ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES IN PRE-MODERN CULTURES

Elizabeth D. Gruber

The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature

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Environmental Humanities in Pre-modern Cultures

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Introduction: Ourselves Our Renaissance: The Verdancy of Critical Practice

Abstract
This chapter lays out the rationale for the eco-self, a hybrid entity whose properties are discernible across broad swathes of early modern literature. In brief, the eco-self acknowledges humans' embedment in the world while simultaneously confirming the necessity of periodically claiming a space apart from it. While ecological discourse has offered a necessary corrective to certain aspects of Enlightenment thought, the time is ripe for revisiting proprietarily human concerns. In undertaking this work, the introduction offers fresh conceptualizations of such key ideas as vulnerability, indistinction, and aesthetics.

Keywords: Atomism; ecocriticism; ecopsychology; indistinction; materialism; WEIRDness

I want to tell the story of the self. The goal is an updated biography of a thriving entity, not an autopsy. Of course, a comprehensive account of the self would require a multi-volume work completed over the course of several decades, so the more modest and manageable focus here is on changing conceptions of personhood in early modern English literature. Tracking these innovations offers fresh insights into the zeitgeist of the period; reciprocally, the relevant changes have the potential to suggest some updates or refinements to current conceptions of personhood. The unique verdancy of critical practice invites diachronic comparisons. That is, literary criticism constitutes a fundamentally ecological endeavor in that it so often works by setting various texts or discourses in play and gauging their confluences and reciprocal effects. In this sense, virtually any text possesses an infinite renewability, a capacity to speak to and for diverse

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epochs. Perhaps most crucially, while the quotidian experiences of early moderns differed from ours in obvious and important ways, there are some isolable, persisting dimensions of humanness. These are my focus.

Because early modern texts interweave psychological and ecological concerns, they prove especially relevant to defining humanness. In *Hamlet* (1602), for example, Shakespeare exploits the interdependence of self and world, so that the rot pervading Denmark taints its inhabitants. Specifically, the debased king infects the entire geopolitical state. This interplay of self and world is often rightly assessed as a byproduct of humoral theory, so that it activates a particular conception of humanness, one predicated on porousness or permeability.[1] On the other hand, both *Hamlet* and Hamlet draw attention to the possibility—at the very least the glimmer—of a robust or restless interiority, a *self* that periodically merges with and retreats from the surrounding world. In his defiant claim to "that within which passes show," Hamlet acknowledges the individuated self (1.2.85).[2] While this inner orientation does not exempt Hamlet from the demands of nature or the obligations enforced through belonging to a particular community, it intimates the necessity of a complex, fluid model of personhood, one that encompasses psychological as well as ecological principles.

In repeatedly demonstrating the dialectical relationship between self and environment, early modern writers point toward a compromise version of humanness, summed up in the term "eco-self." This hybrid entity enfolds biological exigencies (needs that are pan-organismic), yet it also encompasses the proprietarily human. To my knowledge, the term "eco-self" has not been employed by previous writers, though the concept certainly has roots in early modern scholarship and, more generally, in ecological discourse. For example, Robert N. Watson refers to the "ecological self" in an engaging reading of the identity theme in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Watson emphasizes dispersibility, so that the self is presumed to be diffused throughout the world.

1 Gail Kern Paster's analysis of humoral theory is especially useful for contextualizing early modern preoccupations with embodiment. On the other hand, as this project endeavors to show, early moderns frequently engage questions of inwardness, so they are not thoroughgoing materialists.

2 Katharine Eisaman Maus assesses the importance of Hamlet's self-description in *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. For a very different reading of Hamlet, essentially a repudiation of the inward turn in criticism, see Margreta de Grazia's Hamlet *without Hamlet*. These deservedly influential books stake out opposing moves in early modern studies, whereas my preference is a new synthesis of the two.

As conceived here, the eco-self addresses both the relational dimensions of experience (i.e., Watson's focus) *and* the periodic need to claim a space apart from the world. In this sense, the eco-self extends ecofeminist insights regarding selfhood.[3] For example, in "Self and Community in Environmental Ethics," Wendy Donner makes the case for championing "A strong sense of self, a unity of self, a self-affirming, autonomous self," concepts she believes have been abandoned or discredited in environmental/ecological discourse (385). Following Donner, for oppressed or marginalized individuals and groups, claiming a self can be a liberating move, a vital step toward equity and justice. This self-assertion does not necessarily require abandoning a communal ethos.

Ecofeminist work that focuses on the early modern period provides an especially useful context for understanding the eco-self. In their introduction to *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity* (2011), Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche lay out a fundamental aspect of ecofeminism in their description of the self's constant movement toward and away from the world, which is likewise central to my conception of the eco-self. Focusing on the specificity of female experience, they note that early modern women "necessarily acted in ways that mark them as distinct from and yet ever-connected to—even in continuity with—the natural world they inhabited" (4). The diverse essays in their anthology successfully demonstrate how the discourses of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and feminism prove mutually enriching, even interanimating (5). In her contribution to the collection, Lynne Dickson Bruckner suggests that, without defaulting to essentialism, "we can recuperate the historic bond between the feminine and nature in a productive and inclusive way" (17). She adds, "The historic alignment between women and nature locates a position for all humans to occupy" (25). The eco-self seeks to build on this insight, tracing the self-in-motion in various texts.

My conception of the eco-self is indebted to the pioneering work of ecofeminists, though I emphasize shifting definitions of the self and new possibilities for subjectivity rather than, for example, focusing primarily on establishing or reviving the bond between women and nature. Whereas ecofeminists seek to restore a sense of agentic nature, the current project reconsiders the possibilities for human agency. That said, the eco-self does

3 Freya Matthews's balanced essay, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology," notes the commonalities as well as tensions in the two approaches identified in her title. And she responds to the founding tenets of Deep Ecology, as laid out by Arne Naess. Subsequent chapters consider more fully Matthews's endorsement of the relational self, particularly its affinities with the eco-self.

not originate in tropes or fantasies of dominating nature; rather, it acknowledges humans' continuity with the natural world while simultaneously examining pressing psychological needs, such as those defined by the concept of "individuation." All the texts selected as focal points for ensuing chapters interrogate the relationship between self and world, individual and community, humans and/in nature, so they bring out the implications of the eco-self.

Ecocriticism has been especially lucid in its articulation of what we share with all other living beings. It strikes me that the appeal of such approaches derives partly or even principally from collective weariness, a dissatisfaction with dominant institutions and accompanying values. Charlene Spretnak articulates this issue in *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World* (1997). Commenting on the fragmentary conditions of late-twentieth-century life (she is writing specifically of the Global West), Spretnak identifies an existential threat, "widespread collapse into an enervated self" (12). Notice how the self, so defined, offers cold comfort: it provides refuge from the hostile world but also enforces unwelcome alienation. In terms that sometimes verge on the mystical, Spretnak urges a return to a communitarian ethos, which she believes possible once we recognize that "[*t*]*he real* is poking its true nature through the modern abstractions that have denied it for several centuries" (13). For Spretnak, "the real" encompasses material and corporeal processes, to which she ascribes a kind of sacral power. Of course, in the decades since Spretnak published her book, ecological discourse has embraced the animated materialism she endorses.[4]

The interplay of agency and communion, dating back at least as far as ancient Greece, lends a distinctive shape to Western history. Certain eras celebrate or enforce communal interests, while others enshrine the individual. Indeed, some historians argue that the early modern breaks from the Middle Ages by promoting an individualistic ethos.[5] Generally, ecocritics (as well as ecofeminists and certain other varieties of feminist inquiry) emphasize the dangers of ignoring shared needs and aim to recuperate a communal set of values and accompanying actions. Such efforts are both necessary and laudable. But exigent circumstances, including such natural

4 Jane Bennett's theorization of neo-materialism remains essential given its cogent articulation of all organisms as participants in networks of influence or effect.

5 Joseph Klaits examines the increasing emphasis on individual as opposed to communal interests in his account of witch persecutions. Deborah Willis also examines these tensions in her account of the gendering of witchcraft in the period.

disasters as climate change or pandemics, require a new configuration of agency and communion, or individual and shared interests. To take one example, mitigating the spread of some viruses works only when each member of the collective complies with prescribed measures. Stated bluntly, one infected person behaving carelessly could contaminate a roomful of people, with the effects spiraling out from these unsuspecting carriers in formidable fashion. This scenario demonstrates the interdependence of moral agency or individual responsibility and collective well-being. In advancing the possibilities of the eco-self, the goal is to provide a sort of course correction, an alternative to the object-oriented (or object-obsessed) tendencies of many current strands of materialism.

Ecocriticism and related fields such as ecofeminism lay the conceptual foundations for each chapter. And current philosophical and psychological models of selfhood also prove enriching. For instance, ecopsychology explores the synergy of self and world, so its salient principles inform the readings offered in each chapter.[6] Although it can be tricky to apply one era's insights to the cultural output of a preceding age, recent scholarship often emphasizes innate or biological processes, and these sometimes remain remarkably consistent over time. In *The Birth of the Mind: How a Tiny Number of Genes Creates the Complexities of Human Thought* (2004), Gary Marcus meticulously outlines the genetic basis of all human behavior (a phenomenon that links us to all preceding and succeeding generations) while at the same time insisting on the inextricability of environmental factors from any assessment of essential traits or capacities. He ultimately concludes, "any attempt to fully disentangle nature from nurture is doomed to failure" (167). For those interested in early modern literature, this is an especially significant claim, given that Shakespeare articulates, and possibly originates, the pairing of "nature" and "nurture" as the dual or dueling facets of identity. Their intimate relationship finds succinct expression *The Tempest* (1611), when Prospero complains that Caliban is a "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick" (4.1.188–89). This passage distills the identity-crisis that energizes early modern texts, indicating a desire to understand the origins of personality and behavior. If, as I take it, early moderns self-consciously redefined humanness, the current era exhibits a similar volatility. Writing of our present age, Stefan Herbrechter reflects that

6 James Hillman's distillation of ecopsychology identifies the subfield's abiding interest in where to draw the boundary between self and other or self and world. These questions likewise animate ecocriticism. And, as I seek to demonstrate, they lend a propulsive energy to early modern texts.

"the human and humanity are in radical transition or transformation" (5). Whereas the early moderns were assembling a version of humanness that we have inherited, it seems that we are, often with equal self-consciousness or deliberateness, dismantling it, so this process is central to my overall project.

For some decades, academic work has emphasized the contingency or cultural specificity of all human experience, in turn generating hostility to overarching claims about humanness. We might think of this as part of a general disaffection with the Enlightenment, particularly its version of universal humanity. In certain respects, this antipathy makes sense. After all, the traditional subject of the Enlightenment (i.e., the rational self it imagined and celebrated) often encompassed a narrow range of human experience. Ecocritics, particularly ecofeminists, have painstakingly traced the consequences of a faux-universality, a conception of personhood that excludes various individuals and cultural groups and insists upon (or creates) a gap between self and world. Carolyn Merchant's *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) encapsulates the eco-critique of Enlightenment thought. She offers a compelling story, really a cautionary parable, about humans' misguided flight from the natural world. Merchant's ecological history preceded by some decades ecocritical studies of the early modern period; her arguments discernibly shape ensuing discussions of early modern attitudes toward the natural world, and her characterization of Francis Bacon as an architect of the anti-ecological turn in Western thought has proven influential, though some ecocritics have pushed back against this reading.[7] Implicitly or overtly, early modern eco-critics attend to the relationship between self and world, so in this sense we are intellectual heirs of Merchant.

As early modern writers demonstrate, "nature" resists definition; it sometimes seems that any statement one makes about nature immediately invites its obverse. For instance, in their introduction to *Early Modern Ecostudies: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare* (2008), Karen Raber and Thomas Hallock offer the lucid observation that "Nature implies imperviousness to change, it points to physical laws of the universe beyond human control" (1). I admire the elegant simplicity of this assertion; moreover, "natural laws" have historically been invoked with formidable authority precisely because of their ostensible immutability, just as Raber and Hallock acknowledge. On the other hand, "nature" also readily conjures the antithetical possibility,

7 Todd Borlik outlines the pushback against Merchant's arguments, focusing mainly on diverse perspectives among ecocritics. For a very different critique of Merchant, see Alan Sokal's critique of the humanities.

entailing and connoting perpetual change, as early modern sonneteers frequently remind us.

The lexical richness of "nature" amplifies in the early modern period, given that the era revels in contrariety. To take one example, among the first wave of early modern ecocritics, we find two compelling but seemingly contradictory hypotheses. Specifically, Watson discerns in the period's literature a longing for nature, a nostalgia that emphasizes humans' estrangement from the material world.[8] By contrast, Simon C. Estok mines a vein of early modern ecophobia, a hostility toward nature buried in numerous texts.[9] Obviously, these are clashing presentiments; nonetheless, they are not mutually exclusive. In other words, at times early moderns courted/worshipped/loved nature; alternately, they hated/feared/sought refuge from it, at least judging from the representations examined by Watson and Estok. Of course, even a cursory survey of twenty-first-century attitudes toward the natural world—within and beyond the Global West—will turn up similarly diverse perspectives.

In *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmpolity in Shakespearean Locales* (2013), Laurie Shannon summarizes an important aspect of early modern rhetoric, noting, "when early moderns describe relations between humans and nonhumans, they readily frame them in terms of polity" (3). This is striking because it positions both humans and other animals "within the reach of politics," a move that "runs directly against the grain of traditional political thought from Aristotle to Agamben" (3). The two philosophers named here epitomize the problematic binary thinking that Shannon ascribes to contemporary discourse, whereby humans are imagined in contradistinction to other animals. She seeks to counter an abiding penchant for "relapsing to a categorical alterity at odds with the genealogical commons established in evolutionary theory" (2). Notice how Shannon nimbly skips from the early modern version of affinities between humans and other animals to a post-Darwinian understanding of pan-organismic kinship. In doing so, she expressly decenters anthropocentric concerns.

Similarly disruptive moves manifest in the work of other early modern eco-critics, reinforcing a shared opposition to the hierarchical thinking characteristic of the Enlightenment. For instance, in *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (2006), Erica Fudge points out, "early modern anatomists knew that the human body and

8 See Watson's *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance*.

9 Estok's monograph, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia*, traces the pervasiveness of the attitude named in his title, laying the foundation for much ensuing scholarship.

the animal body were almost identical in the structure and overall workings of many of their organs," and therefore corporeality (the raw material of humanness) could not have been imagined or deployed as "a central source of difference" (6). Fudge demonstrates that a facile binarism, the opposition of human to animal, does not accurately convey early modern thought. Of course, as Fudge acknowledges, early moderns perpetually confronted the possibility of devolving, lapsing into an ostensibly lower form of life. In this respect, other animals provided ballast or ground, as they were used to shore up flimsy definitions of the human. Yet the prospect of boundary crossing, such as by moving from human to beast, was not always or necessarily angst-ridden. A collection of ecocritical essays edited by Jean Feerick and Vin Nardizzi, *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature* (2012), presents abundant textual evidence of early moderns' fundamentally plastic understanding of selfhood, premised on the notion that organisms (human and non-human alike) exist in fluid relations with the surrounding world. Notably, this view of the individual was in flux, shortly to be supplanted by a new version of Western personhood, the one often associated with the Enlightenment. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains, this peculiarly Western self was understood as "bounded, unique, [a] more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe" (31). Generally, ecocritics oppose this conceptualization, effectively unmaking an episteme, by countering the heuristic power of Enlightenment ideas and ideals.

Although the eco-critique of the Enlightenment was both necessary and warranted, this seems an opportune moment to revisit certain issues, such as the repudiation of the individual. In brief, we need the self for reasons that are at once intimately personal and profoundly political. Because it synthesizes diverse needs or experiences, the eco-self offers a remedy for healing the breach between a thoroughgoing materialism that cannot adequately address exclusively human needs or desires and a no-longer-satisfying social constructionism, outmoded because it does not account for the biological/evolutionary dimensions of human experience. The "eco" in eco-self conveys the relational dimensions of humanness, our perpetual—sometimes pleasurable, at times perilous—embeddedness in the surrounding world; "self," by contrast, acknowledges the rich store of aesthetic and cultural endeavors that define humans and embraces the concomitant need to claim a unique vantage point, a space from which the world can be understood and appreciated.

Early modern texts provide ample opportunities for tracking diverse conceptions of self and world and for gauging their interplay. For instance, the oceanic turn in early modern ecocriticism, pioneered in the scholarship

of Dan Brayton and Steven Mentz, shows how Shakespeare and his contemporaries recuperated or reimagined the metaphorical, even visionary, power infusing the natural world.[10] Commenting on oceanic themes in Shakespeare, Brayton speculates that a discernible "plasticity of meaning [...] may well have been the basis for the ocean's appeal to an artist of Ovidian imagination, drawn to transformation, mutability, and the mind's capacity to shape the world. Imagining the trajectory of human life meant, for him, shaping poetry in which the human relationship to salt water is essential" (9). After laying out his absorbing assessment of the oceanic in Shakespeare, Brayton pivots to a consideration of human agency (or perhaps culpability). As he writes, "Human activity has demonstrably caused ecological regime shifts—and collapse—in marine ecosystems from the Caribbean to the Gulf of Maine, from the California Coast to the Baltic" (9).

Early modern writers could not have predicted the ecological disasters Brayton outlines, but they were aware of certain dangers, such as shrinking natural resources. In *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* (2013), Vin Nardizzi brings to light an intriguing relationship between the aesthetic realm, particularly theatrical spaces, and the commercialized uses of the arboreal world. For example, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he discerns an "ecomimetic logic" such that "matters pertaining to forest economy [...] are also matters pertaining to playhouse ecology" (61). Nardizzi's analysis contributes to an important subfield within early modern ecocriticism, scholarship that forefronts material concerns, focusing on the actual resources used in the production of artistic works.[11]

In my view, ecocriticism enriches English studies because it relinks scholarly activity and lived experience. With this in mind, I extend a point Brayton ascribes to Shakespeare, a recognition of "the mind's capacity to shape the world." This attitude, essentially a phenomenological perspective, recurs in literary texts across diverse eras *and* aptly describes how humans move through the world. That is, we shape the world because we understand it through the medium of consciousness, calling upon the twinned workings of memory and anticipation—built-in narrative structures—to lend meaning and coherence to experience. As tempting as it might be to posit a raw or unmediated self, as early modern writers understood, such an entity does not exist. I want to use the early moderns' electrified awareness of the elusive self

10 See Mentz's *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* and Brayton's *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration*, for absorbing studies of oceanic possibilities in early modern texts.

11 For an interesting assessment of the material artifacts used to create sonnets, see Joshua Calhoun's ecocritical essay on the Sonnets.

to arrive at a persisting understanding, a workable model, of humanness. Not incidentally, in the twenty-first century, we retain something of this tension, the gap between the social persona/performative self and an accompanying desire for authenticity. Indeed, the proliferating social media platforms that transform the self into an endless masquerade paradoxically stimulate and frustrate the desire for some stable or authentic self.[12] *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* pursues a model of the self flexible enough to shed light on early modern apprehensions and to engage the concerns or anxieties that delineate our current moment.

In deliberately transgressing the boundaries effected through periodization, my approach taps the presentist energies of some early modern ecocritical work, a body of scholarship that generally prioritizes questions of praxis, so that the formalized study of literature becomes a means of engaging with the world, such as by advocating on behalf of pressing environmental issues. Of course, presentism no longer dominates the scholarship of early modern ecocritics. If, as Todd Borlik suggests, it took some time for ecocriticism to gain traction in early modern studies, now the approach hosts distinct phases or "waves" (the latter is a term Lawrence Buell uses to denote trends in ecocriticism proper).[13] In fact, the inaugural interest in presentism has given way to a new movement, an outcropping of ecocritical essays inflected by a retooled historicism.[14]

Ultimately, adjudicating between presentism and historicism is unnecessary because the choice is false. We can embrace the forward-leaning, relevance-seeking goals of the former while also being diligent in the effort (always important, never perfectly realizable) to understand what it was like to be alive in the early modern period, as historicist critics endeavor to show. Peter Erickson elucidates the issue in *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* (1991), reminding us, "no study of the past is totally separated from, or uninformed by, the present," which means that "the historical distinction between past and present is relative rather than absolute" (3). This is especially pertinent to studies of the early modern period; after all, the label itself reflects the judgment that we find in the earlier period the origins of values and institutions lending shape and meaning to the post-modern

12 A recent collection of essays by Jia Tolentino juxtaposes the desire for an authentic self with the distorting effects of social media performances of selfhood.

13 Buell outlines specific movements or "waves" in ecocriticism in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*.

14 Sharon O'Dair endorses presentism in early modern eco-studies. By contrast, Ken Hiltner cautions against "succumbing to presentism" (82).

world.[15] More recently, critics such as Marjorie Garber and James Shapiro have illuminated the time-traveling properties of many Shakespearean texts.[16] In Garber's judgment, "Shakespeare sampled, Shakespeare quoted without quotation marks, has become a lingua franca of modern cultural exchange" (xviii). She positions Shakespeare alongside other "initiators of discourse" (a term borrowed from Michel Foucault) to convey his abiding influence (xxii). Shapiro likewise emphasizes the adaptability of Shakespeare, noting how his conflicts, characters, or shaping themes speak to and for astonishingly different cultural contexts. While Shakespeare's texts often seem remarkably portable, other writers also evince a similar flexibility, arguably because a hallmark of this era was the systematic, self-conscious effort to redefine the self. The struggle to understand humanness remains of pressing significance, which offers at least a partial explanation for the enduring relevance and the curiously presentist dimensions of early modern literature.

A novel variant of presentism unifies a recent collection of ecocritical essays, *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination* (2019), edited by Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth. In distinct ways, the contributors to this volume show that interpretation constitutes a spatialized practice. In his preface to *Premodern Ecologies*, Robert Allen Rouse explains the methodology that creates a framework for the book, noting that the goal is "to implement a critical practice of context-driven interpretation that attributes an interpretive weight to the geographies of the places in which a text is both produced and consumed" (xi). This reading strategy seems exceptionally well-suited to ecocritical work, as it emphasizes the relationship between person and world and makes the case for exploiting (rather than ignoring or trying to overcome) differences of time, place, ideology, and so forth. Moreover, this form of presentism highlights the experiential/sensorial dimensions of reading, showing how we automatically, albeit unconsciously, refract literary landscapes through our own recollected travels across various terrain. This awareness of the reader's embodiment, which reaffirms the interpenetration of self and world, likewise informs my conceptualization of the eco-self.

For my purposes, what is most exciting in *Premodern Ecologies* is its endorsement of the generative work of the imagination, and the adjacent reminder that a rich inner life, a tendency toward introspection, could

15 A succinct explanation of the shift from "Renaissance" to "early modern" is provided by Leah S. Marcus.

16 See Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, and Shapiro, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future*.

ground us more firmly in the world. This realization crystallizes in the conclusion to Jeffrey J. Cohen's engaging essay about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Having reexamined the dual trajectories that hurtle the poem forward (i.e., the rhythmic turning of the vegetal world, as well as the relentless movement of the Christian calendar), Cohen concludes by recreating a particular moment from his own travels through a park near his home. In this pleasingly meditative interlude, the commonplace action of gazing into a puddle suddenly takes on fresh meaning. In Cohen's words, "Time, for a moment, slowed. Water became sky, the ground close to home disclosed a deeper story. I knew at this moment that I had to take this picture, an emblem for my eco-temps, to share my *here* with you" (52). Literary texts enable the everyday magic to which Cohen alludes, the ability to make one's situation—oneself—suddenly available to others. Paradoxically, the very specificity one inhabits becomes transportable. Although mega-generalizations about most topics should usually be avoided, the unique energy and value of reading literature is its infinite assay: the attempt to reveal a self or selves in motion, engaging with and withdrawing from the world. The eco-self encapsulates this fluxing process, so it acknowledges how humans—as everything else—are permanently ensconced in the world yet likewise capable, and at times desirous, of claiming some distance from it.

In a way, the gap between person and world has closed. This is because current versions of humanness enforce a particular understanding of evolutionary theory. The trend, a variant of materialism, is discernible in multiple academic disciplines and across the varied domains of popular culture.[17] In these diverse contexts, the distant past—usually the Paleolithic era—takes on acute significance, ostensibly because, in this vanished world, humans existed in perfect harmony with the surrounding world.[18] This theory holds that our ancestors' physical characteristics and cognitive abilities perfectly suited their environment, whereas now we labor under ancient endowments manifestly out of tune with the conditions of modern life. This tidy declensionist narrative implies our species' perpetual estrangement from the natural world, a judgment that requires ignoring or discounting the motive principle at the heart of evolutionary theory. Notwithstanding

17 Peter Godfrey-Smith concisely defines materialism in *Metazoa*, noting "that experiences and other mental goings-on are biological" (20). As *Metazoa* demonstrates, the phenomenon of life erupting, differentiating, and spiraling out across the Earth is astonishing, as is our ability to read and reflect on it. For an especially illuminating analysis of materiality in early modern texts, see Jonathan Gil Harris's *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*.

18 Robin Fox epitomizes the tendency to enshrine the Paleolithic as the Golden Age in our evolutionary story. See *The Passionate Mind: Sources of Destruction and Creativity*.

nostalgia for the Paleolithic era, some recent scholarship on evolution presents a more nuanced and complex account of the relationship between humans and the spaces, natural as well as cultural, that we inhabit. Once again, the eco-self reflects this more balanced arrangement.

In Search of Consilience: The Eco-Self as Compromise

There are good reasons to emphasize the irreducibly biological dimensions of human experience, but we should also attend to the uniqueness of our species—just as researchers do when studying bats, chimpanzees, or any other type of organism. Certain exclusively human needs originate in cultural rather than biological processes; assuming the neat separation of the two subverts the effort to understand humanness. After all, even E.O. Wilson, founder of sociobiology, celebrates proprietarily human needs/abilities, such as our attachment to the aesthetic, symbol-using, story-making realms of experience. Indeed, Wilson launches *The Origins of Creativity* (2018) with the claim that "[c]reativity is the unique and defining trait of our species," adding that "its ultimate goal" is "self-understanding" (3).

In *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (2016), Joseph Henrich dispenses with the either/or treatment of "nature" and "culture" by insisting on their shared contributions to human evolution. Although evolutionary arguments often emphasize cross-species commonalities, Henrich attends to exclusively human practices, accomplishments, and values, among which he includes the desire to "play chess, read books, build missiles, enjoy spicy dishes, donate blood, cook food, obey taboos, pray to gods, and make fun of people who dress or speak differently" (ix). As the subtitle implies, *The Secret of Our Success* links evolutionary adaptations to cultural forces; once again, the effect is implosive, forcing a crumbling of the nature/culture dyad.

In a more recent book, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (2020), Henrich offers an even bolder claim about the effects of cultural practices on evolving humanness. In brief, he argues that the early modern period hosted the birth of a new subset of the human species, the WEIRD individual newly defined by the following traits: "Western," "Educated," "Industrialized," "Rich," and "Democratic." This emergent human, he suggests, was "psychologically unusual" (31). Henrich is not the first to remark on the novel traits associated with the early modern self. As he recognizes, the qualities in question comport with the Geertzian synopsis of Western personhood,

an understanding premised on the notion (or illusion) that humans exist in contradistinction to the world (31). Admittedly, many ecocritics devote considerable intellectual energy to refuting precisely this version of the individual. Nevertheless, Henrich raises the distinct possibility that this new self, created through a complex network of cultural innovations, is part of our evolutionary heritage, not a perverse or "unnatural" departure from it. Indeed, the relevant changes are inscribed in the very tissue of our bodies, in measurably thicker corpus callosa.[19]

A foundational premise of *The WEIRDest People in the World* is the straightforward postulate that reading innovated our species; emphasizing this point might be the best way to restore the perceived relevance or cultural significance of literary studies.[20] Doing so fosters the uniquely human appreciation for literary virtuosity, whereby each linguistic or syntactic or formal element in an artful text performs its role to perfection. An elegant account of the transforming effects of literacy anchors *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011), in which Stephen Greenblatt documents a sharp turn from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. This tidy division of historical epochs risks alienating some readers, but Greenblatt offers abundant evidence in favor of the disjunctive paradigm. For him, the early modern period's debt to the classical world is best expressed in terms of a mutual "glorious affirmation of vitality," a celebration of the corporeal/earthly/material dimensions of existence and a simultaneous turn away from the religious or spiritual or supernatural (9).

Greenblatt makes a compelling story out of the shift named in his title. His unlikely hero, the Italian Poggio Bracciolini, ignites a cultural and intellectual revolution by recovering an ancient manuscript and ensuring its circulation in the world.[21] Of this plot point Greenblatt writes, "The finding of a lost book does not ordinarily figure as a thrilling event, but behind that one moment was the arrest and imprisonment of a pope, the burning of heretics, and a great culturewide explosion of interest in pagan

19 Henrich documents the effects of literacy on the corpus callosum. As he argues throughout his book, the traits unique to WEIRDness have set the standard for understanding humanness per se, though they do not universally apply.

20 Various writers, with disparate aims, have chronicled the self-imposed marginalization of literary criticism. From an outsider's (i.e., physicist's) perspective on this issue, see Sokal's attempted takedown of the humanities.

21 Greenblatt's account of the found manuscript implicitly endorses a progress narrative of Western cultural development. For a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the spread of literacy, see Margaret W. Ferguson's *Daughters of Dido: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France*.

antiquity" (13). The detonative process to which Greenblatt refers culminates in a new arrangement of humans and nature, premised, he suggests, on an appreciation for "order in the universe [...] built into the nature of things, into the matter that composes everything, from stars to men to bedbugs" (237). This version of materialism structures *The Swerve*, implicitly offering a recuperative account of the relationship between humans and the environment. The enviable lyricism and compactness of the story Greenblatt tells might be liabilities as well as assets, given that historical developments are always messier than any coherent account allows. For one thing, as early modern ecocritics have meticulously demonstrated, the period's attitudes toward nature ranged from biophilia to ecophobia. The images and metaphors used to represent nature were similarly diverse, a range sometimes evident within a single text. To take one example, in *Titus Andronicus* (c.1598–92) Shakespeare variously associates femaleness with savage tigers and vulnerable deer, thereby calling upon nature to figure conflicting qualities. In short, engaging with early modern ecocriticism would have enriched Greenblatt's birth story for modernity.

If *The Swerve* locates the roots of modernity in a tilt toward materialism, the book also advances a subtle, powerful counter-tale, an argument on behalf of human autonomy and agency and even of human exceptionalism. After all, though *The Swerve* unfolds with the pace of a thriller, it is structured around the adventures of Poggio, a protagonist who bears all the traces of humanness. Once again, it is the determination to preserve and disseminate a book, an object whose contents are only meaningful to humans, that propels Greenblatt's story. Even though this work concedes that pan-organismic kinship is inscribed at the molecular level so that humans are positioned in the same plane as everything else, distinctively human needs cry out for attention.

As previously acknowledged, countering certain Enlightenment tenets has been a paramount goal in contemporary ecological discourse. Most notably, those interested in ecological or environmental concerns treat the very concept of the individual as suspect, associating it with a destructive worldview. Additionally, critics representing a range of approaches have taken issue with the progress narrative that identifies literacy as one of the engines of ostensibly "forward" movement. Or, in Margaret W. Ferguson's cogent distillation of this position, "literacy costars with print and Protestantism in a narrative of human progress toward enlightenment" (3). This stance, as Ferguson notes, extends the arguments of Claude Lévi-Strauss, particularly the so-called "Great Divide" theory that posits crucial distinctions between literate and non-literature cultures. The counter-tendency construes writing

as inherently oppressive, a vehicle of domination. Both positions have merit because as a technology, writing is morally neutral, or perhaps ambiguous, in that it can be activated to beneficent or sinister effect, as early modern writers variously demonstrate. An important through line here concerns the centrality of reading to the version of the self, the eco-self, that emerged in the period.

The early modern texts selected for inclusion in ensuing chapters bring out the readerly dimensions of the eco-self. Perhaps more crucially, literary navigations of the eco-self model the process by which actual selves are constituted. This is because the self arises out of continual interactions with the surrounding world and the reflective processes accompanying these experiences. Philosopher Thomas Metzinger, whose work influences my understanding of selfhood, offers a lucid explanation of the relevant self–world dynamic, noting, "Yes, there is an outside world, and yes, there is an objective reality, but in moving through this world, we constantly apply unconscious filter mechanisms, and in doing so, we unknowingly construct our own individual world, which is our 'reality tunnel'" (9). Another philosopher, Heidi Ravven, makes a similar point about selfhood. Ravven suggests that the self "is not 'atomic,' not isolated and contained just within our skin. Rather, there is a self beyond itself, beyond the physical body" (287). While this position rightly acknowledges how the self arises through ongoing negotiations with the surrounding world, Ravven often relies upon a materialist worldview that seems unnecessarily limited, such as contending that free will cannot exist because scientists have been unable to isolate a neuro-structure in which it resides.[22] By contrast, the eco-self recuperates moral agency, lighting the way toward a renewed understanding of the rational or deliberative functions that distinguish humans from other species. In elucidating the eco-self, the hope is to offer a newly energized reading strategy, one that permits us to time-jump in assessing certain fundamental properties of humanness and restores an appreciation for the unique vigor and range of early modern texts.

Crisis and the Practice of Criticism

I began writing this book before the novel coronavirus took possession of our lives, but the global health crisis brought various themes into sharp

22 Ravven persistently maintains that free will is an illusion, or perhaps a delusion, given that no particular region of the brain seems responsible for it. An impetus for the current project is my conviction that we cannot afford to jettison the concept of free will.

relief. The pandemic is humbling, an irrefutable demonstration of nature's claims on us. Curiously, the virus that causes COVID-19 thrives on quintessentially human traits. Specifically, the need to socialize and the nearly constant use of our hands—to gesture, to show respect or affection, or to pick up and hold objects—propel contagion. Recognizing this, ecocriticism must now be prepared to grapple with distinctively human needs and behaviors without abandoning the important work of illuminating what we share with all other organisms. Overtly or unconsciously, any work of criticism binds itself to the moment of its construction. The time-stamping of critical work need not be viewed as a liability, given that particulars must always be addressed before anything approaching universal or generally applicable claims can be established. Focalizing attention on the relationship between humans and the natural world, the pandemic might bring a new vitality to criticism. This fits perfectly with the longstanding ecocritical attunement to praxis, as this approach originated in the awareness of global environmental crises and the necessity of acting. At times, this orientation to lived experience produces an odd malaise, a fear that critical practice is not only inconsequential but possibly detrimental, environmentally speaking.[23] A different set of concerns informs the introduction to *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (2006), in which Robert N. Watson worries that ecocriticism might be "the last resort of identity politics in the academy" (4). These and other like-minded ecocritics raise legitimate concerns, but they ignore or discount the intrinsic value of reading and studying literature, activities that distinguish our species. Additionally, if the pandemic reminds us of life's fleetingness and fragility by foregrounding our fundamentally biological identities, it also provides abiding evidence of art's necessity in human life, a concern that awakens affinities with early moderns.

In *A Future for Criticism* (2010), which assesses major trends in critical practice, Catherine Belsey suggests, "Fiction not only shows what is thinkable at a specific time," it also "affect[s] what is thought" (107). The formalized study of literature, therefore, illuminates and alters the knowledge that lends shape and meaning to life in a particular era. Belsey urges critics to pay attention to the pleasures made available through reading literature. She also offers particular methodological advice, suggesting that "we should

23 Jonathan Bate makes this point at length in *Song of the Earth*, which develops his thesis that "culture" exists in unavoidably violent symbiosis with "nature." Also see Buell's introduction to *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* for a discussion of the putative limits or liabilities of ecocriticism.

work outwards from the inside, allowing the fictional texts to construct for criticism a knowledge of its own" (103). Here, Belsey implies that criticism is all too easily hijacked by sociological or ideological aims. The solution? Embracing the uniqueness of literary texts or other cultural artifacts deserving of aesthetic analysis. In other words, methodological grace, if not purity, should define critical practice.

Heeding Belsey's advice does not require defaulting to an archaic formalism but, rather, demonstrating literature's deep engagement with the themes, issues, or cruxes relevant to the approach one favors. Ecocriticism consistently meets this standard, and it especially suits the present moment given the renewed emphasis on humans' embedment in natural processes.

Obviously, mortality stalks us all, though this does not mean we are accustomed to dealing with death. In the world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, of course, death was omnipresent, not an unpleasantness that could (however temporarily) be sealed off from daily life. Notably, Shakespeare's own life was bookended by contagion. In 1564, when Shakespeare was several months old, a virulent plague, reminiscent of the Black Death that swept through the Middle Ages in the middle fourteenth century, menaced Stratford. In a way, a whiff of the miraculous accompanies the infant Shakespeare's survival.[24] Biographer Park Honan reminds us that Shakespeare seems to have died of a mysterious fever, lending an eerie symmetry to the conditions surrounding his arrival to and exit from the world. In an article published in *The New Yorker* shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stephen Greenblatt observes that Shakespeare's works have remarkably little to say about the plague, though he sometimes uses images of pestilence to rhetorical effect. Perhaps Shakespeare remained comparatively silent on the issue of disease *because* it pervaded life. Then as now, those things that weave into the fabric of daily existence tend to go unremarked. In this light, literary criticism performs important epistemological work, bringing to light the taken-for-granted or exposing the newly contested.

Historian Norman F. Cantor considers the impact of the Black Death on the Middle Ages and traces the ongoing effects of "chaotic morbidity."[25] Viewed in these terms, the early modern period takes on the appearance of

24 Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* and Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare* offer enlightening accounts of the crucial social, cultural, and political contexts in which to place Shakespeare's writing.

25 For Cantor's influential analysis, see *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*.

a post-apocalyptic landscape, albeit one in which bleakness and deprivation cede to artistic innovation and intellectual ingenuity. As scholars from various disciplines attest, diverse artistic mediums of the early modern period celebrate the human body, infusing it with a beauty and realism lacking in medieval art; representations of the natural world undergo a similar transformation.[26] This newfound appreciation for the material world, including the bodies inhabiting it, is by now a commonplace in our understanding of the period's robust aesthetic output. Nevertheless, the transition from rampaging anguish to the exaltation of bodies (human or otherwise) should give us pause, as there is nothing predictable or logical in this perceptual and artistic shift. Stated another way, a more expected response to the cruelties of late medieval life would be a surge of artworks confirming humans' proneness to death and decay. With this in mind, early modern cultural innovations take on a rebellious character, marking an explicit counterpoint to lived experience.[27]

The early modern celebration of corporeality, abetted by the self-conscious revitalization of classical writers, artists, and thinkers, did incite psychological crisis. The period's evolving aesthetic required a new confrontation with mortality. In a way, death—conceptualizations or apprehensions of mortality—became feral, as the chapter on the Sonnets suggests, because traditional beliefs were in a state of flux. For instance, as Philippe Ariès suggests, the longstanding metaphor of death-as-sleep was moribund. Death, therefore, took on a new or renewed ferocity. Across the cycle, Shakespeare invokes art as a reliable means of combating time, decay, and death. On the other hand, a strain of bitter acceptance, a reluctant ecology, infuses early modern tragedy. Shakespeare draws attention to this attitude in *Hamlet* when Gertrude offers the pseudo-solacing point that Hamlet should cease grieving for his father because such losses are so very commonplace. She advises her son, "Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72–73). Even if Gertrude intends the advice as balm for grief, her words miss the mark. But they are instructive for ecocritics: in effect, Gertrude offers a mini-lesson in ecology, an assertion of the cycling rhythms of nature and humans' ineluctable place therein. As

26 Edward William Tayler's *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* outlines key aspects of the shifting attitudes toward and depictions of the natural world in this period; for an updated perspective on art and nature, see Randy Thornhill's essay "Darwinian Aesthetics Informs Traditional Aesthetics."

27 See art historian Mary D. Garrard's *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy* for an engrossing study of the way in which the Black Death catalyzed Renaissance humanism and stimulated artistic production.

I want to demonstrate, early modern tragedy takes up this theme, showing how the genre concedes humans' embedment in nature *and* mourns this reality.[28]

At its core, ecocriticism reveals the complex, multiform relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world. Research supports the claims that humans have a built-in love of nature *and* that we are wired to fear or loathe it.[29] Rather than establishing which position is correct, the goal here is exploring diverse permutations of humans and (or in) nature. Now more than ever, the central concepts in ecocriticism, along with the vocabulary that constitutes its architecture, must be called upon to make sense of the world. For example, numerous ecocritics have taken up the analytical challenge of differentiating between *zoe* and *bios*; these terms, bequeathed to us from the ancient Greeks, both denote "life." Whereas "*zoe*" refers to the instinctive, primal, and physiological, "*bios*" conjures the human-built world, including ideas, institutions, and artifacts of culture.[30] Generally speaking, ecocritics have subordinated "*bios*" to "*zoe*," principally to highlight our enmeshment in nature. This stance deliberately rejects the Enlightenment version of the self as an isolate subject governed by reason, a faculty presumptively belonging exclusively to humans. In any case, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* offers a different perspective on tensions between *zoe* and *bios*, showing how critics' preferences for one term over the other hew to assumptions of permanence. That is, ecocritics who celebrate *zoe* embrace the continuity it brings, as in the periodic regeneration of the botanical world. On the other hand, champions of *bios* assign posterity, longevity, and even permanence to cultural or aesthetic forms, as if in agreement with the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnets, who repeatedly and self-servingly touts the immortalizing effects of poeticizing. Crucially, these diverse positions link up in their shared (albeit usually ignored) confirmation that we chase permanence.

28 For a compelling analysis of ecological awareness in the early modern period, see Randall Martin, *Shakespeare & Ecology*. As I aim to show, this awareness often triggers anxiety in early modern text.

29 Edward O. Wilson makes the case for humans' innate love of nature in *Biophilia*; for an account of humans' antipathy toward and estrangement from the natural world, see Simon C. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Scientific research confirms both positions, indicating the importance of culture, context, and experience in assessing humans' attitudes toward the natural world.

30 Cary Wolfe argues in favor of *zoe* over *bios* throughout *Before the Law: Humans and Others in a Biopolitical Frame*. Lewis Hyde's discussion of the oppositional (or complementary) relationship between *zoe* and *bios* is likewise helpful; see *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*.

We now have empirical and qualitative evidence that selves are at once culturally constructed and biologically determined so that segregating *zoe* from *bios* proves increasingly difficult. Freed from the necessity of choosing one over the other, we release the fullest potentialities of both, which is my goal in posing the eco-self as the best means of understanding humanness. This version of the human materializes in the early modern era and likewise speaks to contemporary experiences. With this in mind, I cannot help but wonder if our post-pandemic world will host a revved-up period of creative output, as happened in the wake of the Black Death. In this respect, we appropriate to ourselves the rejuvenating properties of the Renaissance, including the lushness of sensuous experience.

Reasserting the Self in an Age of Hypermaterialism

Updated theories of embodiment offer bracing insights into the ebb and flow of existence, so they highlight the ways in which humans (like everything else) continually interact with other entities. As previously mentioned, just such a relational awareness, which Watson terms the "ecology of the self," was already available to early moderns, though this apprehension of personhood was giving way, as evidenced by the changing meaning of "individual." Originally denoting the embedment of person in world (including the physical environment and the social order), "individual" morphed into its own antonym, coming to denote the isolate, autonomous subject typically associated with Enlightenment thought. The current materialist hegemony, discernible across diverse academic and lexical fields, directly challenges the hierarchies established by Cartesian thought. Simply put, the pivot to materialism centers corporeal or biological concerns, and it invokes evolutionary theory to explain most phenomena, including behavioral patterns among humans. This shift was necessary, as it remedied the false notion of humans' separation from the rest of nature. I am particularly interested in how the ascendance of materialism affects the self and in the related concepts of autonomy and free will.

Political scientist Jane Bennett takes up this issue in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), which advocates for a theory that "acknowledges an indeterminate vitality in the world without slipping back into a vitalism of nonmaterial agents" (92). This stance downplays or even repudiates the individual, instead prioritizing process and flux, the oscillating patterns that define existence. Influential theorists such as

Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad similarly emphasize boundarylessness.[31] An ethical imperative to generate sounder ecological and environmental policies and modes of being powers much of this current scholarship. Even so, the widespread insistence on systems rather than individual subjects mutes moral agency. Bennett herself intimates this. To give a mundane example, she writes of consuming potato chips, speculating that doing so is not really a choice once the chip is in hand. She proposes to "treat food as conative bodies vying alongside and within another complex body" (39). The "dominant chip" requires or compels the act of consuming it (40). I suspect this example is meant rather playfully as a means for Bennett to bring to life her theoretical suppositions. Still, it encapsulates the lack-of-agency assumption so often endemic to current theories of materialism. Pursued to its inevitable conclusions, the example suggests that rampant consumption simply cannot be reined in. If true, this would hamstring the environmentalist movement, particularly its conservationist efforts.

If, as I take it, we now live in an era of hypermaterialism, this has been a somewhat recent development. For instance, in their introduction to *Material Feminisms* (2008), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman write of feminism's general "retreat from materiality" (3). They object to the tendency on the part of social-constructionist feminists to conceive of "material reality" as something wholly distinct from "language, discourse, and culture" (3). In an essay appearing in the same volume, Elizabeth Grosz offers a similar argument, writing, "There has traditionally been a strong resistance on the part of feminists to any recourse to the questions of nature" (23). Now, roughly thirteen years since the publication of *Material Feminisms*, the social-constructivist position has been soundly defeated in most academic enclaves, with spiraling cultural implications. In the specific context of early modern studies, materialism clearly dominates academic inquiry, so this tendency receives sustained attention across various chapters.[32] On the positive side, this indicates a broad acceptance of scientific research. But the original critique of "essentialism," to use an older term for the materialist camp, has been discarded, though the issues it raised remain important. Specifically, as Grosz cautions, we need "a complex and subtle account of [...] biology," which would render it suitable to conveying "the rich

31 Alaimo's "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature" presents her theory of interconnectivity, whereby bodies are imagined in continual dynamism with the surrounding world; for Barad's similar perspective on the unbounded self, see "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter."

32 In "Materialism and Reification in Renaissance Studies," David Hawkes offers a useful overview of materialism as the leitmotif in early modern scholarship.

variability of social, cultural, and political life" (24). Of course, the problem is that describing (i.e., generating accounts of a thing) too easily slips into prescribing, with the relevant narratives accruing a delimiting power. To give one example, Galenic science governed apprehensions of gender for centuries. Furthermore, the one-sex model, as Thomas Laqueur observes, retained some of its heuristic force even after early modern scientists had regular access to human corpses and were able to dissect and study them.[33] Simply put, early modern anatomists "discovered" in the body what they expected to find. In sum, the tools of "language, discourse, and culture" will always enable our examinations of material reality. With all these points in mind, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* seeks to give the pendulum a slight nudge in the other direction as a means of countering the hypermaterialism of our era. Doing so does not entail rejecting evolutionary theory or the insights generated by the natural sciences; nor does it mean reverting to social constructionism. Rather, the goal is to establish the limits of materialism, which itself cannot adequately define or explain humanness.

To make the case for an updated self, one attuned to material as well as tangible concerns, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* draws upon current psychological research, including cognitive behavioral theory. Especially useful for defining the eco-self is the work of cognitive psychologist Jonathan Haidt. Deeply influenced by evolutionary psychology, Haidt concedes that a preponderance of human behavior derives from "automatic processing."[34] On the other hand, he presents a lucid and workable theory of human agency and accompanying ethical obligations. Simply put, Haidt reminds us that "all societies must resolve a small set of questions about how to order society, the most important being how to balance the needs of individuals and groups" (16–17). This delicate negotiation takes on acute significance in the early modern period, as the self was under reconstruction and the ensuing changes rewired the circuitries of moral thought. My aim is to bring out this tension, an emerging set of ethical dilemmas, that manifests in various early modern texts.

From an ecological point of view, a dread of the Individual, that hubristic creature enshrined in the Enlightenment, makes perfect sense. On the other

33 Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* traces the persisting influence of the one-sex model, adroitly showing how "sex" was conceptualized as the more fluid term, with gender therefore activated in support of maintaining distinct socio-political roles between men and women.

34 See *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom,* for Haidt's account of "automatic processing" versus deliberative decision-making (13). He believes the former dominates, though we do have some capacity for moral agency.

hand, romanticizing groups carries its own risks or blind spots. Consider the following entities: community, collective, mob. Each connotes a specific type of group dynamic with radically varying outcomes. Groups can provide cover for unjust or brutal actions, a phenomenon especially acute during times of stress or crisis, whether caused by social unrest, natural disasters, or an admixture of the two.[35] Potentially troubling aspects of collective identity materialize in "groupthink," which Ravven defines as "the social pressures exerted by the leaders of a group and its overall dynamics toward loyal consensus of opinion and the elimination of doubting and dissonant voices" (127). Moreover, groups often coalesce around their antipathy toward perceived outsiders or Others. Pascal Boyer illuminates this tendency in *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create*, writing, "A great part of coalitional psychology consists in mobilizing support against others" (45). This dynamic, we might think of it as "rage bonding," is especially pronounced in times of heightened suffering or deprivation—as we see in our own tumultuous world.[36] When groups morph into lethal mobs, they show us the dark side of "hive" experiences. The appeal of hive experiences is the *temporary* jettisoning of selfhood or self-consciousness, as one enters a collective realm of experience. In such contexts, a group of people moves as if with a single body and singular purpose. This very quality also holds the key to the potentially menacing aspects of the hive experience. As Haidt explains in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012), "Fascism is hive psychology scaled up to grotesque heights. It's the doctrine of the nation as a superorganism, within which the individual loses all importance" (280). Subordinating the individual to the group does not always or necessarily yield desirable results. Finally, the necessity of the self (self-concept, if one prefers) snaps into focus when this elusive entity is imperiled, *in extremis*, threatened with complete erasure, such as when the fragile individual proves no match for groupthink and the actions ensuing from it.[37]

35 In *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt shows how societies oscillate between xenophilia and xenophobia, noting that the latter quality often ensues from the association of "plagues," "epidemics," and "new disease" with "foreigners" (173). In sum, deprivation or suffering triggers antipathy toward outsiders.

36 Boyer's research extends Freud's argument about the scapegoat function, which he makes at some length in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. All this work unsettles the belief that collective actions are necessarily salutary.

37 For an unapologetic defense of individual rights and an accompanying critique of groupthink, consider Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women's Rights*. Hirsi Ali argues that "intersectionality" and "globalism" are detrimental to women, as various types of female-directed oppression end up being ignored or justified out of a desire to honor cultural

While Descartes got a lot wrong, which we have no trouble pointing out from our distanced perspective, he might yet have something to teach us about humanness, as neuroscientist António Damásio suggests. His influential book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), joins the chorus of voices raised against the Cartesian notion of selfhood, particularly what he terms "the abyssal separation between body and mind" (250). Crucially, however, Damásio, retains—in fact, insists upon—the importance of the self, which he defines as "a perpetually re-created neurobiological state," and he rejects the notion of a "selfless cognition" (100). In short, we crave or even require acknowledgement of our inner lives, the intangibles that cannot be measured but nonetheless prove deeply meaningful.[38] Damásio's perspective on the self nourishes my understanding of the eco-self, so it marks an important through-line linking various chapters.

Assessing the Anthropocene

Ecocriticism constitutes a vital tool for understanding the complex, varied relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world. Of course, literary criticism and other academic endeavors housed within the humanities do not generate new empirical knowledge of the natural world; likewise, critical practice is not the place for testing scientific theories. Still, while tensions between "the two cultures," the sciences and the humanities, have proven tenacious, this does not negate the value of humanities disciplines. For instance, although literary critics are not authorities on how evolution works, we are equipped to evaluate the circulation of narratives about it and the meanings and values attached to it. This might mean bringing to light latent contradictions in the currently vogueish materialism. Specifically, consider that, even as various disciplines emphasize what humans share with all other organisms and note our ongoing indebtedness to evolutionary processes, some researchers advance a new form of essentialism that posits intractable differences—*neurological* differences— between men and

differences. This is, obviously, a detonative point, which is all the more reason we should engage with it.

38 Psychologist Paul Bloom provides an exceptionally useful model for understanding the complexities of humanness in *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*. He cites abundant research demonstrating how expectations and assumptions shape sensorial experiences and produce measurably different activity in the brain, including the enjoyment of food (25–53).

women, ostensibly owing to the intrauterine influence of testosterone on a developing fetus.[39] The tension between these arguments, both testaments to the sway of materialism, fascinates, precisely because it reminds us that research is never value-free. With this in mind, it is worth considering who wins or loses from the argument that men's and women's brains are simply different and that these distinctions shape our lives. Such questions of value, meaning, or purpose lend a distinctive shape to the humanities.

Earlier eras might have axiomatically accepted the notion that literature creates the opportunity for social transformation or, indeed, that it propels bracing engagements with the fundamental questions of human experience. We probably cannot assert either possibility with assurance right now, given the general downturn, the shrinking role and vanishing prestige, of the humanities.[40] Cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf speculates on the waning emphasis on literary studies, suggesting that because so much of our reading lives happens on screens, we have less and less immersive contact with actual books. This should concern us, Wolf argues, because reading primarily on screens diminishes one's ability and, equally crucially, willingness to tackle complex texts.[41] Perhaps, then, we are undoing the effects of the intellectual/cultural/social revolution that distinguished the early modern era. In any case, according to Wolf, our era's flagging interest in reading books erodes certain cognitive abilities. But this decline can be corrected, provided we rededicate to reading; in this sense, English departments (and critical practice) have a potentially crucial role to play given their ability to generate conversations about literature.

In addition to restoring a love for and facility with reading, critical practice can also demonstrate its value by providing a vocabulary and conceptual framework for assessing the assemblage of stories that define any era,

39 Cordelia Fine documents the tendency in current scholarship to insist that testosterone shapes fetal brain development in *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society*; she shows how the evidence for this claim is rather scant. Fine's *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* is also important, as it shows how an essentialist perspective on gender roles skews contemporary research.

40 Kurt Spellmeyer analyzes the downturn in the humanities in *Arts of Living: Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-First Century*. Although I accept his analysis of the problem (depleted funding for the humanities and dwindling programs and opportunities across the landscapes of higher education), his solutions focus strictly on vocational concerns, so they do not address the intrinsic value of reading, writing, or critically engaging ideas.

41 Wolf documents the cognitive liabilities sparked by reading mainly on screens in *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. Wolf does not advance a simplistic luddite position, whereby readers are urged to shun computers and technology. Rather, she calls for a judicious readjustment of our reading habits.

including our own. With this in mind, I want to consider the *genre* of the Anthropocene, our current age. In literary contexts, knowledge of generic conventions primes us to identify the techniques employed to deliberate effect and to appreciate and evaluate the content of what we are reading. Genre encompasses writers' obligations and readers' expectations, so in this sense it is transactional. All of this is to say: if we can identify the genre of our current age, we will have a clearer sense of where we are headed.

Now in common usage across multiple disciplines and cultural contexts, "Anthropocene" insists upon the novelty of our current age, the way it presents unique challenges vis-à-vis the human/nature relationship. In their trenchant overview of the Anthropocene, Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall suggest that this era requires us to accept that "human agency," which must be "decoupled from individual subjectivity," is "radically open to nonhuman influences" (62). The first point, the repudiation of the individual, is a commonplace in ecological discourse, and it receives sustained attention throughout each of these chapters. Obviously, no single individual can transform environmental policies or stave off disaster. Yet one person can pollute an entire watershed. Beyond this, lacking a sense of personal accountability frees people to overlook the daily behaviors that do have discernible impacts on the world, though this does not exempt large corporations from responsibility for their actions. Rather than abandoning the concept of the individual, we need an updated version of the personalized dimensions of human agency. That said, Boes and Marshall's point about humans being profoundly susceptible to "nonhuman influences" is inarguable.

Theorists of the Anthropocene repeatedly call attention to the theme of reciprocity. This is the defining narrative of our time with respect to humans and (or in) nature. As Boes and Marshall see it, "Nature has of course always acted in turn upon human societies"; But only in recent times have we had to confront the possibility that nature might also fundamentally alter our existence as a species and that, what is more, it might do so as the ultimate outcome of processes that we ourselves set in motion" (61). When we think of the Anthropocene as a genre, an overstory defined by specific conventions, the implications of this symbiotic arrangement snap into focus. Specifically, the Anthropocene takes on sinister aspects, as we appear to be living inside a revenge tragedy, an arrangement in which harmful actions inevitably produce a boomerang effect. I suspect the problem is evident: as this popular early modern subgenre demonstrates, once underway, cycles of vengeance predicate doom. Likewise, left unchecked, the environmental crises instigated and exacerbated by humans will engulf us.

This might sound like hyperbolic doom-mongering, so I want to offer a provocative example of the Anthropocene as a revenge tragedy, intimated in Bill Schutt's engaging *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History* (2017). As the title implies, Schutt aims to show how, among certain species, cannibalism is an expected, even beneficial, practice. In his words, "Cannibalism makes perfect evolutionary sense" (287). As he concedes, this is a much tougher sell when considering human examples of cannibalism because "we've evolved along a path where cultural or societal rules influence our behavior to an extent unseen in nature" (288). Even in survival contexts, overcoming the taboo against cannibalism exacts a hefty psychological price.[42] Near the end of his book, Schutt almost casually identifies a scenario in which humans will be forced to engage in cannibalism. Specifically, he suggests that global environmental crises will worsen deprivation and suffering and asks, "Since cannibalism is a completely normal response to severe stress, especially during times of famine and warfare, how much of a surprise would it be if the butchery of humans for food becomes commonplace in drought-ridden and overpopulated regions of the near-future Earth?" (294). Here's the worst part: cannibalism among various human populations will, Schutt argues, set off a global pandemic. Admittedly, at this point the scenario is purely speculative. Perhaps this is the point: we yet have the chance to stave off or minimize environmental disasters. As ever, the question is how best to accomplish this work. As a partial solution, *The Eco-Self in Early Modern English Literature* advocates embracing rather than denying human uniqueness, while keeping in mind Joseph W. Meeker's observation that "uniqueness does not in itself confer superiority" (4).

Defaulting to a thoroughgoing materialism will not work, though this seems the clear trend. In an essay published two decades ago, Jonathan Franzen remarks on our "current cultural susceptibility to the charms of materialism—our increasing willingness to see psychology as chemical, identity as genetic, and behavior as the product of bygone exigencies of human evolution" (33). As he observes earlier in the same piece, an obsessive or hyper-materialism will "reduce our beloved personalities to finite sets of neurochemical coordinates" (19). He asks, "Who wants a story of life like that?" (19). Centuries before Franzen, early modern writers affirmed the necessity of cultivating a different understanding. *The Eco-Self in Early*

42 There are, of course, examples of humans deliberately engaging in cannibalism, which Schutt addresses. Additionally, Bloom's *How Pleasure Works*: *The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* identifies several ways in which cultural practices, such as certain religious rituals or more isolated actions, entail cannibalism (36–39).

Modern English Literature attends to this alternate story, endeavoring to show how the negotiated self, arising through continual interaction with the world, also encompasses a robust inner life. In short, the eco-self dominates early literature and provides *us* with an updated self-concept.

Chapter Overviews

The first chapter, focusing on Shakespeare's Sonnets, tracks the emergence and evolution of a new psychological orientation in early modern England. This burgeoning mindset amplified morbid psychologizing and sparked the desire for an elusive permanence. The problem shifts into focus in several poems that mournfully acknowledge the inevitability of becoming worm food, a chthonian destination that locates humans firmly within nature's turning cycles. This ecological awareness proceeds in tandem with a revved-up focus on the posterity-ensuring potential of artistic expression so that organic and symbolic processes knit together. In keeping with ancient conventions, Shakespeare relies on botanical tropes and images to evoke perpetual renewal. But he departs from tradition by appropriating to the lyric mode the eternizing properties conventionally ascribed to the botanical world. Given their close attention to biological exigencies and the counter-magic of poeticizing, the Sonnets prove especially useful for tracking the eco-self with its similar admixture of the biological and the psychological.

The Sonnets oscillate between continuity and removal: humans are ensconced in nature and ever-subject to its demands yet likewise desirous of claiming a space apart from it. This recurrent emphasis lays the groundwork for considering several early modern tragedies, texts that mutually concede humans' embedment in nature, yet they likewise resist, resent, or mourn this fundamentally ecological condition. Tragedy has always, if paradoxically, been a potent vehicle for tracking selfhood. The goal here is to rethink the ecological implications of the genre's obsessive psychologizing.

Each of the three tragedies offers a different perspective on the eco-self. For instance, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* depicts an intermediary creature, essentially a self trapped between competing views of personhood. Presenting Faustus as a creature of multiform appetites, Marlowe demonstrates that need mediates the relationship between self and world. Accordingly, Abraham Maslow's well-known Hierarchy of Needs grounds my reading of *Doctor Faustus*. I do, however, propose a new geometry for Maslow's needs: substituting a loop for the traditional pyramid acknowledges

how we cycle perpetually among diverse needs, dispelling any illusion that we ever "transcend" the physiological demands that connect us to all other life-forms. Ultimately, Marlowe's Faustus abnegates the proprietarily human need—periodic replenishment of the imagination—that prompted his illicit conjurations. To illuminate Faustian psychology, this chapter also engages with current research on phenomenology, as this scholarship provides crucial insights into the theme of identity-in-crisis that structures *Doctor Faustus*.

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* also contributes a vital chapter to the unfolding story of the early modern eco-self, as it takes up a crucial thread from Marlowe's play. Additionally, *Antony and Cleopatra* extends the annelid theme so important in the Sonnets; in both contexts, worms prove essential to defining humanness. In the play, the Clown twice mentions "the joy of the worm," thereby intimating the impending and curiously enacted suicide of Cleopatra. The version of Cleopatra's death popularized by Shakespeare has proven tenacious, and I believe it encapsulates the play's unique significance for ecocriticism, especially on the issue of humans' continuity with or indistinction from the natural world. Likewise, images of dissolution, of one entity melding into another, pervade *Antony and Cleopatra*, a theme visually conveyed in multiple references to the Tiber, a river capable of sweeping everything into its surging currents. Drawing attention to such moments, *Antony and Cleopatra* exemplifies the anxious ecology that so often defines early modern tragedy. Shakespeare's play points to the necessity of the self, of an abstracting inner life capable of exerting influence on the world. In so doing, *Antony and Cleopatra* offers a viable model of the eco-self.

John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* proves disruptive vis-à-vis the story of the self. This play extends the reluctant ecology of early modern tragedy, dwelling on the prospect of humans' eventual, inevitable entrée into nature's cycling rhythms. More specifically, the Malcontent, Bosola, laments the reality that "we are eaten up of lice, and worms" (2.1.57). In the same rant, Bosola complains that humans are doomed to inhabit "a rotten and dead body" (2.1.59). This obsession with intransigent flesh—judged so because of its proneness to debilitation and decay—powers *The Duchess of Malfi*, occasioning productive engagement with current theories of selfhood, particularly as these tend to emphasize or even celebrate embodiment. In sum, *The Duchess of Malfi* demonstrates that ecological concerns brim with psychological significance. In brief, Webster's howl of protest against corporeal frailty outlines a deep need, a manifestly human yearning, generated by the inexorabilities of organismic life. Yet, perversely, *The Duchess of Malfi* concludes in a spirit of nihilism, with the self imagined as fragile and imperiled—as ephemeral as bodies' outlines cast in snow. Curiously,

therefore, Webster offers a prescient critique of our own hypermaterialist age, with its similarly dismissive treatment of the self. By negative example, *The Duchess of Malfi* endorses the necessity of harmonizing biological and psychological needs.

The bleakness of the Websterian universe, or its self-annihilative properties, recedes when read against the struggle to define selfhood in a utopian prose text by Margaret Cavendish. To conclude this biography of the early modern eco-self, the final chapter focuses on Cavendish's engagement with emerging science and technological innovation in *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* (1666). Writing as the Enlightenment was powering up, Cavendish both celebrates rationality and expands its range to include the world proper. In this way, Cavendish anticipates current trends (twenty-first-century moves) in ecological theory. If *The Blazing World* spotlights pivotal developments in Cavendish's era, it also stimulates fresh consideration of how well the guiding principles and structuring tropes of ecological discourse serve our current needs. Writing in an era of acute devastations, Cavendish expresses reverence for the self-powering grandeur and infinite beauty of the natural world, in whose ambit humans are located. Yet her eco-awareness never effaces the individual. Striking a balance between communitarianism and individualism, *The Blazing World* advances an alternate version of the eco-self, one that melds the possibility of autonomy with an awareness of humans' rootedness in the natural world. In sum, tracking the story of the self as it unfolds across diverse early modern texts brings out a key aspect of the period's insights into humanness and has the potential to yield refinements to contemporary ecological discourse.

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