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WE ARE LARGER THAN OURSELVES

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BA in English, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa, 2016

Thesis

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We Are Larger Than Ourselves:
What We Can Learn About Eco-Literature in the Anthropocene
from Derek Walcott and Juliana Spahr

Contemporary ecocriticism has developed in conjunction with the defining of the Anthropocene and the continued inability of humanity to take serious action in response to climate change, both of which demand that we reconsider what makes nature or climate literature successful and how have past literary conceptions of nature and climate literature have hindered the promotion of more radical reconsiderations of humanity's place in the world. We have always lived in nature to varying degrees; why is it so difficult to write about our contemporary relationships to nature and climate change? As authors continue to write about climate change, and theorists continue theorizing about that writing, it is important to step back and question the strategies we are using to approach our environmental predicament. Although eco-literature is different from the systemic political changes that will be necessary for combating climate change, it can help us more accurately understand our crisis and imagine possible solutions.

Humans have long written about their environments, but recent theorists have questioned how our representations of nature miss key aspects of the natural world, causing readers to create warped relationships to the world around them. In his essay "Representing the Environment," Lawrence Buell finds that our varied ideological perspectives and the selective filters of human perceptions mean "our reconstructions of environment cannot be other than skewed and partial" (97). For Buell, we have made the environment into a single, bit player in literature, "setting" (98). Timothy Clark, in his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* focuses on contemporary environmental destruction, writing that "crucial forms of environmental destruction cannot immediately be seen or localized and resist representation at the kind of scale at which most poetry, narrative, or drama operate" (175). Faced with climate change, natural settings lack the passivity we once gave them. Clark goes deeper, stating that "the techniques available to engage a reader's immediate emotional interest emerge as most often at odds with scale, complexity, and the multiple and nonhuman contexts involved" (181). Can contemporary forms of storytelling illuminate the struggles of climate change that sit both directly in front of our noses and beyond human comprehension?

One of the leading theorists in ecocriticism is Timothy Morton, who has attempted to reorient how we look at the problem of representing climate change. In his books *The Ecological Thought* and *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World,* Morton attempts to create a new vocabulary for our relationship with nature. His term hyperobject is helpful for analyzing our difficulties representing climate change. For Morton, climate change is a hyperobject, meaning an object that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (*Hyperobjects* 1), to such an extent that it cannot be grasped by humans. His examples include all the nuclear materials on earth, the sum of all capitalist machinery, and all the plastic in the ocean (*Hyperobjects* 1). I will give a more in-depth definition of Morton's hyperobject later in this essay, but for now, it is most important to understand that climate change is a hyperobject, spread across billions of people and many centuries. We may think we can feel the totality of climate change in the form of rising ocean levels consuming whole island nations, the desertification of formally arable lands, or the megastorms that now regularly strike around the world, but these are merely symptoms of climate change, and it is only the combination of all these symptoms, and other less visible attributes, that the true form of climate change takes shape. For Morton, focusing on these symptoms ignores the complete form of climate change, a form that is not accessible to humans.

One book in particular, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, uses different literary and climate theorists to provide one of the most contemporary, global, and fierce analyses of contemporary literature in the face of climate change. Early on, he touches on some of the basic problems of setting and time in the dominant contemporary literary form: novels. He writes that in novels, "settings become the vessel for the exploration of that ultimate instance of discontinuity: the nation-state," and that these novels "rarely extend beyond a few generations" (58). How can stories take on global climate change, and a climate that functions along geologic timelines, rather than human time, when the stories are so focused on the short existence of nations that encompass small and random areas of the world? Though Ghosh grants that the climate takes place in places, the totality of climate change cannot be seen in a single place, which means we need stories that "defy the boundedness of 'place'" (62). Ghosh finds a kind of "probability" (16) in novel, in the form of cohesive, believable narratives, as compared to earlier narrative forms that linked "'exceptional' or 'unlikely'" events (17). But this dedication to likely narratives goes against the idea of climate cycles altered by carbon emissions, which increases of improbable events, like 1000-year floods or storms occurring more and more often. Literature that focuses on the connections between likely events might include the symptoms of climate change, but it cannot include the overall destruction of the environment. Because the totality of climate change is Morton's hyperobject, representing the symptoms can never reflect the whole. This is the principal issue with stories of climate disasters: they point out individual, emotional events, that are locked into their locality (72). The emotional content of localized struggles is the center of much of the novel from, but hyperobjects will inevitably fall outside of these limits.

In addition to Morton's and Ghosh's large-scale analysis of eco-literature and climate change, it is important to investigate a more historical approach to climate change, one that takes into account the connection between late capitalism and environmental destruction. Other writers have focused specifically on creating a postcolonial ecocriticism which investigates the ways that past ecocritical writings, and conceptions of the Anthropocene, have ignored many formerly colonized nations. This approach identifies ways that a more global understanding of environmental destruction is available through indigenous and postcolonial studies. In their essay "'Introduction' to Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment," Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin describe the value of looking "for the colonial/imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both 'colonising' and 'colonised' societies of the past and present" (179). They discuss the destruction and later investigations of native knowledge of nature (184) as an important connection between colonization and rethinking nature, and how postcolonial ecocriticism can perform an "*advocacy* function" (186), for colonized peoples and natural environments. The importance of these connections is further explored by Kathryn Yusoff in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, in which she describes how the globalizing and geologic connotations of terms such as Anthropocene ignore oppressed peoples: "this planetary analytic has failed to do the work to properly identity its *own* histories of colonial earth-writing, to name the masters of broken earths, and to redress the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake" (2). She describes how recent attempts to revalue nature and geology ignore the fact that "the biopolitical category of nonbeing [was] established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold" (5), connecting colonization, black and brown people, and the destruction of the natural world. Yusoff sees the Anthropocene as “a psychopolitical staging of subjectivity as well as a historical rendering of materiality” (8), meaning that we cannot discuss literature of the Anthropocene without unpacking how colonial subjects have been placed in the same category as trees and minerals, as a binary with humans. Yusoff’s view is echoed in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s landmark essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” in which he writes that “the geological hypothesis regarding the Anthropocene requires us to put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history of humans” (212). These deep connections between postcolonialism and environmentalism can also be seen in Rob Nixon’s writings on “green imperialism” (197), “strategic essentialism” (199), and the colonial dream of an “untouched country” (199), all of which further the imperialist goal of controlling colonial peoples and nature. Essentializing the protection of certain areas of nature, often whatever was not destroyed by colonial powers, is well understood by postcolonial theorists, but the globalizing effects of climate change must be put into conversation with these postcolonial ideas in order to create an eco-literature more grounded in environmental justice.

Literature feels powerless in the age of climate change, but authors like Ghosh and Morton, along with Donna Haraway, Timothy Clark, and Don McKay, offer some paths for writers attempting to confront climate change, especially those who are working outside the dominant tradition of western novels. Ghosh sees epics as a possible path, citing their “universes of boundless time and space” (61), their “acceptance of the agency of nonhuman beings” (64). He specifically looks to religious or mythic epics because of their interest in the collective over the individual (80). If we cannot see climate change through any kind of individual, head-on approach, because it is so separate from us in time and space, epics provide a mythic authority across huge spans of time, what M.M. Bakhtin, in his essay “Epic and Novel,” would call the absolute past. As later discussed, Bakhtin's work in defining the novel against the epic helps illustrate the strengths of the epic for approaching hyperobjects. Similarly, the lack of individual subjectivity within the characters of epics allows epics to sidestep the pitfalls of individualism as characters represent ideas or groups of people. Although culturally foundational narratives may be too large of a goal for eco-literature, they are a necessary component for altering our perspectives on nature and climate change in the Anthropocene.

Contemporary ecocritical thinkers have not deeply examined the usefulness of epics for approaching climate change, but their work celebrates similar literary strategies as possible ways of approaching it. In her book *Staying With The Trouble*, Donna Haraway sees the importance of finding a new "myth system" (49) for approaching the Anthropocene, a system that includes "geostories" (49). Similarly, Don McKay, in his essay "Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time," argues that a reemergence of "mysticism" (47) is key to writing about the Anthropocene, along with frameworks that do not "desire to resolve into fact" (47). He supports writing that "cultivates . . . astonishment . . . in the presence of . . . marvels" (49), specifically geologic marvels that create the sense of a timeline beyond the human. Although McKay may be talking about geopoetry, while Haraway is most interested in science fiction, their interest in myths reveals the experimental possibilities across genres.

My goal in the following essays is to identify strategies for eco-literature as it attempts to describe global climate change. Some strategies will emerge from books that are not considered eco-literature, as authors in various genres have approached other larger issues, such as colonialism and genocide, in ways that could assist eco-literature. The analysis of work from other genres will necessarily leave out some important aspects of these books, but my analysis will attempt to create perspectives that other authors can explore in their eco-literature rather than to concentrate on the significance of the literary work itself.

In judging the eco-critical strategies employed within a text, it is helpful to identify the most important challenges of climate literatures. Although the relative importance of various challenges is debatable, I believe that the following six areas cover the most important aspects of the Anthropocene: valuing a communal perspective and so qualifying any individual point of view; exploring the contemporary ecological mesh between humans and nonhuman creatures; valuing local struggles and particularities while setting them within a global system; representing the scales of geologic and colonial histories; moving beyond the paralyzing effects of climate anxiety; and imagining possible futures for the earth. I will provide a brief synopsis of why these areas are specifically important. Also, for this project, I will focus specifically on eco-poetry, rather than other forms within eco-literature. The challenges I will use can apply to any work of eco-literature, but specific, genre-bending works of poetry allow us to see how poetic experimentation can help authors approach the writing in the Anthropocene.

1. Valuing a communal perspective, illustrating limitations of individuals

The causes and effects of climate change cannot be tied to individuals because our current climate crisis developed over centuries and affects all people to some degree. A global perspective, that addresses the systemic roots of our current crisis, is needed to portray the communal action that is needed to combat climate change, and to accurately describe the immensity of the crisis. Timothy Morton has delved into this idea in many of his books, but *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* most directly illustrates why the Anthropocene demands the placing of the individual in a wider perspective. Morton defines hyperobjects as “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). He includes celestial objects (stars) and planetary objects (all the plastic in the oceans). He adds other important details about hyperobjects: they are seen “interobjectivley” (1), meaning they can be seen only indirectly through their relations with other objects; they are “viscous” (28), meaning they surround us and stick to everything that attempts to measure them, making hyperobjects both hard to see and ontologically overwhelming; they are “nonlocal” (39), because any single symptom or physical incarnation of hyperobjects is not the hyperobjects themselves; they create “temporal undulations” (55), because they are spread across vast expanses of time, meaning we must conceive of multiple different timescales when we think about hyperobjects; and they appear to “phase” (69) shift as they enter and exit our field of understanding, giving us very limited access to their existence. If we conceive of climate change as a hyperobject, it is easier to understand why creating a representative object small enough and human enough for us not only to understand but also emotionally experience inevitably excludes some of the hyperobject. Morton wonders if we have reached an unbreachable limit in human understanding. Though he does not directly state that one key to representing the hyperobject of climate change is decentering individuals, his conception of hyperobjects compels the conclusion that an individual’s experiences can never fully address climate change. The only way to accurately assess and approach climate change is through a communal, or even global, perspective.

Morton’s conception of climate change a hyperobject is put in conversation with literature by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, in which Ghosh points out literature’s obsession with the stories of individual moral journeys, and the ways this focus fails to grapple with climate change. Ghosh uses John Updike’s description of novels as “individual moral adventures" (77), as the basis for explaining that the emotional content of individual struggles cannot easily extend to represent the quantity and variety of global experiences of climate change. Even when stories of climate disasters focus on a single, emotional event, they remain locked into the individuals involved in that disaster. Similarly removed from individual actions and control are the local and global economic systems that have involved billions of people propelling climate change across time, systems that require communal rather than individual solutions. An eco-poetry for the Anthropocene will devalue individual actions and stories in favor of communal actions and stories because the causes and solutions to climate change are not individualistic.

As we reevaluate our relationships with other creatures, we will need to begin thinking of ourselves as part of a community that includes the rest of nature. In Haraway's view, we can already see the ways we are connected with nature in "quasi-collective" (64) partnerships. Humanity cannot save itself from the ravages of climate change if it destroys the environment in the process. Thinking against individuality also means rethinking what is part of our community.

2. Exploring ecological mesh between humans, nonhuman creatures, and other things that make up our environment

The second challenge is to explore how humans are enmeshed with their environments. Contemporary ecology investigates not only how humans are changing earth systems, but also how humans are more entwined with nonhumans than the dominant frameworks of modernity suggest. These connections include our instigation of the sixth major extinction event, as well as the ways that all organisms, including humans, live in symbiotic relationships. Timothy Morton, in his book *The Ecological Thought*, calls this the mesh: “all life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and non-living beings” (36). Morton writes that contemplating the mesh is “a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral” (14). This concept is a helpful way of thinking about the interconnectedness of our world.

Similarly, Donna Haraway, in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, describes the ways that we live in symbiotic relations with microorganisms, creating “quasi-collective/quasi-individual partners” (64). Any contemporary ecopoetics must attempt to grapple with this understanding of interconnectedness, both because it is the most up-to-date scientific conception of nature and because it illustrates how our actions affect other organisms. Haraway describes ways of imagining new relationships between humans and nature through “tentacular thinking” (5), and “making oddkin” (4) with other living and nonliving things. This imagining extends into the future to help us focus on what kind of world we can create in the face of climate change. This is a process that will occur with nature, a connection that Haraway calls “Sympoiesis” or making with (5). Haraway’s work highlights the ways we are already deeply entwined with nature, and ways we could become more connected.

3. Depicting local struggles and ecologies within global contexts

Both Morton’s and Ghosh’s theories also reflect the third challenge, the competing focuses on the particularities of local communities and ecologies and the global realities of the climate crisis. Morton’s hyperobjects are nonlocal (39), so any eco-poetry that confronts climate change will need to at least partially exist globally, rather than within any particular locality. Ghosh's writings illustrate how novels are trapped by their locality: "settings become the vessel for the exploration of that ultimate instance of discontinuity: the nation-state" (58). Stories which focus on the short existences of nations that encompass small and random sections of the world will inevitably miss the largest and most important aspects of the Anthropocene. Though Ghosh grants that climate occurs in places, the totality of climate change cannot be seen in a single place, which means we need stories that "defy the boundedness of 'place'" (62). Nonetheless, we live locally, and climatic and colonial struggles are faced locally, and as Haraway observes, in contrast to visiting experts, "local people [have had more] accurate assessments of . . . the terrible history of land seizures and colonial and postcolonial search-and-destroy operations" (82). Like history, ecology is specific to individual locations, and to discuss the environment otherwise would be inaccurate. Put simply, climate change exhibits its symptoms locally, but exists across the entirety of the globe. Therefore, successful eco-poetry must combine the specificity of individual locations and the larger global realities of climate change.

Eco-poetry must also be both global and local because of the unequal distribution of pain and fault regarding climate change. As Yusoff points out, the white western world has caused most of climate change, but the global south suffers the consequences because it cannot build the necessary defenses against megastorms and other symptoms of climate change. Universalizing climate change ignores the historical background of environmental destruction. The world's inequalities have been exacerbated by the global climate catastrophe, and our depictions of the crisis cannot ignore the deep fractures that exist between those who create suffering and those who suffer.

4. Representing the scale of geologic time.

Much of Morton's discussion of hyperobjects describes the fourth challenge, as he focuses on the vastly different scales between human lives and geologic deep time. He observes that climate change may be felt within our own lives, but it exists within the many eons of deep time, or at least across the last 15,000 years of human history, the period when civilization developed. Literature that fully confronts climate change and the Anthropocene must address Morton's claim that these ideas "massively outscale us" (12). Climate change is here and now, in the form of a massive wildfire; is then and there, in the form of the climate tragedies that occur around the world; is spread out over human history, in the form of the data that illustrates how global temperatures have risen since the industrial revolution; is the future, in the form of our predictions for future change; and is spread over geologic history, in the form of the sixth extinction, which, unlike the other five major extinctions, is being caused by humans. Containing all of this within literature remains one of the most mystifying challenges for authors. Don McKay describes ways in which geopoetry can help us approach our newfound geologic power: "the poetic frame permits the possible . . . to be experienced as a power rather than a deficiency; it permits the imagination entry" (48). To fully grasp the immensity of the Anthropocene, we cannot ignore how we have entered a geologic history that existed long before us, and will exist long after we are gone.

5. Moving through the paralyzing effects of climate anxiety

The fifth challenge is moving past our paralysis. Climate change is obviously anxiety-inducing, but our current lack of action illustrates that climate anxiety does very little to combat climate change. Lynn Keller, in her book *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, calls this anxiety "apocalypse fatigue" (75). This lack of action toward fighting climate change is a simplistic reaction to a complex history. In some ways, climate anxiety seems reserved for the wealthiest people, those who will lose the most from global economic collapse. In her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff writes that "if the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism" (xiii). In this way, climate anxiety has been principally reserved for white, wealthy communities. Although climate anxiety is worth some exploration, it is more important to consider how we move past paralyzing anxiety. For Haraway, there is a twofold response. First, "human being must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing" (39). Rather than reveling in anxiety, we must collectively grieve all that we have lost, thereby realizing the importance of our losses without getting bogged down in our loss. Second, we must create "collective speculative fabulation" (8), or other kinds of science fiction, where we try to imagine possible solutions. These, or other, strategies are important for working through our own anxious drive toward inaction.

6. Imagining possible futures

Finally, as the future of the climate and humanity looks increasingly grim, it is important to push our imaginations past the apocalypse to envision possible existences in the future. Since Bill McKibben's landmark essay, *The End of Nature*, we have been faced with the challenge of reimagining an existence for nature, and for ourselves within nature. Much of Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* is devoted to this kind of imagining. Haraway uses Anna Tsing's ideas around the “art of living on a damaged planet” to explain that we must “reimagine wealth, learn practical healing rather than wholeness, and stitch together improbable collaborations without worrying overmuch about conventional ontological kinds” (136). Given humanity’s overwhelming focus on the end of civilization and the end of nature, imagining, or as Haraway calls it “collective speculative fabulation” (8), is necessary for not only combating climate change but also for deciding what kind of new world we will create within the rubble of our current world. For Haraway, this collective imagining can occur in science fiction, but her ideas around the importance of imagining can be applied to any genre within eco-literature.

Robyn Maree Pickens, in her doctoral thesis *Reparative Eco Poetics, or This Thesis Isn’t Only About You*, describes this kind of writing as reparative ecopoetics, which “makes repair of degraded environments apprehensible” (1). Even if, as Morton argues, we cannot fully grasp climate change, any important eco-poetry will find a way to continue existence, whether that existence is for humans or not. Pickens writes that through literature, we can “reparatively ingest” (40) the land we have destroyed, finding paths for existing with the planet, even if that existence is deeply flawed due to centuries of environmental degradation. Having a future to aim for, even a merely imaginary future, makes any kind of repair a useful action.

This project cannot be bound by a single literary history or lineage, because climate literature is not reserved for a single genre and the solutions to our cognitive struggles will be found in strange and experimental works, especially those that push against our previous understandings of literary categories. Since the development of literature as a capitalist commodity, genres have, in addition to creating formal system of categorization, become the method by which writing is packaged and sold. Although I will not directly address the political and systemic changes that are required to combat our climate crisis, I hope to trace paths towards an eco-literature that can help us better understand our place within this crisis and this world. To better evaluate the variety of strategies for writing about climate change, I will focus on two books that push against the limitations of their genres, refusing easy definitions: Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now*. Walcott refused to call *Omeros* an epic, even as critics wrote about its obvious connections to Dante and Homer. Spahr's collage poem expands into personal essays, scientific lists of creatures and chemicals, and choral refrains that resemble lyrics or plays. The experiments in these books, especially where they break or combine genres, are their most powerful strategies for writing about climate change.

Each of these texts have been analyzed in the context of their dominant genre and content, and I will not touch on many of the qualities that make each of them incredible works of literature. Instead, I will be attempting to focus on what they offer eco-literature in the Anthropocene, evaluating their connections to the six cognitive struggles identified above. This strategy will inevitably leave out some aspects of each book, but it will allow us to depict the abstract strategies that could then be applied to future works of eco-literature.

Omeros and *Well Then There Now* are very different poetic projects but analyzing them next to each other reveals the large span of strategies for eco-poetic, postcolonial projects. Walcott's work imagines methods for pushing through the cognitive barriers created through slavery and colonialism, while Spahr's poems focus on her neo-colonial position within discussions of climate change. Together, these poets act as important place markers in the arc of contemporary postcolonial poetic projects. Eco-poetry is deeply connected to global capitalism, and the imperialism that shaped this system, and both Spahr and Walcott are attempting to work through this history. By looking at these two writers together we can see the importance of history within eco-poetics, and we can see a perspective that takes the economic wake of imperialism into account when discussing climate change. Their experimental long poems come out of vastly different traditions, and therefore use vastly different strategies for addressing hyperobject-sized issues. Other contemporary poems fit within this eco-poetic conversation, but the huge scope of Spahr's collection and Walcott's epic poem make them interesting and fruitful touchstones for revisioning eco-literature as a whole.

In the first chapter I analyze Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, showing that the poem contains strategies for devaluing individual perspectives, exploring the ecological mesh, connecting local and global contexts, illustrating the scalar dissonance of geologic time, moving through climate anxiety, and imagining possible futures. Walcott's work addresses large groups of people across massive spans of time and creates healing for the wounds left by violent colonial histories, illustrating how authors can grapple with inhumanly large issues. While this book is not directly concerned with climate change, its experimentation with postcolonialism and epic poetry provide powerful strategies for meeting each of the challenges for eco-poetry in the Anthropocene.

In the second chapter I analyze Juliana Spahr's collection *Well Then There Now,* discussing the successes and limitations of her formal strategies for directly addressing climate change. Through experimental collage and post LANGUAGE poetry, Spahr makes great strides in addressing the depiction of climate change in literature, but at times her writing illustrates the limits of her experiments. Unlike Walcott, Spahr's is working in the center of the climate crisis, and while her work struggles at times to meet the challenges of eco-literature, her work is helpful for developing a path forward for contemporary authors.

Chapter 1: The Weaving of Multidimensional Histories

Omeros, The Contemporary Epic, and Rethinking Our Connection to Nature

The genre of the epic is difficult to define. The designation is often reserved for literature that descends from Homer's epics, or any massive literary project. With the rise of the novel, and theorists like M.M. Bakhtin who used the epic to define the novel, along with the modernist long poem, which provided a different model for longer works of poetry, epics have faded from the contemporary literary vision. In his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin defined the novel against the epic, writing that the novel is "determined by experience" (15), "free and flexible" (7), "exists within 'my time'" (14), and is "the sole genre that continues to develop" (3), while the epic exists in the "absolute past" (15), is written in a "deaf monoglossia" (12), is an "object of memory, not a living object one can see and touch" (18), and is a closed genre, as it occurs "only in this [absolute] past"(15). He does, however, leave all genres open to growing with the novel, writing "in an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized'" (5). Perhaps it is through novelization that epic has quietly continued evolving. Theorists have defended the epic against Bakhtin, by finding overlooked qualities of the epic that allow it to change and by reviewing how its strategies could work in contemporary literature. Allison Hirsh, in her dissertation *Transgressive Intent: The Postmodern Epic and The Subversion of Generic Form,* argues that postmodern epics continue a tradition of formal experimentation that has always been present in the tradition. For her, the epic begins with "a self-conscious invocation of epic genealogy" (10) that allows authors to confront and alter the "constructions of the epic" (10). Citing *The Idea of Epic* by J.B. Hainsworth, Hirsh asserts that "there can be no non-self-referential epic, since a cumulative encyclopedic tendency not only characterizes the epic, but defines it" (11). The epic continues, evolving with a patience earned across eons of history.

Derek Walcott's *Omeros* is an example of this development of contemporary epics, and its epic and novelistic qualities meld to create new paths of literature. Its melding and experimentation within genres provide a fascinating example of how a work of literature can take on topics of superhuman size. While Walcott may have been contemplating building a postcolonial nation and working through colonial trauma, his work provides strategies for other complex literary challenges such as climate change. The usefulness of these strategies illustrates the important parallels between postcolonial literature and eco-literature: both must create a deep historical consciousness and engage with multidimensional modes of understanding. More concretely, any eco-poetic project will need to work in the connection between imperialism and contemporary environmental damage. Through Walcott's postcolonial epic, we can see the possibilities of an eco-poetic epic, or at least the paths authors could take for better illuminating our relationships with climate change and the natural world. As we look for ways to create this deeper understanding for our ecological predicament and alter the societal principles that brought us here, it is worthwhile to look at the contemporary version of a genre that seeks to define a society's histories and beliefs: the epic. I will investigate these strategies through their relations to the six major challenges of climate literature: valuing communal over individual perspectives, depicting the ecological mesh, providing local and global contexts, exploring the scalar dissonance of geologic time, moving beyond climate anxiety, and imagining possible futures.

1. Valuing Communal Over Individual Perspectives

One of Bakhtin's principle issues with the epic is its drive to build mythic narratives for nations, narratives that are created through their disinterest in real individuals. Joseph Farrell connects this creative drive to "the idea that the stories told by the epic narrator are objectively true" (279), which he characterizes as the authority of the epic, and to "the idea that the epic is in some sense a source for subsequent culture, particularly as the literary embodiment of a nation's character" (280), which he calls the originality of the epic. For second wave ecocriticism, the drive to speak for larger groups of people, like nations, is an important part of grappling with the immensity of global climate change. *Omeros* provides strong strategies for this approach, by devaluing individualism through its use of the mythological roots of epics and the multiplicity of characters who have the same name, both of which gesture toward collective experiences and struggles, rather than depicting individual lives as the most important formulations of experiences. This revaluation of the value of individual experiences is balanced with *Omeros*'s distinct figures, like Philoctete, Hector, and Achille, allowing Walcott to celebrate communal perspectives and actions through realistically idiosyncratic characters.

Recent scholars of global literature have worked toward reimagining the epic as a powerful contemporary tool for depicting collectives, such as nations, rather than accepting Bakhtin's understanding of the epic as a genre locked to the past. Isidore Okpewho's essay "Rethinking Epic" argues that epic studies have had "too much emphasis on the idea of *tradition*, and too little sensitivity to the social and political reality of life among the folk who produce these epics" (218). She outlines works of Parry and Lord on the "formulas and themes" that define oral epics, and analyzes the importance of performance in contemporary African epics, which have been ignored by epic studies because they are not descendants of Homer and have not yet been transcribed (221). But their orality connects them more directly to Homer than the works of Dante or Virgil to Homer. Further, Okpewho challenges Bakhtin's description of epic as having a "deaf monoglossia" (12), arguing that the singular narrating voice and the heroic identity devoid of subjectivity (Hirsh 5) is "really meant to conjure a much larger, *metonymic* relationship to the character's total personality or to a broader mythology (as a part to a whole) that the tradition has conferred on that person" (229). Epic characters are not muted, but instead are pieces of the oral mythologies that performers can explore during performances.

Bakhtin also critiques the lack of individuality and subjectivity of epic characters, who are not "determined by experience" (15), but Walcott's epic uses this aspect of epic characters to draw power away from individuals and towards collectives. Isabella Maria Zoppi, in her article "Derek Walcott and the Contemporary Epic Poem," finds that epic poetry's lack of "narrative time" and *Omeros*'s focus on "interwoven threads, complex patterns, all against the background of a collective memory" (509), allow the "recovery of ancestral memory" and "a development of the collective unconscious" (526). In contrast, Bakhtin's novel assumes the trappings of capitalist commodities by promoting the individual over communities. Writing in a different analytical context, Timothy Clark, in his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, finds the problem with Bakhtin's sense of the contemporary popular novel when Clark describes "the dominant valorization of the reading experience as a kind of consumer commodity" (190). Rejecting commodification through writing of the collective and investigating mythic histories is an important task for postcolonial literature, and the epic is an ancient genre built for this challenge.

In *Omeros*, Walcott creates characters who walk the line between epic figures and novelistic personalities, creating a sense that these people can be both real and representative. Both Achille and the narrator of *Omeros* are derived from classical epic figures, and Walcott explores their lack of individual subjectivity through the inclusion of multiple characters named Achille and multiple narrators. This approach allows Walcott to explore the importance of postcolonial collective and personal traumas as he speaks of an individual and a part of a larger community at the same time. For Achille, this multiplicity allows him to represent all enslaved people and their descendants while remaining an individual in the contemporary world. For the narrators, multiplicity allows Walcott to more directly enter the poem to speak as a real author and to explore the history of the epic.

Within *Omeros*'s timeline, the earliest Achille is an enslaved person who helps the English on St. Lucia defeat the French fleet. This enslaved person is originally named Afolabe, like Achille's hallucinated father, but Afolabe is renamed by the English troops after he helps them push a cannon up a hill. Walcott writes, "It was then that the small admiral with a cloud / on his head renamed Afolabe 'Achilles,' / which, to keep things simple, he let himself be called" (83). This new name recognizes Afolabe's strength by giving him the name of a fearsome classical hero. The naming is a complex mix of Black strength becoming connected to Eurocentric myths, which could be read as positive or negative, and the destruction of connections to African ancestries. Beyond this effect, the transformation from Afolabe to Achille illustrates the importance of a collective that is not wholly focused on an individual, but on how individuals function within communities across timelines that are longer than a single life.

This focus on the collective over the individual as a method of understanding the traumas of slavery is further explored when Walcott describes plantations in the American South as having "Hectors and Achilleses . . . [and] towns named Helen, / Athens, Sparta, Troy" (177). This discussion comes in the second half of *Omeros*, after the main Achille and Hector have already been explored as individuals, so this connection to past enslaved people gives all enslaved people the same individuality, while allowing them to remain part of the collective whose trauma shapes the postcolonial world. The multiplicity across time of Hector and Achille takes the mythic quality of classical epic heroes and uses it to explain the personal yet collective traumas of slavery. Paul Jay, in his essay “Fated to Unoriginality,” describes the function of multiple characters with the same name as creating an “undecidable text” (551), which includes incompatible readings that are possible but mutually exclusive. He describes how this approach creates multiple histories, allowing a history to exist outside of Eurocentric histories. As Jay recognize, Walcott sees the individuality of enslaved people, and their collectivity, and allows both states to exist together across time.

The narrator role of *Omeros* has a different kind of multiplicity than Achille, focusing more on Walcott’s investigation of epic authority and literary heritage through three narrators who I will refer to as the narrator, the Walcott-narrator, and Seven Seas. The narrator serves as the traditional epic narrator for this poem. He has the omnipresent voice of epic authority, which he uses to describe, or speak, this poem. He can move across time and space, jumping from St. Lucia to historical American plantations, to Ireland and mainland Europe. The narrator is in some ways indistinguishable from the Walcott-narrator, with the only difference being that the narrator only speaks of the epic story, while the Walcott-narrator lives in the autobiographical sections of the poem. The Walcott-narrator removes the epic from its absolute past and allows histories to live within postcolonial subjects. Bakhtin exhibits a distaste for the unselfcritical epic, but the Walcott-narrator turns himself into a character who questions his own healing as it is mixed with Achille’s and Philoctete’s healing. Together, the narrator and the Walcott-narrator question the goals of epic poetry, especially the goals related to Helen. The classical Helen is rarely allowed to speak and is seen primarily through other characters’ descriptions. In contrast, near the end of *Omeros*, the Walcott-narrator enters the poem within the line "I remembered that morning when Plunkett and I" (270), signaling that the Walcott-narrator is a character within the poem. He then asks, "Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow, / swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone, / as fresh as the sea-wind?" (271) Here, the Walcott-narrator and the narrator mix together to comment on the creation of the poem. They describe their own hopes for representations of Helen, which they may or may not have achieved within this poem. The St. Lucian Helen is given the possibility of a future where she lives without the masculine eyes of Homer, or any other man, allowing her the possibility of self-determination. This possibility is directly related to the ways the narrators question the poem itself.

Walcott's final narrator is Seven Seas, also known as Omeros and Homer, and he acts as an epic narrator from past epics, with whom Walcott and the narrator speak with, and as a character who appears across the world throughout *Omeros*. The Walcott-narrator speaks to Seven Seas about his lack of literacy in ancient epics (271), creating a moment for Walcott to update the epic form. Walcott can write into epic history, describing how he has changed the form, and in the process, he creates a timeless presence for the epic author in a way that illustrates the way a literary figure can live throughout time while morphing into many things for many people. Later, the Walcott-narrator sees Seven Seas as a homeless man in London (194), and as an old blind man in Ma Kilman's café (316). This representation of one of the western world's greatest poets multiplies to exist everywhere, providing insight for different characters throughout *Omeros*. Seven Seas is many people in many places, while still remaining connected to his classical incarnation as Homer.

Walcott's expansion of characters across time is further complicated by moments when he seems to insinuate that some characters, and narrators, exist in the real world outside the poem. While Achille is returning from his sunstroke dream, the Walcott-narrator is returning to the United States after visiting his mother in St. Lucia. His mother describes him as "Warwick's son" and "Derek" (166). In this scene, the poem takes on a memoiristic quality. Then the Walcott-narrator looks down from his small plane to see "a canoe, nearing the island" (168). As the poem leaves the Walcott-narrator, it is revealed that on the canoe, "Achille raised his hand / from the drummer rudder, then watched our minnow plane / melt into the cloud-coral over the horned island" (168). By moving so quickly from memoir to fictional character, and having the characters in both genre-sections see each other, is Walcott signaling that Achille is a real St. Lucian fisherman outside of this epic poem? This is unanswerable, like Jay's concept of an undecidable text. In contrast to Bakhtin's view of epic as living in the absolute past, Walcott's postcolonial epic questions the distance between mythic characters and real people, allowing Achille to be real, fictional, a representative of collective trauma, and a man learning about his own heritage, all at the same time. Walcott's investigation of different histories through the epic's traditional role as mediator of the absolute and mythic past allows characters, and people, to be full of history, rather than merely within history.

Walcott's characters come together to form a species of choir, one that expands to include the nonhuman, providing a larger landscape of communal perspectives. Isabella Zoppi succinctly describes *Omeros* as "a choral song, which narrates how an individual or a people can face and overcome the wearying business of living . . .[putting] together the divided parts of the self in an Ego that will survive History, in the recovery of ancestral memory and in respect for the individual" (526). Beyond the strategy of naming that was previously discussed, these characters are placed together in history to sing the song of colonial devastation. When Walcott steps back from these specific characters, we see depictions of a collective, choral struggle: "But they crossed, they survived . . ./ Multiply the rain's lance, multiply their ruin, / the grace born from subtraction . . . / So there were Ashanti on way, the Mandingo another, / the Ibo another, the Guinea. Now each man was a nation / in himself, without mother, father, brother" (149-150). Characters do not exist on their own but as a community that includes people across colonial histories, inside and outside the poem. Zoppi pushes this farther, stating that *Omeros* is an "epic in which Nature is still origin and heir" (526). While she sees this concept in Walcott's long descriptions of nature and how each character works with and in nature, this can also be seen in creatures that speak for characters and, more generally, for history. Early in the poem, an iguana watches history pass on St. Lucia, including the arrival of white people: "a new race / unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees" (5). Later, Maud embroiders a quilt with a catalog of birds from across the island, and Walcott describes how these birds have their own relation to history: "The African swallow, the finch from India / now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern / with the Chinese nightingales" (313). Gregson Davis, in his essay "'Pastoral Sites': Aspects of Bucolic Transformation in Derek Walcott's '*Omeros*'," writes that "the birds are made to sing in Maud's microcosmic opus," adding that "the birds inscribed and figured in the embroidery represent the linguistic diversity of the Caribbean archipelago" (48). Here is the community of humans and nature, one that cannot be described through individual voices, but only through a choral, communal voice.

Walcott's community of characters helps us envision a large group of people capable of speaking to a communal form of suffering. As mentioned earlier, Amitav Ghosh describes novels as being unconcerned with "men in the aggregate" (77). In contrast, Walcott allows characters to exist variously as fictional individuals, possibly real individuals, epic figures, and representations for larger ideas about literary heritage and collective colonial traumas. This multiplicity contained within the postcolonial epic allows for the consideration of large groups of people both as groups of individuals and as collectives shaped by forces larger than any single person. For Walcott this force is primarily colonialism, but it could easily be climate change. Similarly, although colonialism does not fit into Timothy Morton's definition of hyperobjects, it shares many of the same qualities at hyperobjects: it is distributed across time and space, its effects can be seen and measured but this does not allow the thing itself to be seen, and it shifts in and out of our focus due to its scale and our own limited perceptions.

Viewing *Omeros*'s depiction of individual and communal perspectives through an ecocritical lens reveals potent strategies for reevaluating the power of communities. The multiple characters named Achille and the multiple narrators contribute to the creation of Haraway's "collective speculative fabulation" (8), because by the end of the poem, a community that has been wounded by slavery and colonialism can begin working towards their own future. As Ghosh discussed in relation to Morton's hyperobjects, tragedies that exist across centuries and affect countless people may be experienced by individuals, but their true scale is visible only when all these individual perspectives are combined. Walcott's community creates their own lives on St. Lucia, but they struggle with history to better understand their place in the world. If literature can imagine a community that exists across time and space, both as individuals in their own lives and as pawns spread across the absolute past of history, it can depict the kind of anti-capitalistic communal vision required to understand and fight climate change.

Walcott's nonfiction touched on the representation of hyperobject-esque entities. In his essay "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," Walcott described the "Antillean experience" as a "shipwreck of fragments," which had "survived the Middle Passage," along with countless other journeys (70). Even with what he denominates as an "epic vocabulary," Walcott describes the Caribbean as having "no people," instead having "Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken" (68). Not only does this characterization of new, postcolonial peoples fit well with ecocriticism's conceptions of an unidolized nature, but it also reflects the fragmented symptoms of hyperobjects that we are able to see. The mash of wildly different origins, which are together only due to the larger force of colonialism, resembles the slices of climate change that we can see. Here too is a new sense of collectivity, derived from varied individuals who are all moved by the same force.

Though Morton never directly addresses the epic, his view of hyperobjects provides an interesting means to sidestep many of his issues with traditional, artistic representation through epics. Beyond the topics that Ghosh investigated through Morton, hyperobjects' qualities, including their sense that "[the] general itself [as] comprised by the particular" (54), their "traces of unreality" (28), their quality of being "futural" (122), and their large scale shifting from "accidental to substantial" (101), link hyperobjects to the focus of epics. Epic characters are both real, in the sense that they are humans doing actions in their own fairly realistic lives, and unreal, because they lack subjectivity and often merely represent beliefs or concepts. This combination of the particular and the general may not fit well within the individualism of the novel, but hyperobjects require this kind of dualism. In addition, epics are not wedded to reality, instead opting for a mythic or absolute past, in which they can simplify the subjective realities of the contemporary world. Beyond these characteristics, epics reside in the past and speak to the future, while avoiding the subjective present, allowing them to function on large and inaccessible timelines. Finally, epics use their authoritative perspective of the absolute past to transform what might seem random or accidental into a larger map of indelible qualities of the world. Morton's hyperobjects exist beyond our contemporary, humanistic rationality, and all the detached qualities Bakhtin found in epics render epics perfect for creating the possibly irrational understanding required for contemplating hyperobjects.

2. Ecological Mesh

Some of *Omeros*'s most interesting eco-poetic strategies can be used for investigating Morton's ecological mesh. Morton defines the ecological mesh, stating that "all life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and non-living beings" (*The Ecological Thought* 36). More broadly, Walcott displays an interest in how we translate words or experiences across the boundaries of history and nature. Unpacking *Omeros* reveals important ways to explore the ecological mesh, as well as Haraway's species collectivism, through discussions of knowledge without literacy and the means by which knowledge is transferred across history and between humans and nature.

The origins of the western, written epic can be found in the transition from an oral to a written society in ancient Greece, and Walcott is interested in this transition, or translation, and how it can be mirrored in the cultural changes wrought by colonialism, slavery, and post colonialism. In *Omeros*, Walcott delves into the ways in which the movement from oral to written can be used to rethink our relations to history and nature. In his essay "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," Walcott described St. Lucian fishermen as "illiterate in the way leaves are illiterate" (81), a concept which is mirrored in *Omeros*'s discussion of the possibilities of knowing for “illiterate rocks” (295). Here Walcott is echoing Walter Benjamin’s question in “The Storyteller,” where he writes “What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel” (72). Walcott’s epic uses this wealth of the epic and uses it to promote an understanding that not only predates literature but has its own strengths unmatched by the written word.

This investigation of forms of learning outside of literacy is deepened in order to compare colonial and indigenous understandings. The narrator of *Omeros* admits to the Homer figure that “I never read it,” meaning Homer’s epics, instead saying “I have always heard / your voice in that sea” (283). Even though the narrator’s knowledge does not come entirely from literacy, and he lacks knowledge of the canon, the narrator and these fishermen have greater access to the original epics through an unmediated connection with the land and the sea. Literacy is not held up as inherently better than illiteracy; rather, it is merely a different way to access knowledge. Similarly, Maud Plunkett is wondering why her husband has chosen to live in St. Lucia over England: “How odd to prefer, over its pastoral sites— / reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth— / these loud-mouthed forests on their illiterate heights” (61). Again, illiteracy has become an aspect of the natural world, one that is humorously compared to the more reasonable land of England. The European ground may be easily understood, but this new land has an important connection to knowledge through its own illiteracy.

Walcott further describes the natural world as a place where knowledge is gained without colonial forces, and beyond colonial forces. Philoctete is wounded for most of the poem, but he is finally healed by Ma Kilman. She heals him with the help of “the sea” (242), the African deities who have been “subdued in the rivers of her blood” (242), and the ants who lead her to a plant that heals Philoctete, which was brought from Africa in the belly of a sea swift. When Ma

Kilman is searching for the cure, she is described as “[praying] in the language of ants and her grandmother” (244), and she is able to cure Philoctete “because ants had lent her / their language” (245). Here is a connection to the land that creates knowledge across the ecological mesh, allowing humans to learn, or relearn, ways of healing themselves. This kind of learning is repeated in the narrator’s early conversation with Seven Seas, in which he reveals that he has not read the classic epics. He then says to Seven Seas, “I have always heard / your voice in that sea, master, it was the / same song / of the desert shaman” (283). As we reevaluate our ways of learning to better connect across the ecological mesh, this kind of celebration of learning that is not merely between two literate humans, but still contains the possibility of being about humanity, illustrates ways of revising human-centric ontologies.

These moments of learning through nature can be seen in Haraway’s tentacular interspecies relationships. When describing the relationship between homing pigeons and the people who train them, Haraway writes that “Pigeons [and] people . . . have teamed up to make each other capable of something new in the world of multi-species relationships” (19). Walcott avoids directly anthropomorphizing nature; such an approach would create more of a nature-as-human effect rather than a mesh effect. He instead opts to use poetic imagery and language to build the connections between humans and nature. This strategy presents an accurate depiction of the ecological mesh without lauding humans as somehow superior to the rest of nature. For example, these interspecies relationships are investigated within a long passage about building a canoe. Achille says “‘This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes’” (3), equating a tree to a canoe, which is later deepened when he prays, saying “‘Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot’” (6). The tree is given agency over its destiny, and the transformation is given a spiritual aura by the prayer. The relationships among the fishermen, the trees, and the canoes are depicted as full of mutual respect, communication, and understanding. The trees do not become humans; they merely exist with and through humans, and vice versa.

Another location where humans and nature meet and mingle is within gardens, specifically Maud's colonial garden and Philoctete's subsistence garden. Maud's garden is colonial because it is full of species from other countries and it is groomed rather than allowed to exist in a more natural state. Her garden is part of what Rob Nixon, in his essay "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," describes as "an extraordinary web of imperial gardens . . . that [become] implicated in . . . economic power, political policy, and imperial administration" (201). When Helen visits the garden she picks a flower, at which point Maud thinks "She'll wreck the blooming garden if I don't come down" (123). Helen, an oppressed citizen of St. Lucia, helps destroy an invasive species but is immediately chastised for her action because it reflects an attack on colonial power. This garden's opposite is Philoctete's garden, which is built in some ruins and grows his food (21). Philoctete's healing is directly related to the health of his garden: when Seven Seas is asked about the healing of Philoctete's wound, he says "I heard his agony / from his yam garden. . . . They doing well, / the white yams" (318). This garden is built on the knowledge and plants brought from Africa, and the garden supports Philoctete's health. His garden is much closer to nature's garden, whereas Maud's garden is alienated from nature.

The voice of this natural world does not involve only humans learning from nature, but also nature learning from humans, furthering the complexities of the mesh. This can be seen, as previously discussed, in Maud's embroidery of birds, "The African swallow, the finch from India / now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern / with the Chinese nightingales" (313). Gregson Davis, as noted above, describes the connection between these birds and language: "the birds inscribed and figured in the embroidery represent the linguistic diversity of the Caribbean archipelago" (48). The connection between language and our relationship to nature is illustrated throughout the poem. Examples include when the narrator travels "to hear a brook talk the old language of Ireland" (198) and when Achille speaks a language "as brown and leisurely as a river" (139). In *Omeros,* the mesh is not comprised merely of humans returning to nature, or nature being anthropomorphized, but is a complex sharing of knowledge that comes in the form of human speech, animal speech, and kinds of inarticulable connections.

Walcott advances these connections between language and nature further, speaking to humanity's position as both part of and separate from nature. Anna Tsing, in her essay "Natural Universal and The Global Scale," touches on the translation of semantic knowledge to physical objects, observing that "Indonesian hosts and guides juggle local, national, English, and Latin names, and they used their familiarity with multiple systems to identify species" (216). Tsing's solution to translating between multiple languages and between multiple names is further explored by Dana Phillips in her essay "Expostulation and Replies," in which she quotes Roland Barthes, "But a tree as expressed . . . is no longer quite a tree" (264), and concludes that "confusing actual and fictional trees . . . is a critical error" (265). Thus, Walcott's approach to naming, across time and through translation, illustrates that a word creates a connection to a natural entity, and also creates a second, fictional version of this entity. Tsing and Phillips recognize the importance of names in eco-literature, and Walcott provides a way to better explore this complexity of naming. Walcott captures this multiplicity of languages well in his essay "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in which he writes, "One rose hearing two languages, one of the trees, one of the school children" (80). Language is no longer reserved for humans, nor is it wholly tied to literacy. Instead, language becomes a broad category of ways humans connect with each other and other creatures.

Walcott blurs the lines between humans and nature, allowing knowledge to pass between them. These connections reflect Haraway's concept of "quasi-collective/quasi-individual partners in constitutive relatings; these relationalities are the objects of study" (64). Finding new definitions of learning and communication can help us engage with reconnecting with nature. As Walcott wrote, nature is illiterate, but its vast knowledge is still accessible. With this revaluation of kinds of learning, we can create Morton's concept of "a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral" (*Ecological Thought* 14). The characters in *Omeros* learn a great deal from nature, and Walcott depicts this without merely anthropomorphizing nature, instead expanding the methods of connections between humans and the world around them.

3. Local and Global Contexts

To discuss the history of colonialism, and specifically the Atlantic slave trade, Walcott spreads *Omeros* across multiple continents and centuries, depicting both real and imagined landscapes. This breadth allows the poem to exist in a specific local context, St. Lucia, and the larger global context of colonial histories. This strategy offers an approach to producing eco-literature that accounts for the local and global. More particularly, *Omeros*'s expansion of the epic's nationalistic history to investigate postcolonial identities, and its movement across many times and places, creates strategies for literature that can be both local and global.

The reevaluation of epics illustrates that the genre continues to balance local and global understandings. Hirsh's analyses of the history of the genre are echoed in Joseph Farrell's article

"Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World," in which he discusses Walcott's *Omeros,* stating that "the genre attempts to correlate its heroic ideology with the (largely antithetical) values of the external world," and that the contemporary epic "continues the epic tradition of questions and self-questioning engagement on the part of the poet with his predecessors" (284). Both Hirsh and Farrell bring the epic out of Bakhtin's sense of a "completed and finished generic form" (15), and into the postmodern literary landscape through the epic's own history of experimentation. In epics, the personal can grapple with the collective or national. Alexander Irvine, in his essay "Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of the Western Myth," observes that "*Omeros*'s constant refutation of epic parallel even as it relies on knowledge of the epic . . . is deterritorialization," of the western canon's hold on the definition of an epic (125). Irvine further observes that Walcott "incorporates French Creole, wordless vowels, and the voice of the St. Lucian land – and seascape" to broaden the monophonic conception of the epic (125). In this way, Walcott's epic takes many identities that exist across time and space and illustrates how multiple origins and nationalisms can exist in a single person. Paul Jay, in his essay "Fated to Unoriginality," discusses the complex identities of postcolonial writers, such as Walcott, who are at once "African and European, Caribbean and American, local and metropolitan, resistant and co-opted, and fated to unoriginality, but an unoriginality redefined in terms aimed at underwriting a positive Caribbean poetic" (548). By investigating an inaccessible absolute past, while using the traditions of the western canon, Walcott reformulates conceptions of history and identity to more accurately reflect that people exist within themselves and within larger global histories.

This reformulation of identity can be seen more specifically in the ways Philoctete and Achille find healing. In the *Iliad,* Philoctetes is healed when he rejoins the Greek armies at the siege of Troy. In *Omeros,* Philoctete initially attempts to refuse the cure for his ailments, but

Homer's Philoctetes is convinced by the gods while Walcott's Philoctete is convinced by Ma Kilman. The classical character is healed through divine intervention and the glories of war, while the St. Lucian man is healed through the knowledge that has been nearly lost through the horrors of colonialism. After he is healed Philoctete can help Achille and celebrate Boxing Day, but unlike his classical counterpart, he does not make war against colonists or tourists. Walcott's view of the path of healing in the complex cultural mixing that takes place in postcolonial nations reflects a modernization of the classic, epic character. It is finally a kind of global knowledge and global nature that stops Philoctete's suffering and allows him to heal others. Similarly, Achille's suffering is connected to a global and historical trauma. His trauma is connected to enslavement of his ancestors and is most specifically described through the historical moment when a British admiral renames Afolabe, calling him Achilles. David Hoegberg analyzes this renaming in his essay "Unstable Identities," in which he states that "by imposing this name, the admiral is exercising his cultural and verbal power over the slave and fitting him into a Western paradigm, but he is also praising Afolabe" (57). Further, Afolabe allows himself to be called this new name because it is simpler, illustrating the difficult positions of enslaved people in the new world, while allowing this slave to retain some power of choice. With this past Achille's connection to the contemporary Achille, Walcott creates a lineage for the descendants of enslaved people who cannot trace their own history due to colonial violence, and refuses, as Hoegberg writes, "to specify a single cultural matrix . . . [as] part of his attempt to explore the myth of cultural purity and emphasize his own mixed racial and literary heritage" (63). The characters of *Omeros* heal their colonial wounds through a matrix of multiple cultures and histories, illustrating the relations between local lives and global histories.

Throughout the poem, characters and narrators move between continents to better understand their positions in the world. One narrator, Seven Seas, is described both as Homer and Omeros. He is Walcott's connection to classical epics, particularly the original western epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.   While traveling in London, the narrator sees Seven Seas as a homeless bargeman resting outside a church, where he is shooed away and described as "a public nuisance" (197). Here, Seven Seas watches the "devalued empire" (195). Comparing this scene with the scene in which Seven Seas sits in Ma Kilman's café and, though he is blind, comments on the goings on of the town reflects that one version of the originator of epic poetry is no longer needed in a crumbling empire, while the other version serves his original purpose, but for new peoples: "He hummed in the silence. The song of the chanterelle, / the river griot, the Sioux shaman. Asphalt / rippled its wires, like a harp. The street was still" (318). Instead of viewing the world, and history, from a single, local context, Walcott allows his characters to see themselves from multiple distances, providing a more accurate conception of how people exist within their lives and within the connections to collectives and histories that are too large to be easily understood.

Walcott creates a poem that jumps between, and combines, global and local contexts, offering ways of depicting the collision of relations created through global climate change. *Omeros*'s narrator jumps between locations, illustrating the locations' historical and contemporary relations and creating a narrative that, as Ghosh said, defies "the boundedness of 'place'" (62). Further, the forms of healing that characters find are brought from around the world but are accessible only to the locals who combine multiple sets of knowledge. This reflects Haraway's point that "local people [have had more] accurate assessments of . . . the terrible history of land seizures and colonial and postcolonial search-and-destroy operations"

(82). Unstable identities exist within single individuals, allowing those individuals to access a hyper-specific knowledge of place while still inhabiting centuries of history that created their multifaceted selves. Walcott's nods to the history of the epic to connect St. Lucia to the global history of colonialism, but he can nonetheless create novelistic characters who use their specific locality to learn and live.

4. Scalar Dissonance of Geologic Time

The epic's concern with mythic history provides powerful strategies for contending with time scales that exceed human comprehension. In contrast to Bakhtin's absolute past, which is inaccessible and unchangeable, the epic attempts to convey how cultures are shaped by history. Further, Bakhtin seeks "the authentic folkloric roots of the novel" (21), but he often ignores the folklores of postcolonial peoples, which are often lost due to colonial genocides, and their lack of connection to the western novel form. The memories of postcolonial peoples exist in the contemporary world, but their connections to a much longer history of colonialism more closely resemble a mythic "absolute past" (21) rather than a common or popular conception of memory as contemporary and familiar. Here, Bakhtin's concept of absolute past is a good descriptor for cultures destroyed by colonialism, and therefore a perfect site for investigating how postcolonial peoples navigate a history that is connected to but also separate from colonialism itself. This conception of a mythic history resembles past understandings of geologic history, because they are both somewhat disconnected from contemporary life and totally unalterable by contemporary humans. But, as we reconceive of humans as a geologic force in the Anthropocene, we must also find ways to connect humans to this inaccessible past. In *Omeros*, characters explore myths and colonialism, producing a better understanding of how humans create change across much longer histories. This practice can be seen in Walcott's approach to the development of nations, especially in relation to the history of epic poetry, and his use of varying tenses.

Some new conceptions of the epic attempt to illustrate how probing mythic history can create a better understanding of change across long spans of time. Jahan Ramazani, in his essay "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetic of Affliction," explains that the postcolonial epic complicates historical difference: "Walcott's restless work of discovering and creating resemblance confound the tribal, ethnic, and national limits set by colonizer and critic" (414). Ramazani gives further credence to the use of epic as a postcolonial tool with Frederic Jameson's generalization that texts from developing nations are always national allegories (412). Similarly, Walcott, in his essay "The Muse of History," faces the history of colonialism and epic obsessions with history, and in response he states that "fact evaporates into myth" (38), allowing the postcolonial epic to use its mythic origins and authority as tools to rewrite a Eurocentric history.

Ramazani also investigates how Walcott's epic conception of history can confront the traumas that exist across huge expanses of time, such as the entire history of colonial slavery. In his essay Ramazani brilliantly analyzes the use of wounds in *Omeros*, focusing on how Philoctete's wound "memorializes the untold suffering of African Caribbean" (415) while bridging Walcott's interests in European epics and African trauma (411) both to present a path beyond affliction and to investigate any benefits left to postcolonial peoples by their oppressors, which for Walcott is principally the English language. Postcolonial individuals exist with traumas that are difficult to access because the wounds are both their own and part of a longer history. This duality illustrates what Hoegberg calls "the futility of genealogies" (54), because though Achille cannot trace his genetic heritage through every generation due to slavery and the violence of colonialism, he is able to connect to his heritage. His identity does not require a single history, it requires only an imagined route through the history of slavery.

Walcott's epic also illustrates the human connection to longer time scales by playing with understandings and descriptions of time. As Hirsh explains in *Transgressive Intent*, an epic is interested in not only the passage of a mythic past, but also in the overall passage of time. Regarding the *Odyssey*, Hirsh writes that "Penelope not only warps time with her loom, she transgresses the boundary between the real and the fantastic as well, disrupting any distinction which might keep the real and the Active hermetically opposed" (57). In *Omeros*, this warping of time takes the form of not only Achille's journey to Africa and the narrator's discussions of colonial history, but also of Walcott's experiments with temporal adverbs. Emily Greenwood discusses these experiments in her essay "'Still Going On': Temporal Adverbs and the View of the Past in Walcott's Poetry," in which she discusses Walcott's belief that "the insistence on linear, historical time serves to perpetuate the colonial condition, enforcing a temporal sequence in which the so-called new world must necessarily be belated and secondary" (132). She further observes that Walcott's references to the ancient war, in this case the Trojan war, that is still being fought, and his use of tense to stress the continuity of the past highlight our connection to distant histories (135). Greenwood also notes that Philoctete's wound is described as "still unhealed" (*Omeros* 9), stressing the "continuity with the (Homeric) epic past" (Greenwood 136). Walcott's use of varying tenses and temporal adverbs creates powerful connections between the struggles of the distant past and the struggles of today. This strategy for connecting contemporary humans with ancient humans, and giving that connection the power to pass along traumas, illustrates that the scalar dissonance associated with geologic time can be productively approached within eco-literature.

Walcott's playing with time creates a powerful imaginary space in which time can be experienced beyond a traditional understanding. The power of these warped temporal spaces is addressed in Alfred K. Siewers essay "Reading the Otherworld Environmentally," in which he proposes that the "experience of different temporalities associated with different cosmic environments coming together" (303) can go "beyond either subjective or objective human temporalities and overlaps with a distinctively human experience of eternity" (304). Walcott builds an imagined and new temporal space in which postcolonial people can connect with their ancient counterparts. This kind of imaginary space can be a helpful tool for breaching the impossibilities of geologic scalar dissonance.

This temporal imagining is reinforced by a re-visioning of history which, as previously discussed, Walcott uses to reorient our understanding of postcolonial identities, but this engagement with history can also help create eco-literature that more successfully deals with colonialism and geologic time. Breslin describes time and space in *Omeros* as "strangely elastic" (18). This elasticity is one method of approaching the first thesis from "The Climate of History: Four Theses" by Dipesh Chakrabarty, which states that "Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Age-old Humanist Distinction between Natural History and Human History" (201). A new understanding of a mesh of histories will require an elasticity of understandings. Chakrabarty goes on to describe this mesh of history, "the geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history" (212), and this mesh of understandings, "the task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tensions with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital" (213). Haraway's description of a tentacular understanding of our world also fits Walcott's elastic sense of history. All of history meets, and continues, on St. Lucia, and an eco-literature must create spaces that achieve this historical meshing.

Walcott's approach to scalar dissonance and epic time is well reflected in the presence of the iguana in *Omeros*. In the first chapter, Walcott describes the arrival of white settlers and the destruction of the native Aruac people on St. Lucia through the eyes of an iguana: "a new race / unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees" (5). Humans engage with nature and are watched by nature. Throughout the book, the iguana watches the changes on St. Lucia: Achille sees the iguana and feels afraid, until the iguana disappears (163), and later the mountains are described as looking like "an iguana's spine" (308). The lizard is one of the last remaining natives of the island, and it has experienced all of history with a calm eye. An eco-literature for the Anthropocene would benefit from such an observer of deep time, one that has some humanity but is not human, a subject but also an object in nature, a creature that represents the connection between humans and geologic history but also represents the fact that nature is larger than humanity.

5/6. Beyond Climate Anxiety Through Imagining Futures

While there are other ways to deal with climate anxiety, one important path could be imagining and working towards a sustainable future. In *Omeros*, Walcott follows a similar path by dealing with the anxiety of all that was lost to slavery and colonialism through imagining a future for St. Lucia. Through examining Walcott's anxieties around his own epic poem, along with his anti-lament and future-focused imaginings, we can see how characters heal through a combination of different sets of knowledge, thereby creating new collectives or nations, presenting a powerful strategy for dealing with climate anxiety through imagining possible futures.

One of the strongest connections between epic poetry and eco-literature is the anxiety inherent in each genre. Line Henriksen, in her book *Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound's 'Cantos' and Derek Walcott's 'Omeros' as Twentieth-Century Epics*, discusses the anxiety that is inherent in epics. She begins with the observation that the epic has functioned as the definitive poem for an age, placing the poet among the greatest writers of all time (xvii). She calls the anxiety produced by this grand function "epic anxiety," stating that "involved in this most ambitious of poetic enterprises are the inevitable risks of failure and arrogance: of having overestimated one's abilities and taken on more than one can master" (xviii). This epic anxiety leads epic authors to distance themselves from the immodest project. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen throughout the history of epics, including denial that the project is an epic and pleas to the muses to provide the story, rendering the gods the author of the epic, rather than the poet. In *Omeros,* Walcott develops more contemporary methods for fighting anxiety. His investigations of his anxieties related to language and the lack of accessible precolonial histories provide examples of ways to deal with climate anxiety.

Omeros also uses the epic's traditional use as a foundational text for nations to create a future for postcolonial nations that is not wholly driven by colonial forces. Beyond Walcott's desire to create a literary foundation for St. Lucia, and beyond the centuries of epic theories that focused on how the genre reflected the creation of nations, Alexander Irvine delves into the deterritorialization of western myths of nationhood when he describes "*Omeros'*s constant refutation of epic parallel even as it relies on knowledge of the epic to be read" (125). Even as

Walcott enters the epic lineage, he gives his epic a new drive, one that may be antithetical to the drive of past, western epics. Literary influences and colonial histories swirl throughout Walcott's poem, but as we leave St. Lucia the poem looks to a future beyond the afflictions of colonialism. This is what Hirsh called "gesturing towards an even vaster future" (43). Achille has worked his African heritage into his life while continuing his work as a fisherman, in contrast to Hector's work for the tourist industry, and Philoctete no longer needs to make money through his unhealed wound, and the narrator ends the poem, stating that "When he left the beach the sea was still going on" (325). Characters are allowed to find a way to continue existing, both in the present and across a larger timeline that exists for sea. Paul Breslin, in his essay "Derek Walcott's 'Reversible World,'" observes that Walcott's vision of identities across time and space allows characters to move and exist without the anxiety of colonial history weighing on them: "It is an unfinished and unfinishable shuttling back and forth between past and present, present and future, by which we provisionally shape who we are" (19). Walcott's linguistic resolution is not a perfect resolution, but its imagining acts as a strategy for resolving the intractable issues and anxieties that exist as a result of the destruction of precolonial cultures. With the healing that has taken place across the book, St. Lucia and its people can build a nation out of its matrix of cultural histories, and this building occurs with the constant and continuing rhythm of the sea.

In the process of investigating how to hold climate anxiety, Walcott's nonfiction essays provide insights into how his movement away from lament is also a path away from anxiety. In "What the Twilight Says," he proposes that authors who have sought to discover a past folklore have not rediscovered "old gods," but instead have "artificially resurrected [them with] the anthropologist's tape recorder and in the folk archives of departments of culture" (7). He discusses the "'African' phase" of postcolonial artists who find an old god who is "not a contemplative but a vengeful force, a power to be purely obeyed" (8). In his strongest rebuke of such postcolonial art, Walcott writes that "most of our literature [has] loitered in the pathos of sociology, self-pitying and patronized" (9). Although *Omeros* focuses on investigations of history and colonialism, Walcott attempts to find a path to the present world beyond a purely historical focus. In his essay "The Muse of History," he explains that literature of the Americas is:

> a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos. The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. This shame and awe of history possess poets of the Third World who think language as enslavement and who, in a rage of identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia. (37)

This essay has been controversial since it was published in 1974, and while Walcott did choose to republish the essay in his 1999 essay collection *What the Twilight Says*, his polemic stance seems to have softened by the time he wrote *Omeros*. Jahan Ramazani argues that Philoctete's wound represents the continuing burden of historical wounds, illustrating the ways in which Walcott revised his position on writing about history (406). Through Philoctete, Walcott may not wholly explain or forgive history, but he does make room for history as a continuing force in the lives of postcolonial peoples. For Walcott, the easy paths of anger or remorse do not produce literature that can become foundational for postcolonial nations. Instead, Walcott focuses on the possibility of change. Breslin highlights moments in *Omeros* when this idea of change is presented most directly, such as when Walcott writes that "there is no answer" (139). Breslin describes these moments as representing Walcott's focus on "the element of renewal, fluidity, and unceasing change" (21). Walcott uses this element to fight, and move past, the overwhelming anxiety of epic poetry and colonial history, looking to a better future.

Pushing towards an imagined, postcolonial future not only assists in the alleviation of epic anxiety, but also provides a future-focused strategy that can be applied to eco-literature. In a different section of his essay "The Muse of History," Walcott discusses his goal of recognizing but also moving beyond colonial wounds. He states that for "most writers of the archipelago who contemplate only the shipwreck, the New World offers not elation but cynicism, a despair at the vices of the Old which they feel must be repeated" (43). Envisioning a future after colonialism is a key part of *Omeros*, and this goal often comes in the form of the renunciation of colonial myths. Breslin analyzes *Omeros*'s challenges to hierarchies using journeys through postcolonial, colonial, and European spaces (20). Breslin says that Walcott goes beyond history and myth, stating that "even myth must be renounced" in order to have a "shadowless purity of vision" (20) that can imagine a contemporary world united beyond colonial connections. The desire to move past the myths of colonialism resembles the desire to move past the myth of a perfect, humanless nature. We can see these similarities in Walcott's imagining of an imperfect yet healing future.

Healing colonial wounds is a complex task, but *Omeros* illustrates ways in which characters can investigate their pasts and collective traumas in a reparative way. Though Achille's injury begins primarily as a linguistic wound, his healing grows to inhabit the physical world. After he returns to St. Lucia, Achille exemplifies Walcott's desired postcolonial combination of retaken African traditions and contemporary colonial remnants, such as English. Achille hopes to give Helen's child an "African name" (318), and when Achille celebrates Boxing Day, he celebrates "for something older; something he had seen in / Africa," dressing with Philoctete in costumes that resemble "androgynous / warriors" (277). Achille does not change his name, nor does he wage war on tourists or other neocolonial institutions, but instead settles into a quietly flourishing happy life that is portrayed as combining the scars of colonialism with knowledge that was previously lost to colonial violence, creating a wholly new way of living.

Though the journeys of Achille, Plunkett, Philoctete, and the Walcott-narrator represent investigations of colonial wounds, their conclusions move beyond these wounds. Achille has kept his anglicized name, but he wants Helen's child to have an African name, and in the final tercets of the poem, Achille is turning away from his battles with Hector: "Achille put the wedge of dolphin // that he'd saved for Helen in Hector's rusty tin. . . . When he left the beach the sea was still going on" (325). Achille is not vengeful, nor has he acceded to Western influences, as he is still focused on his life as a fisherman and that connection to the sea. Achille's narrative ends with him at peace with the world and moving into a new life, one that he has chosen for himself. Plunkett's "wound healed slowly" (309), after his wife Maud's death, but he has changed from a colonizer of St. Lucia to a member of the community: "He began to speak to the workmen / not as boys who worked with him, till every name // somehow sounded different; when he thought of Helen / she was not a cause or a cloud, only a name / for a local wonder" (309). Even as a colonizer, Plunkett has been psychologically wounded by the histories of colonialism, but he is healing that wound, and in the process, Black St. Lucians have stopped being enslaved people or sexual conquests in his eyes. He is happy to live more like his late wife, who "preferred gardens to empires" (254). Philoctete's wound was healed by Ma Kilman, with the help of African remedies, but the fact that only these long-lost remedies heal him does not anger him. Instead, this knowledge frees him from the belief that he is continuing to suffer due to slavery. His yam garden is thriving, he can stand up straight, and he is the godfather of Helen's child (318). The Walcott-narrator discusses his own healing that has taken place across the poem and compares this healing to Philoctete: Like Philoctete's wound, "this language carries its cure, / its radiant affliction" (323). Although *Omeros* is a poem in English, the language of colonizers, both the Walcott-narrator and Philoctete find healing within this language that has been forced upon them, illustrating the mix of traits from colonizers and traits for the colonized that allow postcolonial peoples to move beyond their suffering.

Walcott's postcolonial epic imagines a future for postcolonial nations that revolves around building a new world by acknowledging and working through, rather than continually revisiting, inherited traumas, and such a future-focused text allows us to see how we might create more effective ecocritical works. Donna Haraway finds a future that is similar to Walcott's vision, one that includes grieving past destructions. She explains that "Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living dying; human beings must grieve *with,* because we are in and of this fabric of undoing" (39). This path for grief is a response to what Haraway sees as a need for new myths related to the future of our world, because "the myth system associated with the Anthropos is a setup, and the stories end badly. More to the point, they end in double death; they are not about ongoingness" (49). In this statement, we see Walcott's attack on literature that merely laments the past, without finding ways to continue. Haraway describes this approach as a "capacity to reimagine" (136), stating that global changes happen "in risky embodied connections to places, corridors, histories, and ongoing decolonial and postcolonial struggles" (138). Haraway is speaking principally about science fiction writing, but Walcott's open-ended conclusion for his contemporary epic fits Haraway's focus on connections and imagination.

Although Omeros is not principally concerned with ecology or nature, Walcott's focus on change and renewal, and his use of the sea as an example of constant change, imbues his writing with the tinge of eco-poetry. Walcott's description of Hector's death reflects these themes. As Paul Breslin writes, though Hector dies after choosing to leave the sea in order to work in the tourist industry, images like "the wind changes gear like a transport with the throttle / of the racing sea" (*Omeros* 49), present a "circular figure [that] suggests that Hector remains with the sea, and the sea with him, even though he has left it" (Breslin 21). While Hector may have died due to an overreliance on an industry of continued colonial domination, Walcott imagines that his connection to nature cannot be severed, and he will continue to live on through and with the sea. As Walcott imagines an imperfect healing, he illustrates an understanding of nature as intimately part of humans, and vice versa. This is an ecological mesh, a form of Haraway's quasi-collectivism, that can imagine healing even in the face of death.

In the response to anxieties around the violence of the past, *Omeros* describes a path towards healing from the wounds of colonialism through imagining a future that melds different sets of knowledge without ignoring the centuries of, and ongoing, pain. Walcott's hope for combining local, global, western, postcolonial, precolonial, and ecological understandings of the world is a solution to Haraway's point that to deal with global climate change, humans must "reimagine wealth, learn practical healing rather than wholeness, and stitch together improbable collaborations without worrying overmuch about conventional ontological kinds" (136). Walcott is dissatisfied with reveling in grief for what was lost due to slavery. He seeks to engage with suffering while finding a route to the future. Walcott refuses to merely describe the horrible history of slavery, or to create characters that simply enact their devastating histories or magically move past the legacy of colonialism. His approach is analogous to ecocriticism's critiques of writing that either glorifies a fictional, pristine nature, or imagines the terrible conclusions of the ecological doom we are facing, as Walcott's drive is to envision the real lives of the descendants of enslaved people and to offer them complex forms of healing. The healing is Haraway's "collective speculative fabulation" (8), and the movement through the lives of those wounded by history is reflected in Haraway's idea that, again, human beings "must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing" (39). His strategies also enact what Robyn Maree Pickens, in her doctoral thesis *Reparative Eco Poetics, or This Thesis Isn't Only About You*, described as an eco-literature that "makes repair of degraded environments apprehensible" (1). A literature that imagines a future through recognition of our histories, our current problems, and our possibilities for cultural melding can confront our next steps for a rapidly degrading world.

While the epic may be too large a goal for eco-literary authors, the epic's eons-long purpose of continuously recreating the foundations of a society may be exactly what is needed to rewrite our relationship with the rest of the ecological mesh. Walcott saw *Omeros* as a necessary step for moving St. Lucian literature through anger and grief to a productive future. Through his epic we can see strategies for valuing a communal perspective and so qualifying any individual point of view, exploring the contemporary ecological mesh between humans and nonhuman creatures, valuing local struggles and particularities while setting them within a global system, representing the scales of geologic and colonial histories, moving beyond the paralyzing effects of climate anxiety, and imagining possible futures for the earth. *Omeros* confronts history and imagines a way forward. Walcott's poetic imaginings provide healing where healing seemed impossible, encompasses a history too degraded and large to understand, and illustrates the connections between peoples and their worlds. Eco-literature that reorients how we relate to nature will need such ambitious imagined spaces.

Chapter 2: Well Then What to do Now

The Challenges for Ecopoetry in the Anthropocene and Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now*

As the time dwindles within which any action is capable of avoiding our own environmental apocalypse, our expectations of eco-literature grow. Each novel, poem, or story must be a silver bullet, addressing every dimension of the Anthropocene, but what else can we dream in such a dire situation? Whether the realization of such a dream is possible, it is valuable to analyze how ecopoetry of the Anthropocene is successful and how it fails. One writer to look towards is the poet and theorist Juliana Spahr, whose ecopoetic work has perhaps the most important descriptor for ecopoetry: experimental. In *Well Then There Now*, Juliana Spahr's experiments in collage, eco, and post-language poetries provide powerful examples for an ecopoetics that values communal perspectives over individualism, explores a more complex ecological mesh between humans and other organisms, and places itself within both particularly local and larger global situations. Spahr's experiments, however, face limitations when facing some important challenges of ecopoetry in the Anthropocene: encompassing the scalar dissonance of geologic time, moving past climate anxiety, and imagining possible futures.

Well Then There Now consists of six long poems and two essays, all of which use various styles to address aspects of the Anthropocene and colonialism. Spahr's earlier work in language poetry is obvious is poems like "Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours," "Sonnets," and "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," all of which use slightly altered repetitions as an investigative tool. For her essays, "Dole Street" and "2199 Kalia Road," Spahr uses prose to discuss more clearly her personal relationship with colonialization and the ways it feeds climate change. All the poems in this collection use collage, but “Unnamed Dragonfly Species,” “The Incinerator,” and “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache” use this method specifically to broaden understandings of relations between humans and other animals. Spahr’s varied styles assist her in addressing the breadth of the Anthropocene, but at times they limit her ability to address major aspects of our current climate crisis. Here, I will celebrate the successes across different poems and styles, while analyzing the failures across those same poems and styles. I will look at how Spahr responds to the six major challenges of climate literature: valuing communal over individual perspectives, depicting the ecological mesh, providing local and global contexts, exploring the scalar dissonance of geologic time, moving beyond climate anxiety, and imagining possible futures. Only through analysis can ecopoets better dive into the Anthropocene.

Well Then There Now Exceeds Climate Struggles

Juliana Spahr’s *Well Then There Now* meets the first challenge. One of its strongest ecopoetic aspects is its ability to value communal feeling and action while reevaluating the place of individualism. The first poem in the collection, “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours,” begins with a Gertrude Stein-esque repetition with variations. “We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are in this world. We are in this world. We are together. We are together” (11). Spahr thus begins her collection by calling out that everyone is a part of what we are about to discuss, in a way that is vaguely reminiscent of the Greek epic’s call to the muses. She precedes to clarify that “Some of we and the land that was never ours while we were the land’s” (12), referencing Robert Frost’s poem “The Gift Outright,” which he read at John F. Kennedy’s presidential inauguration. Spahr points out the inequalities within “we,” clarifying that only some of “we” can be blamed for colonialization and climate change. Here is the complexity that Yusoff demanded of a global eco-literature. As Lynn Keller observes in her essay *“The Post Language Lyric”: The Example of Juliana Spahr,* with respect to an earlier book by Spahr, “the plural . . . functions with an expansive ambiguity that is thematically significant: [it is] addressed [as a] collective, apparently one that include the book’s readership” (Keller 2010, 76). She continues that Spahr is expanding the traditional lyric “I” through her study of language poetry. Similarly, Tana Jean Welch, in her essay *Entangled Species: The Inclusive Posthumanist Ecopoetics of Juliana Spahr*, writes that “Spahr’s use of ‘we’ is not so much an echo of Language poetry’s attack on the conventional lyric self, as it is indicative of a shift toward a more collective (or communal) perspective” (7). Spahr’s work is not simply an echo of language poetry, but it does take language poetry’s goals and strategies, using them to investigate the need to remove individualism from our ecopoetics. Poetry’s historic “I” is upended to reevaluate the individual, in both the form of an authoritative author and any kind of individual experience.

Spahr continues this line of thinking in the poem “Unnamed Dragonfly Species,” which uses similar repetitions but expands to be more directly about climate change. The poem consists of connected statements separated by alphabetically listed organisms, many of which are endangered or extinct:

> They heard about all this cracking and breaking away on the news and then they began to search over the internet for information on what was going on. **Blue Whale** On the internet they an animation of the piece of the Antarctic Pine Island glacier breaking off.

> **Bluebreast Darter** After they found this, they often called this animation up and just watched it over and over on their screen in their dimly lit room. (77)

Spahr's "we" has transformed into "they," which refers to all people but at times also refers to particular people, specifically people like Spahr. This is a perfect combination of the particulars of individuals and the general experiences of communities facing climate change. The interjection of nonhuman organisms further pushes this sense of community to include more than humans. Tana Jean Welch describes how Spahr's "we," "they," and naming of animals "prevents the poem from giving too much priority to a single, solid static subject" (22), and includes animals, furthering the complexity of this community. Through the entire poem, Spahr creates a sense of a global community dealing with climate change, but specifically a global community that is made up of human and nonhuman individuals who have emotions that connect them to the rest of the community. In his essay *Why Ecopoetry?*, John Shoptaw describes Spahr's poems as "choral and citational" (400), highlighting how Spahr combines many voices with references to real life events, creating a collage that depicts a focus on community over the individual. A chorus of all humans, though differently oppressed humans, with nonhuman organisms refuses to create Ghosh's individual moral journey and successfully reproduces parts of Morton's scalar differences.

The trend of communal perspectives over individualism comes to a climax in Spahr's poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" where she continues her pronoun play and listing of animals, while leaning into the choral elements through refrains. She writes "and whoever lost her butterfly lost her harelip sucker / and whoever lost her white catspaw lost her rabbitsfoot / . . . What I did not know as I sang the lament of what was becoming lost and what was already lost was how this loss would happen. . . . I turned to each other" (131-132). She continues the mixing of human and nonhuman, furthers the experiments with pronouns, and adds refrains that conjure a choir singing a lament. Dianne Chisholm, in her paper "Juliana Spahr's Ecopoetics: Ecologies and Politics of the Refrain," describes how these refrains build to create a "wake-up call" (131) to readers. She then compares how Spahr's refrains differ from other ecopoetic writers, specifically Walt Whitman: "instead of aggregating identity and gaining control over the drift, her subject circles brackish things with a song of love that spirals out of control" (132). Spahr's "we" and "they" could give her greater control over discussing the entirety of humanity, and for a time it appears that she is working towards such control, but her continued play with repetitions refuses a simple kind of control, letting her community of many individuals exist in its own chaotic reality. This kind of balance illustrates how a future ecopoetics could speak to a global community of humans and nonhumans who are suffering together but suffering variously.

Spahr's ability to tackle investigations of large, complex communities can also be seen in her depiction of Morton's mesh, or less specifically, the interconnectedness seen within contemporary ecology. Across *Well Then There Now,* Spahr eloquently and complexly depicts how humans cannot be separated from other organisms, and how the space where these connections exist also includes nonliving things. One of her most successful depictions of this interconnectedness is "Unnamed Dragonfly Species," where she interjects different species into a discussion about all humans, and delves into different connections humans have with the natural world:

> They could not even remember thinking at all about weather that year. **Extra Striped Snaketail** When they really thought about it, they had no memory of any year being

> hotter than any other year in general. **Fat Pocketbook** They remember a few hot summers and a few mild winters but they were more likely to remember certain specific storms like the blizzard of 1976. **Fence Lizard** They did not remember heat as glacier remember heat, deep in the center, causing cracking and erupting. (80)

Organisms interject, and are given roughly equal weight as the humans, because they are bolded and each sentence gets one animal. Spahr depicts how humans must alter how they remember their connections to the climate in order to see how much they are connected with climatic changes. After illustrating this re-imagining, she adds that glaciers are also connected to climate, but in a way that humans cannot fully understand. Humans, nonhuman organisms, and nonliving things all meet in this mesh. Welch describes this as "the entangled stratums of history, biology, technology, and naturecultures that describes the complex figures we continuously become," (23) and throughout the book she describes Spahr's mesh as "posthumanist" (1). Even as Spahr explores how humans in general, and at times specific humans, relate to their environments, she proposes that we are always with different species, and that it is possible to understand and feel the mesh that connects all things.

The collection's penultimate poem, "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," advances these explorations, focusing more deeply on the feelings we have for, and with, the land and its other inhabitants. The poem continues Spahr's listing, but narrows in on human emotional connections with a river and its inhabitants:

> It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.
> It was a brackish stream and it went through the field beside our

> house.
> But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of it also.
> Some of it knowingly.
> We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts and we let in pink
> tampon applicators and we let in six packs of beer connectors and
> we let in various other pieces of plastic.
> And some of it unknowingly. (130-131)

She ends this section with:

> and whoever lost her butterfly lost her harelip sucker
> and whoever lost her white catspaw lost her rabbitsfoot
> and whoever lost her monkeyface lost her speckled chub
> and whoever lost her wartyback lost her ebonyshell
> and whoever lost her pirate perch lost her ohio pigtoe lost her
> clubshell (131)

In the wake of destruction, Spahr finds the possibility for newly discovered emotional connections between humans, a river, the nonhuman inhabitants of that river, and the garbage that humans have put in that river. Her listing creates these connections, and the last lines of the section connect one loss, of an object, to another loss, of a creature. The mesh is all these things, and human emotions can travel along this mesh. In parallel with these connections, in his essay "A Mesh of Strange Strangers in Juliana Spahr's Well Then There Now: An Exploration of

Timothy Morton's Ecological Thought," Alwyn Roux describes these lists as "a lament," (65) pointing out that connecting our garbage to the river's destruction allows us to grieve the loss of nature, not as a distant observer, but as an integral part of the environment. Roux continues, stating that "the things they knew were everyday things" (66), because Spahr is investigating how there are things we cannot know, while still creating emotional connections through the things we can know.

The collection's final poem, "The Incinerator," pushes the mesh a step further when Spahr describes herself having sex with her hometown. Only after this description does Spahr reveal that this is her hometown and not some real human lover, writing, "My parents moved there when they first move to Chillicothe" (141). Before this, she writes "I am fucking with Chillicothe in the / vegetable garden behind the house. . . . I am atom / Chillicothe and I straddle Chillicothe's chest. My breasts are in / Chillicothe's face and Chillicothe cups them" (138). The rest of the poem is a discussion of Spahr's family history, the town's history, and the many stories she sees when she thinks about the land. The revelation that Spahr was having metaphorical sex with a town, and that this town is not wholly transformed but remains both a land that she can investigate and a lover, gives a fantastical and successful description of the mesh between humans and land. Siobhan Phillips, in her essay *A Catalogue of Us with All: Juliana Spahr's "Well Then There Now,"* describes this as Spahr's rejection of "any separation between intimate passion and general policy" (2), pointing out the ways that Spahr's strategies connect the political action required to lessen the effects of climate change with a very human kind of love. Robyn Maree Pickens calls Spahr's physical relationship with the land an act of "reparatively ingest[ing]" (40) destroyed environments. Spahr joins with the land in a way humans cannot, illustrating how we might emotionally enter the mesh that we are already physically within.

The final ecopoetic challenge that Spahr most successfully meets is the balance between a global world with a global climate crisis, and a specific local struggle with a specific local ecology. She includes two essays in *Well Then There Now*, "Dole Street" and "2199 Kalia Road," where she grapples with her position as a kind of colonial invader in Hawai'i. These essays create what Keller calls "intrusion of public events" (2010, 78), allowing Spahr to connect her poetic world with the real world. In "Dole Street" she writes:

> Punahou school has a famous stone fence covered with night blooming cereus, a cactus. A seaman brough the cactus from Acapulco and gave it to a missionary teacher at Punahou years ago. It not only still grows there, but the cereus grows all over the dry areas of O'ahu. Like many of the plants brought from afar it has taken over. It has a huge white bloom that opens at night and then wilts in the morning sun. Bees are attracted to it. (46)

Spahr builds ethos through her research of Hawaiian history, and connects the local ecosystem to global colonialism and the invasive species that have moved through globalization. She builds on this theme in "2199 Kalia Road," writing about observing mainlanders who spend large amounts of money to visit Hawai'i in order to see all the tropical beauty. Once on O'ahu, these tourists "wake up and find themselves broke and here, in the decaying urban jungle of Waikīkī" (115). Spahr takes the imagined tropical jungle and reveals the decay of colonial invasion, pointing out the destruction of Hawai'i's ecosystems. Christopher Arigo, in his essay *Notes*

Toward an Ecopoetics, succinctly describes Spahr's punning of jungle: "Spahr uses basic ecology to talk about her position as an invasive species (read: colonizer)" (17). Even Spahr's discussion of the invasive cactus doubles as a critique of her own position in Hawai'i. She also connects this recognition to global travel, a major contributor to climate change, and the way we imagine some distant, untouched nature, which is long gone, no different from the destroyed nature we find around our own homes. Christine Gerhardt, in her essay *Imagining a Mobile Sense of Place: Towards an Ecopoetics of Mobility*, argues that Spahr's discussion of localities where she is a distinctly colonial figure helps "envision and express a distinctly *mobile* sense of place" (421). In our globalized world, a mobile sense of place helps connect global climate change with specific locations. These essays are most successful, however, in how they work in conjunction with the rest of the book. Spahr addresses the global only after she delves into her own local. Without the essays, Spahr would be Yusoff's white, wealthy speaker who ignores the past and present oppressions of black and brown people. With the essays, Spahr blends the global with the local. More specifically, she can blend her position as a colonial invader with her drive to speak towards a greater understanding of the Anthropocene.

The collection's final poem, "The Incinerator," directly explores how local places interact on a global scale, and the fact that humans exist both locally and globally. Spahr writes:

> As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning them: my current
> income puts me in one of the top income percentiles of the world yet I continue to
> think of myself as broke.
> As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning them: I wanted to
> end

> this piece with a scene of metaphoric group sex where all the participants were place names, but the minute I attempted to do this I got bogged down in questions of which places would penetrate and which places would be penetrated. (153)

These sections lay out how Spahr experiences herself locally (broke) and globally (in one of the top income percentiles). She goes further by asking how we can create poetry about many localities without reinscribing colonial power dynamics. Her inability to create her sex scene allows her to directly address the difficulties of combining the global and the local. Regarding how the collection tackles these ideas, Chisolm writes that the poems "let in more than a body or territory can assemble within its borders" (134). Even when Spahr admits her own limitations, she allows the particularly local to live within the global, without being it minimized or ignored.

Well Then There Now Falls Behind Climate Struggles

Spahr's experiments develop fascinating strategies for an ecopoetics of the Anthropocene, both as methods of expanding our understanding of ourselves and nature, and as poetry with the goal of creating political change. But Spahr recognizes the difficulties in producing poetry that leads to real political change. In an interview she asked "how much is literature becoming like opera? . . . Opera is no place to locate our political speech" (Zucker). Due to linguistic and financial barriers, Opera is primarily accessible to wealthy, white people; it cannot reach a diverse, or large, audience. As we continue to investigate what a contemporary, successful ecopoetics might look like, it is valuable to delve into the limits of Spahr's poems in regards to scalar dissonance, climate anxiety, and possible futures.

As Morton's hyperobjects illustrate, it is important for ecopoetics to grapple with the ways the Anthropocene exists across vast scales of time, but Spahr does not find ways to evoke this dissonance. Her essays, "Dole Street" and "2199 Kalia Road," are her most in-depth discussions of history, but they are limited to recent colonial and postcolonial history. They even shy away from a strong indictment of colonialization, choosing to use a dispassionate tone to discuss colonial history. These pieces rarely advance beyond an emotionally distant description of a "missionary teacher" (46) or that "Sanford Dole was an annexationist" (33). Spahr has discussed her reluctance to delve into this colonial history, stating "I would never set a novel in pre-contact Hawai'i" (Zucker). While this is a reasonable assertion and prevents the creation of literature that continues a kind of colonial imagination, it prevents her from connecting with a history beyond the last one or two hundred years. Within the collection's poems, Spahr briefly touches geologic time with lines such as "they remember a few hot summers and a few mild winters but they were more likely to remember certain specific storms like the blizzard of 1976. **Fence Lizard** They did not remember heat as glaciers remember heat, deep in the center, causing cracking and erupting" (80), but beyond the weather held in living memory, or a small description of how glaciers have felt climate change, there is very little about deep time.

Though Spahr is limited to recent history, she is more successful at approaching scalar dissonance through the suprahuman scale of climate change. Lynn Keller writes that Spahr "explores how daunted people feel when they try to grasp the suprahuman scale of human generated-transformations . . . effectively [exposing] scalar dissonance and its accompanying aggregate of emotions, during the reader into that experience through [the book's] rhetoric and construction" (2018, 39). It is important to address how deep time relates to the scalar dissonance of humans as a geologic force, but Keller points out the ways Spahr addresses the importance of the dissonance that produces climate anxiety. Spahr's poems explore the "profound contradictions" (2018, 43) that people deal with when thinking about climate change, illuminating one aspect of the scalar dissonance within climate change.

Robyn Maree Pickens' *Reparative Eco Poetics, or This Thesis Isn't Only About You* further defends Spahr's lack of scalar dissonance, arguing that these kinds of scales are not only beyond human conception but are a socially constructed understanding of climate change. She writes that Morton's hyperobjects "lead to an abdication of human responsibility for [the] socio-ecological crisis" (7) and are "products of abstraction in which tools lose their creators and become independent actors, eliding, if not exonerating humankind of responsibility for global heating and extinction" (9). Picken's sees Spahr's work as a kind of reparative "ingestion" (19) of the effects of climate change. From this perspective, Spahr is "turning towards" (19) the world in order to live within and repair it, so Spahr does not need to address Morton's more abstract conception of climate change. While this is a reasonable point, it ignores the value of understanding our species as potent actors across geologic time, from contemporary mining operations to the ways human agriculture has reshaped how ecosystems function. In his essay *Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time,* Don McKay discusses the poetry of deep time, arguing that "the poetic frame permits the possible . . . to be experienced as a power rather than a deficiency; it permits the imagination entry, finding wider resonances, leading us to further implications for ourselves" (48). Even if we ignore the need to represent geologic time scales, we must confront the extractive histories of capitalism and colonialism, which go back centuries, much longer than Spahr grapples with in her poems.

Regarding climate anxiety, Spahr seems unable to move past the discussion of her own status as a colonial invader or the debilitating apocalyptic revelations of climate change. While her essays help illustrate the work required to understand colonial history and to write from the position of a white, neo-colonial figure, at times Spahr is overly focused on describing her position in Hawai'i rather than focusing on unveiling the destructive history of colonialization. In the final section of "2199 Kalia Road," titled "confession," she writes "I've only told a small story. There are layers on top of layers of this story. I am only beginning to understand them. . . . I am nowhere smart enough to tell this story" (121). While this admission is laudatory, Spahr is admitting her limits when grappling with her own anxieties about colonialism. At times, Spahr's acknowledgement of her own anxieties does not hold that anxiety in a way that could allow for action. Instead, she stops short of containing climate anxiety. While her work is undoubtedly anti-colonial, she stops just before moving past the colonial and the past the anxieties associated with colonialism.

In the poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," Spahr's powerful repeating lament of all that has been destroyed by humans, she ends by reveling in sadness without moving to any action or vision of change. In the last lines, she says:

> I put my head together on a narrow pillow and talked with each other
> all night long.
> And I did not sing.
> I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.
> I did not sing groaning wounds.
> I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.
> I did not sing groaning wounds.
> I did not sing o wo, wo, wo!

> I did not sing I see, I see.
>
> I did not sing wo, wo! (133)

This gorgeous elegy for what we have not done to save the planet references the Greek myth of Cassandra, whose prophecies fall on deaf ears. But Spahr does not treat this failure as a crisis, instead she begins by placing this lament in bed with a lover, a setting which seems to act as a safe space, a bunker against the stresses of the Anthropocene. In *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, Keller writes that “nostalgia seems an insufficient response to current environmental problems” (2018, 17), and while Spahr may not create a nostalgic picture of nature, she does retreat to a kind of nostalgia for simple, personal relationships. Keller later describes Spahr as creating a kind of “dulling mesmerization” (2018, 41) through her repeated refrains, language poetry inspired repetitions, and listing of different animals. While this evokes the feeling of being inundated by data describing the destruction of the earth, it also allows the reader to pass over without creating a strong emotional connection. In poems like “Unnamed Dragonfly Species,” the mesmerization distances the reader from the organisms that are at risk of extinction, who are listed alphabetically, a distinctly human form of organization. Gina Myers, in analyzing this poem in her review of *Well Than There Now,* writes that Spahr’s poetry “successfully captures the anxiety many environmentalists are likely to feel in this day and age—the overwhelming sense that things are damaged beyond repair, that reducing one’s own carbon footprint may not do much in the grand scheme of things, that, despite all of this, one must continue living” (2). While Spahr’s laments sometimes paint a deeply emotional connection to the nonhuman world, the strategy is a double-edged sword, creating poems that allow readers to skim without engaging with the true nature of climate change, because they are mesmerized by climate anxiety.

With this understanding of Spahr's apocalyptic fugue, it is easier to see how her colonial and climate anxieties prevent her from imagining possible futures for the world. The essays in her collection are wonderful discussions of Hawaiian history, but they are trapped within the short history that can be accessed in archives, meaning that Spahr is trapped in the present, unable to gesture towards life before colonialism, or imagine a future solution for the remaining wounds of colonialism. This is repeated in "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," which laments but cannot move past that lament. On the final page of the final poem, "The Incinerator," Spahr writes:

> Streams going off in all directions.
>   Going off in all directions,
> the road almost cultureless,
> exits at even intervals, floats
>   floats above
> above the desire I want
>   The desire I want as epilogue,
>   as epilogue, for in my heart seeds
>   heart seeds of
> unending love,
>   love, still, and also despite.

This final section describes a desire for something after our current climate crisis, but although it even imagines that many paths exist to move toward something after our ending, it cannot imagine this future. Spahr is trapped behind the event horizon of apocalypse. It is where most of us are, unable to see any outcomes beyond brutal annihilation. But theorists like Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing illustrate how imagining something beyond our crisis is an important step in working toward creating a future, whether for us or other living and for nonliving things. It is worth requoting Haraway and Tsing: we must develop an "art of living on a damaged planet," where we can "reimagine wealth, learn practical healing rather than wholeness, and stitch together improbable collaborations without worrying overmuch about conventional ontological kinds" (Haraway, 136). In some ways, Spahr is developing way of living in our current damaged world, but her work does not take the step of building or imagining a future. Without this collective fabulation, we are left with apocalypse fatigue, and no future we can work toward, and without a future to work toward, a reparative ecopoetics cannot give meaning to reparative actions.

Spahr's ecopoetic experiments create astonishing methods for grappling with climate change in literature, and discussing her limits does not diminish her accomplishments as much as it helps imagine a better ecopoetics for the Anthropocene. The challenges of eco-literature may lack complete responses for a long time, but attempting to imagine and create such a work of literature is important, because whatever we discover will inevitably help us better understand and combat global climate change. But perhaps it is time to add more extreme aspects to the writerly life. As Juliana Spahr once said, "if writers were arming themselves and aligning themselves with militant groups like they did in the late 60's, the government would pay more attention to poetry" (Zucker). A future ecopoetic movement may involve a greater emphasis on the political actions that literature produces, or it may include literary projects that destroy the boundary between poetry and real-world action. Whatever changes come to ecopoetics, Spahr's work pushes us to better understand our dying world, and through that understanding, better commit ourselves to building a sustainable and vibrant future.

We Are Larger Than Ourselves:

The Goals of Eco-Poetry

Humans have always made art about their relationship with nature. The simplicity of this statement masks the challenges of making art within a tradition that spans the entire timeline of civilization. Our artistic depictions of our relationships with nature have taken on various incarnations: cave paintings of animals, Homer's gods and storms, Virgil's rural world, Vivaldi's seasons, Wordsworth's flowers and romances, Van Gogh's landscapes, Ansel Adams's mountains and presidents, Robert Frost's lonely snow, Edward Abbey's polluted deserts, Joni Mitchel's yellow taxi, and Richard Powers's talking trees. Each artist finds new meaning for humans, whether with or against nature. Today, terms like 'Anthropocene' mark a unique change in our relationship with nature, so our art has changed as well, but not without some anxiety. The rising levels of destruction due to global climate change imbue art about nature with a somber atmosphere, a political relevancy, and a horrific urgency. In the political sphere, the climate crisis is intertwined with the world's racial violence and economic disparities through the unequal distribution of resources to fight, and the global capitalist economic system that perpetuates, climate destruction. Artistic movements are not themselves political change, but as writers seek to alter humanity's relationship with nature and climate change, it is important to ask what our goals are, what our strategies are, where we are failing, and where we are succeeding. When we step back to consider these questions, and contemplate our answers, we will begin to find paths for eco-literature, paths that lead to innovation in how humans live with, in, and for nature.

In these chapters, I have presented six major challenges that eco-poetry faces: valuing a communal perspective and so qualifying any individual point of view; exploring the contemporary ecological mesh between humans and nonhuman creatures; valuing local struggles and particularities while setting them within a global system; representing the scales of geologic and colonial histories; moving beyond the paralyzing effects of climate anxiety; and imagining possible futures for the earth. These six challenges are connected to the realities of global climate change. Our devastating effect on the climate has not been created through the isolated actions of individuals, but through the actions of the entire species, together. Similarly, solutions to global climate change must be found among communities, not by individuals alone. To find solutions, we must alter our understanding of how humans live with nature, at least partially overcoming the current estrangement between humanity and the rest of the planet. Furthermore, we interact with nature on the local level but the climate is global, and these two perspectives must be combined to clearly comprehend the relationship between humans and nature. The vastly different scales of individual experiences and global climate are mirrored in the connections between recent ecological devastation and the geologic timescale. Humans are now a geologic force, and we must understand how we exist in timelines that go beyond contemporary history. With our new understandings of climate change, we must face and hold our own climate anxiety. With these understandings and our willingness to exist with our anxieties, we can look forward and imagine a possible future for the planet and our species.

Through my examination of two innovative long poems of our time, I have sketched eco-poetic strategies for confronting these six major goals for eco-literature. The texts I have analyzed work through a variety of topics, bringing together lyrical intimacy, romantic attention to the natural world, and a broad historical scope. They are not perfect examples of eco-poetic projects in the Anthropocene, but we do not have perfect eco-poetic projects, nor do we have clear paths to such projects. Instead, Derek Walcott and Juliana Spahr have explored new poetic paths, ones that are directly eco-poetic, in the case of Spahr, or are deeply relevant to eco-poetry, in the case of Walcott. Our familiar habits of representation in literature have proved inadequate for addressing the global climate crisis, so we must look to work that explores formal innovations in an effort to better understand the possibilities of eco-literature.

Walcott's *Omeros* is an epic poem for the postcolonial world, and its ability to confront centuries of suffering, and to move through that suffering, offers a model for eco-poetic projects that seek to address similarly vast issues. While the poem centers on the people of modern St. Lucia, it also moves around the world and across centuries, presenting the individual lives of postcolonial people through an investigation of slavery, colonial violence, connections to pre-colonial Africa and the Caribbean, and contemporary neo-colonial capitalism. By moving through these varied topics and spaces, Walcott presents a postcolonial world that can create its own future, is deeply connected to its recorded history and its history lost to colonialism, and has rekindled a multifaceted relationship with the descendants of enslaved people, the descendants of enslavers, and the natural world.

Omeros's movement through history and into the future offers a powerful strategy for reckoning with long, violent histories. Walcott asks where we are now and where we could be in the future rather than, as he put it, "loitering" in self-pity (*What The Twilight Says* 9). Philoctete's healed wound, Achille's visit to Africa, and Ma Kilman's medical rediscovery enact Walcott's desire to move past the history of slavery, without forgetting the atrocities that continue effecting contemporary people, and into an independent future for postcolonial peoples. Christina Sharpe, in her book *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being,* also investigates this kind of movement through history and into the present and future. Sharpe uses the word 'wake' to investigate contemporary blackness and its lasting connections to slavery. She does not address

Walcott's work, but her description of the wake is relevant to *Omeros* and eco-literature. Sharpe presents a multifaceted definition of the wake, connecting the definitions to slave ships and their continuing symbolic relevance:

> Wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances, a watching practiced as a religious observance. But wakes are also 'the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)'; finally, wake means being awake and, also, consciousness.
>
> In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school. (Sharpe 21)

The wake is the path left by slave ships that contain an echo of that space in the form of segregations, mass incarceration, and other methods of keeping black people unfree. The wake is the ceremony where we can mourn everything that was, and is, lost to slavery and other forms of racial violence. The wake is the continuing reminder that the world is shaped by the Atlantic slave trade. Sharpe describes the ways in which "Black scholars of slavery get wedged in the partial truths of the archives while trying to make sense of their silences, absences, and modes of dis/appearance" (12). The pitfalls of partial truths are navigated by Walcott's focus on the future without giving up the horrific truths of the past. Sharpe and Walcott want to live with history, and recognize that we are shaped by history, but they also want to find paths forward that take history into account but are not held back by history. Today, even as we continue to increase our carbon pollution, we are living in the wake of past pollution. We are at once creating climate change and living in its effects. Perhaps if we can imagine how to understand and hold this anxiety-inducing state of existence, we can imagine a future beyond these struggles.

Walcott's weave of multiple historical perspective is easily understood as an important strategy for postcolonial literature, but it is also a necessary path for an eco-poetry that addresses global inequality and the history of climate change. As I previously discussed, writers like Kathryn Yusoff and Dana Phillips have argued that there is a deep connection between colonialism, capitalism, and climate change, and eco-poetic projects that ignore the racial and economic disparities within environmental destruction present inaccurate depictions of human relationships with the natural world and misleading understandings of the vast political changes required to address climate change. Through *Omeros*'s investigation of these colonial histories, a multifaceted understanding of our contemporary world emerges, one that is critical for understanding the climate crisis. Postcolonial literature and eco-literature have different goals, but their desire to include multiple complex histories presents an important connection that can guide authors towards a more successful literature of the Anthropocene.

Spahr's *Well Then There Now* directly addresses colonialism and climate change, and the book's innovative presentation of intersectional subject positions illustrates valuable strategies for eco-poetry. This collection of linked long poems delves into the histories that brought Spahr to the former colony of Hawai'i while investigating environmental destruction and celebrating environmental beauty and endurance. Collage poems, personal essays, sonnets, and other formal strategies allow Spahr to wrestle with how we exist in the wake of colonial violence and within a rapidly degrading world, addressing climate anxiety and our relationships with nature through varied perspectives. This weaving and winding journey creates one of most innovative works of eco-literature of the past decades.

Perhaps the most important strategy we gather from Spahr is how to write about climate change and colonialism as a white, western, neo-colonial figure. Walcott is writing as a postcolonial subject, a community who has suffered the most due to colonialism, and who will suffer the most due to global climate change, but Spahr speaks from a more affluent perspective. Her research into colonial histories and examination of how neo-colonial figures continue to perpetrate the crimes of colonialism are invaluable for understanding how white, western authors can write about climate change. By engaging with colonial and neo-colonial histories, authors can present a clear portrayal of climate change and climate history without minimizing colonial violence through universalizing narratives.

Although eco-poetry is not the equivalent of the political movement to slow climate change, the challenges that I have proposed parallel the underlying goals of climate activists. Macarena Gómez-Barris, in her book *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, describes the means by which colonial resource extraction continues today across South America, a process that has condemned these areas to be viewed purely for their extractive capabilities. She also examines the philosophies of activists who are working against neo-colonial invaders, stating that a "transfeminist, Indigenous anarcho-perspective imaginatively sees and describes the impulse behind not only the arc of radical genealogies but also their potential future" (131). Similarly, when analyzing the documentaries made by these activists, Gómez-Barris writes that their "experimental techniques [are] an assault upon colonial modes of representation" (68), further stating that "through a nonlinear sense of time, surrealism, and a critique of representational evacuation, we find decolonial alternatives" (87). For Gómez-Barris, representational evacuation occurs when depictions of South American environmental destruction do not include the indigenous peoples who live in these areas. Extractive zones in South America illustrate the links between global capitalism, colonialism, and the climate crisis in the form of Western companies continuing the colonial tradition of destroying environments and the indigenous people who live there. Within indigenous activist groups, we see the importance of placing local struggles in a global context, imagining futures, and creating communal perspectives rather than overvaluing individual actions. Eco-poetry, and other ecologically focused art, helps imagine and depict the reorientation of values that activist groups are trying to create in the political sphere.

Naomi Klein, in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, writes more broadly about global climate change and late capitalism. She connections between climate change and the dominant forces within late capitalism, and argues that global political inaction around climate change, even with widespread scientific consensus and growing environmental destruction, is because the actions needed to lesson climate change go against the core values of modern capitalism, including endless growth and consumption, connecting amount of power to amount of wealth, and the primary governmental role of maintaining economic stability. Klein rejects capitalist and technocratic solutions to climate change, including solutions created through wealthy eco-friendly nonprofits or billionaires. Instead, she sees our only hope in collective action that focuses on ending global capitalism and giving more power to indigenous peoples. Her analysis is not about eco-literature, but her goals around communal action and valuing local struggles run parallel to the challenges for eco-poetry in the Anthropocene.

Klein focuses on how the personal value systems that are lauded by capitalism are antithetical to the values needed to create political change. She describes a Yale study which explains “that people with strong ‘egalitarian’ and ‘communitarian’ worldviews” believe we need to work to stop climate change, while “those with strong ‘hierarchical’ and ‘individualistic’ worldviews” reject the scientific consensus that climate change is real and will devastate humanity (36). Here we can see the importance of an eco-literature that values a communal perspective and so qualifies any individual point of view. Klein rejects valuing technological solutions to climate change that continue capitalism’s focus on growth and consumption. She describes the “explosion of ingenious zero-waste” technologies, which have still not led to “the kind of large-scale transition that would give us a collective chance of averting catastrophe” (16). The political movement to slow climate change is the most important factor in saving humanity from further devastation, and developments in eco-literature and other ecologically inclined arts are one way to promote the cognitive changes needed to move people towards supporting the large-scale solutions humanity needs.

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What do we need from eco-poetry? We need historically conscious work that celebrates our local, global, and nonhuman communities; helps us hold the anxiety of climate apocalypse; and imagines a future for our damaged world. This work will probably move between genres, using the strategies of each to better achieve its goals. Walcott and Spahr have created this kind of work. They have different goals, strategies, and perspectives, but their innovative poems offer strategies for writers who want to create an eco-poetry for the Anthropocene. I have analyzed two long poetic projects, but eco-poetic strategies can be used in shorter poems, like Franny Choi's "The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On," from her book by the same name. Choi creates a collage of apocalypses, giving enough detail of each to make them recognizable, but remaining broad enough to connect the history of violence with our contemporary climate apocalypse. The poem reads in its entirety:

> Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse of boats:
> boats of prisoners, boats cracking under sky-iron, boats making corpses
> bloom like algae on the shore. Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse
> of the bombed mosque. There was the apocalypse of the taxi driver warped
> by flame. There was the apocalypse of the leaving, and the having left—
> of my mother unsticking herself from her mother's grave as the plane

> barreled down the runway. Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse
> of planes. There was the apocalypse of pipelines legislating their way
> through sacred water, and the apocalypse of the dogs. Before which was
> the apocalypse of the dogs and the hoses. Before which, the apocalypse
> of dogs and slave catchers whose faces glowed by lantern-light.
> Before the apocalypse, the apocalypse of bees. The apocalypse of buses.
> Border fence apocalypse. Coat hanger apocalypse. Apocalypse in
> the textbooks' selective silences. There was the apocalypse of the settlement
> and the soda machine; the apocalypse of the settlement and
> the jars of scalps; there was the bedlam of the cannery; the radioactive rain;
> the chairless martyr demanding a name. I was born from an apocalypse
> and have come to tell you what I know—which is that the apocalypse began
> when Columbus praised God and lowered his anchor. It began when a continent
> was drawn into cutlets. It began when Kublai Khan told Marco, *Begin*
> *at the beginning*. By the time the apocalypse began, the world had already
> ended. It ended every day for a century or two. It ended, and another ending
> world spun in its place. It ended, and we woke up and ordered Greek coffees,
> drew the hot liquid through our teeth, as everywhere, the apocalypse rumbled,
> the apocalypse remembered, our dear, beloved apocalypse—it drifted
> slowly from the trees all around us, so loud we stopped hearing it. (Choi 1)

As reflected in Choi's poem, before we feared climate change, humanity's apocalypses included the Middle Passage, the post-9/11 war on Muslim people, the deaths of migrants, the killings in response to civil rights movement, the prohibition of abortion, the genocide of indigenous peoples, and the continued destruction of indigenous lands. We can see the long history of devastation that has led to our contemporary apocalypse, and the inequalities that persist as we attempt to create global action against climate change. A short poem may not take on all of climate change, but Choi’s poem provides an example of a fairly simple strategy for addressing one aspect of eco-poetry in the Anthropocene. The strategies we learn from epics and other large literary projects can be applied to shorter works, and through an abundance of poems, we may begin to meet the challenges that face eco-poetry.

The dominant framework of modern societies defined humankind as distinct from and superior to nature. Humankind has been defined by what it is not, principally that it is distinct from the natural world. Our control over our environments has been at the center of our species’s power. Although this power has created our current climate crisis, we were misled to this end. The binary understanding of humans versus nature has created a deeply flawed relationship between humanity and the planet. Altering the fate of humanity and the climate will require radical political change, and to make that change, and ensure those changes endure, we must alter our conceptions of nature and ourselves, the ways we are connected, and the goals of our existence. Eco-literature can play a critical role in bringing about these changes in our vision, counteracting the devastation of climate change. The ability to manipulate language to bring about a better understanding of our world and ourselves may be the seemingly small step that brings about an existence that we, and the planet, can sustain.

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