

University of Nevada, Reno

**Diffraction Poetics: Material and Culture, Composition and Critique
in the Late Modernist American Long Poem**

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Abstract

Diffractive Poetics: Material and Culture, Composition and Critique in the Late Modernist American Long Poem explores the relationship of late modernist poetry to contemporary theories of materialism. The dissertation argues that Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938), William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946-58), Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), and even a 21st century sequence like Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* (2004), engage in revisionary responses to modernist poetics, particularly to the modernist long poem. Like their more canonical antecedents, these long poems also attempt modern reformulations of cultural totality and mythopoetic construction, but they use the bricolage techniques of the modernist long poem to more provisional, localized, and egalitarian purposes. Drawing particularly from the materialist theories of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter, the dissertation further argues for the poems' combined participation in what I term a *diffractive materialist poetics*, present in each poem's examination of the imbricated constitution of the cultural and the natural. The poems exhibit moments of inter-field entanglement, mapping patterns of interference between the physical, cultural, and discursive. The dissertation conceives of late modernist poetics as both a theory and practice of materialist thinking. I argue the poems take up and generate working theories of materialism (philosophical, political, cultural, ecological respectively) that both anticipate and help elucidate the current interrogation of the concept and its application to critical methods of reading.

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Introduction

Diffractive Poetics: Material and Culture, Composition and Critique in the Late Modernist American Long Poem

Introduction

In an essay on the importance of Marianne Moore's work to modern poetics from 1925, William Carlos Williams compares her experimental poetry to a complex mathematics, his description moving briskly from geometry to the prismatic refraction of light into the color spectrum:

Good modern work, far from being the fragmentary, neurotic thing its disunderstanders think it, is nothing more than work compelled by these conditions. It is a multiplication of impulses that by their several flights, crossing at all eccentric angles, might enlighten. As a phase in its slightest beginning, it is more a disc pierced here and there with light; it is really distressingly broken up. But so does any attack seem at the moment of entanglement, multiple units crazy except when viewed as a whole.¹

Williams insists that the seemingly disjointed aspects of "good modern work" function in the same way that different wavelengths of light produce different colors, yet their relationship to the full spectrum still suggests an assorted and disjunctive whole. Typical of Williams's materialist poetics, this correlation of modern poetry with spectral optics is not deployed as a metaphor or imaginative comparison, but as an expression or extension of the conditions of reality. Here and throughout his career, Williams argues for the necessary participation of modern poetics within these new conditions brought about by the changes in science, technology, and culture. For Williams modern poetry must

¹ William Carlos Williams, "Marianne Moore," *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1971), 312.

respond to the new paradigms by working within the new modern material grounds which have been revealed. While using this example of refraction (rather than diffraction) to praise Marianne Moore's removal of needless "connectives" (like the metaphor or simile), he is also attempting to give material veracity to his own poetics, as well as anticipating the multi-scale work of his late modernist long poem, *Paterson* (1946-1958), a poem which brings together the entangled "multiple units" of physical, cultural, discursive relationships that make up a modern city.

In his essay "Poetry and Knowledge" (1944), the Martinican poet, Aimé Césaire, also insists on important relationship of poetics to the emerging materialist paradigms and breakthroughs of modern science; but he proposes an inverse approach to their relationship, arguing that poetics and language will always condition our understanding of the modern sciences:

More and more *the word* promises to be an algebraic equation that makes *the world* intelligible. Just as *the new Cartesian algebra* permitted the construction of *theoretical physics*, so too an original handling of the world can make possible at any moment a new (theoretical and heedless) science that poetry could already give an approximate notion of. Then the time will come again when *the study of the word* will condition the study of nature.²

Here Césaire points out that all scientific breakthroughs are also contingent upon the creation a new poetic language or paradigm by which to articulate them. The phenomena they describe exist already in the world, but they require a new creative language or structure, "an algebraic equation," by which to articulate them conceptually—a new *mythos* or storytelling structure that can sustain the new content of the *logos* or new

² Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," trans. by James Arnold, *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1900-1950*, ed. Melissa Kwasny (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 238 (emphasis added).

material evidence. In short, for Césaire, a scientific, historical, or cultural paradigm is a kind of poetics.

In his recent book, *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens*, Mark Noble notes that this connection of poetic language to scientific representation was not lost on the quantum physicists of the early 20th century, such as Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. They realized that the empirical breakthroughs of scientific observation are still limited by their discursive representations. In fact, some of the more sustainable theories of the new physics could only be addressed in the language of contingency, complementarity, and uncertainty: “they recognize that greater specificity about the features of the atom means greater uncertainty about our relationship to it—that more powerful theories of the material world carry us inexorably to the edge of human understanding.... [P]hysicists have before them the vocational task of fashioning new language for addressing the mind's interaction with the material”.³ For Bohr and Heisenberg, this new language required notions of complementarity and uncertainty. As Heisenberg describes, “going from one picture to the other and back again, we finally get the right impression of the strange kind of reality behind our atomic experiments.”⁴

For Williams and Césaire there is a moment of revelation at this “moment of entanglement”⁵—a particular resonance and interference pattern that is tracible in the intersection between the vocabularies of science and the materials of poetry. For

³ Mark Noble, *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 169.

⁴ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolutions in Modern Science* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 49, quoted in Noble, *American Poetic Materialism*, 169.

⁵ Williams, “Marianne Moore,” 312.

Williams, this occurs by an incorporation of the word under the conditions and paradigms of the new science. Words and concepts function as extensions of material reality; they do not exist separately “as a symbol of nature, but as a part, cognizant of the whole.”⁶ For Césaire, this is a reminder that the breakthroughs of science are, for us, always conditioned and mediated by the poetics or linguistic representation of the new concepts—that words and the narratives they create hold a tremendous power over our vision and understanding of the world. Scientific knowledge still involves the creation of new poetic structures or creative paradigms in order to describe the external objects of the world from which it draws its material content. Both poets are correct, of course; but it is perhaps being able to hold both fields together (the natural and cultural, the scientific and the poetic) without fully synthesizing them or subordinating one to the other that allows a more fulsome exploration of the interaction and interference between them.

Williams and Césaire are certainly not the first 20th century poets to find a useful parity between the materials of poetry and the materials of modern science. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919),” T.S. Eliot makes his famous claim towards transhistorical canonicity by invoking the notion of the poet as a supposedly impersonal catalyst, declaring that successful poetry even approaches “the condition of science.”⁷ Yet despite the novelty of his analogy to chemistry, the purpose of Eliot’s modernist poetics, especially in his longer efforts, is bent more on finding a channel back into a lost moment of literary and cultural unity than it is in actually reconciling the fields of modern science and art. The particulars of the world and the historical moment become

⁶ Williams, *Imaginations*, 102.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 40.

subsumed into an literary totality that Eliot himself admits borders on “the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism.”⁸ Likewise for all Ezra Pound’s bluster to “Make it New,” much of both his and Eliot’s longer sequences are texts that obsess over a lost cultural purity, using the new experimental poetics to reestablish circuits back into past literary and cultural traditions, “mixing/memory and desire” as Eliot opens *The Waste Land*,⁹ or as Pound closes his last Canto, “to affirm the golden thread in the pattern” or to offer “a little light, like a rushlight/to lead back to splendour.”¹⁰ As Margret Dickie notes in her study of the modernist long poem, “as it revealed its energies in these long poems, Modernism became in the end a conservative or conserving movement, quite different from its revolutionary beginnings.”¹¹ This is certainly the case with these canonical figures of the first-wave of modernism (1900-30), who despite the revolutionary form or “new algebras” of their early poetics drift towards the structures of religion (Eliot) and even fascism (Pound) in their late modernism. The late modernist long poems which I explore in this project also take up with the concept of totality and attempt to articulate a new mythopoetic structure or re-fashioning of material reality (philosophical, scientific, political, cultural, ecological). But they articulate structures which emerge from the new material conditions of the 20th and 21st centuries, more attuned to the notion of a provisional, dynamic, and emergent totality rather than one obsessing over the lost totalities and structural hierarchies of the past.

⁸ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 43.

⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems (1909-1935)* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 69.

¹⁰ Pound, Ezra, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 817.

¹¹ Dickie, Margaret, *On the Modernist Long Poem*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 4.

In this dissertation, I argue that Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938), William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946-58), Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), and, finally, 21st century poet Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* (2004), form a set of late modernist poetic sequences that both extend and revise earlier attempts at the modernist long poem. They continue to draw from and develop poetic strategies particularly associated with the traditional and the modernist epic: the use of deep archival research alongside experimental poetic structure, the employment of the epic as an opaque concept with little or no fidelity to its traditional form, and the desire to give an accurate and expansive material expression of a particular culture. In their expansiveness, these late modernist texts are attempts at re-presenting and re-visioning earlier notions of totality; but rather than amalgamating and constraining disparate materials into a forced literary and cultural coherence—affirming Pound's "golden thread in the pattern"—their articulations of totality remain contingent, particularized, and peripheral. They convey the sense of epic, planetary expansiveness but always in particular, material expressions.

In their reaction and revision of earlier modernist epic conceits, they work themselves into the legacy of modernism as a simultaneously literary, political, transnational, scientific, and technological phenomenon. It is useful to think of these poems as late modernist poems because they both extend and redeploy the modernist long poem as a way of reconciling emerging interstitial complexities of the disordered cosmos; but they are also further attuned to the post-nuclear, labor, decolonial, and

ecological questions that arise later in the 20th and 21st century. They respond to globalization with a poetics that is hyper-local while simultaneously invoking a planetary sense of irreducible totality. These poems differ from *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* in their stated focus on specific places (Paterson, New Jersey, Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, the republic of Liberia, the state of California) rather than unreal or composite cities or abstracted distillations of culture in those epic poems. They each see their poetic projects not merely (or mostly) as representations but as extensions and elaborations of the local worlds from which they draw. As Williams describes at the beginning of *Paterson*: “[t]o make a start/ out of particulars/and make them general/ rolling up the sum by defective means.”¹²

Furthermore, I argue that these poems exemplify the ongoing, fractious relationship between late modernity and materialist thought—both arising out of the same philosophical and scientific grounding of 18th and 19th century empiricism (Bacon, Darwin, Marx) and further borne out in the cultural milieu of the 20th and early 21st. In drawing together the concepts of modernism and materialism, these poems help to expose the link between them. While new material paradigms are always supported by a new poetics (as Césaire suggests), the long or epic poem is particularly suited to this mythopoetic task. I argue that each poem contains an implicit or explicit *theory* of the materialism and its relationship to modern culture as much it serves as a material-cultural artifact or aesthetic representation of the confluence of modernism and materialism. In fact specific moments in each poem make rhetorical and theoretical arguments for what

¹² Williams, *Paterson*, 3.

modern poetry is supposed to do even while being a working expression of that argument: Williams's empiricist mantra "no ideas but in things"¹³ which serves as the impetus for his experiments in exploring the city of Paterson; Rukeyser's political argument that "poetry can extend the document"¹⁴; Tolson's decolonial argument for a reformulation of Eurocentric science and culture, "[a]gain Black Aethiop reaches at the sun, O Greek./ Things-as-they-are-for-us, *nullius in verba*,/ speak!"¹⁵; Sikelianos's ecological impetus "to find a world a word/ we didn't know."¹⁶ Each of these poems in various ways takes up and generates a theory of materialism while also composing elaborate material examples of specific places and cultures. They all (to varying degrees) explore the philosophical (Williams), political (Rukeyser), cultural (Tolson), and ecological (Sikelianos) implications of materiality.¹⁷ And they favor the more provisional, lateral discoveries produced through dissonance, opacity, and heterogeneity rather than totalities of forced synthesis, homogeneity, and vertical integration. In their epic length, they provide a tentative articulation of totality in response to the changing particularities of its content.

In grouping these long sequences together, my project argues more specifically that each of these poems deploys a *diffractive materialist poetics* that attempts to articulate or map the patterns of interference between the physical, cultural, and discursive. In using this term, I build particularly on Karen Barad and Donna Haraway's

¹³ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992), 9.

¹⁴ Muriel Rukeyser, *U.S. 1* (New York: Convici-Friede Publishers, 1938), 146.

¹⁵ Melvin B. Tolson, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1953), ll. 453-5. This first edition does not contain page numbers, only line numbers.

¹⁶ Eleni Sikelianos, *The California Poem* (Berkeley: Coffee House Press, 2004), 9.

¹⁷ While each of my chapters will focus on these particular aspects of materialism in the poems, the poems themselves naturally tend towards conceptual overlaps between these realms.

theoretical notion of diffraction. Drawing the concept from the scientific fields of physics and optics, they argue that diffraction can serve as a critical tool to map and trace patterns of interference and connection between different material realms. Both Haraway and Barad argue that this concept of diffraction poses a useful alternative to the critical practice of reflection; its contextual, dynamic method intentionally resistant to a singular vantage point. As Haraway asserts, “[d]iffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the *effects* of differences appear.”¹⁸ Haraway posits the concept of diffraction as a useful way of breaking up the critical tendency to reflection or mirroring, which she argues often just “displaces the same elsewhere” as in the thesis, negation, and synthesis of dialectical thinking.¹⁹ Here, I briefly describe the scientific concept of diffraction (as opposed to reflection and refraction), which I will build on more explicitly in my first chapter on Williams.

Reflection, refraction, and diffraction are particular descriptions of similar phenomena, all of which entail the bending of waves or forces (light waves, water waves, sound waves). *Reflection* occurs when waves bounce back directly when meeting an obstacle; *refraction* describes the redirection of waves when moving from one medium into another: from air into water for example, or the dispersal of light caused by light waves refracted by a prism glass (like in Williams’s example from the opening);

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *Cyber Sexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. ed. Jenny Wolmark. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999, 320.

¹⁹ Donna Haraway, Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thriza Nicholas Goodeve* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 101.

diffraction describes the bending of waves around a particular obstacle or through a small opening, or, alternately, the patterns of interference and superpositions created between opposing waves or forces (like the overlapping ripples on the surface of a pool of water). Within classical physics, diffraction is a pattern of interference that can occur between any type of wave (light waves, sound waves, water waves); but these waves are not considered to be material substance but rather forces or disturbances. In quantum physics, this bending of matter has been found to occur in both waves and particles. At microscopic levels, particles can actually overlap and bend like the properties of waves, and, likewise, can leave tangible interference patterns that can be traced and recorded. This peculiar overlap in the diffractive properties of waves and particles inspires both Haraway and Barad to bring the concept of diffraction into a much larger context.

As both Haraway and Barad suggest, this phenomenon of diffraction serves as both a constructive metaphor and worldly example of the patterns of interference between discursive, cultural, and physical forms of materialization. In his book, *Poetics of Relation*, the decolonial theorist and poet Édouard Glissant also uses a concept of diffraction (though in a less formally scientific sense than Barad and Haraway) as a term to help distinguish his notion of limitless creolization from the traditionally synthetic and purely linguistic aspects of what it means to creolize (what he negatively terms *métissage*). He highlights the productive translocal overlap and interference that occur between diffracting cultures that are resistant to the synthetic absorption of colonial hierarchies—where decolonizing cultures might build from the language and draw from

the concepts of the colonizer but in ways that are unforeseeable and generative.²⁰ For Glissant, cultural diffraction is a necessary alternative to cultural synthesis.

As Haraway, Barad, and Glissant use the concept of diffraction with intentional interdisciplinary capaciousness, so too will this dissertation use the concept of diffraction as both a theoretical anchor to an overarching investigation of the relationship of materialism to late modernist poetics, but also as a way move quite freely between the productive interactions and interferences between literary, scientific, and cultural discourse. This project is not an extended study of scientific or historical materialism nor is it a new periodization of modernist, late modernist, and postmodernist poetics, but it is rather an exploration of where these materialisms and these literary temporalities intersect and overlap productively.

In this dissertation I argue that these particular late modernist long poems also engage in this diffractive process (what I call a diffractive poetics), exploring where the boundaries between nature and culture intersect and exert a tracible pattern of influence upon each other. These poems also draw on the epic's resonance with totality and form: deploying multi-scale storytelling, conditional frameworks, and both critical and compositional *poesis* (as both unmaking and remaking) to articulate the late modernist and contemporary negotiations of these boundaries. While these poets are not necessarily informed by the contemporary questions raised by cultural studies and science and technology studies, I find that each of these poems explores the implications of

²⁰ Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 34.

diffraction both as a material phenomenon and as a discursive practice of poetics. Through these poems, my chapters explore the implications of what I term diffractive materialism in its philosophical, political, cultural, and ecological manifestations, respectively.

Inversely, I also wish to explore and even challenge these materialist and diffractive methodologies by, at times, reading them against the theories of materialism emergent within these poems—using the materialist arguments generated by these poets in their poems in a kind of dual praxis, interrogating the uses and implications of both modern and contemporary materialisms. At times, the contemporary theory will function as the critical apparatus for investigating the poems; and at other times, the poems will serve as critical apparatuses to explore and even challenge the theories. In this way my project attends to late modernist poetics as a theory or practice of diffractive and materialist thinking. In each chapter my exploration of the poems' relationships to diffractive materialism will be particularly invested in 1) the poems' use of the epic mode or long sequence as a conduit to represent the peripheral totalities of inter-field entanglement, 2) the translocal implications of their simultaneously hyper-local and planetary scope, as well as 3) the diffractive poetics emergent within the poems themselves.

As a preliminary gesture, my project finds that productive strains of materialist thinking and productive strains of late modernist poetics are, at their best, ambitious, revolutionary, and transgressive, but they must also contain a measure of openness, opacity, and conceptual humility. This is what Édouard Glissant describes as an open

totality or total diversity that does not “feed on its own dazzle”—that does not finally close in upon itself.²¹ Or as another late modernist poet, A. R. Ammons, declares towards the end of his poem, “Corsons Inlet”: “I see narrow orders, /limited tightness, but will/Not run to that easy victory:/Still around looser, wider forces work.”²²

Late Modernist Epic and Translocal Expansion

The poems selected for this dissertation are all written towards the end of or even after the generally accepted literary period of modernism (roughly 1890-1945): Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” in 1938, *Paterson* from 1946-1958 (though Williams began to conceptualize this project in the 85 lines of “Paterson” in 1927), Tolson’s *Libretto*, begun in 1947 and finally published in book form in 1953. Sikelianos’s poem is the most transgressive of period boundaries, published in 2004. Yet even giving the poets and the poems a cursory glance, their connections to modernism both temporally and conceptually are quite evident. Williams is an established American modernist that happens to write his most expansive work, *Paterson*, in a period after modernism. Rukeyser is a later “second-wave” modernist whose writing, particularly in “The Book of the Dead,” is influenced by the formal experimentation of the first wave avant-garde as well as the social realities of the depression and the late interwar years. Although Tolson is two years older than Langston Hughes and wrote his master’s thesis at Columbia on the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s, he comes to poetry too late to be directly affiliated with that group of writers, publishing his major works, *Libretto for the Republic of*

²¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 197.

²² A. R. Ammons, “Corsons Inlet,” in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 884.

Liberia (1953) and *The Harlem Gallery* (1964) well after the traditional boundaries of modernist literature. While Eleni Sikelianos is a contemporary eco-poet, *The California Poem*, is deeply engaged with the legacies of both the modernist and ancient epic. My project argues that these poems are late modernist in a literary sense in that they each directly respond to the material and form of the earlier modernist long poem. If Ezra Pound described the epic as “a poem including history,” these are poems including philosophy, history, science, ecology, and simultaneously hyper-local and transnational topographies.

Recent arguments in the field of new modernist studies have challenged the temporal and spatial frameworks of earlier, more formalist modernist periodization. Even long-established modernist scholars, such as Jean-Michel Rabaté and Marjorie Perloff, have disputed the modernist/postmodernist binary, suggesting that by 21st century these placeholders have become less useful for distinguishing between 20th century poetry. As Rabaté argues in his introduction to *A Handbook of Modernisms Studies* (2013): “It seems today that modernism has absorbed most of the twentieth century, that it goes back deep into the nineteenth century, and that it has moreover swallowed postmodernism.”²³ While I would not go as far as to dismiss the legacy of postmodernism as a literary style or period outright, this project is far more concerned with how these midcentury and contemporary long poems continue to engage in a dialogue with modernism, conversations which remain unresolved by either postmodern literature or scholarship. These midcentury and contemporary poems may exhibit aspects attributable to

²³Jean-Michel Rabaté, *A Handbook of Modernism Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 11.

postmodernism; but I am most interested in how they continue to participate actively in the legacies of modernism. As Michela Bronstein has argued, building on calls for the opening of the field of modernist studies by Paul Saint Amour, Douglas Mao, and Rebecca Walkowitz, one useful benefit for the weakening of the theory of modernism, is a more fulsome understanding of the modernist past in relation to how it was retooled and repurposed in the future, what she describes as “the influence of the future has upon the past.”²⁴ While my project is tethered to anglophone poetry and American literature, rather than more geographically adventurous comparative territories, I believe that in reading these poems as late alternative traditions within modernism, rather than clock-checking them into the postwar, postmodern category, and in focusing on their translocal and transnational manifestations rather than merely their American essentialism, this project fits squarely within the productively loosening frameworks of the evolving field of the new modernist studies. In particular, I am invested in (1) their late modernist revision or expansion of the modernist long poem or epic as well as (2) how their translocal poetics, which Jahan Ramazani notes as characteristic of both canonical and global modernism, exemplifies Glissant’s capacious notion of cultural diffraction and creolization and anticipates contemporary theories of diffractive inter-field entanglement.

²⁴Michela Bronstein, *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27. See also, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. “The New Modernist Studies.” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737-748, JSTOR, and Paul Saint Amour, “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 437-459, Project Muse.

Epic Expansion and Peripheral Totality

The four long poems' simultaneous reliance on and resistance to the earlier modernist iterations of the long poem or modernist epic is explicit within the texts themselves. The poems need not fit the formal criteria of an epic in order to invoke and play with the idea of the epic as a concept. As Franco Moretti insists in his *Modern Epic*, none of the so-called epics of modernity formally adhere to the structure of the ancient and classical genre. And they are often as notable as semi-failures of the epic form as they are considered major works or masterpieces of world literature.²⁵ Other than possibly *Paterson* (which Fredric Jameson does credit as being perhaps the most successful *failure* of the modern epic),²⁶ none of the poems of my project are considered well-known “masterpieces,” much less, formal epics. However, I find that these late modernist poems continue to play with the epic concept or conceit in its both modern and traditional iterations—particularly the problem of representing totality and material unity.

In *The Theory of the Novel* (1914), the modernist cultural critic Georg Lukács famously asserts that the epic, in its traditional form, is no longer possible since the modern world presents a fractured sense of reality and has lost the epic unity of cultural integration: where “the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of the meaning of life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms

²⁵ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Márquez* (New York: Verso, 1996), 4-5.

²⁶ “William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* is then signally one of those, a modern epic that knows in its deepest structural impulses—unlike its great models in the pocket epics of Pound and Eliot, and in ways quite unlike the naivete of cognate efforts like Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*—that it must not succeed, that its conditions of realization depend on a fundamental success in failing.” Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (New York: Verso 2007), 5.

of totality.”²⁷ Yet his argument for the ascendancy of the realist novel, neglects to explore the longer works of modernism, many of which took the fragmentary nature of the modern condition as a premise to begin their work rather than as the inevitable conclusion. Still his suggestion that modern work still “thinks in terms of totality” does seem fitting when considering the canonical works of the modernist epics as well as the late modernist long poems of my study.²⁸ As Eliot suggests in the essay “‘Ulysses,’ Order and Myth” (1923)—though perhaps in reference to his own mythic method rather than that of Joyce—the modernist epic “is simply a way of controlling, ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”²⁹

Rather than controlling, ordering, and shaping futility, the sense of totality in these late modernist long poems is more consonant with the material emergence theories of Deleuze and Guattari than it is with either the latent conservative tendencies in Eliot or Pound or the teleological synthesis of Lukács’s historical materialism. As Deleuze and Guattari assert in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972):

We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the

²⁷ Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968), 56.

²⁸ As C. D. Blanton argues in his book, *Epic Negation*: “What Lukacs’s grudging accession to the novel’s prose of life failed to imagine was the possibility of a disjointed epic, a disarticulated epic, capable of mediating a totality conceptually.” C.D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 7). While the time frame of his study overlaps with mine, *Epic Negation* is more concerned with the Anglo-American and British late modernist epic. His definition of the modern epic is also much more capacious than mine, going as far as to include T.S. Eliot’s later critical work in *The Criterion* as a type of late modernist epic form. His approach is also embroiled in strong commitments to Hegelian and Jamesonian dialectics, which my own project attempts to cautiously work alongside of but not completely within. Though I absolutely concur with his reading of Lukács here.

²⁹ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 177.

original unity. We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some later date. We no longer believe in the dull gray outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution, aimed at forming a harmonious whole out of heterogeneous bits by rounding off their rough edges. We believe only in totalities that are peripheral.³⁰

Likewise, these long poems retain a heterogenous whole that makes up the disordered cosmos while finding particular moments of engagement from within its dynamic opacities. Rather than attempting the lost transcendental concept of totality pined for by Marxist cultural theorists like Georg Lukács and engineered by crypto-fascist poets like Eliot and Pound, I find the totalities articulated in these long poems are always peripheral, opaque, and provisional.

Despite their contingency and heterogeneity, each poem also expresses an implicit and, at times, an explicit desire to serve as a form of cultural instruction. This is a trait that both Margaret Dickie and Michael André Bernstein have noted which the modernist long poem retains from classical epic. As Dickie argues, specifically in reference of the long poems of T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound, “openly didactic, the poets set out to teach not only necessarily difficult lessons, but simple precepts that required new and complex forms of expression responsive to the conditions of the modern world.”³¹ The late modernist poems of my study also include cultural critique while simultaneously attempting a new form or composition appropriate the material problems they reveal. While drawing explicitly on the transhistorical

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 42.

³¹ Dickie, *On the Modernist Long Poem*, 7. Or as Michael André Bernstein argues, in discussing Pound, Williams, and Charles Olson: “[t]he element of instruction, arguably present, if only by implication, in all poetry, is deliberately foregrounded which offers its audience lessons presumed necessary to their individual and social survival.” Michael André Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 14.

resonances of earlier modernist epics, they also attempt to avoid the earlier pitfalls of their retrograde movement. Williams opens the first book of *Paterson* with an epigraph describing his overall project as “a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands,”³² a clear rejection of the erudition and polyglot poetics of Pound and Eliot in favor of an embodied, idiomatic American poetics. Yet here he is also clearly placing his long work in conversation with their still looming influence. As his long poem becomes more disjunctive with each successive book of *Paterson* he publishes, Williams begins to weave its dissonance and apparent failure into an explicit structural method of improvisation and discovery.

Rukeyser’s documentary poetics in “The Book of the Dead” still draws on the same transhistorical frameworks of the early *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* in her depiction of an industrial mining disaster entwined with references and even passages from the Egyptian underworld text of the same title. Yet in its use of contemporary social archive (including medical evidence, congressional transcripts, and personal testimony), it serves an explicit egalitarian political purpose to “widen the lens and see...new signals: processes.”³³ It is a prosopopeial resurrection not only of the ancient voices of Osiris, Isis, and Thoth, but of the recently murdered laborers of the Gauley Bridge disaster. While sharing some of the formal aesthetics of the modern epic, Rukeyser’s documentary poetics were deemed too politically motivated and socially activist for the early New Critics, who began the project of enshrining modernist poetic austerity—but, as a social

³² Williams, *Paterson*, 2.

³³ Rukeyser, *U.S. 1*, 71.

writer, they were, inversely, too experimental and iconoclastic—too “modernist”—for the more orthodox left of the Popular Front.

From the very opening of his long poem, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, Melvin B. Tolson makes clear that his poem is not only an epideictic poem celebrating the centennial of the founding of the free-slave state of Liberia, but it is also a contentious reply to the literary monopoly of elitist modernist poetics. Heavy with allusions to Western and Asiatic culture as well as African myth and history, he declares both the country of Liberia and his own poem to be “[n]o micro-footnote in a bunioned book/Honed by a pedant/With a gelded look...No waste land yet, nor yet a destooled elite.”³⁴ Here Tolson is speaking back directly to the moderns, especially the Eliot of *The Waste Land*. And he doubles down on the modernist epic conditions of the archival research and documentation; his endnotes to the poem are in fact longer than the entirety of *The Waste Land*! *Libretto* is also meant to serve as a defrocking of not only the Anglo-American literary establishment but also the cultural and scientific hegemonies of Western modernities, replaced by a counter-vision of a proto-Afrofuturist new humanism—a work of both logocentric critique and mythopoetic composition.³⁵

Eleni Sikelianos’s *The California Poem* is bursting with examples of 21st century intersections of ecology and human culture, but it also speaks back to both the moderns and the ancients in allusions and footnotes that deliberately resemble that of the modern

³⁴ Tolson, *Libretto*, ll. 2-4, 50.

³⁵ Incidentally, he was later dismissed by black artists and intellectuals in the burgeoning Black Arts movement of the 60s and 70s as too imitative of white Eurocentric form and language to be truly radical—even though his late poems contained early examples of Afro-Futurism. And, alternately, he was brushed aside as footnoted as second rate or ethnic modernism by those same white-washed intellectuals that curated the New Criticism and even later 20th century modernist scholarship.

epic. References to the mask of Agamemnon, the Virgilian stars of Dante, and even Williams's *Paterson* abound throughout the sprawling poem; though these are often set alongside explicit ecological and cultural interventions. It mixes the overt didacticism of the epic catalogue (one including a list of endangered and extinct species) with a more subtle didacticism built into its complex form and poetic fusion of scientific, literary, and disarmingly personal discourse. While *The California Poem* is written almost a century after the formal advent of modernism, it certainly channels the legacy of the modernist long poem, particularly in its tendencies towards both explicit and implicit cultural instruction.

Diffracting the Translocal: "A Place Composed of Interference Patterns"

These midcentury and contemporary long poems exhibit the transnational effects of modernism at a level that is both exceptionally local while simultaneously intersected by the international influences.³⁶ After two world wars and the rapidly extended reach of globalized capitalism, these long poems engage in ways of incorporating but also diverting some of these international modern constraints. The long poems of my project are ostensibly located or broadly inspired by very specific places. But they are not merely retreats to the local stability and provincialism by which to avoid the ravages of

³⁶ Within the larger field of American studies, Wai Chee Dimock argues for the "intricate interdependencies" of the supposedly American field, "shaped by emerging forces" that exceed national borders (2-3). Dimock, Wai Chee, "Introduction: Planet and America, Set and Subset," *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, eds. Wai Chee Dimock and Laurence Buell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2-3. Likewise, in the new modernist studies, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that we should give more attention to how modernist literary works "assume an indeterminacy of origins, the ongoingness of mobile modernisms, and an affiliation of projects that indigenize ideas from elsewhere—transporting, translating, and transculturating them from context to context, from agency to agency." (221). Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernism: Provocations of Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia, 2015), 221.

globalized modernity.³⁷ As Jahan Ramazani suggests: “In a global age, poetry often embodies and illuminates the accelerated *intermelding of the local and the global*; a poetic locus often makes legible the multiplicities enfolded within a singular geographic locus.”³⁸ Ramazani’s focus on transcultural “intermelding of the local and the global” echoes Williams’s notion of the “interpenetration” between fields in *Paterson*, the universal aggregated through an expression of the local material. But Ramazani’s argument also reiterates Édouard Glissant’s notion the limitless “creolization” of diffracting cultures. For Glissant, his concepts of creolization extend beyond the cultural and semiotic into the corporeal and geographical: “thought in reality spaces itself out into the world.”³⁹ And, drawing from both Aimé Césaire and as well as the materialism of Deleuze and Guattari, he argues that the poetics of relation draw in concepts from various cultures and regions without necessarily fully synthesizing or subordinating their differences: “[i]f we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable. *Creolization diffracts*, whereas certain forms of *métissage* can concentrate one more time.”⁴⁰ Ideas, myths, and languages from one culture might be repurposed or diffracted into another culture without that culture being

³⁷ Jed Esty notes *this* provincial move within late British modernism from the universality of empire to local particularism, specifically noting Eliot’s late long sequence, *Four Quartets*. While his argument is compelling in his specific engagement with texts of late British modernism, including the later works of Eliot, Woolf, Forster, I would argue there is an entirely different phenomenon occurring with the specific American poems of my dissertation—a local focus that extends out into world networks, rather than retreating from them. Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

³⁸ Jahan Ramazani, “The Local Poem in a Global Age,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2017), 696, emphasis added. <https://doi-org.unr.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/691005>

³⁹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 1.

⁴⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34, emphasis added.

subsumed or subordinated into the other. Glissant's sense of cultural diffraction and creolization moves beyond cultural synthesis and suggests that this translocal interference has unforeseen implications that can be generative and sustaining.

I will return to Barad and Haraway's concept of diffraction more extensively in the final section of this chapter; but Haraway's notion of diffractive mapping as "a place composed from interference patterns"⁴¹ is a useful way to think about these how these poems attempt to compose their particular subjects topographically or translocally. Each poem, using various techniques, derives its expression of a particular place through these patterns of interference, the effects of difference and relation. Some of this interference registers in transnational overlaps, while some of this interference occurs between macro and micro scales and between different material fields like the physical, the cultural, and the discursive. Sikelianos articulates this translocal notion explicitly in an interview: "that is the truth of place — it carries every other place in it, historically, psychically, or potentially. [...] The land is a deep palimpsest, with all kinds of scribblings etched into it."⁴²

While earlier modern poems like *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* certainly deploy their own translocal poetics, their use of local and global attempts to build back towards a lost totality, "to affirm the golden thread in the patten," or to find singular unity beyond the present chaos of modernity reflects more of what Glissant describes as the unproductive *métissage* or cultural synthesis that attempts to "concentrate one more

⁴¹ Haraway, "The Promise of Monsters," 320

⁴² Eleni Sikelianos, "The California Poem: Epic, Elegy, Ode, Paean," interview by Jesse Morse, *Jacket* 2 33 (July 2007), paragraph 14. <http://jacketmagazine.com/33/sikelianos-ivby-morse.shtml>.

time,” or a root system seeking one totalitarian root at its center. Instead, he advocates for a totality that invokes endlessly diffracting wandering, overlapping, and influencing not grounded in stability but a perpetual dynamism, building new provisional totalities rather than sustaining old hierarchical ones. As Williams declares, *Paterson* is “a mass of detail/ to interrelate to a new ground”⁴³ which finally becomes a “contrapuntal dance” at the end of the poem⁴⁴—multiple stories and narratives intersecting from a subatomic to planetary scale.

Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” gathers material together to map intersecting narratives (X-rays, stock exchange reports, personal testimonies, references to ancient underworld texts) that converge at the disaster at Gauley Bridge, creating an exigence for a revolution at both a local and planetary scale. As Rukeyser suggests in an endnote to the poem, drawing attention to how the poem, like the place, draws on both the local and extra-local: “Gauley Bridge is inland, but it was created by theories, systems and workman from many coastal sections—factors which are, in the end, not regional or national. Local images have one kind of reality. *U.S. I* will, I hope, have that kind and another too. Poetry can extend the document.”⁴⁵ As she argues towards the end of the poem: “[d]efense is sight; widen the lens and see/ Standing over the land myths of identity, new signals, processes.”⁴⁶ (71). These new identities are created through her translocal mapping of these intersecting narratives.

⁴³ Williams, *Paterson*, 19.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Paterson*, 236

⁴⁵ Rukeyser, *U.S. I*, 146

⁴⁶ Rukeyser, *U.S. I*, 71.

Tolson's own project in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* draws liberally from any number of myths and origin stories from European, Asiatic, and African myths, arguing finally for the common emergence of their structures. As he declares: "O East, O West, on tenotomy bent, Changs' tissue is /Eng's ligament."⁴⁷ Here Tolson suggests that these cultural partitions often disavow transcultural overlap and influences, ignoring what he describes (via Arthur E. Christy) as "the shuttle ceaselessly weaving the warp and weft of the world's cultural fabric."⁴⁸ Of all the poems in this project Tolson's translocal entanglements in *Libretto* are perhaps the most ambitious—as his poem concerns a country he had never been too! While at times his transnational syncretism gets away from his egalitarian intervention, his project is perhaps the most consonant with Glissant's notion of cultural diffraction, particularly Glissant's use of intentionally nomadic thinking and diffracted insights.

In Sikelianos's *The California Poem*, she dwells on patterns of interference and the network of relations between different geographical locations as well as differing material and cultural scales: "Cilia, spirochete, composite beings/ born of symbiont meetings/ (humans) fall apart Are you speaking of molecules or community interactions?"⁴⁹ Here, she is speaking of the relationships between micro and macro, the scientific and cultural sense of community interactions simultaneously. And while the poem is ostensibly a paean to the region of California, it often drifts toward translocal and transhistorical intersections: "In my topophiliac state/ I am receiving & transmitting/

⁴⁷ Tolson, *Libretto*, ll. 457-60.

⁴⁸ Tolson, *Libretto*, endnote 287.

⁴⁹ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 160.

international influence now.”⁵⁰ Here she announces that her intensely local project (her tophilia: a love story to a specific place) is also informed by influences and transmissions from around the globe. Most of the inhabitants of California (humans, flora, fauna) are not truly indigenous and essential but have their origins in other regions. They are as much an ongoing process of translocal cultural and ecological interactions, as they are an isolated product of a singular place and time.

Aspects of the translocal and transnational are certainly at play in all of the poems of this project, but they are especially pronounced in the Tolson’s *Libretto* and Rukeyser’s *The California Poem*. Tolson’s poem is very explicitly a work of translocal poetics in the sense that the translocal overlaps with the transnational; and Sikelianos acknowledges in numerous essays and interviews that her poetics also draws directly from Glissant’s notions of non-filial cultural relationships. I find that this translocal notion of poetics builds explicitly on Glissant’s notion of cultural diffraction, but also the notion of diffraction as a materialist concept first invoked as a metaphorically by Donna Haraway and later theorized metonymically by Karen Barad: a method of reading patterns of interference between different realms of material knowledge.

It is this more capacious application of diffractive materialism that I find runs throughout all of these poems. Building on the notion of these poems’ late modernism in their extension of the modernist long poem and their translocal poetics, I turn towards their status as materialist poems that use a diffractive method in their poetic process. But in the next two sections, I would like to briefly 1) give positional definitions for my

⁵⁰ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 66.

extensive use of the term materialism and 2) unpack the embedded relationship between modernism and materialism within recent theory and criticism before returning to the poems in the final section.

A Brief History of Theoretical Materialism

Before addressing the poems' relationship to both modernism and materialism, it is important to make some general positional statements on my use of the term *materialism* throughout the project. Materialism is, at its base, a proposed structure, paradigm, or theoretical grouping of material phenomena. It is an attempt to represent, quantify, and interpret reality. There are a number of definitions of materialism that are specific to different disciplines within academia. Indeed, in everyday parlance, *a materialist* might be a person committed to empiricism and the use of scientific material evidence, a critic of the embedded ideologies which sustain our modern economic and cultural structures, or perhaps—most commonly and pejoratively—an unapologetic consumer of the fashionable products and inventions of modernity. For the purposes of brevity, I define materialism within its two general academic contexts, *scientific* and *historical*, and then move quickly into a brief overview of the *new materialist* theory that I draw from explicitly in this dissertation.

I define physical or *scientific materialism* as a focus on matter with specific attention to physical material phenomena. This form of materialism emerges out of early modern empiricism and the scientific methods of natural philosophers like Francis Bacon

and Isaac Newton, who both argued against the dependence on metaphysical or religious paradigms for describing the natural world. For example, Newton famously argued against using any superfluous causes or extraneous hypotheses. For early modern materialists like Newton and Bacon, all hypotheses or theories about the physical world must be generated out of actual evidence from the world rather than depending on or justifying a predetermined transcendental theory. Modern science has largely built upon these premises for its methodology as well as for defining the limits of materialist theorization. While this project in no way seeks to challenge this empirical stance, it will explore and problematize how, historically, many of its practitioners have conflated the empirical study of objects and physical phenomena with pure objectivity or factual certainty, as well as how this *scientism* and these essentialist conceits have made their way into the constructions of historical and cultural materialisms as well.

I define historical or dialectical materialism as a focus on matter or material with specific attention to the human systems of economic power—with consideration to the physical world as it influences or is influenced by the forces and products of human labor. As Marx and Engels famously assert, “[b]y producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”⁵¹ Labor becomes the universal substrate on which human material reality is conditioned and, also, where human consciousness emerges. There are other less robustly Marxist or and even post-Marxian

⁵¹ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 2001), 42. In reference to the material origins of consciousness: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior. [...] Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life," 47.

historical materialist paradigms, yet all are filtered through historicist lenses often framed alongside economic and political revolutions within the long modernity. Within literary studies and the humanities, dialectical/historical materialism is often tethered to historicist and cultural studies approaches to textual and cultural analysis—and these materialist critiques have expanded productively beyond purely economic paradigms to address issues of gender, race, and environmental material inequalities.

This significant turn within cultural, linguistic, and literary studies in the last quarter of the 20th century has proven to be exceptionally useful in both locating and de-essentializing the some of the embedded ideologies within the cultural applications of science, politics, economics, and art. But, as some recent philosophers and critics have noted, this heightened focus on the cultural and political can also end up reducing the external world to merely products of discourse or ideology, neglecting on how these material phenomena are active participants in a reality anterior to their merely conceptual and ideological uses. In short, exposing the transcendental tendencies in ideology led inadvertently to transcendental tendencies in historical theory and critique as well. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue in their introduction to their edited collection *Material Feminisms* (2008):

The turn to the linguistic and discursive has been enormously productive for the feminist deconstruction of dichotomies but, although postmoderns claim to reject all dichotomies, there is one dichotomy that they appear to embrace without question: language/reality. [...] Defining materiality, the body, and nature as [merely]products of discourse has skewed the discussion of these topics [...] foreclosing attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices.⁵²

⁵² Alaimo, Stacy and Susan Hekman, “Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1-3.

This *new materialist turn* to a reconsideration of the physical material and an acknowledgment of the corporeality of the body has been extremely influential within the recent currents of feminist, eco-critical, decolonial, and biopolitical thought; but it has also undergirded some of the recent critiques of science studies. As Latour argues in *We Have Never Been Modern*, “[y]es, the scientific facts are indeed constructed but they cannot be reduced to the social dimension because this dimension is populated by objects mobilized to construct it. [...] Is it our fault if the networks are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society?”⁵³ Latour’s argument in this book, which he has largely extended and recast throughout his later work, is that different wings of the academy have tried to distill or purify the study of the material world into one of three basic threads: facts, power, and discourse (or naturalization, socialization, and rhetoricalization). But this epistemological separation over the years has actually caused us to ignore the proliferation of hybrids and entangled entities, resulting in over-determinations and under-determinations of material phenomena, forcing them to cohere within the paradigms of our particular fields of study, and even ignoring or reducing the importance of those that do not. Latour, rather than arguing for the privileging of one field or the other, stresses the need to finally acknowledge that all of these stories or explanations of phenomena are working simultaneously, overlapping and influencing one another.

Along with Latour, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad offer especially useful non-binary and interdisciplinary paradigms for exploring the entangled relationships between

⁵³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 6.

what we call “nature” and what we call “culture.” As Barad argues in her extension of Latour’s previous thought in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007):

What is needed is a reassessment of physical and metaphysical notions that explicitly or implicitly rely on old ideas about the physical world—that is, we need a reassessment of these notions in terms of the best physical theories we currently have. And likewise, we need to bring our best social and political theories to bear in reassessing how we understand social phenomena, including the material practices through which we divide the world into the categories of the social and the natural.⁵⁴

Rather than trying to continue this conceptual bifurcation between nature and culture, I would like to focus on how these phenomena are inseparable. And, as my study of these late modern long poems reveals, the desire to separate or purify these spheres of relation is also a problem within the larger project of modernity as well. This is a persistent logic in modernity that, in attempting to be a total representation, has, in the recent past, engendered intellectual perversions like Social Darwinism and Western exceptionalism, and, even more recently, the conceits of both radical objectivity (in the sciences) and radical subjectivity (in the humanities).

Modernism and Materialism; Poetics and Criticism

These late modernist long poems each engage in a diffractive materialist poetics that explores the legacy of both modernism and materialism. Moreover, I find the concepts of modernism and materialism are themselves influentially porous and mutually constitutive of one another: that materialism is a product of historical modernity as much

⁵⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 24-5.

as literary modernism is a response to the implications of both scientific and historical materialism.⁵⁵

My project is particularly interested how modern poetry interacts with both scientific and historical materialism; yet it also maintains a healthy attention to the uses and limitations of both. As physical/scientific materialism can often be conflated or misconstrued to stand in for unmediated objectivity, so too can strong theories of dialectical materialism reduce the world to very specific ideological positionalities and

⁵⁵ The inception of these overlapping literary, historical, and theoretical phenomena (modernism and materialism) began with the Enlightenment's embrace of science over religion and tradition, becoming even more radically advanced in the philosophies and sciences of the 19th Century and their further manifestations in the 20th. Indeed, one cannot separate the intellectual associations and historical evolutions of scientific and historical materialism with their historical effects upon late modernity and upon the art and letters produced during this turbulent time: the gradual shift from an enchanted cosmos to one determined by external material forces often impervious to the position and aspirations of the human subject. The macro and micro explorations of scientific materialism produced new wonders and a new sense of relation and hierarchies, but often at the expense of myths of human exceptionalism. Likewise, the rapid emergence and proliferations of modern technologies and industrial powers and their influence on new economic and cultural disparities brought forward ongoing dialectical materialist critiques of modernity in terms of its relation to human labor and capital: first made by Marx and Engels in the 19th century, later recast by Lukács, Adorno, and Althusser in the 20th, and specifically applied to literary modernism and late modernity by cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson and Naomi Klein into the 21st. Indeed, the different stages of capitalism are deeply embedded within the long modernity, evolving and shapeshifting alongside the advances of science, politics, technology—taking on global manifestations from the evolution of colonial technologies, to the structures of imperialism, to today's globalized corporate entities (with GDPs larger than many small nations). Perhaps one of the strongest historicist arguments for late modernism, and against the cultural and literary notion of post-modernism and postmodernity, is the fact that we have not yet reached a post-capitalist moment. If capitalism and modernity are indeed mutually conditioned, then the "post" of one will have to wait for "the post" of the other. See Nathan Brown, "Postmodernity, Not Yet: Toward a New Periodization" *Radical Philosophy* 2, vol. 01 (February 2018), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/postmodernity-not-yet>.

These scientific and economic recalibrations of materiality were mapped in the aesthetic and cultural output of the time, humanisms reconstructed according to the new conditions of materialist thought. The move in literature and art towards a firmly materialist rather than an enchanted cosmos was a gradual one, but this notion of the decentered materialist condition of humanity within the world became the accepted premise of modernist literature rather than the elaborate argument that shaped much of the works of naturalism and realism. While not all the writers of modernism were Nietzscheans, Marxists, Darwinians, or Freudians, their conceptual discourses (which themselves were responses to empiricism and scientific materialism) had permeated 20th century culture. As Michael Bell argues in his essay "The Metaphysics of Modernism": "the fact that the world itself does not privilege the human, which was a matter of shock to Thomas Hardy and other Victorian agnostics, was incorporated into a more self-standing humanist conception [in modernist literature]." Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13.

singular, symptomatic approaches. As Adorno reminds us in *Negative Dialectics*, our rigorous concepts of things and objects never fully encapsulate the things they attempt to represent—that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” and that “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.”⁵⁶ This Adornian dispensation—that to a certain extent the entirety of a phenomenon cannot be fully conceptualized—has actually become an important inflection point for recent projects exploring the productivities of *new materialist theory* within interdisciplinary projects in literary studies and the humanities.⁵⁷ While holding onto the egalitarian principles of historical materialism, it is also important to attempt to step away from its natural tendencies towards total synthesis and mastery—the transcendental tendency within any strong theory.⁵⁸ As Donna Haraway argues, “It will not do to approach science as a cultural or social construction, as if culture and society are transcendent categories, any more than nature or the object is.”⁵⁹ Indeed, one of the central engagements with new materialist theory is the renewed commitment to rejecting any transcendental signifier, seeking lateral connections, the resonance and dissonance between the boundaries of knowledge-making practices rather than re-inscribing new hierarchies or subsuming one materialism

⁵⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), 5.

⁵⁷ Both Bill Brown and Mark Noble invoke Adorno in the studies previously mentioned. And Jane Bennett devotes a major section to Adorno in her political science approach to new materialism. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

⁵⁸ Mark Noble argues in his book *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens*, that Adorno’s purpose in his long treatise on negative dialectics is to rescue historical materialism from “a degraded form of idealism,” that it is very easy for robust materialist thinking to “slip back into metaphysics”: “Adorno’s philosophical alternative requires relentlessly negating fixities and stabilities if it hopes to prevent materialist discourse from lapsing into banal idealism. [...] For Adorno, only such a commitment keeps alive any alternative to the totalizing tendency of dialectical thinking that promises an allusive outside to its own operation” (21,28). Noble highlights here Adorno’s crucial intervention in dialectical materialist thought. Noble, *American Poetic Materialism*, 21-28.

⁵⁹ Haraway, “The Promise of Monsters,” 358.

into the service of the other. Any compelling paradigm, no matter how dedicated it is to representing reality inevitably ends up tending towards establishing a hierarchy or reifying into a kind of hegemonic discourse that claims to stand outside of the material it purports to represent. Adorno actually admits as much in the introduction to his lecture notes on *Negative Dialectics*: "Great philosophy has always possessed the paranoid zeal of the wicked queen in Snow White to ensure that there should be none more beautiful than she. [...] It pursues the Other with all the wiles of reason, while the Other constantly retreats in the face of that pursuit."⁶⁰ In this somewhat disarming analogy, Adorno readily admits the dangers and futility of a robust and overbearing theory, highlighting the need to continually insert outside reality and non-identity into his dialectic of concepts.

My project is certainly not the first to engage with the peculiar relationship of modern poetry and materialist theory. In *Toy Medium: Materialism and the Modern Lyric*, Daniel Tiffany explores the relationship of the modernist lyric to the historical concept of material *substance*. Drawing from transatlantic canonical modernist poetry and the long history of Western materialism, Tiffany notices that the form of the short lyric closely resembles the models of scientific materialism (atomic models, planetary models, even Marx's formal critique of capitalist structure) in that they are both imaginative representations of invisible or unobservable substances. My project is more concerned with the materialist paradigms or "models" embedded in the late modernist long poem or *epic* rather than the canonical modernist *lyric*. However, my project is certainly inspired and indebted to Tiffany's innovative link between theories of

⁶⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. and trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 127.

materialism and modernist poetics: particularly his notion of poetry and theory as both serving as conceptual paradigms or models, as well as his productive injunction to not give “any sort of critical immunity to the principle of materiality.”⁶¹

My project also builds on the work of Bill Brown. In *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) and his more recent work, *Other Things* (2015), Brown draws on William Carlos Williams’s famous mantra “No ideas but in things” as a sustaining notion for Brown’s “thing-theory approach” to modern cultural criticism. His first book takes his critical explorations of the late realist/proto-modernist novel to the very limits of the historicist approach. As he argues, “my gambit is simply to sacrifice the clarity of thinking about things as objects of consumption, on the one hand, in order to see how, on the other, our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism.”⁶² Brown largely builds on these claims in his more recent book, though here he starts with a much more explicitly object-oriented approach (drawing extensively from Bruno Latour and Graham Harman); this time attempting to bring this new object theory (which arose in the years between the books’ publications) back into conversation with cultural criticism.⁶³ My project builds on Brown’s willingness, like Tiffany’s, to engage critically with historicist critique itself as well as

⁶¹ Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and the Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 16.

⁶² Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5-6.

⁶³ As he argues in *Other Things* drawing together Adorno and Williams: “Theodor Adorno’s much invoked assertion that “we are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize rather out of these thing” has been read as Critical Theory’s version of American modernism’s “no ideas but in things.” But the emphasis can be recast to assert the need to philosophize out of these concrete things not just to historicize them (say) or to curate them into a scene of cultural coherence.” Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 39.

his use of modernism as an inflection point for a discussion of the questions of materialism. However, my own theoretical approach in this dissertation deliberately avoids the recent lure of so-called object-oriented philosophy, which I will explain shortly.

Besides these important earlier appraisals of the relationship of modernism to materialism, there are two recent works that are particularly engaged with the relationship of American poetry to recent theories of materialism. Paul Jaussen's book, *Writing in Real Time: Emergent Poetics from Whitman to the Digital* (2017), directly takes up the modern American long poem, reading these extended works through the productive lens of systems theory (drawing especially from the work of N. Katherine Hayles and Niklas Luhmann). Jaussen argues that these longer poetic sequences (particularly those by Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, Nathaniel Mackey, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Juliana Spahr) exhibit some of the same emergent patterns as autopoietic organic entities understood within a systems theory approach: "[a]s complex adaptive systems, emergent literary texts use their internal processes—iteration, recursion, provisional closure, and feedback loops—to engage the external languages of the networks to which they are structurally coupled. [...] In Spahr's hands, emergent poetry allows us not simply to repeat or surf the flow of information but to creatively remember and inhabit the network of connections in which we are inevitably, hopelessly entangled."⁶⁴ While my own project does not engage extensively with systems theory, I believe there is a consonance in Jaussen's cybernetic concept of poetics to my own argument for diffractive poetics—

⁶⁴ Paul Jaussen, *Writing in Real Time: Emergent Poetics from Whitman to the Digital* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 178-9.

both of which are clearly indebted to the productive interdisciplinary thought of Donna Haraway (whose work he gestures towards in his conclusion).⁶⁵ And, at times, I do draw indirectly from his transdisciplinary concepts that link poetic and material emergence,⁶⁶ as well as his notion of *structural coupling* (“whereby the operations of one system are entangled within another”),⁶⁷ which I find to overlap productively with the my own diffractive arguments for inter-field entanglement and interference within the poems and the theory of my project.

Finally, Mark Noble’s book *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens* (2015) traces a particular strain of materialist thought within American poetry and philosophy (in particular the philosophical treatises of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and George Santayana and the poetry of Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens), bringing them into a larger historical conversation with what he describes as *aporetic materialism* (drawing from Lucretius, Spinoza, Adorno, as well as quantum theory of Heisenberg and Bohr). While his particular engagement is more explicitly philosophical than my own, my project also engages in a transnational and transhistorical

⁶⁵ As Jaussen argues: "I prefer Haraway's own double vision, which she uses to wrest the dream of a liberatory cyborg from the destructive forces that brought it into being. Acknowledging that the hyper-technical systems that generate the cyborg may also be read as a sign of the total dominance of Western power, Haraway argues that "the political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveal both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point." Similarly, emergent poetics does not itself generate a politics. Such texts, instead provided a powerful mechanism for political imaginations that wish to remain fluid, projective, and experimental." Jaussen, *Writing in Real Time*, 186. While my dissertation turns primarily on Haraway’s notion of diffraction rather than her early ironic myth of the cyborg, there is a common theme throughout her work that sustains this important critical practice of double vision, that attempts to use the insights of different fields together without fully synthesizing them into one or the other. She has articulated this in her most recent work *Staying with the Trouble*, which I discuss in detail in my final chapter on Sikelianos. See, Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁶⁶ Emergence as a concept is certainly not limited to systems theory. Some aspect of it often attends any philosophical, theoretical, immanent materialism that rejects the idea of metaphysical or transcendent design or structure.

⁶⁷ Jaussen, *Writing in Real Time*, 3.

exploration of materialism within a distinctly American poetic context. As I mentioned in the introductory section, his chapter relating Stevens's "Ordinary Evening in New Haven" to the quantum indeterminacy of Heisenberg and Bohr comes closest to my more specific investigations of Barad's diffractive methodology, which he references briefly (like Jaussen's reference to Haraway) though does not fully explore.⁶⁸

Diffraction as A Critical Lens

Using diffraction as both a reactive and productive concept, I want to cautiously put forward a method of critical analysis, what I term *diffractive materialism*, that draws from both scientific and historical materialism, finding moments of productive interference and overlap (both the resonance and dissonance) that occurs between their imposing structures. This move is necessarily interdisciplinary, leaning equally on the work of critics from both cultural studies and science and technology studies, as well as the arguments for diffractive materialism emergent within the poems themselves. This is not a deconstruction of the internal structures of either scientific materialism or historical materialism, nor does it claim a total knowledge of either paradigm of thinking. It is rather a creative, literary exploration of the resonance and dissonance that occurs where their boundaries overlap. Using the materials of these poems, as well as the theoretical arguments made by the poets themselves, this project investigates both the productive and destructive aspects of a diffractive approach to materialism and poetics. Diffractive materialism shares the same egalitarian commitments of historical materialism, but with

⁶⁸ Noble, *American Poetic Materialism*, 170. "The poem's ["Ordinary Evening"] figurations of material abstraction and instability lend themselves, in other word, to an understanding of a fluid boundary and an indeterminate commerce between object and subject--something akin to what Karen Barad calls a diffractive methodology."

the concern of opening the dialectical approach beyond the limits of pure economic or ideology critique. Within the field of the new modernist studies, Paul Saint Amour has noted the appearance of this new direction in critical materialism in his recent article “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism” (2018):

Yet the humanities have lately tended towards countervailing models of the subject as distributed, precarious, dependent on and even co-constituted with other beings, objects, environments. Modernist studies, for its part, has begun attending to objects that exceed the commodity form or exhibit agency and social standing; to subjects that partake, without being objectified, in the uncertain or unactualized being of objects; to subject object relations that offer alternatives to extractivism and anthropo-narcissism.⁶⁹

Here Saint Amour suggests these alternative approaches (posthumanist and ecological) that move beyond what he calls the “political formalism” of the past decades of criticism offer new avenues and channels to interrogate the legacy of modernity. He suggests that a shift in register and a change in scales might actually help to reinvigorate the critical challenges to the enduring power structures. Similarly, in her essay “Latour and Literary Studies,” Rita Felski argues for the continual importance of the political in her descriptive compositional approach. She argues that such an approach “does not exclude the political—it is deeply concerned with conflicts, asymmetries, struggles—but its antipathy to reductionism means that political discourse cannot serve as a metalanguage into which everything can be translated.”⁷⁰ While I concur with Felski’s sentiment here, I do not

⁶⁹ Paul K. Saint Amour, “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” 456. Or as he argues in a previous paragraph: “But if I were to frame a response from a weak theory perspective, I might begin by saying that capitalism, not least in its neoliberal morphology, is the ultimate strong theory without a theorist, the ultimate sovereign field without a sovereign. When we oppose it with an equally totalizing theory of anticapitalism, we often mass-produce the same findings and refusals we’ve been cranking out for decades, multiplying these across the landscape in a strange parody of the thing we wish to challenge. Yes, there are oppositions that bear repeating and disseminating. But when what you oppose has a death-grip on repetition and dissemination, you may need to shift registers: you may need not only different ways of speaking your opposition, but different scales and intensities at which to speak it,” 455.

⁷⁰ Rita Felski, “Latour and Literary Studies,” *PMLA* 130, no 3 (2015).

journey with her argument far enough to claim we are at a moment of post-critique within literary studies. But do I believe that for critique to remain effective, it should also be attended by new composition, new description, and new ways of storytelling.

In exploring my general concept of diffraction as a critical apparatus as well as a form of poetics, I wish to also distinguish the useful and progressively engaged areas of new materialism from those that are logocentric, solipsistic, and politically irresponsible. I believe there is a marked difference between the philosophical and political goals of what is commonly referred to as speculative realism and/or object-oriented ontology and those of my diffractive materialist approach which draws from the work of material feminisms and science and technology studies. The former (OOO) in its philosophical exploration of the radical agency of objects—in trying to accord all things (human and non-human) singularity and autonomy—too quickly occludes or diminishes issues of gender, race, and identity. In the name of a “democracy” of objects, it flattens the ontology of real, material cultural differences and inequalities. The further irony is that in the quest to grant agency for objects, its philosophical gymnastics also reinscribe the modernist desire for logocentric mastery. Ontology for the sake of ontology, the desire to name the thing-in-itself, is perhaps one of the most alluring tropes of false essentialism. In contrast, the diffractive strain of what I would call new materialism seeks to open up and extend the limits of cultural materialism beyond purely social and linguistic models rather than attempting to jettison or replace them. This can only be done through a continual exploration of relations and entanglement, not by any conceits towards singularity or false isolationism: not “in things themselves” but “out of things,” as Adorno reminds us. Or, as Muriel Rukeyser argues in her book *The Life of Poetry*,

quoting the French mathematician Henri Poincaré: “It is in relations alone that objectivity should be sought, it would be vain to seek it in beings considered isolated from one another.”⁷¹ Or as the Objectivist poet George Oppen declares: “Things explain each other/ not themselves.”⁷² Likewise, Glissant argues that a better understanding of material relations lies in “focusing on the texture of the weave rather than the nature of its components.”⁷³ I would posit that these assertions are consonant with my diffractive approach in this project: looking at the patterns of interference and relationship between fields of knowledge, focusing on the textures of their interactions rather than the ontologies of their individual structures. If there is any sense of universal ground or totality invoked in this project, it is one that finds its ontology in the dynamic relations between systems, concepts, and matter not in the originary constitution of the material itself.

Diffractive Reading, Diffractive Poetics

The central apparatus that this project uses to draw attention to the imbrication of the material and the cultural is the strategy of diffractive reading. And I argue that each long poem uses a *diffractive poetics* in its organizing structure that helps to network and conjoin its assemblage of materials. In invoking the term as well as the method of diffractive reading, I draw extensively from the concept of diffraction as theorized by Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. Inspired by the optical phenomenon of diffraction

⁷¹ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (New York: Current Book, Inc, 1949), 176.

⁷² George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2008) 134.

⁷³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

which shows the tracible interference patterns between different waves and particles, Haraway first introduced the concept as a worldly metaphor for the inseparability of nature and culture—what she refers to as *naturecultures*. Haraway invokes diffraction as a way of resisting the abstraction of conceptual frameworks that place one method of determination (scientific or social) in a hierarchy over the other. Barad takes up Haraway’s idea of diffraction by insisting that diffraction is more than just an analogous metaphor for reading or mapping natural-cultural interference—or any pattern of interference for that matter—but, in fact, a manifest example or metonymic expression of the continual intermediary states of the material-cultural-discursive. Both theorists insist that the physical and cultural worlds are entangled inseparably with one another. And they suggest that we would do well to pursue channels of critical thinking that reject the mirror imaging or oppositional construction of these fields, that define one in terms of the other (scientific realism v. social construction), and instead pursue diffractive methods that draw specific attention to the overlap and interference between these conceptually but not actually bifurcated realms. My project explores this idea of a diffraction not only as a tracible phenomenon, but as an apparatus of reading and critique. However, my specific deployment of the term is even more capacious than the science studies approach of Haraway and Barad. Throughout the dissertation, it also draws from Glissant’s notion of cultural diffraction and creolization, Latour’s notion of irreducible hybridity, Adorno’s negative dialectics, Gregory Bateson’s notion of information as “the news of difference” or the “difference that makes a difference,”⁷⁴ Sylvia Wynter’s semiotic critique of the

⁷⁴ Gregory Bateson, *A Sacred Unity: Further in the Ecology of Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 218.

racialization of the modern sciences and her mythopoetic project, inspired by Césaire, of composing a new “demonic ground,” as well as the diffractive patterns and arguments that I find emergent within the poems themselves.

While exploring the uses of a diffractive approach to both materialism and poetry, I also want to distinguish my project from Barad’s tendencies to over-valorize diffraction as an inherently affirmative or essentially ethical mode of reading and discovery. My own use of diffraction in this project also does not extend to the strong claim Barad makes concerning diffractive patterns as a universal substrate, what she describes as “the fundamental constituents that make up the world.”⁷⁵ This reminds me too much of the idealism of Hegel, “who wanted his philosophy to be all things.”⁷⁶ I also do not journey with Barad as far as to claim that diffraction and entanglement are inherently ethical concepts within themselves.⁷⁷ Diffraction is a useful and timely approach for pointing out moments of inter-field entanglement and interference. And I believe these new angles and vistas can create new exigences for ethical and political intervention. They are ways

⁷⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 72.

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 34.

⁷⁷ At the end of her interview in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Barad argues: “Ethics is not a concern we add to the matter, but rather *the very nature of what it means to matter.*” Karan Barad, “Interview With Karen Barad” *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, eds. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 70, emphasis added. These sorts of strong claims towards limitless affirmation in the feminist materialism of both Karen Barad and Rosie Braidotti pose the danger of re-essentializing a materialism that feminism, deconstruction, and cultural studies has de-essentialized in the service of the very egalitarian ethics she is claiming. As Stacey Moran argues in her recent essay “Quantum Decoherence”: “I worry that it is too easy for feminists to transform the positivity of entanglement as connection into a positivist notion of feminist philosophy that naturalizes socio-political entities and becomes reducible to the quantitative methods of physics, thereby rehearsing forms of reductionism that feminists have fought hard to overcome.” Stacey Moran, “Quantum Decoherence,” *Philosophy Today* 63, no. 4 (2019), 1060. Moran’s critique of Barad and Braidotti’s overly affirmative casting of entanglement and diffraction, is not a disagreement with their goals; instead, it suggests that the arguments for entanglement and diffraction need further exploration and external critique.

of telling a new story. But attempting to view multiple fields together is not virtuous in itself. In optics and physics, diffraction reveals both constructive and destructive interference patterns. The intersection of waves can create amplifications and well as cessations. Using diffraction as tool of critique or praxis, similar effects may result. In the spirit of Daniel Tiffany, this project does not grant the notion of *diffraction* critical immunity. While the ethical, political, and literary possibilities of diffraction and diffractive reading are apparent, the patterns of interference that diffraction might create and illuminate are still subject to the necessary interpretive process of external critique.

Regardless of the implications of diffraction to contemporary physics and philosophy, looking for patterns of interference between realms too long theorized as separate can be a productive method for discovering new ways of articulating our embedded, occluded relationships that work both within and outside the traditional contexts of humanism. This dissertation engages in this diffractive mode of thinking and of reading, applying it specifically to these late modern, materialist poems. In these long poems, which themselves wrestle with the overlaps and folds of the natural and cultural, I see a particularly fruitful opening by which to interrogate not only the legacy of literary modernisms, especially the late modernist long poem, but also the theoretical field of materialist studies. Instead of trading one strong theory or grand narrative for another, we need more practical, dynamic, and capacious approaches to materialism that seek to renew and enrich empiricism rather than endlessly critique and negate it. I hope this project provides a small contribution to this promising emergence within the realms of literary studies.

Chapter Descriptions

In each chapter, I explore the concept of diffraction and diffractive poetics from a philosophical, political, cultural, and ecological vantage point respectively—though by their very nature these fields will often intersect. My first chapter is most invested in how Williams’s poem *Paterson* exemplifies the Barad/Haraway scientific and philosophical deployment of the concept, contrasting their concept with Williams’s own poetics of creative dissonance and “interpenetration”—his intentional conflation of the discursive, cultural, and material aspects of the city of Paterson in order to create a general impression or expression of a particular midcentury reality. I also read *Paterson* as a modern epic in contrast to Georg Lukács’s theory that the modern novel has superannuated the epic form. For both the theorist and the poet, the desire to still “think in terms of totality” persists, even when the global energies of modernity cannot be finally integrated or synchronized, but for Williams this is an emergent premise rather than a disaffected conclusion. It is here I connect Williams’ modern epic (re)vision in *Paterson* to the notion of diffraction and inter-field entanglement in the new materialist theory of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. I argue that *Paterson* is a poem that exhibits this notion of diffractive interference, and, in fact, uses a diffractive poetics of dissonance and improvisation at the center of its generative process. Rather than lamenting the impossibility of a synthetic re-integration of the cultural and the natural, Williams expresses a world already entangled, too capacious to be finally integrated, yet capable of moments of tangible material disclosure.

While the chapter on Williams's *Paterson* serves well to help express the *philosophical* and *theoretical* aspects of diffraction, the next three chapters explore the political, cultural, and ecological implications of diffractive materialism and poetics. In the second chapter, I argue that Rukeyser's politically driven documentary poetics in "The Book of the Dead" anticipates the renewed attention to diffractive interference between the manifestations of political, cultural, and physical materiality. In her poetic retelling of the Gauley Bridge disaster, she attempts to give a full account of the conditions and possibilities of a material event without finally constraining or reducing it to a unidimensional narrative. I explore how Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" uses a documentary poetics that draws on cinematic effects of overlapping montage to create a provisional sense of totality as well as an exigence for intervention and immediate political engagement. Drawing from Marx's metaphor of the camera obscura and Adorno's notion of negative dialectics, I investigate Rukeyser's iconoclastic fusion of scientific and historical materialism, exploring how diffractive interference creates opacities that cannot simply be resolved by resorting to formal dialectics. However, I also argue that the poem, while demonstrating the need for immediate intervention on a local, political scale and presaging the need for revolution on a transnational scale, remains markedly diffident in defining and clarifying the isolated particulars of the materials of relation. This is specifically noticeable in her unusual deployment of the abstract themes of *power* and *mastery* and their conflicted relationship to the malefactors and the martyrs in this particular event. The mineral-material of silica permeates the entire poem, but at times it also serves to block and obfuscate (in the very literal example of the disease of silicosis) as much as it is meant to allow for clarity and transparency. Yet, I argue that the

opacity or blurred image that she creates out of the “groundglass” camera actually testifies to her idealistic faithfulness in trying to articulate the complex material conditions to which she draws political attention.

In the third chapter, my deployment of diffraction leans most strongly towards Glissant’s notion of cultural diffraction and creolization. The chapter explores how Melvin B. Tolson’s critically neglected masterpiece, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, participates actively and intentionally in a mid-century Afro-modernism that attempts to retool the cosmopolitan foreclosures of high modernism. In its difficult, diffractive cultural allusions, Tolson looks to a deeper past in order to envision a future mythology, science, and humanism—what he terms in his notes “role of the new ‘demiurge’ in Negro life and Africa,”⁷⁸ a counter-mythos that opens up ideological foreclosures within the realm of literary modernism and attempts to articulate a new structure of transnational Afro-centric identity and culture. Drawing from both the poem and my archival research of Melvin Tolson’s letters, outlines, and notes, I argue that Tolson’s revision of modernist cultural poetics exposes the inherent racialization and underlying descriptive statements embedded in the modern regimes of politics, science, and the cultural arts. Building on Sylvia Wynter’s decolonial critique of the racialization of Western science, this chapter reiterates that while nature and culture are mutually conditioned by one another, that the composition of new paradigms must also be attended by the rigorous critique of the older paradigms. However, I also address how some of Tolson’s over syncretism and messy

⁷⁸ Melvin B. Tolson, “Notes for Harlem Gallery” (circa. 1960-5), Container 7, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

cultural synthesis also point to some potential pitfalls of an overly diffractive method, highlighting the limits of valorizing diffraction as uncritical affirmation and positivism.

In the last chapter, I argue that Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* (2004) takes up the materialist questions raised by these late modernist long poems; and that the poem, in its contemporaneity, responds to the questions of new materialism and the residual problems of cultural modernity and literary modernism in a way that those earlier poems can only anticipate or gesture towards. While my intervention throughout the project is materialist rather than purely ecological, this final chapter explores the implications of diffractive materialist poetics as it relates to contemporary ecological thought. While *The California Poem* is not explicitly modernist, it deliberately evokes and plays with the modernist long poem's transnational and transhistorical intertextuality. Like both the traditional and modernist epics, it also contains a good measure of cultural and ecological didacticism. This is most explicit in her use of the catalogue, but also more subtly embedded in her diffractive poetics throughout. While she does not invoke Barad or Haraway's concept of diffractive mapping directly, her constant refrain of interacting symbiont relationships, drawn from the work of the feminist biologist Lynn Margulis, serves as a consonant attempt to explore the productive interference between different entities within overlapping ecological communities. Finally, I argue that Sikelianos's ecological materialism is based on a commitment to language as a larger material process shared by both human and non-human organisms—a way in which living things both encode their own preservation and regeneration, as well as articulate and interact with one another. For Sikelianos the difference between human and non-human language process and genetic structural formation is one of degree rather than

kind; and at times she often takes inspiration from the emergent networking and self-adapting processes of non-human animals, in particular the radial symmetry of the echinoderm or starfish, which is a recurring theme throughout the long poem.

In the coda, I reflect on the uses of diffraction as a form of poetic writing, a form of critical reading, and as a productive way to illuminate the overlapping legacies of modernism and materialism. My diffractive approach is built on a commitment to both critique and composition. It is a process-based method that attempts to register some of the salient patterns of interference between modernist and late modernist poetics, as well as between the traditions of materialism in the sciences and the humanities.

Chapter 1

“The Dissonance of Discovery:”

Diffraction Poetics in Williams Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*

Introduction

William Carlos Williams’s late modernist long poem *Paterson* is a local, material reaction to the cosmopolitan modernist long poem. As he declares in the poem’s invocation, it is a “reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands” in favor of “a local pride” a “gathering up” of one very particular place and culture.⁷⁹ He describes the impetus of his project in his autobiography, “the first idea centering around the poem, *Paterson*, came alive early: to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world around me. [...] [I]t would be as itself, locally, and so like every other place in the world. For it is in that, that it be particular to its own idiom, that it lives.”⁸⁰ Here Williams appeals to the local, the idiomatic, and the particular as a means to ground his poem in the material-cultural soil of Paterson, New Jersey.⁸¹ As he opens “Book I”:

To make a start
 Out of particulars
 And make them general, rolling
 Up the sum, by defective means— (*P* 3)

The particulars or materials he uses are often gathered from the local historical documents, letters to and from other poets, and his own poetic observations and

⁷⁹ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992), 2. Hereafter cited in the text as *P*.

⁸⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 391 and 392.

⁸¹ In “Book Three” Williams even includes a chart where he describes the mineral composition the different layers of substrata at the artesian well at the Passaic Rolling Mill. Williams, *Paterson*, 139.

improvisations; but his complex poetics or “defective means” in the poem are not solely constrained to the city of Paterson or to a poetry “in the American grain,” as much as he often declares. Here and throughout his career, Williams maintains a materialist commitment to using poetry as an extension of a local or observable reality, “[n]ot to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.”⁸² This wariness of “vague categories” or abstraction, in favor of concrete, worldly particulars is certainly a rejection of an erstwhile Romanticism, but it is also a rejection of the polyglot erudition and cultural amalgamations of Pound and Eliot. Yet the poem in its locality is markedly translocal, intermelding its local materials and idioms with transnational poetic forms and larger late modernist questions of poetics, particularly the necessity of the long poem or cultural epic. *Paterson* is a local response to a larger transnational question of what Jahan Ramazani calls “the local poem in a global age.” Williams’s materialist focus in his poetics also resonates philosophically with the contemporary diffractive materialist theory of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, particularly their concern with articulating the porous boundaries between the natural, the cultural, and discursive.

Like Williams but writing decades later, Donna Haraway also professes what she calls a distinct “allergy to abstraction,” favoring interpretive tools and conceptual frameworks that emerge out of concrete “worldly examples.”⁸³ One enduring theoretical apparatus she has developed out of these worldly examples comes from her scientific metaphor of *diffraction*, which she proposes as a useful counter to the reflection and

⁸² Williams, *Autobiography*, 391.

⁸³ Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thriza Nicholas Goodeve* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 106-8.

mirroring of traditional critique. But it is Karen Barad who theorizes, beyond Haraway's metaphorical association, that diffraction is not merely a useful analogy for critical interdisciplinary analysis, but that diffraction-as-analysis is a metonymic extension of material entanglements between waves, particles, cultures, and discursive practices.⁸⁴ As I have stated in my introduction, I don't journey as far as Barad to suggest that diffraction serves as a universal substrate for material interaction;⁸⁵ however, I do want to preserve a bit of Barad's metonymy beyond Haraway's metaphor, particularly since it bears a particular closeness to Williams's own non-abstract, material poetics. Her extension of Haraway's scientific metaphor envisions a broader template for tracing the underexamined interaction between physical, cultural, and discursive materiality.

Williams's commitment to the materiality of language in *Paterson*, particularly his claim that "[t]he province of the poem is the world" (*P* 100) and "this rhetoric/ is real!" (*P* 145), bears a particular closeness to Barad's assertion that "*Theorizing, like experimenting, is a material practice.*"⁸⁶ While not seeking to over-speculate Williams's engagement with diffraction in a new materialist sense, I do wish to highlight Williams's sustained focus on dissonance and improvisation as a means to discover the entanglement or, as Williams describes, the "interpenetration, both ways" (*P* 4) of material substance and culture.

Rather than seeking a final epic unity, Williams expresses a world already entangled, too capacious to be finally integrated, yet capable of moments of tangible material disclosure.

⁸⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 71-91.

⁸⁵ Barad refers to diffraction patterns at one point as "the fundamental constituents that make up the world." Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 72.

⁸⁶ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 55 (italics in original).

Brief Chapter Layout

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the historical context and the material contents of the sprawling poem, discussing Williams's commitment to the locality of place as an extension of his long abiding commitment to a material poetics. Williams casts himself as a distinctly regionalist poet writing only of a locally demarcated universality. But, *Paterson*, from its nascent beginnings in the 20s to its final book published in 1958, draws on transnational questions of concerning late modernism and poetic materialism, particularly the long poem as an expression of material culture.

The second part of the chapter discusses the status of *Paterson* as a late modernist response to the modern epic, reading the poem against Georg Lukács's theory—or rather dismissal—of the modern epic form. While writing from quite different positionalities within transnational modernism, I find that their thought productively converges on the notion that the epic serves as a literary integration of the natural and social world. Lukács's notion of the epic as both transcendental and empirical overlaps with Williams's materialism of concepts and ideas emanating out of things. This mythopoetic desire for the total, enfolded harmony of nature and culture persists, even if the modern expressions of the natural and the social will not ultimately cohere. But I argue that this is the premise of *Paterson* rather than its conclusion. And in fact, Williams finds this failure and dissonance to be a productive, instrumental part of the poetic process in *Paterson*. Williams's overlap of the physical, cultural, and discursive material is instead articulated in provisional, diffractive moments of productive interference rather than falsely enfolded into a total synthetic integration.

Building on these issues of material substance and unfinished totality, in the last two sections I read *Paterson* as an example of a diffractive poetics, using Barad's particular diffractive method to examine Williams's poetic materialism. Inversely, I also use the poem to explain and, at times, challenge diffraction as a critical concept. I find that *Paterson*'s repeated attempts at articulating aleatory and improvisational connections between the physical, cultural, and discursive engage in their own kind of diffractive method. I focus on his own exemplar of the "dissonance of discovery," inspired by Marie Curie's haphazard discovery of radium. I end the chapter with an extended reading of the Passaic Falls scene at the end "Book III," where he draws from the turbulent waters of the falls to illustrate the metonymic and metaphorical power and instability of his diffractive poetics. Finally, I end with a brief discussion of the uses and limits of Barad's diffractive materialism, before moving into the next chapters, which explore diffraction through more specifically political, cultural, and ecological lenses.

The Local Material and the Transnational Impulse

Paterson is Williams's largest demonstration of a lifelong concern with the material, consequential relationship of poetry to the physical world. The construction of the five books of *Paterson* was an ongoing process, spanning over four decades (from 1927-61), to render an organic, empirical description of a particular locale. In it he draws from the particulars of the town of Paterson often directly including non-poetic subject matter such as archival material and personal correspondence. Perhaps most importantly, the poem is not meant to be a merely reflective representation but an extension, an elaboration, and a direct expression of reality. This is a very unnuanced theme of

Williams that he advocates throughout his career—though *Paterson* is certainly his most extended treatise. As Williams declares in his early prose-poem, *Spring and All* (1923), “the word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but as a part, cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized,”⁸⁷ or even more mythically, “the work of the imagination is not ‘like’ anything, but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth—at least one small part of them.”⁸⁸ For Williams, poetry functions as an emergent metonym rather than a transcendent metaphor for reality. As Sarah Nolan argues, Williams’s poetics is meant “to entwine the real and the poetic realm. [...] [*Paterson*’s] material significance emerges through words that stand in as physical objects, thus demonstrating the interconnections between the real and the imagined.”⁸⁹ And his material poetics has continued to prove influential to both language and eco-poetry. Even recent poets such as Eleni Sikelianos, who I discuss in the final chapter, have reiterated this entangled state of the textual with the corporeal—often directly invoking Williams’s early call.⁹⁰ This chapter is more explicitly concerned with the philosophical and conceptual applications of the concept of diffraction—though nature

⁸⁷ William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 102

⁸⁸ Williams, *Imaginations*, 121.

⁸⁹ Sarah Nolan, “‘The Poem is the World’: Re-Thinking Environmental Crisis Through William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*,” *Undercurrents* 18 (2014), 38.

⁹⁰ As Sikelianos suggests in an essay discussing her own materialist poetics, “I write to find that place where language wakes us up, with a smack or gently, rather than putting us to sleep. That means rummaging around in the gap between language and body/consciousness to make the real *real*. In that sense, it is a devotional act whose mission is to attend to the particulars of self and other (and others are also animals, rocks, trees, and dirt), to particularize the world (in contrast to the generalizing forces of power).” Her last sentence in particular directly invokes the opening of *Paterson*: “To make a start,/ out of particulars/ and make them general.” Eleni Sikelianos, “Refuse/Refuge: Be Longing” Poetry Foundation, first published February 12, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2018/02/refuse-refuge-be-longing>.

and ecology are certainly an overlapping concern of diffractive materialism, particularly as it arises in Williams's poetics.

The first manifestation of *Paterson* appeared earlier in Williams's career when he published the 85-line poem "Paterson" in *The Dial* magazine 1927.⁹¹ Some of Williams's lines from his original poem "Paterson" make their way untouched into the first book of *Paterson* in 1946. For example, Williams pulls through his famous empirical mantra "NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS" as well as the vision of Mr. Paterson on the omnibus.⁹² While Williams's literary output is prolific between these two decades, his poetics remains firmly committed to the materiality of both objects and their concepts:

Say it! No ideas but in things. Mr.
Paterson has gone away
to rest and write. Inside the bus one sees
his thoughts sitting and standing. His
thoughts alight and scatter—

Who are these people (how complex
the[~~this~~] mathematic) among whom I see myself
in the regularly ordered plateglass of
his thoughts, glimmering before shoes and bicycles[~~—~~]?
They walk incommunicado, the
equation is beyond solution, yet
its sense is clear—that they may live
his thought is listed in the Telephone
Directory—⁹³

⁹¹ William Carlos Williams, "Paterson," *The Dial: A Semi-monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion, and Information*, (Feb. 1927): n. p..

⁹² This image on the bus is focalized into the singular occupation of the titular character, played by Adam Driver, in the recent film adaptation of *Paterson* adapted by Jim Jarmusch. While the film remains faithful to the much of spirit of Williams's complex text, by necessity it dwells on the human-centric aspects of the poem more than it does its more-than-human materials. *Paterson*, directed by Jim Jarmusch, (2015; Paterson, New Jersey: Amazon Studios, 2016), Online Streaming.

⁹³ The only differences between the two versions of the text are indicated by the brackets: "this mathematic" becoming "the mathematic" and the removal of a (perhaps) extraneous em dash between "bicycles" and the question mark, both of which I have indicated by brackets. Williams, *Paterson*, 11-12 [from "Book I," 1946], and Williams, "Paterson," *The Dial: A Semi-monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion and Information* (Feb. 1927), n.p..

These early lines from “Paterson” appear largely unaltered in the twenty years from their original appearance in the 1927 issue of *The Dial*. Perhaps Williams preserves them because, while his poetry has evolved, his desire to draw together a poem containing the complex mathematic, an equation admittedly “beyond solution,” remains constant. This selection from both “Paterson” and *Paterson* also underscores the poem’s early debt to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, another modern epic about another unremarkable city—at least by the cosmopolitan standards of the modern world epic. In fact, the early serialized episodes of *Ulysses* were published alongside some of William’s own early prose-poetry (which become the standalone *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*) in *The Little Review Journal* between 1919-20. William’s biographer, Paul Mariani notes the “profound effect” of Joyce’s own improvisational style and provincial local on Williams’s own poetic process and regional attentions.⁹⁴ As Williams recalls in a memoir from 1958: “I may have been influenced by James Joyce who had made Dublin the hero of his book. I had been reading *Ulysses*. But I forgot about Joyce and fell in love with my city.”⁹⁵ As in *Paterson*, the speaker or storytelling perspective in *Ulysses* often shifts very suddenly. Franco Moretti, describes Joyce’s Leopold Bloom as a figure that “notices everything but focuses on nothing” in particular.⁹⁶ While (Mr./Dr./the slumbering giant) Paterson is not always prone to absentmindedness, his thoughts here do “alight and scatter,” and his often tangential ruminations do not always find a clearly articulatable coherence, “the equation

⁹⁴ Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982), 149.

⁹⁵ William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 5, qtd. in Michael André Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 202.

⁹⁶ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Márquez* (New York: Verso, 1996), 137.

is beyond solution.” Williams/Paterson is always “rolling up the sum/ by defective means.” Here these thoughts begin follow the parataxis of the lines and names of a telephone book. This is, perhaps, Williams’s own modernized American version of the exhaustive cataloging of the muster of Hellenic ships or of the designations on the shield of Achilles.⁹⁷

In *Paterson*, the epic mode remains conceptual and deliberately tenuous, and the traditional form is almost completely abandoned. There are, however, other more extensive uses of the catalogue in the late modernist version of the poem. For example, “Book II” “opens with “Sunday in the Park,” with Paterson, as flaneur, voyeuristically observing and speculating on a number of miniature scenes involving different people, animals, and areas of the large park, “his voice, one among many (unheard)/ moving under all” (*P* 55) In “Book Three,” in a less anthropocentric moment, Williams even includes a chart entitled “SUBSTRATUM” where he lists the mineral composition of the different layers of ground (red sandstone, red shale, sandy shale, fine quicksand, selenite, etc.) at the artesian well at the Passaic Rolling Mill (*P* 139). This comes from a found document, like many other included in *Paterson*—though in this case, this geological catalogue of Paterson’s soil is certainly playing with Williams’s enduring material preoccupations within the poem.⁹⁸

Returning to this early version of “Paterson,” the poem won him The Dial Award in 1927, and he spent much of his career wishing to take it up again and expand on it. As

⁹⁷ Paul K. Saint-Amour notes this modernist encyclopedic trope in *Ulysses* in his book *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, and Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015). See in particular, “Chapter 5: The Shield of Ulysses,” 222-62.

⁹⁸ Within this project, Eleni Sikelianos makes perhaps the most extensive use of the trope of the epic catalogue. But this is clearly something that Williams engages with as well in *Paterson*.

he mentions in a letter to Louis Zukofsky in 1929: “‘Paterson’ is as thoroughly incomplete a poem as I have ever printed. Makes me itch with disgust. Yet the poem itself (which I have never been able to get at to finish) is one of my most favored children.”⁹⁹ But almost twenty years later, he did attempt to finish it as it grew into the multi-volume work that he resumed in the 1940s and continued expanding upon until his death in 1963.¹⁰⁰ In an interview with John C. Thirlwall in 1961, after the completion of the fifth and final published book of the cycle, Williams describes some of the decisions he made concerning the poem’s eclectic assemblage of material content, its provisional structure, and also its very particular American location:

I always wanted to write a poem celebrating the local material [...] but to use only the material that concerned the locale that I occupied, that I do occupy still, to have no connection with the European world, but to be purely American, to celebrate it as American. [...] And I searched around for what would be the center of the thing. Because a city is a typical thing of the modern world, it’s a place where men are most operative. [...] [And later in the interview] All poems have been built on physical changes whatever they may be. If it’s an *Iliad*, it’s the violence of war. If it’s an *Odyssey*, it’s the voyage, the compendium of all that’s been about voyages and places seen. There must be a physical feature; there can’t be a philosophical poem without physical features to give them character and to bring them to a head.¹⁰¹

Notice his recurrent appeal to the material focus of the poem: “the local material,” “there must be a physical feature.” These are rearticulations of his materialist mantra: “no ideas but in things” (*P* 9)—his long-held, empirical position that there should be no attempt at philosophy or generalities without physical substantiation. Here he also accentuates the

⁹⁹ *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams & Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 52.

¹⁰⁰ The revised edition of *Paterson* edited by Christopher MacGowan contains a facsimile of a typewritten draft to an unpublished “Book VI” of *Paterson* which dates to around 1961. Williams, *Paterson*, 237-40.

¹⁰¹ John C. Thirlwall. “William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*: The Search for the Redeeming Language—A Personal Epic in Five Parts,” *New Directions Journal* 17 (1961): 307, 309.

poem's relationship to a particularly idiomatic American modernity which is a common refrain with Williams. However, looking closely at the opening goals that Williams sets forth for *Paterson* in the interview: to be a local poem, "purely American," to have "no connection with the European world," as the interview moves on, he begins listing some of the originary epics of European culture. His boast of an authentic regionalist focus is very clearly caught up in larger literary and global forces. As Jahan Ramazani notes in his book, *A Transnational Poetics*, even self-described regionalist poets like Williams cannot avoid the increasingly globalized connectedness brought by the rapid proliferations of modern technology and national and global migrations: "the transnational flows and circuits of global experience and imaginaries."¹⁰² The materials Williams assembles might be increasingly gathered from the local archives; but his poetics, his philosophies, and his politics are clearly influenced by enduring transnational conversations about both poetry and material expressions of modernity.

Throughout his career, Williams, not so consistently, balances a self-constructed image of a fiercely regionalist American poet with an enduring fascination with the international avant-garde. Williams was well aware of the radical improvisations in modernist art and often sought to borrow their unusual perspectivism and incorporate it into his own poetry. His early shock and fascination with the visual art of the Armory show in 1913 found their way into his early imagist(e) poems.¹⁰³ While the locale of his poems is often set in the Northeast, the shape and the textures of the poems are certainly influenced by and reactant to the transatlantic and transnational conversation within

¹⁰² Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2009), 26.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Autobiography*, 134-42.

modernist and late modernist poetry and art. John Beck also notes that, within a transnational modernist context, he was (and often still is) “portrayed, as Pound never let him forget, as the provincial, unsophisticated country doctor with artistic ambitions his circumstances could never fulfill.”¹⁰⁴ Yet Williams often manicures and accentuates this ethos as a form of artistic authenticity. In fact, his poetry repeatedly feeds off this sense of marginalization. For example, at the end of “Book III” of *Paterson*, he includes a quote by a contemporaneous critic that “American poetry is a very easy subject to discuss for the/ simple reason that it does not exist” (P 140). But these sorts of dismissive pronouncements are certainly meant with a great deal of irony; and this inferiority complex is in part what gives his self-deprecating regionalist poetics so much energy, channeled into the development of a modernist aesthetic “in the American grain.” Yet his feigned modesty and self-dismissiveness also reveal an underlying desire to be internationally relevant, particularly in the modern era that rapidly disseminated the newest modernist literature (like *The Little Review*) across the oceans. His strategy in responding to these sorts of dismissals from cosmopolitan critics was to double-down on the *Americanness* of his persona and literary product. Yet *Paterson* from its inception already transgresses these local demarcations. Even as it evolves more fulsomely into the regional response to the transnational modern epic, it still manages to “indigenize from elsewhere” as Susan Stanford Friedman suggests about modernist texts.¹⁰⁵ It was, after all, also inspired by an Irish expatriate in continental Europe. In a poem as ambitious and

¹⁰⁴ John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, and American Cultural Politics* (Albany: State University of New York P, 2001) 5.

¹⁰⁵ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations of Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 225.

comprehensive in scope as *Paterson*, its transnational impulses lie not far below its regionalist aspirations.

By the time Williams introduces the first book of the *Paterson* cycle in 1946, his poetic arrangements and assembling of materials also draw heavily from the documentary poetics of Muriel Rukeyser, specifically her long poem from *U.S. 1*, “The Book of the Dead” published in 1936 (as I will explore in the second chapter). Like Rukeyser, he blends his own poetic voice with historical documents, middle-school textbooks, city planning manuals, advertisements, letters to and from other poets, and sermons from Billy Sunday. In “Book IV,” he also directly hails Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (which I discuss in the third chapter), claiming it as a poem working in a similar vein to *Paterson*. Even within an American context, the poetic concerns of *Paterson* certainly “alight and scatter” well beyond the industrial regions of New Jersey.

In later chapters, I return to this notion of the translocal more extensively: first in Rukeyser’s notion of the localized event that illustrates a global crisis in “The Book of the Dead,” Tolson’s explicitly translocal poetics composing a poem about a country he had never been too, and finally, Eleni Sikelianos’s *The California Poem* whose “topophilia” is overwhelmed by international signals and patterns. While not as topographically adventurous as the other poems in this project, *Paterson* is certainly the most disjunctive and structurally tenuous; but rather than lamenting its incoherence and dissonance, he consciously weaves these structural problems into the central, generative process of the poem.

Epic Anxieties: Totality and Failure in *Paterson*

The epic ambition of *Paterson* is palpable from the first lines of the poem. As Williams declares in the opening invocation, the long poem is a “*local pride; spring, summer, fall, and the sea; a confession; a basket; a column, a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands; a gathering up; a celebration.*”¹⁰⁶ But Williams almost immediately subtends this grandiose vision with the futility and immanent failure of the attempt: “*daring; a fall,*” “*hard put to it,*” “*rolling/ up the sum by defective means,*” “[i]n ignorance/ a certain knowledge and knowledge/ undispersed, its own undoing.”¹⁰⁷ This rolling up, this aggregation into a local yet comprehensive vision, becomes almost immediately an errant quest, grandiose in its own unravelling.

Williams’s opening admission of his long poem’s epic failure is anticipated by one of literary modernism’s eminent critics and discontents. Georg Lukács declares in his central argument to his *Theory of the Novel* (1914) that “the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”¹⁰⁸ Here he argues the epic poem as a literary form is no longer possible with the complexity and fragmentation produced by the modern condition, and the novel is now the only expansive genre that can draw attention to this sense of alienation rather than affecting a false cultural coherence.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Paterson*, 2 (italics in original).

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Paterson*, 2 (italics in original), 3, 4.

¹⁰⁸ George Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971, 56.

¹⁰⁹ Lukács makes this pronouncement in 1913-1914, the beginning of what we now consider to be the temporal boundaries of the literary modern period, before the political, transnational, and cultural

Reading Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* and Williams's *Paterson* alongside one another, I want to briefly explore their mutual treatments of the epic as a concept within modernism and late modernism respectively. Lukács's treatise arises at the birth of literary modernism (1914), Williams's *Paterson* (1946-1958), late in modernism's own self-awareness as such. *Paterson* both confirms and resists the Lukács's assertion that thinking in terms of totality in art is no longer tenable or productive. And both texts also resonate in their insistence that the epic form arises out of a materialism that is not purely cultural, physical, or poetic, but an interaction of all three: that in the epic, physical immanence and cultural transcendence are fully enmeshed. But where their visions differ is that Lukács, in his historical moment just preceding the great wars and revolutions, evokes a frustrated 19th century idealism; whereas Williams, at the end of the second world war, recognizes a need to articulate a peripheral, contrapuntal sense of totality without necessarily giving this totality a final sense of synthesis. Williams's determination highlights not only a focus on creative process rather than fixed, final product, but also a willingness to fail, to intentionally use dissonance, failure, and contradiction as an integral if not essential part of his structural formula. For Lukács, modernism heralds the foreclosure of a genre; for Williams, the developments of modernity demand its reopening.

revolutions that attended the first half of the 20th century, and before many of what are considered the major works of modernist literature had been written. Indeed, Lukács's very pessimistic pronouncement is perhaps more representative of the *fin de siècle* hangover from the late 19th century: a literary and political reaction to the scientific materialist grand narratives of Darwin, Marx, and Freud, and a failure to reconcile or sublimate these, then, new materialisms with the recent impoverishment of late Romantic and more traditional aesthetic structural categories. As he admits in his 1962 preface, "the author [Lukács] clearly was not looking for a new literary form but quite explicitly for a 'new world.' We have every right to smile at such primitive utopianism, but it expresses nonetheless an intellectual tendency which was part of the reality at that time." Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*, 20.

In “Book II” of *Paterson*, speaking with the same mythic yearning as Lukács, Williams asserts his own theory for the modern cultural epic and the need for its language and form to radically adjust to the new realities particular to its historical present:

Without invention nothing is well spaced,
 unless the mind change, unless
 the stars are new measured, according
 to their relative positions, the
 line will not change, the necessity
 will not matriculate: unless there is
 a new mind, there cannot be a new
 line, the old will go on
 repeating itself with the same recurring
 deadliness: [...]
 without invention the line
 will never again take on its ancient
 divisions when the word, a supple word,
 lived within it, crumbled now to chalk. (*P* 50)

Perhaps a late modernist elaboration in 1948 on Ezra Pound’s early vanguard poetic mantra to “Make it New,” here Williams highlights the modernizing term “invention,” with its mythopoetic as well as technological connotations to describe the novelty and timeliness of his aesthetic urges—the sense of the urban and the natural combined but recalibrated under a new modern vision. Yet the astronomical/astrological imagery in this section also harkens back to the epic soothsaying and prophesy of the “newly measured stars” and a refashioning of “ancient divisions.” In a late modernist context, the stars’ “relative positions” perhaps suggest the new theorems of Einstein’s theory of relativity and even Bohr’s and Heisenberg’s new theories of quantum indeterminacy as much as they might refer back to mythic, astral divination. In a later section, Williams juxtaposes an ancient literary image with the very modern image of a particle-separating machine: “against the long sea, the long, long/sea, swept by winds, the ‘wine-dark sea’ ./ A

cyclotron sifting .” (P 115). The sweeping winds of Homer’s Aegean become the revolutions of a particle-sifting machine—an example of a late modern, post-nuclear aesthetics that incorporates the new forms of quantum mechanics, man-made but at the same time very literally elemental. For Williams, the language needs to change, even the aesthetic categories of the literary form must adapt to the real changes (cultural, physical, historical, technological) that were happening at a frenetic pace in the early and mid-20th century. The *word* must adapt, not to re-signify or represent, but to be a supple material expression of the new *world*.

These meta-textual lines intersect with Lukács’s own notions of the epic’s original function as a complete representation of the unity and integration of the natural and the social, the empirical (immanent) and the cultural (transcendent). Lukács argues throughout his treatise that this unity has been irrevocably bifurcated by what he describes as the “barbarity of capitalism” and the rise of the “lifeless and life-denying social and economic categories.”¹¹⁰ Lukács ends his own treatise with as much frustrated despondence as he opens it, though his rhetoric remains full of utopian desire, practically bursting with frustrated idealism, envisioning a totalized reality that, he suggests, could only be the stuff of epic history or rather, epic myth:

The world is the sphere of pure soul-reality in which man exists as man, neither as a social being nor as an isolated, unique, pure, and therefore abstract interiority. If ever this world should come into being as something natural and simply experienced, as the only true reality, a new complete totality could be built out of all its substances and relationships. It would be a world in which our divided reality would be a mere backdrop, a world which would have outstripped our dual world of social reality by as much as we have outstripped the world of nature. But art can never be the agent of such a transformation: the great epic is the form bound to the historical moment, and any attempt to depict the utopian as existent

¹¹⁰ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 20.

can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality. The novel is the form of the epoch of absolute sinfulness [...] and it must remain the dominant form so long as it is ruled by the same stars.¹¹¹

Like Williams in the section of *Paterson* quoted above, Lukács invokes the soothsaying role of the stars in his argument for the impropriety of the epic form to represent the conditions of modernity. The ruling stars of the modern epoch are auguring an era of alienation from the natural. The new social worlds of capitalism and transnational conflict are further divorcing culture from an integration with the physical and natural material represented in the historical epic. And, for Lukács, the realist novels of the 19th century and early 20th century are the new form that has arisen, not to stand in for the epic poem's lost unity, but rather to draw attention to the *dis-aster* (etymologically speaking the *bad* or *ill star*) that hangs over an era marked by the alienation of the natural from the social. While Lukács argues here that any attempt at the modern articulation of the epic would only succeed in destroying the form, this literary destruction was largely a prerequisite of the methodology at work in many of the early 20th century modern epics, and, certainly, within *Paterson*. As C.D. Blanton has noted in his study of the Anglo-American late modernist epic, "what Lukács's grudging accession to the novel as the prose of life failed to imagine was the possibility of a disjointed epic, a disarticulated epic, capable of mediating a totality conceptually."¹¹²

As much as *Paterson* and *Theory of the Novel* might be presenting oppositional views on the timeliness of the epic form, their ideas overlap in their similar preoccupations with the mutual entanglement of the natural and the social. Consider

¹¹¹ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 152.

¹¹² C.D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 6.

Lukács's insistence in material substantiation as the ultimate principle of the epic: “[f]or the epic, the world at any given moment is the ultimate principle; it is empirical at its deepest, most decisive, all determining transcendental base. [...] [Its totality] is not born out of the form itself, but is empirical and metaphysical, combining transcendence and immanence inseparably within itself.”¹¹³ Here Lukács asserts that the epic is a poem of material reality and this material combines the physical and empirical (the immanent) with the social, cultural, and abstract (transcendent).¹¹⁴ While Williams's anti-Romantic impulses might make him shy away from abstract terms like metaphysics and transcendence, he would certainly concede that any sense of the abstract or philosophical must have its ultimate originations in the physical world. “No ideas but in things,” after all; or, as he argues in the aforementioned interview, “there can't be a philosophical poem without physical features to give them character and to bring them to a head.”¹¹⁵

While speaking at different moments within modernity and from different global positions, their thoughts on the epic converge on the notion that its form must be derived directly from the material ecology of the world it is seeking to articulate and express. And they share a utopic or, for Williams, a post-utopic desire for a total, enfolded expression of nature and culture even if the present systems of nature and culture will not cohere. In an epic totalization, there should be no distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, and that this is precisely the problem that Lukács locates. Perhaps what separates their relationship to totality is that Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, in its historical

¹¹³ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 46 and 49.

¹¹⁴ This is pure Hegel here: that the Concept can only become the fully integrated or synthesized Idea (or Ideal) through material substantiation.

¹¹⁵ Thirlwall, “William Carlos Williams' ‘Paterson,’” 309

moment just preceding the great wars and revolutions, evokes a frustrated Hegelian idealism, whereas Williams's *Paterson*, written just after the second world war, contains a more provisional, emergent poetics that highlights, not only a focus on creative process rather than a fixed, final product, but also a willingness to fail—to, in fact, intentionally employ failure, dissonance, and contradiction as an integral, if not essential, part of its improvisational poetics. “The equation is beyond solution” (*P* 10) but one that nevertheless entails “rolling/up the sum by defective means” (*P* 3). This sense of the failure of a final, fully integrated totality does not deter Williams. He added on a fifth book to what was to be a four-book project in 1958, and he was even working on a sixth book when he passed away in 1963.

Other critics have noted this sense of totality in Williams wrapped up simultaneously with the recognition of eventual failure. In his essay, “The Poetics of Totality,” Fredric Jameson (perhaps the Lukács of our own critical epoch) elevates Williams's *Paterson* over the more canonical epics of Pound and Eliot precisely for its willingness to traffic and even thrive in failure:

William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* is then signally one of those, a modern epic that knows in its deepest structural impulses—unlike its great models of the pocket epics of Pound and Eliot, and in ways quite unlike the naivete of cognate efforts like Hart Crane's *The Bridge*—that it must not succeed, that its conditions of realization depend on a fundamental success in failing, at the same time that it must not embody any kind of will to failure either, in the conventional psychology of the inferiority complex or in the willful self-crippling of the accident-prone or the writer's block.¹¹⁶

Indeed, Williams himself acknowledges this tendency towards failure throughout the poem and as early as the poem's invocation. And as Williams mentions in a letter written

¹¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, “The Poetics of Totality,” in *The Modernist Papers* (New York: Verso, 2007), 5.

in 1950, referring to the general process of writing poetry, but almost certainly with *Paterson* in mind, “the poem...is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, towards an assertion with broken means, but an assertion always of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to an expression.”¹¹⁷

John Beck concurs with Jameson’s argument about the aesthetic failure of the *Paterson* project; but Beck’s diagnosis of this failure differs in that he links Williams’s process in *Paterson* with the American philosopher John Dewey’s emphasis on instrumental process over idealistic dialectical progressions:

The epic provides for Williams the materials for a dismantling and reassembling of the institutional frame, as the poem discovers in its structure a failure of structure, its language speaks only of a failure of language, its quest for totality is a futile and potentially self-destructive quest. [...] This is one of the ways Williams reconceptualizes the structure of the epic, by transvaluing totality as a means of holding together contradiction without succumbing to the idealistic goals of synthesis.¹¹⁸

Here Beck articulates a sense of totality in *Paterson* that allows for convergence and contradiction without necessarily requiring dialectical synthesis and a fixation on an absent idealism.¹¹⁹ While my project is not engaged with the legacy of American philosophical pragmatism, here I do agree very strongly with Beck’s reading of Williams’s *Paterson* as a work not afraid to traffic in contradiction, dissonance, and failure. But instead, I find this notion of “transvaluing totality” by holding together contradiction without synthesis to be particularly resonate with not only Barad’s and

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, 137

¹¹⁸ Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, 136.

¹¹⁹ Beck actually uses Lukács to make a distinction between his Deweyan notion of totality that he reads in *Paterson* and Hegelian idealism: “Dewey’s view of totality is an attempt to eradicate the kind of tragic failure critics such as Georg Lukács have attributed to the modern world. An imagined ideal totality, whether nostalgically memorialized or projected into an unattainable future, is for Dewey a case of privileging absence over presence which devalues the actual in favor of an imagined elsewhere.” Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, 136.

Haraway's critical notion of diffraction but also Deleuze and Guattari's notion of peripheral totalities that form transversal connections but do not follow a pattern of dialectical synthesis or of primordial reconciliation or recollection: "[w]e no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date. We no longer believe in the dull grey outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution, aimed at forming a heterogeneous whole out of heterogeneous butts by rounding off their rough edges."¹²⁰ Williams was never outspokenly political other than a kind of left localism; but the politics of his late modern poetics should certainly be distinguished from Pound's slide into overt fascism and Eliot's late cultural conservatism on the one side and the more explicitly Marxist poetics of Muriel Rukeyser, and Melvin B. Tolson on the other. Whether Deweyan-inflected or not, Williams's poetic impulse doesn't let the failure of final synthesis and the endless negations of the dialectic get in the way of his articulation of the material present.

Franco Moretti also praises this willingness in modern epics to contain contradictions, and he sees their consistent failures as actually a saving grace. As he argues, not referring to *Paterson* directly but the more salient examples of the world-epic from Goethe and Joyce: "[i]n short, [they are] all extremely *imperfect* works: not properly welded together, unstable—unrepeatable. [...] Because if literature is rarely capable of perfection, it is also true that human societies *almost never need perfection*. Better, far better, to have bricolage than engineering. Because *bricolage* does not dream of unattainable (and often) worse final solutions, but accepts the heterogeneity inherent in

¹²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 42.

particular parts but does not totalize them, it is a unity of all these particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately.”¹²²

This sustained heterogeneity seems to be precisely what Lukács finds so disconcerting about the condition of modernity and what Williams finds so promising. As I will argue in the second half of this chapter, registering the diffractive interference and overlap between ostensibly separate material realms is a poetic strategy that Williams employs throughout *Paterson*.

Reading Diffraction Patterns in *Paterson*

Paterson is a poem that not only encourages diffractive reading but is itself a product of a diffractive composition process. Throughout the long poem, Williams uses linguistic and conceptual enjambement in order to provoke or help to disclose moments of discursive, cultural, and material entanglement. Many of the cascading lines of the poem are formally enjambed—the final word ending one line but beginning a new phrase or idea. But this enjambment also occurs on a macro-scale with the overlapping rhetorical and physical constructions that he attempts to assemble in unusual ways. I argue that *Paterson*'s failing attempts or experiments at unity deploy a capacious (and somewhat capricious) methodology that refuses to look at cultural-social and material-natural expressions as separate phenomena, but rather as endlessly overlapping, entangled relations that enact differences upon one another. Furthermore, this diffractive reading and writing, which I find prevalent throughout *Paterson*, anticipates new materialist methods for approaching and articulating the embedded relationship between nature and

¹²² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 42.

culture. Williams's *Paterson* highlights and indeed turns on the interpretive discovery that often arises out of dissonance. In much the same way, Haraway and Barad encourage reading methods more attuned to interference and inter-field entanglement, which, they argue, offer productive alternatives to the reflexive mirroring that often occurs in purely social and cultural paradigms of critique. Before examining the diffraction in *Paterson* more directly, here I elucidate Barad's use of the term of diffraction from its emergence in theoretical physics to its application in cultural and literary studies.

Barad asserts, reiterating Haraway, that "diffraction can serve as a useful counterpoint to reflection: both are optical phenomena, but whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference."¹²³ Diffraction is a phenomena that has been investigated on the microscopic and atomic level, but it is also something that can be observed by the naked eye—like the overlapping ripples caused by two stones dropped on a placid body of water. The diffraction *pattern* is where the two waves overlap, which can cause either a cessation or an amplification of the force of the other.¹²⁴ As Barad explains, "[d]iffraction can occur with any kind of wave: for example, water waves, sound waves, and light waves all exhibit diffraction under the right conditions."¹²⁵ According to classical physics, the *medium* for the waves might be physical—like the water in the pond—but

¹²³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 71.

¹²⁴ The other slightly different example of diffraction is when waves bend around an object or impediment, or when they bend after passing through a diffraction grating or small opening. As Barad explains: "Some physicists insist on maintaining the historical distinction between interference and diffraction phenomena: they reserve the term 'diffraction' for the apparent bending or spreading of waves upon encountering an obstacle and use 'interference' to refer to what happens when waves overlap. However, the physics behind diffraction and interference phenomena is the same: *both result from the superposition of waves.*" Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 80.

¹²⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 74 (italics in original).

the waves themselves are considered as non-physical disturbances or forces. Barad goes on to clarify:

It is important to keep in mind that waves are very different phenomena from particles. Classically speaking, particles are material entities, and each particle occupies a point in space at a given moment of time. Waves, on the other hand, are not things per se; rather, they are disturbances (which cannot be localized to a point) that propagate in a medium (like water) or as oscillating fields (like electromagnetic waves, the most familiar example being light). Unlike particles, waves can overlap at the same point in space.¹²⁶

These patterns come together in what is referred to as a *superposition*, which is a moment of direct overlap or interference; and they either amplify or diminish the intensity of the alternate wave. But as Barad suggests, diffraction also poses a structural challenge to Newtonian physics because, at the quantum level, the phenomenon of diffraction has been observed occurring between particles as well as waves. This superposition or entanglement of matter is considered impossible by Newtonian standards. And it is this quantum entanglement of various states of matter that Barad draws from to assert her application of diffractive interference to larger interdisciplinary contexts. Both Barad and Haraway pay particular attention to the imprint or pattern left by diffraction that can be observed in both physical and non-physical entities; and both theorists have continued to argue for the benefits of tracing this material impression of inter-field activity.

I will leave it to scholars more adept at the nuances of contemporary theoretical physics to ascertain whether Barad has solved the two-system dilemma (between the internal coherence and functionality of both classical and quantum physics and their remaining incompatibility or decoherence with one another) by her strong appeal to

¹²⁶ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 76.

(literally) universal diffraction.¹²⁷ But what both Haraway and Barad suggest, and what I find incredibly useful from my literary studies perspective, is that this optical and textural phenomena may also occur in conceptual and discursive realms. For immanent materialists—including Williams and myself—these supposedly non-material realms are actually expressions and extensions of the physical rather than pure abstractions that replace or supersede physical reality.¹²⁸ As Barad argues, “[t]o theorize is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. *Theorizing, like experimenting, is a material practice.*”¹²⁹ Williams makes much the same claim at the beginning of “Book III” where he suggests that “[t]he province of the poem is the world./ When the sun rises, it rises in the poem/ and when it sets darkness comes down/ and the poem is dark”(P 100). Or more stridently, at end of “Book III,” he declares that “this rhetoric/ is real!” (P 145). What I am arguing here is that *Paterson*, as a poem, is consumed with this idea of overlap and categorical transgression; and that Williams intentionally attempts to create or recreate interactions between these physical, cultural, and discursive fields in order to demonstrate

¹²⁷ For example, early in her chapter on diffraction, Barad makes the claim: “there is a deep sense in which we can understand diffraction patterns—as patterns of difference that make a difference—to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world” *Ibid.*, 72. This attempt to turn diffraction into a singular material substrate is a bit too ambitious and speculative an assertion for me to maintain—at least without further reinforcement from other scientific thinkers.

¹²⁸ In fact, much of new materialist theory returns to the monism espoused in Spinoza’s work in his *Ethics*, often subtitled “God and/or Nature.” This immanent materialist philosophy asserts that any sense of the transcendent, conceptual, or universal ultimately has its origin in the physical foundation of matter. While considered blasphemous in its own time and still controversial today, Spinoza’s thought is echoed in the works of materialist thinkers as various as Karl Marx, Bruno Latour, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway.

¹²⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 55 (italics in original). Or as Édouard Glissant argues in a similar vein: “Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. In informs the imaginary of its peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms meaning, in them it risks become realized.” Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*, 1.

their interpenetration and superposition: to come upon haphazard, inventive moments of material expression.

Perhaps one of most vivid examples of Williams's diffractive poetics appears in the opening book of *Paterson*, where he introduces the endlessly complex entanglements that make up his project—at once centered on a city, a man, and a natural-cultural ecology:

Yet there is
no return: rolling up out of chaos,
a nine months' wonder, the city
the man, an identity—it can't be
otherwise—an
interpenetration, both ways. Rolling
up! obverse, reverse;
the drunk the sober; the illustrious
the gross; one. In ignorance
a certain knowledge and knowledge,
undispersed, its own undoing.

(The multiple seed,
packed tight with detail, soured,
is lost in the flux and the mind,
distracted, floats off in the same
scum) (P 4)

Here Williams gives us a template for the imperfect formulas of his entangled world-construction in *Paterson*. Notice his focus on imbrication and entanglement: “it can't be otherwise—an/interpenetration, both ways.” This positional posture is very much akin to Haraway's own firmly materialist template for approaching her non-dualistic theorization of what she terms: “‘naturecultures’—as one word—implosions of the discursive realms of nature and culture.”¹³⁰ Here Williams attempts to articulate a poetics that recognizes

¹³⁰ Haraway, *How Like a Leaf*, 105.

both the “multiple-seed” construction of an individual’s cultural identity and the construction of an ecology of place that is in part derived from the human and non-human entities that populate it: “shells and animalcules/ generally and so to man, /to Paterson” (P 5). Williams attempts to create a verse that is a more organic, capacious expression (rather than being just a correspondence or representation) of the urban ecology around him. To cite again his early argument in *Spring and All* for the material extensions of discursive practice, he argues that “the work of the imagination is not ‘like’ anything, but transfused of the same forces which transfuse the earth—at least one small part of them.”¹³¹ This is not suggest that his material poetics in *Paterson* is perfectly contiguous with the diffractive theories of Barad and Haraway, but that his willingness to explore the interpenetration of physical place and cultural identity and, to some extent, to ignore or intentionally problematize the natural/cultural dichotomies of our modern and contemporary conceptual frameworks leaves the poem open to the transdisciplinary overlap of contemporary diffractive reading methods. As John Beck describes the empiricism of Williams’s poetic process: “The poet, like the scientist, discovers connection through the observation of individual, specific occurrences—the local—and compiles these specifics, relates each to the other, to extrapolate meaning. The observer is the organizing force, located within the field, and therefore all observations are relative, related, to him or herself.”¹³² This sense of poet as material observer or scientist highlights the diffractive interference entailed in empirical observation as well as its positional limitations. Barad credits Neil Bohr’s early notion of complementarity, as

¹³¹ Williams, *Imaginations*, 121.

¹³² John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, 139.

opposed to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, as being vital to her own arguments about the co-relational entanglements of scientific observation. She reiterates that it is impossible to divorce the role of the observer and the apparatus from the construction of the thing being observed; there is a diffractive relationship between the two, not because they are separate entities, but because they are always already entangled with one another.¹³³ Though, for Barad as for Bohr, this does not take away from the veracity of the observation, nor does it imply that, since observation is always mediated by a cultural subject, that the material is therefore subordinated to mere cultural observation. For her, it only demonstrates the imbrication of cultural expression within the non-anthropocentric universe and vice versa. For both Bohr and Barad, a certain measure of objectivity is possible, but their sense of objectivity does not imply a separation between the observer and the observed or a Cartesian sense of independence or observational austerity. As Barad argues, rejecting Protagoras's famous dictum that "man is the measure of all things":

Posthumanism, as I intend it here, is not calibrated to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issues with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving). Posthumanism does not attribute the source of all change to culture, denying nature any sense of agency or historicity. In fact, it refuses the idea of a natural (or for that matter, a purely cultural) division between nature and culture, calling for an accounting of how this boundary is actively configured and reconfigured.¹³⁴

¹³³ Barad terms this relationship *intra-action* rather than *inter-action*, since the latter implies a sense of autonomy that violates her notion of an already entangled universe. She defines and distinguishes both terms in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, "I introduce the neologism 'intra-action' to signify the mutual constitution of objects and agencies of observation within phenomena (in contrast to 'interaction,' which assumes the prior existence of distinct entities)." Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 197.

¹³⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 136.

Here Barad confirms, with much more philosophic and scientific acumen than Williams, his own articulation of the “interpenetration” of the natural and the cultural, the observer and his/her/their physical location. Furthermore, her notion of natural/cultural imbrication also pushes against any sort of homogenized merging of the natural-material and the cultural-transcendent. She consistently counters the subsuming narratives envisioned by the strong theories of scientific realism and cultural construction. For Williams there is a constant move in *Paterson* towards a gathering up and rolling up of the sum; but the result is always a heterogeneous, messy, local totality that does not and perhaps should not formally cohere into a final articulation. As Barad suggests, the boundary or point of interference must be “actively configured and reconfigured.” *Paterson*, as a late modern epic, certainly sustains this peripheral or localized approach to the conception of totality, “rolling/ up the sum by defective means” (*P* 3), “a mass of detail/ to interrelate on a new ground” (*P* 19).

Early eco-criticism has already drawn attention to Williams’s anticipation of some of the ecological thought that often attends new materialist theory. In Michael Long’s essay, “William Carlos Williams, Ecocriticism, and Contemporary American Poetry,” he argues that the natural-cultural entanglements in *Paterson* presage the now more rigorously theorized foundations of eco-poetics.¹³⁵ Rather than nature being merely a place of wonder, escape, and renewal or an opaque backdrop to the primacy of cultural

¹³⁵ For examples of the engagement of very recent eco-criticism with new materialist and posthumanist theory, see *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2014), *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, eds. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2018), and *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bingall (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019).

reality, Long argues that Williams presents an ecology where man, nature, and the modern city are intricately and inseparably enmeshed:

Theories of writing and reading poetry that underscore language as a function of *poesis* suggest the inadequacy of the view that language separates us from the world—the idea that all human patterns of thought, schemas, and generalizations are impositions on a preexisting state we call nature. [...] The crucial point is that Williams’s poetics looks back not at reestablishing a lost connection with the world because, as I have said, we are always already in that world. Rather the problem the poet faces is looking forward to the ways that we are able to become present to the possibilities of the phenomenal world where we have been living all along.¹³⁶

Here Long highlights the ontological rapprochement between nature and culture in literary studies and earlier eco-criticism that philosophers of science and culture like Haraway, Barad, and Latour have been simultaneously theorizing for nearly just as long. Rather than continuing the conceit oftentimes perpetuated by *both* scientific realism and cultural construction, that the human observer is somehow apart or outside the natural constitution of the world, Williams’s poetics assumes that we are always already deeply embedded within it. As Williams opens “Book II” of *Paterson*:

Outside
 outside myself
 there is a world,
 he rumbled, subject to my incursions
 —a world
 (to me) at rest,
 which I approach
 concretely— (P 43)

In this declaration, Williams reiterates his materialist commitments to concrete embeddedness rather than poetic or cultural abstractions. Yet even here, Williams dithers on the relational status of this entanglement of the human and non-human world. He

¹³⁶ Mark Long, “William Carlos Williams, Ecocriticism, and Contemporary American Poetry,” *Ecopoetry: An Introduction*. Ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2002), 59, 65.

defines the world as “outside” and “at rest” but yet “subject” to his incursions. But notice the parenthesis around the words “to me” that break up this static image of the human observer in a world, tangible but without apparent motion. Williams/the speaker suggests that there is a world outside himself, beyond himself, a world responsive to his interaction and incursions, but the subjectivity introduced by the “(to me) at rest” suggests that great portions of the world are active in ways beyond the limited capabilities of his concrete, yet subjective incursions.¹³⁷ The world is “at rest,” or must appear to be, for the purposes of both the organization of the poem and for the functionality of being in the world. Yet on the molecular and cosmic level, even early modern physics and astronomy suggest rapid movement, constant flux, and reformation within the actual constitution of our physical reality. And 20th and 21st century physics have further borne out the parallax and quantum states of being that, while sometimes determined to be in certain locations, are in fact constantly in motion. In measuring the positions of external objects, so much depends upon the observer’s own relationship to those objects. Bohr defined this as complementarity; Barad extends this idea to material-cultural diffraction. Or as Haraway suggests, “[a] diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear.”¹³⁸ In these lines, Williams intimates the capriciousness of the outside world while also recognizing that this capriciousness is often un-regarded by the limited position of the observer.

¹³⁷ Barad argues throughout *Meeting the Universe Halfway* for the agency of supposedly inanimate matter; this *liveliness* or vitality is the specific focus of Jane Bennett’s political science approach to new materialism. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

¹³⁸ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” 320.

These lines from *Paterson* suggest that moving away from an anthropocentric point of view is an important gesture, but it is also an impossible one as well. Many of the understandings we have of the natural world extend only to our interaction, inference, and physical superposition with it. Here, Williams's lines expressing the slippery relationship between human entanglement and interaction with the outside world coalesce with Barad's notion of a diffractively mediated relationship. She argues that the incursions of material reality and discursive practices are far more interrelated and influential than they are often conceptualized or articulated either in scientific or cultural theory. As she asserts in the introduction to *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

Performative accounts that social and political theorists have offered focus on the productive nature of social practices and human bodies. By contrast agential realism takes account of the fact that forces at work in the materialization of bodies are not only social, and the bodies produced are not only human. Crucially, I argue that agential realism clarifies the causal relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena. That is, I propose a new understanding of how discursive practices are related to the material world.¹³⁹

While Williams is, of course, neither a theoretical physicist nor a new materialist philosopher, *Paterson*, as a whole, is concerned with finding a more concrete approach to the accessing the "outside" world. This desire to articulate the connection between the physical material and the discursive is palpable throughout the poem. And many of the (sometimes jarring) linguistic assemblages that make up the scattered roots of the poem serve to instigate the intentional trespassing of discursive and material boundaries. They attempt to chart and register these moments of discursive connection to the material. Barad and Haraway describe this as the mapping of diffractive patterns of interference;

¹³⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33-4.

Williams, in “Book IV” of *Paterson*, describes it as the dissonance that leads to discovery, which I will discuss in the final section of the chapter.¹⁴⁰

Dissonance, Discovery, Diffractive Poetics

From his early prose improvisations in *Kora in Hell*, Williams consistently maintains a method of carelessness and haphazard linguistic invention encouraged by his commitment to conceptual errantry and disjunction. The poetry becomes a process of continuously failing experiments that may lead to discovery, often by very productive mistakes or new, field-generated, hypotheses. As he argues with deliberate incongruity at the beginning of the third section of “Book III”: “It is dangerous to leave written that which is badly written. [...] Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive” (*P* 129). Rather than taking the premise that bad writing is dangerous and should be avoided, Williams counterintuitively argues that this should inspire carelessness rather than refinement, that affected or cautious writing can actually lead to the “recurring deadliness” of the tired, well-worn paths of the earlier poetic traditions. He insists instead that poetic carelessness can actually generate new discovery and uncanny connections that might not arise from deliberate, linear contemplation. As he asserts in another section, perhaps deriving his argument from similar lines in the lyric poems of Emily Dickinson, “Let the words/fall any way at all—that they may/ hit love aslant. It will be a rare/visitation” (*P* 142). Here Williams suggests that there is a measure of success to circuitous, oblique, and disjunctive engagements with language. This intentional errantry in poetic composition is actually taken up by later movements in the

¹⁴⁰ Williams, *Paterson*, 175.

New American poetry such as the Beatniks, the Black Mountain School, and, to some extent, language poetry. This rough-hewn, inspired poetics is often described using Allen Ginsberg's mantra: "First thought, best thought."¹⁴¹ But here Williams invokes the idea as a method, not only of avoiding tired, Euro-inflected frameworks for American poetry, but also as a means of establishing a more tangible connection to reality—even if the bulk of this careless production leads to dead ends. Williams takes up this notion of aleatory interaction again in "Book IV," using the chemist Marie Curie's accidental discovery of the radioactive properties inherent in different variations of uranium as an example of what he refers to throughout this passage as "the radiant gist" of haphazard discovery:

A dissonance
in the valence of Uranium
led to the discovery

Dissonance
(if you are interested)
leads to discovery

—to dissect away
the block and leave
a separate metal:

hydrogen
the flame, helium the
pregnant ash .¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Williams actually includes correspondence between himself and Ginsberg, a Paterson native and, at the time, a fledgling poet, in "Book IV" and "Book V" of *Paterson*. See Williams, *Paterson*, 172-4, 193, 210-11.

¹⁴² Williams, *Paterson*, 175. I believe this analogy to chemistry also serves as perhaps one of the many "potshots" he takes at Eliot throughout *Paterson*. Here he is intentionally reworking Eliot's famous analogy of the talented artist as catalyst in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In other much less subtle moments in *Paterson*, Williams references Eliot, usually with pejorative insinuations. In the first book, he undercuts Eliot's Heraclitan continuums in the recently published "Burnt Norton," where Williams intones "For the beginning is assuredly/ the end—since we know nothing, pure/ and simple, beyond/ our own complexities"; and toward the end of "Book III," "[w]ho is it spoke of April? Some/ insane engineer." While Williams's

While Curie did not actually discover *uranium* per se, in her experiments she came across some of its radioactive iterations such as radium and thorium; and she found that their powerful properties—while caused by particular catalytic interactions between elements—actually emerge from within the subatomic particles themselves. While Williams’s scientific analogy is a good deal more simplified than the emergent process of radioactivity itself, this late modernist, post-nuclear description of the radioactive potential of poetic discovery also overlaps with Barad’s argument for diffractive interpretation, finding productive interference between areas that are traditionally theorized as separate or unrelated.

Paterson, as both poem and material object, is a form of diffractive writing, blending the genres of poetry and prose, historical and contemporary examples, conflating and overlapping ecological and scientific narratives with those of poetics. Using dissonance as the catalytic method here, Williams’s purpose is not to generate a syncretic, fully integrated totality or some sort of elegant remainder, but rather to generate productive moments of interstitial superposition. For both Barad and Haraway, mapping patterns of diffraction entails looking for these traces of material, cultural, and linguistic interference —where “the *effects* of difference appear,” For Williams, his apparatus in *Paterson* entails finding moments of interpenetration or productive

Paterson was certainly a late modern response to the erudition to all the modern epics, he certainly had a special bone to pick with Eliot in particular. Williams, *Paterson*, 3, 142. Though at other times, Williams confesses that much of the epic structure and formulae of *Paterson* were indebted in part to a form of scholarly writing he had so vehemently opposed: “that the poet,/ in disgrace, should borrow from erudition (to/ unslave the mind): railing at the vocabulary/ (borrowing from those he hates, to his own/ disenfranchisement)” *Paterson*, 80. As I have argued in the first part of the paper, Williams’s connection to or decoupling from the cosmopolitan epics of high modernism was complicated to say the least.

interference, where the effects of the natural, the cultural, and the personal are momentarily disclosed.

Perhaps, the most important physical feature and metonymic image that serves to sustain the energy of the poem is the Passaic Falls. In each of the five books of *Paterson*, he returns to the falls as a source of both poetic and material inspiration, recognizing it as the kinetic life-force for the town of Paterson. It is also the physical feature that most clearly exemplifies Williams's own conception of diffractive poetics. As Williams describes in a statement preceding the poem, "[t]he noise of the Falls seemed to me to be a language which we were and are seeking and my search, as I looked about, became to struggle to interpret and use this language. *This is the substance of the poem.*"¹⁴³

Throughout *Paterson*, Williams offers up the geographic feature as both a generative and destructive force. It powers the great engines of industry to the benefit of urban growth and to the detriment of the local ecology.¹⁴⁴ But it also consumes two of its historic citizens, the daredevil, Sam Patch, and the ambiguous suicide, Mrs. Cummings. Williams brings their respective falls into recursive contemplation throughout the first three books.¹⁴⁵ But at the end of "Book III," Williams returns to the waterfall in a moment of creative crisis. And in this extended passage, he articulates the volatile energy of the waters, relating it to his own—at times unwieldy—foray into the creative process of composing the lengthy poem. In this turbulent section of emotionally agitated, almost destabilized writing, Williams attempts to end the third book. In the diffractive, dissonant *metonymic metaphor* of the falls, Williams reveals his own internal conflict and

¹⁴³ Williams, *Paterson*, xiv, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁴ Williams, *Paterson*, 69-74.

¹⁴⁵ Williams, *Paterson*, 14-16, 83-85, 145.

misgivings, and he re-exposes the precarity of the loose structural grounding of the long poem itself:

The past above, the future below
and the present pouring down: the roar,
the roar of the present, a speech—
is, of necessity, my sole concern .

They plunged, they fell in a swoon .
or by intention, to make an end—the
roar, unrelenting, witnessing .
Neither past nor the future

Neither to stare amnesic—forgetting.
The language cascades into the
invisible, beyond and above: the falls
of which it is the visible part—

[...] I cannot stay here
to spend my life looking into the past:

the future's no answer. I must
find my meaning and lay it, white,
beside the sliding water: myself—
comb out the language—or succumb

—whatever the complexion. Let
me out! (Well, go!) this rhetoric
is real! (P 144-5)

Here many of the themes of *Paterson*, its embedded history, its physical expression, its conceptual-discursive iteration of an individual and cultural identity, all converge in an image of heterogeneous confusion and existential crisis. “Book III” ends with a wish to escape and with the plea being granted. This is more than a bit ironic since both the luckless Sam Patch and the “swooning” suicide of Mrs. Cummings are mentioned at the top of this section: “they plunged, they fell into a swoon . / or by intention to make an end.” While in “Book I,” Williams takes time to explore the possible reason for their

leaps, here the speaker seems to be contemplating his own creative leap with the poem, tying in the physical leap with his rhetorical, discursive leap: “[a] speech—/ is, of necessity my sole concern.” But clearly this leap is intended to be more than merely rhetorical. And Williams intentionally combines the physical and discursive aspects of this scene, “[t]he language cascades into the/ invisible, beyond and above: the falls/ of which it is the visible part—”. Here Williams is excessively vehement in merging the expressions of both the natural and the discursive, the visible and the invisible. And he adds to this the anxiety of historical influence, which converges both at the top of the falls (the past) and the bottom (the future). While denying neither the past nor the future, the speaker makes a final decision to seek for meaning in the turbulent confusion of the physical and discursive present—though this decision will not necessarily generate a successful synthetic outcome: “I must/ find my meaning and lay it, white,/ beside the sliding water: myself—/Comb out the language—or succumb.” Here in this very diffractive analogy, Williams argues that this dance of meaning or determination seems to be at the center of a number of different referential frameworks: the historical, the natural, and the present, provisionally discursive; to “comb out the language” and “find the meaning” between these overlapping words and waters.

The scene at the Falls serves as both a metaphor and a physical example of his notion of dissonance as a form of discovery, but also of its precarity and potential failure. He articulates the natural, violent, creative powers of the plunging water, while suggesting that it overlaps with—rather than merely abstractly resembles—his own linguistic forays into world and culture creation. The Falls serve as a metonymic extension *of* rather than a purely metaphorical substitute *for* his own process of aesthetic

creation—though the image is strained enough to exhibit aspects of both metaphor and metonymy. His own discursive assemblages and conceptual enjambments throughout *Paterson* are meant to be linguistic, but nevertheless material, examples of nature rather than detached representations of it. It is also important to note the looming importance but also the un-sublimated role of history in this passage. He ends this third book with both a concession to the inability to evade historical influence—its presence within the present—but he also argues that an overreliance on historical determinacy can become a pitfall that can paralyze or occlude the possibility of discovery in the present moment.

Conclusion

My reading of Williams's *Paterson* in this chapter has served to illustrate and express the philosophical and conceptual aspects of diffraction as both a scientific phenomenon and a critical method, exploring in particular Barad's formal articulation of the concept; however, in the next three chapters I examine two other late modernist long poems as well as a contemporary long poem that explore the relationship of diffractive materialism to more explicitly political, cultural, and ecological poetics. And my theoretical use of diffraction in these chapters extends beyond Barad as I explore how other theories from thinkers as various as Theodor Adorno, Gregory Bateson, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter enhance and build on my diffractive reading of these poems, and also help to fortify and recast the critical uses of diffractive materialism.

While *Paterson* contains moments of concern for both the human and non-human other, his poetics of epic localism are often overly engaged in Williams's own solipsism,

his late modernist poetics also resting in large part on the laurels of his stature as a central American modernist. The world expressed in *Paterson* is multifarious microcosm, yet it concerns itself mostly with those elements of the outside world that he traces back into himself, or perhaps those aspects of himself that he projects onto his local world. As he announces with a good deal of pretension in the opening of *Paterson*, “But/ only one man—like a city.”¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, Rukeyser’s “Book of the Dead,” Melvin B. Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* and Sikelianos’s *The California Poem* are also deeply personal works, but their impetuses are more clearly devoted to explicit political, cultural, and ecological engagements. And while I disagree with Barad’s claim that reading diffractively is synonymous with ethics,¹⁴⁷ I do believe that an attention to diffractive interference can reveal an exigence for intervention—that diffraction can engender a new sense of responsibility to both human and more-than-human issues of material entanglement.

¹⁴⁶ Williams, *Paterson*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ As Barad argues: “[e]thics is therefore not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part. [...] [E]thics is not a concern we add to the question of matter, but rather it is the very nature of what it means to matter.” Barad, “Interview With Karen Barad,” 69

Chapter 2

Documentary Poetics: Montage, Diffractive Mapping, and Opacity in Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead"

Introduction

Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938), which takes up the first seventy-two pages of her collection *U.S. I*, is a late modernist poem that directly influences Williams's own extended use of the social rather than the literary archive in *Paterson* (1946-58). In the poem, she gives a detailed account of a recent mining disaster in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia (which occurred between 1930-2), blending her own frame-narration with an assemblage of found materials. She draws from documents which include the testimonies of doctors, the interviews of local townspeople and survivors, the rhetoric of politicians and defense attorneys, the stock exchange index, the x-ray report, and even chemical formulae. Some of these materials in the poem are drawn directly from the public record or gathered from her own journalistic expedition to the town in 1935; some these materials are also drawn from the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. All the materials are sutured together through her own poetic voice and experimental framing techniques. As she argues in endnote to the poem: "Gauley Bridge is inland, but it was created by theories, systems and workmen from many coastal sections—factors which are, in the end, not regional or national. Local images have one kind of reality. *U.S. I* will, I hope, have another too. Poetry can extend the document."¹

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, *U.S. I*, (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1938), 146. Hereafter referred to in the chapter as *BD*.

Here she suggests that her poem functions as a living system made up of physical, cultural, and discursive materials much like an actual location or event is composed of these same interacting processes.

Like William's *Paterson*, Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" engages in what I have defined as a diffractive materialist poetics, mapping the patterns of interference between different material realms. Yet in the poem, her engagement with the material takes on a more expressly political register. While Williams's *Paterson* gestures a towards a vague politics that leans towards a left localism or a Deweyan pragmatism, "The Book of the Dead" builds on a strong Marxist critique of the existing power structures but also on a mythopoetics that actively promotes and attempts to envision new cultural and material conditions. It is a poem committed to both critique and composition. As she argues in the final section of "The Book of the Dead": "[d]efense is sight, widen the lens and see / standing over the land myths of identity, new signals, processes" (*BD* 71).

The poem exemplifies the energetic but complicated relationship of her commitment to both experimental modernist poetics and political activism. In the time of the New Criticism (which arose in the early 40s and dominated the midcentury) that praised ahistorical poetic formalism and championed the erudite, impersonal poetics of Pound and Eliot, her poetry, while exhibiting technical ingenuity and complicated with esoteric allusions, was largely considered too explicitly partisan, too directly engaged with socio-economic concerns to be considered worthy of critical appraisal. Inversely, and somewhat ironically, she was often admonished by her political allies on the left for being too complicit in this new difficult modernism to be accessible for tangible political

effect, even receiving sexist attacks for her supposedly “unscientific Marxism” in a leftist review of *U.S. 1*.² While Rukeyser’s work maintains a solidarity with both modernist poetics and radical leftist politics, in both spheres she is certainly no formalist. And it is precisely her enduring fascinations with the intersections and interdependencies of politics, science, and art, and her second-wave modernist renewal of the modernist sequence, that makes her work, particularly her long poem “The Book of the Dead” (1938) and her prose treatise on the relationship of poetry to science, cinema, and politics, *The Life of Poetry* (1949), important touchstones in investigating the relationship of her late modernist poetics to both modern and contemporary theories of historical and scientific materialism.

In fact, much of her defense of the active uses of modern poetry in *The Life of Poetry* (1949), rests on her argument about the deep ties between modern poetry and science, as well as her belief that science and poetics are useful intermediaries and agents in a robust political activism:

But to go on, to recognize the energies that are transferred between people when a poem is given and taken, to know the relationships in modern life that can make the next step, to see the tendencies in science which can indicate it, that is for the new poets. [...] Exchange is creation; and the human energy involved is consciousness, the capacity to produce change from the existing conditions.³

² John Wheelwright, “Review of U.S. 1,” *Partisan Review* 4 (March 1938), 54, quoted in Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 146. Yet, this critique from Wheelhouse is a bit ironic since Rukeyser rather built her poetics and her ideology around a commitment to the uses of science in both her politics and her poetry. Wheelhouse’s charge of “unscientific socialism” implies that her method in the poem needs a clearer narrative didacticism or that it lacks a clear solidarity with the specific doctrinaire Marxism of the Popular Front.

³ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (New York: Current Book, Inc, 1949), 183. Hereafter referred to as *LOP*.

In articulating what she sees as the task of the *new* poetry (as opposed to the static, “fossilized” poetics praised by the New Criticism),⁴ she attempts to reconcile the spirit of Marx—whose goal was to change the world rather than just interpret and critique it—with the dynamic processes at work in the contemporary sciences, which had moved away from a focus on dead matter and mechanical determinism to quantum process and material vitality. Like her title, *The Life of Poetry*, suggests, it is the *living*, inter-relational nature of these disciplines which make them useful. And she insists that modern poetry, like modern science, should cease attempting to reveal things in isolation or as static objects, and instead seek to reveal the process of relations—that “science is a system of relations,” or invoking the mathematician Henri Poincaré, “[i]t is in relations alone that objectivity must be sought; it would be vain to consider it in beings considered as isolated from one another” (*LOP* 176). This is an argument for what she terms “a reciprocal reality” (*LOP* 166), that the purpose of scientific, political, and poetic objectivity involves observing and locating the networks of relation, rather than seeking to conceptualize objects in their static isolation. While Rukeyser’s poetic and political stance here is not directly inspired by diffraction, it certainly evokes the renewed focus on the interference between disciplinary realms that is integral to the diffractive methodologies of Haraway and Barad.

⁴ In fact her specific quarrel with the New Critical approach to poetry was its obsession with the static and “fossilized” treatment of words and images, much the same way that modern science was still trying to shake off the static treatment of lifeless material left over from early Newtonian and 19th century conceptions of ecology and physics. Rukeyser rather stresses the dynamism and continual process inherent in both modern science and modern poetry. As she argues in *The Life of Poetry*, “In poetry, the relations are not formed like crystals on a lattice of words, although the old criticism (which at the moment is being called, of course, the New Criticism) would have us believe it so. [...] When Emerson said that language was fossil poetry, he was leading up to some of these contemporary verdicts. To think of language as earth containing fossils immediately sets the mind, directs it to rigid consequences. The critics of the new group, going on from there, see poetry itself as fossil poetry.” *The Life of Poetry*, 177-8.

This chapter begins with a brief description of the Gauley Bridge Disaster itself, drawing from Rukeyser's poetic account alongside a more recent epidemiological study done by Martin Cherniak (1986). I follow this with a brief description of the form and content of the poem, arguing that its complex structure is influenced by the tradition of the modernist long poem. Yet it resists the totalizing, reductive, and reactionary tendencies in vanguard examples such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos* while still drawing from their mythopoetic influences. I argue that her use of these techniques is actually an attempt to reconcile the intertextuality of modernist bricolage with the new cinematic techniques of documentary, particularly Sergei Eisenstein's theory of the montage of attractions. While Eisenstein's theory of montage is more directly influenced by the movement of dialectics, I find that its tendency towards agitation, provocation, and the collision of disparate images evokes the dissonance and resonance of diffractive interference patterns.

In the second half of the chapter, I argue that Rukeyser's explicit deployment of modern mapping technologies (at times transposed upon one another) evokes Haraway's concept of diffractive mapping that registers the interference between different manifestations of cultural, and scientific, and discursive materiality. I also find that Rukeyser's notion of the map and system also directly anticipates Gregory Bateson's notion of information and feedback as the "the news of difference" from cybernetic theory—an emerging field of complex systems theory of which she was cognizant. In its expansive effort to relay the complex elements of relations, the poem creates a sense of peripheral and provisional totality as well as the exigence for intervention and political engagement.

Nevertheless, I find that the poem, while attempting to “extend the document,” remains deliberately diffident or opaque in its defining and clarifying some of its major extended metaphors and themes. In fact, she opens the poem with a conflicted image of both clarity and opacity: “Now the photographer unpacks camera and case, / surveying the deep country, follows discovery/ viewing on groundglass an inverted image” (*BD* 10). This extended trope of *lens/glass/silica* permeates the entire poem, but at times it serves to block and obfuscate, in the very literal example of the disease of silicosis which caused the many deaths of the miners, as much as it is meant to represent the clarity and transparency of glass or crystal. This opacity also extends to her deployment the abstract concepts of *power* and *mastery* and their conflicted relationship to the malefactors and the martyrs in this particular event, revealing their emergent and amorphous complexities. While many recent critiques have noted this tendency as a either a structural or ideological weakness of the poem, I argue that this opaque or blurred image that she creates out of the “groundglass” camera testifies to her idealistic faithfulness to her dynamic poetics of process.

In this way, the poem’s residual opacity reflects Adorno’s admission of the recalcitrance of the material world within in his negative dialectics, “that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder,”⁵ as well as Eduard Glissant’s notion of continual opacity and open totality which refuses to “reduce things to the Transparent.”⁶ In “The Book of the Dead” she attempts to give a full account of the

⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

conditions and possibilities of the material event without finally constraining or reducing them to a unidimensional, fully-synthesized political or cultural narrative.

The Gauley Bridge Industrial Disaster

“The Book of the Dead” is a poetic retelling of the mining disaster near Gauley Bridge, West Virginia which occurred between 1930-32. To this day, the incident remains the one of most lethal industrial events in American history. Due to the profoundly unsafe working conditions of the operations there, somewhere between 760 to 2,000 workers eventually died from a degrading lung condition referred to as acute silicosis.⁷ In briefly describing the event itself, I draw from both Rukeyser’s 1938 poetic retelling as well as Martin Cherniak’s book-length epidemiological study, *The Hawk’s Nest Incident: America’s Worst Industrial Disaster* (1986), which more formally chronicles the events leading up to the development of the tunnel, the disaster itself, as well as the immediate aftermath and fraught legacy.⁸

The Gauley Bridge project, as it was conceived in the late 1920s, was originally intended to divert the New River in West Virginia through a three-mile-long tunnel in Gauley Mountain, creating a massive hydroelectric facility that would supply an unprecedented amount of power to that area of the Middle South. During the early

⁷ Leonard Scigaj. “Ecology, Egyptology, and Dialectics in Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead’.” *Mosaic* 38, no. 3 (Sept 2005), 132.

⁸ Martin Cherniak, *The Hawk’s Nest Incident: America’s Worst Industrial Disaster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Hereafter referred to as *HNI*. His colleagues in the Health Department praise his intrepid research nearly 45 years after the incident in the preface: “Dr. Cherniak had pieces together medical, epidemiological, legal, and social data, as well as new clips, oral history, and Congressional testimony, to recreate the story of the drilling of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel, and its terrible consequences. He has rescued from oblivion a major chapter in the history of industrial health.” Cherniak, ix. This glowing description given by his colleagues could have just as easily described Rukeyser’s work assembling the material evidence for her own poetic documentary account of the event nearly 40 years before.

economic doldrums of the Great Depression, the project was viewed by both the local population and the state and national agencies as a tremendous opportunity to boost the meager economic conditions. It would provide innovative and cheap electric power, and it was also a long-term project that promised a stable source of income for unemployed coal miners and other itinerate laborers. In fact, the vast majority of the laborers that worked on the Hawk's Nest Tunnel travelled from outlying areas, not from the town of Gauley Bridge itself; and, as both Cherniak and Rukeyser note, the great majority of those that worked on the tunnel project, and correspondingly, died of acute silicosis were African Americans.⁹

Early in the mining project, a large deposit of silica (or silicon dioxide) was discovered in near the heart of the mountain, an extremely valuable mineral compound used in the production of glass. It was the discovery and excavation of this material that eventually caused the lethal fallout that occurred gradually but steadily over the next few years. At the time of the drilling, there were few formal regulations on mining practices in America; yet the dangers of exposure to silica were already well-known to experts in the mining industry. Safe mining practices such as wet-drilling and the use of respirators were already a common practice; but none of these techniques were used at Gauley Bridge—at least until well after the damage was done. Indeed, according to both Rukeyser's and Cherniak's accounts, the culpability of Union Carbide lay in its

⁹ Cherniak, *The Hawk's Nest Incident*, 18. "Of the nearly three thousand who worked at least part of the time inside the tunnel, 75 percent were black. Of the whites, a considerable percentage were foreman—sixty-eight men—or operators of heavy equipment." Cherniak also notes that even the amounts of the belated settlements were decided by race: "[s]ettlements eventually ranged from \$30 to \$1600, with single black laborers receiving the least and families of deceased whites, such as Cecil Jones, receiving the maximum payment," 67. Rukeyser, "George Robinson: Blues" *U.S. 1*, 33-3.

prioritization of expedience over safety, company profit margins over human lives. But the company's guilt also extended well after the event, when it used its tremendous financial resources in an attempt to bury the investigations, often blaming the deaths of the black miners on racialized stereotypes of unhealthy lifestyles, buying out lawyers representing living plaintiffs in the case, and finally paying the survivors or family members of the deceased a pittance of the damages originally sought. As Rukeyser suggest towards the end of the poem, using the Congressional Record of the subcommittee hearing: "They cowardly tried to buy out the peo-/ple who had the information on them. [...] [T]he most damnable racketeering that I have ever/ known is the paying of fees to the very attorney who represented these victims" (*BD* 57). Or as Cherniak suggests in his epilogue, "[t]here was a unique mismatch between a primitive, poorly paid, and unprotected labor force and an industry ahead of its time, able to utilize the most modern equipment and techniques" (*HNI* 108).

Both the poem and epidemiological study take the time to quantify and qualify their material evidence in distinctive forms; but Cherniak and Rukeyser also address the inherent subjectivities that are involved when attempting to describe the objective whole of a specific event. As Cherniak asserts in his epilogue, "There is a symmetry in this study without names. Its subject, industry of scale, is also an anonymous process, consisting of great numbers of men and great number of replaceable mechanical parts, sometimes treated without distinction. *As such, analogies might summon the language of war rather than that of economy*" (*HND* 109, emphasis mine) This echoes, almost verbatim, Rukeyser's own prognosis of the implications of the disaster, repeating her analogy of the warlike effects of the disease, which was proliferating in other unregulated

industrial situations around the country. “500,000 Americans have silicosis now. / *These are the proportions of a war...wounded and fighting, the men at Gauley Bridge*” (BD 60, emphasis mine). Reading similar passages such as this, it is remarkable that Cherniak, in his exhaustive study, makes no mention of the poem or Rukeyser in his text or bibliography.

While Rukeyser’s poetic method is quite different than Cherniak’s, the poem does attempt a multi-scale analysis of the situation, but it is far from anonymous. Many of the sections of the poem are titled by the names of those involved. And from the opening lines of the poem, she argues for the importance of creating a map or topographic vision from different material and human sources: “These are the roads you take when you think of your country/ and interested bring down the maps again” (BD 9). But as I will discuss at length later in the chapter, the poem also reveals that the multiple lenses—these different road/maps—while meant to serve as correctives and extensions of a more multi-faceted documentation of objective reality, still create an opaque vision, an attempt at empiricism that remains provisional and limited by the fallibility of its instruments of measurement. This opacity is in part built into her documentary poetics, but at times also exceeds her poetic intentions.

The Social and Political Archive in Late Modernist Poetry

Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” is both an aesthetic and a political document—influenced by the complexity and intertextuality of the vanguard modernist long poem but also driven by a journalistic commitment to register and illuminate the exploitations of capitalist power during the Great Depression. As she insists towards the

end of the poem: “[c]arry abroad the urgent need, the scene, / to photograph and to extend the voice, to speak this meaning” (*BD* 71). In this sense the poem continues the both activist and archivist vein of the American long poem, what John Carlos Rowe describes as an alternative or counter-modernism devoted to poetic justice.¹⁰ In its commitments to both narratives of social justice and experimental poetics, its second-wave retooling of modernist aesthetics inspires later feminist revisions of the myths of male-dominated modernism by late 20th century poets such as Adrienne Rich. And the poem’s early concern with nonhuman ecologies also anticipates contemporary eco-feminist poets like Eleni Sikelianos (whose ecological diffractive poetics I discuss in the final chapter).¹¹ From a political perspective, the poem goes beyond a call to arms; and, from an aesthetic perspective, it is much more than an epideictic beatification of the departed laborers. “The Book of the Dead” uses the techniques of journalism, cinematic documentary, and the deep research of the literary archive in order to recreate and accentuate the cultural and political importance of the event and its aftermath.¹²

¹⁰ John Carlos Rowe, “Another Modernism: Poetic Justice in Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*,” *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 137.

¹¹ John Carlos Rowe also notes Rukeyser’s proto-ecological poetics: “Rukeyser’s mythic feminism anticipates more recent eco-feminisms, for which there are few precedents in the 1930s.” Rowe, “Another Modernism,” 141. His analysis here is prescient considering the renewed interest in her work within eco-criticism. See Stacey Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2010); and Leonard Scigaj, “Ecology, Egyptology, and Dialectics in Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead’,” *Mosaic* 38, no. 3 (Sept 2005)

¹² Her endnote to the poem outlines and name the myriad sources that she draws on in constructing the poem. It’s quite the works cited page:

The material in *The Book of the Dead* comes from many sources, the chief of which include: An Investigation Relating to Health Conditions of Workers Employed in the Construction and Maintenance of Public Utilities. Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee of Labor, House of Representatives, Seventy-fourth Congress, Second Session, on H. J Rs. 449, January 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29 and February 4, 1936. United States Printing Office. Washington: 1936. Congressional Record, Seventy-Fourth Congress, Second Session, Washington, Wednesday, April 1, 1936.

Other documents, include the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (in various translations), magazine and newspaper articles on Gauley Bridge, letters and photographs.

Rukeyser's use of journalistic research within a poetic medium begins earlier in the 30s. Already an activist reporter for progressive political causes, her first book of poetry, *Theory of Flight* (1935), draws largely from her experiences as a student journalist at Vassar College. In that collection, her poem "The Lynching of Jesus" specifically references the Scottsboro Trial in Alabama in 1932, which she personally attended. Invoking historical figures like Copernicus, Shelley, and Marx and including dramatic dialogue from the defendants, this nine-page poem is a proto-version of documentary poetics she deploys at greater length in "The Book of the Dead."¹³

Even though Rukeyser visited Gauley Bridge in 1935, the poem itself was not drafted until after another journalist excursion to Spain at the height of the Spanish Civil War in 1937. Tim Dayton, in his book-length study of the poem, draws attention to the transnational influence on the local American context: "the advent of the war in Spain, intervening between her trip to Gauley Bridge and the writing of the poem, encouraged her to see the events she investigated in West Virginia as a local instance of an unfolding global history."¹⁴ In the last section of the poem, Rukeyser references the Spanish Civil War directly, finding a correspondence to the outpouring of support for the deceased miners with "the old Mediterranean/ flashing new signals from the hero hills/ near Barcelona" (*BD* 68). Her localized, multifaceted focus on the events at Gauley Bridge is fused into the translocal circuits of revolutionary left activism: "strikers, soldiers,

I should like to thank Betty and George Marshall; Glenn Griswold, M. C. Fifth District, Indiana; Nancy Naumburg; Eunice Clark; and the work of many investigators and writers, notably Philippa Allen; who made the poem possible. (*BD* 146-7)

¹³ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, eds. Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog (Pittsburg: U of Pittsburg P, 2005), 25-31.

¹⁴ Tim Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead*. (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003), 16.

pioneers, fight on all new frontiers, are set in solid/ lines of defense” (*BD* 69) As a piece of activist political writing, “The Book of the Dead” serves as a microcosm of the planetary fight for the exploited worker against modern systems of economic and political power.

Along with the recent political events at home and abroad, “The Book of the Dead” is also inspired by the modernist long poem in its extended use of intertextual material. And like those earlier canonical examples like *The Waste Land* or *The Cantos*, it also plays with the concept but resists the formal characteristics of the traditional epic. There are aspects of lyric, epic, and dramatic form in the poem. There are also portions that include unaltered extended lines of prose—though certainly not as much as Williams uses in the later *Paterson*. Many of the sections represent distinct vantage points: some personal, others clinical and juridical. “Statement: Philippa Allen” draws from the testimony of a social worker that was a local to this region of West Virginia, who later gave witness testimony before the House committee hearing (*BD* 13-5). “Mearl Blankenship” is a section devoted to one of the miners slowing dying from the complications of silicosis (*BD* 24-6). And some of the other sections, like “The Disease” (*BD* 31-2) and the “Bill” (*BD* 62-5), draw directly from x-ray reports, medical analysis, and legislative rhetoric. However, throughout the poem, the voice of the frame-speaker serves to help process the information and gently direct the reading (reminiscent of the guiding narrative of Virgil in Dante’s *Inferno* or of Tiresias who flickers in and out of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*). In these moments, Rukeyser employs a deictic register that serves to bind the different scenes together, using an epic-like present-tense framing, giving directions and exposition: “[t]hese are the roads to take when you think of your

country” (*BD* 9); “[t]his is the life of a Congressman. / Now he is standing on the floor of the House” (*BD* 59); “[t]his is a lung disease” (*BD* 31); “here the severe flame speaks from the brick throat” (*BD* 47). Even when the content of the poem tends toward direct material sources, the speaker/narrator, often merges different discourses to produce particular effects. For example, in the section “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones,” one of the foremen ruminating on disaster is given the line: “hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs with glass” (*BD* 18). This use of free-indirect discourse, ostensibly from the mind of the foreman, also seems to merge with the frame-speaker’s own larger assessments: economic abstractions merging in with a description of the deadly effects of the raw material. And in the one of the closing sections, “The Bill,” Rukeyser includes many lines directly lifted from actual congressional minutes but concludes with the evaluative, extra-textual phrase, “the subcommittee subcommits” (*BD* 65). While the most extensive reflection occurs in the opening and final sections, Rukeyser does not shy away from interjecting her evaluation of the materials throughout.

Besides helping to build her own political case, this complex assemblage of materials evokes the bricolage techniques of high modernism when thinking of the work of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce. But where earlier poets like Pound and Eliot might use these techniques to point back to some sort of lost aesthetic totality, “the golden thread in the pattern” as Pound ends his *Cantos*, or Eliot’s mystic notion of “concentration without elimination” in “Burnt Norton,”¹⁵ Rukeyser, instead, uses citation and collage in order to highlight the immediate social necessity of her intervention, as well as to give a

¹⁵ Pound, *The Cantos*, 817; Eliot, *The Collected Poems*, 216.

multifaceted rather than a univocal critique of modern industrialized power. Totalities here are meant to be shattered rather than composed. As Michael Davidson argues in his book concerning the legacy of modernist poetics and materialism in 20th century

American poetry:

Of course, nothing could be more modernist than the introduction of non-literary materials into the literary, but what distinguishes these works [the poetry of Rukeyser and Reznikoff] from the Dadaist or Surrealist collage is their documentary character, their reliance on public record and the institutions that support and uphold that public record. [...] [*Q*]uoting from documents in poetry redirects modernism's emphasis on the materiality of aesthetic language to the materiality of social speech.¹⁶

As Davidson suggests, Rukeyser's intertextuality in "The Book of the Dead" draws to some extent from the transhistorical research of the literary archive like the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. But she negotiates this esoteric citationality with many more immediate social and scientific materials relating to the present event. Shoshana Wechsler, in her essay on Rukeyser's closeness to the Objectivists, notes the similarities, both in subject and in style, with Pound's "American cantos," *Eleven New Cantos*, from the early 30s. As Wechsler argues, "[b]ecause it also exhibits many of the earmarks of a long modernist poem 'including history,' it arguably merits inclusion in the same canon occupied by Ezra Pound's Jefferson and Adams cantos (to which it offers a striking counter model), and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (which it anticipates by just a few years)."¹⁷ As I argue below, I find Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" to be a direct influence on rather than just an anticipation of *Paterson*. But following Davidson and

¹⁶ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 139 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Shoshana Wechsler, "A Ma(t)ter of Fact and Vision: The Objectivity Question and Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," *Twentieth Century Literature* 45.2 (Summer 1999), 121-137, 122.

Weschler, it is certainly apparent that there is something in her social use of documentary and archive that, while differing from canonical modernist citationality, still draws some of its affective power in its attempt to also conjure mythic or transhistorical resonance.

Rukeyser deploys the aesthetic powers of difficult modernism in order to draw even more vivid attention to the contemporary scientific, economic, and testimonial archives that she assembles in the long poem. In Michaela Bronstein's book, *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction*, Bronstein draws particular attention to the afterlives of modernist literature, how later 20th century writers—even contemporary writers—continue to draw from modernist forms and aesthetics. And she asserts that their reverse influence changes and at times recuperates our understandings of “modernist” literature as such. Here Bronstein draws particular attention to how later writers invoke modernist sensibilities, often for very immediate personal, social, and political purposes:

Where Conrad, James, and Faulkner seem regularly to move beyond the local political realities of their works—sentences swerve unexpectedly from being about particular characters to being about the human condition in general—their successors view local history and the universally human as best addressed together. Baldwin, Ngugi, and Kesey leverage their historical specificity to claim the authority to comment on human experience in universal tones. For them, evoking “human nature” has an immediate social and political use.¹⁸

While Bronstein draws from the examples of late modernist novels, her analysis might also illuminate Rukeyser's modernist epic tendencies in “The Book of the Dead.” While written in the late 30s, the work speaks back directly to earlier modernist fixations with both avant-garde poetics and mythic citationality, drawing on larger transhistorical questions of the human condition. As Rukeyser invokes the Egyptian underworld text, “I

¹⁸ Michaela Bronstein, *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* (New York: Oxford, 2018), 21.

open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal/I come forth by day, I am born a second time" (*BD*, 30, emphasis in original). Here she draws on the chthonic figures in the ancient text but also makes a striking connection to the crystalized lungs of the recently deceased miner. Rukeyser's counter-modernist impulses do not reject high modernist poetic strategies outright but rather appropriates their aesthetic gravitas to add transhistorical resonance to her immediate political invectives.

William Carlos Williams also notes the hybrid strains of politics and experimental poetics ensconced in Rukeyser's work. In his review of *U.S. I* (which contains "The Book of the Dead") in 1938, his evaluation is somewhat tempered but generally positive towards the collection as a whole and certainly the long poem in particular. Throughout the review he remarks on the materiality of her language, with all the scientific and political connotations that the word *material* implies. As Williams asserts, with a good deal of admiration:

In her first poem, "The Book of the Dead," her material, *not* her subject matter but her poetic material, is in part the notes of a congressional investigation, an x-ray report and the testimony of a physician under cross-examination. These she uses with something of the skill employed by Pound in the material of his "Cantos." She knows how to use the *language* of an X-ray report or a stenographic record of a cross-examination. She knows, in other words, how to select and exhibit her material. She understands what words are for and how important it is not to twist them in order to make 'poetry' of them."¹⁹

Like the contemporary critics mentioned above, Williams also compares her direct use of found documents to Pound's use of materials in *The Cantos*. And he draws particular attention to the specific ways that she applies the documents directly without fully absorbing them into her own poetic voice, while still assembling them in such a way to

¹⁹ William Carlos Williams, "Muriel Rukeyser's 'US1,'" *The New Republic* 94 (March 1938), 141-2, 141 (emphasis in original)

build her case, to accentuate her political intervention. And, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, Williams's later revision of *Paterson* employs a similar use of found documents from Paterson, N.J.: historical records, textbooks, and geological surveys, etc. As this review indicates and the pages of *Paterson* strongly suggest, Williams's interest and fascinations with the materials and techniques in Rukeyser's poem moved beyond admiration and into direct influence, even imitation. But in this review, Williams also tempers his praise of Rukeyser's commitment to her political materialism. He ends the review with a critique of some of the weaknesses of her later poems in *U.S. I*: "[h]er passion will not be sacrificed, on the contrary it will be emphasized, by the success of such attention to technical detail. So will the revolution."²⁰ Williams remains inspecific here on whether he sees these weaknesses as stemming from the appearance of the overly political or whether the "technical difficulties" are hindering the collection's deployment of the political. There seems to be some level of masculinist condescension and gatekeeping here. Yet, this last remark reveals perhaps more about Williams's own struggles to articulate a coherent political stance in his poetry than it does with Rukeyser's own so-called "technical difficulties" or aesthetic/political shortcomings.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the question of materialism and how matter should matter is at the heart Williams's poetic mantra: "NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS." But perhaps one of the greatest deficiencies of *Paterson* is its ability to construct a coherent political stance in relation to this materialism. He invokes the enmeshment of the social, cultural, and the natural, the "interpenetration" of matter and

²⁰ William Carlos Williams. "Muriel Rukeyser's 'US1,'" 142.

meaning. But its central themes and narrative—if it can even be said to contain a clear narrative arc, or a coherent structure—tend to ruminate upon themselves *as* form and structure. To be fair, this is a recurrent conceit in many extended modernist sequences whether in poetry or prose.

Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," does at times engage in this self-referentiality, commenting and reflecting on itself as a structure. Yet of all the poems of this project, it is certainly the most engaged and focused on a singular event. One way that she helps to focus the disparate materials into effective and compelling politically driven images is by drawing on the montage effects of cinema.

The Montage Effect as a Poetic Strategy in "The Book of the Dead"

Perhaps the most innovative way in which Rukeyser attempts build on the bricolage aesthetics of modernist poetics while also reconciling them with her social activism is her understanding of them in relation to the techniques of cinema. Rather than creating difficulty for its own sake, these overlaps and fusions are intended to illuminate and help frame the materials that she has gathered, allowing the reader to become part of the meaning-making process. David Kadlec notes that this early Soviet concept of the montage effect was incorporated by a number of American modernist poets in the beginning in the late 1920s. As he asserts, the influence of Soviet news reels and the montage in particular "affected the way American poets thought about the words they were using, and more importantly how montage methods of construction [influenced] the ambitious long poems of the 1930s and 40s."²¹ While in his essay, Kadlec focuses

²¹ David Kadlec, "Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry," *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (2004), 301.

particularly on the long poems of Williams and Zukofsky, “The Book of the Dead” also deploys these montage techniques at the service of Rukeyser’s political aesthetics.

In both *The Life of Poetry* and in a radio interview given shortly after the publication of “The Book of the Dead,” she gives spirited defenses of her poetry against the charge of being too difficult or too “modernist” by arguing that her complex assemblages in the poem engage in the montage effect used in popular films and in documentaries—that the seeming disjunction of disparate images actually serves to make the larger themes and ideas of the work more resonant with the audience. As she argues in *The Life of Poetry*, “[a]t the same time, almost anything that can be said to make the difficulties of poetry dissolve for the reader, or even to make the reader want to deal with those ‘difficulties’ can be said in terms of film.”²² And in a radio interview from 1938, she specifically addresses the unusual structure of the sequences of “Book of the Dead,” arguing that these rapid cuts between and within the sections actually create a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the reader and the material itself:

I think it would be misleading to describe my poem as narrative poetry in the ordinary sense. I have tried to write a series of poems which are linked together as the sequence of a movie are linked together [...] so that during the sequence the reader has built up for him the story and the picture. [...] The movie public has adjusted itself to this sequence so that there isn’t any strain or lack of belief in the tie up between the two pictures. And in the same way, readers of contemporary poetry are finding that the adjustment of this kind of writing makes for vivid and active poetry.²³

Challenging the notion of bricolage as being part of the difficulties of modern poetry, Rukeyser counters that her complex bombardment of different poetic images and discourses actually work to make the material more approachable and digestible for the

²² Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 150-1.

²³ This transcript is in an appendix in Tim Dayton’s *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead*, 147.

reader, as well as making the reader/viewer an active participant. Like moviegoing audiences adjusting to the new advances of the cinema, it might take a bit of time for readers of poetry to adjust or acclimate to these new poetic techniques, but, as Rukeyser suggests here, it is worth the effort.

In this passage, she is almost certainly drawing directly from the Soviet filmmaker and theorist, Sergei Eisenstein's notion of the montage effect, especially his desire to move away from linear narrative and realist description in an attempt to agitate and provoke rather than merely inform the audience. As he asserts in his essay, "The Montage of Film Attractions," "in cinemas it [the montage of attractions] is made up of the juxtaposition and accumulation, in the audience's psyche, of associations that the film's purpose requires, associations that are aroused by the separate elements of the stated (in practical terms in 'montage fragments') fact, associations that produce, albeit tangentially, a similar (and often stronger effect only when taken as a whole. [...] [*E*]ach fragment is chosen to 'provoke' associations."²⁴ Here Eisenstein argues that his particular use of montage is meant to induce both physiological and ideological reactions, causing the audience to readily respond and participate in the meaning-making process of the associations, which is more effective than being a passive, contemplative viewer.

²⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions" (1924), in *The Eisenstein Reader*, trans. Richard Taylor and William Powell (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 36, emphasis added. Often in his essays on the montage and cinema, he takes great pains to distinguish his method on montage from that of his rival Vertov or his teacher Kuleshov, associating their methods with realism and stasis as opposed to his own that are full of action and agitation. See Eisenstein "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," *The Eisenstein Reader*, 53-59. There is perhaps a further connection to be made between Eisenstein's distinction of his dynamic, activist approach and Rukeyser's own distinction of her poetics to the "fossilized poetics" of the New Criticism that she attacks in *The Life of Poetry*. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 177-8.

In the radio interview, Rukeyser draws on Eisenstein's concept to both explain her craft as well as to mount a defense against the perceived obscurantism and difficulty of modern poetry. She argues that rather than making things less clear and more difficult to decipher, her seemingly disjointed presentation of the disaster at Gauley Bridge is actually carefully calibrated, even cut and edited, to make the reader more engaged and active in the construction of the meaning evoked between the strategic deployment of multiple images. This sense of the larger montage sequence, or what she describes as "vivid and active poetry," is certainly at play between the different sections or movements of the poem. But this montage effect also occurs between lines of the poem as well. For example, in the section "Praise of the Committee," the first part begins like an extended montage sequence. Here she condenses an expansive amount of time taken up by the committee hearings into series of representative moments, pasting together the tremendous amount of data being presented into a few fragments of overlapping narration and soundbites:

This is a defense committee. Unfinished Business:

Two rounds of lawsuits, 200 cases
 Now as to the crooked lawyers
 If the men had worn masks, their use would have involved
 time every hour to wash the sponge at the mouth.
 Tunnel, 3 1/8 miles long. Much larger than
 The Holland Tunnel or Pittsburg Liberty Tubes.
 Total cost, say, \$16,000,000. (BD 21)

This collage of free-indirect discourse from the defense attorneys and prosecutors at the committee hearing goes on like this throughout the majority of the section before suddenly cutting away from Washington to return to the scene at Gauley Bridge. Rather than a juxtaposition of information and rhetoric, the previous montage *sequence* shifts to

a more singular montage *effect* between a few choice images, less rhetorically driven, and more visually evocative and distinctly poetic in register:

The dam's pure crystal slants upon the river.
 A dark noisy room, frozen two feet from stove.
 The cough of habit. The sound of men in the hall
 Waiting for word. (BD 23)

While there is a cinematic aspect to both scenes in this section, this second example perhaps illustrates the very provocative elements of Eisenstein's montage effect (rather than the extended montage sequence) in evoking a number of different associations within just a few short lines, sometimes even within a single line. There is a sudden flashback to the ecological site of the disaster, the light reflecting off the water of the dam evoking translucent crystal—a very mixed, recurrent image that here evokes a glinting beauty but also reminds the reader of the deadliness of silica or glass. The very next line suggests the ongoing meanness of the injured/dying miners' living conditions, a packed room where the stove emits a paucity of warmth. The habitual nature of the chronic cough serves as a background sound effect, which is juxtaposed to the thickness of a tense silence, waiting for the decision of the committee. Perhaps this last moment takes place in a room full of workers waiting for news back at Gauley Bridge, or perhaps this has now cut back to Washington, instead it is a room full of the workers that have just given testimony waiting just outside the senate chamber doors. These montage effects occur throughout the long poem sometimes in extended sequences but often in these brief imagistic collisions of scenes/frames as well.

There is certainly an implication of diffractive interference at play within this notion the montage: the dissonance and resonance registering the effects of difference in

the juxtaposition between flickering images. As Eisenstein suggests in his continual distinction of his theory of montage from his predecessors or rivals: “[m]ontage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another.”²⁵ While here, Eisenstein is more intent on illuminating the proper dialectical functions of his montage effect—the sublation that both cancels out and preserves the clash of thesis and anti-thesis—the image he gives here certainly provokes the notion of diffractive interference as well—what Haraway describes as the interference patterns “where the *effects* of difference appear,”²⁶ where the interference gets registered. Leaving the montage effect to its intended place within the perpetual movement of the dialectic, in the next two sections, I explore the more explicitly diffractive aspects of Rukeyser’s documentary poetics, arguing that her extended mapping process throughout the poem draws on Haraway’s notion of diffractive mapping as well as Gregory Bateson’s cybernetic concept of information of the “news of difference, which she in fact anticipates in *The Life of Poetry*.

Mapping “The News of Difference”: Diffraction and Cybernetic Feedback

Building on my analysis of Rukeyser’s poem within the context of her later engagement with the modernist long poem and the techniques of early cinema, I here turn to specific aspects of the poem that accentuate Rukeyser’s abiding fascination with the interdependencies of science, technology, culture, and poetics. Her emphasis on the

²⁵ Eisenstein, “The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form),” *The Eisenstein Reader*, 95 (emphasis in original).

²⁶ Haraway, “The Promise of Monsters,” 320.

overlap and interference between these realms in “The Book of the Dead” interacts productively with Donna Haraway’s concept of diffractive mapping, which entails registering the patterns of inference between different fields. In the poem, Rukeyser uses the concept of mapping as a persistent trope, drawing particular attention to the proliferating technologies of modern mapping. These often stand in and enhance her desire to “extend the document” (*BD* 146). These mapping processes include the x-ray, the telescopic lens of the documentary camera, the stock exchange, the molecular formula, and the topographic map. She draws together or transposes these different types of cartography in order to triangulate a contingent network of material relation, what she terms a “reciprocal reality” (*LOP* 166). In this sense, the poem is an attempt to deterritorialize—or perhaps reterritorialize—the way the events at Gauley Bridge have been previously “mapped” or registered—to re-orient the narratives that have been presented to the public. As she opens the poem:

These are the roads you take when you think of your country
and interested bring down the maps again,
phoning thing the statistician, asking the dear friend,
reading the paper with morning inquiry. (*BD* 9)²⁷

Here Rukeyser sets the scene for her multifield approach to retracing the event. In this sense, she anticipates Barad and Haraway’s notions of diffractive reading, thinking of the cultural, the natural, and the discursive together. Or rather, she refuses to separate these fields for the sake of clarity and order. In a later section of the poem, she brings together

²⁷ These opening lines as well as this notion of the mapping process are almost certainly alluded to in Adrienne Rich’s poetry collection, *Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991): “I drive inland over roads/ closed in wet weather [...] roads that crawl down into darkness and wind into light. [...] These are not the roads/ you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching/ for life and death is the same.” Adrienne Rich, *Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*. (New York: Norton, 1991), 5.

two different types of mapping systems, one of generated from aerial photography, one from radiology:

No plane can ever lift us high enough
to see forgetful countries underneath
but always now the map and X-Ray seem
resemblent pictures of one living breath
one country marked by error
and one air. (BD 61)

Here Rukeyser highlights the diagnostic aspects of any sort of mapping process whether radiological or topographical, the final homonymic rhyme in the last two lines suggesting that both mapping techniques maintain a degree of fallibility. Both “air” and “error” could easily apply to the x-ray materials which reveal the blocked air passageways in the miner’s lungs, as much as it might also refer to the topographical mapping by plane that loses sight of the particulars in its distance from the earth. The “resemblent pictures of one living breath” evokes a sense of totality, but one peripheral and opaque. The multiple textures impart a richer description but are not impervious to new imprecisions and the blurring of complex material evidence.

This sense of thick, overlapping description evokes the diffractive arguments of Haraway and Barad to engage reality on multiple fields without necessarily privileging one field over the other. As Barad argues at the end of her chapter on diffractive reading in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

My aim in developing a diffractive methodology is to attempt to remain vigorously attentive to important details of specialized arguments within a given field without uncritically endorsing or unconditionally prioritizing one (inter)disciplinary approach over another.

Hence the diffractive methodology that I propose enables a critical rethinking of the science and the social in their relationality. What often appears as separate entities (and separate sets of concerns with sharp edges does not actually entail a relation of absolute exteriority after all. Like the diffraction patterns illuminating

the indefinite nature of boundaries—displaying shadows in “light” regions and bright spots in “dark” regions—the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of exteriority within.²⁸

For both Barad and Haraway, this diffractive methodology involves looking for patterns of interference and moments of superposition between apparently disparate fields of knowledge—fields that are in fact always already integrated and interdependent. This argument against “false divisions” and “disciplinary splittings” is integral to Rukeyser’s poetics, her politics, and her general understanding of material reality. As she asserts in a late poem “Islands” (1976), “O for God’s sake/ they are connected/ underneath.”²⁹

Rukeyser spends much time in both her poetry and prose defending the interrelationship between fields of study, in particular the realms of science and the realms of poetry. As she argues at the end of *The Life of Poetry*, connecting the emerging field of cybernetics and systems theory to the implications of active poetry:

Now a poem, like anything separable and existing in time may be considered a system, and the changes taking place in a system may be investigated. The notion of feedback, as it is used in calculating machines and such linked structures as the locks of the Panama Canal, is set forth. The relations of information and feedback in computing machines and the nervous system, as stated here, raise other problems. What are imaginative information and imaginative feedback in poetry? [...] We know that poetry is not isolated here, any more than any phenomena can be isolated. (*LOP* 201).

In this commingling of art and science in the final pages of the book, Rukeyser *anticipates* Barad’s and Haraway’s notions of diffractive interference; but her argument about information and feedback within systems directly *engages* with the emerging

²⁸ Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 93.

²⁹ Anne Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman, “How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet”: *The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), xvi.

cybernetic theories of Norbert Wiener and Gregory Bateson.³⁰ In his book *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson argues that complex entities, both human and non-human, register information through a process of feedback loops or external interference with the environment. In the following passage, he uses a topographical example, insisting there is always a difference between map and territory, and that these patterns of difference are actually how the maps are drawn up or constructed: “[t]he bridge between map and territory is *difference*. It is only *news of difference* that can get from the territory to the map, and this fact is the basic epistemological statement about the relationship between all reality out there and all perception in here: that the bridge must always be in the form of difference.”³¹ Here Bateson argues that information or feedback, what he defines as “the news of difference” or “*the difference that makes a difference*”³² can only be found in the relationships between entities; it doesn’t exist separately or independently. The *mind* (as both a human and cybernetic processing system) “will always have certain limitations because it can never encounter what Immanuel Kant called *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself. It can only encounter news of boundaries—news of the contexts of difference.”³³ Here Bateson’s

³⁰ Paul Jaussen, in his book *Writing In Real Time*, mentions this relationship of Ruckeyser’s poetics to the realm of cybernetics and systems theory—though in his exploration he focuses on other American long poems rather than exploring “The Book of the Dead” explicitly: “As early as 1949, Muriel Ruckeyser indicated the possible directions for literary criticism coming out of the cybernetic movement, arguing that concepts such as feedback, information, and systemic change had immediate and far-reaching implications for poetry.” Jaussen, *Writing in Real Time*, 25.

³¹ Gregory Bateson, *A Sacred Unity: Further in the Ecology of Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 218, emphasis in original.

³² This mantra seems quite consonant with Haraway’s concern with the way that matter *matters* or Barad’s claim that “ethics is not a concern we add to the question of matter, but rather it is the very nature of what it means to matter.” Barad, “Interview With Karen Barad,” 69

³³ Bateson, *A Sacred Unity*, 218-9. I don’t wish to over-speculate the relationship of Haraway’s notion of diffraction to Bateson’s cybernetic arguments about information and feedback. But I suspect there is a resonance here, especially since Haraway’s early concept of the cyborg is inspired by cybernetic theory.

argument evokes Rukeyser's own appeal to the mathematician Poincaré, "[i]t is in relations alone that objectivity must be sought; it would be vain to consider it in beings considered as isolated from one another" (*LOP* 176). For Rukeyser, her mapping process is built upon a particular attention to the relations and interferences between material realms, not in defining objects in isolation.

Returning to Rukeyser's specific mapping techniques in the poem (the patterns marked by "error" and "air," the measurement of the stock index of Union Carbide, the findings of the subcommittee) all these things are systems of measurement that show where patterns of interference, "the news of differences" appear; but they can never tell the whole story. As she laments, "no plane can ever lift us high enough/ to see forgetful countries underneath" (*BD* 61). Yet, Rukeyser still finds a usefulness in assembling these different forms of evaluation, often forcefully juxtaposing them, finding diffractive patterns of resonance and dissonance between these scientific, medical, legislative, and personal narratives. As Donna Haraway suggests in "The Promises of Monsters," "[a] diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the *effects* of differences appear,"³⁴ or as Bateson suggests, it is the "news of difference" that generates the map or the productive feedback out of a reaction to the territory.

One extended example of Rukeyser's desire to draw attention to the overlap and interference between these realms of knowledge or evaluation comes in the section "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones," where Rukeyser portrays the thoughts of an old

³⁴ Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters," 320.

foreman, reflecting on the many lives that were lost for the sake of the industrial endeavor:

On the quarter he remembers how they enlarged
the tunnel and the crews, finding the silica,
how the men came riding freights, got jobs here
and went into the tunnel mouth to stay.

Never to be used, he thinks, never to spread its power,
jinx on the rock, curse on the power-plant,
hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass.
(O the gay wind the clouds the many men). (BD 18)

Here in the mind of Vivian Jones—inflected to some extent by the frame-speaker’s own valuation of the event—he ruminates on rural mining, manufactory chemistry, hydro-electric power, and the effects of the disease all through the sardonic calculus of the value abstractions of capitalism. The miners “breathed in the value,” re-contextualizing the monetary signification of the raw materials that might have been refined into glass, but instead hastened their deaths.

Vivian Jones’s intricate epiphany elicits the dehumanizing mapping system of capitalist subsumption. As Haraway describes in her book *Modest Witness*, connecting the cartography of mapping to commodity fetish: “inside the mythic and fiercely materialist zones of market relations, things are mistakenly perceived as generators of value, while people appear as and even become ungenerative things, mere appendages of machines, simply vehicles for replicators.”³⁵ The value is in the product and the machines are the producers; the human being is fully subsumed within this mapping framework of production. In the epidemiologist Cherniak’s final analysis, he notes the same problem in

³⁵ Donna Haraway. *Modest Witness@ Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse*TM (New York: Routledge, 1997), 135,

mapping the Gauley Bridge disaster on a larger scale, “its subject, industry of scale, *is also an anonymous process, consisting of great numbers of men and great number of replaceable mechanical parts, sometimes treated without distinction*” (HNI 106, emphasis added). Depending on the system of mapping, the value of human and non-human entities is registered on vastly different scales.

Rukeyser also juxtaposes different scales of value in a later section of the poem. The racketeering charges that the congressmen level at Union Carbide are juxtaposed to a brief numerical line of the stock exchange index. On this chart, the stock value has risen three points on the same day the subcommittee agrees to the culpability of the corporation. Yet in both sections, Rukeyser uses the vivid examples of the miners’ suffering to counter the economic abstractions of what is to be considered valuable. Rukeyser’s diffractive mapping process, transposing maps upon other maps, pushes back against this dehumanizing sense of value by giving names and stories to the anonymous casualties. Yet while these additional layers description add a thickness to the storytelling, the abundance of overlapping material connections also create a sense of opacity as well.

“Viewing on Groundglass an Inverted Image”: Diffraction, Dialectics, and Opacity in “The Book of the Dead”

Besides the use of multiple forms of mapping, Rukeyser draws on other images and recurrent themes that help to suture the long assemblage poem together. Perhaps the most pervasive is the example of silica/glass that takes on a variety of metonymical and metaphorical significations throughout the poem. While at times the image is used to

evoke a sense of clarity and vision, it also contains strong associations with opacity as well. As she opens the poem:

Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,
surveying the deep country, follows discovery
viewing on groundglass an inverted image.
[...] Here is your road, tying
you to its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice.
Telescoped down, the hard and stone-green river
cutting fast and direct into the town. (*BD* 10)

Here Rukeyser first unveils her documentarian approach. Notice the use of verbs of discovery and measurement: “surveying,” “viewing,” “telescoped”. At first blush, this visual imagery creates a broader sense of clairvoyance, scope, and vision “cutting fast and direct,” revealing the visual technologies and alternative cartographies she will draw from in her re-vision of the disaster. And she reiterates this panoramic visualization at the end of the poem—poetry as a form of witness and advocacy: “Defense is sight, widen the lens and see,” “to photograph to extend the voice, / to speak this meaning” (*BD* 71).

Yet she also embeds a line here in the opening section that serves to destabilize rather than support this theme or trope of transparency and revelation. The line “viewing on groundglass an inverted image” doubly negates this clarity of vision that she invokes at other moments of meta-textual expression. The term “groundglass” itself has at least a dual signification in relation to the subject matter of the poem.³⁶ First, the most literal

³⁶ There is actually a third signification of the word “groundglass” which refers to the specialized medical discourse of contemporary radiology, relating to the larger term “ground-glass opacity.” The term, as it is used today, refers to a condition of air displacement in the lungs visualized by CT scanning. It is a surprisingly fitting term in relation to Rukeyser’s text, since she introduces a sense of opacity in her reference to “groundglass” and because of her tendency in the poem to elide words that have different meanings in relation to different discourses. However, I am not versed enough in medical language to know if the term existed during Rukeyser’s time, or if it was a term which relates to reading the radiological charting data produced specifically by CT scanning, a technology which did not emerge until the late 70s. In any case, “ground-glass opacity” is an evocative phrase, especially in relation to the sometimes cloudy or indeterminate abstractions of her own project in “The Book of the Dead.”

definition of the term “groundglass,” refers to glass which has not been refined or has had its transparency destroyed. It might retain a sense of translucency, one might be able to see some light through it, but any image it reveals would be cloudy and indeterminate. This is certainly a strange sort of glass to be associated with cameras, telescopes, and clarity of vision. The second connotation of the “groundglass” is almost certainly meant to reference Marx’s famous metaphor of the camera obscura in *The German Ideology* where he argues that the conditions of ideology make reality appear inverted, upside-down: “[i]f in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life processes as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”³⁷ This allusion to Marx’s metaphor of the distorted vision produced by the ideological lenses of capitalism is in many ways a perfect example in a revolutionary poem written by a Marxian poet. Yet in its specific deployment (with the photographer unpacking the case and telescoping into the event at Gauley Bridge), this seems to undermine the idea of a corrective lens, describing it as opaque and then suggesting that it produces the inverted image of the camera obscura rather than an image meant to counter this ideological vision. Perhaps this is not what Rukeyser was attempting to imply here; but reading these lines closely, between the “groundglass” and “the inverted image,” it is still difficult to turn the two negative optical visions into a clearly positive one.

Many recent critics have also remarked that the creative significations of silica/glass end up becoming inconsistent and mixed throughout the poem. Walter

³⁷ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. *The German Ideology: Part One*. Ed. C.J. Arthur. (New York: International Publishers, 1970: 47.

Kalaidjian argues in his deconstructive/historicist reading of the poem that this “glass lens of the camera obscura functions as a metaphorical *pharmakon* that serves at once to produce and ‘cure’ powers of ideological representation.”³⁸ His invocation of Derridean pharmacology is particularly apt in describing a poem that uses the trope of glass in a number of different, often conflicting ways. Silica dust, is after all, the material reason, the “poison,” that caused the miners’ lungs to fail; and the relationship of the production of glass to modern industrial mining is perhaps the reason that brought them into harm’s way; but in its modern use as a product of technology, it is also the “remedy” or “cure” brought about by the countering gaze of the photo-journalist, who widens the lens and extends the document.

Stacy Alaimo, in her book, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, takes an eco-feminist approach to the text, tying Rukeyser’s project in “The Book of the Dead” to Alaimo’s own new materialist concept, “transcorporeality,” which attempts a reconciliation of the bodily, material natures of human and non-human subjects with social and political theory. However, Alaimo makes one particular criticism about the final indeterminacy of Rukeyser’s method of transdisciplinary signification. As Alaimo argues, “even as Rukeyser includes a panoply of discourses, she struggles to map an ontology in which the body of the worker, the river, the silica, the ‘natural,’ and the industrial environment are simultaneously material and social, sites where institutional and material power swirl together.”³⁹ Indeed, in a poem that employs as its material evidence a number of different mapping technologies, molecular formulas, legislative

³⁸ Walter Kalaidjian, 168.

³⁹ Stacy Alaimo. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 48.

rhetoric, and survivor testimonies, it is still difficult to find a stable *ontology* or central material ground on which her arguments rest.

Both Kalaidjian's invocation of the "pharmakon," and Alaimo's diagnosis that Rukeyser "struggles to map an ontology" reiterate that despite the preponderance of evidence and the multiplicity of vantage points, much of the material and ideas in "The Book of the Dead" remains indeterminate or at least provisional. It is easy to read the poem on its face as a philippic on the negligence, greed, and deception of a mining corporation and, by implication, the corrupt ideologies of American and transnational capitalism; but there is also significant remainder in the poem that cannot be fully synthesized or incorporated into this clear, singular vision. While Rukeyser is steadfast in "The Book of the Dead" as well as her own personal commitment to radical politics and change, some of the material contents of her poetics actually opacify the metaphor/metonymy of material tropes like glass/silica, and also tend to leave indeterminate ideological abstractions like "mastery" and "power."

While not fully disagreeing with Kalaidjian and Alaimo, I argue that there is an element of her ambitious deployment of materiality that remains deliberately elusive, opaque, and un-synthesized, that resists a centralized material or political ontology. Some of this is intentional, indicating her desire to generate a total vision through an aggregate of assembled materials; but some of this opacity also exceeds her willed intentions. This has at times created quite disparate interpretations of the poem. For example, Tim Dayton, in his book-length treatment of the poem, praises the end of one of the later sections, "The Dam" as a celebration of the eternal resilience of the dead workers, who in

the end gain “mastery” or moral victory over the forces of capitalism.⁴⁰ Perhaps this is so. Yet these last few lines are preceded by a section which describes in lurid detail the racketeering that allowed the disaster as well as the fallout to be absolved or minimized, including the index showing the Union Carbide stock rising by three points. This abstract poetic rumination on eternal power and mastery could instead be a dark reflection on the durable, morphic powers of capitalism which maintain control over the life-processes of the bodies of the laborers:

Collecting eternally power. Spender of power,
 Torn, never can be killed, speeded in filaments,
 Millions, its power can rest and rise forever,
 Wait and be flexible. Be born again.
 Nothing is lost, even among the wars,
 Imperfect flow, confusion of force.
 It will rise. These are the phases of its face.
 It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.
 It changes. It does not die. (*BD* 58)

This could as easily stand as a harrowing description of the cunning, Protean powers of modern capitalism as much as it might be a hymn to the resilience of the workers in the afterlife. The clouded connotation of the language suggests both. There is a power and mastery that is perfect and eternal in the voices of the dead who are now a part of the earth, but there is also a Manichean implication of power that seems to drive and sustain the engines of these companies that is equally as palpable.

These abstract terms are deployed enough throughout the poem, in enough different contexts, that they serve to dilute or opacify their meanings. However, I would argue that this is a testament to Rukeyser’s move (both conscious and unconscious)

⁴⁰ Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead*, 104-5.

towards a what she terms a “reciprocal reality” or a more provisional objectivity. Maps, symbols, and poetic forms help clarify the world to a degree, but they remain always as fallible approximations marked by errors and omissions. Rukeyser is certainly not diffident in her political commitments; but she is not simply out to write a poetic version of the orthodox proletarian novel. There are certainly elements of this; but the conclusions and focuses are too capacious, too opaque, and too contingent to be reduced to that singular vision. As Donna Haraway argues, “You have to register the interference. [...] [Diffraction/diffractive mapping] attempts to make visible all those things that might have been lost in an object; not in order to make the other meanings disappear, but rather to make it impossible for the bottom line to be one single statement.”⁴¹ In the “Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser at times allows the interferences and opacities to linger without forcing them into a false sense synthesis or transparency.

Conclusion

Rukeyser’s poetic approach in “The Book of the Dead” anticipates diffractive interference while still working within Marxist commitments to political revolution. And her poem’s resistance to final synthesis gestures at the diffractive opacities of Édouard Glissant as much as it upholds the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno. The poem creates a need for revolution as well as a sense of totality, but is a totality that remains peripheral, contingent, and developing. As she ends the poem she argues for “new processes, new signals, new possession” (*BD* 71) and “desire, field, beginning” (*BD* 72).

⁴¹ Haraway, *How Like a Leaf*, 105.

Her deep fascination with the complexity and process of reality will not allow for the reduction of her findings into one final unity. As she argues in *The Life of Poetry*, “for all things change in time; some are made of change itself, and the poem is of these. It is not an object; the poem is a process” (*LOP* 186).

In this way, her sustained practice of avoiding the lure of false transparency resembles the notion of opacity and open totality that Édouard Glissant argues for in his work *Poetics of Relation*. As he cautions:

[D]ifference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent. [...] Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave, not on the nature of its components.⁴²

Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of “peripheral totality” (which Glissant refers to as “open totality”), the supposed weakness of preserving opacity is actually a strength. The failure to map or put forward “a stable ontology” (as Alaimo claims of Rukeyser’s poetics) is actually a method which preserves an “irreducible singularity” rather than synthesizing and reducing it into an enclosed framework. Rukeyser’s “Book of the Dead” is a poem that employs a Marxist lens of critique throughout the entire poem. But it is a poem that also highlights the non-dialectical interactions of materialism that remain unsynthesized—interested in allowing for complexity and the opacity of “the groundglass” that serves as the lens of sight for the entire poem. The diffraction, interference, and residual opacities are not a replacement for the necessary reflection of

⁴² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

dialectics and critique, but rather help renew their connections and commitments to the physical material on which they reflect.

Rukeyser, while devoted to the goals of historical materialism, nevertheless, allows the materials of her poem to “react to the world,” and at times to remain diffident and not fully synthesized. As Adorno argues in his *Negative Dialectics*: “Theory does not contain answers to everything; it reacts to the world, which is faulty to the core. [...] It means a double mode of conduct: an inner one, the immanent process which is a properly dialectical one, and a free, unbound one, like a stepping out of dialectics” (*ND* 31). Here, for a brief moment, Adorno opens up a vista outside of the dialectic, acknowledging that critical theory or the universalization of dialectics is limited. And that these limitations are, in fact, the conditions of reality. Likewise, Rukeyser’s notion of the opacity of groundglass, allows for the free unboundedness of material reality to become the new external ground by which to begin the dialectical task again. While the photographer follows discovery, and views on “groundglass an inverted image,” the dialectical image may—for a moment—reverse the angle of the camera obscura, but we still see through the groundglass somewhat darkly, or opaquely.

In his concept of identity, the mediation of reality through the necessary and contingent structure of materialism, Adorno admits that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder. [...] [T]he concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.”⁴³ In a diffractive sense, the internal workings and coherence of internal dialectical synthesis must always be recalibrated and reset by a “reaction to the world,”

⁴³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

the external diffractive interference that prevents it from endless mirroring and reflection of concepts and their opposites or negations. This sense of residual opacity in Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" suggests that there is always a remainder in dialectical thought. That dialectics as a "reaction to the world" might need at times to reach outside its reflective or reflexive tendency towards mirroring and sameness. As Adorno argues, this requires productive moments of "stepping outside" dialectics; continuing to "register the interferences"⁴⁴ rather than displacing the same elsewhere as Haraway asserts; or "reducing things to the Transparent,"⁴⁵ as Glissant warns. Activist poetics and materialist theories are not just methods of critique but methods of composition and storytelling as well. Or as Rukeyser suggests at the end of the poem "Deliberate combines and new qualities/ sums of new uses [...] new process, new signals, new possession" (*BD* 71). This requires both a commitment to the insights of critical reflection but also an openness to the incorporation and composition of new materials as well, despite their lingering opacities.

Rukeyser's poetics in "The Book of the Dead" demonstrates an activist political engagement that is, at times, productively complicated by an opaque diffractive lens. While Rukeyser's life work reveals an abiding commitment to racial as well as economic justice, in "The Book of the Dead," her political formalism in terms of class consciousness at times diminishes some of the racial disparities that were at work in the events that transpired. As David Kadlec argues, "[w]ritten out of Rukeyser's brilliant exposure of corporate and state mechanisms of erasure are the less-than-superficial racial

⁴⁴ Haraway, *How Like a Leaf*, 105.

⁴⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

dimensions of Gauley tunnel.”⁴⁶ In *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, Melvin B. Tolson speaks back to the racial foreclosures of modernist aesthetics as well as the material and political disparities upheld by the so-called empiricist claims of Western Science. In the next chapter, I more fully explore the particularly cultural implications of diffractive materialist poetics in Tolson’s *Libretto*, building more explicitly upon Glissant’s own particular theorization of cultural diffraction, as well as Sylvia Wynter’s materialist critique of the Western “descriptive statements” of science and culture. And in the final chapter, I return to this notion of diffractive mapping I have discovered in Rukeyser’s poetics, exploring it within the context of Eleni Sikelianos’s 21st century approach to ecological poetics.

⁴⁶ David Kadlec, "X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser," *Modernism/modernity* 5, no. 1 (1998): 23-47. [doi:10.1353/mod.1998.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.1998.0020).

Chapter 3

Tolson's Demiurge in *Libretto for The Republic of Liberia*:

Cultural Diffraction and Demonic Ground,

Rewriting the Descriptive Statement of Modernist Poetry at Midcentury

Introduction

Much like Williams opens *Paterson*, declaring it “a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands; [...] a plan for action to supplant a plan for action,”¹ Melvin B. Tolson’s midcentury long poem, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), opens by announcing its engagement but also its revaluation of the modernist long poem: “Liberia?/ No micro-footnote in a bunioned book/ Homed by a pedant/ With a gelded look [...] No waste land yet.”² Here Tolson speaks back to the moderns—particularly Eliot—directly and in not so very flattering terms. His poem magnifies the country of Liberia in contradistinction to the “unreal cities” and waning civilizations of the West, challenging what he views as Eliot’s *sterilized* cosmopolitan poetics. Yet his aggressive opening also belies his desire for his poem to be considered within the same formal criteria. Unlike Williams’s local, bare-handed alternative to the high modernist erudition of Pound and Eliot, Tolson doubles down on their transhistorical allusiveness and citational strategies. His poem comes replete with sixteen pages of endnotes, themselves longer than *The Waste Land* itself; and the poem travels in time and space to a past before the founding of Liberia, the Songhai dynasty (of the 1400s), and it also envisions its utopian future, “the

¹ Williams, *Paterson*, 2.

² Melvin B. Tolson, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1953), ll. 1-4, 50. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *L*. The first edition has no pagination, so I will refer instead to the line or endnote number.

Futurafrique” (L 575), long after its centennial anniversary in 1947. Yet while *Libretto* certainly engages in the erudition and mythopoetic syncretism of high modernist epics like *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land*, Tolson’s poem (as those introductory lines suggest) intentionally girds itself against being assimilated or quarantined within a “white-washed” high modernist framework. As Muriel Rukeyser in “The Book of the Dead” uses the bricolage techniques of modernist poetics in order to deploy her active political and scientific engagement with social justice—“to extend the document”—so to does Tolson’s turn to a transhistorical mythopoetics to bolster his commitment to racial justice as well an emergent Pan-African solidarity: “*Mehr licht* [more light] for the Africa-To-Be! [...] Black Lazarus risen from the White Man’s grave” (L 16, 38).

Yet this ambitious fusion comes at a cost, leaving him and his midcentury long poem on the peripheries of canonical literary modernism (1900-1945), as well as lodged between the Harlem Renaissance (1920-mid 1930s) and the Black Arts movement (1965-75). While the poem works in the vein of an emerging 20th century Pan-Africanism and even anticipates the speculative, utopian registers of Afro-Futurism, it has also been fairly criticized by contemporaneous and later critics as being assimilationist, if not in politics, then certainly in literary style and form. As the Black Arts poet-critic Sarah Webster Fabio suggests of *Libretto* and Tolson’s even more ambitious final work, *The Harlem Gallery* (1965), “while Tolson busied himself out-pounding Pound, his fellow poets forgot to send him the message that Pound was out.”³ Here Fabio chides Tolson, fairly,

³ Sarah Webster Fabio, “Who Speaks Negro?”, *Negro Digest* 16, no. 2 (1965), 56-7, quoted in Robert M. Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson, 1898-1966: Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 276.

for being aesthetically out of step even to the tastes of the white Agrarians from the Fugitive School; yet her critique misses that within his late modernist style is an incredibly subversive politics. Embedded in his dense allusions and citationality is a deep structural critique of the political and scientific notions of the Western human subject.

Like Rukeyser and late modernist and midcentury poets like Louis Zukofsky and Gwendolyn Brooks, Tolson did not view the techniques of modernist poetics as incommensurate with progressive political activism. Instead, Tolson's embrace of this high modernist poetic style was driven by a desire to open up new avenues of political and cultural engagement, as well as to experiment—albeit quite speculatively and naïvely—within a new Pan-African imaginary. *Libretto* actively seeks to counter or present an alternative to the Euro-centric cultural, scientific, and political imagination; but the poem also actively courts a direct comparison with the high modernist sequence. Tolson saw his turn to modernist aesthetics as one of necessity and inevitability. As he argues in a book review in 1955: “[w]hen Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the victory of the moderns was complete. Poetry will never be the same. The modern idiom is here to stay—like modern physics.”⁴

Yet Tolson's underlying ideological commitments were also driven by distinct blend of Christianity and Marxism, “sustained by a faith and dialectics” as he reflects in one of his late notebooks.⁵ The poem certainly echoes the erudition and austerity of Euro-American high modernism while at the same time consciously undermining the

⁴ Melvin B. Tolson, “Modern Poetry Under the Microscope,” *Midwest Journal* 7, no. 1 (1952), 113-4, quoted in Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 144.

⁵ Melvin B. Tolson, Container 7, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

structuring myths of western exceptionalism by projecting a counter-mythology and history. While addressing Pound and Eliot on their own aesthetic ground, Tolson's *Libretto* excavates the buried myths and histories of a previously diminished and disregarded Africa as well as composing new myths and visions to counter their Eurocentric visions of modernity. As he intimates in his notes to the poem, "I wish to explore a realm previously unvisited by Eliot."⁶

Within recent recuperative scholarship, Tolson's *Libretto* stands as a late modernist or an Afro-modernist text that uses the myth-making tropes of the high modernist long poem to fashion its own counter-narrative of its severe omissions. In his chapter on Tolson, Lorenzo Thomas locates in the poem homages to earlier models of the western epic (like the nation-building done by Virgil in *The Aeneid*), but he argues the poem also functions as a kind of corrective or re-centering of a new tradition of "Afro-centric modernism."⁷ Kathy Lou Schultz, like Thomas, also finds a parity in Tolson epic impulses with that of Langston Hughes from the Harlem Renaissance and Amiri Baraka from the Black Arts Movement, expanding Thomas's description of *Afrocentric modernism* to explore specifically what she notes as the 20th century tradition of *the Afro-modernist epic*. As she argues in her introduction,

Tolson and Baraka in particular are responding to early twentieth century modernist revisions of the epic, as well as to Classical sources. [...] Yet, all these poets came to employ the Afro-modernist epic at a time when they needed a long form to contain portions of diasporic history, as each re-envision his own story of the African diaspora. In doing so, they revise elements of the Classical epic to

⁶ Tolson Papers, Container 9.

⁷ Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 111.

create collective stories of people of African descent and form a new representation of diasporic identity.⁸

Both Thomas and Schultz point to the revisionary re-centering of modernist poetry that is occurring particularly in this midcentury period after the Harlem Renaissance, where even firmly-rooted Black American poets like Tolson are reaching towards a mythopoetic structure that extends far beyond regional American contexts. Echoing Thomas and Schultz, Matthew Hart suggests that terms like “Afro-modernism” have served as a moving signifier in 21st century criticism, arguing that the concept has been “implicitly underwritten by social theories about the possibility of ‘alternative modernities’ centered on time and places other than the capitalist west”.⁹

These concepts of Afro-modernism and “alternative modernities” serve well to describe the project that Tolson attempts in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*—that within this somewhat amorphous literary movement, there is a move towards revision or alternatives to the Euro-centric monopolization of the cultural project of modernity. Tolson’s Afro-modernism in *Libretto* very intentionally challenges the *cordon sanitaire* of literary modernism, while simultaneously attempting to theorize and re-vision what a world would look like with an Afro-centric rather than a Euro-centric or American-centric imaginary locus. Yet as Tyrone Williams suggests, Tolson’s poetic and political visions of Africa and Liberia are also deeply inflected by his Black American positionality.¹⁰ Perhaps, what makes the poem and poet so difficult to incorporate even

⁸ Schultz, Kathy Lou Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History: Tolson, Hughes, Baraka* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xviii

⁹ Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 148.

¹⁰ Tyrone Williams, The Pan-African-Americanism of Melvin B. Tolson, *Flashpoint Magazine*, Web Issue 14 (Spring 2012), n.p.. <https://www.flashpointmag.com/twmstol.htm>.

within an aesthetic/period term like Afro-Modernism is that, as Hart suggests, the poem itself resists a final synthesis: it “struggles to reconcile the tension between its multiple ideological commitments to Liberia, America, and a future world beyond nations and empires.”¹¹ Yet its failure of synthesis and its ideological complexities may actually be what makes *Libretto* so resilient as a midcentury modernist text.

In this chapter, I argue that *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* participates actively and intentionally in a mid-century Afro-modernism that attempts to reshape the form and revise the subject matter of modernist poetry, particularly the modernist long poem. Tolson’s primary purpose is not to deflect or ironize the high modernism of Eliot and Pound, “no caricature with a mimic flag” (*L* 43); but it is rather to remaster it and suture it to the political and anthropological purposes of an ascendant culture. While the poem celebrates Liberia as a nation, it uses Liberia as a concept to articulate a transnational sense of Black identity, connecting the ongoing struggles of Black Americans during the Jim Crow era to the resilience of the ongoing Liberian project. The poem is at times transcendent, strident, and flat-footed. Yet its difficult, diffractive allusions produce patterns of both productive and destructive interference rather than moments of synthetic absorption. Tolson looks to a deeper past in order to envision a future mythology, science, and humanism—what he terms “the role of the new demiurge in Negro life and Africa”¹²—a counter-mythos that opens up ideological foreclosures

¹¹ Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry*, 8.

¹² Tolson, Container 7, Tolson Papers.

within the realm of literary modernism and attempts to articulate a new structure of both Afro-centric and post-racial humanism.

Building on its historical context, I also examine how *Libretto* illuminates some of the larger diffractive materialist concerns of this project. However, I find that Tolson's engagement with diffractive materialism takes an inverse approach from that of Williams and Rukeyser. Those long poems are more attuned to the physical manifestations of materialism that emerge in the "interpenetration" of Williams's *Paterson* and the scientific, medical, and political diffractive mapping project in Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead." Rather than exploring how the linguistic and cultural emerges from the physical material, *Libretto* is particularly invested in how scientific and political materialist claims are influenced and produced by cultural and linguistic narratives.

I argue that the poem incorporates a diffractive poetics that uses high modernist intertextuality and mythic allusiveness in order to challenge the embedded essentialism of Western cultural thinking. In particular, I examine the productive interference patterns created between the poem and its robust endnotes. Drawing from Édouard Glissant's specific argument about cultural diffraction in *Poetics of Relation*, Tolson's *Libretto* participates in a *diffraction* of cultures that serves to undo the concentration and reification of the false roots of Western cultural and scientific ideologies. Glissant's diffraction builds his notion of limitless or irreducible creolization from the traditionally synthetic and purely linguistic aspects of what it means to creolize—highlighting the productive translocal overlap and interference that occurs between diffracting cultures that are resilient and resistant to the synthetic absorption of imperialism. Likewise,

Tolson's tendencies towards cultural syncretism, particularly in the canto "TI" and his endnotes, attempt to bind together intercultural knowledge without concentrating them into one synthetic root system.

Tolson's own construction of a humanist materialism—which he references numerous times in his notes, journals, and essays—anticipates some of the notions of hybridity and entanglement in what I have previously associated with diffractive materialism. Tolson describes this interstitial relationship as the "tridimensionality" of biology, sociology, and psychology which makes up a person's full material constitution.¹³ This entangled concept of the human certainly anticipates the diffractive entanglement of physical, cultural, and discursive matter in Barad and Haraway, and the hybridity of facts (the scientific), language (the linguistic), and power (the social/cultural) in Latour. But it even more directly intersects within the decolonial critiques of humanism in the theory of Glissant, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter.

In *Libretto*, and throughout his career, Tolson is aware how the many of the pillars of structural racism are embedded in supposedly empirical and authoritative discourses. As he asserts in the seventh canto, "TI," "Again black Aethiop reaches at the sun, O Greek. / Things-as-they-are-for-us, *nullius in verba*, / speak!" (L 454-6). Invoking the empiricist mantra of the Royal Society, "nothing in words"—which faintly echoes Williams's own materialist mantra "no ideas but in things"—Tolson challenges how the discourse of Western culture has willfully ignored the empirical evidence of the black

¹³ Tolson, "Modern Poetry Under the Microscope" *Midwest Journal* 7, no. 1 (1952), 115, quoted in Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 144. See also Melvin B. Tolson, "Melvin B. Tolson: An Interview, A Poet's Odyssey" *Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, edited by Herbert Hill (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 187; and *Container 7*, Tolson Papers.

experience, falsely posting a mythic Euro-centric, Greco-Roman through-line of political and scientific development. Tolson is not only challenging the cultural occlusions of the Western cultural order, but also the way these political and cultural discourses have been buttressed by Western scientific empiricism, often at the expense of the dehumanization of the colonial, black African subject.

Like the decolonial challenges made by Frantz Fanon (who Tolson invokes specifically in a late essay) and late 20th century decolonial philosophers like Édouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter, Tolson's embedded critique in *Libretto* both exposes and delegitimizes the inherent racialization in the modern regimes of politics, science, and the arts, which have served alternately to foster and bolster one another's myths. Wynter's decolonial project exposes the underlying "descriptive statement" that has served as the hidden bedrock that upholds the evolving political and scientific definitions of "Man" in the modern era: "which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."¹⁴ Likewise, Tolson's concept of material relation in *Libretto* is not focused on physical materialism, but rather on the relationship of scientific and political materialism to the construction of the human subject. Tolson's *Libretto* calls for the disenchantment of Western discourse and attempts to lay the groundwork of an alternative constitution of both modern Africa and a new planetary unity, "the oneness/ in the manyness/ of Man!"¹⁵

While his ambitious poem works in the same vein as theoretical projects of decolonization and articulates the revision of Western human subject, in its explicit

¹⁴ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003), 260. Project Muse. [doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015).

¹⁵ Tolson Papers, Container 9.

connection to neo-colonial Liberia, it also transposes some of the myths of American greatness onto this developing model nation. In short, some of the daring cartographies that Tolson maps in this poem are still, consciously and unconsciously, guided by the same exceptionalism that he attempts to critique.

Brief Chapter Description/Outline

This chapter first examines Tolson’s historical background and his complicated relationship to both literary modernism and the Republic of Liberia. In discussing this underrepresented poet and poem, I draw from important recovery work done by previous critics as well as my own archival research on Tolson’s notes and drafts to the poem and his unpublished letters and essays. I open with two brief sections that seek to contextualize Tolson, his poem *Libretto*, as well as its reception. I also provide a navigable explication of the complex poem, which is often lacking in other treatments of the text. In the second half of the chapter, I examine *Libretto*’s use of a diffractive poetics, most specifically in the interference patterns created between the poem and its baggy endnotes. Here I focus on Glissant’s notion of translocal cultural diffraction and creolization which he argues avoids the tendencies towards the synthetic absorption of imperialism. And in the final section, I explore Tolson’s critique of modern humanism and materialism through the lens of Sylvia Wynter’s argument for revising the embedded “descriptive statement” of Western modernity. *Libretto* is a poem that participates actively in both critique and composition, and it illustrates the promise and the limits of a cultural diffractive poetics.

Tolson’s Road to *Libretto*

Melvin B. Tolson is a poet that is difficult to classify within a particular era or school in 20th Century American poetry. Although he was a direct contemporary and became a close friend of Langston Hughes (he was actually born two years before Hughes in 1898), Tolson didn't publish his first major collection of poetry, *Rendezvous with America*, until 1944, well after the height of the Harlem Renaissance. This first collection, while including some more traditional forms of poetry like the sonnet and the ballad, also contains some aspects of American poetry's early dalliance with *vers libre*, reminiscent of the work of Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandberg, Langston Hughes, and, perhaps most immediately Hart Crane in *The Bridge* (1930).

His turn in *Libretto* to not only to a more cosmopolitan literary style but also a transnational cultural focus is especially notable considering Tolson's rural upbringing and professional career. Many of his contemporaries, were either born in or emigrated to the American municipalities of modern art and literature (New York, Chicago, San Francisco). Tolson was born in rural Missouri. Besides attending college at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and completing his one-year Masters in Literature at Columbia University in New York in the early 30s, Tolson spent the majority of his life teaching at Wiley College in East Texas and Langston University in Oklahoma.¹⁶ While Tolson spent the majority of his life rooted in small towns and colleges in the middle of America, his scholarship and literary ambitions extended to larger American contexts, writing a weekly column entitled "Caviar and Cabbage" for the black newspaper *The*

¹⁶ He is perhaps most well-known in popular culture for his role as the debate coach that led the Wiley debate team to victory against USC in the 1930s, recently dramatized by Denzel Washington playing Tolson in the movie *The Great Debaters* (2007).

Washington Tribune from 1937-1944. Here he explored quite openly his radical fusion of Marxism and Christianity. These include his pontifications on the embeddedness of systemic racism in the politics and science of “the Great White World” as well as some of his Marxist ideas for creating revolution and equality. In fact, some of the social critiques that he works into the complex matrix of the cantos of *Libretto* (and later *The Harlem Gallery*) are actually described with a good deal of candor in this column (which I take up in detail later in the chapter). Many of the criticisms that Tolson has received for being an accommodationist and gradualist often overlook how Tolson’s radicalism started early and also never really left. For example, after a brusque run-in with Ralph Ellison in the 1966, Tolson reflects how Ellison has abandoned his early radical Marxism, whereas Tolson insists that his own remains steadfast.¹⁷ While his politics is unassailable, his poetry does make a marked shift from the populist short poems of *Rendezvous with America* in 1944 to the dizzying erudition of *Libretto*’s contrapuntal exertions in 1953. Perhaps his newly found cosmopolitan aesthetics evolves to match his increasingly transnational subject matter.

While Tolson was not a well-travelled poet, even within America, in 1947 he managed to garner the title of poet laureate of the Republic of Liberia; and he was commissioned to write a poem celebrating the centennial anniversary of the African nation. This was an especially unusual appointment; and even recent critics are at odds as

¹⁷ Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 299. As Tolson laments in his notes, suggesting Ellison’s betrayal of a former radicalism they both shared: “The ideological battle is the most bitter and devastating battle that there is. Ex-Communist turns on Communist. Ellison knows that I know, but he knows I cannot be bought. I haven’t changed he has. [...] He is an individualist. I am a social writer. Ellison claims he is a descendent of Emerson. He says the Negro endures; I say he advances. He and I have debated long. I don’t want to write an Alger story of a Negro who succeeded. I have a social approach to man’s problems.”

to whether Tolson ever visited the country during his lifetime!¹⁸ Matthew Hart also points out that Tolson's position as Laureate actually "evolved" a great deal. He was originally appointed to a dual laureateship with Duke Ellington tied specifically to an exhibition in Washington D.C. in 1947, celebrating the centennial of the African nation. As Hart finds, "sometime between 1947 and the publication of *Libretto* in late 1953, however, Tolson's title morphed from one of two occasional laureateships to its expansive final version: national in scope, individual in nature, and unlimited in term."¹⁹ This transnational collaboration between Tolson and the country of Liberia was, at least in part, due to his connections with his alma mater Lincoln University, one of the first historically black colleges in America (founded in 1854), originally named after Jehudi Ashmun, an early white abolitionist and one of the founders of the concept and eventually the country of Liberia. Many of the political leaders of Liberia attended Lincoln University over the next hundred years. And some other notable students from Lincoln University also led some of the 20th century decolonial efforts in other African nations, such as Kwame Nkrumah (who became prime minister of Ghana) and Nnamdi Azikiwe (who became prime minister of Nigeria).²⁰ Hart also notes (referencing scholars of diaspora studies) that this early transnational Pan-African collaboration was actually the inadvertent result

¹⁸ Kathy Lou Schultz believes that he may have never visited Liberia in his lifetime. Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic*, 39. And Matthew Hart argues that, he did in fact make a journey there for the inauguration of the President in 1956, over 9 years after his laureateship was conferred and nearly three years after the poem was published, Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry*, 168. Tolson's biographer, Robert Farnsworth references a trip to a presidential inauguration in Liberia but is himself somewhat bemused that Tolson has no personal writing documenting his time in Liberia or his layover in Paris—his only ostensible journeys outside of the United States. Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 217-20.

¹⁹ Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry*, 160

²⁰ Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 151. Farnsworth also locates a connection between the themes in Tolson's *Libretto* and Azikiwe's book on a new African ascendancy, *Renascent Africa* (1937), especially where Azikiwe lampoons Spengler's decline of the west and quotes George Bernard Shaw's claim that "the next great civilization may come from the Negro race," Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 159.

of the continued segregation of higher-education in America into the 20th century. African Americans often studied alongside native Africans or Black scholars from other diasporic nations; and this collaboration produced fruitful networks of black emancipation and transnational solidarity.²¹

However, it is important to stress that this peculiar relationship between the poet and the independent nation of Liberia also reveals the mixed legacy of America-Liberian neo-colonialism. While Liberia, as its name suggests, was a symbol of the liberation of the former slaves from the Americas and the West Indies, it also has an equally problematic heritage with its ongoing colonial and post-colonial sponsorship by the United States. Within its own borders, Liberia has had a fraught history of exclusion and inequality between the Americo-Liberian gentry and the lower caste of indigenous Liberians. This has continued to this day, a reminder that that many other governments “conceived in liberty,” like Liberia’s original sponsor, depend on the labor of a continuously oppressed and often disavowed minority to sustain their economic prosperity. Tolson’s biographer Farnsworth acknowledges that Tolson was certainly aware of some of these flaws within the Liberian state, but, as poet laureate, was not in a position to focus on those shortcomings in an occasional poem celebrating the country’s hundred-year anniversary.²² Perhaps another reason that Tolson abstains from a direct

²¹ Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry*, 160-1.

²² As his biographer puts it: “Tolson deliberately chose to look at the hopes and promises inherent in Liberia’s past and its key position on a continent of nations emerging from colonial rule. He deliberately looked past many of the well-known social problems of contemporary Liberia: the troublesome social divisions between the descendants of American settlers and the native African peoples and the dangers of the extraordinary power of American corporations and the autocratic rule of the national government. [...] Instead he focused the democratic aspirations inherent in its founding ideals and its potential role in a brotherhood of nations seeking to realize a democratic dream.” (Farnsworth 165).

critique is that his ideological goals in the poem extend far beyond his limited knowledge and engagement with Liberia. The poem is written to commemorate a particular Liberian exceptionalism, but it is also Tolson's opportunity to explore new avenues of both poetic form as well as a transnational cultural poetics. And when Tolson christens the state on its centennial as "the rope across the abyss [...] a moment in the conscience of mankind" (L 15, 56), he is attempting to enunciate a larger transcultural concept or aspiration rather than a linear, candid history of a place that he may never have even visited. Needless to say, while Tolson's connections (both geographic and political) to the Republic of Liberia might be more than a bit tenuous, the transnational spirit of the poem reflects a larger recognition of a global sense of Pan-African identity and solidarity that was beginning to take root in the 20th century.²³

Libretto and Its Reception

Libretto contains eight major movements or cantos each named, somewhat high-handedly, after the notes of the diatonic scale. Tolson fulfills his role as poet laureate, keeping each section tethered to Liberian subject matter. But his literary and cultural aspirations are much more transnational, even while its style and content also test the limits of his knowledge of both Liberia and midcentury Pan-African movements. The poem sustained multiple drafts before it was finally published in its entirety by Twayne Publishers in 1953. An earlier version of the seventh canto, "TI," was published by *Poetry Magazine* in the Spring of 1950, alongside a preface written by Allen Tate, who

²³ For a more nuanced take on the problematic relationship of Tolson's poem to the fraught history of the Republic of Liberia, read Matthew Hart's chapter on Tolson, "Transnational Anthems and the Ship of State: Harryette Mullen, Melvin B. Tolson, and the Politics of Afro-Modernism" particularly pp. 158-176. Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry*, 142-176.

was at that time a recent American poet laureate, a major figurehead of the Fugitive School of Southern Agrarians at Vanderbilt, and by default one of the leading practitioners of the New Criticism. This acknowledgement from the conservative Tate, while actively sought by Tolson, ended up overshadowing the poem itself, and has earned Tolson much of the criticism that he was acquiescing to the poetic tradition as much as he was attempting to counter and reappropriate it. Most critical treatments of Tolson's strong pivot to high modernist aesthetics in his later poems discuss both Tate's preface to *Libretto* and Karl Shapiro's blundering attempt to rescue Tolson from Tate's patronizing valuation in his introduction to Tolson's *Harlem Galley*.²⁴ Michael Bérubé's book comparing the receptions of Tolson and Thomas Pynchon provides the most extensive treatment of the fallout created by both prominent white poets' sponsorship of Tolson's poetry. He notes in particular that Tate's preface published alongside the short section of *Libretto* in *Poetry Magazine*, ends up serving to both overshadow and even stand in for the poem, long before the full version was ever published. Furthermore, Bérubé suggests that Tate's argument that "[f]or the first time, it seems to me, a Negro poet has assimilated completely the full poetic language of his time and, by implication, the language of the Anglo American African tradition" actually completely inverts Tolson's

²⁴In an effort to recue Tolson from the denaturing praise of Tate, Shapiro wrote that "Tolson writes and thinks in Negro." Melvin B. Tolson, *The Harlem Gallery: Book 1, The Curator* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), 11. While Tolson used the term "negro" frequently in his own writing, the term was already out of fashion within the Black community in the mid-60s, especially coming from the pen of a white poet-critic. Unlike Tate, Shapiro was a dear friend of Tolson. They often corresponded; and in a late letter, it seems apparent that Shapiro actually may have introduced an aging Tolson to the work of Frantz Fanon (Tolson Papers, Container 1). While Shapiro meant his introduction to *The Harlem Gallery* to be a way of restoring Tolson's cultural identity as a poet, as opposed to Tate arguing that he was a poet in spite of his blackness, this ended up doing Tolson no favors with his reception by the ascendant Black Arts movement of the 1960s.

poetic strategies in *Libretto*.²⁵ As Bérubé argues: “Tolson’s career is a history not of his assimilation of modernist poetics but of his de-formation and transformation of them in the service of ‘ideas’ poles apart from those of Tate and Eliot.”²⁶ However, it was this abridged version of *Libretto* with its own New Critical explication that served (and often still serves) to quarantine the poem and poet in a way that tepidly places Tolson within the margins of the midcentury mainstream, while simultaneously alienating him from the more radical black poetry developing on the horizon.

Nevertheless, the preface as well as the poem’s placement in a taste-defining journal such as *Poetry Magazine* did bring Tolson some previously ungarnered attention, especially from influential poets in the modernist vein. In fact, William Carlos Williams appreciated the selection so much that he salutes Tolson directly in “Book IV” of *Paterson* (which incidentally appeared two years before the actual publication of *Libretto*). The poetic “shout-out” also replicates the breathless parataxis that makes up much of the cataloguing style of Tolson’s original canto:

--and to Tolson and his ode
And to Liberia and Allen Tate
(Give him credit)
And to the south generally
Selah! (P 182)

While here Tate’s preface seems to get equal billing alongside Tolson’s poem, this was nonetheless a major plug for a relatively unknown black poet. This reference is from the same section of *Paterson* where Williams argues that “dissonance/ (if you are interested)/

²⁵ Allen Tate, “Preface,” in Melvin B. Tolson, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1953), n.p..

²⁶ Michael Bérubé, *Marginal Forces/ Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 139.

leads to discovery.” (P 175). Clearly there was something of this productive dissonance that resonates with Williams in this “TI” section of *Libretto*. Williams finds in Tolson’s blending of disparate and supposedly conflicting ideas something akin to his own expansive, diffractive project in *Paterson*. Yet this technique, while clearly endearing him to Williams, also draws (and was meant to draw) more immediate comparisons to the cosmopolitan syncretism of *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, specifically its desire to match and even sublimate their encyclopedic attempts at cultural bricolage and transnational totality. Although Tolson may have actively sought out comparisons with these looming modernists, his project instead caught the attention of the modernist “anti-Eliot.” Yet *Libretto* and *Paterson* certainly share a kinship as intentional late modernist rebuttals to the earlier modernist epic poems.

Here I provide a brief explication of the long poem—though I will return to some of these sections in more detail as I continue to expand on its relationship to cultural diffraction and materialist critique in the second half of the chapter. Throughout his career Tolson refers to the poem alternately as an epic and as a Pindaric ode—though it is only the first section that emulates the latter in any formal or technical way. As an epic, the poem also fails—as most modern long sequences do—to meet the criteria of the traditional form. Yet as a disjunctive whole, it does contain references to the past, present, and future of a particular culture, soothsayers, a journey to the underworld in the Middle Passage and the pilgrimage back, and dizzying sections of catalogues, especially in the last canto.

The first canto is divided into seven stanzas of eight lines, each of which contains the strophe (“the turn”) and antistrophe (“the return”) requisite in the Pindaric ode. Each stanza opens with the question, “Liberia?”, first describing the country by what it is not or, rather, how it has been portrayed or marginalized by Western modernity: “no micro-footnote [...] no haply black man’s X [...] no waste land yet” (*L* 2,18, 50). And in the antistrophe, he asserts the resilient, exemplary nature of the nation, “You are/ the lightning rod of Europe, Canaan’s Key, / the rope across the abyss/ *Mehr Licht* for the Africa-To-Be” (*L* 13-16). From this early canto, Tolson begins his transcontinental jaunt across different cultures which is sustained throughout the poem, invoking European, Judaic, and Asiatic influences but intertwining them into a new counter-narrative of Pan-African ascendancy. Tolson’s anthropological and mythic goals are to recuperate a primordial foundation of Africa as another formative culture while finally gesturing towards its modern futurity. And he describes this dialectic method of thesis, negation, and sublation—being, not-being, and becoming—at the end of the first canto, as a luminous new epoch: “Liberia and not Liberia, / A moment in the conscience of mankind” (*L* 55-56). While Tolson draws on specific historical events, his poem is much more concerned with Liberia as a political and philosophical concept that is still in the process of teleological formation.

This counter-narrative of cultural greatness is extended in the second section, “RE,” which explores the former magnitude and influence of the West African Songhai Empire (of the 1400s) and describes its eventual demise at the hands of raiding European and Persian nation-states. “Before Liberia was, Songhai was” (*L* 60). It is here that he also invokes the “Good Grey Bard of Timbuktu,” a Pan-African mirror of the epic

expansiveness of the American poet Walt Whitman.²⁷ Perhaps also a reflection of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, Tolson's bard, who is an African *griot* (what Tolson terms "a living encyclopedia") (*L* Note 168), anticipates the doom of the Songhai nation, but also presages its eventual rejuvenation in the modern Liberian state.

The third section, "MI" opens with the American inception of the new Liberian nation state, introducing its nascent beginnings before the Civil War and then jumping to its involvement in aiding the Allied cause during World War II. The short section ends with a declaration (which gives the feeling of a wartime radio address or propaganda film): "*The rubber of Liberia shall arm/ Free peoples and her airport hinterlands/ Let loose the winging grapes of wrath upon/ The Desert Fox's cocained nietzscheans*" (*L* 120-23, italics in original). Here Tolson juxtaposes the early abolitionist movements that first envisioned Liberia to the triumph of Liberian modernization and democracy in its contribution the Allied Cause over the technocratic excesses of fascist imperialism in North Africa.

In keeping with the musical theme of the poem and the historical theme of the recently ended world wars, the brief fourth section "FA" describes an *interlude* of peace—though one offset by the symbolic imagery of three predatory animals: an engorged boa sleeping in the grass, perhaps an earlier reference to Europe as an "empty

²⁷ Looking at his drafts of the poem in the Tolson Archives at the Library of Congress, his overt references to Whitman are scaled back in the final version of the poem, perhaps in order to redirect some of the poem's focus to the African republic rather than reemphasize that American-specific populism that consumed the themes and style of his earlier work in *Rendezvous with America*. Some of the earlier drafts of the poem have Whitman in a far more prominent role: "O Walt!/O race/ Ego Mirror of his face/ O poineers [sic.]/ seek/ the pearls too rich for swine," Tolson Papers, Container 9. Again, the revision of this more Americanized Whitmanesque style into a later more syncretic transnational mode, seems to further support Schultz's claim for the sharp turn from the populism of the Chicago Renaissance modernism of Sandburg and Whitman to a more intentionally transnational, polyglot syncretism of Eliot and Pound.

python” foretold by the Bard of Timbuktu in the previous section (*L* 86, 126-9); an unspecified bird of prey perhaps a reference to the earlier Nazi threat on North Africa; and a striped cat crouching in the grass. While each image is followed by the line “in the interlude of peace,” there is a sense of looming menace that might represent the ever-present danger of colonial aggression or the recent provocations within the continent, like the illegal annexation of independent Ethiopia by Italy during the interwar years.

This interlude is followed by the canto “SOL,” which frames the original violence of the Middle Passage against the Liberian charter back to Africa on the *Elizabeth*. This juxtaposition between the suffering of the Middle Passage and the reverse sea-journey of the Liberian “pilgrims” is perhaps the most problematic aspect of the poem, especially when considering America’s own colonial and imperialist origins. Nevertheless, as much as this section might suggest an Americanized “Mayflower” version of the founding of Liberia—the Plymouth Rock moment²⁸—Tolson also attends the canto with a detailed endnote that includes quotes from John Rolfe and Marshall Field, reminding the reader that the 1619 entrance of the slave ship, the *Jesus*, predates the *Mayflower* landing by over a year (*L* Note 147). This section underscores the precarity of Tolson’s entire poetic project in *Libretto*. Tolson may be attempting to illustrate a counter-pilgrimage of liberation, but it also belies the colonialist trappings that attended the settlement of the Puritans in the New World as well as the fraught legacy of Liberia’s own re-colonization project.

²⁸ An early paperback printing of *Libretto* actually has a cover image of the Liberian “pilgrims” dressed in Puritan regalia.

The next section “LA” is devoted to an early figurehead of the Liberian colonization project, Jehudi Ashmun, a white, early abolitionist that helped found the nascent colony even before it became a nation in 1847. The section ends with the prosopopoeial proclamation by the deceased “prophet” Ashmun, who declares: “My Negro kinsmen, / America is my mother, / Liberia is my wife, / And Africa my brother” (L 251-4) While certainly a lovely universalizing sentiment, like the image of the pilgrims in the previous canto, these lines also exemplify the colonial and cultural syncretism that makes this poem both radically insurgent and problematically assimilationist.

The last two movements, “TI” and the final “DO” are by far the most expansive and also receive the most endnotes. As mentioned above, “TI” was the most widely read section of the poem because of its pre-release in *Poetry Magazine*. It is also Tolson at his most modernist, erudite, and obscure, as well as, perhaps, his most successful. It contains many polyglot phrases and fusions, which—like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—are not always attended by endnotes (themselves bewilderingly expansive). In “TI,” Tolson is perhaps at his most distant from the actual Liberian nation-state while, simultaneously, he is also most fully immersed in his use of diffractive transcultural poetics (which I examine explicitly in the next section).

The poem ends with the final “DO,” completing the octave as a futuristic fever dream heralding the modernity that Tolson envisions not just in Liberia but in the Pan-African hemisphere. Here he morphs “The Futurafrique” (L 575), “The United Nations Limited” (L 635), “The Bula Matadi” (L 663), and “*Le Premier des Noirs*” (L 680) into

symbols of modernized transportation (the automobile, the train, the ship, and the airplane). It is a montage of somewhat breathlessly worded visions, at times resembling Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto," in its sense of both vibrancy and superannuation:

Le Premeir des Noir, of Pan-African Airways, whirs
beyond the copper cordilleran
climaxes of glass skyscrapers on
pavonine Cape Mesurado... (L 680-3)

The canto as a whole is a bit indulgent and brash in its utopian musings. In fact, one of its extended footnotes, Note 619, which I discuss in the next section, serves the poem much better than the strident arias it musters. Yet, despite its aesthetic excesses, the canto, very imperfectly, anticipates the more developed speculative visions of later Afro-Futurism with its notable fusion of technology within a Diasporic context.

Libretto's Opacities: Endnotes, Cultural Diffraction, and Decolonial Modernism

Here I turn to the conspicuous presence of *Libretto's* robust endnotes. While the notes often serve to amplify the central text, at times they also serve to produce their own new patterns of interference, sending the reader far afield. Drawing from Glissant's concept of cultural diffraction, I argue that the play between Tolson's poem and his endnotes creates a diffractive intertextuality that challenges the singular origin narratives of the Western canon and also creates an opaque mythopoetic structure out of its creolization of language and cultures. Building on the resonance and dissonance created by the endnotes, at the end of this section, I move to a larger argument relating the cultural diffraction in Tolson and Glissant to the concept of diffraction as a deliberate alternative to endless reflection and synthesis in the theory of Barad and Haraway.

All the poems of this project, except for *Paterson*, include endnotes written by the poems' authors.²⁹ Tolson's own twenty-nine-page epic is attended by sixteen well-crowded pages of endnotes, more than half as long as the poem itself. While Kathy Lou Schultz wisely suggests reading the notes as if they are their own final canto,³⁰ any extensive exploration of some of *Libretto*'s often very impacted lines requires a jumping back and forth between them. At times, this method proves difficult since there are no original "call-outs" in the poem that correspond to the notes distinguished by line numbers. For the 770 lines of *Libretto* there are 194 endnotes—a high ratio of lines to annotations for any text. Often these endnotes can turn into a long digression or a further elucidation of an obscure phrase's apparent purpose within the poem. And like the notes in *The Waste Land*, they often direct interpretation as much as they serve a referential purpose. Schultz suggests that the notes "enact the poem's intertextual project [...] leading the reader back to the archives."³¹

These digressions that lead far afield are often built into the aesthetics of modernist long poems, where it is up to the studious reader to figure out the encryption—to find a pattern in the code. In the case of *Libretto*, this deluge of inter-cultural references in both the poem and endnotes intentionally blurs the lines between what

²⁹ T.S. Eliot's notes are perhaps the gold-standard for thinking of both the endless referentiality and the controlled interpretation of the modernist long poem. Even poems like Pound's *Cantos* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, while they originally included no endnotes, were certainly written to be endlessly deciphered and explicated by later critics. While Eliot often makes grandiose claims in his criticism that true poetry is *autotelic*—that the poem should speak directly to the reader and needs no elaboration—this claim begs the question of why he includes his own endnotes in later editions of *The Waste Land*. Indeed, invoking clarity or coherence while producing endless opacity is a particularly noticeable trope of canonical modernist long poems, and this tendency is certainly apparent in *Libretto* as well.

³⁰ Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic*, 44.

³¹ Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic*, 44.

might be considered singular European, American, Asiatic, and African cultural anthropologies. In his book *A Transnational Poetics*, Ramazani praises Tolson's last poem *Harlem Gallery* for what he terms "a polyglot hybridity and pan-cultural allusiveness [that] explodes mononationalist conceptions of culture and pushes towards the global."³² Clearly these juxtapositions and confluences of inter-cultural knowledge are meant to, as Ramazani argues, develop a "transnational poetics can help define an alternative to nationalist and even to civilizational ideologies."³³ Dwelling more on Tolson's intentional difficulty, Jon Woodson draws particular attention to this Eliotic tendency in Tolson's annotations to "mislead the reader without allowing the reader to realize that he or she has gone astray" (162).³⁴ Woodson points out the most glaring example of Tolson's seeming selectivity in what he chooses to cite and what he withholds, revealing that his incendiary first lines "no micro-footnote in a bunioned book" is actually "a key allusion to Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, in which Spengler asks the rhetorical question—'do we not relegate the vast complexities of Indian

³² Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, x.

³³ Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, 28-9.

³⁴ Jon Woodson, "Consciousness, Myth, and Transcendence: Symbolic Action in Three Poems on the Slave Trade," in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, edited by Joanne V. Gabbin (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 162. There is some merit to Woodson's claim that we lose an accurate vision of Tolson's re-description of the Liberian project in the elusiveness of the intertextualities Tolson creates. As Woodson argues: "Tolson's poem enacts the transformation of the Caliban, the Fool, into Prospero, the Magician; however, Tolson's concern is more for Prospero's books of knowledge than for the man himself," Woodson, "Consciousness, Myth, and Transcendence," 164. Yet Schultz also raises the astute observation that these sorts of dismissals are holding Tolson guilty of a type of poetic obscurantism that was alternately praised in the avant-garde poetry of Eliot, Pound, and Stein: "While Gertrude Stein's distinctive word play is labeled as innovation, and Ezra Pound's dense elusiveness keeps him under the avant-garde heading despite his contradictions, Tolson's unusual forms, along with a timeline out of sync with many literary histories, have often rendered him invisible," Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic*, 45. Why is it that certain canonical modernists are praised and even valorized for their elusiveness bordering on incomprehensibility, while poets like Tolson are marginalized for these same qualities?

and Chinese culture to footnotes with the gesture of embarrassment?”³⁵ Indeed, it does seem odd that Tolson would neglect to cite this source anywhere in his own endnotes.

Yet at other times, a note will brush past its citational reference and serve to function as an essential structuring element for the poem. For example, Tolson’s *macro* endnote to line 619, which begins by translating the transliterated Japanese phrase “*Shikata-gai-nai*,” “it cannot be helped,” ends up turning into almost a page-long treatise on Tolson’s idiosyncratic teleology. Here I cite a small portion of the baggy endnote:

History, then, remains a Heraclitean continuum of a world flaring up and dying down as “it always was, is, and shall be.” Some moderns have turned this ancient see-saw figure of a crude dialectics into a locomotive of history. In the poem however, the flux of men and things is set forth in symbols whose motions are vertical-circular, horizontal-circular, and rectilinear. In spite of the diversity of phenomena, the underlying unity of the past is represented by the ferris [sic.] wheel; the present by the merry-go-round; and the future by the automobile, the train, the ship, and the aeroplane. (*L* Note 619)

This important footnote outlines much of his entire project in the poem while also bringing up political symbols and philosophical ideas that are scarcely present in the poem itself. For example, the reference to the “ferris wheel” and “the merry-go-round” refers back to “the ferris wheel/ of race, of caste, of class” in lines 474-45 in the previous canto, “TI.” But to understand Tolson’s use of these images, the reader would have to also be aware of his earlier developments of this theory from his newspaper column “Caviar and Cabbage” from 1940 where he connects the history of “racial superiority and class superiority” to the “vertical-circular” symbol of the Ferris wheel, and the “horizontal-circular” symbol of the “merry-go-round” to a new history based on the

³⁵ Woodson, “Consciousness, Myth, and Transcendence,” 162.

brotherhood of Marxism and democracy.³⁶ These sort of extended theorizations in the endnotes add further credence to Schultz's claim that they function as their own canto to the poem. Indeed, this particular footnote serves to anchor the entire poem, and suggests that while it is a text that revels in its own allusiveness, it is buttressed by an egalitarian populism rather than a re-inscription of literary and cultural hierarchies.

Along with the complex intertextuality going on in the poem itself, the endnotes provide a passageway to a history and culture, presenting a rich African history to counter the dominant teleology of both Euro-American centric cultural modernity as well as Anglo-American literary modernism. Another footnote that provides scaffolding to the unwieldy poem explicates this stanza from "TI" which highlights the overlapping influence and interdependencies of supposedly monolithic cultures. Here I quote the stanza first:

Rome casketed herself in Homeric hymns.
 Man's culture in barb and Arab lies:
 The Jordan flows into the Tiber,
 the Yangtze into the Thames,
 the Ganges into the Mississippi, the Niger
 into the Seine [...]
Lest we forget! Lest we forget!
 to dusky peers of Roman, Greek, and Jew.

Selah!
 (L 287-90, 294-96, emphasis in original)

³⁶ Melvin B. Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Tribune, 1937-1944*, edited by Robert M. Farnsworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 92. "Racial superiority and class superiority produce the hellish contraption called the Ferris Wheel of History. Democracy will produce the Merry-Go-Round of History. [...] As long as there are upper classes and superior races, there will be wars and revolutions. The class or race that is up today will go down tomorrow. I shall stay on the merry-go-round of history 'till the day I die. I am a democrat in theory and practice. I do not ask for myself what I shall not give to others."

Here Tolson suggests the common historical and literary origins of all mankind, and his footnote further exemplifies the Glissantian notion of the diffractive influence of different cultures upon one another:

287. V. Christy, *The Asian Legacy and American Life*. This book contains vital facts on Oriental influences in the New Poetry. What I owe the late Professor Arthur E. Christy, a favorite teacher, is not limited to the concept of “the shuttle ceaselessly weaving the warp and weft of the world’s cultural fabrics.” (L Note 287)

This reference to Arthur E. Christy’s transnational literary anthropology, reveals the cultural syncretism at work in *Libretto*, or rather describes the unacknowledged creolization that occurs between supposedly monolithic cultures.³⁷

While this chapter draws a great deal from Tolson’s own archives at the Library of Congress, in this case, I quickly found a facsimile of Christy’s outdated book on a Google Search, which includes the passage that Tolson is referencing.³⁸ Speaking back against the Euro-Occidental centrism of Spengler, Christy argues instead that: “Spenglerian prophets of doom for the West have thought too exclusively of domination or decline. They have ignored the fact that *a shuttle of interacting influence is ceaselessly weaving the warp and weft of the world’s cultural fabric*, while other forces are laying foundations under man’s dream of a universal brotherhood.”³⁹ Christy’s book traces how some of the major accomplishments of Western culture have their roots connected to Asiatic influence. While Christy’s early 20th century anthropological treatise is still rife

³⁷ According to Farnsworth, who surprisingly misses this important note, Arthur Christy was incidentally Tolson’s thesis advisor for his M.A. at Columbia in 1940. So, his reference to Christy as his “favorite teacher” was a personal and well as philosophical statement. Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 40 and 42.

³⁸ Arthur E Christy, *The Asian Legacy and American Life* (New York: Asia Press Book, 1945), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/asianlegacyandam030205mbp/page/n13/mode/2up/search/warp>

³⁹ Christy, *The Asian Legacy and American Life*, viii (emphasis added).

with cultural essentialism, it is also a proto-post-colonial text that seeks to challenge the binaries of “oriental” and “occidental” cultures. Likewise, Tolson’s goal in *Libretto* is to uncover the past history of African-European-Asian interaction to draw attention to these transcultural overlaps rather than preserving cultural distinctions and hierarchies. Where “Rome casketed herself in Homeric Hymns,” so also do other cultures create their own new mythopoetic wickering out of their resonance and dissonance with earlier cultures.

In this way Tolson’s own “warps and wefts” of transcultural “interacting influence” resemble some of Glissant’s in his decolonial argument for cultural diffraction:

Nowhere is it stated that now, in this thought of errantry, humanity will not succeed in transmuting *myth's opacities* (which were formerly the occasion of setting roots) and the *diffracted insights* of political philosophy, thereby reconciling Homer and Plato, Hegel and the African griot.

But we need to figure out whether or not there are other succulencies of relation in other parts of the world (and already at work in an underground manner) that will suddenly open up other avenues and soon help to correct whatever simplifying, ethnocentric exclusions may have arisen from such a perspective.⁴⁰

Here Glissant invokes a deliberately capacious sense of creolization, what he terms “the succulencies of relation” and “diffracted insights” which are not unlike Tolson’s attempts in *Libretto*, fusing the African griot with the Whitmanesque tradition of the effusive cataloguing of an earlier developing American culture. This is a diffraction of cultures in order to create a new sense of relation; or what Glissant describes as other times as a rhizomatic or rooted rootlessness—one that establishes a sense of ground without

⁴⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 21 (emphasis added).

centralizing or privileging a particular root.⁴¹ Both Tolson and Glissant draw on the mythopoetics of the griot. The living embodiment of an encyclopedia, according to Tolson (*L Note 168*), the griot serves to preserve the stories of a culture by creating new myths out of resurrected stories often borrowed from neighboring cultures, many of these often salvaged and repurposed from the fraught legacies of colonial conflicts. As Glissant suggests, specifically calling on his own experience with diffracting cultures in the

Antilles:

Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary, from Asia and from Africa, but to an ancestral, an ecstatic rhythm in the blood that cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture, while nouns are renamed and the given names of places accepted like Felicity village or Choiseul.

The original language dissolves from the exhaustion of distance like fog trying to cross an ocean, but this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity, even renaming himself. The stripped man is driven back to that self-astonishing, elemental force, his mind. That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a tribal vocabulary.⁴²

Here Glissant is specifically accentuating the linguistic process in the decolonization of a culture, the refashioning and re-appropriation of the French tongue (among many other planetary cultural influences). Certain words and landmarks are preserved but also given

⁴¹ Drawing specifically from the process materialism of Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant invokes their notion of the rhizome as an alternative to cultural exclusion: “Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and even, perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of the totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.” Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*, 11. I take up Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of peripheral totalities and transversal connections within the context of Glissant’s own notion of cultural diffraction and productive opacity in the final chapter of the dissertation.

⁴² Édouard Glissant, “The Sigh of History,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/08/opinion/the-sigh-of-history.html>.

different significations, apart from their distinctly colonial original contexts. In describing this refashioning as an *epic* process, Glissant suggests the impetus for Tolson's own transcultural project in *Libretto*, a poem that at times draws heavily from the Western canon while also actively subordinating and demystifying its ideological influence. Tolson makes an argument for *Libretto*'s irreducible singularity primarily by way of constructing the profound heterogeneity of endlessly diffracting cultures. As Tolson asserts at the end of "TI," challenging the univocal nature of cultural power and knowledge:

White House,
Kremlin,
Downing Street.
Again black Aethiop reaches at the sun, O Greek.
Things-as-they-are-for-us, *nullius in verba*,
Speak!
O East, O West,
On tenotomy bent,
Chang's Tissue is
Eng's ligament!
Selah! (L 451-461)

Here in highly materialist terms, Tolson challenges the Mediterranean circumscription of political, cultural, and scientific understanding. Notice how in opening with the post WWII victors (America, Russia, and England), he returns to an image of North Africa set against Ancient Greece. In an earlier draft of this section, "Things as they are for us" was written in an approximation of Kantian or Hegelian German, "Der Ding Und Sich" [sic].⁴³ The impossible "thing itself" juxtaposed to the empirical dictum "nullius in verba"— "nothing in words" which remains the longstanding motto of the British Royal

⁴³ Tolson Papers, Container 9. *Das ding an sich*—"The Thing in Itself."

Society of Science. Though in re-centering Africa in this moment, Tolson also appeals to the Asiatic influence on “occidental” culture as well: “Chang’s Tissue is/ Eng’s ligament.” The whole passage functions a corporeal, medical metaphor for an interconnected world—“tenotomy” being a medical procedure which involved the cutting or separation of ligaments. While Tolson is perhaps highlighting a neo-African exceptionalism, it is also at the service of a somewhat hackneyed (if you will pardon the pun), or at least somewhat strident appeal towards an intercultural, planetary unity. It challenges the origins of the scientific and intellectual monopolies of the West, arguing that the separatist sense of cultural difference is one that has been intentionally, surgically maintained.

In another passage in the *Poetics of Relation* (which I have previously referenced in relationship to Rukeyser’s own use of opacity in “The Book of the Dead”), Glissant argues for the production of intercultural blendings and opacities in terms surprisingly similar to Christy’s “warp and weft of the world’s cultural fabrics.” Glissant insists that opacity “is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarky but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave, not on the nature of its components.”⁴⁴ This fixation on the texture of the weave in Glissant’s argument for cultural diffraction supports Tolson’s messy, diffractive poetics in *Libretto*; but it also overlaps with the new materialist arguments for diffraction posited by Donna Haraway and later developed by Karen Barad. Glissant argues, like Haraway, that the study of

⁴⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

diffraction within a cultural context moves beyond an obsession with the individual materials, “the fabric” and is more concerned with the “texture.” Similarly, Haraway distinguishes that “a diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of differences appear.”⁴⁵ Glissant’s argument for diffraction occurs within the field of culture, but it is conditioned by physical geography as well. Barad and Haraway use the physical concept of diffraction to argue that the cultural and discursive are caught up in these inter-field entanglements. In his *Poetics of Relation*, he describes the Mediterranean as a sea that concentrates into a closed system of thought, whereas the Caribbean is “a sea that diffracts,” which “provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation.”⁴⁶

For Glissant, like Haraway and Barad, concepts and thoughts are not pure abstractions but always contain metonymic as well as metaphorical qualities. As Barad argues, “[t]heorizing, *like experimenting, is a material practice.*”⁴⁷ Likewise, Glissant opens *Poetics of Relation* by insisting “[t]hinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself into the world.”⁴⁸ For Glissant linguistic concepts like creolization extend beyond the semiotic into the corporeal, and he insists on the anti-totalitarian benefits of creolization which he sets in contrast to concentration and over-synthesis: “[i]f we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and

⁴⁵ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” 320.

⁴⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 33.

⁴⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 55 (italics in original).

⁴⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 1.

its consequences unforeseeable. *Creolization diffracts*, whereas certain forms of *métissage* can concentrate one more time.”⁴⁹ While Glissant’s notion of diffraction, is not directly informed by Barad’s and Haraway’s more scientific deployment of the term, it also articulates productive patterns of interference between cultures—patterns which refuse to fully synthesize. This is precisely what Tolson’s project is after in *Libretto*, destabilizing the idea of purely American, European, and African *mythos*, opacifying what would be considered “natural” or “essential” to any one of these particular cultures. For Tolson, as for Glissant, the only sense of cultural totality or singularity is through radical heterogeneity and diffracting influence, rather than the myths of homogeneity and through-lines of exceptionalism: “Chang’s Tissue is/ Eng’s ligament.”

Returning back to the notion of *Libretto* as a revision or counter to the modernist epics of Eliot and Pound, *Libretto* might be distinguished by its rhizomatic rootlessness and its diffractive rather than synthetic outcomes. These earlier long poems, while they also obsess over intertextuality and cross-cultural overlap, still attempt to distill their cacophonies into a singular pattern, a concentration. Eliot yearns, even in his later “Burnt Norton,” to capture the “still point of the turning world,” a sense of “concentration/ without elimination.”⁵⁰ And at the end of *The Cantos*, Pound’s finally gestures towards a backward-looking coherence: “to affirm the golden thread in the pattern.”⁵¹ (817). This urge towards coherence and concentration is what Glissant calls the “totalitarian root”⁵² (or what Franco Moretti terms “the totalitarian temptation [...] which is almost never

⁴⁹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 215, 216.

⁵¹ Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 817.

⁵² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

absent in the world texts of modernism”⁵³). Tolson’s *Libretto* on the other hand, maintains a kind of nomadism, keeping a frenetic pace that remains in motion, a “Heraclitean continuum,” as much as an un-synthesized dialectics of continuously emergent cultural relations: “*Mehr Licht* [more light] for the Africa-To-Be” (L 16).

Tolson’s Demiurge: Rewriting the Descriptive Statement and Towards a New Humanism and Materialism

Beyond the poem’s enactment of Glissant’s diffractive cultural poetics, *Libretto* also makes very direct challenges to Euro-American cultural, political, and literary hegemony, especially at the midcentury. Yet, the poem is certainly out of step with the ascendant poetics and politics of the Black Arts Movement, its cultural syncretism clashing with the more activist arguments against assimilation and towards a uniquely Black aesthetics. However, the anti-essentialism at work in *Libretto* also anticipates the decolonial project of Sylvia Wynter, particularly her argument against the Western Imperialist conception of “Man,” “which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”⁵⁴ Numerous times throughout the poem, Tolson exposes the inherent racialization ongoing in regimes of politics, science, and the cultural arts within the long history of modernity. In this final section, I explore how Tolson’s arguments in *Libretto* calls for a reconstitution and new description of the human subject. Like Wynter, Tolson’s *Libretto* attempts to deconstruct the powerfully embedded *descriptive statements* that stand in for objective political, scientific, and cultural projections of “Man.” And, as Wynter argues

⁵³ Moretti, *Modern Epic*, 227.

⁵⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003), 260. Project Muse. [doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015).

for a new “demonic ground,” a re-description or new science that exists outside the current boundaries or paradigms of Western thought, Tolson’s *Libretto* attempts, however imperfectly, its own “new demiurge,”⁵⁵ a mythopoetics that conceives of a new material ground for humanism beyond the cultural hegemonies of Western modernities. While my argument here might seem to move away from a direct engagement with diffraction as a concept, both Wynter and Tolson’s critiques of Western modernity and materialism are deeply concerned with the interdependencies and embeddedness of the physical, cultural, and discursive, which are at the heart of diffractive materialism.

In her long essay, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” Sylvia Wynter outlines how the long project of modernity, in particular the Enlightenment and the scientific materialisms of the 19th and 20th century, has served to uphold what she calls a “descriptive statement,” an underlying description of “Man” that continues to affirm and fortify a white, Eurocentric, masculine figuration of the human subject. She traces this colonial/colonized dichotomy of “human” v. “not quite human” as far back as the premodern separation of the clergy with the laity in Europe. This pre-modern definition shifts into what she terms “Man₁”: the Enlightenment *Man* as a political subject constructed in large part by defining new concepts of the rationality and the modern state in contrast to the “primitive” colonial difference of the New World.⁵⁶ She then argues that this “descriptive statement” is later recast into a new definition of “Man₂”: a biocentric concept of man discovered and re-essentialized through the breakthroughs of

⁵⁵ Tolson Papers, Container 9.

⁵⁶ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 299-300.

the physical and genetic sciences in the 18th and 19th centuries. Drawing from Frantz Fanon's notion of *sociogeny* and Foucault's notions of the *regimes of truth* as well as from thinkers as various as Gregory Bateson, C.P. Snow, Anibal Quijano, and Bruno Latour, Wynter argues that modern science, despite its "dazzling triumphs"⁵⁷ has proceeded to reinscribe the binaries between the Western "human" and the colonial "not quite human," or what she terms as the different *genres* of the human being. As she argues towards the middle of the essay:

The Argument proposes that the new master code of the bourgeoisie and of its ethnoclass conception of the human—that is, the code of selected by Evolution/dysselected by Evolution—was now to be mapped and anchored on the only available "objective set of facts" that remained. [...] [T]hat is, as a set of (so to speak) totemic differences, which were now harnessed to the task of projecting the Color Line drawn institutionally and discursively between whites/nonwhites—and at its most extreme between the Caucasoid physiognomy (as symbolic life, the name of what is good, the idea that some humans can be selected by Evolution) and the Negroid physiognomy (as symbolic death, the "name of what is evil," the idea that some humans can be dysselected by Evolution).⁵⁸ (315-16)

Here Wynter argues that, while there is the historical conceit of empiricism and objectivity within the modern sciences, they have, in large part, continued to separate and "genre"tize the orders of humanity between human, not quite human, and nonhuman, as previous political and religious definitions of Man had done in the past. Throughout the essay, Wynter highlights the connection between the underlying influence of the symbolic or semiotic process even in the construction and conditioning of ongoing scientific evidence and knowledge. While Wynter's argument about the relationship of scientific empiricism to semiotics arises specifically in the context of the colonial

⁵⁷ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 328.

⁵⁸ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 315-16.

question, her concern with the construction of scientific ontology also relates to one of Karan Barad's main contentions in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, that matter is always entangled with meaning, that the influence of the observer and the thing being observed is intra-actional. Likewise, Latour argues that the realms of scientific facts are often projected as separate from the realms of language and culture, yet these areas are always mutually constituted. Wynter, drawing from Latour among others, finds this mutual influence and entanglement to have particularly insidious repercussions, especially in the new biological definitions of man. The objectivity of the Western scientist is clouded by a positionality that affects the interpretation or reading of the experiment. The symbolic or semiotic does not completely override the physical or biological evidence, but its underlying cultural influences are often repressed or even intentionally forgotten. Wynter argues that one of the most dangerous aspects of the creation of this biocentric definition of Man₂ is that it simultaneously dehumanizes mankind as a whole while still maintaining the hierarchies of the earlier political and religious definitions of a particularly "favored" subject. The biocentric definition of the human is then weaponized to continue establishing differences and cultural hierarchies.

While Tolson's *Libretto* does not interrogate the underlying foundations of modern Western science and politics to such a detailed degree as Wynter, he opens the poem by listing some of these false narratives that often passed as assertions of essential cultural difference. As he recounts in the opening Canto "DO," for far too long Liberia and by proxy Africa and the African-American subject have been described by way of secondary status and negation: "No micro-footnote in a bunioned book" (L 2), "No side-show barker's bio-accident" (L 10), "No Darwin's bulldog for ermined [whitened] flesh"

(L 27), “No caricature with a mimic flag” (L 43). Here Tolson lists some of the aesthetic, biological, naturalist, and political descriptive statements that cast the African colonial subject (and the African American) in contradistinction the idealized standard of the modern, Western “Man.” Indeed, Tolson’s critique of the racializing logics embedded in scientific and literary discourses long precedes his challenges here in *Libretto*. As he argues in his editorial column “Caviar and Cabbage”:

When I was in college, the Negro was the victim of vicious propaganda in all the sciences. [...] Conservative sociologists, historians, educators, statesmen, and novelists filled thousands of pages with Uncle Toms, Aunt Dianahs, Sambos, black rapists, black Al Capones, and grinning crapshooters. [...] By a vicious system of propaganda the white man drummed into my mind the idea of his superiority. White became the symbol of perfection. Everything that was good was declared to be white. God was white. Angels were white. All great scientists, artists, and leaders were white.⁵⁹

Here Tolson, in prose, describes the network of systems which serve to give authority to a false ontology of racial difference. These are the sorts of academic and cultural discourses that would give false pseudo-scientific sanction to an already institutionalized racism. They construct what Wynter and Fanon would call a *sociogeny* that passes as an *ontogeny*—that there is some essential biological/aesthetic difference between the “Negroid” and “Caucasoid” physiognomy. For Tolson, *Libretto* was an opportunity not only to critique these systems but offer a powerful counter-narrative. In the canto “TI,” after lamenting the false separation or “tenotomy” of the transcultural development of scientific knowledge, he emphasizes that the DuBoisian Color Line affects all aspects of cultural knowledge and human self-consciousness: “*O Cordon Sanitaire, / thy brain’s tapeworm, extract, thy eyeball’s mote!*” (L 319-20). By invoking the idea of the “brain’s

⁵⁹ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 39, 78.

tapeworm,” Tolson suggests, like Wynter and DuBois, this color-line or *cordon sanitaire* while “institutionally and discursively” drawn has a toxic cognitive and psychological effect on the construction of race, both in the minds of the colonizer and the colonized. These false physiognomies are culturally constructed but their influence over time ends up having physiological or somatic effects.

In fact, long before he wrote *Libretto* and late into his career, Tolson argues for what he calls the *tridimensionality* of the human made up of the biological, the sociological and the psychological. He references this in a late book review and interview, and he would often scrawl these three points of triangulation throughout his notes and even on the sides of early drafts of poems and lectures.⁶⁰ In his book review, “Modern Poetry Under the Microscope,” for *Midwest Journal* in 1955, he gives his clearest description of the imbricated relationships between the three. Talking issue with the authors’ formalist description of the new modern poetry, Tolson argues:

Perhaps the chief quarrel I’d have with the Maritians lies in their emphasis on the subjective. The poet does not live in a vacuum. He, like other men, is a tridimensionality: his biology, his sociology, his psychology. As Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare: he is both born and made. No man escapes his race, his milieu, his class, his moment of history. The reality of his epoch passes through his *chemique* and shapes his idea and image, his content and form.⁶¹

For Tolson these three were all factors that constitute the formation of the human subject, or, as he terms in an endnote to an earlier poem “E. & O.E.,” “the Law of Synthetic

⁶⁰ In a late interview, Tolson argues that “the analysis of a real person’s tridimensionality is never complete—his biology, his sociology, his psychology,” Tolson, *Anger and Beyond*, 187. I also found a variation of these three interacting human chemistries in a notebook of drafts. In one example he notes, “tridimensionality of the bios, société, and psyche,” and in another he writes “A Negro is more American than any other American: melting biologically, psychologically, and sociologically,” Tolson Papers, Container 9.

⁶¹ Tolson, “Modern Poetry Under the Microscope” *Midwest Journal* 7, no. 1 (1952), 115, quoted in Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, 213.

Identity.”⁶² Unlike the “descriptive statement” of modernity, which would rather seek to preemptively assign a sense of identity based off of a specifically biological, political, or even rational difference, Tolson’s notion of “tridimensionality” attempts to rearticulate the individual, in this case the artist, within a larger understanding of his historical construction. Tolson’s conception of this tridimensional material relationship certainly overlaps with the entanglements between the physical, cultural, and discursive in the diffractive theory of Barad and Haraway. But, more directly, it relates to Wynter’s challenge to the over-determinism or overrepresentation of the supposedly detached scientific description of material phenomena, as well as how Frantz Fanon argues these false determinations nonetheless promote long term physiological effects within an oppressed culture.

Shortly before his death, Tolson invokes Fanon in speech script entitled “Black Sylla [sic.] and White Charybdis” (1965),⁶³ though having only lately been exposed to Fanon’s decolonial perspective.⁶⁴ Yet even without Fanon’s direct influence, many portions of *Libretto* are influenced by a DuBoisian and even a Baconian wariness of the cultural and social influences over scientific discourses. Throughout his career, Tolson often invokes Francis Bacon’s “Idols of the Tribe”—the false symbols of scientific truth that are actually projections of the inherent biases of a particular culture. As Bacon

⁶² Melvin B. Tolson, “*Harlem Gallery*” and *Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson*, 147.

⁶³ Tolson Papers, Container 10.

⁶⁴ In fact there is a letter from Karl Shapiro to Tolson that mentions Fanon, which suggests that Shapiro may have alerted Tolson to Fanon’s radical approach to decolonization. As Shapiro writes: “Do you know Fanon? Frantz Fanon. Grove has just published his book in English with a wild introduction by Sartre. Really sends me. *The South here is being “decolonized” – I got that word from him.*” Tolson Papers, Container 1 (emphasis added). While Tolson comes belatedly to the decolonial theoretical project, clearly there is much in *Libretto* that suggests this kind of work, even while it also flirts with neo-colonialism in its glorification of the project of Liberia.

describes, “the human understanding is like a false mirror, which receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.”⁶⁵ This Baconian dis-anthropologizing of Western scientific discourse is central to Wynter’s decolonial critique and present throughout Tolson’s work as well. These “idols of the tribe” manifest in the Social Darwinism and Euro-Centric historicizing that serve to justify the racial exceptionalism of imperialism, fascism, and Jim Crow. In *Libretto*, Tolson refers to the “The Desert Fox’s cocained nietzscheans” in North Africa (L 123), the recent example of Nazism and the “uberman,” itself a heightened version of the overrepresentation of “Man.”⁶⁶

But Tolson also challenges the more insidious historical depiction of Africa as primitive or blank space in the process of human cultural development. As he declares in “SOL,” “*Seule de tous les continents,*” the parrots/ chatter “*l’Afrique n’a pas d’histoire!*” (ll. 170-1) The endnote to this French chatter, references Eugène Guernier, a French colonial historian of French West Africa. But Guernier’s French words are also *parroting* one of the most influential German thinkers of modernity, G. W. F. Hegel. In his *Philosophy of History*, he infamously claims that Africa is place and culture without a clear history. Hegel ends his section on “The African Character” impinging and summarily negating the continent and cultures as a whole: “[a]t this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. [...] What we properly understand by Africa is the

⁶⁵ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, edited by Fulton H. Anderson (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 291-93, quoted in Farnsworth, 87.

⁶⁶ Tolson actually has a poem titled “Idols of the Tribe” in his earlier collection *Rendezvous with America* where he challenges German fascism directly. Tolson, “*Harlem Gallery*” and *other Poems*, 97-104.

Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's history."⁶⁷ These sorts of *ex cathedra* cultural pronouncements from philosophers as venerated as Hegel serve to sustain and nourish these "idols of the tribe." While much of Hegel's philosophy and Darwin's naturalism have been used productively, often their ideas have also been twisted to fortify and fuel the "descriptive statements"—the myths projected by cultural bias rather than scientific or philosophical objectivity—mingling their own nature with the thing observed. Indeed, Wynter further argues that this underlying racializing "descriptive statement" is often disguised within the *objective* empiricism of the new sciences:

Here, the dimensions of the fundamental paradox that lies at the core of the Darwinian answer to the question of who we are...emerges. The paradox is this: that for the "descriptive statement" that defines the human as purely biological being on the model of a natural organism (thereby projecting it as preexisting the narratively inscribed "descriptive statement" in whose terms it inscripts itself and is reciprocally inscripted, as if it were a purely biological being, ontogeny that preexists culture, sociogeny), *it must ensure the functioning of strategic mechanisms that can repress all knowledge of the fact that its biocentric descriptive statement is a descriptive statement.*⁶⁸

Here, Wynter posits that racialization occurs systematically within the cultural and sociological level, but, more insidiously that it also infects, even undergirds, the modern construction of the physical and biological sciences—semiotics passing for biology—Euro-centric, white-washed cosmologies passing for empirical ontology. The biological argument is conditioned by the repressed cultural biases of the scientist, and inversely,

⁶⁷ G.F.W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 93-99, in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Fifth Norton Critical Edition, edited by Paul B. Armstrong (New York: Norton, 2017), 197.

⁶⁸ Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being*, 325-6 (emphasis added).

the discursive and cultural are further conditioned and bolstered by the false empirical authority of the new sciences. Wynter's thought here is very much in line with contemporary decolonial studies, Foucault's and Agamben's theories of biopolitics,⁶⁹ and also with Latour's notion of the cultural constitution of scientific discourse, which she references earlier in the essay.⁷⁰

Tolson, himself, takes on the troubling specter underlying the false detachment and impartiality of Western science in *Libretto*'s penultimate canto, "TI":

"Ecce homo!"
 the blind men cowed in azure rant
 before the Capitol
 [...]

O Africa, Mother of Science
...lachen mit yastchekes...
 What dread hand,
 to make tripartite one august event,
 sundered Gondwanaland?
 (L 260-2, 273-77)

While Tolson neglects to include an endnote for the Latin phrase, *Ecce homo* ("behold the Man"), there is an earlier poem "E, & O.E.," where he references the dual signification of the term. The famous phrase refers both to Christ presented to the public

⁶⁹ The new "turn" towards the question of material in recent posthumanist and biopolitical theory is a realm that has, in fact, been richly explored by black feminist theorists like Wynter and Hortense Spiller—especially the connections of regimes of modern science and politics to continued racialization of the black/colonial body.

⁷⁰ As Wynter argues: "This central oversight would then enable both Western and westernized intellectuals to systemically repress what Geertz has identified as the 'fugitive truth' of its own 'local culturality' (Geertz 1983)—of, in Bruno Latour's terms, its 'specific constitution with a capital "C,"' or cultural constitution that underlines and charters out present order, as the parallel constitutions of all other human orders that Western anthropologists have brilliantly elucidated underlie and charter all other human orders (Latour 1991)," Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being*, 282. As Latour notes, and Wynter reiterates, the culturally conditioned aspects of science and anthropology, while condescendingly projected onto non-Western cultures, are often forgotten when considering the unmediated objectivity of its own regimes of knowledge.

by Pontius Pilate in the gospel of John and also to Nietzsche's last published work.⁷¹ In either case, the phrase "behold the Man" is used somewhat sardonically, for in the next line the blind men's "azure rant" suggests the stridency inherent in the glorification of the Western human subject, what Wynter calls "the paradox of the Humanists' invention/overrepresentation of 'Man.'"⁷² In the endnote, he describes "cowled in azure rant" a reference to a "cloak of deceit and false humility" (L Note 262). Shout it loud enough and the rhetoric stands in for the humanism and the science. And a few lines later, he reasserts the intercultural connectedness of human knowledge, asserting Africa as the "Mother of Science" as well as invoking the original geographic as well as intellectual connectedness of culture in invoking the former unity of the Jurassic supercontinent of Gondwana.⁷³ Like his medical analogy to the tenotomy of cultures, here through geological analogy, Tolson pushes against a univocal Western, "white-washed" vision of scientific progress.

As a counter to the "azure rant" of the white humanists, Tolson invokes a Yiddish phrase "*lachen mit yastchekes*" which Tolson translates as "laughing with needles being

⁷¹ Tolson, "*Harlem Gallery*" and *Other Poems*, 149.

⁷² Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being*, 283.

⁷³ In an the earlier section, "RE," Tolson also gives a more diverse planetary description of the common origins of cultural and scientific knowledge:

Footloose professors, chimney sweeps of the skull,
From Europe and Asia; youths, souls in one skin,
Under white scholars like El-Akit, under
Black Humanists like Bagayogo. *Karibu wee!* (L 81-4)

Here and in many other portions of the poem, Tolson takes great pains to re-vision the history of what might be considered "Western" knowledge. That in an pre-modern past, knowledge was stored and shared in very different metropolises than what where presently considered the civilized Europe and the primitive Orient: "Solomon in all his glory had no Oxford,/ Alfred the Great no University of Sankoré" (L 79-80). While some historians might twinge a bit at this Edenic description of the pre-colonial routes of knowledge, it is no secret that much of the knowledge gathered by the West in the Renaissance was often either developed or preserved by intellectuals of non-European civilizations. While some of Tolson's revisionist history, at times, might verge on mythmaking, it is a myth that counters the powerful myths of white-European exceptionalism.

stuck in you,” but he also suggests that it stands in, transculturally, for “ghetto laughter” (*L* Note 274). It implies the sardonic resistance to a false narrative of identity thrust upon an oppressed minority by the dominant culture. Timothy Dejong argues that “Tolson’s ghetto laughter is a communal act; precipitated neither by a Nietzschean gaze into the darkness nor a Beckettian embrace of the absurd, it refuses solitude in favor of commiseration.”⁷⁴ Dejong’s affect-minded reading of these lines does well to highlight that Tolson’s purpose here is not one merely of ironic parody or grim bitterness. Tolson’s purpose in *Libretto* is not just to laugh back at the white-washed Euro-centric modernist epic and the embedded structural racism of the modern sciences and humanities, but to also propose a viable transcultural alternative.

Tolson’s *Libretto* reaches back towards a deeper, more capacious global history as it also attempts to envision a futurity that sublates this Euro-centric concept with a new image of Liberia, Africa, and the world. As Tolson intimates in later section of the same canto “Esperanto trips the heels of Greek” (*L* 396)—suggesting that a more multi-cultural modernity will replace the mythic precession of a singularly Greco-Roman influence. In fact, in studying Tolson’s manuscripts and drafts of *Libretto* in the Library of Congress, I found that the final version actually excises some of his more ambitious transnational and Marxian futurist musings that were more pronounced in the earlier drafts. Perhaps this is to reorient his larger themes into a more Liberian-centric focus of the poem’s original commission. For example, in an earlier version of “TI,” Tolson ends the canto with a

⁷⁴ Timothy Dejong, “Affect and Diaspora: Unfashionable Hope in Melvin B. Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*,” *Research in African American Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014), 123. JSTOR. doi:10.2979/reseafrilite.45.3.110.

stronger Marxist undertone: “The proletariat/ of one world, of one race, dare to speak! / In this time in this place, use no Greek!”⁷⁵ And in another draft, he ends the same canto with a final stanza, excised from the final version:

Sound Taps for Yesterday
 O Nations young and old,
 bugle today’s reveille; rise and span
 Tomorrow with a global bridge; uphold
 the oneness
 in the manyness
 of Man!
*Selah!*⁷⁶

While this stanza, perhaps evolved into the more explicitly proto-Afro-Futurist euphoria that makes up the final canto “DO,” here Tolson’s deeply egalitarian pluralism is on full display. And like some of the earlier late modernist epics discussed in this book, Tolson manages a sense of open totality that is careful not to finally close into a more singular, homogenized vision. This sense of totality in multiplicity that Tolson invokes here again evokes the endlessly diffracting and opaque totality that Glissant invokes in *Poetics of Relation*. If there is any sense of totality for Glissant, it is one that remains open, contingent, and convergent. For Tolson, “irreducible singularity,”⁷⁷ “the oneness/ in the manyness/ of man”⁷⁸ is one that rejects the vertical hierarchies of “the ferris wheel/ of race, of caste, of class” (L 474-5) in favor of the horizontal egalitarianism of the symbol of the “merry-go-round” (L 487).

Both Tolson’s counter epic, *Libretto*, and Wynter’s decolonial critique remain ever vigilant at exposing the false lights and valorizations of the Western subject. And

⁷⁵ Tolson Papers, Container 9.

⁷⁶ Tolson Papers, Container 9.

⁷⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*, 190.

⁷⁸ Tolson Papers, Container 9.

they both do so by turning the very language, literature, and philosophies of the West against themselves. But one other attribute both writers share is a certain measure of speculative confidence in the future creation of a more capacious sense of Man and a *new humanism*. Both articulate a sense of new material composition (what Wynter terms “demonic ground”) meant both to overwrite the strong theories of the West and to underwrite the ground for a new conception or paradigm of a decolonized human subject. As Wynter argues at the end of the essay, invoking the idea of a new decolonial science first proposed by Aimé Césaire in 1946 in his essay “Poetry and Knowledge”:

The natural sciences...are, in spite of all their dazzling triumphs with respect to knowledge of the natural world, half-starved. They are half-starved because they remain incapable of giving us any knowledge of our uniquely human domain, and have had nothing to say to the urgent problems that beleaguer humankind. Only the elaboration of a new science, beyond the limits of the natural sciences (he had then proposed), will offer us our last chance to avoid the large-scale dilemmas that we must now confront as a species. This would be a science in which the “study of the Word”—of our narratively inscribed, governing sociogenic principles, descriptive statement, or code of symbolic life/death, together with the overall symbolic representational processes to which they give rise—will condition the “study of nature.”⁷⁹

Here Wynter paraphrases Césaire’s essay (which I discuss in the opening pages of the dissertation) where he argues that language and poetics will always necessarily condition the discoveries of science.⁸⁰ While the phenomena already exist in nature, it takes the creative *poesis* of new kind of storytelling in order to accurately represent them. In the past, this has served to bring forth dazzling triumphs of modern technologies as well as dehumanizing cultural effects of global imperialism and capitalism. The only way to

⁷⁹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 328.

⁸⁰ “Just as *the new Cartesian algebra permitted the construction of theoretical physics*, so too an original handling of the world can make possible at any moment a new (theoretical and heedless) science that poetry could already give an approximate notion of” Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” 238 (emphasis added)

overcome these effects is to construct a new paradigm, to tell a new story. As she ends her essay, invoking Fanon, “the true leap...consists in introducing invention into existence.”⁸¹ In this way, Wynter’s call for a new science and humanism reflects Karan Barad’s own arguments about the much-needed rapprochement between the bifurcated, intellectual projects of science and the humanities. As Barad argues in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

What is needed is a reassessment of physical and metaphysical notions that explicitly or implicitly rely on old ideas about the physical world—that is, we need a reassessment of these notions in terms of the best physical theories that we currently have. And likewise we need to bring our best social and political theories to bear in reassessing how we understand social phenomena, including material practices through which we divide the world into the categories of the “social” and the “natural.” What is needed is an analysis that enables us to theorize the social and the natural together, to read our best understandings of social and natural phenomena through one another in a way that clarifies the relationship between them.⁸²

Here Barad outlines the important intervention that she argues is necessary in bridging the intellectual rift that impoverishes the self-isolated realms of science and culture. The corollary of Wynter’s argument, by way of Césaire, is for a new science that involves a “study of the Word,” the importance of the word functions as a kind of *mythos* as much as a *logos*. She argues that since all scientific knowledge is, to some degree, conditioned by semiotics—whether influenced by politics or some other embedded descriptive statement—the only way to counteract this is to come up with new words and new worlds that challenge those powerful descriptive statements. As she argues in a recent interview with Katherine McKittrick: “The idea is one in which the study of the Word (the *mythoi*)

⁸¹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 331.

⁸² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 25.

will condition the study of nature (the *bios*). [...] What I have been attempting to put forward on the basis of Césaire’s proposed new science will call for a rewriting of our present now globally instituted order of knowledge.”⁸³ Like Barad, Wynter believes that since empiricist claims are always conditioned by discursive practices, it is important that they are a conscious part of the process in the revision and redeployment of the humanist and new materialist project. As Henry Paget suggests, highlighting the futurity of vision in Wynter’s humanist project: “[i]n short, the way out of the present crisis of postcolonial reconstruction is the projecting of new emancipatory narratives that are rooted in a new episteme, *but whose auto-poetic functioning is consciously exposed, as are the discursive strategies of a modernist text.*”⁸⁴ Wynter’s decolonial materialism is built on a simultaneous foundation of critique and composition. Tolson’s *Libretto*, as a counter-modernist epic and a proto-Afro-futurist vision of a decolonized planet, ambitiously attempts this new “science of the Word.” Ironically, while his conceptual vision was meant to be firmly liberatory as well as de-essentialist, his actual subject matter, the Republic of Liberia, was also inspired and preserved by the same colonial power structure he attempts to critique.

Conclusion

In some of the notes and outlines for Tolson’s final, unfinished long poem, *Harlem Gallery*, there is a handwritten page titled simply “New Humanism.” It contains a

⁸³ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.

⁸⁴ Henry Paget, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 137.

mixture of potential lines of poetry for his next large work, some aphoristic pronouncements regarding the state of art, culture, history, and science, as well as his vision for the role of the Black artist in contributing to these new “post-war” conversations. While these statements are, of course, emerging and not fully cultivated, I think they speak expressly towards the revisionary work he first attempts in *Libretto* in 1953 and which he continues in the first book of *The Harlem Gallery* (1965) up to his death in 1966. At the top of the page, he writes: “The pessimism of the white man throws into new relief the role of the *new demiurge* in Negro Life and Africa”⁸⁵ And towards the bottom of the page he writes the following fragments (though some of the lines continue the previous ones):

Flowers of culture & art
 Artist’s rapprochement with man.
 Complex of man
 Bacteria of historical fatalism and pessimism
 Sustained by a faith and dialectics
 That man is a maker
 of history
 Man will never whittle *Finis*
 On his world...⁸⁶

I think it particularly elucidating that Tolson chooses the word “demiurge” to describe the opening he sees for his own epic projects as well as a new foundation for a world or culture that expands beyond the artistic to larger definitions and inscriptions of the human itself. The meaning of the word contains both a mythopoetic and material aspect to the creation of a world. In Gnosticism and later philosophy, “the demiurge” is a being that is separate and fashioned out of the actual material substance of the world rather than a

⁸⁵ Tolson Papers, Container 7 (emphasis added).

⁸⁶ Tolson Papers, Container 7.

metaphysical, primordial being or first mover. Returning to the epic impulses of *Libretto*, but also earlier poems from this project like Williams's *Paterson*, Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," and certainly Sikelianos's more recent *The California Poem*, all these long poems embody, in their extended projects of *poesis*, an urge to counter and refashion the form of the modern epic, but also to re-vision the human relationship to the natural-cultural world.

There is also in the term *demiurge* the connotation that the new creation is discordant and contentious to the original like a demigod or a rival to the original order. Sylvia Wynter in another essay, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," argues for the very importance of this *demiurge* in new art and theory; but she uses a slightly different term "demonic ground" to describe an imaginary that can retroactively expand the original limits of thought:

We shall need to move beyond this founding definition, not merely to another alternative one, non-consciously put in place as our present definition, but rather to a frame of reference which parallels the "demonic models" posited by physicists who seek to conceive of a vantage point outside the space-time orientation of the homuncular observer. This would be, in our case, in the context of our specific socio-human realities, a "demonic model" outside the "consolidated field" of our present mode of being/feeling /knowing... This terrain, when fully occupied, will be that of a new science of human discourse, of human "life" beyond the "master discourse" of our governing "privileged text," and its sub/versions.⁸⁷

In many ways recasting her argument Césaire's "new science of the Word" in more creative and poetic terms, she argues—using Kuhn's paradigm shifts in scientific revolutions—that a new "demonic" or *daemoniac* model is needed to revise the current

⁸⁷ Sylvia Wynter, "Afterword: Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 364 and 366.

Western-centric “master discourse” or reigning genre of the human, the invention of a new frame of reference or “materialistic substrate.”⁸⁸ Tolson’s own *demiurge* or daemonic inspiration that bids him to both imagine a new history, a new science, and a new humanism for the “Africa-To-Be” (*L* 16), “the Futurafrique” (*L* 575) seems very much akin to Wynter’s argument for a new decolonized descriptive statement or a fundamental paradigm shift in both science and culture. As Tolson suggests in his notes, the “bacteria of fatalism” and the “white man’s pessimism” presents a *kairos*, an opportune time or an opening, for the new construction of the human, a new re-fashioned relationship to materialism and humanism that reject the false myths of scientific essentialism and racialization, the idols of the tribe.

Tolson’s attempt in *Libretto* is certainly ambitious. Yet perhaps one of the greatest shortcomings of the poem is that Tolson’s transcultural vision cannot quite overcome his own embeddedness within the American colonial project. While Tolson seeks to establish the historical foundations of the former slaves’ founding the nation-state, it also suggests the tinge of colonial hierarchy which has unfortunately defined the ongoing project in Liberia, even to this day. As Tyrone Williams suggests “for Tolson, Liberia will become a country ‘more’ African than other African countries precisely because it was founded and settled by African-Americans.”⁸⁹ Like Williams’s *Paterson*, Tolson’s own epic project ends as imperfectly as it starts. In its desire to both speak back to the moderns using their own discourse, while simultaneously creating a new vision of

⁸⁸ Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings,” 357.

⁸⁹ Tyrone Williams, “The Pan-African-Americanism of Melvin B. Tolson,” *Flashpoint Magazine*, Web Issue 14 (Spring 2012), n.p.. <https://www.flashpointmag.com/twmstol.htm>.

an alternate and more egalitarian vision of Pan-African and planetary culture, it buckles under its own ambitions and the limits of Tolson's own knowledge of the complexities of global cultural politics. Nevertheless, it resonates as a lost object of late modernism and a proto-example of Sylvia Wynter's new counter-humanism and Édouard Glissant's diffractive poetics of relation.

Chapter 4

Language, Material, Ecology: The Diffraction of Scientific Discourse and Experimental Poetics in Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem*

Introduction

Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* (2004) is a feminist ecopoem written at the beginning of the 21st century. Infused with transhistorical poetic influence, the discourses of environmental science and microbiology, as well as disarmingly casual personal observation and experiences, the long poem wends its way—often quite haphazardly—between corner store bodegas and childhood memories; between shorelines, deserts, and woodlands; from cellular structures to reels of celluloid; it contains homages to Virgil and Alice Notley, Linnaeus and Evel Kenievel. The nearly two-hundred-page poem recalls the assemblage and documentary poetics that make up Williams's *Paterson*, Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," and Tolson's *Libretto*. Like these late modernist long poems, I argue that *The California Poem* employs a diffractive poetics which attempts to locate moments of interactions and overlaps between different fields of reality: the physical, the cultural, and the discursive. Using Haraway's description of diffractive mapping, I argue that this regional poem unfolds as "a place composed from interference patterns."¹ As Sikelianos wryly suggests of her own method early in the poem, "California, where the car brakes never work and I always roll/

¹ Donna Haraway, "The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 320.

through stop signs and into the gaps.”² In this playful reference to the Hollywood (or California) stop, Sikelianos suggests that the poem’s focus resides in these interstitial realms, where the structures of different regions overlap, interfere, and often serve to mutually constitute one another.

Her poetics in the long work is both heedless of and obsessed with form and structure. Throughout the poem she spends much time speaking of bilateral and radial symmetry, privileging the five-point, multi-lateral structures of the echinoderm or starfish over the two-sided linearity of most living entities (which I will examine in the last section); but her preoccupations with form, design, and structure are never fixed or overly tight. She is more often concerned with the space that “oozes at the edges/ of symmetry” (*CP* 109)—where a notable pattern in one field folds into the structure of another field. Sikelianos argues for her investment in these multi-scalar meetings or couplings throughout the poem:

Cilia, spirochete, composite beings
 born of symbiont meetings
 (humans) fall apart Are you speaking of molecules
 or community interactions? I’m speaking here
 only of the heart. (*CP* 160)

To answer her question here, the heart of the matter to which she is speaking is *both*. She is speaking of the resonance and structural overlaps between both macro and micro levels of community interaction, and these include symbiont (mutually constitutive) meetings and intersections between natural, cultural, and discursive networks. Indeed, the poem

² Eleni Sikelianos, *The California Poem* (Saint Paul, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004), 22. Hereafter referred to as *CP*.

builds much of its ecological argument on the productive use of symbiosis (or symbiogenesis) in applications often quite far afield from its original use in evolutionary biology (as I will elaborate in the second section of the chapter). Like Barad and Haraway's notion of diffraction, symbiogenesis is a natural phenomenon that also serves as a critical lens.

The poem often draws from the discourse and concepts of science while also remaining tethered to historical questions of poetics. The speaker addresses the reader with a disarmingly personal voice but also with a strong sense of literary and historical influence: "Let E., me, keep yapping, 'for EARTH is an intelligence' in all her vestments & pants" (*CP* 92). She includes a copious amount of both footnotes and endnotes; but, as with Tolson's *Libretto*, there are also numerous lines from other poems and documents embedded in the poem which often go uncited. These are weaved into the subject matter of her own material, at times in a seamless cadence and at other times, with an intentional sense of cacophony. Recalling the modernist long poem, it draws ostentatiously from aspects of both Western and non-Western traditions of the epic. But it also pulls from the long tradition of modern American poetry, invoking Whitman's "poem of the materials,"³ *Leaves of Grass*, as well as directly channeling the modernist epic legacies of Williams, Pound, and H.D..⁴ Yet Sikelianos uses these epic allusions and affects to both utilize as well as destabilize their mythopoetic authority.

³ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 134.

⁴ And, within a more contemporary timeframe, the poem also takes up the legacies of the modernist poetry in its intertextual oscillation between its commitments to and departures from language poetry and the New York School.

Sikelianos’s poetics could be described as experimental, scientific, or feminist; but, in *The California Poem*, all these attributes work towards the service of a distinctly diffractive eco-poetics. It is a poem deeply concerned with its contemporary position in a biosphere fully imbricated within the Anthropocene—where the human footprint has touched all aspects of the physical world. Packed tight with moments of ecological concern, it also overflows with moments of affirmation and pleasure. It reveals a speaker, on the one hand, deeply self-conscious and individual and, on the other, decidedly ecological and posthuman. Like Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” the poem reads as “an argument for the *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and *responsibility* in their construction.”⁵ As Sikelianos suggests early in the poem: “[a]ll of human history/ is lying in the grass, in/ nature, there is nothing/ we can do to escape it” (CP 60). The “it” in the final line could as easily refer back to “human history” or to “nature,” and the uncertainty of the pronoun’s original signifier suggests that they are equally inescapable.

For Sikelianos, as for many other contemporary poets writing about the Anthropocene, nature and ecology cannot and should not be separated from the cultural, political, and discursive constructions of material human existence. Lynn Keller describes this poetic turn as “the poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene.”⁶ In contrast to a more naïve and self-centered nature poetry in the tradition of romanticism, late 20th and 21st

⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1991), 150, italics in original. Accessed May 5, 2018. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁶ Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 9-26. As Keller asserts about the general tendencies of this movement: “[t]hrough their poetry they seek to better understand the nature and scope of the changes humans have wrought on the Anthropocene. [...] [T]hey are interested in exploring how current environmental problems are rooted in received ways of thinking and speaking, in our ways of relating to human and non-human others, as well as in our social, political and material cultures” (24).

century eco-poetry and ecocriticism attempt to build on the important critiques of language and ideology provoked by poststructuralist and cultural criticism. Yet it also pushes back against the postmodern or late modern tendencies in poetry and in theory to recast physical material as hermetically sealed within (or apart from) language or ideology. For Sikelianos and other contemporary eco-poets and critics, the natural world is not a thing apart, a place to retreat to escape the ravages of urban industrialization and modernization. In the current epoch of the Anthropocene, it is a place where the human is fully enveloped within ecology and, inversely, where the human imprint is now impossible to distinguish or separate from its natural foundation. Human cultures (industrialization, land modification, exponential population expansion) have modified and shaped the current eco-systems as much as the natural world continues to shape and inspire our own cultural realities. As Sikelianos suggests above, “there is nothing/ we can do to escape” either.

The poem draws on the legacies of the traditional epic as well as the modernist long poem in the use of both explicit and implicit cultural and ecological didacticism. Invoking *The Aeneid* as well as *The Iliad*, she opines: “I might ‘find occasion to/ sing war & perfect soldiers’—/ the war that wages over the/ face of the Earth, against/ every edible turtle &/ movable tree, the tyranny/ of money” (CP 43). Here invoking Virgil’s “arms and the man” and the rage of Achilles, she spends much of the poem drawing attention to the destructive effects of human impact often driven by the rapacious energies of capitalism. The middle of the poem is divided by a timetable which lists the human history of the California, highlighting how the more recent settler-colonial history has destroyed many of its human and non-human indigenous populations (CP 80-1) Towards the end of the

poem, she even includes a major section or “interlude” which catalogues all the endangered, threatened, and extinct species of the area (*CP* 165-8). Yet aside from this more explicit cataloguing, her didactic impulses are more subtly embedded in her diffractive poetics which explores the interstitial overlaps (both destructive and productive) between human and non-human communities.

Influenced by the insights of late 20th century theory and poetics, Sikelianos is a poet aware of the dangers of linguistic essentialism and the problems of language as both a producer and a product of cultural ideology. As she argues in a recent poem, “Experimental Life”: “[i]n a culture that seems to care little about cultural production/ In a language that has been wielded to betray [...] What is the context?”⁷ But she also finds poetic language to be a site of resistance and intervention, creating productive interferences and renewed connections. Like Williams in *Paterson*, she privileges moments of dissonance and interference as opportunities for discovery or revelation. Likewise, she honors Rukeyser’s mantra that material poetry “can extend the document,” “deliberate combines add new qualities, sums of new uses.”⁸ Invoking the opaque imprecision rather than the transparency of language, she calls for a productive reconnection of poetic language to material existence. As she asserts at the end of her “Prologue”:

Now: to let go what we knew
to not be tight, but
toney; to find a world, a word
we didn’t know (*CP* 9)

⁷ Sikelianos, Eleni. “Experimental Life.” *American Book Review* 37, no. 5 (2016): 14. [doi:10.1353/abr.2016.0097](https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2016.0097).

⁸ Muriel Rukeyser, *U.S. I*, 146, 71.

Here Sikelianos embraces this experimental mentality, what Williams describes as “the dissonance of discovery” or a failing experiment that leads to a better assertion.

Sikelianos wants to find a place where her poetic language might reconnect with the material world, but she also realizes that even linguistic breakthroughs or discoveries serve best as proximal mediations. In this way, her opening invocation might remind us of Aimé Césaire’s *science of the word* which in turn influenced Sylvia Wynter’s notion of demonic ground.⁹ As much as language has preserved false systems of cultural representation, its creativity and malleability also allow for opportunities to fashion new paradigms and structures. For both Césaire and Wynter, this *mythopoesis* or paradigm construction is at the foundation of any new theoretical or scientific assertion. While originally driven by a strong critique of old systems of thought and dangerous conceptual paradigms, it is also moment of creative composition or mythopoesis that allows for new articulation of material reality. This new storytelling move requires a compositional openness beyond a critical tightness. As Haraway describes in her recent book, *Staying with the Trouble*, “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open for surprising new and old connections.”¹⁰ Eleni Sikelianos’s *The California Poem* is a poem that contains strong ecological and cultural critique as well as an experimental poetics that also reaches, “theoretical and heedless,” towards a new knowledge of material composition. It attempts a new form of storytelling

⁹ As he argues in “Poetry and Knowledge”: “More and more the word promises to be an algebraic equation that makes the world intelligible. Just as the new Cartesian algebra permitted the construction of theoretical physics, so too an original handling of the word can make possible at any moment a new (theoretical and heedless) science that poetry could already give an approximate notion of. Then the time will come again when the study of the word will condition the study of nature. But at this juncture we are still in the shadows....” Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” 238.

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 101.

and composition that “keeps the edges open” that seeks a consonance or toney-ness rather than a theoretical tightness in its critical, ecological, and poetic ambitions.

Brief Chapter Description

In this chapter, I argue that *The California Poem* takes up the materialist questions raised by the late modernist long poems of my study. Yet, the poem, in its contemporaneity, responds to the questions of new materialism and as well the residual problems of cultural modernity and literary modernism in a way that those earlier poems can only anticipate or gesture towards. While my intervention in this project is materialist rather than purely ecological, this chapter will explore the implications of diffractive materialist poetics as it relates to contemporary ecological thought.

In the first section, I argue that *The California Poem* plays with the epic form as a high modernist conceit while simultaneously drawing on its mythopoetic power and gravitas. Like both the traditional and modernist epics, it also contains a good measure of cultural and ecological didacticism. This is most explicit in her amplified use of the catalogue, but also more subtly embedded in her diffractive poetics throughout. In the second section, I examine some of the salient examples of this diffractive poetics—specifically her use of a translocal mapping process and her transdisciplinary application of symbiogenesis. Where the traditional map creates a sense of crystallization or stasis, Sikelianos offers up this regional poem as a “watery map” or continuously changing palimpsest, composed of ultimately itinerate rather than essentially indigenous entities. While she does not invoke Barad or Haraway’s concept of diffractive mapping directly, her constant refrain of interacting symbiont relationships, drawn from the work of the

feminist biologist Lynn Margulis, serves as a consonant attempt to exploring the productive interference between different entities within overlapping ecological communities. In the third section, I argue that Sikelianos's ecological materialism is based on a commitment to language as a material process shared by both human and non-human organisms—a way in which living things both encode their own preservation and regeneration as well as interact and engage with one another. For Sikelianos the difference between human and non-human language process and structural formations is one of degree rather than kind; and at times she often takes inspiration from the emergent networking and self-adapting processes of non-human animals, in particular the radial symmetry of the echinoderm or starfish, which is a recurring theme throughout the long poem.

After Late Modernism: The Ecological Long Poem

Sikelianos's engagement with the modernism as well as the traditional epic register occurs throughout the poem. *The California Poem* is a self-declared descendant of the long poems of Whitman, Pound, Williams and H.D. as well as more contemporary feminist epic revisions, Alice Notley's *Descent of Alette* (1996) and Anne Waldman's *Iovis Trilogy* (1993, 1997, 2011).¹¹ Alongside these 20th century influences, allusions and references to Homer, Virgil, and Dante as well as the origin stories of Meso-American myth abound. Even with these numerous invocations and references to these classical narrative poems, the poem most resembles the bricolage of the modernist dalliance with the epic. It contains a number of lyrical sections that hang together by way of recursive

¹¹ Eleni Sikelianos, "The California Poem: Epic, Elegy, Ode, Paean," interview by Jesse Morse, *Jacket* 2 33 (July 2007), paragraph 5. <http://jacketmagazine.com/33/sikelianos-ivby-morse.shtml>.

thematic repetition and overlap, but they hardly follow any clear narrative arc. Sikelianos admits in an interview that, while her original intention was towards an actual narrative epic like Notley's *Decent of Alette* and Dante and Homer, she ended up failing in the same way as earlier modernist long poems like *Paterson*, *The Cantos* and *Helen in Egypt*: “[w]hat I really wanted to do was to write a sustained long poem, not a series of shorter pieces. In that goal I totally failed. Seven years later I found myself with a poem that more closely resembles Williams’ *Paterson* or Anne’s *Iovis* in its collage-like or kaleidoscopic structure.”¹² The poem draws from the legacy of modernist poetics, arising out of late 20th century schools of modernist-inflected experimental poetics, utilizing classical epic as well as high modernist registers, as well as harnessing the epic’s tendency towards cultural didacticism to her own ecological commitments.

With its footnotes, endnotes, flamboyant allusiveness, as well as the inclusion of the visual arts and scientific discourse, the poem suggests more than a passing interest in the extended legacy of avant-garde modernism, especially the modernist long poem. However, its formal as well as conceptual strategies emerge most immediately from the techniques of both the New York School and language poetry. While to some degree ideologically and aesthetically opposed, both late 20th century movements trace their roots back to the modernist avant-garde. Both schools of poetry are concerned with language and form as a palpable expression of materiality.¹³ Sikelianos certainly leans

¹² Sikelianos, “In Conversation with Jesse Morse,” para. 5.

¹³ The language school traces its lineage from late modernist Black Mountain poets and Objectivists back to the early poetic experimentations of Stein, Pound, and Williams. While committed to egalitarian political goals, the poems (and poet(ic)s) often have an intentionally impersonal and alienating quality, recalling the austerity and formalisms of high modernism as much as they move toward moments of negotiation between the speaker and the reading public. As Michael Davidson observes, “whereas for modernists the

towards the poetic strategies and subject matter of the New York School more than she does towards language poetry. Yet *The California Poem* is also motivated by the idea of experimental poetic language as a form of ideological resistance and subversion. As stated above, she credits both Notley and Waldman (both arguably second-generation New York school poets) as influences on her own attempt at the epic; and the published version of the poem is also a product of mixed media collaboration—a New York school tendency that also recalls the visual aesthetic origins of modernist poetics.¹⁴

The poem includes over twenty-six visual pieces, most of which include collage photography and oil paintings by Isabell Pelissier as well as hand drawings by Nancy Davidson. These photographs, drawings, and paintings were composed by the artists as responses to early drafts of the poem. In an interview, Sikelianos also mentions that some aspects of her poem were also later revised in response to the work generated by the

defamiliarization of words implies a desire for a realm of pure literariness, for Language-writers defamiliarization involves the interrogation of discursive and ideological structures” Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 18. For the language school, poetry, like poststructuralist and Marxist theory, becomes a form of cultural and ideological critique. Rejecting high modernism’s conceits towards totality and linguistic transparency, it nonetheless embraced its experimental form, as well as to some extent the appeal to impersonality. For this reason, language poetry was and is often dismissive of the Confessional poets and the New York School for their tendencies towards expressivist individualism.

The New York School also embraced early modernism’s commitment to avant-garde forms, but its practitioners were inspired and operated within a broader artistic context. As early modernism was propelled by the works of painting and sculpture even before its later association with experimental poetry and novels, so to do the artists of the New York School come from the realms of music, visual arts, as well as poetry. While the New York School embraced the individual and emotive, it also appreciated the visual and aural aspect of poetry. While the works often contain emotive and personal material (to the chagrin of the insurgent language poets), the New York School was also known for many mixed media collaborations. Often poetic works were inspired by and alternately inspired paintings and jazz compositions.

¹⁴ In this chapter, I don’t wish to belabor Sikelianos’s commitments and oscillations to both the ideological critique of the language school and the multi-modal material aesthetics of the New York School. But they are clearly in conversation in the poem’s contemporary intertextual conversations; furthermore, I believe their presence also demonstrates that Sikelianos has much more than just a passing interest in the late midcentury as well as the contemporary legacies of modernist poetics.

artists.¹⁵ Throughout the poem, she also employs a small figure or symbol from a small section of one of Davidson's drawings to serve as a way of formally breaking up the many subsections of the poem. The figure is composed of a small triangle with three lines or branches that extend out in similar, but not quite congruent or symmetrical lengths. The figure resembles a kind of molecule or some other sort of microorganic structure. The name of the Davidson's drawing (which Sikelianos herself titled) is *Points of Tension / Intersection* (CP 47, 195). This figure, which serves as a signal of conceptual or thematic breaks in the poem, is also meant to signify a sense of interconnectedness. This is a recurring visual reminder that the sections are far from discrete and are also meant to intersect and overlap with one another. (I return to the thematic importance of these drawings again in the final section of the chapter.)

While the poem is neither fully epic nor fully modernist, it partakes readily in the legacy of both. Its disarmingly casual address mixed with epic portent at times gently parodies the heightened style of a particular high modernism, but it simultaneously draws on the aesthetic and cultural powers of this mythopoetic register. For example, invoking the traditional epic as well as playing on high modernism's penchant for transhistorical juxtaposition, she makes oblique references to "where Dante walked/ in secret chambers" (CP 53) or "amongst hydraulic quark scars/ walked Dante" (CP 104) often placing Dante in the chambers of mussel shells, the midcentury actor Karl Malden's nose, and the realms of subatomic particles rather than the predestined circles of the Catholic underworld. The effects are amusing but also remind the reader that the sprawling poem

¹⁵ Sikelianos, "In Conversation with Jesse Morse," para. 23.

has monumental aspirations. The speaker cares deeply about these ecological chambers—these animals and animalcules. Like Dante’s Virgil, the speaker of the poem also serves as an often-sidetracked guide through regions unnoticed by the causal West-Coast traveler. At other moments, the classical allusions seem to directly channel the affected registers of high modernist lyricism:

In other hoods they heard
 the jacuzzi cover sliding back
 sound of plastic kissing itself off water

just as Agamemnon’s shimmering mask
 lying quiet in the secret sweaty chamber
 slides back to reveal the thrill

of blacking out in the lackluster days (*CP* 57)

The apposition of Agamemnon’s shimmering mask to the sweaty condensation on the bottom of the jacuzzi cover is jarring in its fusion of mythic references to the *Iliad* and *Oresteia* to a flippant exemplar of Southern California decadence. The heightened simile, “just as,” conjures high modernism’s tendency to extreme transhistorical juxtaposition. It might remind the reader of canonical modernist moments like Yeats’s premonition in “Leda and the Swan”: “A shudder in the loins engenders there/The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ And Agamemnon dead.”¹⁶ Perhaps its tawdriness also draws on T.S. Eliot’s own fusion of the high and the low in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales.” In Eliot’s poem, the atavistic Sweeney, taking early leave of a brothel, receives a surprisingly underserved allusion to the indignities suffered by the mythic king; the brothel “nightingales” are compared to the Greek chorus that “sang within the bloody

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996), 214.

wood/When Agamemnon cried aloud,/ And let their liquid siftings fall/ To stain the stiff dishonored shroud.”¹⁷ In this image of jacuzzi Agamemnon, she certainly parodies and lightly mocks the high modernist affect as well as her own pretensions towards the epic. Yet in many other moments she draws on transhistorical and intertextual parallels with a greater sense of gravitas and earnestness.

Besides notable Western literary myths, Sikelianos also observes ceremonial texts and origin stories from the American hemisphere. Early in the poem, she includes “a cut up” of a translation of an Aztec epic poem, “The Flight of Quetzalcoatl,” which she titles by its final section “It ended on the beach” (*CP* 36). Like the Mycenaean Agamemnon for the ancient Greeks, Quetzalcoatl is a primordial figure of Meso-American myth: emerging in early Aztec origin stories and *cosmovisions*, and later morphing into a symbol of indigenous resistance against colonization and imperialism within Central American and Mexican cultures. The scene she samples from comes at the end of the long poem, where Quetzalcoatl, the human/deity figure, ends up sacrificing himself on the beach, transforming in Ovid-like fashion into a new, more pantheistic final form. Reminiscent of Pound’s *Cantos*, she culls liberally from the 1967 translation of the poem, assembling the fragments into themes that coalesce with the adjoining passages of her poem.¹⁸ And her decision to actually include the rough facsimile of her cutting and pasting draws attention to the ongoing intertextuality that occurs only slightly less flagrantly throughout the rest poem.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot. *Collected Poems: 1909-1935* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 66.

¹⁸ I believe the poem is sampled from Jerome Roethberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, Oceania*—though there is no direct reference or footnote.

This dalliance with the transhistorical energies of the high modernist epic is shared by the three late modernist poems of this study. Perhaps Rukeyser is the most earnest and guileless in her incorporation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* as well as the montage effects of experimental poetry and cinema. Williams's *Paterson* is certainly "a reply to Greek and Latin" (and by implication Eliot and Pound) "with the bare hands,"¹⁹ but also a desire to replicate and Americanize Joyce's project in *Ulysses*. Tolson's *Libretto* is not written as a mere parody of *The Waste Land*, "[n]o caricature with mimic flag,"²⁰ but an attempt to defrock and supplant the Euro-centric and white-washed monopoly on transnational and transhistorical poetics. With differing levels of both reverence and craftiness, all four poems draw on the legacies of modernism as well as the epic, at times honoring, challenging, and expanding the form while certainly retooling the content.

The poem recalls the bricolage of the modernist epic more than the traditional epic's traditional narrative form, but perhaps the most noticeable formal quality she preserves from the traditional epic is the use of the catalogue. While she employs the parataxis of the catalogue throughout the poem, the most extended use occurs towards the end of the poem. The section "Endangered, Threatened, Extinct Interlude" (*CP* 165-8) lists, quite formally, the vanished or vanishing creatures that have inhabited the region of California. Here she breaks from her normal interplay between scientific discourse, intertextual allusions, and personal experience; and instead, just uses the successive inventory of species names to give the reader pause. The catalogue begins fittingly with

¹⁹ Williams, *Paterson*, 2.

²⁰ Tolson, *Libretto*, line 43.

the “California Grizzly Bear Extinct (1925)” a notable early species driven to extinction that has been preserved, somewhat ironically, as a symbol on the state flag. The section also opens with an epigraph at the top of the page from William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. She quotes from “Book I,” which contains one of Williams’s many diatribes against the self-confidence and imperiousness of the difficult academic poem: “A chemistry, corollary/ to academic misuse, which the theorem/with accuracy, accurately misses.”²¹ Here she suggests that this interlude is a more straightforward corollary to augment and redirect some her experimental excesses and offshoots—a kind of recalibration of the poem meant to regulate the poem’s general exuberance. By the time she arrives at this interlude, there is already an implicit didacticism which works throughout the poem in her interstitial rummaging around intersections and gaps between scientific, cultural, and linguistic fields. The entire poem is meant to highlight the ecological tragedy that is occurring in this region—the genocide instigated by invasive species and cultures—but it also dwells on the pleasures of being in the world—the speaker participating and reveling within the congeries of cultural, natural, and linguistic interactions.

Sikelianos also argues that her long poem, especially in its use of the catalogue, is meant to serve a didactic purpose. For modern and contemporary poetry, this didacticism is implicit in the form as much as it might be explicit in content of the poem. Margret Dickie notes this fusion of experimental and didactic style in earlier modernist attempts at the long poem: “Openly didactic, the poets set out to teach not necessarily difficult

²¹ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 165. Also, William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, 36.

lessons, but simple precepts that required new and complex forms of expression responsive to the modern world.²² Michael Andre Bernstein, in his book on the “modernist verse epic,” also notes that this element of instruction is “deliberately foregrounded in the epic.”²³ Sikelianos suggests much the same about her own poem in an interview: “what does it mean to write an overarching catalogue about a very specific place? I suppose I hope that a catalogue, a calling attention to, can make something happen, save a field or two, clean up the water. It’s certainly a political poem, in its cataloguing intent.”²⁴ The poem contains other openly didactic moments like this interlude. There is also a timetable that breaks up the poem near its center, which gives the human history of settlement and colonization from 12,500 hundred years ago to the present (*CP* 80-1). This timetable and the extinction interlude both serve as corollaries that recalibrate and recenter the experimental poetic theorems and techniques that she deploys throughout the rest of the poem—Brechtian moments that deliver the jarring or alienating effects of raw material data that contrast to her more implicit strategies of the rest of the poem. This implicit didactic tendency is embedded throughout the poem in her diffractive poetics (which I discuss in the next two sections) which explores the overlaps between cultural, natural, and linguistic ecologies. In fact, I would posit that Sikelianos inadvertently describes her own more emergent didactic and diffractive impulses quite lucidly in her critical analysis of Lorine Niedecker’s midcentury place-based poetics:

Here and in other poems her [Niedecker’s] close attention to her physical surroundings evidences a world in which humans are not divorced from their

²² Margaret Dickie, *On the Modernist Long Poem* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 8.

²³ Michael André Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 14.

²⁴ “In Conversation with Jesse Morse,” *Jacket* 2 33, para. 17.

environment, or even foregrounded necessarily, put participate in an eco-system of mergansers, marshweed, and bombs. With Objectivist sincerity, she shows us how to “[think] things as they exist,” how to have the bulldozer in the nature poem, how to include the political and horrific in the most subtle of manners, so that *the didacticism—a word I’d like to wash of its negative charge and reclaim for poetry—is left to the reader* (Prepositions +12).²⁵

Here with Sikelianos’s own eco-critical sincerity, she highlights in Niedecker’s poetics some of the strongest aspirations in her own. *The California Poem* is replete with natural ecologies wrapped up in human cultures. One method Sikelianos uses throughout the poem to achieve this diffractive and emergent sense of an intercultural eco-system is through a multi-scalar mapping process.

“A Place Composed of Interference Patterns”: Translocal Mapping and Symbiogenesis

Sikelianos’s returns to the concept of mapping throughout the long poem—though it is certainly a different sort of mapping than that of traditional cartography.²⁶ Her continual process of remapping and triangulating the unstable dynamic processes between natural, cultural, and discursive fields of reality is where her project in *The California Poem* most resembles the recovery work of *extending the document* in Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead.” Rukeyser’s assemblage poetics takes many different roads to “bring down the maps again,”²⁷ attempting to create a composite vision of a

²⁵ Eleni Sikelianos, “Life Pops from a Music Box Shaped Like a Gun: Dismemberments and Mendings in Niedecker’s Figures,” In *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 40, emphasis added. ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁶ For example, the inside and outside of the front and back covers of the book are actually embedded with the lines of an unmarked topographical map. I believe the close presentation of the swirling lines of elevation also resembling the patterns of fingerprints, which suggests another process of embedded representation or distinction.

²⁷ Rukeyser, *U.S. 1*, 9.

particular ecological location or event. Rukeyser's process of mapping sets out to describe a very specific place, but one also made up of many overlapping translocal factors "which are, in the end, not regional or national."²⁸ As Rukeyser introduces the opacity of the groundglass image and the camera obscura, so too does Sikelianos draw attention to the inevitable proximation, the "toney"-ness rather than tightness of her own mapping process.

Sikelianos's diffractive process of cartography draws attention to the problem of trying to represent and hold together a total vision of a fluid landscape and culture. In a moment near the center of the poem, she makes a direct reference to mapping, accentuating the reflexive fixity and essentialization that occurs trying to tightly map or give the measure of dynamic ecological communities and cultures. Below one of Isabelle Pelissier's collages, Sikelianos declares in her own handwriting: "a map immobilized the landscape/ as if space were a readable object" (*CP* 89). Here she suggests that the precision of mapping can also lead to a false crystallization of a shifting and constantly emergent reality, revealing a place and culture but giving it the appearance of local fixity when in fact it is an unfolding and ceaselessly mutable process. In *Modest Witness*, Donna Haraway also draws attention to the fetishization and false essentialism of traditional mapping processes: "[t]he maps are fetishes in so far as they enable a specific kind of mistake that turns process into nontropic, real, literal things inside containers."²⁹ One of Haraway's alternatives to this essentializing reflective mapping system is replacing it with a diffractive mapping technique: "the rays from my optical devices

²⁸ Rukeyser, *U.S. I*, 146.

²⁹ Haraway, *Modest Witness*, 136.

diffract, rather than reflect. These diffracting rays compose interference patterns, not reflecting images...*a place composed of interference patterns.*"³⁰ I would assert that this diffractive concept of "a place composed of interference patterns" is consonant with Sikelianos's poetic mapping process throughout *The California Poem*. While Sikelianos does not invoke the concept of diffraction or diffractive mapping explicitly in the poem, her own concept of translocal networking and productive symbiogenesis—ideas which she borrows directly from the Édouard Glissant and Lynn Margulis—help her to create a regional poem that is a place composed not of discreet autonomous entities but made up of interference patterns.

Sikelianos engages with this diffractive mapping (rather than supposedly representational, reflective mapping) by allowing the productive distractions or diffractive interferences to become a generative part of her composition process. Throughout the poem, she often moves to describe a particular object or location and then almost immediately veers towards tangential, often extra-regional, associations. For example, some of the sections of the poem forecast a sense of organization around different biospheres within California—an outward appearance of external arrangement and delineation which she rarely follows through on. For example, some of the middle sections are titled: "*Biotic Community: Rocky Shore*," "*Biotic Community: Riparian Woods*," "*Biotic Community: Freshwater Marsh*," "*Biotic Community: Chapparal*."³¹ Each of these sections does contain some reference to, or at times even miniature catalogues of, the flora and fauna that occupy these bioregions. Yet her musings in these

³⁰ Haraway, "The Promise of Monsters," 319-20, emphasis added.

³¹ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 27, 64, 104, 155 (italics in original).

sections can get carried quite far afield—often very suddenly and intentionally. For example, she opens with the section on the Riparian Woodland (the wetlands or riverside); but two pages later, she interjects with a new section title that functions as an intentional interruption of the previous one: “*In my topophilic state/ I am receiving and transmitting/ international influence now—forget my sclerophyllic this or that---/bzz bzz tap tap*” (CP 66, italics in original). Here her “topophilia,” which is associated with a strong connection to and love of place (in this case the “sclerophyllic” or leafy areas), is disrupted or invaded by interference patterns or radio wavelengths of “international influence.” While she draws attention to this overtly in this sudden interjection between the Biotic community sections, this occurs with a great deal of frequency throughout the poem. Sections ostensibly devoted to a certain region are often full of productive distractions or interferences which serve to draw nascent emergent patterns together.

Particularly attuned to border crossings and regional overlap, Sikelianos focuses on some of the itinerate or immigrant species, particularly the opossum, which she finds a certain kinship with early in the poem: “Listen: who’s creating the world/ here, Eleni or opossums? [...] Who/ is of more use on the face of the earth, Eleni/ or opossums?” (CP 58). She even has a section of the poem dedicated to the opossum with the wry title “*Un-Natural Bird-egg Eating Thief, Alien Invader of California*” (CP 70-1, italics in original). Sikelianos finds the animal to be a quintessential example of a native Californian, naturalized but not truly indigenous, like many of its other citizens. In an interview, she reflects on her translocal concept of place in the poem, appealing to idea that a region itself serves a kind of living map or palimpsest—rather than an “immobilized object”—that contains the inscriptions of other places directly on its surface:

My most place-specific work seems to appeal to readers in the widest range of places. But that is the truth of place — it carries every other place in it, historically, psychically, or potentially. [...] The land is a deep palimpsest, with all kinds of scribblings etched into it. U.S. place names show that vividly. Then there is the psychic history of everyone who's walked across it, tarred a road or toiled there, or even passed through. Any place is a watery map you carry in your head to every other place you go. I have layer upon layer of shifting maps in my head, each with brightly inked streets, roads, and hills, each floating above the other.³²

This attempt to express the sense of a living, “watery map,” rather than an “immobilized landscape” also speaks to Sikelianos’s own process in writing the poem. Most of the poem was not written or inspired *in situ* but rather remembered and composed in her time in New York and Colorado after leaving the state.³³ Yet here, this notion of a translocal memoir or record also seems to apply directly to the landscape itself, ultimately composed of itinerate rather than essentially indigenous entities. These entities carry their psychic and genetic histories onto the immediate scene or biotic community.

Sikelianos’s notion of productive itinerancy are most explicitly inspired by Glissant’s notion of errantry and non-filial relations in his *Poetics of Relation* (as I will expand on momentarily). However, Glissant’s own concepts were themselves heavily influenced by the process materialism of Deleuze and Guattari, particularly their notion of errantry and nomadism. In *Anti-Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism*, they describe a productive deterritorialization or reterritorialization that occurs when the wanderer or errant refuses to recognize the received power structures that make up his/her cultural

³² “In Conversation with Jesse Morse,” *Jacket 2* 33, para. 14.

³³ The other poems of this project have varying levels of distance or detachment from the places they represent. Williams chose the adjacent town of Paterson, rather than his hometown, Rutherford, N.J., to be the focal point for his poem. Tolson’s *Libretto* was an ode to a country he never visited until (perhaps) after the poem was published. Rukeyser assembled her poem about Gauley Bridge after a brief visit, using materials gathered from many other places as well.

reality: “continually wandering about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best he can, he plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization. [...] It may well be that these peregrinations are the schizo’s own particular way of rediscovering the earth. [...] He scrambles all the codes and is the transmitter of the decoded flows of desire.”³⁴ While not encouraging the delusions of an actual psychotic or schizophrenic subject, Deleuze and Guattari recognize the power of the metaphor of schizophrenic theoretical thinking (what they term *schizophrenic materialism*) as a way of breaking through the reifications of ideology and economic power that are pervasive.

While I would not describe the speaker in *The California Poem* as schizophrenic, there is a certain degree of attention-deficit or hyperactivity going on which also entails a productive scrambling of the codes: her “topophilia” overwhelmed by the transmissions of international influence, poetic language overlapping with scientific discourse, the human with the non-human, nature with culture, history with the present: “border curve—world’s curve—his voice curving past—a / baseball—its—bat—bat—wings—arching toward—dark—euca-/ lyptus leaf—what/ lopsided, what symmetry” (*CP* 101). Here is just one (quite extreme) example of the hyperactive associative errantry that she deploys as a method of composition throughout the poem. She often fixates on the concept of symmetry and a sense of peripheral or open totality, but they are usually invoked as incomplete and emergent processes. As Glissant suggests of his own

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 35.

particular nomadism and its relationship to totality: “[t]he thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claim to sum it up or to possess it.”³⁵

Deleuze and Guattari’s polyvocal materialism resists political uniformity, even the univocal binaries of traditional dialectics, as well as a purely political concept of materialism.³⁶ Foucault describes their process in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, “Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.”³⁷ As I discuss in the Tolson chapter, Glissant was able to turn this political, psychoanalytic, and materialist theory—this schizophrenic nomadism—into a fluid template to undergird his own arguments for cultural diffraction and limitless creolization in *Poetics of Relation*.³⁸ Much like Haraway and Barad promote diffractive thinking as a

³⁵ Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 21.

³⁶ *Anti-Oedipus* is at once a challenge to psychoanalytic structuralism, to the fascism within both capitalism and the individual, and to the structural limitations of purely dialectical and binary critique. It also presents a method that attempts, disjunctively, to recover the pure desire for material reality. Unlike Lacan, who views desire as a tendency that leads the subject away from reality into the endlessly circular realm of the symbolic and false objects, Deleuze and Guattari finds unregulated desires of schizophrenic thinking as a way of deterritorializing the political constructions of power—of avoiding the tendency to fascism not only in the community but also in the individual—that would preserve the conceit or myth of order and hierarchy, rather than to take material risks in this crossing between institutionalized boundaries. Foucault’s “Preface” serves as a gloss to the political and theoretical implications of their process materialism. Here he describes the enemies they are combatting: “the political ascetics, the sad militants, the terrorists of theory, those who would preserve the pure order of politics and political discourse. Bureaucrats of the revolution and civil servants of Truth. [...] Last but not least, the major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism. [...] And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us,” Foucault, “Preface,” *Anti-Oedipus*, xii-xiii.

³⁷ Foucault, “Preface,” *Anti-Oedipus*, xii, xiii.

³⁸ As he argues at the beginning of *Poetics of Relation*: “Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other,” Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

useful supplement to reflection and mirroring, Deleuze and Guattari propose schizophrenic materialist thinking as a way of breaking through the reifications of ideology and power that occlude and separate the individual from the material world, seeking transversal relations and connections rather than defining reality through one transcendental materialist framework.

Sikelianos does not directly invoke Haraway and Barad's notion of diffractive interference or mapping, nor does she directly espouse Deleuze and Guattari's anti-fascist, nomadic philosophy; however, she does credit the influence of Glissant's thinking to her poetics in a number of recent essays. In particular, she finds an interdisciplinary parity between Glissant's notion of limitless creolization and the feminist biologist Lynn Margulis's theory of *symploysis*. As I describe in the introduction as well as the previous chapter on Tolson, Glissant's championing of the limitless creolization of diffracting cultures is an insurgent challenge to the notions of supposed essentialized structures of colonial hierarchy.³⁹ Furthermore, it subverts the false legitimacy of these structures which were often used to justify cultural claims about racial hierarchies and direct filiation. As he argues: “[a]gainst this reductive transparency, a force of opacity is at work. No longer the opacity enveloped and reactivated by the mystery of filiation but another, considerate of all the threatened and delicious things joining one another (without conjoining, that is, without merging) in the expanse of relation.”⁴⁰ Notice here

³⁹ “If we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable. *Creolization diffracts*, whereas certain forms of *métissage* can concentrate one more time.” Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34. Glissant's sense of cultural diffraction moves beyond dialectical synthesis and suggests that the implications of this translocal interference have material as well as conceptual implications.

⁴⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 62.

the diffractive strain in Glissant's thought that attempts to bring things together into opaque relationship and overlap but refuses the lure of synthesis and transparency. In Sikelianos's recent essay, she finds a parity between Glissant's notion of productive non-filial relation and Margulis's argument on symbiogenesis which she applies her own perceived illegitimacy coming from a broken family of immigrant origins:

Glissant finds structures, like the many-threaded creolized languages, “organically linked to the worldwide experience of Relation.” It is a state made through links between cultures and languages, not one that proceeds from an origin; it is instead “a language of the Related.” [...] The feminist biologist Lynn Margulis [...] advocated a symbiotic view of evolution, one in which several species of bacteria merged to combine possibilities like motility and oxygen consumption. This radical—and genome-vindicated—theory is the biological counterpart to Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.⁴¹

This once controversial concept of symbiogenesis and trans-local/-genic/-species evolutionary relationship (rather than filial or hierarchical) was much disparaged in the scientific community in the early century, and until it was later borne out to be true. Margulis's work reveals a system of networking and collaboration as an alternative (or a productive supplement) to one of pure Darwinian domination and the survival of the fittest. It argues that prokaryotic cells (like bacteria) eventually merged into the organelles of the larger eukaryotic cells of plants and animals. They were not destroyed or replaced, but rather found ways to mutually evolve and subsist.⁴²

⁴¹ Sikelianos, “Refuse/Refuge: Be Longing,” The Poetry Foundation, First published February 12, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2018/02/refuse-refuge-be-longing>.

⁴² Here Sikelianos briefly outlines the concept of endosymbiosis or symbiogenesis in another interview: “Lynn Margulis' pioneering work in evolutionary symbiosis (endosymbiosis) speaks to this, too. In her view, evolution doesn't happen only through gene mutation and natural selection, but through different organisms fusing. She was able to trace how our mitochondria and algae and plant chloroplasts came into being through a symbiotic relationship between cells and bacteria, giving us eukaryotic cells. She was long thought a renegade, but many of her views are now recognized in evolutionary theory. (It's not surprising that a female evolutionist was thought to be a crackpot in the 60s and 70s; and it's fitting that a woman

Margulis's feminist challenges and revisions of biological hierarchies and determinism resemble the philosophical challenges and interpretations of quantum physics made by Haraway and Barad in their notion of diffraction as a process of productive interference and interaction between different fields of material reality. Haraway and Barad's concept of diffraction originates from classical physics and becomes greatly dynamized by the discoveries of quantum physics; and Margulis's concept of symbiogenesis expands the possibilities of evolution and adaptation within the naturalist and biological realms. On a transdisciplinary and philosophical level, all these theorists' arguments for productive rather than destructive material interference serve as timely challenges to theories of hierarchies and essential differences (i.e. in physics, that waves and particles were falsely considered completely separate and not overlapping entities; in biological science, that evolutionary change only occurs through combat and filial transmission).⁴³

Sikelianos directly references the influence of Margulis in the recent essay quoted above; but she is already deploying this notion of translocal symbiogenesis in her poetic/theoretical work in *The California Poem*: "In the beginning/cells discovered the

discovered the symbiotic element of evolution.)" From "Scientific Materialism and Poetics: An Interview with Eleni Sikelianos by Megan K. Fernandes," *The California Journal of Poetics*, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.californiapoetics.org/interviews/4251/scientific-materialism-and-poetics-an-interview-with-poet-eleni-sikelianos-with-an-introduction-by-megan-k-fernandes/>.

⁴³ In "The Promise of Monsters," Haraway actually refers to Margulis in her explanation of diffractive mapping, noting how her biological understanding of non-human polymorphous interaction and production is a useful challenge to the traditional understanding of human reproduction, which relies too much on myths of hierarchy, replication, and carbon copies. Moreover, Haraway finds that Margulis's symbiogenesis paradigm, functions like her own metaphor of diffraction as a productive form of alternative storytelling: "This wonderful book does the cell biology and evolution for a host of inappropriate/d others. In its dedication, the text affirms 'the combinations, sexual and parasexual that bring us out of ourselves and makes us more than we are alone' (p. v). That should be what science studies as cultural studies do, by showing how to visualize the curious collectives of humans and unhumans that make up natural/social (one word) life." Haraway, "The Promise of Monsters," 361.

magic/ of chlorophyll, in the days of our early/ symbiogenesis, redwoods like great
 ‘candelabra held blue green algae/ up to the light’ & sponges branched towards the
 divisions in a spine” (CP 150); and in another section “Cilia, spirochete, composite
 beings/ born of symbiont meetings/ (humans) fall apart Are you speaking of
 molecules/ or community interactions?” (CP 160). Here Sikelianos focuses on the
 productive process of interspecies and intercellular interactions, which create new
 combinations and productive genesis, often beginning in translocal and aleatory
 encounters rather than a particular species’ fitness or exceptionalism. In a more recent
 poem, “Experimental Life” (2016), she suggests that this naturally observed phenomenon
 might serve as a lodestar for larger paradigms of cultural, discursive, and linguistic
 interactions:

The making of new material via collaborative acts rather than competitive ones
 One cell sliding into another one
 Like a word back into its womb
 Or how poets linger on the resonances of word and world in the same chamber
 We can call these cells and words communities of interacting entities
 Which do not obey the unsmiling reason of the fittest⁴⁴

While certainly a fine egalitarian sentiment, I find this example also contains some overly
 rose-tinted associations with change and evolution. While symbiont interactions produce
 changes, they still work alongside other evolutionary processes that also very definitely
 also include plunder and survivalist violence. As Donna Haraway notes in her most
 recent book, *Staying with the Trouble*, “Symbiosis is not a synonym for ‘mutually

⁴⁴ Sikelianos, “Experimental Life,” 14.

beneficial.”⁴⁵ While the presence of some bacteria does benefit the host, the symbiogenic interactions may often contain an uneven levels of reciprocity. I would argue that, like Barad’s concept of diffraction, symbiogenesis is a useful lens, or as Donna Haraway says, a productive “worldly example” for thinking about (ecological, cultural, linguistic) relationships; but I think it is also important not to imbue the ontological and epistemological effects of symbiogenesis or diffraction with an overly affirmative or universalized ethics.

Still, these biological and poetic examples of collaborative rather than competitive interferences can be instructive, and, as I will argue, they attend the more subtle didacticism at work in the poem. Sikelianos posits symbiogenesis as an example of more reciprocal relationships that already exists in nature—though symbiosis does not seem to be a historical tendency within our own species. As humans, we have perhaps the greatest ability (among all the species that make up the biosphere) to reflect on and measure our own actions and interaction with ourselves and non-human (or more-than-human) others. Thus, we also have a greater responsibility to make knowledgeable choices in how we conduct these relationships. Establishing or creating more symbiont and egalitarian interactions is a goal worth striving for, both for retooling the uneven relations in our own economic material cultures as well as in our ecological material relation to the external world. In the next section, I will explore how Sikelianos finds

⁴⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 60, emphasis in original. In this chapter, Haraway builds on Margulis’s notion of symbiogenesis to make an argument for *sympoiesis*, which literally meaning “making with” as an alternative way of thinking about *autopoiesis*, which still implies a false sense of autonomy or “self-making.” While she builds on Margulis’s radical biology, she also acknowledges that symbiogenesis has its limitations as a total paradigm or full replacement of evolutionary theory.

language itself to be a palpable yet contingent material writing process to record these interactions and interference patterns—or as she suggests in the poem above “the resonances of the word and the world in the same chamber.”

The Material of Language: Translation and Coding, Phonemes and Genomes

As much as *The California Poem* might be a paean to a specific place, much of the poem dwells on the borderlines, the metaphorical and literal intersections that she rolls through: the overlap between the cultural and the natural, “where the phone lines tangle with the sea” (*CP* 34), interstitial realms (shorelines and tidepools) between seascape and landscape (*CP* 60), the inseparable and inescapable overlap between human culture and the non-human ecologies.⁴⁶ Her poetic strategy is particularly invested in how these interferences and overlaps get translated and processed. I argue that her poetic technique enacts the diffraction or interference of different discourses (personal, literary, scientific) in order to reveal important resonances and dissonances between ostensibly closed systems. She also explores how language functions as an imperfect instrument or technology used by both humans and non-humans as a form of expression and communication, but also a form of self-inscription for self-preservation and reproduction—language as a material expression or record of *autopoiesis* or self-making. In particular, she finds metonymic similarities between the structure of human language and genetic code. As she argues in the recent poem, “Experimental Life”: “I see syntax as an extension of biology, branching from nature/ In it, we can let language wobble

⁴⁶ “All of human history,/ is lying in the grass, in/ nature, there is nothing/ we can do to escape it” Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 60.

fruitfully, like the gene.”⁴⁷ Yet Sikelianos is careful to not tie this comparison of genetic and linguistic structure to any sort of essentialism or autotelic transparency. Like her deployment of symbiogenesis, her notion of genetic coding is more attuned to social and technical malleability or “fruitful wobbling” of the code, rather than treating it as a metalanguage or external narrative. In *The California Poem*, as well as her other writings, Sikelianos argues that language functions as a kind of disjunctive anchor, containing a polyvocality that navigates and negotiates contingently between different material realms. It serves to slide productively between fields, like stitchwork, but never serves as a Poundian “golden thread” to a total pattern. The form is continually adapting to the content, just as the content is influenced and guided by the form. Her interest in the material uses of language further extends to its emergent form and shape as it relates to natural symmetry—though her notion of symmetry is itself a continual process and imperfection.

In *The California Poem*, Sikelianos places scientific discourse, particularly that of biology and genetics, in a diffractive relationship with cultural and personal discourse in order to generate uncanny interferences and connections. This is not to reveal some sort of metalanguage that provides direct access to unmediated reality, but rather to point out that language, while differential and approximate, still captures an element of relation or structural resonance between fields. Scientific discourse, while productively striving for empiricism and accuracy, is still a discourse of mediation and (as Césaire suggests in “Poetry and Knowledge”) still requires a certain degree of poetic/linguistic invention

⁴⁷ Sikelianos, “Experimental Life,” 14.

(*poesis*) or fabricated structure in order to give a coherent and compelling narrative of its discoveries.⁴⁸ As she states towards the middle of the poem: “This mathematical expression of light/ is not light/ It is merely a suggestion of what light might be” (*CP* 97). Even the material data and measurements collected are still mediations and anthropocentric translations of observable phenomena. Inversely, for Sikelianos, poetics and poetic language also serves a function that moves beyond its common stereotype of sentimentalism and emotive expression. For her and other activist poets, it is a language of resistance that can serve to challenge the syntax and structural hegemonies of received political, cultural, and ecological discourses and paradigms. As she argues in a recent essay, “Poetry is its own *not following*. As it breaks and plays on the militarized forms of grammar and rhythm, it shows us other paths of existence. It shows us how *not to go along*.”⁴⁹ For Sikelianos this “not following” breaks from a complicity within language and cultural production. It serves as a productive dissonance that can create better connections and reconnections, creating new frequencies that respond to a particular exigence. This linguistically playful and conceptually provocative overlap between scientific discourse and poetic language is a strategy that she has employed throughout her work.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” 238.

⁴⁹ Sikelianos, “Change the World” The Poetry Foundation. First published February 5, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2018/02/change-the-world>, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ As she suggests in an interview on her most recent poetry collection, *Make Yourself Happy*: “Well, science is itself a language, a way of communicating things about our world. The word “experiment” serves us perfectly here. I think of both poetry and sciences as ways to test out and discover things about the world, about meaning and structures. I’m not sure most people do think of science and poetry as diametrically opposed, but if they do, it might be because of a cliché about poetry’s sole or primary function as affective. That is not to say that carrying emotion isn’t an important behavior of poetry, it’s just not the only one.” Julie Lairos, “Tentative Nature: Interview with Eleni Sikelianos,” *Numéro Cinq*

One major ecological reclamation she makes for language is her connection of human language with other non-human discursive and expressive practices that occur within the biosphere. As she argues in one of her first footnotes (which is also in poetic form):

All sparrow's songs,
granites, grasses, collaborate, language
is a shape
the planet takes

[poem in which the planet takes over] (*CP* 190)

While this capacious, Whitmanesque conception of language might strike the reader as a bit twee, she spends many portions of the poem expanding on this assertion of deep ecological language by giving contiguous examples from linguistics as well as the genetic sciences. For example, early in the poem she builds on the onomatopoeic relationship of language to nature, stressing the sonic qualities that overlap in both the linguistic and natural realms: “Begin with a homophone, move/ through numbers, animals & rocks participated in the inventions of language/ (from the snapping of twigs/ we learned k’s and t’s)” (*CP* 38). Throughout the poem, Sikelianos plays on the linguistic and conceptual overlaps of these homonyms and homophones—suggesting that they might expand into more general *homologies* and larger discursive connections. These occur first at the syntactic level, but they expand into larger metonyms of inter-field overlaps and entanglements: “[a]re you speaking of molecules/ or community interactions?” (*CP* 160). Here Sikelianos applies this notion of symbiogenesis to the material construction and

8.3 (April 2017), <http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2017/04/08/tentative-nature-interview-elene-sikelianos-julie-larios> .

interaction of language. Something as basic as a sonic similarity can begin to inspire semantic connections, just as syntax and proximity can also begin to establish metonymic connections between seemingly different and autonomous entities. Here she suggests how linguistic and symbolic relationships might originate first by proximate physical spacing:

fool in sunlight
 meditating on daily objects
 to find any aura or possible identity

signees & signets
 a side slip, a skid, a
 downward turn towards the inside
 temblor

oak as a sign-tree
 split-tree
 spit-tree
 the god of imaginable objects
 made me⁵¹

Here she illustrates that the linguistic (and often nonlinguistic) world of sign-making can create aural (with the sense of both ear-related and psychic) connections. These connections might start from haphazard and aleatory encounters, but nonetheless become a part of the syntactic and metonymic process of building connections and establishing residency within a particular biotic community or culture. Notice how she plays on the sonic resonance between the words “sign,” “side,” “skip,” “skid” “split” and “spit,” intentionally highlighting their aural as well as their semantic overlap. She first describes the “oak” as “sign-tree”—a word that in English has come to symbolize or signify a particular species of tree. Then she refers to the “oak” as a “split-tree,” which evokes the

⁵¹ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 98, emphasis in original.

sense of Linnaean taxonomy, relating to the descending, expanding branches of family, genus, and species. Finally, the “oak” as “spit-tree” might first suggest its proximity to the speaker—within *spitting distance*; or, perhaps it might also refer to the function of language as representation—the *spit and image* of a natural oak tree. The latter seems especially likely since she invokes the demiurge figure of poesis at the end of the lines: “the god of imaginable objects/ made me.”⁵² Here in these last lines, Sikelianos plays on the creation and molding functions of poesis, both in language as well as in the material world. The poem is replete with many of these homonymic and homological moments, drawing together aleatoric connections between words that bear sonic similarities but are not traditionally thought of in the same context. As she suggests in a recent essay: “[p]oetry was a way to make a different kind of sense, a way to *experience difference*, in textures that allowed difference to feel like both a fraying and a weaving. [...] Similarly, a word in a poem might take a little swerve or hollow itself out so that it can find relational meanings rather than filial meanings, to repurpose Glissant’s terms.”⁵³ Here again Sikelianos takes up Glissant’s notion of non-filial relation and cultural diffraction—the creolization of differences—and applies it to an ecological cultural

⁵² She returns to this issue/problem of dynamic representation again in the final lines of the poem. drawing on an aphoristic line from the language poet, Clark Coolidge: “how do I notice/ while being Am, am reading the rocks/ noting and riding the surface” (*CP* 189). This “being Am,” seems to refer to a powerful present or presence. Though it also seems to hint at the epic demiurge (the I AM) or, a kind of second creation or creator, “the god of imaginable objects.” Any time one stops to reflect or record a present event, it immediately becomes a recollection, and thus not quite consonant with the emergent reality. These are powerful, almost mystic pronouncements, but perhaps they also suggest a final imperfection or limitation. The difference between “being there” and recalling or remembering.

⁵³ Sikelianos, “Refuse/Refuge: Be Longing,” The Poetry Foundation, First published February 12, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2018/02/refuse-refuge-be-longing>.

context, one that includes human cultures but also the fraying and weaving of the discursive materiality of non-human cultures as well.

As she works through the poem, she moves beyond the external sonic and syntactic connections between language and material structure (the semiotic notion of symbiogenesis), and she shifts into the idea of genetic inscription and internal revision. Here she gives an imperative in a later section: “RISE UP——phonemes/ cum genomes, let language disintegrate, tiny/ technology in the compost heap” (*CP* 139). Here, in more explicit terms, she connects the meaning-making processes of language to the genetic process of coding and re-membering structure. Here she suggests that phonemes, which are internal sonic variances within a word (*pan*, *ban*, *tan*) that create different semantic meanings, have a continuity with the DNA and RNA sequences that make up genomes. Language is a technology or means of recording that preserves and help to reproduce design. For Sikelianos, while language is far from transparent, it resembles DNA in that is an organic code that is continually rewriting and renewing itself. Yet, like her obsession with the productive difference of symbiogenesis, Sikelianos’s parity between language and genetic coding does not imply a master-code or metalanguage, a conceit which, as Donna Haraway has noted, can lead to from a tendency to want to denaturalize or separate genetic language from the material body itself.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Haraway refers to the problematic Cartesian gene/body dualism promoted by sociobiologists like Richard Dawkins: “Thus the ‘selfish gene’ made famous by Richard Dawkins (1976) is a tautology. In this view, genes are things in themselves, outside the lively economies of troping. To be outside the economies of troping is to be outside finitude, morality, and difference, to be in the realm of pure being, to be One, where the word is itself.” Haraway, *Modest Witness* 134.

Building on this connection between language structure and genomes as a form of storytelling, the poem moves into a focus on larger structures and organic patterns. And as an eco-poet, she privileges a few non-human structural patterns or natural symmetries as didactic examples of both emergent adaptation and collaborative evolution. Perhaps one of her most prevalent images throughout the poem is that of the *echinoderm* or starfish. She dedicates the poem to this creature, “for all the echinoderms and dinoflagellates” (CP 3), references it in three extended footnotes,⁵⁵ and returns to the example close to a dozen times throughout the long poem. In most of these sections, she obsesses particularly over the starfish’s *radial symmetry* which she finds to be much more compelling and complex than the *bilateral symmetry* that humans share with most other animal organisms. As she argues in the third footnote: “An *asteroidea* (starfish) begins as a bilateral entity, but does not stay obsessed with mirrors, mirror stages, self-reflection, binary modes” (CP 190). Here she fuses some of the scientific discourse and biological examples with concepts from psychoanalysis and critical theory. While a flippant reference to Lacan’s mirror stage, her desire to move beyond mere reflection also evokes Haraway’s critique of reflection as “displacing the same elsewhere” and notion of diffraction as an alternative critical consciousness. Sikelianos expounds a bit about her preoccupation with the echinoderm in her interview in *Jacket 2*:

It began to occur to me that our basic bilateral symmetry might have led us to thinking about language and the world in a bilateral way. I began to wonder what kind of language these animals I have always loved and about which I was writing—cnidaria (which include jellyfish), or echinoderms (starfish, urchins)—

⁵⁵ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 190-1 (footnotes i, iii, xvii)

would make, given that their symmetry is radial—a kind of infinite and round possibility.⁵⁶

In this very speculative line of reasoning, Sikelianos argues that since multi-lateral autopoiesis exists in certain animal life forms, this internal language might suggest a different relationship to consciousness—one which bilateral and linear entities might learn from. Building on this notion of radial symmetry as a particular language or dialect of self-replication, she returns to this image of alternative autopoiesis towards the end of the poem:

Starfish in the brittle numb curricula
 make secondary pentamerous radial symmetry/ radical syllabi: the
 Asterozoa might teach us
 autonomous habits, how
 to grow back an arm⁵⁷

Here she doubles down on this didactic moment by imbuing this description with pedagogical imagery, describing the cold sea as a gathering of “curricula,” and the starfish’s tendency towards radial symmetry as “radical syllabi”—something to reflect on and learn from. She speculates how our anthropocentric, linear reasoning might be enriched if the emergence of our physical, cognitive faculties were based on multilateral or multi-linear rather than bilateral or linear patterns and organizational conditioning. These sorts of inter-species reflections and homologies throughout the poem do at times border on the outlandish and far-fetched; and as much as this seems to be a desire to enact a closeness with non-human (or more-than-human) animality, the description inevitably lapses into a kind of anthropomorphism, however complex and scientifically

⁵⁶ “In Conversation with Jesse Morse,” paragraph 33.

⁵⁷ Sikelianos, *The California Poem*, 133.

inspired. Yet, this hybridic and speculative gesture is characteristic of the new critical eco-poetics that Lynn Keller describes as the “varied grammars of animacy.”⁵⁸ Likewise Jane Bennett argues for a productive anthropomorphism that “works against anthropocentrism. [...] Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up in a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency.”⁵⁹ In her references to both symbiogenesis and radial symmetry, Sikelianos is not necessarily after a sense of absolute congruence, but rather a sense of closeness, relationality, and instructive homologies.

Even Sikelianos’s fixations with symmetry are productively fraught with imbalance and imprecision. One of the many images that are included as a part of the poem is a drawing by Nancy Davidson, entitled “Pseudo Oreaster” (a type of starfish) (CP 48, 195). The drawing is a rough assemblage of smaller imperfect designs (much like the unusual figure that breaks up the many sections) that gather together to form as a lopsided six-point star rather than the five points that make up the structure of an actual echinoderm.⁶⁰ As she declares contradictorily in another section after raising the

⁵⁸ Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, 136. In her chapter “Understanding Nonhumans: Interspecies Communication in Poetry,” Keller explores the work of Angela Rawlings, Jody Gladding, and Jonathan Skinner, noting the way that their poetry interrogates interspecies subjectivity particularly in communication. “Even as these poets attempt in some ways to translate nonhuman languages into a human tongue, they at the same time use animal signs to modify the English language, pushing its syntax and sounds away from the human/nonhuman divide on which human exceptionalism depends and toward a greater recognition of animal agency and of varied forms of communication in the biosphere. [...] Employing what I will present as varied grammars of animacy, their visual and aurally inventive work encourages appreciation of nonhuman species and their modes of communication; in so doing, it fosters compassionate attention to the plight of nonhuman animals in the self-conscious Anthropocene” (136).

⁵⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 120.

⁶⁰ While the *pseudoreaster* is an actual species of starfish, in this case Sikelianos is playing on the word since the Davidson drawing (which Sikelianos titles herself) falls woefully short even as a pseudo-likeness. Based on the free-style patterns of many of Davidson’s other designs in the poem, there seems a good chance that this pattern was not originally inspired by a starfish at all, but rather a coincidence that Sikelianos noticed when assembling the later drafts of the poem.

question, “See the world/ mathematically?...Draw the world from memory” (CP 100), she opines “what/ lopsided, what symmetry/ ‘What chemistry! (CP 101), “around the world mathematically, perfectly ragged” (CP 103).” This sense of lopsided, contingent, and polyvocal symmetry might remind us again of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the peripheral totality and disjunctive synthesis in their notion the schizophrenic desiring-machine. Like Sikelianos they deploy a very capacious notion of writing and language, also inspired by the concept of genetic coding, but refusing to limit this notion of language to a particular field:

The recordings and transmissions that have come from the internal codes, from the outside world, from one region to another of the organism, all intersect, following the endless ramified paths of the great *disjunctive synthesis*. If this constitutes a system of writing, it is a writing inscribed on the very surface of the Real: *a strange polyvocal kind of writing, never a biunivocalized, linearized one; a transcursive system of writing, never a discursive one*” (39, emphasis added).

Here Deleuze and Guattari’s schizophrenic language production serves to forge paths between supposedly discrete discursive systems, resisting linear sequencing, and suggesting a quantum rather than a binary or linear coding. Like Barad and Haraway’s notion of diffraction, they are interested in how this field and boundary breaking errantry can elucidate the intersections of transmissions and codes that might have their origins in different registers. This notion of intersecting codes is quite consonant with Haraway’s notion of diffractive mapping as “a place composed of interference patterns.”⁶¹ And like Sikelianos’s speculative privileging of the radial symmetry of the starfish over the limitations of bilateral structures, they also seek to resist the dangers or pitfalls of linear and merely dialectical thinking and narrative. Notice too, how this encoding or structure

⁶¹ Haraway, “The Promise of Monsters,” 320.

is connected to a kind of polyvocal writing or self-sustaining storytelling. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Sikelianos’s notion of symmetry is always somewhat lopsided, like their notion of synthesis is always disjunctive and never finally totalizing.

Conclusion

In the recent poem titled “Experimental Life” (2016) (which I have referenced a few times throughout the chapter), Eleni Sikelianos makes a definitive statement about the centrality of *material* to her poetics—a strong claim that also entails the weakening of other theoretical commitments. Drawing on the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “the bare life” as well as the poet Lyn Hejinian’s concept of language in relation to cultural production, Sikelianos insists that, while language and politics work to create context, these are not the only fields by which material contexts are created. In this short poem, she articulates her own stakes for the ideological and ecological implications of her experimental/material poetics. While it is structured as a poem, it reads more as a prose treatise with the line-breaks often serving as punctuation or breath markers:

My understanding of experimental writing
for a long time was as a gesture highly concerned
with the material [...]
What I am saying
I am understanding just now
Is that to consider only material in the abstract
(like capital or language)
Is a way of reducing us to bare life
But to consider material’s animation,
its movement and interactions
Means to take spiritual, emotional, political,
personal and material risks in the poem
And these things (we will call them) together

are what make context
 (from the Latin: to weave together)
 Which is a way to live in the world⁶²

Here I find that Sikelianos's recommitment to the multifaceted (or multi-lateral) contours of material, "to consider material's animation, its movement and interactions," overlaps with Haraway and Barad's concept of diffraction and diffractive mapping, which also involves a recalibrated attention the patterns of dissonance and resonance between different material contexts, rather than processing them through a singular register. As Donna Haraway suggests, "diffraction patterns are about a heterogenous history, not originals. Unlike mirror reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere."⁶³ Tracing patterns of inter-field entanglement becomes a process of finding other material connections that might be lost or occluded by a strong, singular theory of critique—an attempt to avoid reducing the world and human life underneath the transcendental signifier of either linguistic or social construction. While these materialist critiques of language and the social have done well to expose the hidden structures of power and material inequalities, Sikelianos suggests here that their singular applications might inadvertently reinscribe a new "bare" life upon the very people and things these materialist paradigms seek to amplify. Using these paradigms as a meta-language or transcendental viewpoint might end up creating new occlusions or lacunae that can flatten or diminish other aspects of material life. As Adorno suggests, "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder [...] the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived."⁶⁴ Here Sikelianos suggests another way out of these compelling, yet

⁶² Sikelianos, "Experimental Life," 14.

⁶³ Haraway, *How Like a Leaf*, 101.

⁶⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 5.

reductive orders of material knowledge. This is not a “third way” that suggests a sense of compromise or synthesis, but one that requires a continual commitment to experiment as a means of establishing material context.

Within the context of Sikelianos’s ecological materialism, theory and poetics are meant to be an experimental process, though a process not without the potential for risks and failures. Haraway argues as much even in her early work “A Cyborg Manifesto”: that in exploring these interstitial realms, “we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing tasks of partial, real connections.”⁶⁵ Many times, *The California Poem* itself risks lapsing into moments of boundless difference. In fact, it makes a habit of this. Its experiments with language, human and non-human cultures, and scientific discourse create more structural problems and unfinished processes than tidy resolutions. But it is these “partial, real connections” that Sikelianos and Haraway find to be the most urgent to articulate— material connections that don’t fully synthesis or subordinate into one singular framework or conceptual system.

Like Sylvia Wynter’s notion of *demonic ground*, this requires both holding onto the important deconstructive work done by previous theory and critique but also relying on the importance of mythopoetics and invention as a place to create new sense of ground and alternative paradigms, “a ‘demonic model’ outside the ‘consolidated field’ of our present mode of being/feeling/ knowing.”⁶⁶ Within the context of Sikelianos’s 21st century poetics, this involves building from our critical understanding of language and

⁶⁵ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 160-1.

⁶⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “Afterword: ‘Beyond Miranda’s Meaning: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s Woman,” *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 364.

power by previous generations of poets and theorists, as well as a renewed commitment to the possibilities of poetry and theory to be a form of poesis and invention. As Haraway suggests, theory is an attempt, not to tell the same story but to tell a new story,⁶⁷ or as Sikelianos asserts in her prologue to *The California Poem*, the urge or demiurge “to find a world, a word we didn’t know” (9).

⁶⁷ In her recent book, *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway insists on the importance of keeping the critical theory messy and exploring and challenging aspects that are not working, rather than simply lapsing back into the same critical systems that have themselves become hegemonic. And in a recent documentary film, *Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, she insists that while she holds tightly to her historical materialist commitments, there is the danger of letting a compelling theory take over all aspects of our engagement with the world: for instance, constantly repeating the newest, latest, up-to-the-minute version of the critique of capital. She warns that we can become so mesmerized by the brilliance of the latest analysis that we lose all sense that the only reason we do all this theoretical work is not to tell the same story but to tell a new story. Paraphrase from *Donna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival*, directed by Fabrizio Terranova (2017; Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2017), Amazon Prime, 49:00-53:00.

Coda

The Limits and Uses of Diffraction

In the previous chapters, I have argued that the long poems of Williams, Rukeyser, Tolson, and Sikelianos exhibit a diffractive materialist poetics, found in their particular attention to the patterns of interference between the physical, cultural, and discursive. In making this claim, I have drawn particularly on the theoretical work of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Theodor Adorno, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter to examine the material questions at work in the poems; and, alternately, I have used the material assertions in the long poems to further examine the potentials and the limits of these more capacious theories of materialism. At times, the poetry has served the function of critique or theory as much as the theoretical texts have also served as a kind of *poesis* or composition.

In my first chapter, I explored the concept of diffraction in Williams's *Paterson*, noting how his notions of "interpenetration" and "dissonance as discovery" anticipate Haraway's metaphor and Barad's metonym of diffraction as a method of tracing inter-field entanglements—of registering the interference. In my second chapter on Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," I noted how her diffractive mapping process moves towards a specific political exigence by assembling and juxtaposing materials that are traditionally placed outside the political context, drawing from Gregory Bateson's cybernetic notion of feedback and information as "the news of difference" as well as Theodor Adorno's notion that objects exceed the measure of the concepts assigned to them. In the third chapter, I examined the intercultural and intertextual aspects of diffraction in Tolson's

Libretto, reading the poem both through Glissant’s specific notion of cultural diffraction, as well as Sylvia Wynter’s mythopoetic challenge to rewrite the descriptive statements of Western science and culture. And in the last chapter, I found that Sikelianos’s *The California Poem* draws from both the legacy of the modernist long poem and the traditional epic, exploring how her didactic impulses use techniques akin to Haraway’s notion of diffractive mapping as well as how they draw explicitly from Glissant’s notion of non-filial relations and Lynn Margulis’s concept of symbiogenesis. While each poem partakes in a diffractive poetics in a singular way, I believe I have also established a through-line that can be traced in their renewal of the modernist long poem as well as their engagement with questions of both historical and scientific materialisms.

Looking beyond this project, I would argue that diffractive reading can be a productive method for finding overlaps between fields of knowledge that have been too long considered in isolation. Yet a diffractive approach should not be considered a transcendent methodology; and inter-field entanglement and overlap should not be considered simple metonymies for connection and affirmation. Diffraction and diffractive reading are useful tools for finding occlusions and lacunae created by overdeterminations in both scientific and historical materialist paradigms. But replacing one strong theory of materialism with another more “faithful” to reality ends up neglecting and flattening the ontologies it purports to be recovering. So, for me, diffractive materialism remains a useful method of mediation, rather than a theoretical replacement for either scientific or historical paradigms of material understanding. It serves as a process-oriented (rather than an object-oriented) methodology that requires holding ideas and frameworks together, noticing where they intersect and overlap,

without forcing them into a final synthesis or singular framework. As Glissant argues, “[a]gainst this reductive transparency, a force of opacity is at work [...] considerate of all the threatened and delicious *things joining one another (without conjoining, that is, without merging)* in the expanse of relation.”¹

Returning to the question of critique and composition, I would assert that these are not binary choices. We are not post-critique any more than we are truly post-modern. At the beginning of the 21st century, we are still affected by the same issues as those at the start of 20th. Remembering Lukács’s and Williams’s musings on the epic form in the modern epoch, we are still ruled by the same stars of a long modernity shaped in many ways by the uneven distribution of material and ecological resources. But perhaps some of these critical reading methods remain overly dependent on the dialectical revolutions of Hegelian thought, restricted in their adherence to continual synthesis and reflective mirroring, performing complex demonstrations that only seem to recapitulate the same diagnoses. As Haraway suggests, there is perhaps much potential in using diffraction as a critical interpretive practice, not as a replacement to historical critique but as a productive and timely supplement: one that explores patterns of interference that exist beyond purely anthropocentric, dialectical frameworks, moving beyond the overdeterminations in criticism that are at times too reliant on methods of endless reflection and mirroring. As she argues in *Modest Witness*, “[r]eflexivity has become much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection only displaces the same elsewhere.”² Or as she argues in “The Promises of Monsters,” the social and linguistic

¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 62, emphasis added.

² Haraway, *Modest Witness*, 16.

turns in cultural studies, while a very necessary response to modernist and scientific essentialism, have only managed to reflect an inverse mirroring of the Enlightenment mind/body dualism, trading one transcendental signified for another: “[i]t will not do to approach science as cultural or social construction, as if culture and society are transcendent categories, any more than nature or the object is.”³

In a different vein but on a similar frequency, Eve Sedgwick argues for the benefits of allowing other reading methods to attend and counteract singular critical approaches: “while paranoid theoretical proceedings both depend on and reinforce the structural dominance of monopolistic ‘strong theory,’ there may also be a benefit in exploring the extremely varied, dynamic, and historically contingent ways that strong theoretical constructs interact with weak ones in the ecology of knowing.”⁴ Likewise, I am arguing that while we should never deny or ignore the centrality of history in our understanding of materiality, it is perhaps both useful and timely to refresh the lenses in our understanding of our relationship to the physical world and to each other—that the choice between scientific materialism on the one hand and historical materialism on the other is perhaps another false binary left over from the hangover of transcendent notions of the powers of interpretation— or, as Lukács suggests, the desire to still think in terms of terms of totality. In modernist literary studies, Paul Saint Amour has recently argued for a move towards what he terms a weakening of theory, arguing that the political

³ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” 358.

⁴ Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 145.

formalism in cultural theory may in fact be producing the same mirrored negatives of the capitalist logics that it means to counter:

But if I were to frame a response from a weak theory perspective, I might begin by saying that capitalism, not least in its neoliberal morphology, is the ultimate strong theory without a theorist, the ultimate sovereign field without a sovereign. When we oppose it with an equally totalizing theory of anti-capitalism, we often mass-produce the same findings and refusals we've been cranking out for decades, multiplying these across the landscape in a strange parody of the thing we wish to challenge. Yes, these are oppositions that bear repeating and disseminating. But when what you oppose has a death-grip on repetition and dissemination, you may need to shift registers: you may need not only different ways of speaking your opposition, but different scales and intensities at which to speak it.⁵

Here Saint Amour, in a different academic context, recaptures the tenor of Haraway's critique of dialectical reflection which "only displaces the same elsewhere."

Rather than reading science solely through the critical lens of historical materialism or subjecting the complexities of culture to the conceit of objectivity in scientific materialism, there are perhaps other useful paths of critique and intervention that refuse or at least attempt to avoid the endless mirroring of these subsuming frameworks. Perhaps one way is through diffractive reading which focuses particularly on the moments of interaction and superposition between fields that are too often constituted as disciplinarily distinct or, alternately, subordinated to the service of the other's singular vantage point. As Haraway argues, the purpose of theory is not to tell the same story, but to tell a new story. I would venture to say that this is goal of poetry as well, particularly the late modernist long poems of this project.

⁵ Paul Saint Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 27, no. 3 (2018), 455.

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