

CHAPTER 14

*“At the Edge of What We Know”
Gender and Environment in American Poetry*

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What is nature.
Nature is what is.
But is nature natural.
No not as natural as that.

Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America* (1936) ¹

I'm sick of irony
Everything feels everything
Everything returns to earth
There are no spaces between us

Brenda Hillman, *Practical Water* (2009) ²

In these lines, Stein and Hillman, modernist and contemporary poet, share an engagement with nature neither as backdrop nor metaphorical resource, but instead as subject of active inquiry. These epigraphs illuminate some of the persistent concerns taken up by environmentally-oriented American poetry across the twentieth century and into the present. What is nature? How do we understand and experience it, and how might it exceed our definitions, sensory perceptions, and conceptual frameworks? Is nature what is other, external to modern human cultures, or does it suffuse all phenomena? How might different cultural backgrounds contribute distinctive perspectives on environmental relations? Both Stein and Hillman offer a vision of nature that seems to brook no exception or externality. Yet both poets also point to the realm of human conceptualization and differentiation – the adjudication of what is “natural,” the distancing frame of “irony” – as what does not belong, what misperceives. At once correcting and participating in this conceptualizing work, these poems open a space for thinking with the paradoxes of nature.

Stein's lines highlight the difficulty of defining “nature” – what Raymond Williams has called “perhaps the most complex word in the

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language.”³ If nature “is what is” – all that exists – Stein suggests that it is also different than what humans imagine it to be. Nature is “not as natural as that,” more ordinary, perhaps, than our idealizations. In this sense, Stein’s wry definition preserves a certain otherness and unknowability to nature, even as it remains entirely simple. Almost a century later, Hillman’s lines meditate on similar questions, eschewing the term nature for an even more encompassing term: “everything.” If Stein’s rhetorical approach asserts an ontology of pure presence, Hillman’s poem highlights interconnection as primary. All beings, all phenomena, are caught up in a mutual feeling that does not prioritize the human. And all beings “return to earth,” participating in unceasing cycles of living, shared feeling, and dying. If for Stein nature is “what is,” for Hillman nature is “us,” an inescapable, ongoing ecological intimacy. In turn, both these poets offer versions of environmental poetry that refuse to resolve nature into imaginative mirror or aestheticized other in favor of more experimental approaches.

While neither of these poets refer to gender in these particular lines, their poetry more generally explores alternatives to what Stein calls “patriarchal poetry.”⁴ Stein’s modernist experiments in repetition and radical syntax have influenced generations of women poets, including Hillman. Stein’s most radical exploration of a gendered environment is *Tender Buttons* (1914), which offers a sustained glimpse at a domestic realm of feminine goods: cakes, custards, cushions, boxes, umbrellas, cloaks, stamps, bottles, dresses, hats, purses. Working to “see a fine substance strangely,” Stein’s text examines various forms of daily interactions with these objects, largely involving the gendered tasks of housework, such as stitching, cooking, tidying, decorating, trimming, tending, and shopping, and emphasizing the sensations that emerge in these interactions.⁵ In so doing, Stein estranges the everyday surround to produce what contemporary theorists such as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson might call a queer ecology, bristling with sensory vividness and erotic pleasure.⁶ Hillman’s poetry undertakes a similarly defamiliarizing study of everyday environmental relations in her tetralogy of the elements: *Cascadia* (2001), *Pieces of Air in the Epic* (2007), *Practical Water* (2011), and *Seasonal Work with Letters on Fire* (2013). Each book studies one element via an array of formal techniques, ranging from concrete poems to vocables imitating animals to chants and trances. Hillman extends Stein’s experiments to consider the various ways that poetic language might itself participate in, and not merely describe, ecological relations, and she highlights the feminine dimension of this approach. “A man says

he doesn't understand my poetry // Frankly i'm not surprised," she writes in *Practical Water* (47).

These poets, bookends of the period this chapter explores, offer two examples of poetry's environmental inquiry across a century where concerns about ecological destruction grew increasingly urgent. In the first decades of the twentieth century, environmental concerns centered on the effects of urbanization and agrarian decline, the degradation of topsoil across American farmlands, and the need to conserve wilderness areas.⁷ With the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the rise of the Cold War, apprehension about nuclear fallout grew widespread, generating new visions of environmental apocalypse and anthropogenic destructiveness. The 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which investigates the effects of various pesticides on soil, water, air, crops, plants, breast milk, and animal and insect life, is commonly credited with sparking the modern environmental movement. Insisting that "in nature nothing exists alone," Carson's book highlights the complex web of ecological relations that connects all phenomena, while unleashing a powerful indictment against the industrial, scientific, agricultural, and military interests that produce DDT and other contaminants (55). *Silent Spring* and other key environmental texts of the era raised awareness of various forms of environmental degradation, from pollution to overpopulation, which led to important legislation, including the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act, and widespread grassroots activism. In subsequent years, the environmental movement has claimed some important successes, such as the banning of CFCs and the preservation of habitats worldwide. But today, climate change, soaring extinction rates, ocean acidification, and changes in the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles present ever-intensifying crises. Recently, climate scientists and geologists have claimed that we have entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, wherein humans as a species have been altering planetary processes in ways that transform the geological record.

This chapter considers various logics, patterns, and tropes by which American women poets respond to these changing environmental relations across the twentieth century. Many poets re-engage older genres with an eye to their contemporary ecological situation: the pastoral evolves into the necropastoral, the lyric expands to encompass nonhuman others or disintegrates into fragmentary debris, the elegy mourns extinct species and destroyed habitats.⁸ Modernist practices of citation and documentary approaches offer innovative ways of composing collective, polyvocal portraits of a place or event, such as Marianne

Moore’s portrait of Mount Rainier, “An Octopus,” or Muriel Rukeyser’s investigation of the Gauley Bridge disaster in “The Book of the Dead.” In turn, contemporary texts such as Allison Cobb’s *Green-Wood* and Kaia Sand’s *Remember to Wave* refashion these documentary approaches to produce investigations of violent histories sedimented in a particular site (a Brooklyn cemetery, the streets of Portland).⁹ Midcentury innovations such as projective verse and performance-oriented poetics give rise to explorations by poets such as Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman, Alice Notley, Bernadette Mayer, and Jayne Cortez that consider how the poem is itself an environment. More recent iterations of these “expanded field” poetics include experimental sound performances, multimedia works, and site-specific projects that stress poetry as a social practice. Such poetic projects are associated with the emergence, in the early 2000s, of ecopoetics, which marries avant-garde techniques and theories of posthumanism, environmental justice, and science studies. Many, but not all, of these works engage explicitly with the ways gender – as embodied experience, material difference, feminine and feminist epistemology – inflects environmental perceptions and relationships.

Sexuality and Embodiment

In her 1919 essay *Notes on Thought and Vision*, H.D. writes: “the brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important” (11). Connecting reproductive capacities with a different relation both to embodied being and creative endeavor, H.D. describes this sensibility as a “jellyfish consciousness” with “streamers and feelers,” and suggests that for her, this sensibility emerged through her own experience of pregnancy. Mina Loy, in her poem “Parturition,” describes a similarly visionary, if painful, state of consciousness emerging in the act of giving birth, a “cosmic initiation.”¹⁰ In such works, H.D. and Loy formulate a distinctively feminine epistemology grounded in a bodily vitality connected to other earthly phenomena. Loy’s jagged portrayal of absorption into “infinite Maternity” shares with H.D.’s essay a belief that such experiences unfold an “undulating life-stir” that is creaturely rather than rational (7). Describing a “cat / With blind kittens / Among her legs,” Loy says, “I am that cat.” Loy writes of “suspect places” and freakish sexual unions, highlighting the defamiliarizing energies of feminine sexuality and elaborating connections between these energies and those of nonhuman lifeforms.¹¹

Throughout their modernist writings, H.D. and Loy explore the ways feminine eros and reproduction generate states of being that break down boundaries between self, animal other, and nonhuman surround. H.D.'s imagist masterpiece *Sea Garden* (1916) portrays an eroticized, fragile, yet persisting landscape of sea flowers and trees battered by wind and waves to evoke intensities of embodiment and desire.¹² Drawing on Greek myth and Sappho's poetry, H.D.'s poems portray humans and nonhuman forces in violent, passionate confrontation: "If I could stir / I could break a tree— / I could break you" (25). H.D.'s explorations of these liminal spaces between sea and land are framed through lyric address to a "you," which is sometimes the flowers and plants and sometimes an opposing power – wind, sea, storm. This use of apostrophe underscores the degree to which these poems offer anthropomorphic portraits of erotic initiation, fervid mingling, suffering, and loss, invoking a feminine subject whose body and psyche bears the marks of intense experience. Yet in their vivid imagist portrayals of textures, colors, and motion, these poems also retain a sense of nonhuman otherness that does not quite resolve into anthropomorphism. Perceptual uncertainty coexists with precise images to produce a poetry that "quivers" with creaturely life (56). Such portraits raise questions about the degree to which female corporeality is aligned with the natural world and about the connections (or lack thereof) between femininity, ecology, and creativity that continue to preoccupy poets across the century.

If modernists like H.D. and Loy offer visions of feminine sexuality that explore what Stacy Alaimo calls "transcorporeality," where the discretely bound self gives way to strange entanglements, postwar feminist poets such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde trace the sociopolitical implications of female connections to the natural world.¹³ Rich and Lorde draw on burgeoning ecofeminist discourses of the 1970s and 1980s that connect modern dominion over the natural world with patriarchal oppression of women and racist domination.¹⁴ Both poets investigate the psychic complexities of misogyny and its forms of violence against women and the nonhuman environment. Rich's 1973 poem "Waking in the Dark," from her collection *Diving into the Wreck*, offers an image of animal blood dumped in the ocean for sharks, then describes the speaker's own bleeding from "every / aperture."¹⁵ Rich's speaker turns to address a masculine "you" and its contradictory, pathological responses to feminine embodiment: "You worship the blood," "you dip your finger into it and write," "you dream of dumping me into the sea." Rich points to the bodily and psychic costs of modern misogyny and hatred of the natural. "The clouds and the stars didn't wage this war," she writes in her 1983 poem "For the Record,"

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which goes on to chart various forms of violence – including the “raw sewage” and “slow fumes” of environmental degradation – perpetrated against the poor, the workers, women and children, and the natural world (313). Lorde, who lived with cancer for fourteen years, often portrays her own body as a site of suffering and resilience in the face of oppression and disease. In her mixed-genre book *The Cancer Journals* (1980), Lorde describes her experience with cancer in terms of environmental health and justice, claiming that “I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald’s hamburgers and Red Dye No. 2, but the fight is still going on.”¹⁶

Feminist awakening, Rich and Lorde insist, must involve a critique of misogyny, racism, and environmental violence alongside an unearthing of suppressed forms of embodied feminine knowledge and practices of care. These poets credit their experience of motherhood with changing their politics and poetics, offering new insight into what Rich calls the “natural resources” of women that can “reconstitute the world.”¹⁷ In their poetry, they frame their portrayals of awakening to feminist empowerment and lesbian eros through extended metaphors of natural discovery. Rich’s poems often involve images of exploring new and unknown frontiers: the desert, volcanoes, mountain climbing, diving into oceans: “we’re out in a country that has no language,” she writes in “Twenty-One Love Poems” (242). Lorde’s poems highlight images of natural blackness – midnight, coal, caves – to celebrate her identity as a black woman. “I am black because I come from the earth’s inside,” she writes in her famous poem, “Coal” (121). For both Rich and Lorde, the work of poetry is to imagine alternatives to oppression and violence against humans and the nonhuman world, alternatives that begin, as Lorde writes in her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in the “dark places within” – embodied, erotic places tied to “ancient” practices and earthly wisdom.¹⁸ The return to the feminine body as site of eros and knowledge is inextricable from a celebration of the natural world’s beauty and power, unharnessed by modernity’s destructive forces.

Recent poets have drawn inspiration from these sources, exploring alternate states of consciousness that connect feminine embodiment and ecological immersion while examining how these states are at once shaped and threatened by oppressive forces. The contemporary poet Hoa Nguyen offers a particularly compelling example. Nguyen’s poems refuse the heightened symbolism of these earlier poets, favoring instead an examination of everyday environments and activities: eating, sleeping, drinking, making, making love, mothering. Like H.D.’s early work, Nguyen’s poems

are imagist lyrics, but they favor messy interaction to controlled conflict, metonymic transitions to metaphorical clarity. The mood is casual, sometimes dreamlike, and the scenes – largely domestic – unfold through associative shifts from one object or thought to the next, with the gendered body as pivot. In *Red Juice*, poems shift from natural images of growth and human fecundity – “By March I’ll have gained 2 pounds / in uterine muscle” – to fears about “fouled air spewing,” the “wasting disease” plaguing deer populations, gasoline prices, and melting glaciers (108, 110, 113). Matter of all kinds, consumed and excreted, circulates through these poems: mucus, sperm, breast-milk, menstrual blood, pee, tears, placenta, eggs, cookies, chicken, bread, “meatballs simmering in sauce” (115). Various poems describe the making of tinctures that build blood and restore feminine health alongside everyday forms of toxicity like “antibiotics” in the tap water and pesticide-sprayed garlic (185, 225).

Nguyen’s ecofeminism, which stresses feminine bodily wisdom in opposition to ecological violence, is often as pointed as Rich’s or Lorde’s, but also more playful. Again and again, she contrasts birthing, mothering, poetry-making, and other forms of creativity with ecological degradation, corporate downsizing, debt and hunger, and the culture’s “fear of the female principal” (136). But the highly symbolized conflicts and rhetorical master-strokes of these earlier poets are replaced by wry observations and everyday worry: “how can I / have another baby There being / too much human pee and not enough energy” (131). Indeed, Nguyen’s poems often explore feelings of complicity alongside critiques of economic and environmental injustice: “We are free to eat and love / We spray on poison ants bite me” (140). At the same time, Nguyen’s work follows her predecessors in writing a poetry that begins in the rhythms and intensities of the body and that explores defamiliarizing, erotic connections with other living beings: “It’s difficult after all / to tell where one ends and another begins” (131). The “I” of the poems dissolves or extends into various “you”s, human and nonhuman: “life penetrates life” (156). Such fluid boundaries are often intimately tied to the feminine body’s capacity for transformation, bearing new life, caring for others, and spilling forth.

Animals and Animism

If these poets locate women’s bodily epistemologies as the origin-point for understanding ecological relations, other writers across the century offer more extended poetic explorations of animals and insects. Taking other species as their object of aesthetic inquiry, various poets examine their traits

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and behaviors to draw connections with and distinctions from humans. Anthropomorphism is at work in these poems, but many also reveal an interest in the strange particularities of animal life and the coextension of living energies across species bounds. Perhaps the most astute observer of animal life in modernist literature is Marianne Moore, whose poems on animals highlight their surprising qualities. Drawing on the classifications and anatomical specificity of natural history, Moore’s detailed evocations of unusual creatures such as the pangolin, the jerboa, the arctic ox, the frigate pelican, and the wood-weasel emphasize the natural ingenuity of their bodily features. At the same time, these poems – on creatures that Moore herself never saw in person – are meditations on the epistemological methods through which we approach these animals. As Moore scholar Natalia Cecire points out, Moore’s animal poetry “explores the poetics of tensions that are *already* present in the practices of natural history—the tensions, in particular, between thing and name, between category and specimen, and between detail and comprehensibility.”¹⁹ Moore’s famous precision involves highlighting the frames of reference by which humans understand and elicit meaning from animal others.

While Moore’s poems explore various forms of scientific and aesthetic mediation, other poets explore daily experiences with living creatures. Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* (1965) contains a famous sequence of five poems on beekeeping, written in 1962. Plath, who herself kept bees, describes the process of beekeeping from acquisition to harvest. Like Book Four of Virgil’s *Georgics*, Plath’s bee poems compare the social order and habits of bees with human civilization, while also meditating on the particular ways of bees and their unsettling interactions with their human keepers. These poems are often read in biographical terms, as symbolic portrayals of Plath’s domestic saga and psychic intensities; yet this series ultimately centers on the question of how to care for nonhuman beings whose ways remain mysterious. Each poem charts feelings of fascination, repulsion, responsibility, and delight at the strange workings of the bees. Plath often emphasizes the centrality of the female – the queen bee – to the social order, and portrays both the extravagance and the ongoing survival of the bees as notably feminine. In the closing poem, “Wintering,” Plath ends on a hopeful note of regeneration after winter’s diminishment: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring,” she writes.²⁰

Plath’s bee poems navigate the ambivalences of husbandry, but they finally foreground the mysterious beauty of insect life as it moves, unhindered by human interference, through cycles of life and death. More recent poetry, by contrast, exposes the violence underlying animal-human

relations under industrialized capitalism and the ways animal life has been harnessed by the profit imperative. Ariana Reines's *The Cow* (2011) explores the industrial-agricultural processes that transform the cow from living being to consumable product whose very carcass can be rendered into new forms of value. Reines's aim is "to get to the other side of the animal," to consider the logics by which animals appear in modern life not as autonomous beings but as *matter*, profitable and abject (63). Reines is fascinated by these processes – "industry has an aesthetic," she writes – both in their assembly-line rationality and their inevitable excesses (dirty feedlots, mad cow disease) (33). Reines suggests that the poem can become a means of "passing through" to glimpse this hidden reality (56). She asks, "Can a book carry you into the world you have to pretend doesn't exist most of the time, can a book carry you back out into what first made you alive" (56)? Getting "to the other side of the animal," then, means eschewing redemptive or idealizing portraits and concentrating on real material relations.

Yet poetry also serves as a medium for exploring what cannot be "rendered" by capitalist production: "Everything can be put to use except the low. The utterance" (103). In this sense, *The Cow* allies itself with the animal bellow, the sound that serves as indelible reminder of creaturely presence. Other contemporary works, such as Anne Waldman's *Manatee/ Humanity* (2009), Canadian poet a. rawlings's *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* (2006), Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* (2009), dk okpik's *corpse whale* (2012), and Brenda Iijima's *If Not Metamorphic* (2011), also explore such sonic, semiotic, and perceptual registers of interspecies communication, thinking in posthumanist terms about the ways humans and other animals might address each other. For many of these poets, such interactions, real or imagined, open out to an animist sense of the vitality of all beings. Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's most recent book, *Hello, the Roses* (2013) unfolds a powerfully animist phenomenology that regards all entities – birds, frogs, plants, sunlight, petals, rocks, bees, pine needles – as charged with "shimmering" and multi-textured energy (86). The poems explore sensory perceptions that unfold in and around the New Mexico mesa where Berssenbrugge lives, its colors, densities of light, plant textures, weather patterns. Rather than portraying an autonomous observer encountering a natural scene, however, Berssenbrugge's eco-poetic perspective elaborates an expanded consciousness that all these elements partake in. "There's no individual consciousness, per se," Berssenbrugge claims; instead, "There's a sense of pervasiveness; particles go back and forth in me" (4). Thus the singular

subjectivity of human and the discrete details of nature recede in favor of an intuitive, immersive ecological flow gathering in all beings, “like vibrations across water” (65).

Place and Displacement

For many poets, ecological questions emerge by way of considerations of particular places. Poems serve as field guides, describing the habitat and species-life of a given terrain, or as archeological explorations of buried histories, or as blueprints for an imagined site. At the same time, various poets consider the consequences of being displaced from an environment, often through violent circumstances, so that the site becomes a locus for meditating on memory, dispossession, and trauma. As Elizabeth Bishop, whose great theme is geographical displacement and the workings of memory, writes of Santarém, Brazil, “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?”²¹

Midcentury poets Gwendolyn Brooks and Lorine Niedecker, lifelong inhabitants of Chicago and rural Wisconsin, respectively, dedicate much of their poetic work to considerations of their locales. Brooks’s poems offer rich portraits of Civil Rights–era urban black life in all its complexities, drawing on various forms (lyric, ballad, sonnet, epic, jazz, and blues tradition) to depict the living conditions of Chicago’s South Side. From her acclaimed first volume *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) forward, Brooks’s poetry chronicles the daily atmospheres of inner-city life for African Americans – “onion fumes” and “yesterday’s garbage,” overcrowded apartments and beauty shops, alleys and corners.²² Attuned to the everyday workings of environmental racism, her poems document the difficulties of urban impoverishment as well as the dignity and humor of South Side city-dwellers. In several poems across her career, Brooks explores environmental differences along racial lines by portraying a black speaker encountering a white area and vice versa. Her poem “Beverly Hills, Chicago,” from the Pulitzer Prize–winning collection, *Annie Allen* (1949), explores the complex responses – embittered, envious, resigned – of a plural black speaker upon driving through an upscale white neighborhood: “even the leaves fall down in lovelier patterns here. / And the refuse, the refuse is a neat brilliancy” (128). While the speaker insists that “nobody is furious. Nobody hates these people,” they also acknowledge that “it is only natural that we should think we have not enough.” Another poem, “The Lovers of the Poor,” from *The Bean Eaters* (1960), considers an opposite vantage: the increasingly appalled reactions of white suburban do-gooders from the

“Ladies’ Betterment League” to the real living conditions of the black urban poor (349). Skewering the white women’s thin charity, Brooks reveals how black poverty appears in the white racist imaginary – as “too much” (smell, garbage, vermin, bodily presence) to be worthy of aid (350). While such poems incisively chart the geographical dimensions of racial inequality, many of Brooks’s other works, particularly her experimental novel *Maud Martha* (1953) and her long poem *In the Mecca* (1968), detail the cramped, vital abodes of the South Side from an insider’s measured perspective. Through Brooks’s keen evocations, the segregated spaces of black Chicago become as vivid and multi-faceted as the human characters that populate her verse.

Niedecker’s poetry, which also draws on ballad and lyric, as well as folk vernacular and haiku, similarly opens up a particular place – Black Hawk Island – and its dwellers to extended study. While her early work, especially *New Goose* (1946), indexes the folk culture of her local area, Niedecker increasingly turns to reflections on the motions, sounds, and subtle changes of her surroundings. Her poetics of condensation bears forth the sonic intensities of birdsong, the flow and overflow of river, the cycles of plant-life, and the slow evolution of rock. Niedecker lived for most of her life by Lake Koshkonong, fed by the Rock River and prone to flooding, and her poems attend to the pleasures and nuisances of this “floating life.”²³ Her autobiographical poem “Paeon to Place” (1969) describes the way a human self emerges from and is immersed within the element of water: “I grew in green / slide and slant / of shore and shade” (264). Niedecker’s long poem “Lake Superior” (1968) portrays the natural history and violent past of the Great Lakes area. In this poem, the central element, common to all being, is rock: “In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock,” the poem begins (232). Niedecker’s poem highlights the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman realms via the earthly matter of iron, but it also attends carefully to the differentiating effects of Western imperialism and industrialization, including a lament for the extinct passenger pigeon: “Did not man . . . / mash the cobalt / and carnelian / of that bird” (235).

More recently, poets reflect on the ways place can both reveal and obscure ecological relations at a variety of scales. Harryette Mullen, in *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes From a Tanka Diary* (2013), uses the Japanese form of *tanka* to explore the seeming paradox of walking in Los Angeles, city of freeways and smog. The “urban tumbleweed” of Mullen’s title is the windblown plastic bag, ubiquitous in urban locales (though now banned in California!), but it is also a reference to the speaker’s meandering through

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L.A. neighborhoods and city streets. As Mullen points out, the plastic bag, the speaker herself, and many of the most iconic Southern California species (eucalyptus, palm trees) are all “transplants” to the area, raising questions about what and who belongs in a particular place. “Pink Styrofoam peanuts” strewn across a lawn, ladybugs clinging to buses, black bears in SoCal pools, worms in the restaurant salad, bouquets of flowers jetted in, squirrels in the co-op – such everyday juxtapositions evoke the vivid entanglements of urban nature and gesture toward the global systems that underwrite these relations (13). Juliana Spahr similarly examines the connections, complicities, and occlusions arising in particular places (Hawai’i, Brooklyn, Chillicothe, Oakland). *this connection of everyone with lungs* (2005) begins from the premise of geographical isolation associated with living in Hawai’i, a premise that Spahr unravels by invoking global systems of production, consumption, and communication as well as the startling intimacy of ecological connection. Her works are interested in how we accept and deny such intimacy, how we turn to our human “beloveds” and our local surroundings in order to avoid addressing these broader interrelations.

For other poets, collective dislocation from an environment is an overriding poetic theme. Margaret Walker’s volume *For My People* (1942) explores collective longings for a lost homeland that African Americans, long displaced from their ancestral sites of origin, experience.²⁴ Her poem “Dark Blood” names a variety of lost locales, from the “Balkans” and “Africa and Asia” to “Panama and Bocas del Toro”; the impossible return to the “old lands” becomes a means of reflecting on collective trauma as well as on geographic memories transmitted across generations (15). Other poems, such as “Sorrow Home” and “Southern Song,” reflect on the Great Migration and the unmet desire of African Americans to return to the South. These poems describe the ecological features and sensory pleasures of the “Southland,” the “smell of fresh pine,” and the “spring growth of wild onion,” but also the terrors that prevent the speaker’s return, the “Klan of hate, the hounds / and the chain gangs” (19). Such poems evoke what poet and scholar Camille Dungy describes, in her introduction to the seminal anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African-American Nature Poetry* (2009), as a distinctive dimension of African American nature poetry – its investigation of “elements of an environment steeped in a legacy of violence, forced labor, torture, and death,” while also offering elegiac reflections on a lost place (xxi). Contemporary Tibetan poet Tsering Wangmo Dhompa’s poems similarly contemplate the condition of exile as an environmental relation: “From a distance, topography is

intent / as in, *Where I am from is no more.*²⁵ Her poems evoke the ways the contours and daily interactions with a lost landscape can be preserved through ritual and family story, but also the strange psychic absences that such exile produces. “My country, if you were a feather I’d know / what to do with you,” Dhompa says.²⁶

Action and Activism

For many poets, poetry becomes a vehicle for raising awareness of ecological degradation and for envisioning alternatives to current patterns of consumption and environmental alienation. Perhaps the most influential modernist text of environmental activism is Muriel Rukeyser’s documentary poem, *The Book of the Dead*, published in her 1938 collection *U.S. 1.*²⁷ The poem takes as its subject the human-made disaster known as the Gauley Tunnel incident, the largest industrial “accident” in American history, in which thousands of tunnel- and mine-workers were knowingly contaminated with silica dust by Union Carbide and its subsidiaries.²⁸ Rukeyser undertakes an investigative approach, employing eyewitness reports, letters, Congressional testimony, newspaper articles, photographs, and Rukeyser’s own on-the-scene reportage in order to “demand an answer” to the catastrophe in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. *The Book of the Dead* also explores the power of the nonhuman environment, not only as a resource for industrial development but as a generative and destructive force in its own right (water, silica, soil). Interested in the ways industrial capitalism harnesses both human labor and nonhuman phenomena, Rukeyser’s poem claims poetry as a restorative power that can organize resistance while imagining more holistic ecological relations. In the closing lines, Rukeyser envisions the collective energy of living labor unleashed from the “fanatic cruel legend” of capitalist modernity, offering a glimpse of a land restored anew to its cultivators – a landscape that becomes “our region,” common possession rather than private interest (III; emphasis in the original).

While Rukeyser centers on one environmental incident to critique larger forms of exploitation under industrial capitalism, postwar poets increasingly respond to a more generalized sense of ecological disaster and potential nuclear annihilation. One of the most outspoken poets of this era is Denise Levertov, who develops a poetry of witness that takes a stand against various forms of anthropogenic violence – the Vietnam War, environmental destruction, the nuclear arms race – motivated by a belief that “we must fulfill the poet’s total involvement in life” through political

poetry and activism.²⁹ One key theme of her work is how the possibility of immanent annihilation through nuclear war produces new emotional responses to the natural world, from anticipatory anguish to appreciation of its threatened beauty. In a 1982 poem "An English Field in the Nuclear Age," Levertov writes of a field of "sunbless'd particulars," whose various flowers and plants "reflect / nothing, everything, absolute instant"; surveying the sacred ordinariness of these surroundings, the speaker concludes with relief and proleptic sorrow, "this minute at least was / not the last" (651–52). If such works emphasize an atomic apocalypse to come, other poems highlight environmental crisis as immediate and ongoing: "It is not approaching. / It has arrived," she writes in "Two Threnodies and a Psalm" (815). Such poems call attention to the ways modern consumerism and technological innovation alienate us from what Levertov calls the "great web" (829). In the face of these destructive tendencies, her poems make a sustained case, often in religious terms, for the "human power" of "nonviolence, of passionate reverence, active love" (657; emphasis in the original). Levertov's poems also abound with praise for the natural world's forms and cycles.

If Rukeyser and Levertov, among others, emphasize the poem itself as activist site, contemporary poets create ecologically-oriented poetry that expands beyond the bounds of the page, widening the field of social composition and poetic activism. Kaia Sand's performance-based ecopoetics works investigate Portland's "landscapes of foreclosed houses," buried racist histories, and uneven ecological degradations by way of various participatory projects.³⁰ Her piece "Tiny Arctic Ice," about how goods and elemental matter are "shared" and "hard to share" in a time of global capitalism and climate change, has been "recast" various times: on a teabag, in a multilingual performance piece involving paper airplanes, on flowers in a farmer's market in Switzerland, and using e-waste as material exhibit. Poet Jennifer Scappetone explores the remediation of Fresh Kills landfill into a park in an ongoing performative collaboration, "PARK," with choreographer Kathy Westwater and visual designer Seung Jae Lee. Performed at the site and other locations, the piece repurposes various forms of post-consumer waste into materials for dance and poetic vocalization, engendering a collective meditation on the living afterlife of what was the largest landfill in the world.³¹ Such poetic practice in the expanded field draws attention to the variety of sources and materials that can enter an ecologically-oriented poem. At the same time, it points to the necessary work of creative thinking and action involved in combating planetary environmental crisis. As Brenda Hillman writes in her "Ecopoetics Manifesto: A Draft for

Angie” from *Seasonal Works*: “though powerless to halt the destruction of bioregions, the poem can be brought away from the computer. The poet can accompany acts of resistance so the planet won’t die of the human” (29).

Notes

1. Stein, *The Geographical History of America*, 200.
2. Hillman, *Practical Water*, 51.
3. Williams, “Nature,” 219.
4. Stein, “Patriarchal Poetry,” 567–607.
5. Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 11.
6. See Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, eds. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*.
7. See McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun* and Worster, *Nature’s Economy* for authoritative environmental histories of the twentieth century.
8. For examples of these various tendencies, see Corey and Waldrep’s anthology *The Arcadia Project*.
9. Cobb, *Green-Wood*, and Sand, *Remember to Wave*.
10. Loy, “Parturition,” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 6.
11. Loy, “Songs to Joannes,” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 53.
12. Doolittle (H.D.), *Collected Poems*, 1912–1944.
13. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.
14. Key ecofeminists of this era include Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, Susan Griffin, Maria Mies, and Vandana Shiva.
15. Rich, “Waking in the Dark,” in *The Fact of a Doorframe*, 153.
16. Lorde, *Cancer Journals*, 60.
17. Rich, *Fact of a Doorframe*, 160, 167. For examples of these writings on motherhood see Rich, *Of Woman Born* and Lorde, “Now that I am forever with child,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*.
18. Lorde, “Poetry is Not A Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 36.
19. Cecire, “Marianne Moore’s Precision,” 95.
20. Plath, “Wintering,” *The Collected Poems*, 219.
21. Bishop, *The Complete Poems*, 185.
22. Brooks, *Blacks*, 20.
23. Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 268.
24. Margaret Walker, *For My People* (1942; New York: Ayer Publishing, 1968).
25. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake*, 16; emphasis in the original.
26. *Ibid.*, 56.
27. Rukeyser, “The Book of the Dead,” in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, 73–III.
28. See Cherniack, *The Hawk’s Nest Incident* and Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead* for more extensive description of this event and its aftermath.

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29. Levertov, letter to Robert Duncan. Quoted in Boland, “Introduction,” *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, xiii.
30. Kaia Sand’s website offers descriptions and videos of these various projects. kaiasand.net.
31. For descriptions of this piece, see Jennifer Scappettone’s website, oikost.com, and Kathy Westwater’s site, www.kathywestwater.org/kathy_westwater_company/CURRENT_WORK.html.

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