

DESCENDING INTO THE FLESH: EXPLORING EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE,
NONHUMAN AGENCY, AND ECOCRITICAL THEORY

by

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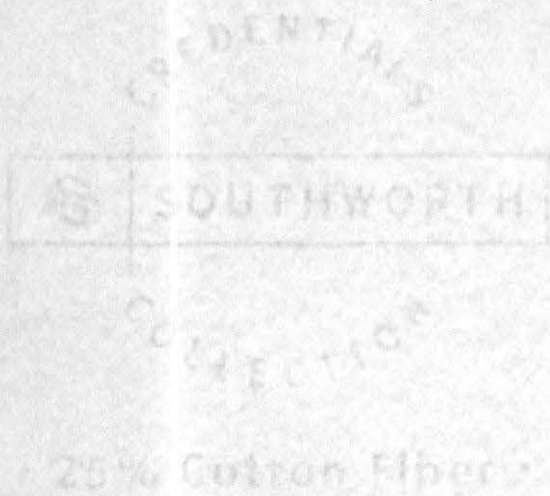
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My thesis explores the ecotone of ecocriticism and phenomenology, focusing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as an interpretive framework for ecocritical theory. I examine the way nonhuman agency is portrayed in literature (Sharon Olds' "The Underlife," Octavia Butler's Dawn, and Ursula K. Le Guin's "Newton's Sleep"). Central to this exploration is the question of the language of the nonhuman world. I draw on Merleau-Ponty and ecofeminist literary theory to articulate an understanding of nonhuman language as intercorporeality. Using Merleau-Ponty's concept of "gestural language," I examine how the "mute world" speaks through the dialectic of interrogation enacted between human and nonhuman subjects, and inquire into the implications of embodied knowledge for environmental justice. It is my hope that the conversation between Merleau-Ponty and these authors will resonate and enrich the reading of each, and articulate an understanding of human embeddedness in the more-than-human world.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship [. . .]. This can happen only if my hand [. . .] takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible.

In this thesis I draw together the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty with works of environmental literature to explore the question of nonhuman voice and agency in the context of ecocriticism, a field of literary theory that focuses on all aspects of the relationship between humans and nature.¹ In his philosophy, Merleau-Ponty affirmed human embeddedness in the more-than-human world,² using the resonant term “the Flesh” to describe both the incarnation of the human subject and the fabric of existence. His phenomenological investigation of embodied experience undermines mind/body and subject/object dualisms in favor of a relationship he described as “chiasm” – an intertwining of our flesh with the flesh of the world, erasing the dichotomy of human/nature in favor of a common fabric or tissue of existence. Merleau-Ponty also

¹ Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” Introduction, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) xviii.

theorized that language is intertwined with and has its roots in the sensual life-world. In his concept of “gestural language,” Merleau-Ponty places words on a continuum with bodily gestures and includes the signing systems of nonhuman agents within the realm of language. Thus, not only does Merleau-Ponty undermine the conceptual dualisms of mind/ body and human/nature, his work also suggests that through our bodies we are already in conversation with the more-than-human world that envelopes us. In drawing together Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical reflections with environmental literature, I hope to investigate the horizon opened by this dialogic relationship enacted between the embodied human subject and the more-than-human world, and to articulate an understanding of nonhuman agency and language made possible by this ontology.

The writers I have chosen for this conversation – Sharon Olds, Octavia Butler, and Ursula K. Le Guin – blend vivid description with ethical and philosophical reflection about the human place in the more-than-human world. Through poetry and fiction, their works pose questions about epistemology, nonhuman agency, embodiment and the sacred. Each author undermines mind/body dualism and articulates a new ontology, one in which the nonhuman finds space to emerge as a subject. In these texts, the nonhuman agent is communicative and has a voice. The alien Oankali of Butler’s *Dawn* speak in their own and human languages, and communicate through a literal chiasm of the flesh. The nonhuman agents of Olds’s “The Underlife” and Le Guin’s “Newton’s Sleep” speak through movement, and the human characters learn how to listen to them. It is my hope

² Many thanks to David Abram for this evocative phrase.

that the dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and these authors will resonate with and enrich the reading of each, offering visions of nonhuman agency and the intercorporeal conversation between human and nonhuman subjects.³

In this introduction, I provide a brief overview of the fields that have contributed to and inspired this exploration. This is a work of environmental humanities, combining the fields of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and environmental philosophy, as well as insights from religious studies. Within all of these fields theorists address the Cartesian split between body and mind, and the necessity of articulating a new ontology that collapses this primary dualism and the others that derive from it. I integrate the questions of nonhuman agency and language from these fields with Merleau-Ponty's work and insights from the emerging field of eco-phenomenology to suggest an interpretive framework for ecocriticism. In the context of the nondualistic ontology offered by Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the flesh, it is possible to understand intersubjectivity as intercorporeality, and this conversation between human and nonhuman as the basis for reimagining the human place in the more-than-human world.

ECOCRITICISM

Ecocriticism is a fairly new field within literary scholarship. The first sessions on ecocriticism at the Modern Language Association (MLA) were held in 1988,⁴ and in

³ I use the terms nonhuman and more-than-human interchangeably, but each term has a different emphasis. Nonhuman is used to indicate specific agents or individuals, while more-than-human indicates the world in which humans are embedded (and therefore is inclusive of the human as well).

1992 the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was formed.⁵ The emerging theoretical basis of this new discipline draws on literary theory, philosophy of science, natural science, environmental ethics and philosophy, deep ecology, feminist theory and cultural studies. This is an incomplete list, intended to signify the wide and interdisciplinary nature of the field. Ecocriticism is not limited to the study of texts that focus on nature.⁶ Rather, it is a critical hermeneutic for understanding the way in which the human place in the more-than-human world is articulated within literature, and the ethical implications of this conceptualization. Ecocriticism has sought to address the environmental crisis in a number of ways, through raising awareness, promoting conservation, articulating a sense of place in literature, forming connections between natural science and literary study, and elucidating the limits of humanism.⁷ In addition to literary analysis, central concerns within ecocriticism include the question of intrinsic value of nonhuman nature, critiques of anthropocentrism,

⁴ Laurence Coupe, ed., Introduction to Part IV, *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2000) by Coupe, 157.

⁵ Glotfelty xviii.

⁶ Scott Slovic, "Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine," *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (New York: Routledge, 2000) 160-1.

⁷ T.V. Reed, "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism," *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*, eds. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002) 148.

criticism of gendered interpretations of the landscape,⁸ and the concerns of environmental justice.⁹

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is a political movement that grows out of both civil rights and environmental concerns, focusing on grassroots activism against all forms of environmental racism.¹⁰ The landscapes that concern environmental justice are frequently urban, in contrast to the wilderness focus of the traditional environmental movement. Among the populations impacted by environmental racism are urban people of color, migrant workers, and Indigenous peoples. The concerns of environmental justice have served to critique the preoccupation of the mainstream environmental movement with the landscapes and issues of white, middle-class populations. The field of ecocriticism, paralleling developments in the environmental movement, is shifting from a focus on the canon of largely white and male “nature writers” to a more diverse and challenging set of texts and concerns.¹¹ In this thesis, I seek to contribute to the growing field of environmental justice ecocriticism through integration of questions of

⁸ See Louise H. Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) and Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

⁹ Reed 148-9.

¹⁰ Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., Introduction, *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002) 4.

¹¹ Reed 145.

race, class, and gender in my analysis, and through the literary works I have chosen to bring into conversation.

PHENOMENOLOGY

As the field of ecocriticism expands, there has been a growing interest in the potential contributions of phenomenology.¹² First articulated by Edmund Husserl in the early 1900s,¹³ "[p]henomenology takes its starting point in a return to the 'things' or 'matters' themselves, that is, the world as we experience it."¹⁴ Phenomenology challenges the dualisms of mind/body and immanent/transcendent experience of reality as articulated by Descartes and carried through the philosophical traditions of both intellectualism and empiricism.¹⁵ However, Husserl maintained the self as transcendental ego, separable from the body.¹⁶ In contrast, his student Merleau-Ponty insisted on the

¹² Examples of this work include Louise Westling, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World" *New Literary History* 30:4 (1999): 855-875; Leonard M. Scigaj, "Reveling in the Referential Flux: Involution and Merleau-Ponty's Flesh of the Visible in Pattian Rogers," *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, eds. John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000) 333-349; Laura Doyle, "The Body Unbound: A Phenomenological Reading of the Political in *A Room of One's Own*," *To the Lighthouse*, *Virginia Woolf: Out of Bounds*, Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, eds. Jessica Berman and Jane Goodman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001) 129-139; Justine Dymond, "'The Outside of Its Inside and the Inside of Its Outside': Phenomenology in *To the Lighthouse*," *Virginia Woolf: Out of Bounds*, Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, eds. Jessica Berman and Jane Goodman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001) 140-4.

¹³ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 35-6.

¹⁴ Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, "Eco-Phenomenology: An Introduction," *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds. Brown and Toadvine, SUNY Series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) xi.

¹⁵ M.C. Dillon, Chapter One: "The Cartesian Origins of Empiricism and Intellectualism," *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 9-34.

¹⁶ Abram, *Spell* 45.

embodied mind, making the lived body the subject of experience in his earlier works, including the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and developing this into the concept of "the Flesh" in *The Visible and the Invisible*.¹⁷

Merleau-Ponty

In his work *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, M.C. Dillon argues that through the course of his works *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty advances two linked theses, one epistemological and the other ontological: "[t]he epistemological thesis of the primacy of perception and its correlate, the ontological thesis of the primacy of phenomena."¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty's work can be understood as a critical response to the "Cartesian fallacy," in which abstraction is accorded greater ontological authority than perceptual experience.¹⁹ In contrast, Merleau-Ponty offers an understanding of thought arising from primordial perceptual experience and the body intertwined with the world in the "Chiasm" through the element of the "Flesh," rejecting the split between mind and body. Merleau-Ponty's critique of Cartesian dualism and insights into the embodiment of mind are supported by the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in cognitive linguistics and philosophy.²⁰ Dillon writes that Merleau-Ponty's later work on the Flesh, as expressed in his final work *The Visible*

¹⁷ David Abram, "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth," *Environmental Ethics* 10 (Summer 1988): 103, 109.

¹⁸ Dillon 51.

¹⁹ Dillon 50.

and the Invisible, holds the potential to move phenomenology (and all of Western philosophy) beyond this splitting of reality.²¹

Flesh

Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the Flesh and the Chiasm are complex and not fully articulated, as Merleau-Ponty died while composing *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this thesis, I seek to highlight those aspects of his philosophy that seem most significant in the context of ecocriticism, but this is by no means a complete or final interpretation. The concepts of Flesh, Chiasm, and related terms are still widely debated among scholars, and, as David Abram notes, Merleau-Ponty did not apply his emerging philosophy to the questions of nonhuman agency, subjectivity, or language.

In Chapter 4 of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty speaks of the Flesh through a series of negatives. The Flesh is not matter or spirit and does not fit the categories of material or spiritual.²² Twice he states that the Flesh has no name in philosophy.²³ It is a new way of thinking, and requires a new way of speaking. Merleau-Ponty therefore created a vocabulary to attempt to express these concepts.

²⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) 4-5.

²¹ Dillon 35 -7.

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis, Ed. Claude Lefort, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 138-139.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 139, 147.

In seeking to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the flesh, this shift in his vocabulary is significant. In the pages of "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," a resonant cluster of words, images and metaphors emerges. Repeated words include "fabric," "element," "touch," "tangible," "tissue," "thickness," and "depth."²⁴ The flesh is "a sort of incarnate principle."²⁵ In this description, Merleau-Ponty employs synaesthetic terms for the flesh, emphasizing both touch and sight, and uses bodily metaphors, particularly those of connective tissue. In the context of this new vocabulary, the flesh emerges as "an 'element' of Being" out of which we emerge and in which we are immersed, and through which we are connected to and inseparable from the more-than-human world.²⁶ As Abram describes it: "both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*."²⁷

Merleau-Ponty draws on the language of sacramental theology to express his understanding of the flesh. Words such as "flesh," "body," "communion," and "incarnation" invoke the Eucharist – the ritual in Catholic practice where the sacred and ordinary meet in the embodied act of eating bread and wine that is at the same time the body of Christ. This analogy was made explicit in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he compares perception to the Eucharistic ritual:

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Chapter 4 "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," VI, 130-155.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, VI 139.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, VI 139.

[j]ust as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion.²⁸

This language suggests an understanding of the sacred by extending the language of sacrament from the ritual of the Eucharist to all aspects of embodied existence. There is no separation for him between the sacred and profane, between matter and spirit.

Merleau-Ponty's nondualistic ontology permeates his concept of the flesh. The human subject is not matter inhabited by an incorporeal soul, but rather, our subjectivity or sentience is contiguous with the flesh of the world, and that flesh includes both visible and invisible dimensions. We are flesh that is self-sensing, but our ability to perceive and to think is dependent upon, rather than independent from, our bodily existence. Our capacity for thought is not something that ontologically separates us from the world,²⁹ but rather, draws us back into the world through the chiasm: "every thought known to us occurs to a flesh. Once again, the flesh we are speaking of is not matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body [. . .]."³⁰ In the chiasm, our sentient flesh folds back upon the flesh of the world in the act of

²⁷ Abram, *Spell* 67. Emphasis in original.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) 212.

²⁹ Dillon 106; Abram, *Spell* 47-9, and Chapter 3: "The Flesh of Language" *Spell* 73-92.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 146.

perception. For Merleau-Ponty, our bodies arise from and are embedded in the flesh of the world, and this chiasmic relationship is the origin of thought, language, and the possibility of intersubjectivity.³¹ As David Abram explains: “[. . .] this silent or wordless dance [is] always already going on – this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.”³²

Chiasm and Intercorporeality

In affirming the body as the site of knowledge, and the inseparability of body and world as flesh, Merleau-Ponty does not collapse the world into the self or vice versa. The chiasm is a “crisscrossing”³³ in which the human body-subject that is not identical to the world folds back on it and is able to perceive it.³⁴ It is by virtue of the difference or separation of the body that experience and perception are possible. While the body is the means of entry into the relationship of perception, the thickness of the body also separates the human subject from the world: “at the same time that we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body [. . .] it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.”³⁵ Ted Toadvine critiques the use of the metaphor of “kinship-with-nature” and warns against collapsing the nonhuman world into

³¹ Abram, *Spell* 44, 47.

³² Abram, *Spell* 53.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 133.

³⁴ Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision: A Proposal for the Completion of The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000) 34.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 135.

the human through the concept of kinship into a monism.³⁶ The communication or communion enabled through the flesh should not be interpreted as identification, but rather experience that is made possible by difference.³⁷

As flesh that is sentient and self-sensing we are able to enter into the flesh of the world through our bodies and thus into a relationship of intersubjectivity. Dillon argues that “intercorporeality” is a more accurate term, “because the problem of other minds is really a problem of other animate organisms: at the most basic levels, human communion is a communion of flesh and not a relation between isolated subjects.”³⁸ Merleau-Ponty writes that just as one hand touches another and feels itself touched and is both subject and object,³⁹ this reversibility is possible between the human subject and the things of the world by virtue of their joining through the flesh:

Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave [. . .] this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same ‘consciousness’ the primordial definition of sensibility, and as soon as we rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient. [. . .] which, laterally, makes the organs of my body communicate and founds transitivity from one body to another.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ted Toadvine, “The Primacy of Desire and its Ecological Consequences,” *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, SUNY Series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 139-40, 149.

³⁷ Low 34.

³⁸ Dillon 122.

³⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 101.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, VI 142-3.

It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's concept of intersubjectivity as the communion between bodies rather than sharing in human consciousness offers a way to enter into conversation with nonhuman agents. In their work *Eco-Phenomenology*, Ted Toadvine and Charles S. Brown write: "[p]henomenology is set apart from other theoretical methods by its unique capacity for bringing to expression, rather than silencing, our relationship with nature and the experience of value rooted in this relation."⁴¹

Phenomenology can contribute to a theoretical grounding for ecocriticism through its careful attention to lived experience, grounding of knowledge in embodiment, and bringing to expression the discourse that exists between our bodies and the other bodies that inhabit the more-than-human world. The interweaving of the fields of ecocriticism and eco-phenomenology has the potential to enrich and amplify both, and to provide an entry into a dialogic conversation with the more-than-human world. In Chapter 2, I will elaborate on the language of the nonhuman agent through Merleau-Ponty's concept of "gestural language," and his extension of the idea of language as that which, as Elizabeth Grosz writes, "gives voice to the world."⁴²

ECOFEMINISM

The field of ecocriticism and Merleau-Ponty share a theoretical orientation away from reification and dualism toward an embracing of human embeddedness, or

⁴¹ Brown and Toadvine xii.

⁴² Grosz 102.

incarnation, in the more-than-human world. Merleau-Ponty and the field of ecofeminism also share this critique of dualism deriving from Western philosophical, theological and scientific models. An area of feminist theory that has given particular attention to the linked conceptualization and oppression of women and nature, ecofeminism has extended its concerns to include all forms of oppression. This field has in turn influenced the critical orientation of ecocriticism, creating a subfield of ecofeminist literary theory that draws on both ecocriticism and ecofeminism to articulate its critiques of Western views of nature and to suggest new possibilities for negotiating the place of humanity in the more-than-human world. The critiques of ecofeminism link to and expand Merleau-Ponty's contributions through its connection of dualism to issues of justice.

In her work *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant combines ecofeminist analysis with historical research to explore the roots of the modern Western view of nature. Merchant argues that during the scientific and industrial revolutions of the early modern period the Western worldview shifted from conceptualizing nature as a living organism to that of nature as a machine. The increasing domination and exploitation of nature was sanctioned through this metaphoric shift, as well as through the association of nature with the female.⁴³ Humanity was increasingly distanced from nature, forming what Val Plumwood identifies as a series of "interrelated and mutually reinforcing" dualisms, including "culture/nature," "male/female," "subject/object," and "self/other."⁴⁴

⁴³ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980); see in particular Chapter 7, "Dominion over Nature" 164-191.

⁴⁴ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, *Feminism for Today* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 42-3.

According to this viewpoint, the systematic domination and subordination of nature and women is thus enabled and supported by a conceptual framework that divides the world into oppositional dualisms.⁴⁵

Significantly, it is during this time that René Descartes articulated his understanding of mind/body dualism that influenced both the intellectualist and empiricist schools of philosophical thought.⁴⁶ In his analysis of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, Dillon writes that the mind/body split is deeply embedded in Western philosophy and culture, tracing back to before Plato.⁴⁷ It is this dualism that Merleau-Ponty seeks to undermine in his epistemology and ontology of the Flesh.⁴⁸ Thus, both ecofeminism (and the related field within ecocriticism, ecofeminist literary theory) and Merleau-Ponty identify conceptual dualism and in particular, the mind/body split, as a fundamental problem in Western culture, and seek to offer alternative ways of understanding human embodiment and the relationship between humanity and the more-than-human world.

Ecofeminism also makes the important contribution of linking this hierarchical conceptual framework to the oppression of those human populations who are identified

⁴⁵ Rosemary Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998) 246. Also see Val Plumwood, Chapter 2 "Dualism: the Logic of Colonization," *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 41-68.

⁴⁶ Dillon, Chapter 1 "The Cartesian Origins of Intellectualism and Empiricism," *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* 9-34; Merchant 202-5.

⁴⁷ Dillon 34.

⁴⁸ Dillon 153-6.

with nature in the complex of oppositional dualisms.⁴⁹ People of color, Indigenous populations, and rural and urban working communities have been similarly exploited and oppressed through this system of hierarchical dualism:

[t]he category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. Thus racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic difference as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture.⁵⁰

The analyses of ecocriticism and ecofeminism therefore include not only issues of nonhuman nature and gender, but also of race and class oppression as it is expressed through landscapes of power. In this way, ecofeminist literary theory offers links to the concerns of environmental justice.

Ecofeminism's analysis of the linkages between devaluation of the body, the female, and people of color illuminates an important consequence of Merleau-Ponty's work. Merleau-Ponty affirmed the body as the site of knowledge and as inseparable from the mind or spirit. He specifically argued against the mind/body split of Cartesianism and critiqued the schools of intellectualism and empiricism on this basis in both *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. His radically nondualistic ontology and correlated affirmation of embodied knowledge has, therefore, the potential to undermine the series of conceptual dualisms identified by Plumwood and

⁴⁹ Tong 246.

⁵⁰ Plumwood, *Feminism* 4.

other ecofeminists, and thus has implications for environmental justice. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz notes that “Merleau-Ponty has always seen his work in opposition to and as an attempt to destabilize the structure of binary oppositions dominating so much of Western thought.”⁵¹ This destabilization of binaries and articulation of nondualist ontology underlies the literary analysis in this thesis. In Chapter 4, “Transgression,” I seek to develop the connection between nondualist ontology and environmental justice in my discussion of Octavia Butler’s work, *Dawn*.

Ecofeminist Literary Theory

Ecofeminist literary theory builds on this critique of the interconnection of oppressions in its analysis of texts, with a particular interest in language. Patrick Murphy has posed the important question of how we can listen to and integrate the voice of the non-human into our texts:

just as the self enters into language and the use of *parole*, so too does the “other” enter into language and have the potential, as does any entity, to become a “speaking subject,” although centripetal structures and cultural forces hinder such a realization. The implications of this “other” as speaking subject need to be conceptualized as including more than humans [. . .]. The pivotal questions here will be the degree to which language is recognized as one type of sign system, the degree to which volition is assumed as a prerequisite for becoming a speaking subject, and the degree to which the other speaking subjects who do not use the *parole* of human beings can “speak” in a sign system that can be understood by humans.⁵²

⁵¹ Grosz 93.

⁵² Patrick D. Murphy, “Ground, Pivot, Motion: Ecofeminist Theory, Dialogics, and Literary Practice,” *Hypatia* 6.1 (Spring 1991): 151. Emphasis in original.

In this passage, Murphy challenges many assumptions based in Western anthropocentric thinking, including the privileging of human language over other forms of communication, and the prerequisite of sentience and volition in granting the possibility of agency. The dialogical, communicative relationship proposed by Murphy has ethical implications. It opens the possibility for the inclusion not only of the *rights* of nonhuman nature in human decision making – a type of thinking that can be critiqued as extensionist – but calls for the more radical move to listen and respond to the *voice* of nonhuman nature. Within extensionism, humans assign value to the nonhuman by virtue of its similarity to the human,⁵³ and this ethical construct therefore retains an anthropogenic, if not anthropocentric, basis for ethical decision making.⁵⁴ In contrast, listening to the voice of the nonhuman, and recognizing its agency and subjectivity, enables a transformation of the relationship between humans and nature to one of conversation, and thus provides a new basis for ethical thinking and decision making.

Listening to the voice of the nonhuman also holds the potential to transform the human sense of self and humanity's place in the world. Val Plumwood calls this a “decentering” of the human subject.⁵⁵ This transformation of the human sense of self and place in the world is shown in each of the works of literature discussed in this thesis. These authors do not turn to nature as a nostalgic escape from culture, but rather

⁵³ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Environmental Philosophies (New York: Routledge, 2002) 167.

⁵⁴ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 169; Cary Wolfe, Introduction, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) xi-xii. (Wolfe uses the language of “humanism” rather than “anthropocentrism”).

⁵⁵ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 169.

interrogate the chiasms of self/other, nature/culture, and matter/spirit to critique Western anthropocentrism and articulate a nondualistic ontology. Their portraits of human-nonhuman interaction and mutual transformation exemplify what Val Plumwood calls a “dialogical interspecies ethics.”⁵⁶ In this analysis, I have turned to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty as a theoretical basis for the articulation of human/nature intertwining, nonhuman subjectivity and language, and the undermining of hierarchical dualisms through the articulation of a nondualistic ontology.

NONHUMAN AGENCY

While Merleau-Ponty affirmed the intertwining of the body and the flesh of the world, he did not specifically advance a thesis of nonhuman agency.⁵⁷ However, in the metamorphosis of Merleau-Ponty’s terminology from “lived-body” in *The Phenomenology of Perception* to “Flesh,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, David Abram believes that “if we follow closely Merleau-Ponty’s final writings we will begin to suspect that there are *other* sentient entities in the biosphere – indeed, that each species, by virtue of its own carnal structure has its own unique sentience or ‘chiasm’ with the flesh of the world.”⁵⁸ Abram acknowledges that although this movement to include the embodied subjectivity of animals was not accomplished in Merleau-Ponty’s final work (which was interrupted by his death), fragments of the working notes refer to the need to

⁵⁶ Plumwood, Chapter 8: “Towards a Dialogical Interspecies Ethics” 167-195.

⁵⁷ Westling, “Insurpassable Richness of Being,” Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment – UK, Bretton Hall, Leeds University (September 2002) 15.

⁵⁸ Abram, “Voice” 112. Emphasis in original.

move beyond humanism, and to refuse ontological distinctions between God, humanity, and the animal world.⁵⁹ Abram speculates that Merleau-Ponty, as a “committed humanist,” needed more time to work through the implications of his own thought.⁶⁰

Merleau-Ponty’s work gestures toward the possibility of nonhuman subjectivity. In articulating the thesis of intersubjectivity/intercorporeality and the body’s ongoing conversation with the perceptual world, Merleau-Ponty uses the active voice.⁶¹ According to Abram, Merleau-Ponty’s epistemology implicitly recognizes the world as animate through its understanding of perception as an ongoing reciprocity with the more-than-human world.⁶² Further, Abram extends Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of flesh and chiasm as a framework for the subjectivity of the more-than-human world:

[e]ach of us, in relation to the other, is both subject and object, sensible and sentient. Why, then, might this not also be the case in relation to another, nonhuman entity [. . .] why might not this “reversibility” of subject and object extend to every entity that I experience? Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity, does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any* visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me.⁶³

Abram argues therefore that extending Merleau-Ponty’s work to include nonhuman agency is consonant with his thinking as revealed in *The Visible and the Invisible* and his

⁵⁹ Abram, “Voice” 113.

⁶⁰ Abram, “Voice” 112-114.

⁶¹ Abram, *Spell* 55-6.

⁶² Abram, *Spell* 56.

⁶³ Abram, *Spell* 67. Emphasis in original.

working notes.⁶⁴ It is not possible to defend what Merleau-Ponty did not say. However, in the context of the emerging fields of ecocriticism and eco-phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's work holds the potential, as Abram argues, to extend our concept of subjectivity to all other inhabitants of the world by redefining the location of subjectivity from the transcendent intellect to the flesh.⁶⁵ Like Plumwood and Wolfe, Abram notes that this movement will require a decentering of the human subject through the acknowledgement that our carnal existence means that we exist as objects for others, both human and nonhuman. In bringing Merleau-Ponty into conversation with authors who depict this kind of post-humanist decentering of the human subject, I hope to open a space to listen to the voice of the nonhuman world.

The Question of Voice

The question of the voice of the nonhuman world is a nascent one in the humanities. In Chapter 2, I outline the silencing of nature that occurred during the advent of modern science and mechanist philosophy. Carolyn Merchant's classic study, *The Death of Nature*, describes in detail this shift in the social and cultural construction of nature, and the capitalist and exploitative projects the new ideology of a deanimistic, objectified world served. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram observes that being deaf to the voice of nature is specifically a Western cultural phenomenon.⁶⁶ Due to

⁶⁴ Abram, "Voice" 113.

⁶⁵ Abram, *Spell* 45-7.

⁶⁶ Abram, *Spell* 24-29.

historical and ideological forces, the nonhuman world has been assumed within much of Western thought to be without subjectivity, agency, or voice. What the work of Merchant, Abram and others suggests is that the assumption that nature is without voice is a social and cultural construction.

In this thesis I bring together some of the many theorists who are seeking a way to listen and respond to the voice of the nonhuman world, in opposition to those constructions of knowledge that assume nature is inert. Within this work, the concept of voice is metaphorical, gesturing to a new way of understanding and interacting with the nonhuman world as agent and subject. Donna Haraway's post-structuralist interrogation of the construction of scientific knowledge in her essay "Situated Knowledges" calls for a rethinking of the categories of subject and object in scientific research, an acknowledgement of the agency of objects (specifically, the nonhuman and the human body), and a reconstruction of knowledge as conversation.⁶⁷ The metaphor of knowledge as conversation suggests a destabilizing of the construction of the human subject and the animal object in favor of understanding the creation of knowledge as an encounter between subjects.⁶⁸

Cary Wolfe notes that "[a] veritable explosion of work in areas such as cognitive ethology and field ecology has called into question our ability to use the old saws of anthropocentrism (language, tool use, the inheritance of cultural behaviors, and so on) to

⁶⁷ Donna Haraway, Chapter 9 "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 183-201.

⁶⁸ Haraway, *Simians* 197-8.

separate ourselves once and for all from animals [. . .].”⁶⁹ This movement of post-humanist theory is just emerging, and the concept of the “voice” of the nonhuman world is similarly nascent and undefined, as it involves a transformation in our assumptions about the nonhuman and a reconstruction of our knowledge practices. In her proposal for a communicative interspecies ethics, Val Plumwood argues that we need to extend our understanding of communication beyond “the narrow sense of ‘rational’ verbal or symbolic discourse.”⁷⁰ Plumwood instead suggests that within a dialogical methodology, all others (human and nonhuman) need to be assumed to be “potentially communicative.”⁷¹

The metaphor of the “voice” of the nonhuman world is emergent in the field of environmental literature as well. Literary texts have begun to portray the nonhuman as agent, and ecocritical theorists to call for a recognition and inclusion of the nonhuman voice into literary texts. Within this endeavor authors who tell these stories are also theorists. In the three literary texts discussed in this thesis, human characters seek to listen to the voice of the nonhuman and to enter into conversation, but do not claim knowledge of the nonhuman’s subjectivity. Like the speaker in Sharon Olds’s “The Underlife,” Butler’s Lilith, and the colonists of Spes in Le Guin’s “Newton’s Sleep,” we are just at the beginning of this conversation, and we do not even know the language we need to speak or how to hear this voice: this is an opening to a new way of thinking about

⁶⁹ Wolfe xi.

⁷⁰ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 189.

⁷¹ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 190.

the nonhuman. In this project, I hope to offer Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in conversation with these literary texts as one way of elucidating the voice of the nonhuman.

OVERVIEW

In this thesis I weave together three related strands of Merleau-Ponty's thought: flesh, gestural language, and intercorporeality. Ecocriticism seeks to elucidate the relationship between humans and nature, and Merleau-Ponty's focus on human incarnation in the world offers a rich understanding of the linkages, rather than dualisms, between human and nature, mind and body, and human and animal.

In Chapter 2, I outline Merleau-Ponty's concept of gestural language, and its potential contributions to ecocriticism. Gestural language is embodied and makes possible a dialogic conversation with nonhuman agents, undermining the exclusive claims of humanity to language. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy also offers a different ground for ethical reflection through the possibility of interspecies dialogue suggested by our kinship through the flesh and through the carnal phenomena of gestural language. This chiasmic relationship makes possible the project of listening, responding to, and being transformed by the nonhuman world. I use gestural language as an interpretive framework to understand how the 'voice' of the nonhuman is depicted in each work of environmental literature as called for by a series of ecocritical theorists and others in the environmental humanities. These movements of listening, responding, and transformation are depicted in Olds's "The Underlife" (Chapter 3), which exemplifies

and extends the relationship of chiasm and intersubjectivity between the human and more-than-human worlds as described by Merleau-Ponty.

Chapters 4 and 5 also depict this movement of response and transformation, and give insight into potential resistances to this process. In these chapters I explore the connections between Merleau-Ponty's undermining of mind/body dualism and the implications of this for issues of environmental justice. In conversation with Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, I seek to show that the nondualistic ontology articulated by Merleau-Ponty not only undermines the dualism of mind and body, but also between human and nonhuman, and the conceptual structures that support the oppression of people of color through their association with a devalued or even demonized nature. Butler's novel also amplifies Merleau-Ponty's thinking through its complication of the chiasmic embrace between self and world, blurring the boundaries between species in ways that some of her human characters find menacing. Ursula K. Le Guin's story of utopia, environmental racism and the construction of scientific knowledge complete this exploration, and illuminates the complexity of the human/nature intertwining suggested by Merleau-Ponty.

CHAPTER 2:

VOICE

We shall have to follow more closely this transition from the mute world to the speaking world.

Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible.

At the center of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is the living body in the life-world, flesh in the Flesh of the world.⁷² Merleau-Ponty offers an understanding of thought arising from primordial perceptual experience and the body intertwined with the world in the Chiasm through the element of the Flesh: "[t]ruth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man,' or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."⁷³ According to Merleau-Ponty, all of our knowledge is derived from and dependent upon the world: "[a]ll knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception."⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty rejected the fundamental dualism of mind and body arising from the Cartesian tradition of Western philosophy, and extended his theory of embodiment to include the body of language, affirming the origins of language in the sensual life-world "[i]t is the error of the semantic philosophies to close

⁷² Low 24.

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, Preface, *POP* xi.

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 207.

up language as if it spoke only of itself: language lives only from silence; everything we cast to the others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave.”⁷⁵

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language breaks from deconstructionist theories that argue that signifier is arbitrarily related to what is signified, and remove both from all reference beyond themselves to the world.⁷⁶ Just as Merleau-Ponty offers a philosophy that moves beyond the dualisms of mind and body, he offers a non-dualistic understanding of language. This is an intriguing theory of language for the discipline of ecocriticism, which is centrally concerned with the relationship between the human and more-than-human worlds as expressed in language and literature. This understanding of language as carnal, gestural, and embedded in the life-world offers the possibility of entering into conversation with the more-than-human world through intercorporeal engagement.

There has been far more written about Merleau-Ponty and language than can be included in this discussion. My exploration of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the embodiment of language is specifically focused on the project of listening to and entering into conversation with the more-than-human world as a potential contribution to ecocritical theory. I begin with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of gestural language as a signing system that includes both human and nonhuman languages from the chapter “The Body as Expression, and Speech” in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). I then explore his concept of the chiasm of the body of language and the voice of the mute

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, VI 126.

⁷⁶ Low 17-8, 26.

world as elaborated in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). I do not attempt to trace the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's dialogue with and singular interpretation of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory through *The Prose of the World* and *Signs*.⁷⁷ While Merleau-Ponty chose not to complete *The Prose of the World*, elements of this work were integrated into *The Visible and the Invisible*, which remained unfinished as well.⁷⁸ Thus, unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language remains in an unresolved form. In spite of its unfinished state, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language as gestural and intertwined with the more-than-human world opens a way to elucidate the voice of the nonhuman. I therefore seek to follow the paths of Merleau-Ponty's thought and to reflect on its significance as a means of constructing a dialogue with the nonhuman world for the discipline of ecocriticism.

SILENCE

In his essay "Nature and Silence" in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Christopher Manes called for a post-humanist criticism that would be capable of understanding the world as a speaking subject: "we must contemplate not only learning of a new ethics, but a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post-humanist perspective."⁷⁹ Manes explicitly connects this

⁷⁷ See James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, Contemporary Social Theory, (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1985).

⁷⁸ Low 3-4.

⁷⁹ Christopher Manes, "Nature and Silence," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) 17.

silencing of nature to social practices. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of power, reason, and the privileging of certain types of speech, Manes articulates the linkages between the silencing of nature in Western culture and the exploitation of the nonhuman world.⁸⁰

Manes attributes this silencing of nature to the advent of literacy and more particularly to the Christian tradition of exegesis. Moving from an anagogical reading of the biblical text to an anagogical reading of the natural world, Christianity enclosed the more-than-human world within the metaphor of 'the book of nature.' In this hermeneutical framework, the things of nature are reduced to "*littera* – signs that served as an occasion for discovering the deeper realms of meaning underlying the forms of the physical world,"⁸¹ thus occasioning a split between surface and underlying reality, privileging transcendent interpretation over immanent experience. Rather than an animate world of agents and subjects, the world became interpreted as the passive icon of a transcendent God. Manes also links this trend to the Renaissance notion of the Great Chain of Being that placed humanity as the highest of earth's life forms, ontologically distinct from other creatures.⁸² In spite of post-Darwinian scientific and evolutionary theory that understands humanity as merely another species, this privileging of human language and reason has continued into the present. This prejudicial thinking is evident

⁸⁰ Manes 16-17.

⁸¹ Manes 19. Emphasis in original.

⁸² Manes 20-21.

in strands of environmental ethics as well⁸³ – for example, in the demand of sentience as a prerequisite for moral consideration.⁸⁴

In light of this history and the ongoing silencing of nature, Manes calls for the articulation of a new language that is capable of entering into dialogue with the nonhuman world. Manes regards Indigenous cultures, Deep Ecology, and the Western contemplative tradition as possible models for this discourse.⁸⁵ This call for dialogue is issued repeatedly through the environmental humanities. As noted in Chapter 1, ecofeminist literary theorist Patrick Murphy also calls for this recognition of the nonhuman as speaking subject, and for learning the *parole* of the nonhuman.⁸⁶ Karla Armbruster echoes this call in her essay “Speaking for Nature.” Like Manes, she highlights the inadequacy of those discourses that seek to speak *for* nature while failing to find a language to speak *with* nature, thus displaying the assumption that nature is incapable of speaking for itself.⁸⁷ According to Armbruster, this failure is evident in areas from literary theory to environmental ethics and advocacy to Western science.

Donna Haraway critiques the discourses of Western science on these grounds as well. Calling for an understanding of knowledge as “conversation,” Haraway argues that scientific research and knowledge must allow room for the agency of ‘objects’, including

⁸³ Manes 21-24.

⁸⁴ Gary Varner, “Sentientism,” *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Dale Jamieson, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, (MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2001) 192-203.

⁸⁵ Manes 24-6.

⁸⁶ Murphy, “Ground” 9.

⁸⁷ Karla Armbruster, “Speaking for Nature,” *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*, ed. Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998) 432-3.

“the agency of the world in knowledge” if it is to be “faithful” in its account of the world.⁸⁸ Haraway does not limit her critiques to the practice of Western science. While calling for a new practice that moves beyond the subject/object dualism of conventional scientific knowledge, she also censures those strands of ecofeminism that have rejected Western scientific knowledge.⁸⁹ Although she recognizes the socially constructed nature of all knowledge, Haraway argues that Western science still provides an important knowledge of the nonhuman world, as long as Western scientific knowledge is not confused with absolute knowledge: “[f]eminists have stakes in a successor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others’ practices of domination [. . .].”⁹⁰ Thus Western scientific knowledge can play a vital role in learning to speak with the nonhuman world, provided that we are willing to recognize the agency of objects in research.

As noted in Chapter 1, in the field of environmental philosophy both David Abram and Val Plumwood call for a recognition of nonhuman agency and a new understanding of what might constitute the voice of the nonhuman. Both philosophers suggest that this recognition of nonhuman agency and the possibility of dialogical conversation will require a new formulation of environmental ethics. All of these theorists thus call for a new language (or languages) that will enable us to speak with the

⁸⁸ Haraway, *Simians* 197-9.

⁸⁹ Haraway, *Simians* 186.

⁹⁰ Haraway, *Simians* 187.

nonhuman world. Since this possibility has not been acknowledged within the anthropocentrism of Western thought, we need to learn how to speak in this *parole*. Although Manes, Armbruster, and Abram each celebrate the knowledges of Indigenous cultures (and Haraway turns to the figure of Coyote to articulate her understanding of the agency of the nonhuman world), attempts by non-Indigenous theorists to adopt this way of knowing as a model can stray into the dangerous territory of cultural appropriation and primitivist nostalgia.

In seeking a language for discourse with the nonhuman world, it seems to me that the place we need to look is the nonhuman world itself. It is the nonhuman world that may be able to teach us how to enter into conversation. According to Merleau-Ponty, since we are flesh in the Flesh of the world, our bodies allow us entry into understanding of the world: “[b]etween the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship [. . .]. This can happen only if my hand [. . .] takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.”⁹¹ This will require both an epistemological and ontological⁹² humility from the human subject. We must take our place among the things of the world in order to move out of our self-imposed isolation and into dialogical conversation. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty provides one *parole* – the *parole* of embodied perception – for this conversation. Moving into conversation with the nonhuman world thus opens the

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, VI 133.

⁹² Manes 25.

possibility for a new basis from which to formulate an environmental ethics – one that grows out of the experience of and dialogue with the more-than-human world.⁹³

The repeated use of words and phrases like “silence” “voice” “knowledge as conversation” “speaking with” seem to indicate a convergence in these different disciplines – phenomenology, ecocriticism, feminist epistemology of science, ecofeminism – toward language as a metaphor for nonhuman agency and subjectivity, and our groping toward dialogue with and knowledge of the more-than-human world. Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of gestural language and intercorporeal communication offer a way to expand our understanding of language so as to include other signing systems, other *paroles*, within our concept of languages – and to begin to respond to, rather than silence, these voices.

EXPRESSION

In Chapter 6 “The Body as Expression, and Speech” of his early work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of gestural language:

it is not clear why my understanding of gestures should for the most part be confined to human ones. I do not ‘understand’ the sexual pantomime of the dog, still less of the cockchafer or the praying mantis. I do not even understand the expression of the emotions in primitive people or in circles too unlike the ones in which I move. [. . .] The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions

⁹³ Abram, *Spell* 69; Armbruster, “Speaking for Nature” 432.

discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his. [. . .] The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence in them. [. . .] It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things.'⁹⁴

In this passage, several important themes in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language emerge: language is embodied; meaning is revealed in the process of communication; and the world is communicative. Finally, in this excerpt, Merleau-Ponty explicitly extends his understanding of gestural language to include the signing systems of the animal world.

In the project of learning to listen to the voice of the nonhuman world, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of gestural language is illuminating. Gestural language is obscure if it is from another culture – the culture of another species, or the culture of a human population that is different from our own. Learning how to understand another's language is only revealed in process “through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others.” As we seek to learn how to speak with the nonhuman world, we will learn through engagement, through what Haraway calls the process of knowledge as a conversation.⁹⁵

According to Merleau-Ponty, gestural language is not the sole property of humans. Instead, a human language, expressed in a unified gestalt through the body and through words, is one language is a world that communicates “[t]his disclosure of an

⁹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 184-6.

⁹⁵ Haraway, *Simians* 198-9.

immanent or incipient significance in the living body extends, as we shall see, to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will disclose on all other 'objects' the miracle of expression."⁹⁶ Our understanding of the languages of other beings is based on our own bodily experience, and recognition of others' languages challenges the construction of the nonhuman world as object. Similarly, the human body is no longer an object, but a subject of experience. We learn through the experience of our bodies embedded in the world how to listen to and understand the gestural, embodied language of the world. When we seek to learn how to enter into dialogue with the nonhuman world, our guide is our flesh embedded in the flesh of the world.

With characteristic lucidity, David Abram summarizes Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the embodiment of language in Chapter 3 "The Flesh of Language" in his work *The Spell of the Sensuous*.⁹⁷ Abram notes that gestural language is carnal, fundamentally communicative, and rooted in the sensual lifeworld.⁹⁸ Abram identifies two important elements of this concept. Language, in Merleau-Ponty's understanding, cannot be understood apart from its lived dimension, that of speech (Merleau-Ponty adopts Saussure's term *la parole* to designate this lived and active form of language⁹⁹); and linguistic meaning is not arbitrarily related to words.¹⁰⁰ This latter contention

⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 197.

⁹⁷ Abram, Chapter 3, "The Flesh of Language," *Spell* 73-92.

⁹⁸ Abram, *Spell* 74-5.

⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 118.

¹⁰⁰ Abram, *Spell* 74-5.

distinguishes Merleau-Ponty from the majority of contemporary (deconstructionist) literary theorists¹⁰¹ and mainstream interpretations of Saussure. Most contemporary theory understands the relationship of signs/signifiers (words) to signified (concepts) as arbitrary. Signifiers are understood to derive their meaning not from the world, but through a negative relationship to other signifiers.

Merleau-Ponty, unsurprisingly, refuses this dualism of speech and language, meaning and words, signifier and signified. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, the link between language and meaning, and between language and the body, is explicit. Speech is “one of the possible uses of my body;”¹⁰² it is not “the envelope and clothing of thought”¹⁰³ any more than the body is the clothing of the soul. Speech is the body of thought in the world.¹⁰⁴

THE VOICES OF SILENCE

This understanding was even more fully articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this work, language is understood as the metamorphosis of meaning from the invisible into the body of language. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty enters into an extended comparison between the body and language. Language structures meaning just as the body structures perception. Language is not univocal, but is always

¹⁰¹ Abram, *Spell* 77.

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 180.

¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 182.

¹⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 182.

fluid and in process.¹⁰⁵ Douglas Low describes this movement from embodied perception to speech as a series of three chiasms. The first is the chiasm between the body and the world, which is the primordial source of meaning. The second chiasm is between language and the speaker.¹⁰⁶ Perception, bodily gesture, and words are meaningful gestures within the continuum of gestural language.

The final chiasm is that between the word and its meaning.¹⁰⁷ Merleau-Ponty speaks of a common “nervure” in which speech is possessed by signification, and “does not speak *of it*, but speaks *it*, or speaks *according to it*, or lets it speak and be spoken within me [. . .].”¹⁰⁸ Speech forms a chiasm between language and thought, word and meaning:¹⁰⁹ “[i]t is as though the visibility that animates the sensible world were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the body for that of language [. . .].”¹¹⁰ Language is also a body, a kind of flesh, that passes between the meaning and *la parole*.

In the final pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly refers to the idea of metamorphosis.¹¹¹ This metamorphosis “is always in virtue of the

¹⁰⁵ Low 92-3.

¹⁰⁶ Low 34.

¹⁰⁷ Low 34.

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, VI 118. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁹ Low 35.

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, VI 153.

¹¹¹ Mauro Carbone, “The Thinking of the Sensible,” *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of the Flesh*, eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) 121.

same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh."¹¹² In this description the three chiasms identified by Low are evident: the chiasm of body and world that gives rise to "mute perception;" the chiasm of speech and meaning; and the "sublimation" of the flesh of the world into the flesh of language. In the final lines of the text, Merleau-Ponty writes that this chiasm of language and the world are "two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth."¹¹³ Thus the relationship between language and the world is as intimate as that of my two hands touching, and it is through this chiasm of flesh and meaning that we gain access to knowledge of the world.

In this series of chiasms, it is the body's lived experience, the chiasm of the body and the world through the element of the Flesh, that is the source of language and meaning.¹¹⁴ Within this same understanding of Merleau-Ponty, David Abram argues that: "[i]f language is born of our carnal *participation* in world that already *speaks to us* at the most immediate level of sensory experience, then language does not belong to humankind but to the sensible world of which we are but a part."¹¹⁵ It is with this thought that "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" closes:

[i]n a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, VI 155.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, VI 155.

¹¹⁴ Low 35.

¹¹⁵ Abram, "Voice" 117. Emphasis in original.

of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests.¹¹⁶

Our own speaking derives from the world and may even have the potential to articulate this “mute world.”¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty gives us an entry into this conversation, and a way to theorize the relationship between language and the world. It is our flesh intertwined with the flesh of language and the flesh of the world that gives us entry into conversation with the nonhuman.

“TO LET THEM SPEAK, TO LISTEN IN”¹¹⁸

The effective, present, ultimate and primary being, the thing itself, are in principle apprehended in transparency through their perspectives, offer themselves therefore only to someone who wishes not to have them but to see them, not to hold them as with forceps, or to immobilize them as under the objective of a microscope, but to let them be and to witness to their continued being – to someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask for in return, the resonance they require, who follows their own movement, who is [. . .] but a question consonant with the porous being which it questions and from which it obtains not an *answer*, but a confirmation of its astonishment.¹¹⁹

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty began to create a new language and set of concepts to express what he had discovered through the chiasm. In the above passage he also suggests how we might enter into conversation with the nonhuman, through

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, VI 155.

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, VI 155.

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, VI 107.

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, VI 101-2. Emphasis in original.

opening a space in which the nonhuman can emerge as a speaking subject. We will learn only through entering into the style of being offered to us by the mute world. We need to accept that in the interrogation of perception, we are a question consonant with the world. We are flesh learning to sing; the things, the waves, and the forests teach us. Our language is “called forth by the voices of silence.”¹²⁰ It is important to speak of *voices* of the more-than-human world:

The predominance of vowels in one language, or of consonants in another, and constructional and syntactical systems, do not represent so many arbitrary conventions for the expression of one and the same idea, but several ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises and in the last resort to live it. Hence the *full* meaning of a language is never translatable into another.¹²¹

This expresses the need noted by Christopher Manes for epistemological and ontological humility on the part of those of us who seek to understand the language of the more-than-human world. Extending Merleau-Ponty’s insights into human languages to other species, we can see that there are many languages, born out of the particular chiasm of the thing and the world,¹²² just as myriad human cultures have evolved different languages. In this multivocal, dialogical world, any way in which we seek to learn the language of another being will be incomplete. They will always transcend our knowledges, whether scientific or linguistic. We will need many stories, and many ways of speaking. In the following chapters, I will apply Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of gestural

¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 126-7.

¹²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 187. Emphasis in original.

¹²² Abram, “Voice” 112.

language and the chiasms of body and world, perception and language, and language and meaning as an ecocritical theory with the goal of listening to the voices of the more-than-human world. As noted in Chapter 1, the intersubjectivity (intercorporeality) between human and nonhuman made possible through the chiasm of our flesh with the flesh of the world is our entry into conversation. With this understanding, attention to the gestural language of the nonhuman world can be understood as an invitation to dialogical conversation. In the following chapters, I seek to illuminate the ways in which Sharon Olds, Octavia Butler, and Ursula K. Le Guin enact this movement of creating a “hollow space” in their texts where the nonhuman finds room to emerge as agent and speaking subject.

CHAPTER 3:

INVITATION

The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence in them. [. . .] It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things.'

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception.

A growing chorus within environmental studies and ecocriticism has called for the inclusion of urban landscapes in our understanding and imagination of nature and the wild.¹²³ This discourse seeks to expose and undermine the continuing nature/culture dualism enshrined within the dichotomization of wilderness and city, explicitly linking this cultural construction to the degradation of urban environments and environmental justice concerns. William Cronon articulates this call for recognition of nature in landscapes beyond those that reflect the Romantic sublime in his well-known essay "The Trouble with Wilderness." In his argument, Cronon makes the crucial connection between the cherishing of home landscapes and environmental degradation:

¹²³ Examples of this movement include Michael Bennett and David W. Teague, eds., *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1990); Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, eds., *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Joni Adamson, Mei Mei

[i]f we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care about their suffering or fate. [. . .] Any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature – as wilderness tends to do – is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior.¹²⁴

Gary Snyder notes that the “wilderness” preserved in public lands is fragmented:

[b]ut wildness is not limited to the 2 percent formal wilderness areas. Shifting scales, it is everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. [. . .] Exquisite complex beings in their energy webs inhabiting the fertile corners of the urban world in accord with the rule of wild systems [. . .].¹²⁵

Snyder thus calls for the recognition of the wild in suburban and urban landscapes, in the food we eat, and within the porous boundaries of the human body that is itself an ecosystem. Both authors exemplify the call for redefinition of the concepts of natural and unnatural, for movement away from the dichotomization of wilderness and city, and a more nuanced and wide understanding of what is wild.

In this essay I explore Sharon Olds’s poem “The Underlife” as an intersection of the urban wild, eco-phenomenology and nonhuman agency. As the poem’s speaker (referred to as ‘Olds’ for convenience’s sake, though this does not imply an identification of the author with the speaker) journeys through the underworld of the subway to the

Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002).

¹²⁴ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996) 84-87.

¹²⁵ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990) 14-15.

intimate space of her bed, she also journeys from a place of revulsion against to intersubjectivity with the nonhuman world. She recognizes the presence of the wild in the city and in her life (through the agents of a rat, a roach, and cancer) and moves into a place of dialogue with the nonhuman world that speaks in gestural language. Sharon Olds's poem is important for the discourse of urban ecocriticism in its recognition of the nature in cities and of the wild that inhabits our daily urban lives: her transformational experiences take place in the subway and in an apartment, with the despised elements of the wild that survive in cities – rats, roaches, and disease. This poem deliberately avoids classic nature writing tropes such as the sublime, the pastoral, or nature as teacher, rejecting the necessity of 'wilderness' for the existence and experience of wildness.

This distinction between 'wild' and 'wilderness' is also significant in understanding Merleau-Ponty's concept of "brute" or "wild" being.¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the mute, primordial, wild, brute being articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible*¹²⁷ is not confined to wilderness but is rather a statement about incarnate being that moves beyond cultural dualisms and is thus can be valuable in reinterpreting our relationship to the more-than-human world. Merleau-Ponty writes that we live in wild or brute being: "This environment of brute existence and essence is not something mysterious: we never quit it, we have no other environment."¹²⁸ We are joined to this brute existence through the element of the Flesh. It is through our bodies (flesh in the

¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, VI 110.

¹²⁷ See Merleau-Ponty, Chapter 3, "Interrogation and Intuition." VI 105-129.

¹²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, VI 116-7.

Flesh of the world) that we are able to enter into conversation with things. Conversation and communication clearly imply intersubjectivity; and as they are enacted by the body and the flesh of the world, Dillon suggests that a better word might be intercorporeality (see Chapter 1).¹²⁹

It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty's concept of the Flesh does not imply a reduction to physicalism or matter. In his explication of Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjectivity, Dillon notes that intersubjectivity is based in Merleau-Ponty's ontology that refuses both Cartesian solipsism and physicalist reductionism: "[. . .] the ontology that grants being only to mutually exclusive domains of unextended thought and unthinking extension must be rejected, and that we must learn to understand that we are flesh."¹³⁰ Intersubjectivity for Merleau-Ponty is based on the rejection of the fundamental dualism of Western thought (philosophical and theological) between matter and spirit, yet avoids monism through its recognition of the alterity of the other.¹³¹

In this paper I will seek to illuminate the nonhuman agency portrayed in Sharon Olds's poem "The Underlife" by bringing it into conversation with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the intertwining of the Flesh and the mute world that speaks through the dialectic of interrogation enacted by perception.¹³² In seeking to understand how the wild is experienced in the city and how the body is itself wild, I will draw on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty as a potential theory for understanding nonhuman

¹²⁹ Dillon 122.

¹³⁰ Dillon 128.

¹³¹ Dillon 166.

language as intercorporeality. In writing about the body's entry into the nonhuman world full of agents, subjectivities and presences, Merleau-Ponty does not turn to wilderness landscapes or images of the sublime, but rather focuses on the discourse that always exists between the body and the world, a discourse not limited to specific places.¹³³

In this conversation, Sharon Olds illuminates the connections between the ontological collapse of spirit/matter dualism with openness to nonhuman agency. Recognition of nonhuman agency entails sacrifice of the ideology of human exceptionalism, whether this is based in the archaic belief that only humans have souls, or the more recent privileging of human consciousness and language as the characteristics that supposedly distinguish us from the nonhuman world. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the corporeality of "gestural language" offers a way to begin conversation with nonhuman others who speak through different signing systems. As noted in Chapter 2, Merleau-Ponty explicitly extended his understanding of gestural language to include the nonhuman world.¹³⁴

The nonhuman world has a gestural, embodied language that is on a continuum with human language. Throughout his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, in particular the chapter "Interrogation and Intuition," Merleau-Ponty refers to the "mute experience"¹³⁵ that underlies our speaking. This world speaks "for those who have ears to

¹³² Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 101-2.

¹³³ Abram, *Spell* 49-53.

¹³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 184.

¹³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 88.

hear.”¹³⁶ It is through the phenomenology of perception that we learn how to hear this mute world speak: the corporeal language of the world presents us with a question through its embodied gestures, or movements, and we are invited to give them our attention, to move into perception as interrogation and conversation. It is through the body that we understand this corporeal language. Merleau-Ponty thus provides a way of understanding our conversation with the nonhuman world. We enter into the corporeal language of this conversation through our bodies that are flesh in the Flesh of the world.

A certain quality of attention is essential to intersubjectivity as described by Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty writes that sensation is “a form of communion.”¹³⁷ In dense and evocative language, Merleau-Ponty writes of perception as the openness of the body to the call of the world, as “sacrament,” as “spell,” as an entering into a “sympathetic relation” with mystery through abandonment and surrender.¹³⁸ In perception, we must “find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed.”¹³⁹ The question is “obscurely expressed” – expressed not in human language but in embodied, gestural language. We are invited into the conversation, and must find a way to incarnate our response through our bodies. Language is corporeal, and is an incarnate response. Sharon Olds’s poem, “The Underlife,” exemplifies this quality of attention that draws the human subject into conversation with the nonhuman other as subject, as the speaker responds to the embodied expression of the nonhuman inhabitants of her poem.

¹³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 155.

¹³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *POP*, 212.

¹³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *POP*, 212-14.

MATTER AND SPIRIT

Sharon Olds's work displays an ongoing effort to articulate an embodied subjectivity. Her poems struggle with the questions of body and spirit, of matter and the sacred. In her poem, "This," Olds articulates a kind of manifesto for matter: "so this is who I am, this body/ [. . .] if you/ want to know who I am, I am this, *this*." (17, 29-30)¹⁴⁰ This identification of herself with her body is the metaphysical ground from which Olds views the disintegration of her father's body by cancer in *The Father*, fifty-two poems narrating a journey toward death taken by the father and witnessed by his daughter. Throughout this work, Olds depicts her father's diseased body in concrete and exquisite detail. In the poems that narrate the moments of and following his death, Olds confronts the question of matter and spirit directly and repeatedly:

[. . .] he was
 alone – as if all we had cared about was his consciousness,
 this man who had so little consciousness, who was
 90% his body. I hated
 the way we were treating him like garbage, we would burn him, as if
 only the soul mattered. [. . .] (5-10)¹⁴¹

In these lines are not only the question of matter and spirit, but of the devaluation of the body in the context of Western and Christian culture. Olds rejects the dualism of this tradition, and moves into a theological understanding based in her bodily experience.

¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, VI 214.

¹⁴⁰ Sharon Olds, "This," *The Gold Cell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 63. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴¹ Sharon Olds, "The Dead Body," *The Father* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) 39.

In these poems, Olds follows her identification of herself with her body (“I am this, *this*”) with an identification of her father with his body. But this proves problematic: at the same time that Olds identifies her father with his body, the dead body is and is not her father. While affirming the interweaving of body and soul, matter and spirit, Olds refuses a reduction to physicalism. Merleau-Ponty provides as language for this understanding: he speaks of the way that the visible and invisible dimensions of existence are intertwined in the element of the Flesh – and like Olds he asks: “[. . .] if our union with the body is substantial, how is it possible for us to experience in ourselves a pure soul from which to accede to an absolute Spirit?”¹⁴² The Flesh is not matter; it is not spirit; it is the intertwining of the visible and the invisible, in which we and the world live and move and have our being.

This tension, or paradox, of the intertwining of matter and spirit, visible and invisible, emerges in Olds’s poem, “The Feelings”:

and everyone else in the room believed in the Christian God,
they called my father *the shell on the bed*, I was the
[.....]
[. . .] only one
there to say goodbye to his body
that was all he was [. . .]. (12-13, 15-17)¹⁴³

In this poem, Olds identifies herself with her father’s body through her desire to honor this body in the midst of a religious system that dismisses it, redefining the sacred through her experience. Olds portrays herself as closer to a body without ‘spirit’ (in the

¹⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 199.

¹⁴³ Olds, “The Feelings,” *The Father* 42. Emphasis in original.

traditional theological sense) than to living humans who denigrate the flesh: her allegiance is to the matter of the world, undomesticated by theology. In the midst of death, Olds creates a set of rituals out of touch, crossing the boundary between the living and the dead with the bridge of matter. In "The Exact Moment of His Death," she writes:

I ran my hand slowly through the hair,
 lifted my fingers up through the grey
 waves of it, the unliving glistening
 matter of this world. (34-37)¹⁴⁴

The language of waves and ocean reemerges in Olds's poem, "The Swimmer." Following her father's death (and cremation), Olds immerses herself in the ocean, feeling unified with the sea, God, and in some way her father: "I am like those elements my father turned into,/ smoke, bone, salt. [. . .]" (16-17).¹⁴⁵ Through the images of waves and elements in "The Exact Moment of His Death" and "The Swimmer," Olds emphasizes the carnal aspects of her father's existence, and overlaps this embodiment with the living world that surrounds both of them in life and in death. Through these images and her description of the process of witnessing her father's death, Olds is rethinking the relationship of flesh and spirit, and the human and more-than-human worlds, and moving beyond dualism to a place of connection through her incarnate existence.

¹⁴⁴ Olds, "The Exact Moment of His Death," *The Father* 36.

¹⁴⁵ Olds, "The Swimmer," *The Father* 56.

THE UNDERLIFE

In "The Underlife," Olds moves further in the direction of this desire for connection with the more-than-human world and with her father's existence after death. The poem is singular among her work and in the collection *The Father*. In this poem, Olds explicitly portrays nonhuman agency, and enters into dialogue with these agents. In the course of this dialogue, she confronts the abyss that follows the death of the body. The poem does not offer answers to the question of what is beyond this death, but a new orientation that demands a different paradigm. There are two versions of this poem: the text I discuss here was included in Christopher Merrill's anthology, *The Forgotten Language* (1991) and originally published in *The American Poetry Review* (1989).¹⁴⁶ A shorter version was included in Olds's collection, *The Father* (1992). While my discussion focuses on the longer version of this poem (and all quotations and references are from the version included in *The Forgotten Language*), I will also include the poem's placement within *The Father* as it sheds light on Olds's project.

"The Underlife" is a narrative of the speaker's journey through the city on the subway – a journey through the underworld. At the beginning, Olds is alone and alienated from her environment: "Waiting for the subway, bad station, no one near me, the/ walls dark and slimy [. . .]." (1-2) The station has swallowed her. In a phenomenological sense, Olds is responding to the built environment as an organism: the

¹⁴⁶ Sharon Olds, "The Underlife," *The Forgotten Language: Contemporary Poets and Nature*, ed. Christopher Merrill (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991) 117. All quotations of "The Underlife" are from this source.

city is alive, but potentially malevolent. There may also be a biblical allusion within this image: Olds, like the reluctant prophet Jonah, has been swallowed by the forces of chaos personified by Leviathan, the whale. This allusion is reinforced later, when Olds remembers that way that "[. . .] wind ripples water in the/ upper world of light [. . .]" (10-11); it seems that she is in an underworld. This image of wind and water links to the imagery of "The Swimmer," where the speaker is submerged in the horizon of the ocean. In "The Swimmer," the ocean is identified with God and fecundity; in this earlier poem, the images are closer to the watery chaos that precedes the act of creation. Invoking Leviathan also brings the spirit of the White Whale into the poem, and the ecstasies of desire and revulsion described in Herman Melville's voluptuous work.

Olds repeats the word "waiting" twice in the first two lines of the poem, but what emerges is not the subway but a rat. At first Olds is unable to recognize what she is seeing:

[. . .] I look down
 [.....]
 and see a section of grey rail de-
 tach itself and move along the packed silt
 floor of the pit [. . .]. (3-7)

This is nonhuman language: it is the gesture that "[. . .] presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice [. . .]."¹⁴⁷ The disjunction of the word "detach" emphasizes the radical break in perspective experienced by the narrator: the rat only comes into the foreground when she gives it her attention. This

¹⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 185.

recalls the participatory nature of experience emphasized by phenomenology: the participation of the seer in what is seen. Olds relinquishes her preconceived ideas about the world in order to move into a primordial, pre-reflective perceptual relationship. The perceptual confusion further blurs the boundaries between natural and unnatural begun in the first lines. The built environment and organism are not clearly delineated; they merge and disappear into one another.

There is an implicit question of why this is “[. . .] the first rat I have/ seen on the subway in twenty years [. . .]” (7-8) as it seems likely rats always inhabited this place. Something has occurred in her life that opens her to the awareness of this presence in the city; later in the poem, the trauma of her father’s death moves to the foreground, possibly explaining this shift in perspective. The inclusion of the poem in *The Father* also seems to imply the impulse for this new openness: the shock of his death has opened her to new questions about boundaries, including perhaps the boundary between matter and spirit, life and death, as well as between nonhuman and human, nature and culture, the city and the wild. This poem is a journey through the underworld of the city, but in the pit she finds not death and disembodied spirit, but the living wild, the *Lebenswelt*.

William Rossi notes that “The Underlife” exemplifies a recurring theme in environmental literature: “[t]he wild as ‘other’ -- unfathomably different, even repellent; yet mysteriously fascinating [. . .].”¹⁴⁸ In this poem, the speaker expresses these conflicting responses through the gestural language of her body. As she looks into the pit

¹⁴⁸ William Rossi, “Overview of Environmental Themes and Forms,” English 469/569: Studies in American Environmental Imagination, University of Oregon (Fall 2000).

and encounters the rat, she is run over not by a train but by a shudder “[. . .]as/ naturally as wind ripples water in the/ upper world of light [. . .].” (9-11) The word play of “naturally” highlights her socially constructed response to the rat. But the speaker enters into the interaction, rather than withdrawing: she leans forward to look more closely at the rat that both repels and attracts her. The speaker thus begins to respond to the mute world’s silent invitation: first recognizing its existence through its movement, then engaging more fully in a participatory relationship of attention. This engagement leads to the possibility of being changed by the wild, and evidences the possibility of the agency of the nonhuman world to break through the social construction of nature as inert and silent.

In her description of the rat, the speaker’s growing attraction is evident: she describes the rat in luminous terms – “silvery,” “dark light,” “translucent”(18, 20, 21) – observing it with naturalist attention and detail. As Olds gives her attention to the rat it offers light in the darkness of the subway. She recognizes that in the context of the city, this wild creature that has adapted itself to the built environment is “wild-life” (13). This wild life opens a way for her to glimpse what Merleau-Ponty calls the wild or brute being in which she has her own existence.

Olds’s next encounter is with a cockroach that invades the intimate space of her bed:

[. . .] a part of the amber
 pattern on the sheet detaches itself and
 moves as if a tiny bit of the
 earth’s crust were moving [. . .] (27-30)

Olds repeats the same words and perceptual blurring she earlier employed to describe the rat's emergence from the subway rail: the cockroach is hidden from her sight, camouflaged by the sheet's pattern, but comes to her awareness through its movement. Like the rat, the cockroach is described in language that illuminates it: the cockroach is "amber," translucent, the color of ancient life crystallized. She is again revolted, and instinctually reacts to this intrusion by the wild with her own gestural language, first slapping and then shouting at the roach. In "Good, Wild, Sacred," Gary Snyder writes "[t]he wild that keeps flying, creeping, burrowing in – is sheer frustration."¹⁴⁹ Snyder is speaking about agriculture; Sharon Olds brings this dynamic to urban consciousness in a visceral way.

Throughout "The Underlife" these images of movement and shifting ground, as well as references to the ruins of cities and civilizations, gesture toward the destabilization of the human subject. The familiar landscape of the city is experienced as disorienting: the boundaries of 'natural' and 'unnatural' blur, and what is first perceived as inert is revealed as alive. The movement of the cockroach is compared to the movement of the earth's crust – an earthquake. This earthquake seems to encompass both the death of Olds's father, and also a shift in the conceptual framework of anthropocentrism, which assumes a landscape of inert objects. As the speaker travels through the city and into her home environment, the wild both destabilizes anthropocentric assumptions and breaks into her isolation.

¹⁴⁹ Snyder 79.

The metaphor of movement also illuminates the speaker's shift from isolation to intersubjectivity, and she turns to the rat and the roach and engages in dialogue:

Christ you guys, I address these beasts, I
 know about the dark floor of life shifting!
 I watched the cancer take my father and
 alter him so he did not fit the
 space he was set in, I saw that cancer
 wiggle him like a bad tooth and
 finally tear him out of the picture so I
 saw the blank behind him [. . .]! (35-42)

This movement into dialogue is a radical shift on the part of the speaker, a recognition of the subjectivity of the nonhuman world. She responds to something they do not say but she nevertheless hears: the voice of Merleau-Ponty's mute world. In a place in her life when she believed herself most isolated, the wild intrudes. The implication, in her images of the merging of rail and rat, sheet and cockroach, is that the wild is always present, beneath the surface of her vision. In descending to the underworld she has encountered a new depth. She speaks to them in her language; in the final lines of the poem, they speak to her in their language, the corporeal language of movement.

[. . .] And the
 roach and the rat turn to me with that
 swivelling turn of natural animals and they
 say to me, We are not educators,
 we come to you from him, to bring you his love. (42-46)

The conversation between the narrator and the rat and roach is not in quotation marks: it is not set off from the other embodied enactments of the dialogue between the narrator's body and the world. Language is not exclusively human: it is embodied in "the

swivelling turn of natural animals." Gesture is the body's dialogue, and reveal intersubjectivity: the world perceives her, as she does the world.

Olds avoids a conventional resolution to this poem. Nature is not the sublime or transcendental teacher. Her horror at the wild is not refined into a lesson ("we are not educators," warn the wild beings). The cancer that killed her father is also the wild, and remains incomprehensible. When she speaks to the animals, it is about the cancer which, with its own agency, has altered her father and torn him out of her life. Olds turns to these animals for understanding of how to live in the ruins of her life, as they have learned how to survive in the ruins of the city. The animals refuse her unspoken question. Instead they offer, through her recognition of their subjectivity, the possibility of communion.

The relationship of flesh and spirit, and the question of the soul's existence after death, is the unarticulated question that pervades "The Underlife." Christ is named twice in the final lines of the poem, but is not the answer to this unspoken question. Instead, invoking the sacramental nature of the Flesh, she addresses the rat and roach as Christ ("Christ you guys, I address these beasts"). The speaker begins the poem in a "bad station, no one near me" and ends in the intimate space of her bed with two companions: the rat and the roach, the omnipresent wild of the urban landscape. Thus, although her questions are not answered, she is no longer alone. As in "The Swimmer," where the speaker feels herself joined to her father's afterlife through the element of the sea, she is drawn once again into communion with her father through the more-than-human world. There is no promise that her father exists as a disembodied spirit after death. But there is a promise of finding a way to live with this loss.

The poems in *The Father* describe the effects of the cancer in detail, giving a sense of both fascination and revulsion with the process of death. As readers we have witnessed the speaker's journey from revulsion to fascination to intersubjectivity with the other in the poem, and it seems that a similar journey is possible with cancer. Cancer is the wild; it is both self and other, a chiasm.¹⁵⁰ The flesh that we are in brute being is not only matter, and is not devoid of spirit, but is not pure soul. We are flesh of its Flesh in a union that is not dissolved by death. We remain flesh in the Flesh of the world.

¹⁵⁰ Cathy Peppers, "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*," *Science-Fiction Studies* 22 (1995): 53.

CHAPTER 4:

METAMORPHOSIS

We have found beneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world [. . .] by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves.

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception.

Viewed within the body of environmental literature, science fiction makes the disquieting contribution of imagining “the endless variety of ways in which life on earth can be destroyed,” observes Noel Gough.¹⁵¹ Science or speculative fiction also makes a unique contribution in its reimagination of the relationship between humanity and the divine or sacred. In the universes of science fiction, populated by a variety of sentient beings, speculation about the nature of the divine, immortality, and spirit abound. In her essay “‘We Are All Kin’: Relatedness, Mortality, and the Paradox of Human Immortality,” Judith Lee argues that speculative fiction asks questions similar to those posed within theology. Lee suggest that unlike theology, however, speculative fiction is

¹⁵¹ Noel Gough, “Playing with Wor(l)ds: Science Fiction as Environmental Literature,” *Literature of Nature Sourcebook*, ed. Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998) 410.

not restrained by doctrine, and is therefore freer to encompass ambivalence.¹⁵² According to Lee, Western monotheistic traditions posit an eternal, unchanging God and an immortal human soul as the basis for understanding the ontology of creation, while speculative fiction imagines a variety of dynamic relationships between matter and spirit.¹⁵³ One of these is what she calls a “‘bodily spirituality’” which reimagines connections between the body and traditional theological spheres.¹⁵⁴

Octavia Butler’s science fiction exemplifies these imaginaries. Butler repeatedly creates apocalyptic scenarios in her novels, destroying life on earth as we know it and recreating the relationships between mind and body, nature and technology, and humanity, matter, and the divine. Her work explores epistemological issues and the boundaries between mind and body through the themes of telepathy, empathy, and embodied ways of knowing. Throughout her work, Butler returns to the theme of acquisition of knowledge through perception and boundary transgression. In her early novel, *Wild Seed* (1980), the telepathic, immortal Anyanwu shape shifts, entering into the bodies and to some extent minds of animals, gaining knowledge of their evolutionary history and present life through her reincarnations.¹⁵⁵ In her most recent works *Parable*

¹⁵² Judith Lee, “‘We Are All Kin’: Relatedness, Mortality, and the Paradox of Human Immortality,” *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, eds. George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, and Eric S. Rabkin (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) 177.

¹⁵³ Lee 171.

¹⁵⁴ Lee 171.

¹⁵⁵ Octavia E. Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1980) 73-4, 79-87.

of the Sower (1993)¹⁵⁶ and *Parable of the Talents* (1998),¹⁵⁷ the narrator and several other characters are afflicted with “hyperempathy syndrome,” causing them to share perceived pain and pleasure with others.¹⁵⁸ Butler violates gender and species boundaries in her imagination of symbiosis and reproduction in contexts where the human subject is no longer dominant in physical or theological terms. She also engages with environmental, scientific and political issues, embracing scientific knowledge while extending the possibilities for gaining knowledge beyond science. While she accepts Western scientific knowledge as a valid and important way of knowing, it is only one of the myriad epistemological possibilities in her worlds. Each of these themes – epistemology and embodied knowledges, the transgression of boundaries between self/other, human/nonhuman, and male/female in the process of symbiotic change – emerges in *Dawn* (1987), the first novel of her *Xenogenesis* series, and the focus of my discussion in this chapter.¹⁵⁹

KNOWLEDGE

In all of her fiction, Butler demands attention to issues of gender, race, and justice. One of the earliest (and still one of the few) African American writers of science fiction, her work explores present and near-future worlds informed by her location as an African American woman from urban Southern California. In contrast to nearly all

¹⁵⁶ Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner Books, Inc, 1993).

¹⁵⁷ Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁸ Butler, *Sower* 9.

science fiction, Butler's cast of characters is consistently multi-racial. There is no unmarked 'white' category in Butler's work,¹⁶⁰ whereas in most science fiction (and environmental literature or 'nature writing') this is the norm. Butler's fiction eschews utopias, requiring instead that the problems of racism, sexism, and speciesism be included in both science fiction and environmental discourses.¹⁶¹ Butler frequently depicts variations on enslavement, from explicitly placing her African and African American characters in the context of U.S. slavery (*Wild Seed* and *Kindred*¹⁶²), to 21st century debt slavery (*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*) to explorations of forced reproduction ("Bloodchild"¹⁶³ and *Dawn*) that echo African American women's experiences under slavery (and those of women under colonization throughout history). By implication, Butler's work challenges the privileged/unmarked white and male subjectivity that dominates both science fiction and environmental literary study. Butler's fiction also challenges the desire to return to a pre-Edenic, unfallen state that characterizes some environmental literature and philosophy (e.g., the desire for a return to Paleolithic, pre-agricultural society). Donna Haraway calls Butler a theorist for

¹⁵⁹ Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Warner Books, 1987).

¹⁶⁰ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, (New York: Routledge, 1989) 381.

¹⁶¹ Michelle Erica Green, "There Goes the Neighborhood: Octavia Butler's Demand for Diversity in Utopias," *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, eds. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994) 168-9.

¹⁶² Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

¹⁶³ Butler, "Bloodchild," *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995) 1-32.

cyborgs,¹⁶⁴ and argues that “[c]yborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man.”¹⁶⁵

Butler’s focus on corporeality and bodily intelligence expresses and reimagines conceptual links between women, animals, nature, and race.¹⁶⁶ Stacy Alaimo notes that the body had been coded as female by Western culture, and thus “[t]he body is a crucial site for contestation and transformation, precisely because ideologies of the body have been complicit in the degradation of people of color, women, and nature.”¹⁶⁷ In her insightful analysis, “‘Skin Dreaming,’” Alaimo describes the way in which, in the context of evolutionary theory and Social Darwinism, racism is evidenced in the concept of the ‘lower races.’ Europeans interposed the ‘lower races’ between themselves and animals, and white women inserted women of color between themselves and nature in order to displace corporeality onto the bodies of women of color – most clearly on African and African American women in the institution of slavery.¹⁶⁸

In Butler’s novels, this corporeality is reclaimed as a site of intelligence by African American women protagonists.¹⁶⁹ In *Dawn*, Lilith’s willingness to embrace a chiasmic relationship with the Oankali and to recognize herself on a species continuum is

¹⁶⁴ Haraway, *Simians* 173.

¹⁶⁵ Haraway, *Simians* 175.

¹⁶⁶ Stacy Alaimo, “‘Skin Dreaming’: The Bodily Transgressions of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan,” *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, eds. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 126.

¹⁶⁷ Alaimo, “Skin Dreaming” 136.

¹⁶⁸ Alaimo, “Skin Dreaming” 124.

¹⁶⁹ Alaimo, “Skin Dreaming” 123.

a source of resilience and adaptability. In her reimagination and revaluation of corporeality and embodied knowledge, Butler ruptures the dualistic hierarchies that support racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism, explicitly linking mind/body dualism to oppression.¹⁷⁰ Bringing Merleau-Ponty into conversation with Butler thus illuminates the potential linkages between embodiment, knowledge, and environmental justice.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES

In *Dawn*, Butler imagines an apocalyptic future in which life on earth as we know it has been destroyed through a nuclear holocaust. Humanity is rescued by an alien species, the Oankali ("gene traders") who place the remnant population into suspended animation while they restore the earth. The story is narrated from the perspective of an African American woman called Lilith, who awakens in an isolation room on board the Oankali ship. Lilith's name deliberately invokes the mythology of Adam's apocryphal first wife, who notoriously refused the prescribed sexual position/relationship of submission with the first man, and instead gave birth to a race of monstrous hybrids.¹⁷¹ Lilith's "Awakening" reveals Butler's story as a new myth of origin,¹⁷² one that allows recreations of relationships between matter and spirit, humanity and nature, and self and other. Like Merleau-Ponty, Butler is imagining the possibility of a nondualistic ontology

¹⁷⁰ Haraway, *Primate Visions* 378.

¹⁷¹ For a detailing of the myth of Lilith and its retelling in midrash and feminist science fiction, see Michele Osherow, "The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women's Science Fiction," *NWSA Journal* 12.1 (Spring 2000) 68-83.

¹⁷² Haraway, *Primate Visions* 378.

in the universe of her story. In the context of Butler's ongoing theorizing about race, gender and species, her project also links to ecofeminist theory's assertion that all forms of oppression are related through the conceptual rift of oppositional dualisms.¹⁷³ Butler ruptures the conceptual (and in the universe of her story, physical and biological) barriers that maintain this rift.

More powerful than the humans who are now dependent upon them for survival, the Oankali demand that humanity become a partner-species through genetic alteration and forced reproduction. The Oankali render humanity sterile in absence of an "ooloi," the third sex of the Oankali who completes an Oankali family, and who is capable of genetic engineering with only its body's technologies.¹⁷⁴ This demand of symbiosis and merging illustrates the central question of Butler's novel: whether acquiescence to the Oankali merging is evidence of adaptability and evolution – or the completion of humanity's extinction. This dilemma is embodied in Lilith, who makes choices that enable survival while struggling with her desire for species purity, resistance and escape.

THE BODY AS AGENT

Dawn provides a rich reflection on epistemology through its depiction of Oankali ways of knowing, often described in language that echoes Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the embodied, chiasmic intertwining between the body and the flesh of the world as the site of knowledge. The Oankali are physically repulsive to humans, with

¹⁷³ Plumwood, Chapter 2 "Dualism: The Logic of Colonization" *Feminism* 41-68.

tentacles in place of sensory organs. Lilith initially sees them as the archetypal Medusa, the humanoid, female monster who turns men to stone. Her reaction expresses the human fear of the nonhuman Other; later, when she has befriended an Oankali, she is able to see him as more like a sea creature who is able to live on land, and whose origins are therefore not unlike our own. These tentacles intertwine to facilitate non-verbal communication among the Oankali, or penetrate the flesh of other organisms to learn about them. The Oankali thus learn through contact and interpenetration – a literal chiasm. Their perception is synaesthetic,¹⁷⁵ reflecting Merleau-Ponty's insight into the way in which human perceptions, when observed closely, also reveal an intertwining between our body and the body of other humans and of the world in the chiasm of the Flesh.¹⁷⁶ When Lilith shares the knowledge of the Oankali Nikanj, she describes the perception through a combination of senses: "It gave her...a new color. A [. . .] nameless thing, half seen, half felt or...tasted."¹⁷⁷ A fundamental metaphor for knowledge among the Oankali is taste – highlighting the pleasurable, sensuous dimensions of embodied knowledge.

The Oankali interest in humanity (depicted as an erotic attraction) is in its genetic structure – particularly cancer. The Oankali find cancer "beautiful" and name the genetic

¹⁷⁴ In the new reproduction partnership, the "construct" (Human-Oankali) families consist of five parents: human female and male, Oankali female and male, and the ooloi, who controls reproduction.

¹⁷⁵ Butler, *Dawn* 20.

¹⁷⁶ Abram, *Spell* 127-8.

¹⁷⁷ Butler, *Dawn* 225.

tendency to develop cancers a "talent."¹⁷⁸ The erotic attraction of the Oankali for humanity is not only a sexual or reproductive urge; it indicates a more complex attraction and desire for knowledge, symbiotic merging, and chiasmic relationship. The Oankali world is flesh, and they are fully conscious of the intertwining in which they exist. The ship in which they live is a plant/animal they have domesticated and with which they live in symbiosis. The Oankali ignore machines in favor of modifying living organisms to fulfill their needs. They do not reject technology, but prefer those technologies that alter living matter. The Oankali's embeddedness and intertwining with their world reflects Donna Haraway's proposal that "[. . .] a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."¹⁷⁹ This cyborg world of blurred boundaries and kinship becomes intensely threatening to humans in *Dawn*, who insist on a genetic purity which is in many senses an illusion in light of the human body's intertwining with its environment. This disruption of the illusion of human genetic integrity reflects the evolutionary theory of Lynn Margulis, who emphasizes the symbiotic relationships that constitute the human body – illuminating another chiasmic aspect of human existence.¹⁸⁰

Butler thus complicates the euphoric embrace of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm by imagining the end of the human self as conceptualized as a stable, atomistic entity.

¹⁷⁸ Butler, *Dawn* 20-1.

¹⁷⁹ Haraway, *Simians* 154.

¹⁸⁰ Lynn Margulis, Chapter 1, "Symbiosis Everywhere," *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (MA: Basic Books, 1998) 5-12.

Through the merging of *Homo sapiens* with the Oankali, Butler explores what it would mean to let go of our illusions of separateness from the more-than-human world, evoking responses in her characters from desire to dread and violence as the Oankali species seeks to form a symbiotic relationship with humanity's last survivors – and thus, from the perspective of the human characters, completing the extinction of humanity as a species. Butler's work illuminates the threatening aspects of the chiasm in light of evolutionary theory, complicating responses to organism-environment interpenetration. In Butler's vision, Merleau-Ponty's chiasm of human flesh with the flesh of the world threatens deeply held concepts of individual uniqueness, particularly species boundaries.

As a species the Oankali stimulate pleasure in humans through all interactions – healing, working, communication. However, some of the (heterosexual) men in the story feel violated and betrayed by their bodies' responses to the Oankali. As one character explains of another's murderous reaction to Oankali-human sexual union: “[h]e’s not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He’s taken like a woman [. . .]. He can’t let them get away with that.”¹⁸¹ The transgression of self/other boundaries enacted through this literal chiasm threatens both male and female humans' sense of self, expressed as species and bodily integrity, and specifically as control over the body and its responses to its environment. Male characters whose socialization has led them to define themselves in terms of mastery and control compare the experience to being female, reflecting the gender fiction of masculine bodily control and separateness, and horror of

¹⁸¹ Butler, *Dawn* 203.

merging and dissolution of boundaries.¹⁸² Similarly, under the control and 'care' of the Oankali, Lilith compares herself to an endangered animal, caged and bred for a "higher good," reflecting Western culture's definition of what it means to be human in opposition to the animal.¹⁸³ The Oankali's literal crossing of the boundaries between self/other and human/nonhuman are thus intuitively connected by the humans to the binaries of male/female and human/animal. The loss of control and the dissolving of barriers is thus experienced as a violation of the self. This question of transgression, betrayal and resistance becomes the central narrative impulse in *Dawn*, as the resisters (who form a patriarchal society) begin to use violence in an attempt to gain dominance in the human community and with the Oankali.

Haraway uses the provocative term "miscegenation" to describe Butler's human-Oankali mating.¹⁸⁴ Like the mythical Lilith, Butler's heroine violates societal prescriptions of sexual behavior. While some humans choose extinction rather than symbiosis with the Oankali, Lilith enters into sexual and societal relationship with the aliens. Her consent is to some extent manufactured; she is given little other choice than to learn to live with the Oankali. But Lilith also makes it clear that she chooses to adapt and live in the present. She refers to dwelling in the past as "[p]ointless" and explains: "I lived in those memories for my two years of solitary. By the time the Oankali showed

¹⁸² For a full exploration of these ideas, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume 1: Women Floods Bodies History*, trans Stephen Conway, Theory and History of Literature 22 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, especially pp. 385-438.

¹⁸³ Butler, *Dawn* 58.

¹⁸⁴ Haraway, *Primate Visions* 378.

up in my room, I was ready to move into the present and stay there.”¹⁸⁵ Lilith makes the conscious choice to leave her isolation room and enter into symbiotic relationship with the Oankali – stepping out of humanity’s evolutionary past and into metamorphosis.

DETERMINISM/MATERIALISM

The question of the body’s agency and intelligence place Butler’s story in the context of the ongoing debate about biological determinism in the fields of feminist theory and biology. Just as there are many kinds of knowledge in *Dawn*, there are many kinds of agency – illuminating Haraway’s concept of knowledge as a conversation between subjects rather than a subject/object relationship.¹⁸⁶ As noted above, there are also a variety of responses to the nonhuman agency of the Oankali – from the resistor’s fear and violence to Lilith’s reluctant cooperation.

Curiously, this fear of the body’s agency is mirrored in some critical responses to Butler’s work. Hoda Zaki labels Butler a biological determinist. According to Zaki, Butler’s work requires acceptance of “[. . .] an essentialist view of human nature similar to that of some radical feminists, such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.”¹⁸⁷ Zaki follows this critique with the assertion that Butler sees human nature as characterized by “incapacity to change [. . .]. The force by which humans are wedded to their

¹⁸⁵ Butler, *Dawn* 135.

¹⁸⁶ Haraway, *Simians* 197-9.

¹⁸⁷ Hoda M. Zaki, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler,” *Science-Fiction Studies* 17 (1990): 241.

biologically-determined natures and their inability to transcend it she makes clear in her 'Xenogenesis' series."¹⁸⁸

Finally, Zaki claims that "Butler's unmediated connections between biology and behavior have an implicit corollary: that abandoning the human body is a necessary prerequisite for real human alteration."¹⁸⁹ The complexity of this issue is evidenced by the body of critical discussion that has been inspired by Butler's work. However, it seems to me that Butler's work can support a different reading than that given by Zaki. Contrary to abandoning the body, in *Dawn* Butler emphasizes embodied knowledge and the need to embrace flesh in order to become conscious of our place in the flesh of the world. It is only with this immersion in the flesh that humanity can escape self-destruction and open new futures. In *Dawn*, those humans who violently resist the Oankali are condemned to life aboard the ship and denied the ability to return to the earth or to reproduce. In this fictional universe, where the Oankali control human reproduction and thus evolution, those who refuse to merge their flesh with the flesh of the other become an evolutionary dead end, an extinct species. This evolution of humanity through symbiosis could be seen as an abandoning of the human body; but this would imply an essentialist definition of what it means to be human. As Haraway notes "Biological-determinist ideology is only one position opened up in scientific culture for arguing the meanings of human animality. There is much room for radical political

¹⁸⁸ Zaki 242.

¹⁸⁹ Zaki 242

people to contest the meanings of the breached boundary.”¹⁹⁰ Butler’s inclusion of evolutionary theory and human biology in her theorizing about human behavior and politics need not be equated with determinism. The human body is not abandoned in *Dawn*, but it is transformed.

Lilith is designated as the leader of the first human group to repopulate the earth as mates of the Oankali; her cooperation with the colonizing species causes her to be labeled as a traitor to humanity (“Judas”) by the resistor humans. However, Butler’s character does not make her choice in freedom, but as a survival strategy. This forced reproduction must be read in context of African American women’s experience of forced reproduction under slavery,¹⁹¹ a theme that Butler explicitly explored in her earlier novel, *Kindred*, in which a 20th century African American woman travels back in time and is compelled to save the life of a white slave owner-rapist in order to ensure the survival of her ancestor and thus her own existence. Butler also examines forced reproduction and colonization/symbiosis in “Bloodchild,” in which human men are forced to serve a host species for the larval young of the serpentine/insect-like Tlic. Butler complicates the reading of *Dawn* as a simple lesson about adaptability and symbiosis through her introduction of these dynamics of power and oppression. Cathy Peppers notes that “[. . .] the narrative of *Xenogenesis* relentlessly keeps the discourses of slavery and sociobiology in continuous dialogue.”¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Haraway, *Simians* 152.

¹⁹¹ Peppers 50.

¹⁹² Peppers 52.

The evocative naming of Lilith illuminates a pattern of Butler's novel. There are no direct or uncomplicated parallels to myth, or allegories to evolutionary theory or sociobiology. Attempts to force Butler's text to make a single, prescriptive ideological statement fail, just as YHWH's original attempts to dominate the mythical Lilith failed. Both humans and the Oankali seek to control Butler's Lilith, while she forms relationships with both communities in which she seeks both survival through adaptation and some degree of self-determination.

SYMBIOSIS

This near-future depiction of symbiosis, resistance and transformation can be seen as a reflection about bodily incarnation. In her depiction of symbiosis and destabilization of human separateness, Butler reflects the observations of microbiologist Lynn Margulis, who demonstrated that mitochondria evolved separately from humans before inhabiting the human body (and other animals) as a symbiotic organism.¹⁹³ In his reflection of human embodiment and symbiosis, Alphonso Lingis notes: "Human animals live in symbiosis with thousands of species of anaerobic bacteria [. . .]. They, and not some Aristotelian form, are true agencies of our individuation as organisms."¹⁹⁴ Lingis extends this reflection on human symbiosis on a macrobiotic scale, to the fields we cultivate for food,¹⁹⁵ emphasizing our interactions with our world in a way that recalls the Oankali

¹⁹³ Alphonso Lingis, "Animal Body, Inhuman Face," *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)166.

¹⁹⁴ Lingis 166.

¹⁹⁵ Lingis 166.

intertwining with their worlds, from the organelle in their cells to the walls of their ship. The human body is an ecosystem within an ecosystem. Butler makes evident in her story the way in which the human person is constituted by interaction and community. What is unusual about her portrait is her understanding of how threatening this realization might be to those who cherish their supposed ontological distinctiveness, their role as the highest organism in the chain of being. This is not a Romantic, nostalgic portrait of harmony with nature, but rather a revelation of the kind of thinking that has brought humanity (and our enfolding ecosystem) to its current crisis. Butler uses the complete destruction of nuclear holocaust to symbolize the destructiveness the hierarchy that imagines humans as the pinnacle of creation. Butler suggests instead that we need to recognize our dependence on the other agents that make up our world.

Following this recognition of human dependence on and constitution by the more-than-human world, Butler does not take univocal, consistent ideological positions about biological essentialism or social construction/ materialism in regards to sex differences and behavior in *Dawn*. Rather, she takes seriously the question of embodiment and the influence of evolutionary forces on the intertwined elements of human body, mind, and culture. Nancy Jesser suggests that Butler's theorizing about the relationship of biology and behavior can be understood in light of current evolutionary theories that emphasize interactions between genetics and environment.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Nancy Jesser, "Blood, Genes and Gender in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Dawn*," *Extrapolation* 43.1 (2002): 46.

Cathy Peppers similarly places Butler's theorizing in the context of feminist epistemologies of science, arguing that the *Xenogenesis* series, as a new myth of origin, contests the Genesis myths, Man-the-Hunter paleoanthropological narratives, and determinist arguments such as sociobiological theories of sex roles and behaviors.¹⁹⁷ Peppers notes that Butler privileges the theories of Margulis (one of the originators of the Gaia hypothesis) over the understanding of evolution that posited a 'survival of the fittest' through competition and assertion of dominance.¹⁹⁸ In contrast, Margulis describes symbiotic theories of origin, in which the human body is an ecosystem composed of different organisms, thus challenging the understanding of human identity as individual and self-sufficient.¹⁹⁹

POROUS BEING

In *Dawn*, Butler questions what constitutes the self, and how the self and knowledge are related to embodiment and evolution. The Oankali attribute fundamental characteristics of their species to the organelle at the center of each cell, an organelle that exists by acquiring new life and merging with it. Similarly, the Oankali characterize humanity by what they call "The Contradiction" (the human genetic tendencies toward intelligence and hierarchy the Oankali believe will inevitably result in violence). However, as Jim Miller notes, it would be a mistake to identify Butler's views with the

¹⁹⁷ Peppers 47-60.

¹⁹⁸ Peppers 53-4.

¹⁹⁹ Peppers 53-4.

Oankali (or any other character in the story).²⁰⁰ Rather, the dialogue and disagreement among the characters in *Dawn* can be read as a dynamic theorizing about evolution, embodiment, ontology and epistemology.²⁰¹

In *Dawn*, the body is a site of knowledge, and has its own intelligence. This is illustrated through the ongoing reconfiguration of cancer in the novel. Lilith has a genetic predisposition to develop cancer which the Oankali call a talent. For the Oankali, cancer's abilities are part of what draws them most strongly to humans – their erotic attraction is an expression of their hunger for knowledge and wildness. This reimagination is a central metaphor for the new way of conceptualizing and living a human-world intertwining. Butler's *Dawn*, in conversation with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, can be understood as a way reconceptualizing our being in the more-than-human world and the relationship between self and other. The cancer is a part of the human body, but is also an independent agent, not under the conscious control of its human host. In the context of an ecocritical project of learning to listen to the voice of the non-human world, the Oankali, through their acceptance of relationship with cancer as an agent, exemplify a new way for humanity to live within the more-than-human world, in which nonhuman others are transformed from enemies to be feared into gifts, other flesh to be embraced.

²⁰⁰ Jim Miller, "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision," *Science-Fiction Studies* 25 (1998): 342.

²⁰¹ Louise Westling, email to the author, 7/17/03.

According to Merleau-Ponty, since we are flesh in the flesh of the world, our bodies allow us to gain knowledge of the world.²⁰² For the Oankali as well, bodies are teachers, and they desire the wildness that human incarnation offers. Just as the Oankali are conscious of and embrace their intertwining of their flesh with the flesh of the world (symbolized by their repeated events of symbiosis in their evolutionary history, and their relationship to their ship), they are conscious of the need for wildness – for what Merleau-Ponty calls brute or wild being that is the ground of existence.²⁰³ This reimagination of cancer as agent and gift relates to the journey enacted in “The Underlife” described in the previous chapter. When Olds’s father is killed by the cancer, she sees him torn from her life, revealing the “blank behind” (42) – an abyss that threatens to engulf human meaning, reducing us to our material being.²⁰⁴ The invitation she responds to from the wild beings, the rat and the roach, is to find a way to understand cancer as part of the flesh of the world in which she and her father are immersed. In the fictional world of *Dawn*, Butler imagines a way to embrace the wildness of cancer.

In *Dawn*, the particular chiasm of human embodiment, and more specifically, of Lilith’s genetic predisposition to cancer, teaches the Oankali how to heal themselves. Nikanj, Lilith’s ooloi mate, uses Lilith’s body’s ‘talent’ for cancer to heal itself. In this scene near the end of the novel (Part IV, Chapter 7), the resistor humans have attacked Lilith, killed her partner Joseph, and severely wounded Nikanj. In order to save Nikanj,

²⁰² Merleau-Ponty, VI 133.

²⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, VI 116-7.

²⁰⁴ Olds, “The Underlife” 117.

Lilith must allow it to penetrate her flesh in order to read the genetic information of her body and in particular the genes that enable her cancer to become active. In the midst of the battlefield, Lilith strips, “refusing to think of how she would look to the humans still conscious. They would be certain now that she was a traitor. [. . .] But she had just lost Joseph. She could not lose Nikanj too. [. . .] Nikanj penetrated her body with every head and body tentacle that could reach her [. . .].”²⁰⁵ Lilith is correct; the humans who witness this scene see it as evidence of her betrayal of her humanity and other humans in her willingness to intertwine with an Oankali, to transgress the boundary of self/other and human/nonhuman.

Afterward, Nikanj explains to Lilith:

“You can’t control it [cancer],” Nikanj said, “but we can. Your body knows how to cause some of its cells to revert to an embryonic stage. It can awaken genes [. . .]. Your body showed mine how to awaken them [. . .]. The lesson was complex and painful, but very much worth learning.”

“You mean...” she [Lilith] frowned. “You mean my family problem with cancer, don’t you?”

“It isn’t a problem anymore [. . .]. It’s a gift.”²⁰⁶

Like the Oankali who Awaken humans and lead them into a new form of being through symbiosis, in this imagined future cancer is no longer an enemy, but has the potential to Awaken the body’s intelligence and to live in symbiotic relationship with its host. As Cathy Peppers notes, cancer has a particularly complex relation with humanity: “[. . .]

²⁰⁵ Butler, *Dawn* 231-2.

²⁰⁶ Butler, *Dawn* 236.

cancer cells are not wholly other, but exist precisely on the border of me/not me. In revaluing cancer, the text is also therefore valuing 'mutation' and 'boundary-crossing' identity."²⁰⁷ Those humans who resist are those who refuse to accept this blurring and boundary crossing, this confusion of self and other, of human and animal/disease/nonhuman. It is the resisters who refuse the ontological and epistemological humility needed to recognize the agency of the more-than-human world and of our own bodies.

The resisters also refuse to recognize the inexorability of human evolution. In clinging to species purity, the resisters refuse to recognize that their belief in a stable, atomized human identity is mythical in light of evolutionary theory. In *Dawn*, this is exemplified by the way that humans are changed simply through their interactions with the Oankali – the food produced by the ship helps their bodies to heal; the Oankali alter the humans while they are in suspended animation; mating with the Oankali changes humans' biochemistry. In spite of all this, the resistor humans insist on species purity. *Dawn* can be understood as a response to evolutionary theory and the fear of change, of becoming less human, in the process symbiogenesis²⁰⁸ the Oankali reveal – a process that is a continual and inevitable part of our incarnate existence.²⁰⁹ "They wanted, Lilith thought, only to be let alone. [. . .] It was the one thing they could not have [. . .]."²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Peppers 53.

²⁰⁸ Margulis 6.

²⁰⁹ Eric White, "The Erotics of Becoming: Xenogenesis and *The Thing*," *Science Fiction Studies* 20 (1993): 394.

²¹⁰ Butler, *Dawn* 176.

Butler's work anticipates the "post-human" movement in philosophy and cultural studies (led by Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe, among others). Butler is destabilizing human identity by compressing the evolutionary time scale through the genetic manipulations of the Oankali and their demand for symbiosis, thus revealing the temporary and "permanently partial"²¹¹ identity of the human species. Eric White suggests that Butler's *Xenogenesis* series offers an "erotics of becoming" in which the body is no longer subordinated to the mind, and the boundaries between self and other are dissolved in favor of delight in embodiment.²¹² This erotic delight requires a willingness from the human partners to allow the dissolution of the boundaries between self and other, and between human and Oankali. This dissolution is the end of the human race as *Homo sapiens* – but in context of the story's nuclear holocaust, this next evolutionary step is necessary. It is a post-humanist challenge to a humanist essentialism that disables our ability to live within the earth's biosphere. Like Lilith's awakened humans, we need to earn the right to return to the Earth through releasing our illusions of human dominance and isolation, and intertwining our flesh with the flesh of our world.

CONCLUSION

Butler's imagination of the death of *Homo sapiens* and rebirth through chiasm with the Other (the Oankali) weaves together but does not resolve questions of biological determinism and sociobiology, colonization and symbiosis. She blurs the boundaries

²¹¹ Haraway, *Simians* 154.

²¹² White 406-7.

between human and animal, and self and other, but acknowledges the fear and revulsion that come with placing humanity within the evolutionary flux.

Although the coercive nature of the Oankali relationship with humanity prevents a simple affirmation of this story of symbiogenesis, Butler's story does offer alternatives to the 'survival of the fittest' narrative of evolution and the dichotomized determinism/materialism debate. Though *Dawn* is set in a science fiction world of the near future, Butler's theorizing reveals aspects of our embodiment within and kinship to the more-than-human world that surrounds us with living matter even as the Oankali ship sustains the Oankali. Butler's story reimagines the relationship between humanity and our own flesh, and the intertwining of our flesh with the Flesh of the world. Through the Oankali embrace of cancer as a talent and gift, Butler suggests that we need to imagine a different relationship between ourselves and the wildness of our bodies. In accepting the Other who is our self whether this is our flesh (our body, cancer) or the Flesh of the world (the Oankali, the environment of living matter that is the ship) through chiasmic intertwining, a new evolutionary future is offered. Instead of death of humanity and the earth through nuclear holocaust, we are offered the metamorphosis of flesh from enemy to gift, from betrayer of the self to a hybrid of self/other that dissolves the boundaries we build to assert human dominance. We are instead invited to listen to our bodies, our flesh in the Flesh of the world, and to find a new evolutionary path away from self-destruction and into mutuality and metamorphosis. In this reimagination of spirit and matter, Butler does not invoke a transcendent power in the form of a monotheistic god or a determinist evolutionary power. Instead, she suggests that as flesh that is self-sensing and sentient,

we have the opportunity to participate in our own becoming through conscious embrace of chiasm.

In the next chapter, I explore the dystopic world of Ursula K. Le Guin's space station from the short story, "Newton's Sleep." Le Guin directly addresses questions of environmental justice and ethics, the whiteness of environmentalism, science fiction, and Western scientific knowledge. She allows the agency of the nonhuman world to enter into the story and pull her characters, who are trapped within the hierarchical dualisms of Western thought, into relationship. Like Butler's characters, to return to earth, they must release their desire for control and superiority in the chain of being, and descend into the flesh – their own and the flesh of the world.

CHAPTER 5:

DESCENT

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?

Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible.

Over the past decades, Ursula K. Le Guin has offered evolving visions of the relationships between humanity and nonhuman nature, gender and knowledge, and utopic and dystopic futures in works such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), and *The Dispossessed* (1974). More recently, Le Guin has begun fictional treatments of environmental questions in *Always Coming Home* (1985) and *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* (1987), in which she has sought to create multi-vocal texts that open a place for the voice of the nonhuman world. Less well known, however, are her intriguing philosophical explorations in shorter fiction such as “Newton’s Sleep” (1991). In this short story – less than thirty pages – Le Guin addresses questions including environmental justice, conceptual dualisms, and the agency and language of the nonhuman world. Working on many levels, subverting her earlier work and the traditional utopias of science fiction, Le Guin offers a vision of acceptance of the world where we already live and the relationship of which we are slowly becoming aware, as we let go of our illusions of isolation and exceptionalism, and descend out of

the transcendent intellect and into the flesh of the world. It is an ambiguous utopia which is already here and also not-yet, a world which requires new ways of thinking, being and writing to be recognized.

I am particularly interested in the way Le Guin creates a place for the nonhuman agent to emerge in the text, and in this essay I explore her story as a way to discuss the complexity and potential of listening for the voice of the nonhuman subject. The emergence of the nonhuman into the world of Le Guin's story disrupts the illusory conceptual dualisms symbolized by the virtual reality landscapes on the space station, requiring recognition of the agency of the nonhuman and the embeddedness of humanity in the flesh of the world.

GOD-TRICK

"Newton's Sleep" begins with the colonizers of the Special Earth Satellite Society (Spes, also the name of the station on which they live) looking down at the California's devastated San Joaquin Valley through video monitors.²¹³ Through this image Le Guin introduces several of the elements she will critique and subvert throughout the story: Western imperialism, rationalist utopia, and the illusion of human separation from nature. These three elements are intertwined, emerging from the tradition of Western thinking that structures the world through hierarchical dualisms and justifies exploitation and oppression of the nonhuman, women, and people of color. Western thinking has also

²¹³ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep," *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994) 23-51.

justified imperialism and colonization in the name of utopia and 'progress,' a type of thinking evident in the invasion of the Americas and the ideology of manifest destiny in the westward expansion of the United States.²¹⁴ In its rejection both of rationalism and utopia, "Newton's Sleep" critiques the concepts of rational/irrational and reality/illusion. Le Guin's work can instead be characterized as "transgressive utopianism" in which the concept and goal of perfection is rejected in favor of dynamic process.²¹⁵

Looking down at the earth from the orbiting satellite, the main character, Ike Rose (a progressive scientist) believes in his "infinitely mobile vision" which enacts what Donna Haraway calls the "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere."²¹⁶ Distanced from the damaged earth, safe on an elitist lifeboat, Ike is the model of the colonialist, rationalist scientific vision critiqued for its oppressiveness and inaccuracy by Haraway in her essay "Situated Knowledges."²¹⁷ It is this perspective which is unwillingly and gradually transformed by the human and nonhuman agents of the story.

Le Guin is also employing another kind of subversion. The narrative structure of "Newton's Sleep" follows the conventional format of her pre-1980's work, in which the dominant narrative voice is that of a central male character who goes on a transformative

²¹⁴ See James Holstun, *A Rational Millennium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²¹⁵ Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism, Women and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 24.

²¹⁶ Haraway, *Simians* 189.

²¹⁷ Haraway, *Simians* 183-201.

journey.²¹⁸ Le Guin shapes her story with this conventional format in order to transform it through shifts in the narrative voice and point of view to marginalized characters. In addition, Le Guin forces Ike (and thus the reader) to undergo a radical reworking of perspective, a shift compelled by the eruption of the nonhuman world into the reality of the story. Le Guin thus demonstrates how an alternatively constructed story might look. This alternative to the conventional, linear narrative is a multivocal text in which nonhuman voices find space to emerge.

Although this strategy of using a conventional format is a powerful critique in many ways, it also engenders problems Le Guin is not able to escape. In particular, this format reproduces troubling gender dualisms. Ike's transformation is mediated by women, in particular his wife and daughter, who are able to see and understand the appearances of the nonhuman world on the station much more quickly and easily than Ike. As these women guide Ike on his journey, Le Guin unfortunately reenacts the patriarchal dynamic in which women function as helpers and mediators of men's journeys. The women's guidance and insight also raise the essentialist question of whether women have a more direct connection to nature than men.²¹⁹ Le Guin does weave an environmental justice critique of the white elite's attempt to separate itself from the human "other" through the story, avoiding the pitfall of treating all women and their

²¹⁸ Jim Jose, "Reflections on the Politics of Le Guin's Narrative Shifts," *Science-Fiction Studies* 18 (1991): 182-3.

²¹⁹ Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999) 112.

relationships to nature as the same.²²⁰ Nevertheless, the repeated examples of women and girls as more perceptive of and closely linked to nature remain problematic.

Through subverting (and thus critiquing) her past work and beginning from the colonist's perspective, Le Guin is also situating herself. Le Guin has acknowledged her privileged status in autobiographical essays, naming herself as a "princess,"²²¹ a term that highlights the critical revisioning of her own work in which Le Guin is currently engaged, an ironic distancing from her earlier and more conventional fantasy stories.²²² As a West Coast writer, Le Guin also recognizes herself as a colonizer: "[. . .] we are the conquerors, we who live here now, in possession, in the New World."²²³ The colonists' earthly beginnings in California are significant when viewed in the context of Le Guin's work and life. California is the world that Le Guin defines as home, and the future West Coast is the site of Le Guin's deconstruction and reconstruction of new societies and new narrative forms.²²⁴ Spes is thus connected to Le Guin's identity as a Californian, and an exaggeration of the colonizer's frontier/conquest mentality.

In this way Le Guin acknowledges her own and white women's participation in oppression, and marks her viewpoint as one which both participates in the colonial identity and is able to see from the subjugated standpoint of the woman subject, a

²²⁰ Sandilands 110.

²²¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, and Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989) 75.

²²² Elizabeth Cummins, "The Land-Lady's Homebirth: Revisiting Ursula K. Le Guin's Worlds," *Science-Fiction Studies* 17(1990): 155-6.

²²³ Le Guin, *Dancing* 47.

²²⁴ Cummins 155.

positioning which is locatable and accountable.²²⁵ As a privileged Jewish scientist, the main character Ike also manifests a subject positioning that participates in both the colonial identity and a subjugated viewpoint. In this story of Spes, 'the final frontier,' Le Guin seeks to destabilize this identity. In this way, ethics are intrinsic to the story: ideology is manifested and interrogated in the narrative in order to be subverted.

ROACH

Immediately following the view of the earth from Spes, Le Guin introduces an environmental justice critique of the colonial identity, a critique that runs through the story and eventually shapes the transformation of Ike and the narrative. Ike is a sexist, and his sexism links women and nature. He describes the monitor as an "umbilicus" which connects the colonizers to earth and wishes to "cut it" in order to be free.²²⁶ Women and children have an emotional attachment to the earth from which he is liberated. In Ike's viewpoint, both women and the earth are associated with an irrationality and unpredictability that has been cleansed from Spes. The domestic spaces on the station are given pseudo-scientific designations: homes are "units" and bedrooms are "cubes,"²²⁷ in an attempt to sterilize them of female connotations and bring the station's (heterosexual) domestic life under the control of science. In this way Le Guin

²²⁵ Haraway, *Simians* 191.

²²⁶ Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 27.

²²⁷ Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 27, 33.

reveals the impulse of Western science to dominate and control all aspects of the natural world, as well as the misogyny implicit in this ideology.

When forced to confront the anti-Semitism in Spes, Ike recalls the rejection of all applicants of African ancestry because of their supposed lack of intellectual qualifications. This racism is justified by 'objective' science: what Haraway would call the "[. . .] perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power. [. . .] the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility."²²⁸ Ike adheres to the false scientific objectivity symbolized by Spes even as its destructive capacity is revealed by the increasingly open anti-Semitic comments of other colonists.

Le Guin thus links fear and rejection of nature to the oppression of women and people of color. John Dewey points to the basis of social injustice in "[. . .] contempt for the body, fear of the senses, and the opposition of flesh to spirit."²²⁹ According to Dewey, this underlying dualism of flesh/spirit results in the institutionalized violence of class and race oppression.²³⁰ Like Dewey, Le Guin links this fundamental dualism to race, class and gender oppression, showing them to originate from the same flawed belief in the superiority of false objectivity and transcendence by the intellect. This belief

²²⁸ Haraway, *Simians* 188-190.

²²⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. (New York: Perigree Books, 1980) 20.

²³⁰ Dewey 21.

justifies oppression and institutionalizes the separation of the human from the nonhuman world.

In an ironic turn, Le Guin names the particular holographic illusion in which Ike lives 'Vermont.' On Spes, claustrophobia is avoided by holographic projections of earth environments, giving the illusion of trees, homes, doorways, and community. Le Guin is challenging several illusions in this move: elitist white America's escapist enjoyment of the pastoral, the mainstream environmental movement's focus on "nature" as opposed to diverse environmental situations, and (as a science fiction/fantasy writer) the traditional nature writing school's definition of the appropriate subject matter for inclusion in the canon of nature writing.²³¹ In this way Le Guin integrates the concerns of environmental justice into her ecocritical theorizing.

ILLUSION

Le Guin's first shift in narrative voice occurs after the exposure of Spes's racist ideology. The point of view shifts to Esther, Ike's visually disabled daughter. Unlike the pastoral holographs of Spes, Esther's memories of earth are urban: "[. . .] cockroaches, rain, pollution alerts, and her best friend in the building, Saviora, who had ten million little tiny short braids each one tied with a red thread and a blue bead."²³² Esther investigates the rumors of the manifestations of people of color and nonhuman nature that

²³¹ Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 31-2.

²³² Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 37.

are beginning to appear on the station, seeking out and speaking with the witnesses – members of the community Ike views as unreliable, such as young girls.

At this point, the lost world of earth begins to shape first the story and then the narrative structure of the text itself. Asian war refugees wander the corridors of Spes. African Americans appear at the table of committee meetings in the holographic illusion of Florida. Scarlet runner beans grow by holographic doors, fish pour from taps. Through these appearances, which have a shifting existence that is not fully material but is not merely illusion, Le Guin calls the construction of reality into question. Ike persists in calling the emergence of the human and nonhuman subjects hallucinations, even as other characters in the story begin to accept the changed reality of their situation: “[. . .] ‘To what extent does the concept of illusion usefully describe a shared experience with elements of interactivity?’” a (female) character asks Ike.²³³ For Le Guin, illusion is the belief in human exceptionalism and the nonhuman world as object, the illusion of Vermont (symbol of the pastoral retreat), and the illusion of human separation from nature. Le Guin inverts ‘reality’ in the world she has created on Spes in order to show the profound interconnection of humanity with our environmental situation. What is real is the presence of nonhuman subjects who change reality for the humans on Spes; what is illusion is Ike’s faith in rationalist science, in human superiority, in a controllable and objectified world. This process of change is an enactment of Le Guin’s transgressive utopic imagination. Lucy Sargisson describes transgressive utopia as a vision that “[. . .]

²³³ Le Guin, “Newton’s Sleep” 46.

creates a space, previously non-existent and still 'unreal' in which radically different speculation can take place [. . .] societies in which the relation between spirit and matter is represented, conceptualized and enacted differently."²³⁴

Although Ike, predictably, refuses to see the appearances of the world he has sought to escape, as readers we know that these appearances are real, because the presences that surround him intrude as bodily sensations. As readers, we recognize the reality of this experience, even when Ike's dominant narrative vision refuses to acknowledge it: "he [Ike] had a curious sensation of pushing into and through a substance, or substances or presences, crowded thickly, not impeding him, not palpable, only many non-touches [. . .] an intangible resistance."²³⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, we are able to know the world because we are a part of it through our bodies: "[. . .] if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part."²³⁶ Though Ike denies the reality of his being as a part of the natural world, in the world of Le Guin's story he is compelled, eventually, to take his place among the many subjects and presences that inhabit the story. This process begins and ends with Ike's body: first with the intrusion of the presences in the corridor, and ending with Ike's movement from blindness to a new way of seeing. We as readers are led to trust Ike's body rather than Ike's narrative vision.

²³⁴ Sargisson, 63, 137.

²³⁵ Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 44.

²³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 133.

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and in Le Guin's story, the more-than-human world, the enviroing situation, interpenetrate, shape and constitute the human subject. This connection is made explicit in a speech by Susan, Ike's wife:

"I don't think there is anything supernatural. But if I don't think about it in words like that, if I just look at it, look at the people and the – the horses and the vine by the door – it makes sense. How did we, how could we have thought we could just leave? Who do we think we are? All it is, is we brought ourselves with us...the horses and the whales and the old women and the sick babies. They're just us, we're them, they're here."²³⁷

And as Susan struggles with how to name the appearances – rejecting the term 'ghosts' because of its supernatural connotations – another element of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy seems appropriate: his reclaiming of the language of the sacred in order to describe the experience of the world through the body as communion.²³⁸ The sacred, in Merleau-Ponty's understanding, is not a transcendent or absolute reality, but rather one that is immanent through the dynamic intersubjectivity enacted between the human subject and the more-than-human world. The hallucinations or visions of the colonists are not supernatural mysticism, but glimpses of the immanent and bodily sacrament of the flesh.

Le Guin describes the agency of the nonhuman world in a way that corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's ideas of intersubjectivity, demonstrated through both the content and the structure of the text. Merleau-Ponty describes intersubjectivity as the way in which "[. . .] the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and

²³⁷ Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 49.

²³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *POP* 212.

which is seen.”²³⁹ Arguing with Ike about the reality of the appearances, the character Larane states: ““I don’t know what you see [. . .] I don’t know what’s real. I know that they’re here. [. . .] I had a feeling for the first time they might be seeing us, not just us seeing them [. . .].””²⁴⁰

There are (at least) two levels of theorizing operating in “Newton’s Sleep”: a querying of the representation of nature in the text, and a theorizing of how nonhuman agency might shape a text. Karla Armbruster praises the way Le Guin “[. . .] renders the natural world in the form of speaking, active subjects [and] thus questions the idea of impermeable boundaries between human and animal (especially the boundary that excludes the nonhuman from discourse)” in the novella “Buffalo Gals.”²⁴¹ I would argue that in “Newton’s Sleep,” Le Guin is working even more radically with the concepts of human/nonhuman and the subjectivity and speech of the nonhuman world.

In “Newton’s Sleep,” the distinction is not between human and nonhuman, but between the illusion of separation and the reality of embeddedness in the flesh of the world. When the elitist and mainly European American colonists of Spes try to cut all connection with the earth, they are invaded by the presences of both the human and nonhuman world that have been lost. The nonhuman world is rendered as an agent and a speaking subject – but is not portrayed as speaking human *language*, as are the animal

²³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, VI 139.

²⁴⁰ Le Guin, “Newton’s Sleep” 45.

²⁴¹ Karla Armbruster, “Buffalo Gals, Won’t You Come Out Tonight”: A Call for Boundary-Crossing in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism,” *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, eds. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 109.

characters in “Buffalo Gals.”²⁴² The signing system of the nonhuman world is expressed through their appearances, and observed in their actions. Bison appear on the station, and the human characters turn from their linear paths to follow them. The humans are shouting and laughing, experiencing the intrusion not in terror but with a kind of biophilic euphoria. The nonhuman agents lead the humans away from their attempts at domination, attracting them toward a new way of being in the world. The characters themselves recognize their inability to fully understand these agents: “‘we don’t know how to coexist with ghosts. [. . .] We have to learn how to do it as we go along . [. . .] They are here, and what is “here” is changing too. [. . .] [W]e who are aware of them have to learn what kind of existence they have, and why.’”²⁴³ In this way, Le Guin is portraying the agency of the natural world, and exemplifying Patrick Murphy’s call to “to learn better how to tell such stories.”²⁴⁴

Le Guin is thus acknowledging the limitations of human language to represent the voice of the nonhuman world.²⁴⁵ In this way her work corresponds to Catriona Sandilands’s work on the Real. Sandilands notes the need for ecofeminist politics to acknowledge the failure of language and of human understanding: “[. . .] nature may be

²⁴² Le Guin, “Buffalo Gals, Won’t You Come Out Tonight,” *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1987) 17-51.

²⁴³ Le Guin, “Newton’s Sleep” 47.

²⁴⁴ Murphy, “Ground” 153.

²⁴⁵ Sandilands 180.

speaking, but not in a language that humans can fully understand.²⁴⁶ Le Guin's work is a witness to the agency of the nonhuman world, rather than an attempt to speak for nature. She is attempting to render the agency of the nonhuman world without claiming to see from the viewpoint of the nonhuman. She communicates the necessity for human subjects to recognize the reality of the other, and to seek to coevolve. In Le Guin's story, nonhuman actors profoundly shape the reality of the humans on *Spes*, but their wild agency is not "subsumed into human discourse," a movement Sandilands warns against.²⁴⁷ Le Guin blurs boundaries and opens space for nonhuman agency, but does not portray a monistic relationship between human and nonhuman. Instead there is difference, and interspecies dialogue through gestural language. This agency and language is extended not only to human and animal actors, but to trees and vines, implying agency of all of the more-than-human world, not simply to those that seem to possess sentience or to act in the way that humans act.

The agency of the nonhuman world also subtly shapes the structure of the text. Ike is finally left as the only colonizer who cannot see the ghosts. As a reader, I long to see the bison, the wild horses, the elms and chestnuts that are available from other characters' points of view. The other characters, the excitement of the story, are circulating around the appearance of the nonhuman agents in the text. But Ike is isolated on the blank margins of the story. He looks down at the floor of the station and sees that

²⁴⁶ Sandilands 180.

²⁴⁷ Sandilands 184.

[n]obody could be lost in Spes. All the corridors led to known places. You came to these places following the arrows and the colored stripes.[. . .] [Y]ou would never get lost and always end up safe where you started from. And you would never stumble [. . .].²⁴⁸

At this moment, Spes appears as a dystopia, engulfed and dominated by technology. To this Le Guin adds an explicit environmental justice critique from Esther's perspective, as she revolts against the hegemony of Spes where "[. . .] all the faces in your whole world were soft and white and fat. [. . .] Roaches, rain, Spanish, [were] all washed away."²⁴⁹

Faced with a linear and univocal path,²⁵⁰ Ike is forced to move non-linearly in order to follow his daughter Esther, who has gone up into the mountains. In Spes, where "you would never stumble," Ike stumbles over a boulder that emerges through the floor of the station, and unable to see, leaves the lines and arrows of Spes and follows his daughter. Revelation is mediated not through the power of the intellect as symbolized by the metaphor of vision, but through the body and the flesh of the world. The movement of the text is Ike's turning from his own linear movement and narrative dominance to develop what Haraway calls a subject positioning of "partial connection."²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 51.

²⁴⁹ Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" 38.

²⁵⁰ Robin Roberts, "Post-Modernism and Feminist Science Fiction," *Science-Fiction Studies* 17 (1990): 148.

²⁵¹ Haraway, *Simians* 193.

DESCENT

“Esther looked at him.[. . .] [A]nd she said, ‘Now we can go down.’”²⁵² In this final line of the story, it is ambiguous whether ‘going down’ is returning to Spes or to Earth. Frank Dietz notes that Le Guin “uses utopian motifs to criticize the stasis of traditional utopianism and to envision a dynamic utopia which must always remain incomplete, thus challenging the reader to complete it.”²⁵³ I believe that Le Guin is calling the reader to descend into the flesh of the world. In Le Guin’s story, salvation is not enacted through escapism or lifeboat ethics but through immersion in the world and decentering of the human subject. Eschewing apocalyptic rhetoric and Edenic narratives, Le Guin calls for the reader to recognize our embeddedness in the living world.

For Le Guin, ‘salvation’ is recognizing the communion enacted through our bodies and the flesh of the world. It is this world of cockroaches and rain, humanity and bison, pollution and storms. Though we will never be able to fully articulate the voice of nature or the Real, as Sandilands warns, Le Guin’s story offers a vision of how to begin to participate in relationship with nonhuman agents who are both other and a part of us. She models a representation of nature that allows the nonhuman agent to emerge into and transform the structure and content of the text. It is a story that, as Patrick Murphy says, needs to be told.

²⁵² Le Guin, “Newton’s Sleep” 51.

²⁵³ Frank Dietz, “Home is a Place Where You Have Never Been: The Exile Motif in the Hainish Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin,” *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*, eds. James Whitlark and Wendell Aycock. (Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1992) 105.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests.

Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible.

The speaker of “The Underlife” stands alone on a subway platform, staring into the pit. Lilith awakens in an isolation room. Ike looks down at the earth, imprisoned by the metal walls of Spes. In each of the works explored in this thesis, the reader begins from the point of view of a subject who is trapped in the isolation of anthropocentrism, and journeys out of isolation into a recognition of her place among the things of the world. The movement out of isolation happens through and depends upon the body.

In this thesis, I have outlined a critique of hierarchical and oppositional dualisms as identified and deconstructed by ecofeminist theory and ethics, and listened to the call for an alternative way of envisaging the human place in the more-than-human world. I have suggested that Merleau-Ponty’s work offers a nondualistic ontology and understanding of language that may contribute to a theoretical basis for ecocriticism and ecofeminist literary theory. With Merleau-Ponty’s nondualistic ontology as a basis for understanding the human place in the more-than-human world, it is possible to reject mind/body, human/nonhuman, and nature/culture dualisms as flawed concepts based in

an anthropocentric framework in favor of understanding a seamless and dynamic relationship of our flesh with the flesh of the world, the Chiasm. In this ontology, as argued by David Abram, space for nonhuman agency is opened.

This ontology thus makes possible a response to the call from multiple thinkers, as recounted in Chapter 2, to listen to and enter into conversation with nonhuman agents. This agency and conversation, and its implications for our understanding of the human place in the world, are imagined in the works of literature examined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Sharon Olds, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Octavia Butler each offer visions in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman, body and mind, and self and other are blurred, but not collapsed into a monistic or pantheistic vision. The relationship between matter and spirit is gestured to, but the authors avoid replacing one theological dogma with another statement of belief. What is offered is the life-world, the flesh. Sharon Olds's speaker looks into the pit and discovers the wild that lives in the urban environment, an agency that leads her toward a new understanding of the relationship between matter and spirit. Octavia Butler's Lilith witnesses the destruction of the earth by nuclear war and is reborn in symbiotic union with an alien species. The colonists of Spes attempt to seal themselves off from the earth, but the more-than-human world crosses space to enfold them and draw them back into the *lebenswelt* in the universe created by Ursula K. Le Guin. Christopher Manes argues that the practice of biblical exegesis enclosed the nonhuman world in the paradigm of the book of nature, silencing its voice. What these authors reveal is that by closing ourselves off from the more-than-human world we have imprisoned ourselves.

A phenomenological approach to ecocriticism based on the work of Merleau-Ponty brings to light the fundamental conceptual rifts that isolate humanity from the more-than-human world – and offers a response to the problem of human ontological and experiential isolation. Works of environmental literature offer the potential to, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "convey the life of the whole and make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin."²⁵⁴ The works chosen for this thesis shake up the dogmas of Western anthropocentrism and ecocriticism, as Merleau-Ponty writes that living language should. None espouses the nostalgic promise of returning to harmony with nature, or valorize temporary escape into the wilderness and its resulting spiritual enlightenment. Instead, they reveal that we have always been located within the more-than-human world, that the sacred is embodied in this relationship, and that we might not enjoy the sense of disorientation that follows a movement into a post-humanist world.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

In this thesis I have attempted to contribute to the emerging conversation between ecocriticism and Merleau-Ponty. There are still many areas that I have not addressed, but whose inclusion would strengthen the interdisciplinary methodology of ecocritical analysis and the project of listening and responding to the voice of the nonhuman world. I suggest four such possible areas below: post-structuralism, post-humanism, cognitive linguistics and metaphor theory, and natural science.

²⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, VI 102.

Ecocriticism has identified and critiqued the social construction of nature as the pastoral and as the sublime. Similarly, it will be important to understand the way in which Merleau-Ponty's understanding of nature is socially and culturally constructed through bringing both critical theory and critiques of Merleau-Ponty's work from the continental philosophical tradition into the conversation. These fields could bring a critical perspective to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of access to reality and the world, helping to avoid the danger of submerging of the nonhuman voice in the metaphor of kinship. Both critical and feminist theories could contribute to an ecocritical analysis, particularly in the areas of environmental justice and understanding of the body. As ecocriticism continues to build its theoretical base and methodology, engaging with ongoing dialogues about the intersections between Merleau-Ponty and theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida offers exciting possibilities in regards to thinking about embodiment, knowledge, and language.

In this thesis I have drawn on Donna Haraway's work in post-structuralist theories of knowledge and their relationship to dismantling hegemonic ideologies. Haraway's work also contributes to post-humanist theory through her linking of the silencing of the object of knowledge and extending this to the body, the animal, and the nonhuman, and to the transgression of human/animal boundaries. The project of post-humanism will be an important dialogue partner in the ongoing effort to understand and articulate the meaning of nonhuman agency and voice, continuing to challenge ideas of human exceptionalism, whether based on beliefs about the uniqueness of human consciousness, agency, or language.

In this project of listening to the voice of the nonhuman, an analysis of “voice” as metaphor could offer important insights. Following the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on cognitive linguistics, metaphor theory, and philosophy, a study on the metaphorical construction of ‘voice’ could help to clarify what this term means, how it is used, and its significance to ecocriticism.²⁵⁵ Combined with a thorough analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “gestural language,” the metaphor of voice could be more clearly articulated and its significance to ecocritical theory established on the basis of cognitive science and metaphor theory, thus strengthening the interdisciplinary basis of analysis.²⁵⁶

Finally, work in ecology, animal behavior and communication, and fields such as plant-pollinator interactions can shape the understanding and imagination of agency and “voice” in ecocriticism and environmental literature. In seeking to be “faithful” in our understanding of the world, as Donna Haraway suggests, we need neither reject science nor assume that the nonhuman is an object of knowledge, but engage in science within the paradigm of knowledge as “conversation,” attentive to the world as an agent and partner in understanding.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ See, for example, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, and Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²⁵⁶ Mark Johnson, personal communication, 8/19/03.

²⁵⁷ Haraway, *Simians* 187, 198-9

CONCLUSION

When Lilith is first freed from her isolation room, she is startled and frightened by the alien world that confronts her. She momentarily withdraws, and her Oankali guide asks “‘Back into your cage, Lilith?’”²⁵⁸ Like Butler’s universe in *Dawn*, Merleau-Ponty’s vision confronts us with a world alien to aspects of the Western imagination. It requires letting go of the illusions of human exceptionalism, and control our bodies and our world. It shifts the location of agency from the mind and rationality to the body and the flesh. The other choice is to retreat back into our cage. Ecocriticism, informed by the work of Merleau-Ponty, offers multiple stories to reimagine our place within the more-than-human world, a way of theorizing a partial identity that will continue to change and be changed through intertwining with an evolving environment. We are neither deaf to the voice of the world nor unable to respond, as Sharon Olds, Octavia Butler, and Ursula K. Le Guin illustrate. Through listening to the voice of the nonhuman other, we are called back into the living world that is our home.

²⁵⁸ Butler, *Dawn* 29.

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