

Entangled Worlds: Subjectivity and Ethics
in Jorie Graham's Ecological Poetics

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“Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?”

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Introduction: Poetry, Self, and Ethics at Nature's End

In October 2018, the poet and essayist Anne Boyer observed in a tweet, “Every nature poem ever written is already an elegy --.”¹ Elegies, of course, are poems of “loss or mourning,” laments for the dead or a past that is irretrievable.² Though Boyer does not elaborate on how *every* nature poem could be an elegy, it is significant that she makes this remark today, in our contemporary moment of ecological catastrophe and during the fourth-hottest year on record.³ The two dashes that conclude her tweet suggest a disruption, a radical epistemological break in our understanding of nature; indeed, her remark is reminiscent of Bill McKibben’s famous declaration of the “end of nature” in 1989. In his book of the same name, McKibben argues that our idea of nature as a “separate and wild province” has gone “extinct” in the age of climate change.⁴ “By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning.”⁵ There is undoubtedly an elegiac quality to nature poetry today, a sense that its traditional subject and spirit now belong to an irretrievable past and are no longer compatible with our warming world.

The dissolution of the border between human culture and the natural world, for McKibben, stems primarily from our pollution of the planet’s atmosphere through carbon emissions. In the three decades since the publication of *The End of Nature*, however, critics and theorists across the environmental humanities have advocated for a more extensive reworking of

¹ Anne Boyer (@anne_boyer), “every nature poem ever written is already an elegy --,” Twitter, October 31, 2018, 8:11 a.m., https://twitter.com/anne_boyer/status/1057651345002500096.

² Roland Greene, et al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 397.

³ Steve Cole, “2018 Fourth Warmest Year in Continued Warming Trend, According to NASA, NOAA” (Washington, DC, NASA, 2019), last modified February 6, 2019, <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/2018-fourth-warmest-year-in-continued-warming-trend-according-to-nasa-noaa>.

⁴ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds. They suggest that the “wounds of the natural world are also social wounds and that the planetary ecological crisis is the material and historical consequence of an anthropocentric and dualistic worldview.”⁶ According to this view, longstanding binaries like subject/object, human/nonhuman, and natural/artificial are predicated on practices of “hyperseparation” and dissociative thinking, encouraging the human subjugation and exploitation of nature while disregarding the potential consequences.⁷ “At the root of all ecological crises,” in other words, lie not just extractive practices, but the “divisive epistemologies that create an illusory sense of an ontological dissociation between the human and the nonhuman realms.”⁸ To foster a more sustainable and more ethical attitude towards the world around us, these critics reject these epistemologies, instead privileging the complex and often messy entanglements that characterize human-nonhuman relationships.

As ecocriticism’s understanding of ecology matured and the field shed its “latent Romanticism,” critics turned to theoretical developments in new materialism to help articulate this radically different view of nature.⁹ New materialism situated ecocritics’ interest in traditional images and experiences of nature within a model of material flows and networks, illustrating that neither the individual nor landscape that composed these images were as separate as they seemed. At the same time, the subject matter of poetic and critical work in the environmental humanities rapidly expanded to accommodate the growing complexity of climate science and its attendant political, social, and cultural dimensions. Hurricanes, pollution, Styrofoam, oil, radioactive waste, carbon emissions, plastic bags, marine debris, and rising sea levels—as well

⁶ Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, Biology and Technology in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.

as the networks of politicians, super PACs, climate scientists, satellites, international treaties, IPCC reports, and lobbyists entangled in these phenomena—have become central to our understanding of the far-flung effects of anthropogenic climate change. In response, the poetry of the Anthropocene has embraced more experimental forms as it attempts to aesthetically represent the complex entanglements of the natural and artificial, human and nonhuman, local and global, present and deep future.¹⁰ Drawing on new materialist perspectives, such poetry abandons “the idea of [a] center for a position in an infinitely extensive net of relations.”¹¹

New materialism rejects the conceptual divisions that have long organized Western metaphysical thought and cemented humanism as the dominating philosophy by which we live our lives. In doing so, new materialism foregrounds notions of enmeshment, entanglement, interconnectivity, and relationality over autonomous human individuals and discrete objects. In this view, agency is no longer “the property of concrete, isolable entities, but manifests itself only as distributed throughout the networks in which these entities are embedded.”¹² A new materialist perspective helps explain how phenomena as diverse as Hurricane Katrina, environmental toxins, and electricity can interfere with and influence not only our bodies but our

¹⁰ I use the term “poetry of the Anthropocene” to refer broadly to contemporary ecological and climate change poetry that addresses shifting conceptions of the human and nature in the twenty-first century. This poetry may also feature strong materialist elements that track the circulation of various objects and “remainders,” to use Margaret Ronda’s term, such as atmospheric pollution, oil spills, waste products, plastic bags, and other obsolescent goods. Examples of this “genre” include Allison Cobb’s *Plastic: an autobiography*, Alice Oswald’s *Dart*, Evelyn Reilly’s *Styrofoam*, John Kinsella’s *Jam Tree Gully*, John Burnside’s *Gift Songs*, Alice Major’s *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, and Juliana Spahr’s *Well Then There Now*, among others. I am also including Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change* in this category. Critical evaluations of these and similar works include Lynn Keller’s *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, Meliz Ergin’s *The Ecopoetics of Entanglement in Contemporary Turkish and American Literatures*, Margaret Ronda’s *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature’s End*, and Matthew Griffiths’ *The New Poetics of Climate Change: Modernist Aesthetics for a Warming World*.

¹¹ Evelyn Reilly, “Eco-Noise and the Flux of Lux,” in *The Eco Language Reader*, edited by Brenda Iijima (Brooklyn, NY: Nightboat Books, 2010), 257.

¹² Hannes Bergthaller, “Limits of Agency: Notes on the Material Turn from a Systems-Theoretical Perspective,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 38.

social and political systems as well. As a result, “reality emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces, rather than as [a] complex of hierarchically organized individual players.”¹³ Because it emphasizes the intricate entanglements of the human and more-than-human, new materialism has been especially useful for illustrating how the ecological consequences of our actions, as Timothy Clark puts it, “may mutate to come back unexpectedly from the other side of the planet.”¹⁴

Crucially, reconfiguring our understandings of subjectivity, agency, and relationality also entails a re-examination of ethics. As Karen Barad and Jane Bennett observe, our anthropocentric worldview is bound up in a violent history of mastery and domination, a worldview that remains closed off from the myriad ways in which we live and act alongside other species and natural phenomena. For these critics, ethics is woven into subjectivity. “A delicate tissue of ethicality runs through the marrow of being,” as Barad puts it.¹⁵ As a result of our entanglement, our sense of responsibility towards others cannot be arbitrarily limited to a particular species or geographical region but rather must extend to include a broad spatial and temporal network of human and nonhuman others. As I show, the entangled subjectivity that these theorists posit promotes an ethics of non-mastery that resists the Enlightenment discourses of mastery, knowledge, and ownership.

New materialism is a particularly helpful lens for analyzing the poetry of the Anthropocene because both emerge from the same moment of intense ecological awareness and critical re-evaluation of what we broadly call “nature.” For both the poets and theorists, our

¹³ Oppermann and Iovino, *Environmental Humanities*, 3.

¹⁴ Timothy Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism,” *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no. 1 (2010): 134, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030826>.

¹⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 396.

species' shifting relationship to nature can be understood via the complex material flows that circulate the globe and even "run right through us in endless waves."¹⁶ Jorie Graham's 2008 poetry collection, *Sea Change*, stands out among this group for its depiction of the material and affective relations between human and nonhuman life in a time of profound ecological crisis. Graham's ecological poetry has been by no means neglected by critics, but there has been little to no scholarship on the relational sense of self or ethical principles she puts forward in *Sea Change*, even as new materialism and ecocriticism have received increased scholarly attention.¹⁷ Indeed, Graham herself often leaves unacknowledged in her interviews the critical and theoretical implications at work in her thinking of interconnectivity. This thesis aims to fill this gap by putting Graham's work into dialogue with contemporary scholarship on new materialism and the environmental humanities. In doing so, I show that *Sea Change* enlivens the theoretical debates surrounding subjectivity and ethics in the Anthropocene, helping us to imagine how we, Graham's readers, might begin to exhibit these selves in our everyday life.

Subjectivity and Ethics in New Materialism:

The subjectivity Graham depicts in *Sea Change* foregrounds our shared relationality with nonhuman others over the fixed ontologies of objects or Cartesian selves. Though Graham relies primarily on various poetic and rhetorical devices to do so, she is in fact tapping into a vibrant theoretical debate about what it means to be human in the Anthropocene, the proposed term for the period during which human activity has become the dominant influence on the earth's

¹⁶ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, Ind., Indiana University Press, 2010), 11.

¹⁷ For critical analysis on Graham's *Sea Change*, see Lynn Keller's *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, 98-120, and Matthew Griffiths' *The New Poetics of Climate Change*, 153-173.

climate.¹⁸ Though Graham sees environmental concepts like Timothy Morton’s “mesh” as unrelated to the themes of her own poetry and would likely view new materialism similarly, I want to suggest that Graham’s depictions of a more-than-human subjectivity can nonetheless be richly illustrated by new materialist thinking, particularly by Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, and Susan Ruddick.¹⁹ These scholars provide an extensive reworking of the figure of the human and its relation to the wider world. One limit of this work, however, is new materialism’s lack of engagement with similar research in critical race studies, which traces how the concept of humanity has been constructed alongside notions of race.²⁰ As a result, the generalized human subjectivity discussed by the scholars above often risks being conflated with one that, in Elizabeth Chin’s view, is “without doubt white and Western.”²¹ Instead, these critics stress the

¹⁸ Originally proposed by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the Anthropocene is meant to designate a new geological epoch designating significant human impact on the planet’s climate, geology, and ecosystems. According to the Anthropocene Working Group, this period can be identified by a “stratigraphic signature,” a clear demarcation in the earth’s geology indicating that humans have become a geomorphic force. Scholars working across the humanities have criticized the term “Anthropocene” for attributing to an entire species a largely capitalist and largely Western set of ecologically destructive practices. Proposed alternatives include Andreas Malm and Jason Moore’s “Capitalocene,” Anna Tsing’s “Plantationocene,” and Donna Haraway’s “Chthulucene.” For a more detailed discussion of the Anthropocene, its history, and alternative terms, see Oppermann and Iovino, *Environmental Humanities*, xiii-13, 155-174, and *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, edited by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, 5-10.

¹⁹ In a 2012 interview with *EarthLines*, when asked if she considers her work to be “ecopoetry,” Graham responds that such a classification would be reductive. In her elaboration of the different forms ecopoetics has taken, Graham cites a number of environmental thinkers and poets—including Timothy Morton—saying, “This is not my way—even my path.” Graham’s dismissal of these thinkers allows her to differentiate the aesthetics of her craft from the more polemical forms of ecopoetry, adding “I am writing poetry, not doing politics.”

²⁰ See, for instance, work by Sylvia Wynter, Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, and Monique Allewaert’s *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*.

²¹ Elizabeth Chin, *My Life with Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 22. Scanning the scholarship in new materialism, Chin writes, “reveals consistent calls to a generalized ‘we’ whether that ‘we’ is framed as stewards of the Anthropocene, actors in systems, or inhabitants of landscapes,” but this “apparently neutral ‘we’” is presented as normative and universal while being “without doubt white and Western” (22). Responding to Chin, I would agree that race remains underexamined in new materialist scholarship and that discourses of human subjectivity in that race are too often focused on white and western conceptions of the human that are presented as a general or universal human subjectivity. But where that work intersects with the environmental humanities—such as Stacy Alaimo’s chapters on X-rays and environmental toxins in *Bodily Natures*—race and materiality can take centerstage in discussions of environmental justice. Alaimo’s analysis of environmental toxicity, for instance, illustrates how the environment “runs right through us” in racialized ways, requiring us to re-evaluate predominant theories of race based solely on social construction (11). In my discussions of human subjectivity throughout this paper, I do not intend to conflate a general subjectivity with a white or western one. Still, the generalized “we” Chin identifies is present in the discourse of new materialism I cite and is reproduced at points in this essay.

human body's inseparability from nature, arguing that such a view "may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions."²²

Here, human-nature entanglements have the potential to challenge human conceptions of nature as merely something to control or utilize and thus can help us cultivate a relation of non-mastery with the world around us.

Barad, Bennett, and Ruddick offer a critique of the Western liberal subject, reformulating traditional notions of agency, relationality, and ethics in the process. These scholars tend to view agency as no longer "aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity" but rather distributed across various human-nonhuman networks.²³ In this view of the material world, relations, linkages, and connections take precedent over fixed selves and discrete objects. Barad, in particular, describes a model of reality that defines matter as "substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency."²⁴ Here, matter *emerges* or is *produced* from these "intra-actions" rather than, as in the traditional model, having *interactions* be produced from discrete objects.

This concept of the self is a relational or "posthuman" one, posthuman in the sense that the category of the human or its body can no longer be productively isolated from the animate and inanimate matter "outside" it. In this view, our very bodies have an alien or foreign quality to them. As Bennett observes, "My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human."²⁵ For new materialists, human subjectivity is in constant contact with the nonhuman, disrupting any sense of a stable or clearly demarcated self.

²² Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

²³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 177.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2009), 112.

Whereas Barad and Bennett emphasize our *material* entanglements with others, Ruddick focuses on our affective connections. In her work, Ruddick proposes a relational ontology that “move[s] us from a concept of ‘the’ subject as a stand-alone agent acting *on* the world, toward one of *subjectivities*—constituted in and through our affective relationships with others.”²⁶ She is invested in thinking through “how to disrupt and reorient the affective connections which sustain this [Western] subject, so as to promote a different vision of plenitude which acknowledges and celebrates the absolute dependence of humans on the workings of nonhuman others.”²⁷ In Ruddick’s view, “Under capitalism, the western subject is organized around a specific expression of plenitude and freedom,” and “we cannot mobilize a cultural shift without offering an alternative vision” to these ideals.²⁸ I see Ruddick’s attention to affect as particularly applicable to poetry about the Anthropocene, which often utilizes affect to communicate the immense scale and ramifications of our current ecological crisis.

While Barad does not explicitly address ecology or climate science, and Bennett only briefly addresses them in her final chapters, their reformulations of subjectivity are particularly relevant for our contemporary climate crisis. The relational worldview that such a subjectivity entails helps us understand that the “existence of anything—any creature, ecosystem, climatological pattern, ocean current—cannot be taken for granted as simply existing out there” but rather is a product of the material-discursive system of which it is a part.²⁹ This worldview is also present in *Sea Change*, when the human subject, who most often appears as the poems’ speaker and lyrical “I,” is forced to reckon with the “unnegotiable / drama” of climate change

²⁶ Susan Ruddick, “Rethinking the Subject, Reimagining Worlds,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7, no. 2 (2017): 120, doi: 10.1177/2043820617717847.

²⁷ Susan Ruddick, “Grounding Our Subjectivity in the Semiotic Web: Or, Nature is a Language, Can’t We Read?,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7, no. 2 (2017): 162, doi: 10.1177/2043820617720064.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 21.

and the large “cast of characters,” human and nonhuman, that must suffer the consequences of a warming world. The lyrical self in Graham’s volume recognizes that its actions (and their consequences) are no longer isolated to a local or bounded region but rather ripple out, amplify, and come back to us, forcing us to confront our culpability in an entangled world.

The more-than-human self these thinkers propose has profoundly ethical implications, since recognizing our material and affective connections with others can help us cultivate a non-masterful relation to the world around us. Here, non-mastery designates an ethical stance or attitude that opposes discourses of mastery, certainty, knowledge, calculation, and utility that are derived primarily from Enlightenment thinking. Mastery, Lorraine Code tells us, “enlist[s] ready-made, easily applied categories to contain the personal, social, and physical-natural world within a neatly manageable array of ‘kinds,’ obliterating differences in a desire to assemble the confusion of the world into maximally homogeneous units.”³⁰ Though mastery has a long and varied history, I am primarily interested in its contemporary ecological manifestations in the work of Code, Alaimo, and Bennett and their attempts to oppose it. For these scholars, an ethics of non-mastery emerges from—and is coextensive with—our inevitable entanglement with the animate and inanimate matter around us. Against our will, our bodies and selves are “caught up in and transformed by myriad, often unpredictable material agencies.”³¹

While such a subjectivity may be cause for great anxiety, it also “offers coordinates for a different politics, unforeseen alliances, [and] orientations toward more expansive affective connections to a lively world.”³² But when this subjectivity and ethics are expressed only through theory it reaches a relatively limited audience and, in my view, lacks a specific vision as

³⁰ Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 19. For more information on mastery over nature, see Code 3-24.

³¹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 146.

³² Ruddick, “Rethinking the Subject,” 121.

to how to live and act in our everyday lives. While theorists of new materialism and posthumanism can skillfully explain how our growing understanding of ecology and climate science requires a dramatic reconfiguring of the human and its ethical relation to the world, it remains the task of poetry to imagine how we can turn this theory into praxis and begin to exhibit these ideas at the level of the everyday.

Jorie Graham's Ecological Poetics:

For the past two decades, much of Jorie Graham's ecologically-inclined work—ranging from *Never*, published in 2002, to her most recent collection, *Fast*, published in 2017—has attempted to imagine a human subjectivity and ethics for the Anthropocene. In *Sea Change*, the collection I will be focusing on here, she conjures up an “as-yet-unimaginable” future of surging storms, mass extinctions, disrupted food chains, and rising sea levels.³³ In interviews, Graham has spoken at length about anthropogenic climate change and its influence on her work, stating that it has “become the essential way in which I see the history of my moment. The signal catastrophic issue. The primary responsibility.”³⁴ In her poetry, Graham summons the poet's familiar tools of imagination and feeling to accomplish what she sees as an urgent aesthetic and ethical task:

How do we make sacrifices—ones that will affect our entire way of life in our only life—for those who we do not even know will exist, that they might have a planet still livable, a biome still conducive to human habitation? This is a very hard task indeed. One cannot

³³ Jorie Graham, interview by Sharon Blackie, “An Interview with Jorie Graham,” *EarthLines* 1, no. 2, (August 2012), 36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

imagine many requests that have ever been made of the human Imagination that exceed it.³⁵

Though Graham understands her work to be primarily a product of the imagination, it is clear that underpinning this conviction is an ethical imperative. While she does not acknowledge her ecological poetry as explicitly ethical, we can see that she attempts through her work to cultivate the proper mood or feeling, the proper consciousness, for ethical action to take place. She wants the reader to not simply understand the science of climate change but to “actually ‘feel’ (and thus physically believe) what we have and what we are losing.”³⁶ In interviews, Graham primarily frames this imperative by referring to our obligations to future generations, as she does above, indicating that her ethics are solely focused on “*human* habitation” with little attention towards the many other species with whom we live. *Sea Change*, however, articulates a more complex and philosophically informed sense of ethics. There, she attempts to rethink the human-nature divide by describing a more-than-human subjectivity that is enmeshed and entangled with the wider world. In doing so, Graham posits an ethics of non-mastery in which our inescapable entanglement disrupts the Enlightenment project of mastery and control over nature.

Graham wrote *Sea Change*, her most sustained meditation on anthropogenic climate change, “after a very deep apprenticeship to the facts and issues involved in climate science.”³⁷ In her words, *Sea Change* is “an attempt to describe to a future people what it was like to have water, to have seasons, to know what blossoming was and a daybreak where one did not fear the sun.”³⁸ A number of Graham’s poems in the collection open with record-breaking wind,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jorie Graham, interview by Deidre Wengen, “Imagining the Unimaginable: Jorie Graham in Conversation,” *poets.org*, February 21, 2014, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/imagining-unimaginable-jorie-graham-conversation>.

³⁷ Graham, interview by *EarthLines*, 39.

³⁸ Graham, interview by *poets.org*.

torrential rain, and the “hiss” of an “incomprehensible” sea.³⁹ An atmosphere of uncertainty, alienation, and urgency pervades these poems, as its narrators have to repeatedly reevaluate their assumptions and perceptions of the natural world as they (and we) adapt to “mornings in the unknown future.”⁴⁰

An allusion to Ariel’s song in *The Tempest*, the title of Graham’s collection signals a dramatic or profound transformation, “an irreversible alteration of a state of affairs, a paradigm shift.”⁴¹ Read literally, the phrase conjures up images of rising sea levels, coastal flooding, and violent hurricanes. The term “sea change” is also perhaps an apt description of Graham’s own development as a nature poet. Despite having an intellectual grasp of the issue of climate change, she admits that her nature poems in the earlier collection, *Never*—some of which were commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency—were still “innocent. I mean by this that I had not fully downloaded it into my soul—and also that I had not yet really gone deeply into the science. *Sea Change* registers that shock.”⁴² Despite the formal and thematic continuities between the two volumes, *Never*, as one reviewer puts it, still remains largely bound to the “beaches of an ebbing and liminal shoreline” while *Sea Change* “quickly loses sight of shore, plunging the reader into a deep-ocean world.”⁴³ In the process, *Sea Change* contributes to what Sarah Wood has called a “developing climate change imaginary,” a growing cluster of signs, symbols, and stories that mark a radical epistemological and ontological break between humans and the planet.⁴⁴

³⁹ Jorie Graham, *Sea Change* (New York, Ecco, 2008), 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴¹ Matthew Griffiths, “Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change*: The Poetics of Sustainability and the Politics of What We’re Sustaining,” in *Literature and Sustainability: Concept, Text and Culture*, edited by Adeline Johns-Putra, et al. (Manchester University Press, 2017), 219.

⁴² Graham, interview by *EarthLines*, 39.

⁴³ Sarah Howe, “To Image the Future: Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change*,” *PN Review* 185, vol. 35, no. 3, (January-February 2009), https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=4252.

⁴⁴ Sarah Wood, *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 6.

In many respects, the posthuman subjectivity Graham depicts is closely aligned with that of new materialism. That is, her human narrators come to see themselves as part of a complex, entangled world and understand that their actions radiate out, spatially and temporally, potentially disrupting earth's "natural" cycles and rhythms. In my reading of her work, Graham depicts this relational sense of human subjectivity primarily through the technique of anthropomorphism, allowing her human speakers to imagine themselves entangled in a complex web of nonhuman agencies and voices. Anthropomorphism often risks being charged with a rampant humanism that can't help but reproduce the human form in whatever it sees. But, following Bennett, I will argue that "we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world."⁴⁵ Through this device, Graham posits a nonhuman personhood for the wind, giving it a voice that "speaks back" to human mastery and autonomy.

Graham perhaps differs most from new materialist thinkers—as well as other ecological critics and poets—in her emphasis throughout *Sea Change* on the human perspective and her depiction of scenes of human life. Graham balances her concern for the "in- / dispensable plankton" with the lyric intimacy and minutiae of human life—a proposal, a parent-teacher conference, a construction crew at work.⁴⁶ While the human speaker of these poems is repeatedly exposed to her complex entanglement with the wider world, those relations are still relayed through a first-person lyrical voice that recurs throughout Graham's volume. Why? While some may see Graham's reliance on traditional concepts like anthropomorphism and first person as remnants of an outmoded humanism, a sign that her vision is not *radical enough*, I want to suggest that it is precisely her stubborn insistence to tell, at least partly, a *human* story about how

⁴⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

⁴⁶ Graham, *Sea Change*, 4.

we can imagine ourselves anew, how we can still “attend to beauty,” as she puts it, that sets her work apart from that of theorists.⁴⁷ Indeed, *Sea Change* is partially a book about us, our species, and how must live in the age of climate change. While the traditional liberal humanist subject may no longer be at the center of Graham’s narrative of life on earth, she nonetheless leverages her use of the first-person lyrical self to imagine that new form of life for her readers.

Significantly, Graham’s account of ecological disaster is not radically posthuman; as I mention above, the lyrical (human) “I” is very much present in her poems as an active interlocuter with nature. Even as that “I” is repeatedly caught up in and disoriented by an “us” that is continually being remade and reshaped, Graham remains committed to imagining how this new subjectivity and ethics manifest in scenes of daily life, how it unfolds alongside our still-prevalent assumptions about nature and alongside a natural world “that is / disappearing, is disappearance.”⁴⁸ This sustained interest in the human perhaps betrays Graham’s slight humanism, but it also reflects the fact that human life and culture, though they may be intertwined with multiple materialities, are nonetheless central concerns for her and her readers.

In the sections that follow, I argue that *Sea Change* makes two distinct but related contributions to the critical debates outlined above. In my first section, I show how Graham, in her title poem, utilizes the rhetorical devices of anthropomorphism and personification as a means of exploring and ultimately producing both a nonhuman personhood for animals and natural phenomena as well as a posthuman subjectivity for the poem’s human speaker.

Somewhat paradoxically, anthropomorphism and personification in Graham’s work do not

⁴⁷ Jorie Graham, interview by Erin Lyndal Martin, “The Possible Absence of a Future: Talking with Jorie Graham,” *The Rumpus*, <https://therumpus.net/2017/08/the-rumpus-interview-with-jorie-graham/>.

⁴⁸ Graham, *Sea Change*, 54.

reproduce and reinstate the humanist subject but rather extend the range of beings and phenomena that must now be considered as material agents.

The recognition of our inescapable entanglement with others leads to Graham's second contribution to this debate, the articulation of an ecological ethics that emphasizes *non-mastery* as a sustainable and ethical mode of being. As I show in section two, Graham identifies mastery as the primary ethical problem of our species. In two poems, "Embodies" and "Futures," mastery takes the form of a desire to know and own elements of our natural world. Graham disavows this rhetoric through the speaker's encounters with two nonhuman others, a bird and a swan. Through these two contributions, Graham utilizes new materialist perspectives and concepts to subvert liberal humanist notions of sovereignty and agency in favor of depicting the complex entanglement of human-nonhuman relationships. She then extends this thinking to posit an ethical and non-masterful relation to the world in which our material interdependence with others (especially nonhuman and inanimate others) disrupts Enlightenment discourses of mastery and human exceptionalism.

I. “[B]lurring the feeling of / the state of / being”: Graham’s Posthuman Subjectivity for the
Anthropocene

In the wake of the political and social turmoil of the new millennium—the 9/11 terror attacks, the 2004 Iraq invasion, the rise of interrogation practices in a perpetual War on Terror, the entrenchment of the surveillance state, and the growth of the internet and artificial intelligence—Graham’s sense of subjectivity, she says, became increasingly “frayed.”⁴⁹ Her latest work, in *Fast* (2017), continues her poetic investigation into the political and technological forces that “permitted and invited a disassembly of a unique, coherent ‘self.’”⁵⁰ In *Sea Change*, we can see Graham’s early articulation of this “fraying” subjectivity predicated on a growing global awareness of climate change, a sense of self that must reckon with its entanglement with the natural world. A chorus of voices must now be listened for and attended to as Graham’s narrators continually reconceptualize their sense of community, of who or what is included in the “us” her poems repeatedly invoke.

Graham depicts this posthuman or more-than-human subjectivity by foregrounding its entanglement in a range of other forces, objects, and relationships and, in the process, rejecting the anthropocentrism that has long guided our species’ relationship with the natural world. Much like the new materialists, Graham understands our species to be part of an ever-evolving world in which the ecological consequences of our actions ripple out and amplify, only to return unexpectedly and in new forms. Yet, in other ways, the human subject is omnipresent in *Sea Change*. Throughout the collection, the human first-person speaker observes scenes of daily life,

⁴⁹ Jorie Graham, interview by Peter Mishler, “In Conversation with Jorie Graham,” *Literary Hub*, February 23, 2018, <https://lithub.com/in-conversation-with-jorie-graham>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

such as a construction crew at work or a neighbor's child in the summer heat. Of course, the lyrical self occupies a not unproblematic place in contemporary nature poetry. Poems that feature a strong human voice often run the risk of being seen as little more than “transparent narratives of self-discovery” in which nature is merely the backdrop for human reflection or adventure.⁵¹

In *Sea Change*, Graham manages to avoid this pitfall while simultaneously relying on the poetic “I” to imagine for her readers precisely what *human* life in the Anthropocene may look like. In doing so, I want to suggest that one of Graham's primary accomplishments in *Sea Change* is to expand the poetic and ontological possibilities of the lyrical self in the age of climate change. That is, in her title poem, Graham utilizes first person to describe the felt sensation of an oncoming storm: “Un- / natural says the news. Also the body says it. Which part of the body—I look / down, can / feel it.”⁵² By the poem's end, the “I” that allowed Graham to express this distinctly human response to climate change shifts and blurs before it is finally applied to the anthropomorphized wind. In short, Graham's use of first person leverages a critical grammatical ambiguity whereby the lyrical “I” no longer has to be considered synonymous with a stable, autonomous (human) self and neither does contemporary ecological poetry have to shy away from its use in portraying human perspectives of environmental crisis. Even while decentering the liberal humanist subject, Graham's poetry nonetheless retains a deep focus on the voice of the lyrical self and the texture of daily human life during ecological catastrophe in order to describe, as she puts it, the “daily astonishments of being human.”⁵³

Highlighting such moments allows Graham's readers to imagine what a subjectivity for the Anthropocene might look like in their everyday lives, to “connect the world in which you are,

⁵¹ Jonathan Skinner, “Editor's Statement,” *ecopoetics*, no. 1 (2001): 6.

⁵² Graham, *Sea Change*, 3.

⁵³ Graham, interview by *poets.org*.

to one in which you have not yet been, or cannot imagine being.”⁵⁴ In “Belief System,” the speaker asks, “The future. How could it be performed by the mind became the / question—how, this sensation called tomorrow and / tomorrow? Did you look down at / your hands just now?”⁵⁵ In her attempt to imagine an unimaginable future, Graham hopes to connect what happens “tomorrow” to who we are and what we do “just now.” By connecting scenes of human action and intimacy with the planetary scale of climate change, Graham demonstrates poetry’s ongoing role in helping us manifest this more-than-human subjectivity in daily practice.

In “Sea Change,” as well as several other poems, Graham relies largely on the techniques of anthropomorphism and personification to depict a more-than-human subjectivity. Along with prosopopoeia and apostrophe, these terms form a family of rhetorical devices that attempt to speak and listen to objects, animals, natural elements, and abstract concepts. The respective entries for these terms in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* briefly sketch a long history of trying to distinguish between their precise characteristics and functions.⁵⁶ For my purposes, however, I am less interested in the minute differences between these devices than I am in how they can broaden who or what counts as a person in the Anthropocene era and, consequently, help reconfigure traditional notions of agency. Extending the work of Barbara Johnson from “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” (in *The Critical Difference*) and “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law” (in *Persons and Things*), I argue that these techniques

⁵⁴ Jorie Graham, interview by Katia Grubisic, “Jorie Graham: Instructions for Building the Arc,” *The Fiddlehead* 244, (2010): https://www.joriegraham.com/interview_grubisic.

⁵⁵ Graham, *Sea Change*, 45.

⁵⁶ The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* gives the following definitions for these terms: apostrophe is a “poetic address, especially to unheard entities” (61); personification “brings to life, in a human figure, something abstract, collective, inanimate, dead, nonreasoning, or epitomizing” (1025); and prosopopoeia is “the speech of an imaginary person” (1120). A definition for anthropomorphism is not provided. The *Encyclopedia* also notes that prosopopoeia and personification are “nearly synonymous” but adds that the pathetic fallacy may be the more appropriate term when the personified thing “does not develop into a recognizably human figure” (1026). Further, the critic Pierre Fontanier argues that prosopopoeia and personification must remain distinct from each other, and J. Douglas Kneale insists that prosopopoeia infers the possibility of reply and apostrophe does not (1121).

help Graham “transform an ‘I-it’ relationship into an ‘I-thou’ relationship, thus making a relation between persons out of what was in fact a relation between a person and non-persons.”⁵⁷ In those essays, Johnson discusses the use of prosopopoeia and anthropomorphism within contemporary debates on abortion and corporate personhood. By contrast, my analysis of Graham concerns the formation of a nonhuman personhood for animals and natural phenomena through the use of personification and anthropomorphism.

Further, this personhood is not a discrete, individual subjectivity that models itself on Enlightenment humanism but is rather, as we see in the wind’s various monologues, a complex and dynamic sense of self intertwined with other natural elements (such as the ocean), animals (such as plankton and fish) and processes (such as evaporation). By the poem’s end, narrative and grammatical ambiguity blurs the perspectives of the wind and human speaker. Because of this, I see anthropomorphism as a distinctly productive and transformative technique that is capable of blurring the boundaries of the human and creating new ways of thinking about subjectivity and personhood.

By applying Johnson’s ideas to issues of subjectivity in the Anthropocene, I follow Margaret Ronda, who argues that “current poetic works might offer distinctive means for conceptualizing the new subjectifications of the human in a time of generalized planetary crisis.”⁵⁸ Using anthropomorphism to reconfigure who or what counts as a person helps Graham to enact, formally and thematically, the relational ontology espoused by Ruddick and the new

⁵⁷ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9. In *Persons and Things*, Johnson defines the four major rhetorical devices she examines as such: apostrophe “call[s] out to inanimate, dead, or absent beings” (6); prosopopoeia refers to “making a thing act like a person as a fiction or disguise” (12); anthropomorphism means “having a human-like character or form” (15); and personification “confer[s] on an idea a human form” (17).

⁵⁸ Margaret Ronda, “Anthropogenic Poetics,” *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014): 105, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/563073>.

materialists, allowing the human subject to imagine itself entangled in a complex web of nonhuman subjectivities and voices.

In letting animals and natural elements such as the wind, flood waters, evaporation, cuttlefish, sky, and air speak, Graham's human narrators recognize themselves as part of a chorus of multiple agencies that must be negotiated with rather than discounted or forgotten. As such, she joins other ecopoets (though Graham rejects the term to describe herself), such as Brenda Hillman and Lisa Robertson, in "dramatiz[ing] the attempt to recognize, to draw into relation," diverse ecological phenomena.⁵⁹ In Graham's formulation, anthropomorphism and personification do not reproduce and reinstate the traditional humanist subject, as Jonathan Skinner and other ecocritics suggest. Rather, in the vein of Bennett's vital materialism, I suggest that Graham's use of "an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure."⁶⁰ Here, anthropomorphism works in favor of subverting the hierarchical model of reality that posits human will and mastery as the most dominant forces acting on the world.

In her opening poem, "Sea Change," and throughout much of her collection, Graham contemplates the human condition in the age of climate change. We can no longer think on the scale of mere decades, she insists. For the first time, "we are being asked to live... on multiple parallel end-stopped lifelines: our own individual one, potentially that of our species, even that of our planet."⁶¹ As we adapt to thinking on multiple scales simultaneously, human subjectivity must consider itself as part of a wider discourse in which other voices and agencies "speak back"

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

⁶¹ Graham, interview by *poets.org*.

to us. The storm that opens “Sea Change” “submerg[es] us, / making of the fields, the trees, a cast of characters in an / unnegotiable / drama.”⁶² The storm’s wind, “stronger than / ever before in the recording / of such,” is the poem’s most immediate and visible instance of a nonhuman agency that falls outside human design and control.⁶³ Further, the storm’s presence serves to implicate humans in a larger narrative or “drama”—climate change—putting our species into relation with the fields and trees while also broadening our sense of “us,” those who must face the storm’s potentially devastating consequences.

“Sea Change” captures the disorienting crisis of ecological catastrophe, particularly in how it unsettles the lived sense of stability and permanence cultivated in the centuries after the Industrial Revolution and which culminated in a surge of technological and economic growth after World War II. Graham writes, “The future / takes shape / too quickly. The permanent is ebbing.”⁶⁴ The quickening pace of climate change over the past half century or so, known as the Great Acceleration, has eroded our sense of permanence and stability but, more significantly, it has also eroded the sense of hubris and mastery that gave the illusion of permanence in the first place. As Clark observes, prior to widespread awareness of climate change, we operated under the false belief that “future time and terrestrial space can act as bottomless repositories for waste or for issues that thinking wishes to avoid.”⁶⁵ The storm in “Sea Change” disabuses us of this idea. In disrupting the self-centered humanist subject, the storm momentarily destabilizes our sense of coherence, “blurring the feeling of / the state of / being.”⁶⁶ What was once defined,

⁶² Graham, *Sea Change*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies,” 133.

⁶⁶ Graham, *Sea Change*, 3.

discrete, and discernible—our bodies, our sense of agency and self, our self-assured future—is now hazy and unclear.

This “blurring” of “the state of / being” is also enacted in the form and content of the poem when the voices and perspectives of the human protagonist and wind become entangled and indistinguishable. The first time the wind speaks, it admonishes our species for our “affliction” and supposed “ignorance” of the consequences of exploiting nature:

consider your affliction says the
wind, do not plead ignorance, & farther and farther
away leaks the
past, much farther than it used to go, beating against the shutters I
have now fastened again⁶⁷

The lack of quotation marks makes it difficult to determine when the wind’s words end and the narration, ambiguously either first-person or third-person, begins again. The wind’s admonishment extends at least to when we are told to “not plead ignorance” but possibly extends to when the wind “beats” against the shutters. The shift from the imperative (“do not plead ignorance”) to the constative (“farther and farther / away leaks the / past”) and the ampersand that separates the two suggests a distinct move from the wind’s point of view to an omniscient perspective. Similarly, the “I” in the fourth line signals the return of the poet-speaker closing her shutters, but it remains unclear when that first-person narration begins. Instead, we return to the speaker mid-clause and mid-action without a clear sense as to *when* that shift occurs. The

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3-4.

ambiguously narrated middle lines (from “farther and farther” to “used to go”) formally enact the blurred “state of / being” caused by the storm as the perspectives of the wind and speaker, as well as whether those perspectives are in the first or third person, become indistinguishable.

The “problem” of untangling the wind’s speech and perspective from that of the human speaker becomes more pronounced in a longer monologue midway through the poem:

here it is now, carrying its North
 Atlantic windfall, hissing Consider
 the body of the ocean which rises every instant into
 me, & its
 ancient e-
 vaporation, & how it delivers itself
 to me, how the world is our law, this indrifting of us
 into us, a chorusing in us of elements, & how the
 intermingling of us lacks in-
 telligence, makes
 reverberation, syllables untranscribable, in-clingings...⁶⁸

In this second, extended monologue, the wind describes the natural cycles that bind it to the ocean and food chain. The wind, for the second time, urges us to “consider” our consequences in a wider world and to imagine the complex entanglements that occur on a daily basis between diverse ecological phenomena. The wind’s repeated invocation of “us”—“this indrifting of *us* /

⁶⁸ Ibid., 4.

into *us*, a chorusing in *us* of elements, & how the / intermingling of *us* lacks intelligence”— foregrounds the inseparability of the ocean-wind system as well as that of the wider network of plankton, cod larvae, warming oceans, and carbon emissions that all act on one another. As a first-person plural pronoun, “us” designates collectivity and community while also often being opposed to an excluded “them.” In Graham’s formulation, though, the “us vs. them” dichotomy is a fiction that does not stand up to the scrutiny of contemporary ecology and climate science. In particular, the wind’s reference to an intermingling “us” reflects the relational, entangled perspective that humans must learn to cultivate in the Anthropocene. The wind is able to conceptualize itself on multiple levels: as a “self” that absorbs water from the ocean through evaporation, as an “us” that is part of a wind-ocean system, and as an “us” that drifts “into us,” an image that suggests a dynamic system in which far-flung elements are thought of as distinct yet related and connected. The repeated use of “us” also recalls the earlier instance of “us” that was submerged by the storm and, at first glance, appeared to be composed only of humans. In connecting the two instances of “us,” Graham complicates the humanist assumptions of who or what is included in our sense of community.

The wind continues:

& how wonder is also what

pours from us when, in the
 coiling, at the very bottom of
 the food
 chain, sprung

from undercurrents, warming by 1 degree, the in-

dispensable

plankton is forced north now, & yet farther north,

spawning too late for the cod larvae hatch, such

that the hatch will not survive, nor the

species in the end, in the the right-now forever un-

interruptible slowing of the

gulf

stream, so that I, speaking in this wind today, out loud in it, to no one, am suddenly

aware

of having written my poems⁶⁹

Again, without quotation marks the precise end of the wind's speech is hard to pin down. While it may extend as far down as the return of the first-person speaker, as Garth Greenwell suggests, the wind's description of the food chain also seems to surpass the level of knowledge we might expect from the wind and more closely resembles the perspective of an omniscient narrator. Unlike in the lines above, the shift from imperative ("Consider / the body of the ocean") to the constative is unhelpful for determining a shift in perspective. Instead, that shift seems to occur somewhere silently between the wind's explicit statements and the return of the lyrical "I." We again return to the poet-speaker mid-clause and mid-action. This ambiguity, of course, is one of the poem's signature achievements. By merging and blending the perspectives of the wind and speaker, Graham depicts a human subjectivity whose sense of self, at least grammatically, is without clear borders or boundaries. Just as Bennett observes that the materiality of "my" body is

⁶⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

not “fully or exclusively human,” the speaker’s sense of self in “Sea Change” is, at least partially, shaped and determined by its encounter with the wind.⁷⁰ Further, in giving the wind a voice and relational sense of self that is constantly being remade by other ecological phenomena, Graham challenges the logic of the liberal humanist subject in the era of climate change.

In the poem’s final lines, the wind resumes its narration:

—& quicken

me further says this new wind, &
 according to thy
 judgment, &

I am inclining my heart towards the end,

I cannot fail, this Saturday, early pm, hurling myself,
 wiry furies riding my many backs, against your foundations and your
 best young

tree, which you have come outside to stake again, & the loose stones in the sill.⁷¹

Here, the wind’s last statement would seem to extend only to the fourth line, ending with “according to thy / judgment.” It would then seem as though the “I” that inclines its heart corresponds to the previous “I,” the poet-narrator who writes poems with her “useless / hands.” The mention of “my heart” reinforces this conclusion: it is, of course, a *person* who inclines their heart, a *person* who cannot fail this Saturday. But the next lines confuse our image of a human: “hurling myself, / wiry furies riding my many backs, against your foundations.” The “I,” it turns

⁷⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112.

⁷¹ Graham, *Sea Change*, 5.

out, is actually the wind. More so than at any other time in the poem, the wind has been fully anthropomorphized, complete with a sense of self, an emotional and psychological interior, and a heart and “many backs.” While the wind’s earlier monologues may have been simply relayed by the speaker without fully inhabiting the wind’s point of view, this last scene suggests that we have definitively shifted to the wind’s perspective. It would seem, then, that what emerges from this final scene is the wind as a nonhuman person. In his reading of this moment, Greenwell observes that the wind’s voice and that of the speaker meld together, as they do in previous lines. “While the final image of human care is seen from an inhuman vantage, the description of ‘your / best young / tree’ is rooted in the perspective of the keeper of the habitation the wind hurls itself against.”⁷² The image of the staked tree, Greenwell adds, represents a “tender and tending action repeated (‘to stake again’) in the face of what seems like hostility.”⁷³ Graham’s “odd animism,” as Greenwell puts it, is her primary method of imagining nonhuman personhood and agency.⁷⁴ Through her use of anthropomorphism and personification, Graham demonstrates a sense of self that is vibrant and fluid, emerging and evolving through its intra-actions with other phenomena.

The endorsement of anthropomorphism that we see in “Sea Change” comes at the risk of veering into anthropocentrism. By definition, anthropomorphism projects the image of the human onto every object, animal, or natural element, endowing them with human qualities and characteristics. Critics Randy Malamud and Matthew Calarco charge that anthropomorphism too often elides the presence of the animal with an anthropocentric conception of being and that anthropomorphism is antithetical to the ecologically-informed poetry we should be producing in

⁷² Garth Greenwell, “Beauty’s Canker: On Jorie Graham,” *West Branch*, vol. 63 (2008): 121.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

the twenty-first century.⁷⁵ Jonathan Skinner, in his inaugural introduction to the journal *ecopoetics*, articulates a similar stance when he observes that “transparent narratives of self-discovery, or solipsistic, self-expressive displays, seem ill-suited to the current [environmental] crisis.”⁷⁶ In doing so, Skinner and Malamud call for a move away from a first-person lyricism that they see as guilty of indulging in the voice and presence of the poet or human self. In Malamud’s view:

A poet who writes about animals and uses a first-person (human) voice must explicitly confront and resolve what that voice means with respect to the rest of the world, if the poetry is to transcend the tradition of regarding animals as unpoetic (except as subjects, backdrop), unvoiced, culturally disenfranchised... Unless the poet consciously orients herself otherwise, the poetic “I” is inherently exploitative of nonhuman animals; superior to them; uniquely expressive, sentient, privileged in the world that the poetry delineates. It is an I that speaks for people to people, and essentially about people, albeit with a cast of thousands of minor characters from other species.⁷⁷

Other ecocritical works, like John Kinsella and Forrest Gander’s *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*, establish a similar set of conceptual strategies designed to address the poetic challenges of the Anthropocene, among them “a dispersal of ego-centered agency” and a “reorientation toward intersubjectivity.”⁷⁸ The fear, for these critics, is that the presence of the lyrical self and voice reinforces a stark divide, rather than a continuity, between the human and animal spheres and reinscribes the centrality of the human self in narratives that are ostensibly about nature.

⁷⁵ Onno Oerlemans, *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 11. See, for instance, Matthew Calarco’s “Identity, Difference, Indistinction” in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11.2 and Randy Malamud’s *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*.

⁷⁶ Skinner, “Editor’s Statement,” 6.

⁷⁷ Randy Malamud, *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 34.

⁷⁸ Forrest Gander and John Kinsella, *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 11.

If we extend Malamud's animal-studies perspective to Graham's anthropomorphism of the wind, water, and sky, we may say that *Sea Change* is situated somewhere between a volume "essentially about people" and one oriented towards nonhuman others. That is, Graham's work is, partially, a book about how we live today and how we must imagine human life in the future. Yet the human speaker that makes these observations is also repeatedly disrupted by nonhuman natural phenomena whose voices urge us to consider the ecological consequences of our actions. In maintaining this balance between human and nonhuman, I want to suggest that one of Graham's primary achievements in *Sea Change* is to break out of the narrow conceptualization of the lyrical self in climate change poetry proposed by critics like Skinner and Malamud. While they are largely skeptical of the poetic "I," Graham's deployment of the first person allows her to track the humanist self's dissolution (as we see in the ending of "Sea Change" when the "I" comes to refer to both the poet-speaker and the wind). At the same time, the use of first person helps Graham maintain a focus on precisely what *human* life in the Anthropocene may look like. While Skinner and Malamud are suspicious of "narratives of self-discovery," the value of the introspection that occurs throughout Graham's volume is that it allows her to intimately trace the changing nature of human subjectivity during a time of ecological crisis.

A more fundamental issue with anthropomorphism emerges at the level of *poiesis*, as the origin of the voice granted to the anthropomorphized thing is always the poet herself. In Graham's "Sea Change," for instance, we would be on firm ground to assert that the nonhuman personhood of the wind is bestowed by and ultimately still subjugated to the poet writing the poem. Here, we come up against the limits of poetry, which (like all writing) can never escape human perception and culture. Despite this, many critics leave open anthropomorphism's possibility for helping us re-evaluate the human/animal or human/nonhuman divide. Poetry,

Susan Stewart suggests, is both “necessarily bound by our human senses and language” and a “way of overcoming the profoundly solipsistic nature of individual existence.”⁷⁹ Poetry, in other words, can be “at once anthropomorphic and antianthropocentric.”⁸⁰

As noted in the opening to this section, Graham’s use of anthropomorphism does not reproduce and reinstate the image of the traditional humanist subject. Rather, somewhat paradoxically, she relies on anthropomorphism to disrupt a stable and assured sense of human being in the age of climate change. Anthropomorphism not only allows Graham to depict the nonhuman personhood of the wind, it more broadly recasts the relationship between the human and the wider world she inhabits. In retaining the first-person lyricism that Skinner and Malamud reject, Graham’s ecological poetics do not fully embrace their more radical model of ecopoetry. When asked if she considers herself an ecopoet, Graham states that such a classification would be reductive, adding, “I am writing poetry, not doing politics.”⁸¹ Graham remains attentive to the aesthetics of her craft, and her work owes much to the great American poets who came before her (Whitman, Elliot, and Williams are among her primary influences). As such, she carefully situates her poetry between this aesthetic tradition and the more polemical ecopoetry Skinner calls for, between a rejection of first-person lyricism and its recurrence throughout her collection.

Rather than reinforcing anthropocentric models of thinking and reproducing the humanist subject, Graham understands anthropomorphism to be a relational and productive technique that is capable of blurring the boundaries of the human and creating new ways of thinking about subjectivity and personhood. In her discussion of the relationship between new materialism and figurative language, Monique Allewaert proposes that figuration, particularly synecdoche, is a

⁷⁹ Oerlemans, *Poetry and Animals*, 9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸¹ Graham, interview by *EarthLines*, 36.

“process of making” that carries material and relational implications.⁸² Using the phrase “all hands on deck” as an example, she explains that under the standard account of synecdoche, the hands and deck are parts of an already existing whole (sailors and a ship). Allewaert, however, observes that parts can also be understood as “autonomous entities” that interact to produce “an event, that of the change of direction that transforms hands and decks and also the contiguous and co-present (but here not representative) bodies of sailor and ship.”⁸³ Here, Allewaert foregrounds synecdoche’s *relational* qualities whereby a “third entity” is produced from the interaction of the two parts: “[E]ach quantitatively discrete part joins with another to produce a new term that changes each of the components joined by the trope. Finally, this account of synecdoche challenges the sense of a static and harmonious world that can be divided into exchangeable quantities.”⁸⁴ Crucially, in Allewaert’s formulation, the parts of a synecdoche cannot simply be substituted for their larger totalities since the parts interact in a way that changes the totality itself. We can see, then, that synecdoche bears a resemblance to other models of relationality, such as Barad’s notion of intra-active becoming, in which phenomena are produced from intra-acting matter, or positive feedback loops, in which small changes to parts of a system can amplify to influence the system as a whole.

How does this account of synecdoche inform our discussion of subjectivity in Graham’s *Sea Change*? Taking up Allewaert’s less-explored example of personification, I want to suggest that Graham’s personification of the various natural elements in *Sea Change* is similarly transformative, but in ways Allewaert may not fully anticipate. Just as synecdoche “continually recreates the categories of the part and the whole as well as the relation between them,”

⁸² Monique Allewaert, “Toward a Materialist Figuration: A Slight Manifesto,” *English Language Notes* 51, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

personification and anthropomorphism take part in the creation of new categories of personhood; and, like synecdoche, the personification in Graham's work takes place between two entities (human and wind) whose interaction produces new ways of thinking about the human self and its surroundings.⁸⁵ In the case of Graham's title poem, personification participates in the production of new subjectivities, both in the sense of a nonhuman personhood for the wind and a posthuman subjectivity for the human speaker.

In Allewaert's view, personification not only assigns human characteristics to nonhuman entities, it actually helps determine the qualities of personhood in the first place. According to Allewaert, "[P]ersonification does not simply describe a process by which the characteristics of persons are vested in nonpersons: in determining the characteristic of persons its more primary work is determining the qualities of persons... [P]ersonification has the power to determine the parameters of persons."⁸⁶ Allewaert understands personification to be just as material and relational a technique as synecdoche. In her account, personification is not an "exclusively human operation within the entirely human technology of language" but rather emerges from the "conjunction of matter in motion, human bodies, and the technology of language, which are contiguous and mutually determining fields."⁸⁷ But Allewaert arrives at personification's power of determining persons by following the work of critic Natania Meeker and the eighteenth-century rhetoricians Hugh Blair and Joseph Priestley. Consequently, her focus is on how the category of the person was constituted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when it was still "being worked out and posited through the operation of personification."⁸⁸ As a result, she doesn't account for the radical potential of personification and anthropomorphism in the

⁸⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 73, n19.

Anthropocene era: the “persons” that are produced by personification no longer necessarily reflect back on and construct the human but rather can help us imagine how nonhuman persons intertwine and interact with human beings. As we see in “Sea Change,” anthropomorphism plays a productive and transformative role in constituting nonhuman persons like the wind and, in the process, positing a new posthuman subjectivity for the speaker.

Graham’s volume, then, posits a productive and positive alternative role for anthropomorphism and personification beyond that of simply reproducing human-centered narratives. As Bennett notes, “A touch of anthropomorphism... can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations.”⁸⁹ In Graham’s title poem, those confederations are endlessly shifting and reforming between the wind and ocean, the wind and the human speaker, and countless other entities. Anthropomorphism is Graham’s primary method of imagining an entangled, posthuman subjectivity for the Anthropocene, a sense of self that emerges from, and continually evolves alongside, its encounters with nonhuman others. Lastly, the sensibility that anthropomorphism helps catalyze is a distinctly ethical one, recasting our place in the world not as a human being surrounded by lesser beings and lesser things but as one networked entity among others. It is through ethics, then, that we must come to understand the ramifications of anthropomorphism’s person-forming power in the Anthropocene.

⁸⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

II. “No rightful way / to live—”: Jorie Graham’s Ethics of Non-Mastery

In my introduction, I noted that Graham does not describe *Sea Change* in primarily ethical terms, even though in interviews she cites the hardships future generations will face due to climate change as a central concern that ought to motivate us to ethical action:

How can you expect a person to find, let alone feel, and act upon, the fine thread that truly connects their very next choice to a life 1,000 years hence which might not in any way resemble what we know of as human life?... This is a very hard task indeed. One cannot imagine many requests that have ever been made of the human Imagination that exceed it.⁹⁰

Though she describes her work as a product of the imagination, it’s clear that Graham’s primary task with her volume is to cultivate the proper mood or feeling for ethical action to take place. In this section, I want to suggest that the ecological ethics depicted in her work go beyond the concerns of “human habitation” expressed above and are more complex and more philosophically sophisticated than her interviews suggest.

For Graham and the new materialists, ethics is delicately intertwined with the project of disrupting the notion of a stable, autonomous being. In their respective works, both Graham and new materialist theorists posit a decentered and entangled sense of self that emerges from the consideration of material connections with other beings and forces. In what follows, I argue that this self leads Graham to articulate an ecological ethics of *non-mastery* that stresses the need to give up our desire to master, know, manage, or own the world around us. In addition to the description of mastery provided by Lorraine Code and the new materialists above, I also draw

⁹⁰ Graham, interview by *EarthLines*, 36.

my notion of mastery from a variety of critics and philosophers, most notably Emmanuel Levinas, Sarah Wood, and Timothy Clark.⁹¹ While Graham does not, to my knowledge, consciously or explicitly cite any of these thinkers, their insights about mastery help us see that Graham's poetry is drawing on a broader critical and philosophical debate. Mastery, as conceived by these thinkers, is a pervasive and permeating mode that infiltrates and dominates discourses as varied as capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, philosophy, education, science, anthropocentrism, and many others. In this view, mastery is an appropriative and forensic mode of being that views objects, animals, and even people as tools to be grasped, facts to be learned, and situations to be apprehended. Graham, I show, similarly identifies mastery as the primary ethical problem of our species, and in *Sea Change*, she associates mastery with the rhetoric of owning, looking, and knowing. To counter these instances of mastery, Graham expresses an ethics of non-mastery that manifests in the speakers' encounters with nonhuman others. In the two poems I analyze, "Embodies" and "Futures," those encounters take place between a bird and swan, respectively.

In "Embodies," for instance, Graham depicts how the entangled materialities of a human and a bird lead the speaker to conclude, as the bird flies away, that "I no longer / can say for sure that it / knows nothing."⁹² Entanglement, for the speaker, results in a loss of epistemological certainty regarding how she interacts in and with the world. This uncertainty and alienation from nature, however, is simultaneously an ethical progression towards non-mastery. In "Futures," Graham examines mastery in the form of the impulse to own—"I own you says my mind. Own what, own / whom. I look up"—but also detects a more ethical alternative to ownership in affect

⁹¹ Also see Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

⁹² Graham, *Sea Change*, 7.

and feeling.⁹³ In my reading, the speaker's encounter with a sick swan initiates a moment of interspecies recognition and sympathy, transforming the act of owning into an "action of beauty."

"Embodies," the second poem in *Sea Change*, opens with an "error" made by nature: a plum tree, mistaking the unusually warm weather for spring, blossoms in "deep autumn." The tree's accidental blooming is a coalescing of decades, even centuries, of ecologically destructive behavior, making local and visible a global and amorphous process. The tree's bloom also makes climate change relevant to the scale of our daily lives: "the plum tree blossoms, twelve / blossoms on three different / branches, which for us, personally, means none this coming spring." Though what this event means "for us, personally," is vastly outstripped by what it means for life on earth, the scene allows Graham's readers to better imagine how climate change may manifest in their everyday lives.

The cascading effects of climate change cannot be contained to the tree's minor error. Drawing on the new materialist concept of entanglement, Graham describes how the ecological consequences of our actions operate as a kind of positive feedback loop, in which nature's "mistakes" accumulate and amplify, eventually impacting the climate system as a whole. Suddenly, a "grey-gold migratory bird" lands on the branch of the plum tree even though it should have traveled south for the winter long ago. "Still here?" the speaker asks. The bird's presence is disorienting, incongruent, *wrong*. It "multipl[ies] the wrong / air":

shifting branches with small

hops, then stiling—very still—breathing into this oxygen which also pockets my

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

looking hard, just
 that, takes it in, also my
 thinking which I try to seal off⁹⁴

The effects of the bird's presence begin to pile up. The bird takes in oxygen that it otherwise wouldn't have if it had migrated south. It hops from branch to branch, causing minute vibrations in the air that would not otherwise exist. The oxygen between the bird and speaker binds them together: the bird breathes in the oxygen, which is also the medium through which the speaker "look[s] hard" at the bird. The speaker attempts to "seal off" their looking and thinking, to not be "taken in" by the bird, to remain detached and autonomous but, crucially, they're unsuccessful.

This encounter initiates the kind of posthuman subjectivity I describe in "Sea Change," in which the recognition of our complex entanglement with other elements and animals acts as a catalyst for a decentered and blurred sense of self that cannot seal itself off from surrounding forces and phenomena. Just as the speaker is remade and reshaped through its encounter with the wind, the speaker in "Embodies," like Alaimo's trans-corporeal subject, is materially changed by the bird. As Alaimo puts it, "[T]rans-corporeality... opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors."⁹⁵ In Graham's poem, the speaker becomes cognizant of their inescapable materiality and hopeless entanglement with nonhuman others:

I cannot
 go somewhere

⁹⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁵ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

else than this body, the afterwards of each of these instants is just

another instant, breathe, breathe,

my cells reach out, I multiply on the face of

the earth, on the

mud—I can see my prints on the sweet bluish mud⁹⁶

Importantly, the sensation of “multiply[ing] on the face of / the earth” signals not the hubris of an omnipresent humanism or anthropocentrism but rather the acknowledgement that simply by living, we necessarily inscribe ourselves on the planet. As a result, we are accountable for how the consequences of our actions ripple out and act on the world on a far greater scale than previously imagined. Our multiplication comes in the form of the material and discursive traces we leave on the earth, not just as footprints in the mud but also the effects of these footprints, of how they “come back unexpectedly from the other side of the planet.”⁹⁷ The tree’s early bloom is a poignant example of this: we may know intellectually that carbon emissions are warming the planet while remaining ignorant of what this looks and feels like at the level of everyday life. The image of the tree’s accidental blooming demonstrates how the effects of carbon emissions released decades ago can reappear in our lives in unexpected ways.

The encounter with the bird and plum tree disturbs and disorients the speaker, who at one point reaches out “to see if / those really were blossoms, I thought perhaps paper / from wind.”

The poem continues as the speaker contemplates this moment of alienation from nature:

we are islands, we

⁹⁶ Graham, *Sea Change*, 6.

⁹⁷ Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies,” 134.

should beget nothing &

what am I to do with my imagination—& the person in me trembles—& there is still

innocence, it is starting up somewhere

even now, and the strange swelling of the so-called Milky Way, and the sound of the

wings of the bird as it lifts off

suddenly, & how it is going somewhere precise, & that precision, & how I no longer

can say for sure that it

knows nothing⁹⁸

These lines feature the associational logic and paratactic style that is so common across Graham's body of work. Here, the various images are linked together by semantic connectors such as em dashes, ampersands, conjunctions, and commas, representing formally the material linkages that compose the poem's narrative. The entire poem, in fact, is one long sentence. The result is a poetic form that enacts the sense of "falling" or tumbling forward, as if one were barreling ahead uncontrollably towards a kind of "tipping point," the very catastrophic future Graham's poems describe.⁹⁹ In this passage, the lack of periods suggests an existential and ethical urgency as the speaker jumps from image to image. The speaker realizes that simply by existing in the world, we leave behind footprints. What, the poem seems to ask, do we do with our inescapable inscription on the earth? "What am I to do with my imagination?" These

⁹⁸ Graham, *Sea Change*, 7.

⁹⁹ Graham, interview by *poets.org*. Speaking about the poetic form of *Sea Change* in the same interview, Graham notes, "[L]etting the sentences move along this grid of very long and very short lines... I also was able to enact a sense of a 'tipping point'—the feeling of falling forward, or 'down' in the hyper-short lines at the same time as one feels suspended, as long as possible, in the 'here and now' of the long line—so that the pull of the 'future' is constrained by the desire to stay in the 'now,' which is itself broken again, as a spell is, by the presence of the oncoming future."

anxieties are ethical questions that emerge from the speaker's consideration of her material entanglement with nonhuman others.

As a way of speaking to these ethical concerns, Graham returns to the speaker's encounter with the bird. Birds, like much of nature, often serve as merely the backdrop to human narratives of discovery or adventure. Here, however, the bird is seen as a being in its own right, and its actions are at the forefront of the speaker's mind. When the bird takes flight, we don't know where it's going or if it even has a destination in mind, but we know that "it is going somewhere precise." Following Graham's associational logic, there seems to be a relationship between the precision of the bird's destination and the speaker's recognition that "I no longer / can say for sure that it / knows nothing." The act of "going somewhere precise" (as opposed to a vague elsewhere) implies both a sense of nonhuman intentionality and a continued consideration of the bird even after it leaves the speaker's field of vision. So we might say that the speaker's relinquishment of epistemological certainty follows from the observation that the bird exceeds our human understanding and remains entangled with us in unforeseen ways: "it is going somewhere precise," therefore "I no longer / can say for sure that it / knows nothing." This moment of interspecies recognition, I argue, seeks to counter anthropocentric thinking and is the poem's central ethical moment. But to better understand the ethics of this move, we need to first examine the poem's most complex ethical gesture, which comes in the long allegory that concludes the work:

the feathered serpent I saw as a child, of stone, &

how it stares back at me

from the height of its pyramid, & the blood flowing from the sacrifice, & the oracles

dragging hooks through the hearts in
 order to say
 what is coming, what is true, & all the blood, millennia, drained to stave off
 the future, stave off,
& the armies on the far plains, the gleam off their armor now in this bird's
 eye, as it flies towards me
 then over, & the sound of the thousands of men assembled at
 all cost now
 the sound of the bird lifting, thick, rustling where it flies over—only see, it is
 a hawk after all, I had not seen
 clearly, it has gone to hunt in the next field, & the chlorophyll is
 coursing, & the sun is
 sucked in, & the chief priest walks away now where what remains of
 the body is left
 as is customary for the local birds.¹⁰⁰

In my reading, this scene allegorizes the violence of anthropocentrism that is at the heart of
 climate change. It recounts the speaker's visit to the Temple of the Feathered Serpent in
 Teotihuacan in central Mexico. The structure dates back to approximately 200 CE and is named
 for the Mesoamerican "feathered serpent" deity. The site is perhaps most notable for the
 discovery, in the 1980s, of at least two hundred sacrificial victims buried beneath the pyramid.

¹⁰⁰ Graham, *Sea Change*, 7.

In “Embodies,” these sacrifices allowed the “oracles” to predict “what is coming, what is true.” Here, the knowledge and certainty that are often framed as positive Enlightenment values are seen as requiring the blood of human sacrifice in order to flourish. In *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces*, Sarah Wood observes that discourses of mastery often seek to “abolish the future” and eliminate the “possibility of surprise.”¹⁰¹ In order to master and conquer the world around us, in other words, we had to “stave off” uncertainty and unknowability through ever-increasing systems of control, management, and prediction embedded in capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, education, religion, and science. Timothy Clark notes that our habits of mastery and management have persisted into the climate change era. Over the past two decades, he observes, “a process of ‘ecological modernization’ has sought to normalize and internalize environmental issues into the workings of industrial capitalism by making them issues of improved efficiency and distribution.”¹⁰² “To try to manage the planet’s atmosphere,” he adds, resembles “the ancient fantasy of establishing some self-moving system of rationality that can be master of its own conditions.”¹⁰³ In Graham’s observation that knowing requires a necessary violence (in this case, human sacrifice), she taps into existing critical and philosophical conversations on the relationship between mastery and ethics.

With this in mind, we can now return to the speaker’s final remark as the bird takes flight: “I no longer / can say for sure that it / knows nothing.” To relinquish epistemological certainty, I argue, is to reject the long history of mastery and control our species has sought over the planet and its nonhuman others. It’s an ethical gesture that instead dwells in uncertainty and unknowability. Drawing on Code’s work and elaborating on the relationship between

¹⁰¹ Wood, *Without Mastery*, 15.

¹⁰² Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies,” 133.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

entanglement and non-mastery, Alaimo explains, “[T]rans-corporeal subjects must also relinquish mastery as they find themselves inextricably part of the flux and flow of the world that others would presume to master.”¹⁰⁴ Mastery reinforces practices of dissociation between a subject and the surrounding world, but the kind of entanglement Graham’s speaker encounters disrupts these practices, emphasizing her epistemological uncertainty regarding the bird’s being.

“Futures” builds on the ethics of non-mastery established in “Embodies.” But whereas “Embodies” focuses on mastery in the form of a desire to know, “Futures” explicates a desire to own:

Midwinter. Dead of. I own you says my mind. Own what, own

whom. I look up. Own the looking at us

say the cuttlefish branchings, lichen-black, moist. Also

the seeing, which wants to feel more than it sees.

Also, in the glance, the feeling of owning, accordioning out and up,

seafanning,

& there is cloud on blue ground up there, & wind which the eye loves so deeply it

would spill itself out and liquefy

to pay for it—¹⁰⁵

In “Futures,” the language of ownership is fused with the act of looking. Here, looking takes on the form of an appropriative glance, an eye that sizes up, grasps, and seizes the object before it.

To understand the ethical implications of the relationship between sight and ownership, it would

¹⁰⁴ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Graham, *Sea Change*, 14.

be helpful to turn to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Vision, for Levinas, is a violent way of comprehending the other. Glossing his thought, Jill Robbins explains, “[Vision] seeks to absorb that alterity, to draw it into the play of the Same. In this way, vision is just one instance of the self’s *habitual* economy, an economy that always fails to do justice to the other.”¹⁰⁶

Ownership, for Graham, originates in a mind that similarly reduces and assimilates the natural world to recognizable phenomena. This ownership is disrupted in the second and third lines by a nonhuman voice: “Own the looking at us / say the cuttlefish.” We may initially read this as a declarative statement, a response from the cuttlefish that they are “owned” by human perception and cognition. But this anthropomorphic gesture is also an unexpected voice that undercuts and speaks back to the owning mind; it can thus be understood as an ethical imperative, as if the cuttlefish are telling the speaker to “own up to” or take responsibility for the way she looks at them.

Significantly, Graham also detects a more positive relationship between sight and the object it comprehends based on feeling and affect, presenting a possible alternative to the “feeling of owning” described above. Seeing, the poet writes, “wants to feel more than it sees.” When the speaker looks up at the sky, her “eye loves so deeply it / would spill itself out and liquefy / to pay for it.” Here, vision still bears a violent, (self-)destructive relation to what it sees and is still embedded in notions of owning and buying, but the initial impulse of love and affect suggest a more ethical alternative lurking within Graham’s concept of sight. Levinas speaks of a similar alternative when he describes the self’s encounter with the other. In Levinas’s terms, in

¹⁰⁶ Jill Robbins, “Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas’s Totality and Infinity,” *Yale French Studies* no. 79 (1991): 137, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2930249>.

our encounter with the other's face "the avaricious gaze *turns into* generosity and language."¹⁰⁷

As Robbins explains:

This transformation that the gaze undergoes is, precisely, ethical in the sense that Levinas gives it: "we name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics." Thus the (ethical) encounter with the other interrupts the self's habitual economy and its tendency to conceive of the world as a space of possibilities and power. It interrupts the play of the Same... The turn from vision to generosity and language, and ultimately, to voice, resembles a synesthesia, a crossing of sensory attributes.¹⁰⁸

While Levinas's philosophy would have to undergo a dramatic shift to align it with the new materialist conception of reality, and his notion of generosity may be quite distant from the concerns of Graham's work, I want to suggest that Levinas's ideas are nonetheless helpful in tracking the relationship between vision and ethics that Graham references. The turn to voice, in particular, is significant when we recall the role it plays in Graham's anthropomorphism of the wind, cuttlefish, and countless other elements. In her work, voice and language are the primary qualities of a personhood that cannot be ignored but rather must be listened to and acknowledged.

Further interrogating the relationship between vision and ownership, the speaker wonders if that connection can be severed, if we can look without the desire to own, asking, "[I]s there a skin of the I own which can be scoured from inside the glance." "No," she concludes. But the speaker nonetheless tries to reformulate her relationship to ownership as a mode of agency and self-empowerment: "I own my self, I own my / leaving." The trope of ownership returns in the poem's final scene, when the speaker witnesses a swan on a "drying river." Here, the act of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

seeing becomes a moment of sympathy for the swan, and the rhetoric of ownership is transformed into an “action of beauty”:

one day a swan appeared out of nowhere on the drying river,

it

was sick, but it floated, and the eye felt the pain of rising to take it in—I own you

said the old feeling, I want

to begin counting

again, I will count what is mine, it is moving quickly now, I will begin this

message “I”—I feel the

smile, put my hand up to be sure, yes, on my lips—the yes—I touch it again, I

begin counting, I say *one* to the swan, *one*,

do not be angry with me o my god, I have begun the action of beauty again, on

the burning river I have started the catalogue,

your world,

I your speck tremble remembering money, its dry touch, sweet strange

smell, it’s a long time, the smell of it like lily of the valley

sometimes, and pondwater, and how

one could bend down close to it

and drink.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Graham, *Sea Change*, 15-16.

The encounter between the swan and speaker here is a moment of interspecies recognition and sympathy: “the eye felt the pain of rising to take it in.” Here, the eye, which has so far been a symbol of human greed, becomes an avenue for affect. It “take[s] in” the image of the swan not as a form of appropriation but rather to illustrate an affective entanglement capable of crossing the human-nonhuman divide. Similar to how the speaker of “Embodies” is taken in by the migratory bird, the speaker here cannot seal herself off from feeling sympathy for the swan. The “old feeling” of owning, however, quickly resurges, taking on the form of counting and calculation. Counting, in this instance, belongs to the discourses of mastery described by Code, using “easily applied categories [i.e. “what is mine”] to contain the personal, social, and physical-natural world... obliterating differences in a desire to assemble the confusion of the world into maximally homogeneous units.”¹¹⁰

Just prior to the act of counting, however, the speaker seems to undergo a subtle yet significant shift in how she views the swan. Whereas moments before counting was an instance of assimilation, it now relinquishes that mastery, restoring the differences that counting and owning would have obliterated. “I / begin counting, I say *one* to the swan, *one*, / do not be angry with me o my god, I have begun the action of beauty again.” By insisting on the singularity of the swan, the speaker establishes an ethical and non-masterful relation to the natural world. Though this scene is couched in spiritual and aesthetic language, this moment disrupts the discourse of ownership that permeates the poem.

We can perhaps trace this movement from ownership to feeling by following the four dashes that punctuate the scene. The dashes in the lines above act as “switches” that indicate a sudden shift in the speaker’s ethical relation to the swan. The first dash separates the speaker’s

¹¹⁰ Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 19.

initial experience of sympathy from the “old feeling” of owning and counting, which continues until the next dash, and the final dash illustrates a definitive break from the previous impulse to own. The two middle dashes (“I will begin this / message “I”—I feel the / smile, put my hand up to be sure, yes, on my lips—the yes”) suggest an ambiguous middle space, a brief transition period where the speaker’s relation to the swan is unclear. The autonomous “I” that would do the counting is disrupted by a smile and affirmative “yes.”

This final scene may more closely resemble traditional nature poetry than the posthuman ecological poetry featured elsewhere in the collection, reflecting Graham’s stated goal for her work: “to not shut my eyes and yet to still recover the ability, in this full knowledge of potential coming ‘collapse,’ to praise the world I love. But out of presence, not out of denial.” Graham frequently returns, perhaps anachronistically, to themes of natural beauty throughout *Sea Change*, but it’s a beauty tainted by ecological devastation and, in the case of “Futures,” a drying river and a sick swan. Despite the Romantic tint to this poem, it nonetheless features aspects of entanglement, especially in our affective relations to others, that disrupt discourses of mastery and ownership. Here, the vision of plenitude and freedom that, according to Ruddick, capitalism provides manifests in the desire to own aspects of the natural world unencumbered by the demands or obligations of others. In “Futures,” Graham offers an alternative “way of imagining being fully in the world, a different vision of plenitude than the one on offer, and a different vision of what it might mean to live on earth” that is grounded in privileging our affective relations to others rather than a relation of ownership.¹¹¹

Conclusion:

¹¹¹ Ruddick, “Grounding Our Subjectivity,” 163.

Jorie Graham's work belongs to what Lynn Keller has called the self-conscious Anthropocene, the period of "pervasive cultural awareness of anthropogenic planetary transformation" that she dates from 2000.¹¹² In its survey of planetary ecological destruction, *Sea Change* covers immense ground, moving from the "in- / dispensable / plankton" at the bottom of the food chain to the "slowing of the / gulf / stream" in our atmosphere, in order to imagine what life will look like in the coming decades and centuries.¹¹³ But, unusual for ecological poetry, it returns, time and time again, to the human self and scenes of daily life. In Graham's final poem, an anthropomorphized evening tells the human speaker (and us):

It is
strange but you still
need to tell
your story—how you met, the coat one wore, the shadow of which war, and how it lifted,
and how peace began again
for that part of
the planet¹¹⁴

This scene is perhaps self-serving, as Graham is the ultimate source of the evening's statement. But throughout this paper, I have suggested that her continual return to the human is not representative of an outmoded humanism but rather a recognition that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, the "age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" has

¹¹² Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2017), 8-9.

¹¹³ Graham, *Sea Change*, 4-5.

¹¹⁴ Graham, *Sea Change*, 55-56.

collapsed.¹¹⁵ The human self and its stories must be put into conversation with ecological destruction, since that is now the condition of our lives. At the same time, the self and ethics we must begin to exhibit should be informed by the material flows and affective connections that characterize our contemporary period. In having the evening, an amorphous concept that is nonetheless composed of a confluence of material phenomena, urge us to tell our stories, Graham is demonstrating her commitment to the fundamental intertwining of the human and nonhuman, the cultural and natural, and the animate and inanimate.

¹¹⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/596640>.

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