs?
My heart is numb as a lobe frozen for piercing, hardly an ideal
condition, but I persevere and note the most beautiful thing
I have seen by four pm is the half-Chinese (half-what?)
woman with the cinched waist in the sports department
who was worried when I told her I'd weighed myself
twice a day since I was fourteen. *I live for the ecstasy*
of food I added by way of reassurance, my heart beating
a little faster after the second double espresso that morning.

[7] *You set your limits, you decide* how much to spend, how long to play. Need help?
Contact the national helpline on 0808 8020 133.

& Because

a string of unilluminated dragonflies dangles
from the ceiling

our screens glow
like fireflies
at opposite ends of the flat, one of us
facing south, the other
north,

the anglepoise reflected
like a moon in the cracked glass – yes,
it's cracked but it endures,
the empty spaces I crave are filled
with dust
dating back to the 18th century

& because I can't forget
the torrent
of the M6 as we switched
lanes on the way back from the retrospective
where we took
photos of you standing by a painting
of your mother in 1975,
how she stared
out of a window, determined
not to smile
and of course your hair is the colour of her hair
and the gallery walls are white

& because roses aren't what they used to be, so few
are fragrant and only a fraction
of those that survive the shivery hold
unfurl into fullness,
their thorns
bred out like pips from a watermelon

&
because water is no longer sacred, our rivers
run like sores
and mountain streams are bottled, sold
binned then spun
into the gyres of the Pacific

[8] *Yuck* is the word that was sprayed on the window of Foxton's when it opened on the High Street.

The Science of Life 531

Prone

In big cities
there has been a great deal of independent
losing

The old and simple types continue
but it is
shot through with progress

On the whole animals
analyse purely
—it is best to leave values out

If a tapeworm
could for a moment be granted the power
he would confess

that his was a blind alley
apparently without limit

[9] *When the Olympics were on* I remember ascending the brow of the hill on a 59 as Usain Bolt won gold and a spasm of triumph surged from the barbershop as the crowd spilled out into the heat. Green, yellow and black flags were everywhere and the barber had erected a gazebo over a soundsystem that thumped out an irresistible bass line into the twilight.

Happiness

when one locust meets another
the nervous system releases
serotonin, causing a mutual attraction
(a prerequisite for swarming)

(a prerequisite for swarming)
serotonin, causing a mutual attraction
the nervous system releases
when one locust meets another

The Science of Life 574

The Sin

It grows a fishing rod and bait on its head
It is elongated, detached —

Numerous members of this same family
attract their prey by means of lures,
always luminous.
The prowling population can never be
without special advertisement.

Sometimes there is a single row of small
lights down the body; sometimes
tiers of lights, like a liner at night.
Its own identity
written upon it in letters of cold fire.

The benefit conferred in return is normally
protection.

Number 19

The back door has a glass pane, obscured
by a Medieval dragon with Hebrew tattooed on its belly.

Outside the French windows an ebony monkey
crouches over a circumcision bowl designed to catch blood.

The front door is purple with a metal grille
over reinforced glass and is kept double locked.

[10] *Things of elegant beauty* do not exist only in the past. That said, there is something bewitching about ladies with parasols in watercolours winding their way up grassy hillocks long since collapsed into Morley's and Rooster's Stop chicken shops.

Tatler's People Who Really Matter

Although you might think them wildly intimidating,
many are astonishingly cosy and nice.

She is not a perfect English Rose,
but he has the loveliest, gorgeous glossy hair.

Imagine how super-clever and super-connected
and affable one must be to have got this far.

Considering they are not all trained, many
are relentlessly upbeat and frighteningly talented.

Boundlessly energetic they approach each border
as if it were new, even after umpteen impressive attempts.

Mind-blowingly otter-faced, she tells the little ones
everything's going to be just fine— the lie

flawless as pale skin, some might call it pneumatic.
When they get through it is delightful.

[11] *A Jacobean chair* was the thing I had to have from the antique shop on the corner of Arodene Road. It was August, my dad was in the Royal Free and the air was dusty. I was on the phone when I bought the chair, distracted by the medical minutiae that surround the terminally ill. Buying the chair was something I could not afford to do, but the compulsion was overwhelming. The chair has diamond-shaped leaves carved on it and woodworm holes on the seat; the proprietor's father—a 17th Century collector—assured me the worms were long dead, otherwise there would have been little piles of sawdust at its feet.

Day of the Dead

She's shut you in
her trophy box.

There is no key.
It has no lock.

You climbed inside
with throbbing cock.

Now hope someone
hears you knock.

[12] *Things that are near yet far.* The top of the Hill when you are cycling up it in the bus lane. The bus as it pulls away from the stop after you've dashed across the road trying to catch it.

Horse Chestnut II — A Coupling
from A Letter From Darwin, C. R to Hooker, J. D
22 May 1860

P.S. | As Horse-chesnuds have male flowers
when a man comes into his flowering season

& hermaphrodite flowers I have wished to examine
with petals soft and tender as breasts, open to bare

their pollen,
his seed

& this has made me observe
∞ this has made me

a thing which has surprised me.— All the flowers
an entreaty, flowering labiatae

now open on my *several* trees
now open and in profusion

are *male* with rudimentary pistil
are female too, rude and raw

with *pollen shedding*; so that I began to think
how dishevelled I was, how

my memory had deceived me
into enamour

& that the pistil was never well developed;
∞ that the pestle was a well, deep and enveloped

but on opening
as I opened, my eyes like

buds near the end of each little lateral twig
sticky, overt, receptive

of the flower-truss, I find
a cluster ∞

plenty of hermaphrodite flowers with pistils
in abundance, asphodels forever pulsing, pert yet

well developed. So that on all my trees
these trees, my roots, these roots attest

there has been a gigantic crop of *quite useless*
ideas. ∞ O, how intoxicating the air, as

male flowers, with millions of pollen-grains wasted,
open, as the male, he flowers, swollen and unsated

for there is not a female flower nearly open.—
For there is not a female or a flower so open.

[13] *Things that are far yet near*. Stanley Clare's Independent Funeral Directors with its plastic flower arrangements and miniature marble scrollwork examples in the window that say things like 'Remembering you is easy Dad, it happens every day, missing you is something that never goes away.'

Negril: in this case the Jamaican café on the hill, where a poet once wrote she was *slightly in love with the waiter*.

Evolution

A man is really very like a frog;
brain in a brain box; eyes, ears, nose,
mouth and teeth but unlike
the vast man-frog plan
man is more like a frog than a fish
for frog and man possess
and a fish does not
but man is less like a frog than a dog,
for man and dog both have hair and divided hearts
and warm blood of several different sorts
and milk
and frogs have none of these things

In terms of classification men and dogs are
frogs are not

Of Ownership

Golden Shovel after Joy Harjo

The verb has a long history of violence: to take is to grab, seize or capture, esp. by force; note its hard 'k' set against the long vowel, a sign of intent, this cave of sound. *He took her by the throat and shook her* is one in a proliferation of examples. To enter into possession or use of (a thing) any thing, the things of supermarkets that lull us as we push the trolley round and round the soothing fountains in the malls, always the polystyrene trays of flesh bright in the fluorescent aisle. Our virgins at such altars now are birds who've never felt the drum of rain on their fattened breasts. Save money. Buy one, get one free & variations thereon. They (the shops) are here to help themselves as best they can. Language is also ownership, we describe our thoughts, and by default corral the heart: most articulation is squandered as a detour from love that manifests as pain inside us, from what is felt, from breath that connects us to grace.

[14] *Things that make one feel nostalgic.* Here illuminated by the Tesco Metro colonising the site of the old George IV —its parties were so late-night they took place in the day, hard house high-hatting out over the insomniac congregation. The protest occupation was futile and brief, coinciding, as it did, with new laws that made squatting a criminal offence.

Voyage

of the Damned

is a film from the 1970s
starring Faye Dunaway with her cat's eyes
and cheekbones

Irpinia

is the name of the ship
the producers chartered
to use as the set

Many Rivers to Cross

was your favourite song
as requested we played it
at your funeral

Irpinia

is the name of the ship
you board at Kingston Harbour
where you had 'a good job'
as a custom's official

Voyage of the Damned

is a film set on a ship in 1939
when a thousand Jewish refugees
fled Germany for Cuba

Irpinia

is a region south of Naples
full of mountains and many rivers
its name means wolf
in the language of the ancient tribes

Voyage of the Damned

is a true story
where the wolf wears a uniform
and spits out bones and teeth

Dunns River

is a brand of ackee
a fruit that's poisonous if picked unripe
it only comes here tinned

On the Irpinia

you organise a committee
of West Indian chefs
to cook for those who find the food too 'fresh'
a term that doesn't mean the same thing
as it does in England

Rivers of ...
is misquoted
and comes from the legend of Aeneas
who said he saw the Tiber
course through his city of wolves
foaming with much blood

Irpinia
is close to the hot mouth of Vesuvius
a verdant passage from
the Tyrhennian to the Adriatic

Voyage of the Damned
was trans-Atlantic
the liner set sail for the Caribbean
full of hope
and families looking for a way in

Cassava River
runs inbetween Above Rocks
and Glengoffe
the village from which your mother Katharine Weir
migrated to the capital

On the Irpinia
people are crowded into dorms
like cattle stalls
in the middle of the ocean

Voyage of the Damned
is a tale of propaganda and dodgy visas
The Nazis knew
Cuba never planned to take the refugees
even as a stepping stone

Irpinia's
passenger log
has your date of birth wrong
it's hardly a luxury liner
the Grimaldi brothers snapped the fleet up cheap
seeing promise in the migrant market

Golden River
froths downstream
from Mizpah, Zion Hill and Sooky Gal
in your childhood parish

Irpinia's
earthquake of the 1980s
left three hundred thousand homeless

Voyage of the Damned

was doomed
SS St Louis sailed back to Europe
where countries quibbled over quotas
only a third
made it through the War alive

The Irpinia

docks at Southampton
you're here
to join your sons and wife
a nurse called Cutie, in a fledgling NHS
hungry for a beginning.

Verbs I Have Seen in Relation to Migrants, With Cranes

North, south and east, they congregate, a conglomerate.
Sky Crane, Crawler Crane, Sidelifter, Fixed—

Rough Terrain Crane is good for nothing but throwing rocks,
Tower Crane hovers, hurls, occasionally prevaricates.

Pitted against the horizon, their shadows unleashed
on the river's surface —glassy as Canary Wharf's pyramid.

Erect in salute, red and white arms rigid,
they push on, into newly smuggled, allocated space.

Here

They come because this is the future
and there's money to be made, because being
here is better than there, where they were,
before they were here. They move in
next door and across the road. They open
shops selling unfamiliar things many
of us are yet to taste. New people work
in the new shops. New customers come to take
pictures, speaking in strange tongues.

At first there were just a few of them, now
they're everywhere you look. They all
drink boutique coffee out of jam jars, they all
buy up old houses close to the park.

Some assimilate, Others do not.

True Love

We learn to conjugate être
before avoir; a mystery made overt
by absence, this unstrung lute—

Imagine a tree,
an abundant avocado, the lure
of creamy fruit: revel
in it, allow your eyes to rove
the room for ever.

When it's over
pain scratches a route
to the heart, quick as an elver
and on repeat: a brutal lout.

The act no man can veto.
Bow to its rule.

The Science of Life 496

Conquest

—the word itself has a nasty
crawling
and to that has been added

a mythical cold
sliminess, partly from forgetfulness
but mainly from the fact

that the lie and its most remarkable products
must be continually lubricated
and kept moist

You have only to watch
to see a creature which has retained
for three hundred million years

this primitive method
of support and progression

Every new construction

leaves a demolition in its wake
and cranes cluster round the towers, crowding
the water's edge. Here, anchorage is sold
by the square metre and the Queen
still owns the river bed.

The sun shines hard as the spokes of the Eye
and it's the warmest July since records began.
I try to buy an iced soya latte on the River Bus,
but the girl says *no*, so I order a cappuccino
with cow's milk instead and ask for a cup
filled with ice cubes only I'm not quick enough
to reject the moulded white lid which now
she'll chuck and I blame her for in my head
until I remember —I said yes without thinking
to the plastic straw with ridges that bend
---as I take my seat by the window looking out
at the pier where the empty Hilton ferry docks.

The Science of Life 493

A Death

speeded up in the mind's eye
a paroxysm spread

Europe heaved in sympathy
worn down to such stumps

what caused it is not
our business

its onset due to
central heating

 this infected all sea
 and filled it full of accumulating
 bits of India and possibly Central Africa
 right up to the equator. The Northern Hemisphere
 was no escape as the earth grew a new plan
 to meet the new conditions—smaller and less luxuriant.

[15] *Procedures when visiting*/The Clink/Her Majesty's/Restaurant— those looking to book a table will need to/ all guests are asked not—/mobile phones or SIM cards are not/cameras are not/scissors, knives and sharp objects are not/chewing gum and aerosols are not/if your name does not/ it is a criminal offence if you do not/

Outside

under the arcade
and the floor-length glass shop front:
a green pop-up dome

flanked by a Burberry
suitcase and a sleeping bag

a makeshift shelter
for Sai from Stratford
with time to invest

in a four-day queue —he's first
in line for an i-phone 6s

no one moves him on
or threatens arrest
as it's not about where

but why you pitch your tent

[16] *People who look as though things are difficult for them*—two little boys whose mother wears pink, pink and only bubblegum pink with a pink wig and a pink shopping trolley.

The Science of Life 388
The CEO

When barbed wire fences
were first introduced
there were many cases
of the new-fangled fences
learning directly from the old.

May it not be
that they owe their fleshiness
to the cumulative effect?

Perhaps, but not necessarily.

Some very fair people
burn and suffer. It is so essential
any further mutations
towards skin were seized.
This in itself is just.

The Science of Life 969

The Superfluous

For a number of generations at any rate,
a dead weight of the dull, silly, under-developed,
weak and aimless will have to be carried.

There seems to be no way of getting rid of them.

The panics and preferences of these relatively
uneducatable minds, their flat and foolish tastes,
their perversities and compensatory loyalties, their dull
gregarious resistances to comprehensive efforts,
their outbreaks of resentment at any too lucid revelation
of their inferiority will be a drag, and perhaps
a very heavy drag, on the adaptation of institutions
to modern needs and to the development

of a common knowledge
and a common perception of purpose

[17] *I remember* I came over from Guyana the day after the riots, my cousin lived on Bonham Road, that wasn't in 81 though that was 85, I forget which riot it was now, my friend had to walk up the hill because there was a bus they'd turned over, the worst thing though was the fish and chip shop, everybody said why couldn't they leave off the fish and chip shop, that was community, it was their livelihood, the lady used to say, take that saveloy, pay me tomorrow, she was Greek, they were a family, they left soon after, they were disillusioned, their hearts weren't in it any more, that's what my aunt used to say, why couldn't the rioters leave them alone, why couldn't they be satisfied with Carpetland?

The Neighbourhood

An estate agent window shatters
any hope of securing cheap accommodation.

Who gave you keys to this city, Mayor?
How did we all forget your plan needs our permission?

Yesterday our grocers closed their doors
because they can't afford to sell olives anymore.

If I don't stop talking politics
I'll have no old friends to sit down and eat cake with.

They sold Ethiopian coffee.
They've gone and now we sell Ethiopian coffee.

Do you remember that architect?
He told us straight: *not everyone gets to have a view.*

In her dream she's still a resident.
When she wakes up she's got no money to pay the rent

[18] *This prime position is*/a chic and/breathtaking/fantastic new/beautifully presented/neutral/offering cool/delights of/vibrant/ wonderful/stunning/ superb/unrivalled/exceptionally/sought after/enviably located/and secluded/private/secure gated/vaulted/extending/chain.

The Science of Life 683

Her Anger

It takes two to make a meal—the
eaten and the eater—

and the world
can weigh on the system like a dirty cloth,
hastily chewed

delicate machinery can be upset
or a septic focus can poison it.

If only it was as simple as that!

The following simple experiment
is instructive—

Fill the mouth with smoke; put the lips
into the kissing position; hold a reasonably clean
handkerchief taut across them;
eject

[19] *When Laura was alive*

she used to parade up and down
in front of

her kitchen window that looked out
onto the prison yard, or stand on a chair
to try to see over the outhouse
with its slate roof that obscured
the view, her long red hair
cascading down her back.

Ars Poetica 101

after Elizabeth Alexander

Poetry

John says, lays claims on the heart (and
also the head), that now
he reads it with more personal attention; my
feeling is the voice
as a conduit for love is
necessary as blood (is diligent as sap rising)

Poetry is

how we accept what we're not
—is all sticky-green-tender and choral, all
we, you or I have, love
being so seemingly— love
being the verb we must wait for in a subordinate clause, love
as a synonym for silly and

O, how I wish I wasn't sorry
for not replying to your letter with the
pressed snowdrop, that arrived, faithful as a dog
who returns, doggedly, to the spot where his mistress died.

Poetry

is testy as friendship (here
I confess I
tend to hear
you as a muffled version of myself
and if not wise, I'm loudest)

Poetry is

what the sea sings to the
last insatiable human
who thinks he's the only one with a voice

to flood the dark with music and
dance or wonder who we are
and why we're here or how we
became I, so exclusively, —not
that the long-lashed ox knows any more of
cathedral spires, his interest
is in trees and grass, he doesn't care to
reach beyond low-hanging fruit. Why, when each
exquisite blade tastes just like the other?

[20] *In a city time is expressed* through layers. Take for example the lamppost from the original electrification in 1888, up high on the same stretch as The Telegraph, the pub where Basement Jaxx had a residency, now a Christian evangelist HQ that rents space to a nursery and holds Zumba™ and yoga classes; this lamppost resembles the lamppost Jadis the white witch threw like a javelin in *The Magician's Nephew*; there is no lamp remaining, just a crossbar, around which a rope is wound that affixes two battered plastic palm fronds to the iron trunk; this refurbishment is all that remains of the Ghanaian restaurant, *Iroko* whose owners decorated the whole strip like a beach promenade before it burnt to the ground barely six months later.

The Island

Underwater, sun flickers like
a conversation we're yet to have, bright

as the polystyrene cup bobbing
on the surface with the yachts.

Everything resembles something else
when light refracts: translucent

medusas turn into puffball plastic bags
as I soar through the blue

gazing down on schools of little fish.
You say the moon touches the sea

like a stone when you skim it. A stone
is a ball of carbon mozzarella over lunch.

In lieu of the volcano a row flares up.
Obsidian glitters against white walls.

[21] *It is important to document* Olive Morris House. You can take enquiries about benefits, council tax, housing and parking to this centre.

It is important to document Olive Morris. Black. Feminist. Panther. Squatter. Pictured with a megaphone, wearing a white vest, the arm that holds it up to her mouth is muscled. On the reverse of another, earlier photograph: 'taken at about 10pm on 15 Nov 69 after the police had beaten me up. King's College Hospital.'

It is important to document also that she said 'not a single problem associated with racialism, unemployment, police violence and homelessness can be settled by "rocking" against the fascists, the police or the army. The fight against racism and fascism is completely bound up in the fight to overthrow capitalism, the system that breeds both.'

If my father were still alive I would have rung him to find out if he knew her, because he was a community activist too, although not until just after the riots, and as Olive Morris was a feminist and he was never a feminist, and she died of cancer in 1979 when she was just 27, perhaps their paths may never have crossed; but she was Jamaican, and if he were alive, he would have told me, he would have insisted, how it was important to document that.

In 1975 the peacock feather

was at the peak of its revival
as an accessory for the boudoir
and suburban lounge.

An Indian man used to sell them
from a sack-cloth bag
along Oxford Street
and in Notting Hill and Camden.

Perhaps it was the same man,
maybe there were several.

Also at that time a French onion seller
from Roscoff would call
from house to house in Hampstead
and Belsize Park on a bicycle.
Strings of garlic were also available.

The onyx telephone did not ring
or the man who was supposed to call
did not call,
or at least he did not call
when she was at home, within earshot,
more than she wanted to be,
but this is how things were, and there was
no such thing as call waiting either.

[22] *On a bright moonlit night* as you pass the abortion clinic over the road from The White Horse, you can hear newly nocturnal wrens, songbirds who've changed their hours so they're no longer drowned out by the volume of traffic. The border is where the South Circular intersects the A23 —at the Wetherspoons the road widens to a dual carriageway and the crest of the hill plateaus before resuming its rise and eventual fall out to the coast.

Landay

Darling, your affair was obvious
Only an imbecile could have been oblivious

Horse Chestnut III – A Coupling
from The Narrow Road to the Deep North, Basho

‘There was a huge chestnut tree
once there was a large horse chestnut

on the outskirts of this post town,
on the border of my home

and a priest walking in seclusion
always when I was alone and sometimes

under its shade. When I stood here
looking up into the light

in front of the tree, I felt as if I were
a viridescent umbrella, I felt as if I were

in the midst of the deep mountains
in the arms of a man, my love, who lived

where the poet Saigyō had picked nuts,
to please me.

I took a piece of paper from
I tore a piece of paper from

my bag, and wrote as follows:
my book

‘The chestnut is a holy tree,
‘A holy tree is the chestnut

for the Chinese ideograph for chestnut,
its seed scattered and brown

is Tree placed directly below West,
is all one could ever hope for in

the direction of the Holy Land.
A tree reaching up to the sun!

The priest Gyōki is said to have used it
—every day, as I gazed into its canopy,

for his walking stick
for protection

and the chief support of his house.’
My support.

Notes

1. 'Brixton Hill: A Pillow Book' runs throughout the book (the first line is in italics) as a disrupted lyric essay. It takes its numbered section headers from the Penguin Classics 2006 edition, translated by Meredith McKinney: some of these quote the original and then diverge, while others mimic the style but are original text. It is published sequentially in *Mount London: Ascents in the Vertical City*, ed. by Tom Chivers and Martin Kratz (London: Penned in *the Margins*, 2014).
2. The found sonnet sequence is taken from *The Science of Life* by H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley and G. P. Wells, 2nd edn (London: Cassell, 1931) and was written in response to Exxpedition 2014: a trans-Atlantic all women's sailing mission investigating the impact of micro-plastic pollution on marine and human life.
3. 'To Dover from Calais' and 'The Neighbourhood' are Sonnet/Landay hybrids. The landay being an oral form from Afghanistan, used predominantly by women who have been denied access to education and literature. In translation, the couplets contain nine and thirteen syllables and may (or may not) conclude with assonance or rhyme. They were written during a 2015 National Maritime Museum poetry residency as part of Re:Think Migration, the outcome of which was the publication of a short, limited edition, illustrated pamphlet *Voyage* published by the NMM in collaboration with the visual artist Sophie Herxheimer.
4. The collection contains two 'couplings': an interventionist form invented by the author, where a passage of prose is cut and lineated, and a response line that includes either assonance, repetition or rhyme is written underneath to form a new lyric narrative. For more on this see *Msllexia*, Issue 64, 2014/15 in which I explain the formal properties in an interview with Fiona Sampson.
5. 'Poetry 101' and 'Of Ownership' are both golden shovels, a derivate form invented by Terrance Hayes. 'Of Ownership' is published in *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. by Peter Kahn, Ravi Shankar, and Patricia Smith (Fayetteville, USA: The University of Arkansas Press, 2017).

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