Before nature's nation: ecological thought and early American poetry

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BEFORE NATURE’S NATION:
ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT AND EARLY AMERICAN POETRY

by

Joshua C. Bartlett

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
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Abstract

This project examines early American encounters with the natural world through the context of contemporary ecocriticism. In readings of Puritan poets Anne Bradstreet and Michael Wigglesworth, African-American poet Phillis Wheatley, and Mohegan minister Samson Occom, it demonstrates how poetic attentions to nature transformed collective antagonism toward the “howling wilderness” into personal feelings of affection and wonder. Likewise, it develops an understanding of the “ecological” that is both methodology, a way of thinking about specific things, such as trees or stones, and epistemology, a kind of thinking that emphasizes relational perception. It then situates these experiences amidst both canonical Americanist scholarship and recent work in new materialism, object oriented ontology, and the environmental humanities in order to demonstrate how the affective capabilities of the natural world shaped individual subjectivities in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England.

By emphasizing entanglement with nature as a dominant characteristic of early American life, Before Nature’s Nation challenges conventional understandings of how early Americans interpreted the world around them. In reading these treatments of natural objects, places, and spaces for ecological possibilities, it reframes traditional narratives of American environmental history and relocates the origins of American environmental thought. Through its particular focus on early American poetry and poetics, the voices of colonial women, persons of color, and Indigenous peoples are foregrounded in ways that core texts of the early American canon often overlook. And, in highlighting seventeenth- and eighteenth-century struggles with unfamiliar landscapes, natural disasters, resource scarcity, and the effects of climate change, this work enables early American literature to resonate with contemporary moments of environmental crisis in crossings unexplored by either ecocritical studies or literary criticism.
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Preface

An earlier version of a portion of Chapter One of this dissertation appeared as “Anne Bradstreet’s Ecological Thought.” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2014, pp. 290-304. I have included this material, of which I am the sole author, in revised and expanded form as part of the larger line of research that concerns this chapter. I do so with thanks to and permission from the publisher, Taylor & Francis, as outlined on their webpage:

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Introduction

Before Nature’s Nation: Ecological Thought and Early American Poetry

The growing crisis of global warming and the pervasive rhetoric of ecological catastrophe have generated substantial visibility for the environmental humanities. Forging new relationships between literary studies, cultural geography, and environmental history, scholars have refined conventional definitions of nature, bolstered emergent disciplines such as oceanic studies, and reinvigorated ethical and activist dimensions of academic criticism. While much of this work focuses on contemporary environmental issues and twentieth- and twenty-first century writing, the “ecological turn” has had particular impact on the field of pre-twentieth century American literature as well. To date, however, little work has examined the ecological possibilities of early American poetry and poetics. As a result, most scholarship continues to trace the origins of American environmental thought to nineteenth-century prose by Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Such readings limit possibilities for innovative scholarship and cross-disciplinary collaboration because they remain bound to an idea of “nature” that, by the early nineteenth century, was already implicated in narratives of emergent United States nationalism and settler colonialism. Likewise, they fail to thoroughly account for the extensive literary production and unique lived experiences of colonial women, Native Americans, and persons of color in pre-1800 America.

Before Nature’s Nation remedies these gaps by foregrounding the presence of the natural world in early American literature and centering seventeenth- and eighteenth-century verse as key to the emergence of American ecological thought. Through close readings of Puritan poets Anne Bradstreet and Michael Wigglesworth, African-American poet Phillis Wheatley, and
Mohegan minister Samson Occom, this project demonstrates how poetic attentions to nature transformed collective antagonism toward the “howling wilderness” of early America into personal feelings of affection and wonder. It develops an understanding of the “ecological” that is both methodology, a way of thinking about specific things, such as trees or stones, and epistemology, a kind of thinking that emphasizes relational perception. It then uses the insights of ecocriticism to demonstrate how the affective capability of the natural world shaped individual subjectivities in early New England.

By emphasizing entanglement with nature as a dominant characteristic of early American life, this research challenges conventional understandings of how early American subjects experienced and interpreted this nature. In reading early American poetic treatments of natural objects, places, and spaces through the lens of contemporary ecological thought, it reframes traditional understandings of American environmental history and conventional definitions of the ecological as such. Likewise, by highlighting colonial struggles with agricultural production, unfamiliar landscapes, and the effects of climate change, *Before Nature’s Nation* enables early American literature to resonate with contemporary moments of environmental crisis in ways unexplored by either ecocritical studies or literary criticism.

My first chapter addresses the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet. Here, I consider how her poetry registers the vitality of early New England nature, especially in terms of the forests of seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Focusing on her early historical poems, known as the Quaternions, as well as her later and more personal verse, I show how her attention to particular aspects of the nonhuman world – birds, for example – cultivates an ecological language of openness and affection. I read her lifelong commitment to contemplative practice, therefore, as
both a specifically ecological activity and a model of early American ecological thought, countering critics who read such interactions in explicitly religious contexts alone.

My second chapter concerns Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth’s engagement with local environmental conditions by considering his “God’s Controversy with New-England” as a counterpoint text to his apocalyptic bestseller, “The Day of Doom.” I begin with analysis of how environmental devastation appears in the latter’s opening stanzas: with graphic detail, but without sustained concern. Then, in turning to the former, I suggest two ways of reading the poem: as a form of early American environmental history and as a personal declaration of affection for the natural world. Throughout, I argue that the emergence of Wigglesworth’s poetic attachment to the “dearest land” (“God’s Controversy” l. 431) – forged in the midst of a severe summer drought – is indicative of the inherent ecological potential of Puritan orthodoxy itself.

I shift from the terrestrial to the oceanic in my third chapter, entitled “Phillis Wheatley’s ‘vast Atlantic.’” In contrast to critical methodologies that figure oceans, particularly in the context of early African-American experience, as spaces of erasure, I read Wheatley’s oceans as vital and vibrant places. I begin by tracing Wheatley’s fascination with hurricanes and related displays of extreme weather and explore her assertion that the ocean influences both mental capacity and emotional control. In shifting to Wheatley’s elegies – and her elegies for children in particular – that invoke the ocean’s presence, I suggest that the ocean in these cases exists as a literal site of earthly attachment and intimate mourning. I then conclude with two poems that bookend Wheatley’s 1773 transatlantic travel between Boston and London – “A Farewel to America” and “Ocean” – focusing on her interest in the ocean’s ability to produce experiences of wonder. In each section, I address how Wheatley’s oceanic attentions developed a broader theory of the relationship between imaginative practice and material sensation – as well as how her
work refigures early American conceptions of both the ocean in general and the Atlantic Ocean in particular.

I conclude with a chapter on the Mohegan minister Samson Occom. Building on critical work that examines the use of Christian hymnody as a strategy of Indigenous survivance, I consider how, for Occom, hymns formed a performative spiritual discourse that remained both materially engaged and environmentally aware. In surveying his journals and letters, I show how Occom’s careful attention to nature manifests itself in his writing on a broad scale. I then explore the ways in which hymns in particular served as conduits between religious affections and experiences of the natural world – and, thus, how they occupied a central and unique role in defining and navigating the sensory conditions of what Occom called “this Great Indian World” (149).

“Nature’s nation” and nineteenth-century America: two narratives

By the summer of 1845, when Henry David Thoreau “went to the woods…to live deliberately” (Walden 90), “nature” – as both collective imaginary and material fact – already occupied a central role in defining American identity. In short, to quote Perry Miller, America had become “Nature’s nature” (“Nature and the National Ego” 209). This conflation generated what Miller termed “the obsessive American drama…the American theme, of Nature versus civilization” (“Nature and the National Ego” 204-205). Moreover, it “identified the health, the very personality, of America with Nature, and therefore set it in opposition to the concepts of the city, the railroad, [and] the steamboat” (“Nature and the National Ego” 207-208). This commitment shaped the broader idea of “an American character” – and while individual and firsthand accounts of the natural world often reinforced this theme, or were adapted to do so,
such narratives were ultimately subservient to more ideological notions of “a nationalism based upon the premises of Nature” (“Nature and the National Ego” 210, 214).

As the title of Miller’s essay indicates, nature supplied more than a sense of national identity alone. It was a prime source of America’s “national ego” as well. America’s nature was systematically transformed into American nature – from geographical location to cultural possession – and thus became a force of American (or, rather, United States) exceptionalism for “a nation that was,” in its own mind, “above all other nations, embedded in Nature” and “beyond all nations…in perpetual touch with nature” (“Nature and the National Ego” 209, 211; emphasis mine).\(^5\) This conviction served – and continues to serve – multiple functions. It allowed the persistence of American religious identification, particularly with various Protestant theologies, without demanding strict adherence to their underlying doctrinal tenets.\(^6\) Likewise, it enacted “an assuaging of national anxiety” regarding an absence of European “culture,” while simultaneously embracing the perceived benefits of that same absence: “The sublimity of our natural backdrop not only relieved us of having to apologize for a deficiency of picturesque ruins and hoary legends: it demonstrated how the vast reservoirs of our august temple furnish the guarantee that we shall never be contaminated by artificiality” (“Nature and the National Ego” 211).\(^7\) Moreover, forging an identity as “Nature’s nation” both enabled and excused United States settler colonialism, the ideology of manifest destiny, and subsequent global and imperialist expansion: “America can progress indefinitely into an expanding future without acquiring sinful delusions of grandeur simply because it is nestled in Nature, is instructed and guided by mountains, is chastened by cataracts” (“Nature and the National Ego” 211; emphasis mine).\(^8\) Whether one celebrated “barbaric” American nature or worried about its disappearance, the feat that “Nature in America is going down in swift in inexorable defeat…[a]ll too soon we shall become like

For many critics, this nineteenth-century entanglement of nature and nation seems to coincide with a fundamental shift in how Americans, both individually and collectively, felt about the natural world itself. This is a central argument, for example, of Roderick Nash’s canonical study *Wilderness and the American Mind*. “Western thought,” Nash asserts, “generated a powerful bias against the wilderness, and the settlement of the New World offered abundant opportunities for the expression of this sentiment” (22). From this premise, Nash constructs “a tradition of repugnance” with regard to perceptions of nature in colonial America (24). Citing Alexis de Tocqueville’s claim in *Democracy in America* that “Americans…are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature,” Nash introduces sources from Cotton Mather to Andrew Jackson in support of this broader thesis: “Tocqueville, on the whole, was correct in his analysis that “living in the wilds” produced a bias against them. Constant exposure to wilderness gave rise to fear and hatred on the part of those who had to fight it for survival and success” (43). Only those who were “removed from a wilderness condition” could “beg[ini]t to sense its ethical and aesthetic values” (43). “The pioneer,” Nash concludes, simply “lived too close to wilderness for appreciation” (24).

**Puritan typology and early American nature**

Prior to the nineteenth century, discussions of “nature” in America were often framed in explicitly typological fashion. This typological emphasis, the notion that natural events have religious corollaries and that religious doctrines and tenets of faith have specific environmental
manifestations, was an especially key component with regard to the formal elements of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England Puritanism. Typological conceptions provided particular reasons for Puritans to look at their environmental surroundings – and they proved to be an important shaping factor in how they would do such looking as well. Nash’s “tradition of repugnance” narrative, as well as this hypothesized absence of “appreciation,” relies heavily on his attention to and understanding of this mode of Puritan rhetorical discourse. As such, the interactions between Puritan typology and the natural world of early America deserve further attention. Likewise, to the extent that the influence of such doctrine extends well beyond the prime years of its practice, it demands similar attention even in the case of writers who were not directly implicated in its theology.¹⁰

Puritan doctrine engaged in serious study of nature for the purpose of spiritual advantage. This perspective encouraged a particular relationship between these early American and their external environment:

The God of Puritanism was both sovereign and wise. His attributes were so balanced that He could be at one and the same time the object of worship and the source of knowledge. The same balance was therefore thought to be extended into the realm of nature, for God’s works must reflect His perfections, and the created universe must be at once the result of His decree and of His thought. It must incarnate His will and also embody the platform of His ideas. Religious doctrine and the vast accumulated store of the intellectual heritage met again in the Puritan theory of nature as they did in the theory of reason. (Miller, *The New England Mind* 207)

Thus, a “Puritan theory of nature” depends on several simultaneously understood precepts. Even taking as given fact the proposition that God is all-powerful, nature continually requires order
and ordering; that is, it must have some set of rules or principles to which it remains bound. This establishes a particularly arduous task, both intellectually and rhetorically, for the religious leader: “[H]e had to force the natural universe to disclose God’s supremacy in the wonderful disposition and control of all its affairs, and yet…hold it faithful to some settled order of ideas so that a consistent set of arguments might be collected from it” (Miller, *The New England Mind* 209). The need for both these truths to co-exist and find stasis generated a particular compromise: “Puritan thought, in short, presupposed a natural framework in which arbitrary power was confined within inviolable order, yet in which the order was so marvelously contrived that all divinely avowed ends were swiftly accomplished” (Miller, *The New England Mind* 207-208). In essence, God submits – freely and willingly – to a restriction of divine power. This is, broadly speaking, a key tenet of covenant theology. Upon this free submission, nature – or, rather, the natural world – is rendered “ordered.” In turn, it is acknowledged that this order is of such perfect design (or “so marvelously contrived”) that is functions in the same fashion and towards the same ends as if God’s power were not, in fact, (self) restricted. As such, major theological conflict is avoided – and as evidence of this, Perry Miller makes note of the fact that “the textbooks used in New England all devoted chapters to natural theology” (*The New England Mind* 208).

Such a theory of nature had profound implications for the spiritual life of the everyday Puritan. The foremost of these implications was that God could be observed in the natural world to great spiritual advantage: “Puritanism believed sincerely that man had fallen, but in Puritan theory his lapse could never be construed as so complete a debacle that he was no longer capable of drawing deductions concerning the nature and immaculate goodness of his creator from the evidence of his senses” (Miller, *The New England Mind* 208). In *The Rise of Puritanism,*
William Haller uses the example of John Preston’s *Life Eternall*, a volume of sermons published posthumously in 1631, to outline the theological basis behind such thought:

The preachment starts from Paul’s statement (Acts 17:27-28) that God, having made the world, has made all men to live and move and have their being in him and to feel after him and to find him. With these words is linked the statement (Rom 1:20) that “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” The existence of God, that is, is revealed first of all in nature and in the heart of man. (170)

While observation of nature alone cannot result in individual salvation – and both Miller and Haller are clear on this as a theological point – such activity has two consequences. First, as Miller explains, also using Preston as example, “by the experience of the senses certain right conclusions might be reached, even though they would not by themselves lead to salvation” (*The New England Mind* 209). These “certain right conclusions,” as they gesture back to the notion of God, serve as tangible examples and proofs of both the belief structure and the underlying tents of faith itself. Thus, as Miller writes in “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,” “knowledge is not only useful, it is part of theology” (77). One ignores the world, in other words, in the same way one ignores God: at one’s own eternal peril.

This understanding of typology, however, should not be taken to encompass the whole of Puritan relations with the natural world. While there is accuracy in Miller’s assertion that the average Puritan was endowed with “the disposition to read sermons in brooks and morals in stones” (*The New England Mind* 214), such sentiments have often been construed by scholars of early America, including Nash, to suggest that Puritans saw only sermons and morals when they looked at stones and brooks – that they did not, and could not, see the world itself through the
lens of their religious convictions. This is the case, for example, in Lynn White, Jr.’s influential essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”:

[T]he present increasing disruption of the global environment is the product of a dynamic technology and science which were originating in the Western medieval world…Their growth cannot be understood historically apart from distinctive attitudes toward nature which are deeply grounded in Christian dogma…Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man…Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. (14)

This misperception motivates Miller’s premise of “stressing the ‘errand’ more than the ‘wilderness’” in his canonical study (“Errand into the Wilderness” 1) – and it likewise guides Nash’s belief that Puritans were unable to “appreciate” the wilderness of early America and his subsequent exclusion of them from narratives of emerging American environmental thought.¹³

I address such misperceptions throughout this study, particularly in chapters on Anne Bradstreet and Michael Wigglesworth, in order to demonstrate how this inordinate emphasis on nature as typology or symbol overemphasizes Puritan doctrine and conflates formal theological discourse with everyday lived experience. Puritans listened to sermons – but they did not reside in them. This is clear, in fact, even within the analyses of Miller and Haller discussed above. Haller’s work, for example, draws a clear line between “the preaching of the word” and “the understanding of the word,” the latter of which requires “nothing…but the natural capacities…of men” (170). Likewise, Miller emphasizes a significant consequence of man’s “incomplete,” rather than irrevocable, “lapse”: the continued primacy of “the experience of [his] senses” (The
In addition to highlighting the importance of sensory experience, as well as the frequency and intensity with which it was undertaken, both Haller and Miller undergird their readings with an awareness that, while “the limitations places upon the light of nature were essentially important in the minds of the preachers,” such limitations were fundamentally less essential in the lives of the members of their congregations (Haller 170). This is further evident in Haller’s discussion of Preston himself:

He turns, then, from the Bible to nature for confirmation of his faith as many another worshiper of nature was to do: “when you see the fire to ascend above the aire, it argues that there is a place where it would rest, though you never say it; and as (in winter) when you see the Swallowes flying to a place, though you never saw the place, yet you must needs gather that there is one which Nature hath appointed them.”…Sun and moon and stars quicken the earth to bring forth plants to feed the beasts, and horses run, oxen plow, and dogs hunt in our behalf so that we may consummate nature’s work by serving God. (171)

Here, nature’s power to “argue” and “appoint” is not only its ability to symbolize or signify; rather, it is also demonstrative of its agency and its capacity to testify. Preston offers a spiritual lesson, to be sure, but suggests more immediately that Puritans immerse themselves in the elemental forces (fire, air, sun, moon) and natural phenomena (plant and animal life) that define their material existence.

To be clear, my goal is neither to argue against the sincerity of Puritan typology nor to claim that these authors were subversive bastions of secularism lurking amidst otherwise pious seventeenth- and eighteenth-century peers. Nor, for that matter, is it to insist on a categorical dismissal of the potential of either religious typology or religious belief as such to generate
environmental commitments. Rather, it is to insist that these attentive practices of close looking and intense engagement, regardless of intention, generate powerful affective remainders. These excesses of feeling, even with the most orthodox practitioners of Puritanism, are generative of relations to the natural world that emerge as ecological in both form and substance. Likewise, my intention is not a simple reversal of Nash’s argument regarding “repugnance” and “appreciation” with regard to early America. Rather, as I explore below, it is to both demonstrate the limitations of such “appreciation” narratives and expand the definition of the “ecological” as such. Typology continues to play an important role in discussion of early America, and of early New England in particular, and the discourse of appreciation should not be disregarded wholesale, but views of both must be revised in the interest of both early Americanist criticism and the practice of ecocritical studies.

The problem with appreciation

Embedded within Nash’s critique of the inability of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans to “appreciate” nature is an implicit celebration of appreciation as a universal good in the pursuit of environmentalist goals. This concept of appreciate, as well as its relation to proximity (“The pioneer lived too close to wilderness for appreciation”) is central to Nash’s thesis – and I trace it here because of its continued influence on scholarly narratives in both literary studies and American environmental history. “Appreciation,” Nash argues, “began in the cities” (44). It began, in other words, when people were “removed” from nature, or their “wilderness condition” and maintained appropriate spatial distance from the natural world – when there were not, that is, “too close.” From such positions, they were able to “sense” nature’s “values” and overturn the climate of “fear and hatred” that categorized the attitudes of previous generations such that, “by mid-nineteenth century, [only] a few Americans had vigorously stated
the case for appreciation” (44). Likewise, the underlying conditions of possibility themselves for this emergent appreciation were generated not from first-hand contact or intimate connection with the natural world, but rather as a result of “Romanticism…creating a climate of opinion in the new American nation in which wilderness could be appreciated” (67). For Nash, this atmosphere (or “climate”) of appreciation is singularly key to the emergence of organized conservation and preservation efforts, the development of an American “philosophy of wilderness,” the creation of state and national parks – and forms the basis of the “ecological contract” that governs the “Island Civilization” model of his utopian epilogue (381-382).

Nash is not alone in such sentiments. Indeed, many environmentalist and conservationist writers have embraced a philosophy of wilderness appreciation. In Desert Solitaire, for example, Edward Abbey celebrates the possibility that “we are learning finally that the forests and mountains and desert canyons are holier than our churches” as he equates such wilderness areas (and, in particular, national parks) with “cathedrals, concert halls, art museums…and the other sanctums of our culture” (52). Likewise, in his “Wilderness Letter,” Wallace Stegner defends “the wilderness idea” as “an intangible and spiritual resource…something that has helped form our character and that has certainly shaped our history as a people” (146). “We simply need that wild country available to us,” Stegner writes, “even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in” (155).

Yet this practice of appreciation has, in recent decades, met with increased scrutiny. In The Death of Nature, for example, Carolyn Merchant’s study of the “age-old association” between women and nature demonstrates how the reification of both under the guide of appreciation repeatedly results in appropriation and exploitation (xix). Abbey’s account in
*Desert Solitaire* of carving an inscription in the “soft white bark of the nearest aspen” serves to illustrate Merchant’s argument:

> On the way, in an area where spruce and fir mingle with quaking aspen, in a cool shady well-watered place, I discover a blue columbine, rarest and loveliest of mountain flowers. This one is growing alone – perhaps the deer have eaten the others – there must have been others – and wears therefore the special beauty of all wild and lonely things. Silently I dedicate the flower to a girl I know and in honor both of her and the columbine open my knife and carve something appropriate in the soft white bark of the nearest aspen. Fifty years from now my inscription will still be there, enlarged to twice its present size by the growth of the tree. May the love I feel at this moment for columbine, girl, tree, symbol, grass, mountain, sky and sun also stay, also grow, never die. (229)

Here, Abbey begins with appreciation for the cooperative forest ecosystem where spruce, fir, and aspen “mingle” and for the aesthetically pleasing columbine. Yet the fantasy of distant appreciation, Stegner’s notion that we might “never do more than drive to its edge and look in,” collapses almost immediately. The solitary flower is conflated with “a girl I know” – and the result of this conflation is violence. Abbey “open[s his] knife and carve[s]…in the soft white bark of the nearest aspen,” a natural object not directly implicated in his flower/woman dichotomy, but one which he now forces at knifepoint to testify to his presence and existence through its own growth. It is telling, then, that in the declaration of love that closes the scene, Abbey equates natural phenomena – trees, flowers, mountains, and so on – with literary device: the love he feels for nature as “symbol.”

Critics such as William Cronon and J. Baird Callicott have addressed the negative consequences of Nash’s “ideology of appreciation” (121) and focus on wilderness from the
perspectives of environmental history and environmental philosophy. Likewise, Timothy Morton echoes Merchant’s argument in his assertion that “[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration” (*Ecology without Nature* 5). In this sense, *Before Nature’s Nation*, as a work of ecocritical scholarship, is a participant in this ongoing intervention. I concur with Cronon’s assertion that “wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural” as well as with his caution that “wilderness dualism…denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use [of the natural world] might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship” (“The Trouble with Wilderness” 80, 85). Moreover, much of the ethical commitment of this study is my own conviction that, in direct opposition to the long tradition of appreciation and reification of nature, the “too-closeness” that Nash cites as a fundamental impediment to a mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world and nonhuman nature is, in fact, precisely what we must learn to cultivate anew. In a time when we demonstrate our own “tradition of repugnance” through the language of oil pipelines and climate change denialism, the problem is not that we are “too close” to nature, but rather than we are much, much too far.

In search of “too close” relations with the natural world, I trace lines of thought that are particularly fraught. The “radical intimacy” Morton theorizes in *The Ecological Thought* (37) is only radical or intimate when it doesn’t collapse into the desire for possession – when it doesn’t end, to return to the example above, in unsheathed knives and carved names. Wonder and enchantment must not spill over into utopian daydreams and escapist fantasies. Closeness must be consensual; “too-closeness,” therefore, must be even more so. Too-closeness demonstrates openness without the expectation of reciprocity: it offers hospitality without leaving a bill. The
voices I have sought to join in this study – working not only in the realms of ecological criticism and new materialism, but also feminist criticism, postcolonialism, and Indigenous studies – coalesce in the critical methodologies demanded by such work. This is not an ecology without appreciation, then, but an ecology beyond appreciation. The scholars I cite and the texts I read, generate a flexible and responsive framework in which the relations between human and nonhuman, text and world, nature and culture, elide fixed binaries – shifting into and out of constellations of thought and thoughts that are fluid and oceanic, always already ecological in being.

The place of early American poetry

Likewise, in intervening at the confluence of such narrative, my argument is not only about the negative consequences of an “ideology of appreciation” and totalizing focus on “wilderness.” Rather, the other central argument of Before Nature’s Nation is that assertions such as Nash’s about early American environmental attitudes and sensibilities are fundamentally misplaced in large part because of the broad exclusions of certain genres – and, in particular, poetry – from the purview of such studies. Neither Nash nor, for that matter, Miller are lone examples. Rather, this choice is echoed in more literature-centric studies of early and nineteenth-century America as well. Lawrence Buell’s The Environmental Imagination, for example, begins by announcing its interest “in the American environmental imagination generally, meaning especially literary nonfiction” (2). As Michael P. Branch writes, “our restricted generic definition of nature writing as the nonfiction personal essay has discouraged us from considering colonial writing about nature, which usually takes less familiar rhetorical forms such as the relation, report, sermon, tract, letter, providential history, spiritual autobiography, or personal diary” (92).
Yet even in this more expansive vision of early American literature pertaining to the natural world, or “colonial writing about nature,” Branch skips over poetry and the poetic altogether.  

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American poetry remains an under-examined category of literature for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these reasons, however, is a pervasive critique of the aesthetic value of such texts: early American poetry, critics and readers from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day have insisted, is simply not very good. To a significant extent, this aesthetic critique is a product of lyricization, or what Virginia Jackson has called “lyric reading”: the modern insistence that “all poetic texts are lyrics” and the subsequent development of critical practices that evaluate them on precisely those grounds (115). Inasmuch as lyric reading “create[s] an abstract personification in place of the historical person, and consequently create[s] an abstract genre accessible to all persons educated to read lyrically in place of the verse exchanged by people with varying degrees of access to one another who may have read according to their own historical referents,” it is a practice ill-suited for the present study (Jackson 100). Moreover, because the poems that concern this study are, by and large, not adequately conceived of via contemporary theories of the lyric in the sense of a speaker reciting the poem in a permanent present to a universal audience, they do not lend themselves favorably to lyricization efforts. As Michael Cohen argues in *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, and which bears relevance to previous periods as well:

[N]ineteenth-century poems are often most interesting for the ways nineteenth-century people did or did not read them…I cannot reach these worlds of lived experience by reading poems in the way I normally would, using the protocols of close reading, since close reading emphasizes the careful analysis of formal, complex uses of language, while producing and valuing interpretation above all else. A large majority of nineteenth-
century poems seem unable to hold up to the rigors of this kind of relation... The relations that made nineteenth-century poems meaningful for nineteenth-century readers therefore require different readings from us. (6-7)

As such, while *Before Nature’s Nation* does not shy away from close reading, it does not ultimately seek to find aesthetic quality of place aesthetic judgment on the texts within its purview in the same way that a study of Romantic or Modernist poetry might.

In her introduction to *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, Joan Richardson offers the important reminder that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought – and, in particular, those strands of thinking that were imported to the New World from their European roots – did not operate in isolation. Rather, they were in constant engagement with what Richardson calls “a particular environment of fact” (2). “A persistently disturbing element of this environment,” she writes, “was/is the incommensurability of nature, its unavailability to the categories of description embedded in the language of the settlers. Nature literally amazed them. Words failed in ‘this new, yet unapproachable America.’ The insistent conditions of American nature invited, and more often demanded, scrutiny of the relation between fact and feeling” (2). “The poetry of the seventeenth-century colonists,” Richardson continues, “registers the perplexing juxtapositions of their world, stretched between the residual security offered by their foundational text, the Bible, and the actualities of the threatening landscape” (3). Moreover, ‘[f]rom the time of the Puritans’ first settlement, the inadequacy of their inherited language to the task of describing where they found themselves generated an anxiety which manifested itself in a self-conscious awareness of an inescapable split between rhetoric and the possibility of accurate representation” (19). To this end, *Before Nature’s Nation* is especially concerned with the way in which poems and poets engaged the everyday environmental experience of early New England
life. I have attempted to generate readings of these texts that are firmly situated in both time and place. This is to some extent, a re-engagement with the environmental and ecological potential of the local, even as eco-critics such as Morton think of the ecological in ever-increasing terms of size and scale. The section of Chapter Two concerning Michael Wigglesworth’s “God’s Controversy with New-England,” for example, takes great care to engage – as the poem itself does – “the time of the great drought.” Likewise, Chapter Four’s focus on Samson Occom’s hymns and the ways in which they encouraged Native singers and audiences to engage with the natural world opens onto a consideration of these texts in direct relation to rapidly shifting policies regarding Indigenous land rights in the late eighteenth century and Occom’s own policy-making involvement via letters, petitions, and the like.

This study is committed to poetry as a genre that, in early America, encompassed a wider audience in terms of both reception and composition than others of the period. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, poems could be found in a variety of places – in printed and bound volumes, but also in newspapers, as circulated manuscripts, and as performances. Poems were often topical or occasional, and they were as much public and communal expressions as private, solitary experiences – whether published as broadsides or read aloud in shared domestic spaces. Individual poems were less identified with either the formal figure of the poet or defined poetic genres. Moreover, the core texts of canonical early American literature studies were written by a small and elite segment of the overall population – and were likewise available to only a small portion of that same population. This access was largely dependent on and conditioned by circumstances of race, class, and gender. Poems, on the other hand, could be written by public and privileged figures such as Wigglesworth, but could also be – and were – written by colonial women, persons of color, enslaved persons, Native and Indigenous peoples, and children. These
works found audiences in ways that were possible specifically because of their genre – and must be included in any survey of attitudes, feelings, and opinions of the historical period, lest those surveys, and the critical evaluations arising from them, be, at best, incomplete.

In “The Shaping of the American Character,” Perry Miller argues that the failure of Puritan covenant theory was a result of its “disregard of experience” and its “disregard of the frontier” (7). But while it may or may not be the case that, as in Miller’s view, colonial “adversities” such as “plagues” and “crop failures” were “crushing” to typology (8), it is certainly not the case that Puritans themselves – or any of the various peoples that constituted early America – lived in disregard of the natural world for which Miller’s “frontier” serves as a sort of shorthand. We see this no more clearly than in the poetry of early America, which – despite the stereotypes discussed above – are filled with declarations of love, wonder, and enchantment regarding the natural world.

Finding the ecological before “ecology”

As ecocritical studies frequently address, “ecology,” derived from the Greek oikos, meaning “house,” is a nineteenth-century word. It was developed in 1866 by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel in his Generelle Morphologie der Organismen and first appeared in the English language in 1873. Invoking the term in the context of early America, then, raises the question of anachronism. I am not suggesting that any of the primary figures of this study were ecologists in the contemporary sense of the term. Likewise, none of the figures I examine here were formally engaged with the emergence of scientific disciplines such as natural history. At times, however, I do ascribe a coincidental engagement with what twenty-first century readers and critics recognize as the science of ecology. In the case of Michael Wigglesworth, for example, I explore how his impressions of changes in the New England forest record the impact
of Puritan land management practices and the ongoing phenomena of the Little Ice Age – though Wigglesworth himself certainly could not have explained what he was seeing in those precise terms. Likewise, in examining Phillis Wheatley’s attention to hurricanes, I consider how her sense of relation between wind velocity and ocean currents anticipates contemporary questions of atmospheric and climatological sciences. In these moments, my goal is twofold: (1) to model a reading practice closely attuned to the ways in which scientific principles and environmental attitudes are embedded in literary texts, even if such a practice pushes limits of critical presentism, and (2) to demonstrate how scientific knowledge often emerges from deep observational and sensory engagement with the natural and material world, rather than through disenchanted distance and detachment from the impact of affective phenomena and bodily sensation.

In general, however, my conviction is that something we can term the “ecological” existed in modes of thinking and feeling well before the formal terminology existed to label these modes as such. My use of “ecological,” then, is less attached to the term’s scientific and biological denotations than to an understanding of its implication in methodological and epistemological fashion. The ecological is not something defined only by modern science and it does not exist only in the contemporary. The ecological, in other words, is not something that separates or distinguishes us from the past (or, for that matter, from the future): there is no inherent or absolute pre-ecological moment because the ecological requires no particular knowledge or technological breakthrough in order to call itself into being. Rather, the ecological connects us and enmeshes us in deep time because it is based in perception and feeling, affect and experience.
As methodology, the ecological engages specific things in ways that privilege close observation while simultaneously valuing both their particularity and their autonomy. Thoreau’s discussion of fish in the “Saturday” chapter of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, for example, is ecological in this way. Following his announcement that “it concerns us to attend to the nature of fishes,” the chapter traces a similar pattern for a number of paragraphs (25). Thoreau give the name of a fish – the common name, then the scientific name, as well as any colloquial names – and then describes it: color, habits, speed, and so forth. At a certain point, he describes his efforts to touch the fish and pick them up:

> I have thus stood over them half an hour at a time, and stroked them familiarly without frightening them, suffering them to nibble my fingers harmlessly, and seen them erect their dorsal fins in anger when my hand approached their ova, and have even taken them gently out of the water with my hand; though this cannot be accomplished by a sudden movement…but only by letting the fingers gradually close about them as they are poised over the palm, and with the utmost gentleness raising them slowly to the surface. (27)

Thoreau does this, he claims, because “[i]t enhances our sense of the grand security and serenity of nature, to observe the still undisturbed economy and content of the fishes” (26).

While in one sense Thoreau’s language might be seen as confirmation of White’s condemnation of anthropocentric entitlement, my reading of the passage reveals a quite different attitude toward both the fish in question and the natural world as such. Though Thoreau’s gesture is unavoidably anthropocentric, in its conviction that we observe nature in order to “enhance our sense” of it and in its “standing over” the natural world, it also displays a remarkable sense of relation and equanimity. Thoreau does with fishes exactly what he says – a careful and slow cultivation of perception – and nothing more. His “standing over” is less a bodily display of
dominance than a posture acknowledging equality: he waits “half an hour” until he and the fishes can engage “familiarly,” without fear (“frightening”) or harm. Contrast this position, then, with Abbey’s act of carving the aspen. Thoreau is attentive to moments of potential transgression, noticing when the fishes “erect their dorsal fins in anger” and responding ethically. He retreats, rather than continuing his approach of the ova. Likewise, his action of removing fishes from the water is demonstrative of mutual consent, rather than an imposition of will. Thoreau’s “fingers gradually close about them,” but only inasmuch as the fishes agree to “poise over [his] palm.” As such, the action lacks the pursuit, the aggressive binary of hunter and hunted, that often characterizes such interactions. Thoreau’s “gentleness” remains long after the fishes have returned to the water – and indeed, as he notes, both their “economy” and their “content,” in both senses of the term, remain “undisturbed.” This “attending to” of nature, then, offers a method for environmental and ecological engagement that does not repeatedly collapse into essentializing appropriation and commodification.

For each author I discuss in this study, this ecological method is central to their engagements with the natural world. In the case of Anne Bradstreet, it is developed most extensively in her practices of contemplation. Whether in contemplating the birds and crickets of the New England woods, the “kitchen implements” and “daily food” of everyday life, or the ashes of her own home following its fiery destruction, Bradstreet’s practice of “looking more” seeks harmony with, rather than domination of, nature. For Michael Wigglesworth, the need to engage with and respond to an actual, rather than imagined, environmental crisis motivates the emergence of his own affections for nature. In noticing, for example, the mourning cows that share the suffering Malden landscape, Wigglesworth encourages a new relation to the world that will restore balance and harmony for them both by shifting attention to his love for the land.
itself. In reading Phillis Wheatley, it is the prolonged engagement with particulars of the Atlantic Ocean – from the hurricanes that batter its coastlines to the open sea that transports her “from Africa to America” and from Boston to London – that demonstrates her unique and wondrous “attending to” of oceanic early America. And for Samson Occom, the ways in which the composition and performance of hymnody drew him into close contact with vast portions of the New England landscape enabled, in turn, the melodic experience of that landscape in familiar, intimate, and affectionate terms.

As epistemology, the ecological assumes broader definition as a kind of thinking that emphasizes relational perception and affective response. Here, my work engages with contemporary vocabularies of ecocriticism, affect studies, and new materialism: Jane Bennett’s “enchantment,” Timothy Morton’s “mesh,” Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation,” Rachel Carson’s “wonder,” Wendell Berry’s “miracle,” and Elaine Scarry’s “beauty.” As Morton writes in *The Ecological Thought*, “the form of the ecological thought is at least as important as its content. It’s not simply a matter of what you’re thinking about. It’s also a matter of how you think” (4). Here, Morton’s “ecological” echoes Glissant’s “Relation”: “To the extent that our consciousness of Relation is total…immediate and focusing directly on the realizable totality of the world, when we speak of a poetics of Relation, we no longer need to add: relation between what and what?” (27). Or, to speak in terms used by Michel de Certeau: the ecological, as epistemology, is a tactic, not a strategy. A strategy, writes de Certeau, “postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its own and serve as a base from which relations with an *exteriority*…can be managed” (36). The “city upon a hill” is a strategy: it suggests, literally, “a mastery of places through sight” (36). “A tactic,” however, “is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for
autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other” (36-37). This is what Morton means when he suggests, regarding “the vast mesh of interconnection” that is “the ecological thought,” that “[e]ach point of the mesh is both the center and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute center or edge” (Ecological Thought 29). As such, what makes Aldo Leopold’s “thinking like a mountain” (129) or Jonathan Edwards’ impulse to “think of the same that the sleeping rocks dream of” (13) properly ecological in thought is not that either is thinking about anything. Rather, it is that they are endeavoring to think as a mountain, to dream like a rock – to inhabit a sense of otherness that enables an altogether different sense of the world and of being in the world as well.

Throughout this study, I examine moments where this divide between exteriority and interiority fails – Anne Bradstreet’s desire to become a bird, as well as Phillis Wheatley’s investigation of where one’s body ends and the ocean begins are two such examples of this epistemological practice. At the same time, while such thinking often concerns objects and phenomena of the natural world, thinking “about” stereotypical “nature” is not an inherent requirement. As I demonstrate in the case of Anne Bradstreet, one can “think ecologically” or “feel ecological” in relation with a house in the same ways as with a bird, a mountain, or an ocean. Such engagements construct new practices of thinking and living ecologically both in the context of early America and, perhaps, for us as well.

Before nation, before nature

In The End of Nature, Bill McKibben addresses “[o]ur comforting sense of the permanence of our natural world…our sense of nature as eternal and separate” (7). This “sense,” he argues, is a product of Western modernity – a confluence of scientific emphasis on the “infinite slowness” of geological time and the emergence of a secularized and evolutionary
worldview that doesn’t center the human as its predominate method of temporal structure (3). Our modern sense of space, McKibben continues, has been similarly affected: “In much the same comforting way that we think of time as imponderably long, we consider the earth to be inconceivably large” (5). This notion that modern nature is defined by separation from “culture” is echoed by Jane Bennett’s narratives of modernity’s “disenchantment” – and the rapid collapse of this worldview, the revelation that “nature” as a distant and durable essence is a “delusion” (McKibben 4), has generated the urgent need to re-examine foundational narratives of both the natural world and modernity as such.23

At this point, a return to early American is neither nostalgic nor escapist. In The Environmental Imagination, Lawrence Buell argues that “the American natural environment…during the last five centuries has been constructed thrice over in a tangled ideological palimpsest. First it was constructed in the image of old world desire, then reconstructed in the image of American cultural nationalism, then reconstructed again in a latter-day scholarly discourse of American exceptionalism” (5-6). Yet engagements with American natural environments are more “tangled” than Buell acknowledges. One era does not slide smoothly into another. As our contemporary moment insists on demonstrating, these past visions and past ideologies are never quite past. This “history,” to quote playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, “is time that won’t quit” (15). The recent re-obsession with coal mining in the United States, for example, speaks to discourses of American exceptionalism and neoliberal economics – but also to the “old world desire” Buell identifies and the fantasy of a resource-laden “virgin” landscape: “the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification” (Kolodny 4). Likewise, confrontations with environmental catastrophe and ecological crisis are not exclusively modern or new. Each of the figures examined here dealt with one or more of the following: food scarcity,
starvation, the challenges of New World agriculture, the encroachment of climate change into everyday life, and the perilous experience of natural disasters.

While nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers were invested in projects of long time and limitless space, as McKibben suggests, this was certainly neither the perception nor the project of most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers. For colonial writers in particular, such as Anne Bradstreet and Michael Wigglesworth, the world was often frighteningly small. Time was short; nature was volatile. If “[w]e have become…a people whose conscious need for nature is superficial [for whom] the seasons don’t matter…except as spectacles,” then early America presents that precise opposite (McKibben 59). The seasons were a compelling topic for Anne Bradstreet, for example, precisely because of their centrality to everyday life. As such, we find them saturating not only her contemplative verse but her earlier quaternions as well – including, of course, “The Four Seasons of the Year.” We see a comparable interest in Phillis Wheatley’s attention to morning and night, sunrise and sunset – not as symbols and tropes, but as natural phenomena that defined her personal sense of temporality and environmental embeddedness. Practices of careful attention to the natural world were of utmost importance in early America because even slight shifts could have catastrophic consequences – something that McKibben argues we have lost the ability to sense and, in turn, to respond to them.

Having broken the “separation from human society” that was the defining characteristic of the modern sense of “nature” (McKibben 55) – having, as it were, “ended” nature in literal and conceptual ways – we thus find ourselves beyond or, as Morton suggests, “without” it. However, if we are beyond nature, then we are also once again before it – before what Perry Miller called “the misguided cult…the sinister dynamic of Nature” (“Nature and the National Ego” 216). In this light, such practices of ecological attention are not merely pragmatic, despite
impending environmental catastrophe. As Jane Bennett writes, “[o]ccasions during which one’s critical faculties are suspended and one is caught up in the moment can produce a kind of enjoyment – a sense of adequacy or fullness – that temporarily eclipses the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world’s often tragic complexity” (The Enchantment of Modern Life 10). This “enjoyment” is productive of a range of subsequent affective states – joy, wonder, and, most significantly, enchantment. “Enchantment,” Bennett continues, “does coexist with despair…To be enchanted is, in the moment of its activation, to assent wholeheartedly to life – not to this or that particular condition or aspect of it but to the experience of living itself” (The Enchantment of Modern Life 159-160). Attuning ourselves to the world, even amidst our deepest despair, perhaps we as well can learn “the experience of living itself” once again.

Near the conclusion of the 1939 film version of The Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy Gale refuses the promise of royalty and the green glitter of empire in favor of the wheat fields and hog pens of Kansas, Glinda, the Witch of the South, finally reveals the secret of the enigmatic ruby slippers. “You’ve always,” she tells Dorothy, “had the power to go back.” But like Mary Rowlandson, Dorothy doesn’t return home unchanged. “Now it is other ways with” her as well (Rowlandson 365). Before she leaves Oz, her three companions – the Scarecrow, who has finally received his “Doctor of Thinkology” degree, as well as the Tin Man and the Lion, both avatars for the affective power of the heart – ask Dorothy what she’s learned.25 “If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again,” she replies, “I won’t look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with.” Like Dorothy Gale, Before Nature’s Nation goes back in order to find new ways forward. It suggests that before nature, before nation, we can think and feel the world anew. It attempts to “look further” in the backyard of American
literature with regard to our past, present, and future relationships to and with the natural world – and it is an open-eyed wish to find our heart’s desire there.
Chapter One
Anne Bradstreet’s Ecological Thought

“Affect’s thou pleasure? Take thy fill,
Earth hath enough of what you will.”

June 12, 1630. An unfamiliar shoreline, a strange new view. From the deck of the Arbella, having recently “changed [her] condition” via marriage, Anne Bradstreet prepared to embark upon a second “change of condition”: a new life as a New Englander (“To My Dear Children” 263). Though John Winthrop had preached and promised a “city upon a hill” during their mutual transit, Bradstreet would experience this life less as a manifestation of Winthrop’s orderly vision and more as a set of everyday challenges posed by her new surroundings and by the environmental realities of the seventeenth-century “New World.” She would practice her faith amidst these realities – and she would craft poetry that bore their trace. She would suffer loss – of possessions, of her home, of her poems themselves – but she would forge both verse and voice against that loss. She would struggle with language, with descriptions of places and the names of things, but she would come to “find ways to accommodate new representations of reality” through innovative uses of that language (Howe 48). If, as Michael Ziser has argued, we can read “the exploration and settlement of the ‘New World’ as the catalyst for a dramatic and revealing transformation of the relation between words and things,” then we can also read it more particularly as a transformation of the relation between individual persons and the world of nonhuman nature (5). Bradstreet stands at the vanguard of such a transformation: not simply as
New England’s first “nature poet,” but as forging a new set of relations, a new way of living with and in the natural world that would become, and that would have to be, uniquely “American.”

“Nature,” as both concept and material reality, challenged Puritan lives, including Bradstreet’s, in multiple ways. It offered constant tension between the dominant metaphors – the “new Eden” and the “howling wilderness” – that defined colonial discourse regarding the natural world throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Bradstreet’s worldview was shaped and structured by these tropes. Via poetry, she would return on numerous occasions to “the ambiguity of nature in the New World” as well as to the “baffling hospitality to [these] radically opposed interpretations” (“new Eden”/“howling wilderness”) that New England landscapes offered (Marx 44, 45). Such ambiguities generated typological anxieties as well. As with many of the “[s]chismatic children of Adam [who] thought they were leaving the ‘wilderness of the world’ to find a haven free of institutional structures they had united against,” Bradstreet often found herself “unprepared for the variability of the directional change the wilderness [she] reached represented” (Howe 48). If this ambiguity and contradiction of literal wilderness resisted comfortable readings, then the status of the Puritan errand into that wilderness seemed to resist evaluation as well. As Susan Howe writes in thinking about the captivity experience and narrative of Mary Rowlandson, it was as if early generations of Puritans were “baptized…in another wilderness” only to be simultaneously “rebuked and ensnared” by “the God who…brought his select nation across an ocean” (94). As a result, they would need to find new ways of making sense of – and in – New England.

The natural world also instigated a series of linguistic anxieties. As Howe asserts, “[a]n English relation of conversion spoken at a territorial edge of America is deterritorialized and deterred by anxiety crucial to iconoclastic Puritan piety. Inexplicable acoustic apprehension
looms over assurance and sanctification, over soil subsoil sea sky. Each singular call. As the sound is the sense is. Severed on this side. Who would know there is a covenant. In a new world morphologies are triggered off” (48). Put more bluntly, “[d]uring the 1630s and 1640s a mother tongue (English) had to find ways to accommodate new representations of reality…After 1637, American literary expression couldn’t speak English” (Howe 48, 37-38). Likewise, as Ralph Bauer notes, “the early modern European encounter with the New World put a considerable amount of stress on Old World languages and received traditions of knowledge, as it was gradually revealed to Europeans that the world was vastly larger and considerably more diverse than what the Old World languages had room for” (29). This “encounter between a new world of experience and an old world of words” placed pressure on the ability to communicate and transmit knowledge (Bauer 57). It cast doubt on both the possibility of preserving existing “Old World” knowledge in “New World” spaces and on the underlying reliability and facticity of that knowledge as such. Moreover, the impasse that Howe identifies, the categorical inability of American literary expression to “speak English,” raised the issue of how various types of communication, both spiritual and secular, might continue to be possible in seventeenth-century Massachusetts and what forms, means, and methods they might assume. To write poetry, Bradstreet would have to identify and invent ways of seeing and speaking that were not wholly reliant on her inherited history or the influence of Renaissance and early modern European culture.

Regardless of religion or rhetoric, Anne Bradstreet did not live in a metaphor. Like most seventeenth-century New Englanders, she lived most directly and immediately in and with the material conditions that made such metaphors possible in the first place. In the case of both the “new Eden” and the “howling wilderness” tropes, these material conditions were primarily
environmental conditions – face-to-face encounters with elements of the natural world. In her letter “To My Dear Children,” Bradstreet reflected upon the transformative moment of her landfall – and, by extension, her particular response to such conditions – in describing how she “came into this country” and “found a new world” (263). The deliberateness of Bradstreet’s language is crucial in unfolding her nuanced perspective on the natural world. Her use of “country” to describe New England, rather than a more unambiguously political designation such as “nation” or “colony,” invokes a sense of her physical and geographical surroundings while, at the same time, establishing a sharp contrast with Winthrop’s promise of detached urban space, a city on a hill rather than a hill itself. Bradstreet’s “country” likewise avoids invoking the tropes of “planting” and “plantation” popular in colonial discourse; she keeps the natural world itself as the focus of her description, rather than shifting toward a metaphorical application or appropriation of “natural” language. “Country,” in other words, both foregrounds the geography of New England in her initial impression and lingers on its lasting impact, refusing to move from the literal geography to metaphorical device, typological interpretation, or pastoral imagination.

The choice of “into,” rather than “to,” is similarly suggestive of a geographical and an environmental attention. “To” is language that demarcates spatial boundaries, that inscribes a border. “To” remains outside: to come “to” something, whether a country, an idea, or a feeling, is ultimately to resist that very thing, to remain apart, insisting on a sovereign separation. “Into,” however, is language of immersion and embodiment, a vocabulary of unstable identity and fluid relation. “Into” recognizes both permeable borders and mutual imbrication in encounters between “self” and “other,” between “self” and “nature,” between “self” and “country” – and, as I elaborate below, it is Bradstreet’s position as a thinker of “into” that figures her as what I call an “ecological” thinker.
In this “country,” Bradstreet “finds” a “new world.” Her sustained commitment “into,” rather than “to,” is what enables this possibility. Bradstreet’s “new world” is not coterminous with the capitalized, colonial “New World,” an aspect of her “change of condition” that is most directly addressed by her mention of “The church at Boston” (263). Rather, Bradstreet’s “new world” signals her commitment to environmental attention and comments explicitly on the environmental novelty, diversity, and challenge that such “country” presented. A “world” is not a static thing to be admired and understood in totality. A “world” is a set of relations: always changing, always becoming. Governed by interaction and reaction, worlds are complex on all scales and at all sizes; they don’t inherently value the human above nonhuman beings or other nature. As her poetry consistently demonstrates, Bradstreet continues to “find new worlds” in the “country” whenever her focus turns to the nonhuman, elemental, phenomenological world that she is “into.” Even the “new manners” she mentions take on different light if we define those manners as new modes of life instead of mere societal conditions or customs (263). “Finding” a “new world” is nothing less than finding one’s self and inventing new ways of being in that new world – and Bradstreet would use her poetry to negotiate such challenges beyond the orthodox boundaries of Puritan theology and epistemology.

Bradstreet also reveals the immediate impact of her “into”: a moment, she declares, “at which my heart rose” (263). Throughout her work, Bradstreet is frequently concerned with the actions and the status of her heart. In “To My Dear Children,” she leaves a record of such concern: she “often communed with [her] heart,” “felt [her] heart out of order” on one occasion, a “carnal” heart on another, her heart “enlarged” on a third (263-264). We see this in other circumstances as well. For example, she consistently discusses the writing of French Calvinist poet Guillaume Du Bartas in these terms. In “The Prologue,” “Great Bartas’ sugared lines” make
her heart “envious” (ll. 9-10), while in “In Honour of Du Bartas, 1641,” they “thaw [her] frozen heart’s ingratitude” until, “ravished,” she exclaims that her “full astonished heart doth pant to break” (ll. 11, 50). And, in “The Flesh and the Spirit,” Bradstreet directly links this unstable heart with the condition of earthly life itself: only Spirit, who lives “only in mind,” can have a “settled heart” (ll. 37, 39). Between the active “I found” and the passive “I was convinced” (“To My Dear Children” 263), Bradstreet’s rising heart tells the story of how unpredictable sensations, feelings, and affects produced by the new “country” overwhelmed the Puritan ideal of detachment – the paradoxical desire to live in, but not of, the material world – from the very moments of first contact with that “country” themselves. Bradstreet’s rising heart reveals an immediate disruption, not a gradual declension, of the Puritan project. She would seek in subsequent moments to control these spontaneous sensations, to restructure her affect in the language of Puritan orthodoxy and into poetic form. She attempts to do so here in the chosen, but ambiguous, passivity of “I submitted to it” that follows “I was convinced.” But she would fail to have a “settled heart”; indeed, would discover the impossibility of a “settled heart.” Detaching the affective heart from the “convinced” mind erases formal separation between the body and the world. Instead, Bradstreet’s heart would continue to rise and fall in time with her “new world” – which reveals itself as a feeling before an idea, an emotion before a “country.”

In this chapter, I explore Anne Bradstreet’s “finding” of seventeenth-century New England through reading the various practices of contemplation and attention that underlie her work. Throughout my reading, I treat her poems less as mimetic records of early American nature and more as texts that document the affective impact of the natural world on early American sense and sensibility. Accordingly, while I address her struggles with the limits of aesthetic representation, I am particularly concerned with Bradstreet’s methods of perceiving
worlds of nonhuman nature, from animal behavior to environmental phenomena, as well as her depictions of their impacts on her processes of thinking and feeling. Likewise, I read the results of Bradstreet’s environmental attentions through the explicitly theoretical lens of the ecological. To position Bradstreet as an ecological thinker, or to position Bradstreet’s thought as ecological thought, is, for me, to emphasize her perception of and active participation in what Timothy Morton calls the mesh: a sense of relation, reciprocity, and interconnection without limit. This “thinking of interconnectedness,” Morton writes, is both “a thought about ecology” and “a thinking that is ecological,” both “a practice and a process of becoming fully aware” (Ecological Thought). While Bradstreet participates anachronistically in the first part of Morton’s definition, “ecology” being a nineteenth-century rather than a seventeenth-century term, this “thinking that is ecological” is more broadly located across space and time precisely because the quality of the thinking does not require the invention of the word in order to make it so. Here, I use the term to emphasize both Bradstreet’s radical difference from mainstream versions of American environmental thought and to draw connections between her seventeenth-century thought and contemporary versions of ecocriticism that have, in their own ways, returned to ways of understanding the world once quite familiar in these earlier moments of American discourse.

I begin with Bradstreet’s “Contemplations,” the poem of hers that has received the majority of attention from ecocritical scholars and environmentally minded readers. I trace the critical history of “Contemplations” as a “nature poem” and value the work for its engagement with environmental content. At the same time, I shift critical focus from the mimetic and aesthetic concerns of the “nature poem” genre toward Bradstreet’s affective relations with the natural world – a shift from what the poem sees to how the poem thinks and feels. In doing so,
my goal is twofold: to reframe an understanding of “Contemplations” as an example – but not an exceptional one – of the shape that Bradstreet’s thinking takes regarding engagement with the natural world, and to thus suggest how the ecological as a concept not only reframes a reading of the poem itself but also opens onto a more unified reading of Bradstreet’s work and thinking of interconnectedness as a whole.

From this point, I turn my attention more specifically to Bradstreet’s engagement with environmental phenomena – and, in particular, her engagement with fire. I begin this examination with an extended reading of her poem “Upon the Burning of Our House,” which takes as its subject the 1666 fire that destroyed her home. Here, I examine how Bradstreet manipulated the typical characteristics of her poetic titles in order to alert unique attention to the particular effect of witnessing fire on her broader sensibility. I then read the poem itself in three sections: Bradstreet’s escape from the burning house, her frequent habit of returning to the site of the fire, and her attempt to construct edification from such experience.

I conclude with Bradstreet’s earliest work: the quaternion poems of The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America. I examine these texts in two ways: for the ecological potential of the quaternions themselves and for the ways in which Bradstreet’s revisions to these poems engage the event of her house fire. This reading argues that Bradstreet uses these revisions to call attention to both her poetic labor and her material loss – but also to the fact that the poems themselves were already performing a kind of ecological thinking all along, an aspect of their content widely ignored by Bradstreet scholars.

In “The Author to Her Book,” Bradstreet develops an extended metaphor comparing her poetry, the “ill-formed offspring of [her] feeble brain,” to an unruly child: her “rambling brat” (ll. 2, 9). In the poem, Bradstreet’s “offspring” clings to her side until it is “snatched…by friends”
and “[m]ade…in rags” (ll. 4, 6) – a reference to *The Tenth Muse*’s publication in 1650. The “rambling brat” returns to Bradstreet’s side at first – and her initial reaction is the same as before: to keep her “brat” from “public view…as one unfit for light” (ll. 5, 10). Yet this confinement fails. The poem’s “face” is dirtier than ever, and its joints grow increasingly “hobbled” the longer it remains “i’ th’ house” (ll. 14, 17, 19). So, with instructions to “take thy way where yet thou art not known,” Bradstreet relents (l. 22). She sends her poems, once and for all, “out of door” to “roam” (ll. 25, 20). This chapter is about how these poems “roam” seventeenth-century New England and how they “ramble” in “this country,” finding new worlds of nature everywhere they go.

“Rapt were my senses at this delectable view”: Reading ‘Contemplations’ Ecocritically

Written in 1661 and first published in 1678, Anne Bradstreet’s “Contemplations” is often celebrated as one of America’s first nature poems. Lawrence Buell cites it as “the first autumn landscape described in the annals of American literature” (*Environmental Imagination* 81). Similarly, Michael Ziser labels it “the inaugural example of the New England poem of autumn” (97). Even as a casual glance, it is not difficult to understand the reasons for such accolades. Certainly, the poem seems to meet, if not exceed, Buell’s criteria for the “ingredients that might be said to comprise an environmentally oriented work” (*Environmental Imagination* 7-8). To begin, there is simply a lot of conventional “nature” to be found in the poem, from the “stately oak…whose ruffling top the clouds seemed to aspire” to the “wanton” salmon that “frisk to taste the air” as they swim upstream (ll.16-17, 170). As the speaker’s “wand’ring feet” follow “pathless paths” through the “autumnal tide” (ll. 52, 2), the poem abounds with details of seventeenth-century New England, and Bradstreet’s “humble eyes” move from tree to leaf, ground to sky, offering commentary and reflection on each new object of attention (l. 53).
Critics frequently praise these scenes for their mimetic accuracy while evaluating the poem according to aesthetic conventions of lyric and pastoral verse. In such readings, “Contemplations” seems to combine its environmental attentions with a “pastoral enthusiasm,” resulting in a “sauntering,” proto-Thoreauvian Bradstreet easily reconcilable with conventional expectations of the nature poetry genre (Gatta 40).

Such valorizations, however, bear a frustrating cost because they treat the poem not merely as exemplary, but also as exceptional. “‘Contemplations’ alone,” wrote James Anderson in 1862, “proves that [Bradstreet] was a genuine poet…that she had an eye to survey, and a heart to feel the beauties of nature” (23; emphasis mine). “On the basis of [this] single work,” writes John Gatta nearly a century and a half later, “Anne Bradstreet warrants recognition as the first poet to record a sustained, appreciative response to outdoor experience in British North America” (40; emphasis mine). Likewise, celebrating the “tender,” “touching,” and “genuine” expression of “Contemplations” (Rich xvii, xix) has frequently required the aesthetic denigration of Bradstreet’s other poems, particularly those of The Tenth Muse, as “prosaic,” “pretentious,” and “not attractive” (Anderson 23, Morrison 50-51). Such critiques carry a corresponding devaluation of Bradstreet’s relationship to the natural world. The “fatal taint in all her poetical life,” wrote Moses Coit Tyler, “was that…she too generally drew her materials from books rather than from nature” (36). Moreover, because this entanglement of nature and aesthetics is often linked to the larger question of Bradstreet’s “active sensibility” (Rich xvii), such readings undermine a fuller appreciation of Bradstreet’s poetic endeavors and their overall intellectual rigor.

Nowhere are the limitations of these mimetic criteria more apparent than in critical debates over the nature and identity of Bradstreet’s “sweet-tongued Philomel,” which appears in
line 179 of “Contemplations.” Ziser voices the concern of many critics, from Miller to Gatta, when he writes: “It is clear that her environmental point of reference has not just expanded but has shifted from the recognizably New England landscape to the landscape of her English birthplace. Indeed, when she redirects her attention again, this time from the water to the air, she rejoices in the ‘sweet-tongued Philomel,’ or nightingale, a European bird that was not – and is not – present in America” (100). Such readings reinforce the perception that, even in “Contemplations,” Bradstreet is not really “seeing” colonial New England; rather, that her poems, when they present natural imagery, rely on an amalgam of nostalgic English memories and doctrinal Puritan tropes. Likewise, they continue to frame her work as a “poetic pastime [that] serves as an escape from the harshness and loneliness of wilderness conditions” (Schweitzer 130-131). This critique, leveled more specifically against Bradstreet’s earlier work by a number of readers, including Wendy Martin and Adrienne Rich, has deeper consequences when applied in broader fashion: it suggests a categorical impossibility for sustained Puritan engagement with the natural world, whether because of spiritual reasons or, as Schweitzer’s quotation suggests, psychological ones.

Insisting on Bradstreet’s “English birds,” then, not only reveals the pervasive bias within ecocritical studies toward lyric voice and mimetic accuracy; at the same time, it discredits the material conditions of Bradstreet’s lived reality in colonial New England and the validity of her claim to experience in “To My Dear Children.” It suggests that her poetry is not, after all, an engagement with life, but a defense from it, and implies that what we find in her work is merely, as Jeannine Hensley writes, “the lore of the Old World and…hope for the next” (xxiii). Moreover, it overlooks the linguistic impact of the New World on colonial literary expression, both in the ways cited above via the arguments of Susan Howe and Ralph Bauer, and in the sense
of what William Cronon calls the “fuzzy nomenclature” of colonial New England: “the natural tendency for colonists to apply European names to American species which only superficially resembled their counterparts across the ocean” (Changes in the Land 8-9). This “fuzzy nomenclature” is yet another example of how Bradstreet’s poems can’t, to use Howe’s phrase, “speak English” – and how, in turn, we must read them with different aesthetic standards and expectations.

In The Environmental Imagination, Lawrence Buell notes that “[t]he first writings about America were works of geographical description…exploring, mapping, and celebrating the land” (14). I read Buell’s quote, however, as not limited to works that engage surface description alone: promotional tracts, early natural histories, and the like. Rather, there is substantial work – and, in particular, poetic work – of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that “celebrates” the land by describing, exploring, and mapping its affective landscapes – its power to enchant viewers and make their hearts rise. I argue, in other words, that whether Bradstreet knows the correct species of bird she sees or not, whether she is even interested in such information or not, is in some rather important ways inconsequential. Bradstreet’s ecological sensibility lies not in her ability to describe leaves with photographic accuracy or portray fish with ichthyologic exactness, but in her constant need to find and recognize vitality in the animal, vegetable, and mineral. Consider, for example, her conceit of an insect symphony:

I heard the merry grasshopper then sing.

The black-clad cricket bear a second part;

They kept one tune and played on the same string,

Seeming to glory in their little art. (ll. 58-61)
What is so strikingly ecological about these lines isn’t our ability to imagine Bradstreet walking through the woods listening to the sounds of nature – even if, as Gatta claims, “[t]his encounter was geographically rooted in what Bradstreet must have observed in woods near her home on the North Shore” (41). Rather, it’s her insistence on “regard[ing] beings as people even when they aren’t people” (Morton, Ecological Thought 8). Bradstreet recognizes in both cricket and grasshopper what she recognizes in herself: individual identity (the cricket, the grasshopper); emotional capacity; a sense of community; and a shared artistic impulse, paralleling “their little art” with her own “lowly lines” (“Prologue” l. 47).

This encounter with the cricket and grasshopper is not an isolated moment. Bradstreet insists on maintaining openness to the nonhuman world throughout “Contemplations.” She converses repeatedly with trees, streams, birds, even the sun, to the point where she briefly dreams of becoming a bird herself: “I…wished me wings with her a while to take my flight” (l. 183). Likewise, she displays extraordinary fascination with the effects of natural phenomena on her sensibility – “a most melodious strain/Which rapt me so with wonder and delight” (ll. 181-182) – and a continual eagerness to pursue such experience whenever possible: “The more I looked, the more I grew amazed” (l. 25).

Throughout the poem, Bradstreet relies on language of affect and affection as she interacts with the world. She demonstrates a clear commitment to the ecological in both her desire for sensory experience and her reluctance to assert any spatial or aesthetic distance that would mediate or restrict the impact of such experience on her sensibility. At the end of the opening stanza, Bradstreet concludes her initial description of the Massachusetts woods with the announcement: “Rapt were my senses at this delectable view” (l. 8). At first, her lines seem to concentrate on visual impact: “The trees all richly clad…Their leaves and fruits seemed painted,
but was true” (l. 4, 6). But the trees don’t just “rapt” her vision; they “rapt” all her “senses.”
Bradstreet stresses the “true”-ness of the trees by referring tangibly to “their leaves and fruits” and to the deeper sensations she receives from their physical bodies. Unpainted and “void of pride,” the colors assure the authentic materiality of the objects – and Bradstreet emphasizes this by employing two adjectives, “rich” and “delectable,” that combine with “leaves and fruit” to produce a simultaneous sense of sight and taste. These trees are not distant and static objects of aesthetic admiration; rather, they are intimately engaged in and with her everyday life.

Likewise, Bradstreet’s “rapt,” a characterization to which she returns in stanza 26 of the poem, frames her practice of contemplation in two ways. With its implications of force and dislocation, “rapt” suggests contemplation’s power in both unsettling the body’s physical condition and disrupting the body’s sovereign autonomy. At the same time, “rapt” also identifies contemplation’s connection to rapture:

> While musing thus with contemplation fed,
> And thousand fancies buzzing in my brain,
> The sweet-tongued Philomel perched o’er my head
> And chanted forth a most melodious strain
> Which rapt me so with wonder and delight

The songbird perched over the speaker’s head, the oft-debated Philomel, is not merely “chanting” but enchanting. Bradstreet’s language here – sweet, wonder, delight – just as in the “delectable view” of the poem’s initial stanza, suggests that contemplation is not a state of hermetic alienation or a practice of abandonment, but a feeling of intimacy, an essential part of the ecological. Intimacy encourages relation and reciprocity with specific beings; as it reaches beyond mere identification with or affinity for another, however, intimacy also fosters an
affective mood that challenges and destabilizes rigid subject-object distinctions – a feeling of intimacy that, as in the above example, might generate in the speaker something like a literal desire to become a bird.

In these opening stanzas and elsewhere, Bradstreet equivocates regarding the natural world both as it exists on its own merits and in relation to the supernatural. In “To My Dear Children,” Bradstreet confirms her faith through her senses and through the natural world: “That there is a God my reason would soon tell me by the wondrous works that I see” (265). In the opening of “Contemplations,” however, and particularly in the second stanza, she frames this comparison between the two realms in such a way as to offer related, but possibly conflicting, readings. “If so much excellence abide below,” Bradstreet writes in line 10, “[h]ow excellent is He that dwells on high/Whose power and beauty by his works we know?” (ll. 11-12)

The “excellence” that Bradstreet initially celebrates is “the vast frame of the heaven and the earth, the order of all things…the daily providing for this great household upon the earth, the preserving and directing of all to its proper end” (“To My Dear Children” 265-266). However, as in the case of the grasshopper and the cricket, it is not the representative that Bradstreet settles her privilege upon, but the particular: the unique and the non-archetypal. Thus, though she has some attention to “the order of all things” and the notion of “all to its proper end,” we should not over-read Bradstreet as a categorical or typological thinker at the expense of her interest in “works” and economy, in the “below” and the “daily,” the individual object and non-repeated action.

Likewise, none of these instances represents an escapist impulse, either pastoral or religious, for Bradstreet. She understands differences between herself and a bird or a tree. Her question to the “glistering Sun,” for example – “What glory’s like to thee?” (l. 26) – indicates
sincere curiosity regarding a perception of “glory” that is unavailable to her. At the same time, she resists the translation of such differences into a sense of absolute difference or absolute otherness. Instead, her actions are based on a thinking of interconnectedness, a “radical intimacy with other beings,” that continually challenges and destabilizes the rigid subject-object (human-nature) distinctions that both pastoral and religious thought are dependent on – and that the ecological seeks to move beyond (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 37). In the case of the sun, Bradstreet’s personification – “Thou as a bridegroom…[a]nd as a strong man” – demonstrates her willingness to see the sun not only as a celestial body but as a being with a language of “joys” and “smiles and blushes” that responds to her in direct and intelligible fashion (ll. 30-32). Likewise, the grasshopper and the cricket are in possession of self-directed agency. They are not tools of teleological force or symbols of the metaphysical; instead, they act in relation and response to one another and to the “I” of the poem. For Bradstreet, this is already an ecological act: her “Muse” is “mazed” by the earth, not by the divine. Her impulse to spiritualize this condition of “mazement” is thus a secondary, not a primary, response to sensation: it occurs in the aftermath of contemplation, when she has turned her senses away, not during the looking itself.

Following her arboreal attentions in stanza 1 and her contemplation of a “stately oak” in stanza 3, Bradstreet turns her attention to “the glistering Sun”:

Then higher on the glistering Sun I gazed,
Whose beams was shaded by the leavie tree;
The more I looked, the more I grew amazed
And softly said, “What glory’s like to thee?” (ll. 23-26)
Initially, Bradstreet insists on retaining control of her sensory faculties and their relation to her mental cogitation. She argues this point in stanza 4 when first devoting attention to the sun. “Soul of this world, this universe’s eye,” she writes, “[n]o wonder some made thee a deity” – and she concludes that “[h]ad I not better known, alas, the same had I” (ll. 27-29). Yet, even “shaded by the leavie tree,” the sun still “glisters,” displaying not only a quality of brightness but also an intensity of brilliance. Bradstreet tempers her curiosity and her search for metaphor – “What glory’s like to thee?” – with the fear that the sun may be, in fact, ontologically unavailable: “Art thou so full of glory,” she asks in a following stanza, “that no eye hath strength thy shining rays once to behold?” But she doesn’t just “behold once.” Despite her doubt – or perhaps because of it – she chooses to “look more.” The results of this “looking more” are unexpected and radical: “The more I looked, the more I grew amazed.”

As Bradstreet continues to contemplate the sun, studying its effects both cyclical and particular, something happens. In the fourth stanza, the sun is predominantly metaphysical, a “soul” and “a deity,” but it is already becoming corporeal: “this universe’s eye.” Like Bradstreet’s own eye of the third stanza’s “I cast mine eye” (l. 16), the eye of the sun can be active as well: it can be cast back at her. The sun’s corporeal nature increases as the poem progresses. As noted above, Bradstreet figures the sun “as a bridegroom…and as a strong man” in the beginning lines of the fifth stanza. The rest of this stanza extends such characteristics to other aspects of the natural world:

The morn doth usher thee with smiles and blushes;

The Earth reflects her glances in thy face.

Birds, insects, animals with vegative,

Thy heat from death and dullness doth revive,
And in the darksome womb of fruitful nature dive. (ll. 32-36)

In this vibrant world, several important things occur simultaneously. The sun as eye, separate from “the morn” that “ushers” it in, “smiles and blushes” at the earth. Earth responds by “reflect[ing] her glances in thy face.” These interactions, as well as those with “birds, insects, animals…vegative,” no longer hold the “I” of the poem as its stable center.

“Growing amazed” fosters a new kind of intimacy in its qualities of attention and engagement – but also in its insistence on exposure and risk:

Thy pleasing fervor and thy scorching force,
All mortals here the feeling knowledge hath.
Thy presence makes it day, thy absence night,
Quaternal seasons caused by thy might:
Hail creature, full of sweetness, beauty, and delight. (ll. 38-43)

While the sun is “pleasing” in its “fervor,” it is also painful, or “scorching,” in its “force.” The speaker’s fear of the sun’s unknowability seems bolstered by the presence of this arbitrary and totalizing power: the sun is literally able to “make it day” or night simply via “presence” alone. But Bradstreet’s practice of contemplation – the pursuit of amazement – specifically eludes the “otherness” of the sun via an emphasis on what she calls “the feeling knowledge.”

In the assertion that “all mortals” have “feeling knowledge,” stressed by her grammatical inversion of the line, Bradstreet suggests that feeling, as well as thinking (or knowing), are primarily questions of affective attunement rather than external acquisition. “Feeling knowledge” is not bound to the aesthetics of what a thing is “like,” as in the speaker’s initial question – “What glory’s like to thee?” – but neither does it transform the thing into a metaphysical concept. In the case of “Contemplations,” “feeling knowledge” suggests that even if the sun is
incomparable, it is not unknowable. The transformation of the sun from the disembodied “soul of the world” to an embodied “universe’s eye” and from the “deity” that “some made thee” to a material “creature” levels the hierarchy of human to nature and anticipates the poem’s later treatment of shared mortality across scales of time. “Contemplations” celebrates the sun’s particularity, both its “pleasing fervor” and its “scorching force,” without mediation, as it endorses the living without distance and sense of “sweetness, beauty, and delight” that lies at the heart of the ecological.

With her “Muse” still “mazed,” and having upset both a clear subject/object orientation in her treatment of the sun and a typological/teleological reading of its actions, “Contemplations” endeavors to shape these sensations of enchantment, sweetness, and wonder into artistic response:

Silent alone, where none or saw, or heard,
In pathless paths I lead my wand’ring feet,
My humble eyes to lofty skies I reared
To sing some song, my mazed Muse thought meet. (ll. 51-54)

But though she desires “to sing some song,” when Bradstreet tries to repeat the rhetorical gesture of stanza two, the movement from physical to metaphysical or shift from earthly to heavenly plane, she is unable to do so. Seeing and knowing, the mental and the physical, the body and the mind, all held separate in line 29, are now combined. What emerges instead of “some song” of praise intended to “magnify” (l. 55) with particular aesthetic standards and expectations (in addition to theological ones) is a literal failure of language as Bradstreet has previously been able to recognize the term’s definition. Bradstreet stutters – “Ah, and Ah” – and then fails entirely, concluding instead with her frustration: “again, my imbecility!” (l. 57)
The junction of stanzas 8 and 9 forms a crucial moment in the poem’s shift towards the ecological. Stanza 8 opens with the absence of sound: “Silent alone.” Inasmuch as we imagine this scene of “pathless paths” in naturalistic fashion, we don’t imagine that there is literally no sound. Rather, in envisioning herself “silent alone,” the speaker either consciously omits ambient noise or has not yet fully attuned herself to it: she just isn’t paying careful enough attention when it comes to her surroundings. But in terms of the ecological, this omission of the “sounds of nature”—the rustle of leaves, the crack of twigs, whatever we might imagine—is not just a strange absence or a mimetic shortcoming. Imagining herself “silent alone,” the speaker seeks to occupy a position of exception outside the ecological “mesh.” She intends to “sing some song” within a framework where she is the only being that can make music and which has a limited aesthetic definition of what a song, as such, is. The evacuated “none” between “humble eyes” and “lofty skies” promises an aesthetic distance from sensation, a place or space from which “to sing some song” in a disembodied time and a disenchanted mood. But as the assertion of aloneness makes a hierarchical and anthropocentric claim about the speaker’s position and value relative to other animal, vegetable, and mineral life, it also represents an abdication of the ethical. To imagine that one is alone in a world without witness (“none…saw, or heard”) and without testimony (the pervasive silence that opens the stanza) renders the speaker’s description of her eyes as “humble” profoundly ironic. “Silent alone,” she conceives a world where relation and reciprocity are impossible because she is the only thing that exists. Her intention to “magnify” what “nature had thus decked liberally” (ll. 55-56) from this artifice of remove collapses in a world where language fails (the stutter), where art fails, where thinking itself fails: a world of painful “imbecility.”
But at this precise moment, this “Ah” of failure, the world of “Contemplations” leaps into sound: first, “the merry grasshopper,” then, “the black-clad cricket” (ll. 58-59). Beginning the ninth stanza, Bradstreet marks this simultaneity by specifically marking the time: “then.” “Then” is a sequential marker, but it also indicates a transformative moment for Bradstreet’s perceptive state. The grasshopper and the cricket begin as distinct entities, or “parts,” but by the third line of the stanza, they have grown indistinguishable: “one tune…played on the same string.” Their “little art,” like Bradstreet’s “lowly lines,” rises first to the level of song and then to the level of ambient cacophony, the overwhelming “glory” in the song’s ability to “resound.” This “glory” is a direct contradiction of the previous stanza’s “imbecility” and one that leads “Contemplations” to ask a new question:

Shall creatures abject thus their voices raise
And in their kind resound their Maker’s praise,
Whilst I, as mute, can warble forth no higher lays? (ll. 62-64)

This question doesn’t present Bradstreet as silent or as silencing herself, nor should it be read as a sort of lament or bitterness. Instead of characterizing herself again as “silent alone,” Bradstreet now chooses the phrase “as mute.” “As mute” does not imply a sense of isolation or a failure of communication; in fact, “as mute” does not suggest a “silent” speaker at all. Rather, the construction “I, as mute” refers to Bradstreet’s previous portrait of the natural world as also mute, a portrait which she has just finished refuting. The speaker of “Contemplations” is capable of voice – but now, instead of seeking out a “higher lay,” a reference to classical European musical and poetic form, she relinquishes an artificially grounded sense of separation. What is now “as mute,” then, is the autonomous “I,” abandoned in favor of affinity with “creatures abject.” Bradstreet comes to understand her voice as one that “can warble” like the birds she
describes in stanza 28 who “[tune their] pretty instrument[s]” and “warbl[e] out” (ll. 193-194). In the later moments where she wishes to be a bird, Bradstreet directly references the transformation of these two stanzas. Her “wishing” of “wings” is not a reductive or idealized gesture, nor is it a fantasy of difference. Breaking through hierarchies of language, “warbling” sets Bradstreet into the world, into a relation with the world, completely anew.

Thus, when she announces that she can no longer offer “higher lays,” I understand this not as aesthetic judgment (i.e. “higher” as “better”) but in the musical context of the stanza – as a direct reference to her inability to sing harmony, “a second part,” in favor of “one tune,” or melody. Harmony approaches the ecological with its suggestion of agreement between things, but it is melody’s collapse of aesthetic distance that generates the enchantment, wonder, and intimacy that the ecological ultimately demands. This sense of melody runs throughout “Contemplations,” requiring our attention, asking that we “look more.” As “the feeling knowledge” creates affective bonds between “all mortals” and transforms the sun into an embodied “creature,” while the “sweet-tongued Philomel” chants “a most melodious strain” until one wishes to become a bird, as the grasshopper and the cricket find “glory” in singing “one tune” – perhaps, Bradstreet suggests, we too should contemplate the sweetness of the ecological if we want to avoid being left “silent alone” in this world.

“My pleasant things in ashes lie”

On the night of July 10, 1666, Anne Bradstreet awoke to “[t]hat fearful sound of ‘Fire!’ and ‘Fire!’” (l. 9). After escaping from her house with her family, she watched “[t]he flame consume [her] dwelling place” (l. 16). The loss was overwhelming. In addition to the house itself, “[t]he flame consume[d]” the majority of her worldly possessions and many of her personal papers (Hensley xxviii). Bradstreet’s most direct treatment of this event, “Upon the
Burning of Our House,” written later that year, demonstrates both the subsequent impact of the fire itself on her everyday life and the extent to which she remained haunted by her witnessing of the event. At the same time, it demonstrates Bradstreet’s unbroken commitment to contemplative practice and affirms her ecological relation to the material world.

The complexity of Bradstreet’s response begins with the poem’s full title: “Here Follows Some Verses Upon the Burning of Our House July 10th, 1666. Copied Out of a Loose Paper.” One of her longest titles, it invokes several familiar elements, including the use of “upon” and the reference to a specific date. It employs these conventions, however, in unique ways. These choices develop characteristics singular to this text that distinguish the poem from Bradstreet’s larger body of work. We can highlight four discrete aspects of Bradstreet’s title for discussion: the notion of “some verses,” her use of “upon,” her naming and dating of the event itself, and the concluding fragment, “Copied Out of a Loose Paper.”

Bradstreet begins with an announcement: “Here Follows Some Verses.” In general, Bradstreet’s titles tend toward one of two categories: prescriptive, as in “The Four Elements” and “The Vanity of All Worldly Things,” or directed, as in “The Author to Her Book” and “For Deliverance from a Fever.” These titles announce the subject material, present the rhetorical circumstances, and provide an interpretive framework for the poem itself. Here, however, Bradstreet is uncharacteristically broad in the introduction, direction, and assessment of her work: “Here Follows Some Verses” neither announces the same intentions nor strives for the same results. Unlike the quaternions, it neither defines segments of the text nor suggests a point of resolution: it has no teleology. Unlike poems that announce themselves as eulogies or elegies, there is no suggestion of formal convention or public function. Rather, “Here Follows Some
Verses” generates an ambiguity of both form and content that remains unresolved during both title and poem itself.

Bradstreet’s “some” particularly accentuates these organic qualities of the poem. As mentioned above, Bradstreet’s titles often define the form and trajectory of the poems themselves by specifying the formal structure (as in the quaternions or “A Dialogue between Old England and New”) or defining the function of the verse (eulogy, elegy, meditation, and so forth). “Some,” however, does not function in the same way as Bradstreet’s identification of specific poetic voices (four elements, two participants in a dialogue) in that that it does not establish a clear sense of an ending. Likewise, it does not replicate the pattern of linking an occasional poem (or, as in the case of her meditations, “several” occasional poems) to the expectations of a particular poetic genre, which would inherently generate its own expectations for poetic trajectory and resolution.

By announcing the poem as “some verses,” Bradstreet suggests both its inherent incompleteness and its perpetual becoming. “Here” are “some verses,” but refusal to identify a final quantity or fix the location of the complete set indicates that this poem is an incomplete treatment of the event itself. There is more to say – and there will always be more to say. Likewise, the suggestion that “here” are “some” is an invitation to search for “some” others “upon” the same event elsewhere – references and verses that cross-pollinate other poems or take on different aesthetic forms. Indeed, the closest that Bradstreet comes to repeating this openness with her titles elsewhere in her body of work is in “A Letter to Her Husband, Absent Upon Public Employment,” which is followed by “Another” and then “Another,” again suggesting and inherent incompleteness and an inherent limitlessness of feeling. It’s not insignificant, I think, that these similarities are found in love poems that rely heavily on nature metaphors for their
affective impact. Indeed, in “A Letter to Her Husband,” Bradstreet identifies herself specifically as “I, like the Earth” (l. 7).

“Here Follows Some Verses” is followed by “Upon.” Bradstreet’s “upon” either in reference to people or in reference to an event. In the first case, these references can appear personal, as in “Upon My Dear and Loving Husband,” or formal, as in “An Elegy Upon Sir Philip Sidney.” In the second case, they address events that directly impact Bradstreet herself and those closest to her. In particular, they disproportionately reference events and periods of illness, whether Bradstreet’s own, as in “Upon Some Distemper of Body” or “Upon a Fit of Sickness,” or that of a family member, as in “Upon My Daughter Hannah Wiggin Her Recovery from a Dangerous Fever.” In these cases, Bradstreet’s “upon” always references events that affect the human body – except for this particular “upon” of “Some Verses,” where it references an event that affects the “body” of Bradstreet’s house instead. As I explore below, Bradstreet’s application of “upon” to the event of the fire and to her house itself suggests a particular understanding of her relationship to both element (fire) and thing (house) that does not adhere to rigid subject-object distinction. Bradstreet writes “upon” the burning and “upon” her house as she does “upon” her husband and “upon” her sickness. In doing so, I argue, she cultivates an attitude of reciprocity toward the phenomenal and the natural world that demonstrates her awareness of its affective power.

When we reach the event itself – “the Burning of Our House July 10th 1666” – both the specificity of action and mention of the date appear as common Bradstreet title conventions in both frequency and content. When Bradstreet affixes dates to her poems, or when dates themselves function as sole introduction, those texts often deal explicitly with various forms of loss: sickness, distance, absence, pain, and death. In other words, Bradstreet makes an explicit
point of marking calendric time when invoking feelings and experiences of loss. Embedding the
date in this way imbues the poem with a particular sense of earthly time, space, and place.
Moreover, it enacts within the lines itself an attachment to the terrestrial that forecloses on the
possibility of escape into the metaphysical or the transcendental.

The final qualification, “Copied Out of a Loose Paper,” is in some ways most significant.
Here, Bradstreet addresses the material circumstances of composition, something she rarely does
elsewhere. While the poem appears in the notebook known as “The Andover Manuscripts” and
then as reprinted in various forms and mediums, Bradstreet’s “copied out of a loose paper” alerts
us to the fact that these verses were originally inscribed on one of the few objects remaining after
the fire itself. Calling this quality to the forefront, Bradstreet creates a double-ness surrounding
the location of the “some verses” and their inscription. They are written, on one hand, “upon” the
fire as subject material; they are, on another, written “upon” a surviving material remnant of that
fire as well. The paper, then, is not unlike Bradstreet herself. By devoting one of her remaining
possessions to this record and response, Bradstreet signals its urgency and importance. The
“loose paper” links her contemplation of fire to her material life both before and after the event.
This action shifts the function of the poem from a spiritual gesture of weaning affection from the
world, as the text is often read.39 Rather, it enables the poem to speak precisely to the persistence
– and even the increase – of affection toward the world that is a core element of Bradstreet’s
ecological sensibility.

“I, starting up, the light did spy” (ll. 5-24)

Bradstreet begins “Upon the Burning of Our House” from within the comfort and
serenity of domestic place: “In silent night when rest I took/For sorrow near I did not look” (ll. 5-6).
These lines are neither utopian nor naïve. They neither deny the existence of sorrow not
preclude the possibility of its appearance. Rather, they locate sorrow spatially relative to the physical structure of a house itself. Bradstreet’s division between inside and outside, between domestic place and ambiguous external space, play on Puritan conceptions of the natural world: the structure of a house separates the individual from the misfortune of “sorrow” because it separates the Puritan from the world itself. Though always guarded against, sorrow is ostensibly not “near” when one is properly situated in one’s house because, at that moment, one is, conversely, not in the world. Thus the fear of “sorrow near” serves as no impediment to “rest” because sorrow is always elsewhere, always outside.

The double-ness of Bradstreet’s “silent night” serves to reinforce this notion. The first silence is an inside silence: the silence of Bradstreet’s house. This silence is peaceful, one that offers comfort and inspires sleep. But because Bradstreet establishes such a sharp dichotomy between the inside and the outside of her house, we must also consider what the outside silence is like. This is a radically different kind of silence. Outside, silence is ominous and uncanny. It is not the restfulness of the mind but the existential terror of the body. In combination with night, it suggests pain and death, not sleep. In the world of seventeenth-century New England, this fear, rather than being predominantly psychological, would have been a literal, palpable, felt reality.

Almost immediately, the poem begins to subvert and question this reliance on inside and outside, on space and place. From the distinction drawn in lines 5 and 6, Bradstreet presents the progression of moments that comprise her awareness of and response to the event of fire:

I wakened was with thund’ring noise
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.
That fearful sound of “Fire!” and “Fire!”
Let no man know is my desire.
I, starting up, the light did spy,
And to my God my heart did cry (ll. 7-12)

These six lines parallel an intensity of bodily sensation with a corresponding increase of bodily action, a sort of affective progression. Line 5 offers a picture of the subject at “rest,” literally asleep, as confirmed by the “I wakened was” of line 7. The wakening from sleep itself is a disruption of silence. Bradstreet describes fire’s sound as “thund’ring noise” – then demonstrates the confusion and disorientation of the circumstances by semantically playing with the origins of the sounds themselves. Line 9, for example, places “Fire” in quotation marks. Here, Bradstreet’s “thund’ring noise” is not “that fearful sound”; rather, “Fire!” is a cacophony of human voices calling attention to the element itself. Thus, in paralleling the “noise” of fire and the “sound” of language, mediated by line 8’s use of “voice” – and by assigning related emotional and affective responses to both – Bradstreet blurs traditional boundaries that hold the two as fundamentally separate.

In *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres identifies the particular danger of fire as its ability to “drive you out” (17). This occurs on two registers. In spatial terms, fire demands movement from inside to outside. In this sense, it reverses the dichotomy of inside as safe/outside as dangerous. For Serres, though, fire also enacts a shift from mind to body. This is because, for him, fire is primarily an experience of sensory contact: it “burns, stings, bites, crackles, stinks, [and] dazzles” as it fosters “a certain relationship to the senses.” The shock of this contact, then, is the primary consequence of fire: “in the spatial experience of passing from inside to out,” the “body learn[s] once and for all to say ‘I’ in the truest sense of the word” (20, 18).

For Bradstreet, this movement from inside to outside, this “driving out,” begins with line 11: “I, starting up.” If lines 7 through 10 figure Bradstreet in a liminal state – awake, but in bed;
listening, but with eyes closed – then this line closes that gap by showing the movement of the body in correspondence with the intake of sensation. Bradstreet “starts” – but, almost as quickly, she is stopped, first by the visual (“the light did spy”) and then by the affective: “my heart did cry.”

Bradstreet’s use of passive language in representing herself as “wakened was,” rather than choosing to wake, serves as preparation for this moment. In moving from mental cognition to bodily experience, the poem begins to lose a sense of order; in other words, of linearity. In previous lines, Bradstreet separated experience into discrete pieces: first, the thundering, then the sound of voices and their identification, then a comprehension of the content of those voices, followed by a commentary on them. From the “starting up” of line 11 to the “coming up” of line 15, however, the poem loses this linear progression and structure. Instead, it becomes increasingly driven by intensities of the body: the crying heart and “my distress.” Bradstreet’s heart needs no “convincing,” as in “To My Dear Children.” Here, it submits directly and immediately.

Lines 15 and 16, then, speak directly to the question of separation raised by lines 5 and 6: “Then coming out, beheld a space/The flame consume my dwelling place.” Through fire, place becomes space; in fact, the poem argues, space “consume[s]” place. In doing so, it also consumes the two realms – the domestic and the literary – that Bradstreet frequently defines herself by. The notion, then, of separation, of compartmentalizing one’s life, is consumed as well. The natural world collapses these distinctions: “goods” are now “dust.”

Yet all is not lost. In these first moments, Bradstreet also “says I.” She distinguishes what was “mine” and what was “His own” – and determines that “yet sufficient for us [is] left.” Even
without her “dwelling place,” in other words, she is able to dwell. “Coming out,” Bradstreet beholds a space that, once again, is a “new world.”

“My pleasant things in ashes lie” (ll. 25-40)

As in “Contemplations,” where she mentions her “wand’ring feet” (l. 52), Bradstreet references her habit of walking in “Upon the Burning of Our House.” After the fire, however, Bradstreet’s tenor changes: she has no time merely to “wander.” Instead, she walks with specific purpose and direction:

When by the ruins oft I past
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,
And here and there the places spy
Where oft I sat and long did lie (ll. 25-28)

Her return to the site of her house is deliberate and frequent. However, in contrast to the night of the fire itself, “when [she] could no longer look” (l. 17), Bradstreet’s “sorrowing eyes” do not turn inward and they do not turn away. Instead, she actively “casts” her eyes to particular spots “here” and “there” that correspond with scenes of everyday life and ordinary household objects: “Here stood that trunk, and there that chest” (l. 29).

In lines 31 and 32, Bradstreet offers the following lamentation: “My pleasant things in ashes lie/And them behold no more shall I.” The lines that follow, though, offer strange contradictions:

Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy table eat a bit.
No pleasant tale shall e’er be told,
Nor things recounted done of old.
No candle e’er shall shine in thee,

Nor bridegroom’s voice e’er heard shall be. (ll. 33-38)

The second person possessive adjective “thy,” combined with the use of “thee” in line 37 and “thou” in line 39, troubles the nature of the poem’s lyric voice. Here, Bradstreet converses directly and intimately with her house as a living being. In conjunction with the shift from “it” to “thou,” Bradstreet completes her move from past tense (ll. 25-30) to present tense (l. 31) to the future “shall.” The “shall” of line 39 – “In silence ever shall thou lie” – laments a change in relation between Bradstreet and her house, yet continues to insist that this relation has not vanished. Bradstreet’s repeated use of “no” and “nor,” with her use of the past tense in lines 29 and 30, emphasizes absence and loss. At the same time, however, her placing or “casting” of these absent objects gives them an uncanny presence both within the poem and amidst the ruins themselves. In this sense, beholding “things in ashes” seems to be precisely what Bradstreet is doing.

Equally striking in Bradstreet’s lines is their simultaneous lack of emphasis on the surface appearances and aesthetic forms of her things as such. Bradstreet fills her house in a perfunctory way. She furnishes rooms, but does not describe them, puts a meal on the table, but doesn’t reminisce about a favorite dinner, puts a story in line 35, but never tells it. “Pleasant,” which she uses twice, seems to be the best – and only – description she can muster.

Yet an awareness of the ecological refigures Bradstreet’s use of the adjective “pleasant.” Bradstreet’s first use of “pleasant” in the poem, seen above, is attached directly to “things.” As far as descriptive language is concerned, we might consider this a middling evocation at best. But throughout her work, Bradstreet’s tendency is to use “pleasant” to describe relations between things, rather than to describe the quality or nature of a thing in itself (Craig 2:718). Her
assertion, for example, in “Meditations Divine and Moral” that “[i]f we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant” argues that the “pleasantness” of spring is neither inherent nor absolute. Rather, it is dependent on both spring’s relation to winter and the presence of “we” (299). Lest we misinterpret her intentions and begin to believe that the “pleasant” is innate to “things” themselves, Bradstreet clarifies this point four lines later by attaching “pleasant” to “tale.” Tales, rather than being intrinsically pleasant unto themselves, are made pleasant in the interactions of teller and listener. Here, as elsewhere, Bradstreet urges for an understanding of “things” in a similar way.

Bradstreet is not detached from her material loss. She is neither in shock from the event itself nor numbed in its aftermath. Rather, these contradictions reaffirm her stance of intimacy and reciprocity with the world and demonstrate the inherently ecological nature of her thought. Throughout the poem, Bradstreet’s impulse is to give her things the particularity she recognizes in them. Much like the specificity of the grasshopper, it is that chest, and not this one. Nevertheless, if we read for mimetic value, we miss the point. Seeing her “things in ashes” reaffirms the insufficiency of the aesthetic to communicate vitality. To define her things by making them static, by fixing them in both appearance and time, would be to objectify them – and, by extension, would make them capable of disappearance or destruction. Maintaining her interconnectedness with them, Bradstreet avoids this in both her lines and her looking. Instead, she challenges herself, as well as her readers, to see these ashes as a radical loss of form – but, simultaneously, to refuse seeing them as evidence of a total loss.

“The world no longer let me love” (ll. 41-58)
Bradstreet returns to the question of her heart in the final section of the poem. Declaring that “all’s vanity,” she “straight” begins “[her] heart to chide” with a series of accusatory questions:

And did thy wealth on earth abide?

Didst fix thy hope on mold’ring dust?

The arm of flesh didst make thy trust? (ll. 41-43)

Bradstreet admonishes her heart both as part of her material body and as an organic entity separate from her control. As in “To My Dear Children,” she confronts her physical and mental captivation by external sensory impact: Bradstreet’s heart requires correction. But her heart is not, in this case, a mere sensory organ, responding against the will or better sense. It does not, that is, simply “rise” or “cry.” In fact, her heart also thinks: “raise up thy thoughts” (l. 45).

Bradstreet’s admonishments carry the implicit assumption of an affirmative answer. They make little sense if the outcome is neither obvious nor determined in advance. This is a scolding, not an interrogation; a lecture, not a conversation. Accordingly, with each subsequent question, the distance between the constructed speaker of the poem and Bradstreet’s thinking, feeling heart grows – and the heart is strengthened in its ties and affections to the natural world. Thus, this conclusion cannot form a mechanical negation of a rhetorically rehearsed drift in order to close a circular belief. Rather, the poem drives the heart away from it. Bradstreet spends much of her time, in fact, trying to convince her heart of truths she has already disputed in the middle lines of the poem. Her argument that the “house on high erect…Stands permanent though this be fled” directly contradicts her engagement with the ashes of her house, as does her first question: “And did thy wealth on earth abide?” (ll. 47, 50). Likewise, her shift to a language of economy –
wealth, trust, “richly furnished,” “purchased and paid for,” “price,” “pelf,” store, treasure – grounds the poem, as well as her heart, in the physical structure and nature of the house as well.

It is Bradstreet’s recitation and repetition of “common sense” tropes and platitudes – “There’s wealth enough, I need no more” and “My hope and treasure lies above” – that is revealed as the true artifice by the conclusion of the poem (ll. 55, 58). Despite its unruliness, its messiness, Bradstreet ultimately chooses her heart. She moves away from her address of the heart as “thy,” “thou,” and “thine” and returns to “I” and “me” – but with a new sense of the stakes in doing so. “The world no longer let me love,” she asks, but the tone and the identity of the addressee are muddled (l. 57). Rather, than offering religious sentiment, Bradstreet is once again talking to the world and to her own heart. She accepts a life of sensory response that she cannot control, a life of openness to the world. What lies – and lives – in ashes, it turns out, is love.

The Ecological Tenth Muse

While Bradstreet’s later work, including “Contemplations” and “Upon the Burning of Our House,” has received significant critical attention, her 1650 collection The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America – and, in particular, the quaternions that form the bulk of the volume – stake her claim as “the first poet’s voice, male or female, to be heard from the wilderness of the New World” (Gordon 14). By most accounts, these poems were well received at the time of their publication and throughout the eighteenth century. Cotton Mather, for example, considered them “a grateful Entertainment unto the Ingenious, and a Monument for her Memory beyond the Stateliest Marbles” (10). But by the middle of the nineteenth century, both critical opinion and popular reception had changed. The lines that once “half revive[d]” Nathaniel Ward’s “chill frost-bitten blood” were now consistently maligned by readers, when not
being ignored altogether (l. 15). “If tried by an exact standard of aesthetics,” wrote James Anderson in 1862, “her poetry…will reveal many blemishes. Its poetical merits are unequal. It is often prosaic, deficient in melody of versification…It will not be difficult to find in her poems passages of bad taste and of sheer doggerel, should a reader examine them for such an ungallant purpose” (23). “Pretentious and imitative,” Samuel Eliot Morrison claimed in 1930, “The Tenth Muse is not attractive. No one of its long poems…would be read by anyone save a literary historian” (50-51).

Such opinions carry over into contemporary – and otherwise sympathetic – criticism as well. Wendy Martin, in An American Triptych, cites “[t]he often wooden lines and forced rhymes of her early poems” (15). In turn, the bulk of critical attention and praise has shifted toward Bradstreet’s “tender” and “touching” post-1650 work (Rich xvii, xix). These “later poems,” Adrienne Rich claimed, “satisfy a larger aesthetic, to the extent of being genuine, delicate minor poems.” Thus they, not the quaternions, became the poems that “rescued[d] Anne Bradstreet…[and] place[d] her…in literature” and “kept her alive for us” (xix, xvii, xv).

Rich argues that these critically admired qualities of the “later poems” can be directly attributed to “a real change in [Bradstreet’s] active sensibility…after 1650” (xvii). Yet this narrative of Bradstreet’s “real change” reflects more than shifting aesthetic tastes over time. Rather, focus on her “active sensibility” often centers on the question of her relationship to the natural world. Critics have argued that Bradstreet’s sensibility toward nature at a given moment can be intuited based on the aesthetics of her poems and that, in turn, when her poems “satisfy a larger aesthetic,” it is specifically because her particular sensibility at that time allowed for it. In other words, the favored later poems “[show] to what she could rise when she was willing to throw aside her musty folios and read the fresh book of nature,” while the aesthetically deficient
*Tenth Muse* poems are a direct result of Bradstreet having “too generally [drawn] her materials from books rather than from nature” when she should have instead “bravely looked…out upon the real world” (Ellis 28; Tyler 36).

Bradstreet may have been “the first poet’s voice…to be heard from the wilderness of the New World,” but for critics from the middle of the nineteenth century on, that wilderness – or its influence – has rarely been seen. These arguments represent a common critical narrative linking Puritan declension with artistic merit, a sort of “bad Puritan”/“good poet” dynamic. Moreover, this overemphasis on the restrictive elements of Puritan doctrine, particularly with regard to the material world, has led many critics to read Puritan texts that register appreciation for nature as wholly indicative of a struggle with or rejection of Puritan orthodoxy. An ecocritical return to *The Tenth Muse*, then, intervenes in traditional readings of Bradstreet’s early work in several ways of interest to both Bradstreet and early Americanist scholars in particular and ecologically-minded criticism more broadly. By de-emphasizing the kind of aesthetic criticism featured prominently in many of the critiques above, an ecocritical approach is better equipped to consider a work’s environmental attention without corresponding evaluation of its religious sincerity. Bradstreet’s ecological thought is not, in the final analysis, dependent on whether she is a “good” Puritan or a “bad” Puritan. Moreover, it dismantles rigid distinctions between pre- and post-1650 Bradstreet – and challenges Rich’s claim regarding the “real change in [Bradstreet’s] active sensibility.” This perspectival shift forges new readings of *The Tenth Muse*, and reveals fresh connections between texts traditionally held as fundamentally separate and different.

In addition to her work on “Upon the Burning of Our House” in the fall of 1666, Bradstreet continued revising a number of her *Tenth Muse* poems. Jeannine Hensley suggests
that these revisions are indicative of Bradstreet’s active desire to publish an expanded second edition of her work (xxxvii-xxxviii). Yet most critics, including Hensley, treat these revisions as minor “corrections” related to the publication circumstances that Bradstreet addresses in “The Author to Her Book”: grammatical changes, adjustments to historical inconsistencies, remedies of printing errors, and so forth. As a result, the substance of these revisions, including Bradstreet’s addition of new material, as well as the inherent significance of her continued interest in the *Tenth Muse* poems, are often glossed over. Adrienne Rich, for example, dismisses these revisions as “of little aesthetic interest” (xvii). This oversight is particularly glaring because many of these additions could not, in a chronological sense, have been intended for inclusion prior to 1650. It is simply not the case that the poems that Bradstreet revised and that were published posthumously in *Several Poems* (1678) are merely polished versions of their 1650 counterparts. Rather, they are fundamentally new texts that need to be read intertextually in relation to both their predecessors and the other works that Bradstreet composed after 1650.

In describing the locations of various pieces of furniture in “Upon the Burning of Our House,” Bradstreet notes that “[t]here lay that store I counted best” (l. 30). She doesn’t elaborate. Instead, the meaning of “that store” is made clear by her addition of “An Apology” to the end of her *Tenth Muse* poem, “The Four Monarchies.” Here, Bradstreet indicates not only that she had an “intent” to revise the poem, “[t]o finish what’s begun,” but also that she, in fact, had done so: “I hours not few did spend/And weary lines…I many penned” (ll. 3553, 3563-3564). These “weary lines,” however, cannot be found on the page. As her “apology” explains:

But ‘fore I could accomplish my desire,

My papers fells a prey to th’ raging fire.

And thus my pains (with better things) I lost (ll. 3565-3567)
Calling attention to the material loss of the “papers” themselves, Bradstreet demands that her audience recognize both the event of her house fire and her post-1650 poetic labor – labor that does not, as she explains, correspond in this case with a material product or textual artifact. Moreover, she does so without altering the bulk of the pre-1650 poem in an aesthetic way. This de-emphasis on the aesthetics of her work pushes her ecological sensibility to the surface of “An Apology.” The fire has made “The Four Monarchies” into something new. It is now unresolved, a text irreparably imperfect. But rather than turning away from it completely or covering its scars with new lines, Bradstreet stands before it as she stands before her “pleasant things in ashes” – encouraging us to do the same – and we grow closer to the poem by reading its imperfection, by recognizing its entanglements and interconnections with the world.  

Following the destruction of her house, Bradstreet also returned to her quaternion “The Four Elements” and, more specifically, to the section entitled “Fire.” Here, Bradstreet writes directly in the persona of Fire. For over a hundred lines, she gives voice to an element who suggests that her “worth” is more evident in “[w]hat I can do” (ll. 28, 31). We might imagine, then, that if Bradstreet were inclined to address her house fire elsewhere in her body of work, this would be the logical poem of choice – particularly when Fire begins to meditate upon her destructive capabilities:

What famous towns to cinders have I turned?
What lasting forts my kindled wrath hath burned?
The stately seats of mighty kings by me
In confused heaps of ashes may you see. (ll. 110-113)
Bradstreet’s four-line addition to the poem appears in the middle of Fire’s list of these “famous towns” – Nineveh, Troy, Carthage, Jerusalem, the Biblical Sodom, “and hundred more in stories told” (ll. 114-124) – and begins to speak of another “famous town”:

And stately London (our great Britain’s glory)
My raging flame did make a mournful story,
But maugre all, that I, or foes could do
That Phoenix from her bed is risen new. (ll. 118-121)

Rather than referencing Bradstreet’s own circumstances, the poem calls attention to a second significant fire, one that occurred in September of 1666, just two months after her house fire: the Great Fire of London.

In calling attention to this fact, Fire calls attention to herself in a peculiar way. Aesthetically, Bradstreet’s addition is jarring. The reference to the Great Fire seems simultaneously in place and out of place in the poem. As a “famous town,” London fits Fire’s list; as a current event, it does not. Here, Bradstreet rejects a reading based on the academic tone and historical nature of this cataloguing by creating an obvious rupture in the timeline of the poem. Furthermore, Fire is embodied in a new way when she finds the ability to use the possessive determiner “our” in line 118. She is the only one of the elements to do so throughout the quaternions, and her employment of it suggests Bradstreet’s ability to find commonality with Fire. Fire says that she had “[made] a mournful story” of London – and, in one sense, the impulse is to connect this to the “mournful story” Fire makes of Bradstreet’s house. But the anthropomorphizing of Fire also calls attention to the “mournful story” Bradstreet herself makes via poetry and suggests that she doesn’t see herself or her abilities as fundamentally different or alienated from the elemental world.
At the same time, locating the ecological in these moments is made possible in part by recognizing that, contrary to the critical disparagement of their relationship to “the real world,” the *Tenth Muse* poems always already embodied an ecological sensibility. Bradstreet’s assertion in “To Her Most Honoured Father” that the quaternions “are of all, the life…the world” suggests this in a broad fashion (l. 21, 25); as a more specific example, though, consider these lines from “The Four Elements” that appear prior to Fire’s list of “confused heaps of ashes”:

> Ye husband-men, your coulters made by me
> Your hoes, your mattocks, and what e’er you see
> Subdue the earth, and fit it for your grain
> That so it might in time requite your pain
> …
> Ye cooks, your kitchen implements I frame
> Your spits, pots, jacks, what else I need not name
> Your daily food I wholesome make, I warm
> Your shrinking limbs, which winter’s cold doth harm (ll. 44-47, 50-54)

Here, Bradstreet is not drawing examples “from books” and “musty folios.” Her words – coulter and mattock, spit and jack – do not function solely as aesthetic details. Rather, they invoke the basic tools of agricultural life – things that break roots and rocks, that cook meals over open fires – and display ecological and elemental attunement to their vitality. Positing an intimate engagement with the physical and emotional sensations of material conditions – the muscle-ache of farming, the stomach-rumble of hunger, the bitter sting of winter, the simple pleasures of eating – these lines are enmeshed in the sensible.
In “The Four Elements,” Fire also speaks of her role in “transmutation”: “And you philosophers, if e’er you made/A transmutation, it was through mine aid” (ll. 56-57). But while traditional alchemy focused transmutation on the creation of entirely new substances – turning lead into gold, for example – Fire suggests a different definition. Reminding “philosophers” of her “air,” as well as reminding “silversmiths” that “your ore I do refine/What mingled lay with earth, I cause to shine” (ll. 58-59), Fire argues that the aesthetic results of transmutation are not her primary concern. Rather, Fire insists on an understanding of transmutation as a process of change without loss. The silver ore and the transmuted gold, like “The Four Monarchies” or Bradstreet’s house, are not only what they appear to the eye.

These lines, then, suggest that Bradstreet was thinking about the ecological notion of “things in ashes” long before they were her things in ashes. They argue for a new consideration of her attention to the world. As such, they also demonstrate the significance of an ecocritical reading practice, as well as a new perspective on the ecological, for the study of Bradstreet’s poetic and intellectual sensibilities. By focusing on moments of relation and reciprocity, intimacy and interconnection, the ecological perspective is interested in the question of Bradstreet’s “active sensibility.” But because it doesn’t tie Bradstreet’s sensibility to a critique of her aesthetics and her relationship to outdated notions of “nature,” it insists on a unified, rather than disparate, view – a reading of Bradstreet that doesn’t require a “real change” to locate the ecological in her early American thought.

Conclusion

Anne Bradstreet’s poetry is never, as Adrienne Rich claimed, an “escap[e] from the conditions of her experience,” a “psychological stepping-stone” that provided “relief from its daily impact” (xiv, xv). At the same time, it never succumbs to pastoral fantasy. Bradstreet is
always aware of the trials, as well as the wonders, of the natural world. Her final poem, “As Weary Pilgrim,” charts the cumulative impact of nonhuman nature on the human body. Before the poem’s expression of spiritual readiness, it offers a detailed record of the environmental everyday of seventeenth-century New England: the “burning sun” and “stormy rains,” the “hungry wolves” and “rugged stones,” the “briars…thorns… [and] erring paths” full of “stumps [and] rocks” (ll. 7-11, 15-16). Some of these things, she has written elsewhere. None of them are mere metaphors. Individually and collectively, they speak to the realities experienced by colonial bodies in New World colonial spaces: “wasted limbs” and “gall[ed]” feet, “parch[ed]…tongue[s]” and “grinding pains” (ll. 3, 14-15, 28). Like Bradstreet’s spawning salmon and ripened apples, they record impressions of this life: these lines unfold new experiences and tell us how it was with her.

But Bradstreet also had a new thought. For her, “finding” New England meant finding a particular relation, a certain mesh, with the “country” and the “world” into which she came. To accomplish this, she invented new speech and new sense in the face of harsh and unfamiliar conditions. There were times when she might have turned away. Instead, she “looked more.” In “Meditations Divine and Moral,” she writes: “[H]e that passes through the wilderness of this world had need ponder all his steps” (300). Through practices of attention and contemplation, Bradstreet pondered how her own steps “roamed” and “rambled” through the wilderness – and, in doing so, staked out an affective position that we can recognize today from the perspective of the ecological. In these experiences of rapture and amazement, wonder and delight, Bradstreet’s heart discovered the rise and fall of its own time – first, in harmony, and then, in melody, with the natural world.
Chapter Two
Michael Wigglesworth’s Ecological Impulse

“Land, then, is not merely soil.”

For Puritan New England, the summer of 1662 was highlighted by the publication of Michael Wigglesworth’s *The Day of Doom*. The volume contained six poems, including “A Short Discourse on Eternity” and “A Song of Emptiness,” but its chief notoriety was generated by the collection’s title poem – a two hundred and twenty-four-stanza account of the Final Judgment, annotated throughout with corresponding Scriptural references. An immediate best-seller, *The Day of Doom* established Wigglesworth as a public intellectual and a figure of religious authority for the rest of his life and for several New England generations to come. As Ronald Bosco notes, “for a half-century after his death, answers to the question ‘What would Mr. Wigglesworth say?’ frequently decided the outcome of debates on doctrinal and disciplinary issues among members of his former congregation (x). Wigglesworth would publish a second collection, *Meat out of the Eater*, in 1670, and wrote additional occasional verse throughout his lifetime, but neither would have the commercial success or the lasting impact of *The Day of Doom*.

More immediately, however, the summer of 1662 was notable in New England for an environmental event. As Wigglesworth biographer Richard Crowder writes:

The summer of 1662 was marked by a tremendous drought…Sickness had increased throughout the colony, especially strength-sapping respiratory infections and chills and
fever. Probably more serious yet, the early summer had been blighted by canker worms and by lack of rain, serious enough, reported John Hall, “that the grass and corn was so scorched, there was little likelihood of any harvest” (113-114)

This drought crisis transcended spiritual precarity for seventeenth-century Puritans. By threatening their physical health, along with the basis of their food supply, it posed direct and immediate risk to their material lives as well. The realities of this event demanded a complex response that would address the circumstances, outline the causes, and frame tactics for survival. In the summer of 1662, then, there could be no more suitable a figure for Massachusetts colonists to turn to for such a response than Michael Wigglesworth.

The opening stanzas of “The Day of Doom” present graphic depictions of environmental devastation: crumbling mountains, tempestuous skies, and violent oceans. As such, we might imagine a reading public that would look to these scenes in the midst of summer drought for commiseration and guidance. Yet, had they done so, they would have been disappointed. Wigglesworth’s poem, despite its invocation of natural disasters, is quite unconcerned with their impact on human lives. By the twentieth stanza, in fact, such scenes have largely faded from view, and barely reappear at any moment for the remainder of the text. “The Day of Doom,” for all its popularity and spiritual applications, offers neither the instruction nor the consolation that might have proved a usable model for Puritan action.

Moreover, despite the growing ubiquity of “The Day of Doom” in the worst months of the drought, Wigglesworth’s own poetic response to the pressing environmental crisis, “God’s Controversy with New-England,” does not seem to endorse a turn to or an application of the former poem either. In directly addressing the environmental circumstances of “the great drought,” “God’s Controversy” invokes similar imagery as “The Day of Doom” – the “quak[ing]
wilderness” and “tempestuous air,” for example (ll. 154, 153) – but frames it with a set of attitudes toward the natural world almost opposite those espoused by the earlier work. Rather than the distanced and detached view of “The Day of Doom,” “God’s Controversy” engages both the physical realities of environmental crisis and the emotional responses provoked by such moments. While the former poem allows the natural world to fall away from the text, the latter insists on its closeness, declaring its concern, compassion, and – ultimately – love for that same world.

With the intersections of these events in mind, this chapter negotiates the contrasts of “The Day of Doom” and “God’s Controversy with New-England” with regard to their shared interest in environmental crisis and catastrophe. It begins with a reading of “The Day of Doom” and its scenes of worldly destruction – and looks to explain the poem’s ultimate disinterest in nature through a reading of its aesthetic constraints rather than via an inherent flaw in its theology. Then, in turning to “God’s Controversy,” I propose two ways of reading the poem: as a form of early American environmental history as well as a declaration of affection for the natural world. At the same time, however, I resist reading the two texts in stark opposition, one as undoing the logic of the other – and I explore the ways in which an environmental sensibility, a type of ecological impulse, emerged for Wigglesworth from within Puritan orthodoxy itself.

“The Day of Doom”

The central event of the first fifteen stanzas of “The Day of Doom” is the “Destruction [of] the World” (l. 23). Though occasioned by divine decree, this destruction is effected primarily via natural phenomena. God appears less as a supernatural (or unnatural) entity than as expressions of superlative nature that pierce the poem’s “still night”: a light brighter than stars, a “hideous noise more terrible than Thunder” (ll. 1, 43-44, 51-52). Such metaphors conflate the
divine with the material by drawing specific attention to the natural object (star) or sound (thunder) to which God is compared. While the poem implies the binary opposition of God and the natural world by suggesting that the “presence and awful Majesty” of such expressions “[a]mazeth nature,” it simultaneously preserves the sense of resemblance between the two: God figured as a star brighter than other stars or as thunder louder than other thunder (ll. 109-111). In this way, the divine and the natural become entangled, distinguishable only inasmuch as they display differing levels of affective intensity, rather than separated by taxonomical differences of kind. God, in other words, is not “unnatural” at all in this formulation. If the divine is a force that “amazeth nature” (emphasis mine), then it is because the divine is an expression or a presence that emanates from amazing nature itself.

This reading is supported by Wigglesworth’s further characterization of the divine in stanza 16:

Whose Glory bright, whose wondrous might,
whose Power Imperial,
So far surpass whatever was
in Realms Terrestrial;
That tongues of men (nor Angels pen)
cannot the same express,
And therefore I must pass it by,
lest speaking should transgress. (ll. 121-128)

Wigglesworth continues to define God’s relationship to “Realms Terrestrial” in terms of both affective and sensory impression. The “wondrous” of line 121 serves as a counterpoint to the “awe” of line 110’s “awful Majesty” and the intensity of “bright” recalls both the sun of stanza 6
as well as the thunder of line 52. God thus produces particular effects “in Realms Terrestrial,” including on human beings, by replicating and amplifying the phenomena that define the experiential conditions of everyday material life.

As the stanza continues, Wigglesworth imbues these symbiotic relations with additional import. In its ability to “express” through the same means, albeit at lesser intensities, as the divine, the natural world is distinguished from both human and supernatural language, both “tongues of men” and “Angels pen.” The poem must “pass by” for reasons of linguistic inexpressibility, “lest speaking should transgress,” but it leaves behind a trace both paradoxical and environmental. While words cannot adequately express the “Glory” of the divine, the objects and phenomena they represent, the material world as such toward which language gestures, can indeed.

In this sense, “The Day of Doom” adheres to the formal distinction made by Puritan theology between “the light of faith” and “the light of nature” while anticipating its inevitable conflation. William Haller explores this convergence in The Rise of Puritanism: “The light of nature could not in itself save, but when aided by the light of faith as revealed in scripture…it was all that any man needed” (170). Haller likewise notes that the inclination to parse the distinction between “light of faith” and “light of nature” was largely confined to formal theological discourse. While “the limitations placed upon the light of nature were essentially important in the minds of the preachers,” he writes, the distinctions, as well as the limitations of the natural world in this regard, were less significant than the observations themselves when it came to everyday life and actual lived conditions in New England (170). “The Day of Doom” addresses this understandable slippage later in the poem when, among the groups of sinners who plead with God for mercy, there is a particular subset that offers a defense related directly to the
natural world. Beginning in stanza 159 of the poem, they argue for divine leniency based on, as the marginal note indicates, “insufficiency of the Light of Nature.”

But we were blind, say they, in mind,

too dim was Natures light…

But Natures Lights shin’d not so bright
to teach us the right way (ll. 1265-1266, 1281-1282)

They are quickly rebuked by God, who informs the “sinful Crew” that they “have not been true unto the Light of Nature” (ll. 1309-1310). Yet even this rebuke cannot resist the conflation that Haller suggests — rather than countering with a remark about faith, God instructs them that:

If you had lov’d, and well improv’d
your knowledge and dim sight,
Herein your pain had not been vain,
your plagues had been more light. (ll. 1318-1321)

In this moment, we can locate the roots of more focused attention on the natural world within Puritan theology. Such examples lay a path toward the more explicit ecological vocabulary adopted in “God’s Controversy” by encouraging both greater sensory acuity (“improv’d sight”) and the cultivation of a particular affective stance toward “Natures light” – “If you had lov’d.”

Stanza 15 forms the graphic centerpiece of the poem’s opening: the world in ruin. These lines reference a series of extreme environmental events and the visible effects they bring. “The Mountains smoak” as if with volcanic activity and “the Hills are shook” as in an earthquake (l. 113). The ocean displays numerous signs of a tsunami: “The Sea doth roar, forsakes the shore, and shrinks away for fear” (ll. 117-118). Another occurrence associated with a variety of natural disasters, peculiar animal behavior, can be observed as well: “The wild Beasts flee into the Sea”
In related lines from stanzas 17 and 18 (ll. 134-135, 137-138), dead bodies become visible, an event that has Scriptural parallels, as Wigglesworth notes in the margin, but which is also often an observed consequence of natural disaster. Floods, for example, are often responsible for disturbing graveyards and returning human corpses to the surface of the earth.

Likewise, there is considerable human distress. Wigglesworth may be working from Scriptural source material throughout this section, but his depictions of both individual responses and group panic are all too real to readers, both then and now, who have experienced such events. These opening stanzas are filled with tears (“No eye so dry, but now can cry, and pour out many a tear”), “horrible despair,” and even suicidal impulses: “Some rashly leap into the Deap/to scape by being drown’d” (ll. 75-76, 84, 91-92).

Ultimately, “the Earth is rent and torn,” left in an uninhabitable state that resembles both apocalyptic finality and pre-creation absence: “As if she should be clean dissolv’d/or from the center born” (ll. 114-116). Yet as the poem begins its transition to the next phase – judgement – a strange fact emerges: almost instantaneously, there is no longer any care for the “torn” earth. Even those whose sin was precisely that of being too attached to the world now fail to lament either their personal loss of life or the collective loss of that world itself. Meanwhile, the “Saints,” those who are saved, “rejoyce to see Judgment executed upon the wicked World” and respond with “a Song of endless Praise” (ll. 1745-1750). These “Saints” are rewarded for their faith with the inability to feel love or attachment to anyone or anything “terrestrial,” regardless of previous emotional investments:

One natural Brother beholds another
in this astonied fit,
Yet sorrows not thereat a jot,
nor pitties him a whit.

The godly wife conceives no grief,

nor can she shed a tear

For the sad state of her dear Mate,

when she his doom doth hear. (ll. 1569-1576)\(^{52}\)

Now, Wigglesworth writes, “such compassion is out of fashion” (l. 1565).

But what is so “unfashionable” about compassion for the “terrestrial” world? In beginning an answer to this question, I return to the oft-cited but under-analyzed “origin story” of the poem itself, an account quite familiar to Wigglesworth scholars. In October 1653, several weeks after the death of his father, Wigglesworth wrote in his diary that he had dreamed “of the approach of that great and dreadful day of judgment” (51). As the narrative goes, throughout the 1650s, Wigglesworth carried the memory of this dream with him. When, by the latter part of the decade, he had become increasingly unable to appear in public due to a variety of physical ailments, he turned to poetry as an alternative method of preaching, animating his dream with what F.O. Matthiessen called “[t]he strange intensity of his imagination” (496).\(^{53}\)

Yet this isn’t, I think, quite an accurate or complete representation. Though it is true, for instance, that Wigglesworth recorded his dream in the above manner, the diary account itself is quite brief. Moreover, Wigglesworth focuses attention on his spiritual response – “exceedingly awakned in spirit…to follow god with teares and crys until he gave me some hopes of his gracious good wil toward me” – rather than details of the dream itself (51). He remarks on later feelings of distraction, which might gesture toward the nature of the content – “The next day I found my self unable to make any work of it at my studys” – but then comments that this is only his “pride prevailing” (51). He touches upon this event in several subsequent entries; they,
however, are equally as brief and unrevealing. In short, while the event of the dream itself seems notable enough for Wigglesworth to have recorded it, there is little written indication that its content was consistently influential or present enough in his daily life throughout the 1650s to have formed the core of one of the most significant texts of Puritan New England.

We should also consider more carefully the nature of the two sources on which Wigglesworth drew in composing “The Day of Doom”: the imagined (or dreamed) and the borrowed (or Scriptural). This reliance limits the potential scope of the poem’s representation in particular ways. While Wigglesworth is able to reference the kinds of phenomena associated with natural disasters, the landscape upon which they generate effects is absent of any specific materiality: the poem is unable to place itself in meaningful fashion. As a result, despite the graphic nature of these early lines, “The Day of Doom” doesn’t call us to look at the natural world – and its refusal to dwell on these images, its abrupt shift to post-apocalyptic divine judgment, further marginalizes these scenes of destruction. Because Wigglesworth does not attach this imagery to specific contexts of place and time, it lacks the ability to be sufficiently felt by either the poem’s subjects or its audience. In essence, “The Day of Doom” takes on the peculiar contradiction of describing environmental catastrophe in the abstract, while remaining indifferent to it in any form or sort of particularity.

The most notable hallmark of this is the poem’s simultaneous insistence on both uniformity and universality. Throughout the opening stanzas, Wigglesworth depicts people, places, and events that appear only in all-encompassing extremes. The first two lines of the poem, for example, display this quality: “Still was the night, Serene and Bright/When all Men sleeping lay” (ll. 1-2). Considered individually, each aspect of these lines might ring true. Considered in relation with one another, however, the juxtaposition defies mimetic
representation. Because the events happen everywhere, they happen – paradoxically – nowhere. The impossibility of a singular night experienced by “all Men” simultaneously overwhelms realistic treatment of individual persons as such. Subjugated to the category of “all Men,” they lose any sense of distinction or wholeness. Even body parts become plural and depersonalized – “their eyes,” their Ear – and their actions made collective. The poem’s sixth stanza, for example, if considered literally, offers a depiction of every person in the world performing identical actions in simultaneity (“They rush from Beds with giddy heads/and to their windows run”) and with uniform emotional response (“they see’t with tears”) (ll. 41-42, 45). Even speech is no longer particular. God begins to speak in stanza 8 by addressing a “you,” but it is only “they” who respond in stanza 9. Likewise, while there is some gesture toward recapturing a relative sense of distinction between persons in stanzas 10 through 13, which identify some broad subcategories (the “mean” versus the “great” in stanza 11, for example, or those who hide in caves versus those who seek shelter in the mountains in stanza 12), the poem never escapes this stance entirely. In the end, Wigglesworth writes, “all hearts do fail” (l. 85).

These “failing hearts” have particular relevance in considering the poem’s stance toward the fate of nonhuman nature. As Wendell Berry argues in *Life is a Miracle*:

Affection requires us to break out of the abstractions, the categories, and confront the creature itself in its life in its place…we love what we particularly know. The abstract, “objective,” impersonal, dispassionate language of science can, in fact, help us to know certain things, and to know some things with certainty…But it cannot replace, and it cannot become, the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of value ultimately are protected…Nothing insists that one place is not interchangeable with another except affection. If the people who live in such places and love them cannot
protect them, nobody can. It is not quite imaginable that people will exert themselves greatly to defend creatures and places that they have dispassionately studied. It is altogether imaginable that they will greatly exert themselves to defend creatures and places that they have involved in their lives and invested their lives in it. (41-43)

Though the language of Wigglesworth’s poem is the language of Scripture, rather than the language of science, the results are the same. Neither religious text nor Wigglesworth’s dream are able to “insist that one place is not interchangeable with another.” When the poem proves unable to generate compassionate – or affectionate – hearts, it subsequently strips the natural world of its investment in and entanglement with human lives. Without a series of situated and localized images to contextualize the poem in space and time, the text is unable to “confront…life in its place”: it demands no attention and generates no passion for its defense. Constrained by such aesthetic limitations, the poem is confined to disembodied rhetoric. Trapped in the universality of apocalypse, “The Day of Doom” negates the world.

“God’s Controversy with New-England”

Unlike “The Day of Doom,” “God’s Controversy with New-England” engages directly with the material conditions of New England during a moment of environmental crisis. A dramatic shift in Wigglesworth’s treatment of the natural world, it displays immediate and sustained investment in time and place and focuses attention on a set of local environmental realities that “The Day of Doom” cannot access. Moreover, it translates that attention into the sort of worldly and ecological entanglement that “The Day of Doom” avoids.

It’s not the case that prior to the events of 1662, Wigglesworth was insensible to the world of nonhuman nature. Details of his own biography, for example, offer an initial suggestion otherwise. Upon arrival in New England in the spring of 1639, the Wigglesworth family was
allotted nearly ninety acres of land for planting grain and pasturing livestock – and by the age of
ten, Wigglesworth had assumed primary responsibility for the daily management of this land due
to his father’s chronic illness (Crowder 10, 15). Wigglesworth’s early life also exposed him to a
variety of environmental crises. In his autobiography, he wrote of a time when, at the age of six,
“a storm…drove us upon a beach of sand where we lay beating till another tide fetcht us off”
(qtd. in Matthiessen 494-495). Likewise, Crowder speculates that Wigglesworth’s childhood
memories would have included “colonists…discussing…the great earthquake that had struck
about noon on the first of June [in 1638]…an earthquake so violent that the townsmen had had
difficulty remaining on their feet” (7).

The entries of Wigglesworth’s diary, which cover the years from 1653 to 1657, are also
indicative of his capacity for environmental attention. They include passages about “that dreadful
disaster at Boston by fire” and the ways in which his “heart was much affected…upon deep
thoughts of these things” (8). Likewise, we find numerous anxieties about the onset of New
England winters, as well as an extended account of “a great and dreadful tempest of rain and
wind” (73). In fact, while – as noted above – the “Day of Doom” dream occupies little space in
Wigglesworth’s diary and provides scarce concrete detail regarding the dream’s content, that
very same week, Wigglesworth devotes significant time to a discussion of the weather during a
return trip from Concord: “Tuesday I drove the time of my return so long till it was so late they
would not suffer me. wednesday. It began to snow exceedingly so that I saw god locking me up
there to wait his pleasure; it continued snowing til it was knee deep, so that I knew not when I
was likely to return” (51). He continues on to record that it began “to rain on thursday and that
night so abated the snow to the ankles thereby giving me a season of returning on friday” (52).
Moreover, he notes that, while his travel was “locked up” by the knee-deep snow, he was
occupied with thoughts of past travels during which he experienced similar weather-related incidents and delays: “then I recall’d how in all the journeys of that nature I haue taken these many years god has cros’t me remarkably” (51).

The fact that much of Wigglesworth’s life was spent in proximity and close contact with various worlds of nonhuman nature suggests that his portrayals in “The Day of Doom” are indicative neither of the particular nature he observed in New England nor his personal sentiment toward the natural world. Likewise, the moments in “The Day of Doom” when more specific descriptions of natural disasters are present supplement the kinds of attention that Wigglesworth’s diary writing pays to the environmental aspects and challenges of New England life. As I turn my focus to the environmental attentions and ecological impulse expressed by “God’s Controversy,” then, I do so within the critical framework offered by these overlaps – insisting that, though the resulting perspectives of the two poems emerge opposed to one another, the underlying epistemologies of each are more consistent than previously acknowledged by readers of early American poetry.

The poem’s title page itself is crucial to unfolding Wigglesworth’s stance toward nature in “God’s Controversy.” While “The Day of Doom” is subtitled simply “Or, A Poetical Description of The Great and Last Judgement,” the full title of “God’s Controversy” places the poem in New England and then attaches a specific year and environmental context: “God’s Controversy with New-England/Written in the time of the great drought/Anno 1662.” Wigglesworth then goes on to identify himself as the author—not by name, but simply as “a lover of New England’s Prosperity.”

Unlike the scenes from “The Day of Doom,” “God’s controversy” in this case is with New England in particular – not with the world as a whole or with the abstract idea of the earthly
realm. By reinforcing the notion that divine perception recognizes places as distinct entities with
distinct characteristics, it encourages the reader, in turn, to consider such possibilities as well.
Likewise, it raises the prospect that such distinctions may result from geographical and
environmental qualities, rather than religious ones. Furthermore, it calls attention to the
definitional differences between “judgement” and “controversy” – not only in the sense of
judgment as absolute versus controversy as negotiable but also in the ways that the terminology
in each case defines the dynamic of the relationship between God, the Puritan, and the world.

Judgment is a term that suggests a hierarchical relation of power: something that happens
“on” or “upon.” Wigglesworth’s title characterizes the judgment, religious in nature, as “doom,”
handed down in the most absolute sense. Indeed, this is precisely the representation of God in
“The Day of Doom”:

Thus every one before the Throne
of Christ the Judge is brought

... The wicked are brought to the Bar

... They are arraign’d, and there detain’d (ll. 161-162, 401, 421)

This construction posits the natural world as subservient to the plane of the divine – and
demands, through apocalypse, that every individual, saved or damned, irreversibly forsake the
natural world for the metaphysical. Here, “judgement,” by definition and design, forecloses on
the possibility of environmental engagement and ecological perspective.

Controversy, on the other hand, suggests the ongoing, the unresolved, and the
provisional. If judgement forecloses on environmental attention and engagement, then
controversy is, by definition, ecological because it insists on staying – on dwelling in and with the material world. And staying is precisely what Wigglesworth’s title page does. It attaches a specific year – “Anno 1662” – to the specific place and it marks both time and place by marking the environmental context of the poem’s composition as well: “Written in the time of the great drought.” This phrase speaks to the connection between “the light of faith” and “the light of nature” discussed above because it directly links the general controversy with the felt, observable manifestation of the controversy: the drought. However, it also insists that history itself is not defined by the theological alone but, equally so, by the natural. Furthermore, it resists the tendency of both reader and poem to distance themselves from their material conditions. While the poem’s subject is theological, the poem as such does not transcend or abandon its environmental origins. Rather, it embodies and enriches them, stressing the demonstration of the controversy rather than the abstraction. It insists on a looser sense of hierarchy and offers a negotiable status with legitimate reciprocity. “Written in the time of the great drought,” the poem is written “in the time” of nature.

Following the title page and a prefatory section entitled “The Author’s request unto the Reader,” Wigglesworth offers a subtitle to the poem that traces a narrative of New England’s ascension and decline: “New-England prospered, declining, threatened, punished.” Unlike “The Day of Doom,” “God’s Controversy” devotes considerable space to the “planted” and “prospered” aspects of New England settlement. While the poem opens by rehearsing a common Puritan trope –

Beyond the great Atlantick flood

There is a region vast,

A country where no English foot
In former ages past:

A vast and howling wilderness (ll. 21-25)

– the initial stanzas seem less concerned with rehashing a spiritual narrative than they do with representing actual natural conditions.

In “God’s Controversy,” Wigglesworth is intent on registering the sense of dissonance between “howling wilderness” mythology and New World nature as lived experience. What will New England look like? In correspondence with the notion of “a vast and howling wilderness,” the Puritans, like many settlers, imagined a world “in darkness plac’t” in both a spiritual and a physical sense (l. 29). There will be “shaddows of grim death/And of eternal night” and the “western woods” will be “Dark and dismal” (ll. 31-32, 45). The woods, like the landscape in its entirety, will be disorienting and threatening. In this context, the notion of building “a city on a hill” seems less a theological impulse than a practical one.

But what does New England look like? In fact, it’s not “dark and dismal” as all. In his narrative of “planting,” Wigglesworth records a world where “all the shaddows of the night/Were turned to lightsome day” and where the woods, rather than being “dark and dismal,” “beheld such glorious Gospel-shine/As none beheld more cleare” (ll. 43-44, 47-48). This New England is neither threatening nor disorienting. Rather, its defining characteristic, “God’s Controversy” implies, aside from its scale, is its safety:

…in this desart haunt:

…through places Wilde and waste

A single man, disarm’d,

Might journey many hundred miles,

And not at all be harmed.
Amidst the solitary woods

Poor travelers might sleep

As free from danger as at home

Though no man watch did keep (ll. 104-112)

Wigglesworth attributes this appearance to divine intervention: it is the “approach” of the “Armies” of the Lord that causes “the darkness sad” to have “vanished away” (ll. 38-42). Yet this attribution also allows us to consider Wigglesworth’s narrative of darkness less as realistic description and more as textual citation or tropological reference. Simultaneously, Wigglesworth’s portrayal encourages his audience to draw direct parallels around the concept of “home,” equating their manmade dwellings with a natural setting, both cast in a positive light. Thus while “God’s Controversy” ostensibly represents theological events, we can read the poem as environmental description and commentary that verge on an early New England pastoral:

The wilderness hereat rejoyc’t,

The woods for joy did sing,

The vallys & the little hills

Thy praises ecchoing. (ll. 81-84)

“God’s Controversy” as environmental history

This aspect of the poem opens one potential way of reading “God’s Controversy” – as documentation of the environmental history of seventeenth-century New England. In exploring the dissonance between “howling wilderness” and actual New England nature, as well as in negotiating the rhetorical oscillations between Edenic paradise – the “fruitfull paradeis” full of “temp’rall blessings” (ll. 192, 125) – and barren deserts, “God’s Controversy” registers the
differences between degraded European landscapes and the nonhuman nature of New England as first encountered by British colonial subjects. This is particularly the case in terms of the state of seventeenth-century British and Continental forests as opposed to the old-growth forests of the Americas. As William Cronon writes, “[o]ne must not visualize the New England forest at the time of settlement as a dense tangle of huge trees and nearly impenetrable underbrush covering the entire landscape. Along the southern coast, from the Saco River in Maine all the way to the Hudson, the woods were remarkably open, almost parklike at times” (Changes in the Land 25). Furthermore, this “parklike” aspect that Wigglesworth’s poem observes was particularly true, Cronon notes, in areas along the coast “where Indian settlement had been greatest” (4).

Wigglesworth’s impressions are a direct, if not wholly understood, result of Indigenous forestry practices and, in particular, the regular burning of forest areas:

The effect of southern New England villages on their environment was not limited to clearing fields or stripping forests for firewood. What most impressed English visitors was the Indians’ burning of extensive sections of the surrounding forest once or twice a year…Here was the reason that the southern forests were so open and parklike; not because the trees naturally grew thus, but because the Indians preferred them so. (Cronon, Changes in the Land 49)

These practices, as well as a more conscious sense of their rationale and effect, are described in detail in Thomas Morton’s New English Canaan:

The Salvages are accustomed to set fire of the Country in all places where they come, and to burne it twize a yeare, viz: at the Spring, and the fall of the leafe. The reason that mooves them to doe so, is because it would other wise be so overgrowne with underweedes that it would be all a coppice wood, and the people would not be able in any
wise to passe through the Country out of a beaten path…And this custome of firing the
Country is the meanes to make it passable; and by that meanes the trees growe heare and
there as in our parks: and makes the Country very beautifull and commodious. (172-
173)\textsuperscript{55}

The “forrests wide & great” into which British settlers are “planted” are not forests that howl.
Rather, they offer resources, security, and even, as both Morton and Wigglesworth indicate,
pleasure.

Wigglesworth’s text does not focus on the initial dissonance of “New-England planted”
alone. Just as this account, juxtaposed with expectations shaped by typological narratives, gives a
clearer picture of the material conditions of early British New England, the movements in
“God’s Controversy” from “planted” to “prospered,” as well as from “prospered” to “declining,”
each tell a unique environmental story. As outlined above, the poem registers the range of
impressions that Indigenous forest and land management practices made on arriving British
colonists. However, it also marks the appropriation and adaptation of those practices and
catalogues the methods by which they were combined with, incorporated into, and altered by
existing British environmental and agricultural attitudes. As the light moves from the initial
“lightsome day” to greater duration (“perpetuall”) and intensity (“dazzle”), we can trace in the
poem a parallel development of Puritan landscape.

British colonists were not alone in their struggles with environmental and resource
management. For some Indigenous communities, “the mobility of village sites and the shift
between subsistence bases reduced potential strains on any particular segment of the ecosystem,
keeping the overall human burden low” (Cronon, \textit{Changes in the Land} 48). However, these more
mobile populations were predominately located in northern New England; southern New
England populations, on the other hand, were more inclined to practice large-scale agriculture on fixed sites. In doing so, notions of place and “planting” for these communities overlaps in certain instances with British models – as did their struggles:

The annual reoccupation of fixed village and planting sites meant that the area around field and camp experienced heavy human use: intensive food gathering, the accumulation of garbage, and, most importantly, the consumption of firewood. One of the main reasons Indians moved to winter camps was that their summer sites had been stripped of the fuel essential for winter fires… The Indians were thus no strangers to the fuel shortages so familiar to the English… Indeed, when the Indians wondered why English colonists were coming to their land, the first explanation that occurred to them was a fuel shortage.

(Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 48-49)

However, because “colonial observers understood burning as being part of Indian efforts to simplify hunting and facilitate travel,” but did not initially understand or appreciate the underlying ecological benefits, the colonial adaptations of the practice based on visual observation and evidence produced a different ecological trajectory (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 50).

As practiced by Indigenous populations, selective forest burning had predominately positive impacts on soil ecology in early New England. In addition to generating the ease of travel and hunting that British colonists observed, removal of forest undergrowth “increased the rate at which forest nutrients were recycled into the soil.” This created “conditions favorable to strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, and other gatherable foods” (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 50-51). These populations planted predominantly multi-crop fields that, “whether they were aware of it or not,” delayed the phenomena of soil exhaustion (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 50-51).
Forest burning worked in combination with these planting strategies in that it “promoted the mosaic quality of New England ecosystems, creating forests in many states of ecological succession [and] promoted what ecologists call the ‘edge effect’” (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 51). These actions, Cronon notes, had positive impacts beyond the scope of agricultural production: “Because the enlarged edge areas actually raised the total herbivorous food supply, they not merely attracted game but helped create much larger populations of it. Indian burning promoted the increase of exactly those species whose abundance so impressed English colonists” (*Changes in the Land* 51). Finally, with regard to the question of disease, “[b]urning also tended to destroy plant diseases and pests, not to mention the fleas which inevitably became abundant around Indian settlements” (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 51).

One of the initial reasons behind the British adaptation of forest burning was the question of safety: “And least their firing of the Country in this manner should be an occasion of damnifying us, and indaingering our habitations, wee our selves have used carefully about the same times to observe the winds, and fire the grounds about our owne habitations; to prevent the Dammage that might happen by any neglect thereof, if the fire should come neere those howses in our absence” (Morton, *New English Canaan* 173). They would soon move beyond these limited concerns, however, to engage in more wholesale transformation of the landscape: “The use of fire to air in clearing land was something English settlers borrowed from their Indian predecessors, but they applied it for different purposes and on a much more extensive scale. Instead of burning the forest to remove undergrowth, they burned it to remove the forest itself” (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 118). While Indigenous populations in southern New England regularly occupied the same places on a seasonal basis, the British had a greater commitment to permanent settlement. “Once a village was established,” Cronon writes, “its improvements –
cleared fields, pastures, buildings, fences, and so on – were regarded as more or less fixed features of the landscape” (Changes in the Land 53). This commitment was shaped further by the particular sense of landscape aesthetic that the British brought to New England. English – and especially Puritan – interaction with the natural world is often critiqued in terms of religious sensibility. Yet this sense of the aesthetic represents an equally strong pull. Writers such as Thomas Morton and Wigglesworth gave value to the “beautifull” and the “parklike,” the peacefulness they saw in and emanating from the land itself.

At first, British forest removal was a gradual process. The earliest settlers favored processes that were the least labor intensive. One example of this was the technique of “girdling,” in which “[b]ark was stripped in an encircling band from each of the larger trees….Removing their bark prevented trees from leafing and eventually killed them, thus allowing enough light to reach the ground for crops to grow. Undergrowth was burned in early spring to suppress the original vegetation, and trees were removed as they eventually rotted” (Cronon, Changes in the Land 116). Although girdling had multiple disadvantages of environmental consequence, such as uneven soil removal, the prime arguments against continued use of the process were framed in terms of aesthetics. Removing trees by stripping their bark and waiting for them to die meant a longer wait before fields could be fully fenced and uniformly planted. Furthermore, “rotting trees…were regarded by European travelers as having what [Timothy] Dwight called ‘an uncouth and disgusting’ appearance” (Cronon, Changes in the Land 116). Accordingly, New England colonial communities shifted to more wholesale forest removal – what Cronon terms “taking the forest” (Changes in the Land 108).

In the first section of “God’s Controversy,” Wigglesworth notes the transition from “New-England planted” to “New-England prospered” by focusing on productivity: “Our
temp’rall blessings did abound” (l. 125). In the context of land management, this “abounding” makes perfect ecological sense. One of the advantages to processes such as girdling and the limited burning practiced by Indigenous populations is, as noted above, a gradual stream of nutrients supplied to the soil over more extended periods of time – limiting growth and abundance in favor of stable sustainability. “Burning,” on the other hand, returned nutrients to the soil “in a single concentrated pulse, sacrificing longer-term conservation for shorter-term gain” (Cronon, Changes in the Land 117). This short-term “prospering,” then, resulted from New Englanders having created an immediate condition of nutrient-rich land in combination with newly acquired open space. The land, Cronon writes, was “blessed with a temporary gift of fertility from a forest which was no more” (Changes in the Land 116).

The poem again takes on the role of environmental chronicle when it begins to address the increase in illness and the decline in land productivity that Wigglesworth observed leading up to and during the 1662 drought. Here, his initial concern is the speed and intensity with which “sicknesses come on” (l. 360). Once a place “where Physicians had no work,” the Puritan community “[n]ow finds them work enough” (ll. 365-366). Here, Wigglesworth gives some basic detail of the human suffering connected to disease. “I lookt again,” he writes, “& quickly saw/Some fainting, others dying” (ll. 349-350). Elsewhere, he suggests the “languishing” of the stricken, inserting the sounds of illness into the poem by contrasting the present with a previous “New England, where for many years/You scarcely heard a cough” (ll. 374, 363-364).

As before, Wigglesworth tells an environmental story in these lines – one again, related to Puritan treatment of the New England forest. As noted above, Indigenous practices of selective forest burning had the effect of controlling disease. Puritan forest removal, on the other hand, had the opposite effect:
Removing trees…actually increases the total amount of water flowing off the land into streams and rivers. In low, poorly drained areas, colonial clearing sometimes had the effect of transforming a relatively dry area into a swamp. This may be one explanation for the widespread tendency among those who visited frontier settlements to link the process of clearing with disease…Colonists attributed their “fevers” and “agues” to bad air and miasma rising from newly exposed soil; in fact, the real culprit may have been anopheles mosquitoes carrying malaria, their populations temporarily swelled by newly swampy areas which had not been drained. (Cronon, Changes in the Land 125)

Wigglesworth calls attention to “fainting” and “dying” individuals as well as cataloguing the ailments themselves – a perspective perhaps less in line with his theological vocation or poetic aspirations and more consistent with his medical background. He lists the ailments he observes – “Now colds and coughs, Rhewms, and sore-throats/Do more and more abound” (ll. 367-368) – and his epidemiological attention traces the location, speed, and frequency of disease:

Now Agues sore & Feavers strong
In every place are found…
One wave another followeth,
And one disease begins
Before another cease… (ll. 369-370, 375-377)

Line 383 then turns the text toward an extended treatment of natural phenomena. Much as “God’s Controversy” observes the rise in illness “[f]rom year to year,” it also notes the transformation of the landscape and its productivity: “Our fruitful seasons have been turned/Of late to barrenness” (ll. 361, 383-384). While Wigglesworth eventually offers a typological explanation for this change, citing “our great unworthiness” (l. 393), the text delays this turn in a
way that it doesn’t when speaking of illness, where it continues in line 377 quoted above by moving immediately to “becaus/We turn not from our sins” (ll. 377-378). Instead, Wigglesworth interjects natural process as intermediary. The poem explores in naturalistic fashion how land can be rendered less productive and less “fruitfull” – either through a lack of rain (“Sometimes throughout great & parching drought”) or too much of it (“Sometimes through rain’s excess”) (ll. 385-386). What is lacking in this case, then, is a sense of environmental – not spiritual – balance.

Here again, Wigglesworth’s text reflects an environmental reality. These “fruitful seasons,” a product of short-term supercharged New England soils, turn “to barrenness” as the soil itself, without the forests, is unable to replenish nutrients. The reduction of soil fertility is a direct consequence of Puritan action. Likewise, this deforestation created significant change on the level of microclimates. Clearing land both warmed and dried the New England soil. It encouraged water evaporation and discouraged natural crop irrigation. Perhaps most importantly, it altered the onset and length of seasons – particularly winter (Cronon, *Changes in the Land* 122-123). Such changes had powerful effects on New England agriculture and on New England life – and we can look to “God’s Controversy” as important documentation of this reality.

**Toward an ecological impulse**

At the same time that “God’s Controversy” serves as a valuable record of environmental history, it also traces the development of an environmental sensibility. Here, I shift my attention from Wigglesworth’s broader observations of natural transformation to his focus on “the time of the great drought” itself. As the poem moves through the “declining” and into the “threatned” present, it imagines a return to the pre-colonial “darkness” of the New World:

Moreover, I beheld & saw

Our welkin overkest,
And dismal clouds for sun-shine late

O’respread from East to West. (ll. 149-152)

As the mortality rates “of our morning starrs” increase, Wigglesworth presents the striking image of a community “sack-cloth covered” in mourning (ll. 145, 148) – followed by the same apocalyptic direction as “The Day of Doom”: “The air became tempestuous/The wilderness gan quake” (ll. 153-154). But apocalypse (or the past tense “punished”) does not engulf New England as this point. Rather, “God’s Controversy” makes a dramatic shift in voice from Wigglesworth’s “lover of New-England Prosperity” to the “awfull voice” of God “thundering” in the first-person (ll. 155, 156). Yet unlike the God of “The Day of Doom,” the God of “God’s Controversy” speaks as an entity both relational and embodied. In “The Day of Doom,” God’s questions are rhetorical devices, rather than gestures of engagement – but this section of “God’s Controversy” constructs a divine voice notable for both its nostalgia and its affection.

“Thundering” though he may be, the God of “God’s Controversy” displays profound attachment to the material results of his creative power. Throughout his monologue, this God makes specific efforts to enumerate and celebrate the natural world. He begins by highlighting differences in landscape, moving from “native soile” to “desart land” to “fruitfull field” (ll. 157, 158, 167). Likewise, he records “the stern billows of the watry main” as if himself making the treacherous Atlantic crossing (l. 170). When his meditations turn to the work of “plant[ing] on the Western-shore,” God is, again, equally as interested in nature as in the Puritans’ spiritual actions. These lines reference immense New World animal populations of both land and sea, the “elbow-room” that British settlers found upon arrival, and the subsequent reduction of “howling wilderness” enacted through the cultivation and improvement of that land (ll. 180, 191).
While Wigglesworth reminds readers of this abundance in the initial section of the poem (“Our temp’rall blessings did abound”), he leaves it to God, as it were, to expand upon these characteristics:

Is this the people blest with bounteous store,
By land and sea full richly clad and fed,
Whom plenty’s self stands waiting still before,
And powreth out their cups well tempered?
For whose dear sake an howling wilderness
I lately turned into a fruitfull paradeis? (ll. 187-192)

As God enumerates the specific ways that New England is a place of physical and natural fulfillment, “a fruitfull field/And Country flowing-full of all good things” that yields “pleasures,” the poem encourages attention to the natural world and connects human appreciation of nature with divine affection for that same world (ll. 166-167).

What is “God’s controversy” with the Puritans? After tracing a brief historiography of the Puritan community, God examines their shortcomings:

In stead of holiness Carnality,
In stead of heavenly frames an Earthly mind,
For burning zeal luke-warm Indifferency,
For flaming Love, key-cold Dead-heartedness,

For temperance (in meat, and drink, and cloaths) excess? (ll. 218-221)

Here, God identifies the Puritans as being guilty of two types of sin. On one hand they are indicted by their embrace of “Carnality”: “excess,” “Luxurie,” and “Covetousness” (ll. 218, 221, 223, 225). On the other hand, they are guilty of “Indifferency” and “Dead-heartedness.” The
contrast of these two categories seems to point to a reading of line 219, “In stead of heavenly frames an Earthly mind,” that would reject the natural world by defining attachment to it precisely as the carnality that renders one dead-hearted to God. Yet such an oppositional reading is, I think, an oversimplified analysis. If we consider the God of “God’s Controversy” as more than an extension of the divine persona from “The Day of Doom,” we can forge a new reading instead – one that redefines both the constitution of these particular sins and the relationship between “heavenly frames” and “an Earthly mind.”

Unlike in “The Day of Doom,” the divine figure of “God’s Controversy” displays clear reluctance regarding the threat of apocalypse—or, more specifically, with the possibility of having to actually carry out the apocalyptic gesture. This is neither because the “controversy” is inauthentic nor is it a limitation of the “Covenant of peace” made between God and the Puritans (l. 205). God, it seems, is also “a lover of New-England’s Prosperity.” Thus, from his perspective, there is a desire to preserve both natural creation as such and a Puritan population that able to exist in nature’s matrix in order to witness and enjoy this creation.

At this point, the poem begins to reveal specific expectations for a Puritan response to nature: “For all this bounteous cost I lookt to see/Heaven-reaching-hearts, and thoughts, Meekness, Humility” (ll. 287-288). Instead (“But lo”), many Puritans have “sensuall Heart[s] all void of grace” – evident, God argues, because “My gospels glorious light you do not prize.” Here, the “gospel” reference echoes the earlier description of the “glorious Gospel-shine” of the New England forest – and we should read God’s indictment as a direct reference to the natural world. Rather than chastising the Puritans for not prizing the gospel in a Scriptural sense, God is admonishing them for not valuing the nature of New England in and of itself.
This returns us to lines 217-222, cited above, and to the question of what “God’s Controversy” means by the terms “sensuall” and “Carnality.” The natural world, in and of itself, is not categorically negative – an idea already suggested by references in “The Day of Doom” to “the Light of Nature.” “God’s Controversy,” then, pushes the human relationship to nature further. The question of the “sensuall” is not as simple as a distinction between material and immaterial. God loves New England in all its material particularity. So does Wigglesworth. This love is what binds them together. The real question that both God and the poem pose, is how to love New England, an issue first raised by God’s rebuke in “The Day of Doom” of those who “have not been true/unto the Light of Nature”: “If you have lov’d, and well improv’d/your knowledge and dim sight” (ll. 1318-1319).

The “sensuall Heart” is linked to “Carnality” and “Covetousness” because of its connection to excess – not its connection to nature. God warns the Puritans not about the snare of the world as such but rather about the pitfall of “Luxurie.” This is where the ecological impulse emerges in the poem. Excess is contrary to the ecological because it gluts the senses and destroys the ability to see and feel with singularity. The result of excess is “Indifferency,” the end of carnality is “Dead-heartedness.” God calls for a new way of seeing nature (“heavenly frames”) and feeling nature (“Heaven-reaching-hearts”) that encourages valuation (“prize”) of the natural object and affection, “burning zeal” and “flaming Love,” for the world.

Michael Wigglesworth’s mourning cows

At the conclusion of this monologue, “God’s Controversy” returns, literally, to “the Earth beneath” (l. 346). The lines that follow record detailed observations of the intertwined occurrences of human illness and environmental crisis that defined the summer of 1662. Here, Wigglesworth re-engages the persona that opens the poem: “a lover of New-England’s
Prosperity.” But in light of the divine attachment to the natural world demonstrated by the monologue, this return is less distinct and less precise in its separation of human and divine.

In turning to “the Earth beneath,” Wigglesworth immediately personifies it: “the Earth,” he says, “did groane” (l. 346). The effect of this personification is twofold: it narrows the gap between human and nonhuman nature through an anthropomorphized and emotional natural world while providing a doubleness to Wigglesworth’s citation of New England’s “cough.” As New England groans and coughs, the “things” of nature aren’t inert; rather, they are imbued with feeling. The darkened skies (“The welkin Blacker grew”) of line 352 suggest a process of change, a characterization that, in turn, proposes a web of connection, relation, and natural process. Furthermore, these are – as carefully noted – “sad changes” (l. 354).

In confirming this description, Wigglesworth continues to anthropomorphize the earth. The “pastures & corn fields,” he tells us, “[f]or want to rain do languish” (ll. 387-388). Several lines earlier, Wigglesworth uses this same verb – “languishing” – to describe suffering Puritans (l. 374). This parallel encourages a sense of commonality and an understanding of nonhuman nature that is relational and sympathetic. These lines don’t record the quantifiable – lack of rain, loss of harvest – as much as they generate a sense of personified nature: pastures that languish alongside “languishing” colonists, an Earth that groans as Puritans cough. This shared “languishing,” felt by the heart, exceeds sensory data alone. To recognize the languishing of your neighbor in a languishing stalk of corn, to hear the groan of your dying relative in the “groane” of “the Earth beneath” – this is what “God’s Controversy” demands. Moreover, Wigglesworth’s vision here is not wholly anthropocentric. If Earth groans for the sufferings of Puritan inhabitants, it also groans more immediately for itself. This natural “languishing” is made explicit when Wigglesworth turns the attention of “God’s Controversy” from vegetal nature, the
pastures and cornfields, to animal nature – and, in particular, to encounters that drought conditions generate between Puritans and the cows of New England.

As “a lover of New-England’s Prosperity,” Wigglesworth is likewise a lover of New England’s cows. He introduces them in the third section of “God’s Controversy,” following his focus on “colds and coughs…& Feavers strong,” when turning to the proliferating sickness of the natural world itself: “our fruitful seasons…turnd…to barrenness and “[o]ur fields & fruits…burn” (ll. 383-398). Wigglesworth explicitly invokes the heart in representing the environmental state of New England – and it is the way New England “appeares” that wounds the heart, fills it with fear, and produces tears. The “burnt things” are not gone. Rather, they are all that remains – and the land has reached a state where its suffering is both evident to the eye and felt by the heart. Indeed, “burnt art all things in such sort,” the poem declares, “[t]hat nothing now appears/But what may wound our hearts with grief/And draw foorth floods of teares” (ll. 399-402). Likewise, the cattle that inhabit these scenes of devastated landscape provoke a similar affective response: “The cattell mourn, and hearts of men/Are fill’d with fear and anguish” (ll. 389-390).

Wigglesworth’s references to domestic animals are often explicitly religious and frequently accompanied by marginal citations indicating the Biblical book, chapter, and verse from which they are drawn. In many cases, however, they display oblique attachment to the environmental context of early New England as well. In “The Day of Doom,” the adaptation of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats from the Gospel of Matthew, which figures sheep as “holy Martyrs” and goats as “all whining hypocrites” (ll. 209-216), resonates in the colonial preference for profitable and well-behaved sheep over destructive goats – who were notorious for eating the bark off apple trees and threatening local supplies of hard cider (Anderson,
Creatures of Empire 110-111). Likewise, in Meat Out of the Eater, Wigglesworth cautions his readers to:

Be not thou like the Sheep,
That, being in a maze,
Instead of running from the Woolf
Stand still and at him gaze:
Till having one devour’d
He come to worry more (“Song VIII,” ll. 65-70)

This carries overt religious connotation, of course, but also reflects unique environmental conditions: wolves, all but extinct in England by the 16th century, were familiar to 17th-century New England readers and towns throughout the region offered bounties and organized hunts in efforts to eradicate these “fierce, bloodsucking persecutor[s]” (Roger Williams, qtd. in Schweitzer 276n32).

The cow, however, is a species of domestic animal that does not frequently appear in Wigglesworth’s poetry. Cattle often functioned as visible and privileged signifiers of the spiritual – as well as practical – health of the Puritan project amidst New England’s “howling wilderness.” But while Wigglesworth’s cows have religious implications, they don’t – as in the case of the sheep and goats – have explicit religious (or Scriptural) origins. Given both this distinction and their general infrequency, it is particularly interesting that they should feature so prominently here.

Cows were especially enmeshed in the everyday lives of early Americans – and vice versa. In Creatures of Empire, Virginia DeJohn Anderson notes that, unlike pigs, goats, and even sheep, “cattle…were often given names that signaled familiarity and even affection” – names
“used [by colonists]…to address their livestock…not just to identify them” (91). This sense of familiarity was amplified by the fact that early colonists frequently practiced free-range animal husbandry; indeed, as Anderson remarks, one might “encounter livestock [including cattle] at almost every turn” in seventeenth-century New England, rather than in demarcated agricultural spaces alone (9). At the same time, cows dramatically – and often negatively – affected early American landscapes themselves. Bovine consumption of native grasses contributed to extensive soil erosion, for example, while an ever-increasing need for pasture repeatedly prompted both colonial expansion and the rapid deforestation discussed above (Anderson, Creatures of Empire 85).

Cattle mourn in two ways – physically, in a bodily failure to thrive, and vocally, by moaning – and Wigglesworth figures these gestures as both performative and communicative: they generate sensation (“anguish,” or pain) as well as emotion (fear) in the “hearts of men.” Cattle suffer – but more importantly, like the groaning Earth itself, they have the capacity to testify to that suffering, without mediation or translation, in a language of mourning that is both not-quite and not-exclusively human. Wigglesworth’s mourning cows are neither passive religious symbols nor anonymous colonial property, but vibrant and agential beings who share roads and riverbanks with early American colonists, who engage in reciprocal and intimate relations of care, and who – in the midst of this drought – are wounding, even breaking, early American hearts.

Loving the “dearest land”

Wigglesworth’s persistent return to the heart, as well as his engagement with the affective agency and testimonial capacity of nonhuman nature, defines the relation between “God’s Controversy” and the natural world. Framing a world of entanglement and reciprocity, the poem
begins to speak in what we might consider more explicitly ecological language. Lines 403 to 430, for example, repeatedly call attention to the future and to a sense of consequence. “All things,” Wigglesworth writes, “a famine do presage” (l. 403). This urges readers to draw parallels to past environmental crises while being cognizant of potential devastation to come: “As if both men and also beasts/Should soon be done to dy” (ll. 405-406). He frames his call for change and emphasizes its urgency – “Unless thou quickly change,” a phrase repeated by lines 426 and 427 – by pairing images of crisis with reminders that future disasters will be of greater intensity and will bring moments of greater suffering:

We have been also threatened

With worser things than these:

And God can bring them on us still,

To morrow if he please. (ll. 415-418)

Beware, O sinful-Land, beware;

And do not think it strange

That sorer judgements are at hand,

Unless thou quickly change. (ll. 423-426)

Both passages highlight the exponential progression of environmental degradation (“worser things,” “sorer judgements”), the immediacy of the crisis, and, thus, the immediacy of the need to confront and combat the issue. These “worser things” and “sorer judgements” are not distant or eventual problems. They “are at hand,” Wigglesworth emphasizes. They can happen (“God can bring them on us”) quite literally “[t]o morrow.”
This section culminates by calling on what contemporary readers recognize as a hallmark of environmental thought – the notion of an ecological “tipping point”:

Or God, or thou, must quickly change;

Or else thou art undone:

Wrath cannot cease, if sin remain,

When judgement is begun. (ll. 427-430)

As in “The Day of Doom,” “judgement” indicates finality. But, as noted above in the distinction between “judgement” and “controversy,” this “great & parching drought” is not quite judgment in that it is neither preordained nor inevitable (l. 385). “Change,” says Wigglesworth, is possible; moreover, it is effective as well. In “The Day of Doom,” the emphasis is on maintaining ever-present individual preparation for an arbitrary moment of destruction – a moment that, while certainly universal, is concerning primarily on an individual level. Through its lack of interest in the materiality of the pre-apocalyptic work, as well as in the fact that no one, whether damned or saved, cares for either community or nature, the poem de-emphasizes any benefit of connection or affection toward “the Earth beneath.” “God’s Controversy,” then, forms a radically different possibility. When Wigglesworth develops the if/then construction of God’s voice and the concurrent if/then sense of ecological balance, the poem shifts from the individual to the communal. “God’s Controversy” restores a sense of both agency and responsibility with regard to the natural world – and natural phenomena are better understood in the context of an environmental whole.  

What is the “change” that “God’s Controversy” demands? God instructs Puritans that they must “learn to fear.” In isolation, this direction seems like a command of religious submission. Placed in the stanza’s broader context, however, it reads differently:
Now therefore hearken and encline your ear,
In judgement I will henceforth with you plead;
And if by that you will not learn to fear,
But still go on a sensuall life to lead.
I’le strike at once an All-Consuming stroke;
Nor cries nor tears shall then my fierce intent revoke. (ll. 337-342)

The image of God “plead[ing] is striking. Compared to the “Judge” of “The Day of Doom,” the God of “God’s Controversy” is less legalistic and more compassionate. In “The Day of Doom,” only the damned plead – and then, only as a procedural formality. In “God’s Controversy,” pleading is shared, a dialogue between human and divine. When God announces he will plead “henceforth,” he reframes the sense of time in the poem. Not only is judgment conditional in “God’s Controversy,” but the poem itself looks forward in earthly time – something effectively abolished in “The Day of Doom.” Furthermore, when God says he will plead “in judgement,” he means explicitly that he will plead in (or through) nature. Thus the divine exhortation to “now therefore hearken and encline your ear” is a call for greater sensory attention to the natural world – attention to the rain and corn and cattle that Wigglesworth calls the Puritan community toward as well.

As with the poem’s “sensuall Heart,” the “sensuall life” of line 340 should be read in relation to the idea of excess, rather than synonymous with earthly life as such. “Fear” should not be confused as a passive or incapacitating sense of terror; rather, it can be understood as a kind of stirring passion. In this way, it is directly linked to the ability to view nature with “heavenly frames” and to experience nature with the “Heaven-reaching-heart” of “flaming Love” (ll. 288, 221). When God warns the Puritans, as in line 341, of the “All-Consuming stroke,” he is not
asking them to reject the physical realm for the metaphysical, but to turn from an excessive life to an ecological life. Only “[i]f by that” [my emphasis], meaning the cultivation of greater attention to the natural world, “you will not learn to fear,” will controversy be transformed into irrevocable judgement. “Cries nor tears shall then my fierce intent revoke,” [my emphasis], but now, if “thou…quickly change,” such “fierce intent” may well be avoided.

God specifically condemns Puritan excess regarding nature in “The Day of Doom.” Among the first group of reprobates brought before him are the

…Covetous and Ravenous,

that Riches got too fast:

Who us’d vile ways themselves to raise

t’Estates and worldly wealth (ll. 251-254)

In “God’s Controversy,” Wigglesworth uses these same tropes – but in order to explain both the present environmental conditions of New England and the environmental crisis facing the Puritan community. The concept of “riches got too fast” as a result of “covetous and ravenous” behavior – as well as the idea that some paths to “worldly wealth” are “vile ways” – are explicitly ecological narratives. Wigglesworth addresses these directly in condensing his drought discourse:

This O New-England hast thou got

By riot, and excess:

This hast thou brought upon thy self

By pride and wantonness. (ll. 407-410)

“This” refers specifically to the material circumstances described in previous stanzas – the sickness, the famine, the destroyed fields and dying animals – and it is the reversal of the
arbitrary environmental degradation and destruction of “The Day of Doom.” Instead, it stresses the reciprocal engagement of human action and environmental consequence. The Puritans have “got this” not because of a personal stance toward God but because of a collective stance of “excess…pride and wantonness” toward nature. Therefore, the “change” needed must precisely address this stance:

Thus must thy worldlyness be whipt.

They, that too much do crave,

Provoke the Lord to take away

Such blessings as they have. (ll. 411-414)

F.O. Matthiessen notes that “it is to be observed that Wigglesworth does not end [“God’s Controversy”] on this heavy note of sin and destruction. At the very close he changes his form once more to make an appeal of love, fervent and devoted, to the brothers of his land” (502). Just as Wigglesworth returned to “The Earth beneath” following the divine monologue at the center of the poem, he concludes by refocusing “God’s Controversy” directly on the natural world: “Ah dear New England! dearest land to me” (l. 431). These final stanzas reinforce his call for attention. Line 434, for example, “If to his voice thou wilt incline thine ear,” echoes God’s plea in line 337 to “hearken and encline your ear.” Wigglesworth weaves the two voices of the poem together in harmony, imploring his audience to feel the divine as tangibly present in New England’s trees and rocks, its cows and corn. He then sustains this call by using “the rod,” itself an object of nature, as synecdoche for nature itself: “Consider wel & wisely,” he writes, “what the rod… [i]nstructeth thee” (ll. 435, 437).
These final stanzas reiterate the process by which attention results in affection and, finally, in love – and, in doing so, reinforce the underlying ecological impulse of “God’s Controversy with New-England.” Just as in the poem’s title, “New England” stands for both place and community, for both the land and the people. Wigglesworth’s love and God’s love find their intersection in the New England landscape. Wigglesworth’s “dearest land” is also dear to God. In turn, both God and Wigglesworth are dear to it – and both “mayst be still more dear than formerlie” (l. 433). The double meaning of “Thrall” in the penultimate line, indicating both confinement and captivation, suggests the ways in which Wigglesworth is tied to the natural world – while his final declaration that “in New-England shall be my delight” invokes the images of rejoicing wilderness and singing woods from the earliest lines of the poem (ll. 445, 446). The closing imagery of “God’s Controversy” calls to hope by encouraging a positive future, rather than a future in ruins. Wigglesworth implores his audience to “[c]heer on,” assuring them that “my heart is with you all” (l. 443). Drawing readers close, just as God does, “with cords of love,” he demonstrates commitment to community while endorsing an affective attachment to the natural world (l. 209). While “The Day of Doom” abandons “mortal bodies” (l. 1788), “God’s Controversy” finds “delight” and familiarity in New England. Refusing “transcendency” (“Day of Doom” l. 1790), “God’s Controversy” embraces the earth, embraces the land, and embraces nature. In so doing – in its imperative to care and its emphasis on love – “God’s Controversy” says yes to the world.
Chapter Three

Phillis Wheatley’s “vast Atlantic”

“there, at the waterline
as the sea swells within us.” 57

Phillis Wheatley wrote often of the ocean – and of the Atlantic Ocean in particular – with great fascination. 58 Yet despite her repeated engagement with the sea, critics tend to read Wheatley’s oceans as forces of erasure – as blank space – while privileging the relationship of her poems to the terrestrial. Her most well-known poem, for example, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” receives significant critical attention for what it says (or doesn’t say) regarding the places it names, but almost none regarding the oceanic conditions of Wheatley’s “being brought”: the experience of the Middle Passage itself. Lesser-known poems such as “Ocean” and “To a Lady on her remarkable Preservation in an Hurricane in North-Carolina” are relegated to minor critical status even by the most comprehensive studies of Wheatley’s work. Such readings substantiate Katherine McKittrick’s claim that “Black geographies are often unimaginable because we assume they do not really have any valuable material referents, that they are words rather than places, or that their materiality is always already fraught with discourses of dispossession” (8). Likewise, they demonstrate Hester Blum’s broader argument that, by imagining the ocean primarily as land’s other or as a source of symbols and tropes, “the actual sea has often been rendered immaterial in transnational work” (670). 59

In contrast to these critical figurations of erasure, I read Wheatley’s oceans as vital and vibrant places. From West Africa to America, from her Middle Passage crossing to her travel
between Boston and London in 1773, Wheatley’s poems live on, around, and between coasts—and life is always in both relation and immediate proximity to the ocean, the crash and wave of Atlantic salt waters that ebb and flow throughout her work. Likewise, Wheatley displays constant interest in the poet’s ability to make nature “happen,” as in these lines from “To Maecenas”:

While Homer paints lo! circumfus’d in air,

…

Heav’n quakes, earth trembles, and the shores resound.

…

The lightnings blaze across the vaulted skies,

And, as the thunder shakes the heav’’nly plains,

A deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins. (ll. 7, 10, 12-14)

Thus, by emphasizing the oceanic nature of her writing throughout this chapter, I argue that the centrality of the sea to Wheatley’s poetics of testimony shapes her particular attunement to the natural world. I suggest, moreover, that this work embodies a broader strain of transatlantic ecological sensibility, encompassed by the oceanic, that traversed early America.

In beginning to reorient critical perceptions of Wheatley’s oceans, I open by discussing two of her best-known poems: the aforementioned “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England.” Taking Wheatley’s references to her 1761 Atlantic crossing as central elements of each text, I argue that—rather than embracing or reflecting a “discourse of dispossession,” to use McKittrick’s phrase—such mentions help form the material transatlantic and the coherent oceanic geography that undergirds much of Wheatley’s work. Moreover, in juxtaposing critical work by Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant, I
develop a reading practice that emphasizes the literality and the materiality of Wheatley’s oceans as such.

Following this discussion, I introduce sections that concern the various “categories” of Wheatley’s oceanic poems: those that focus on displays of extreme weather (and often on hurricanes more specifically) and those that focus attention on the ocean’s beauty. In each case, Wheatley’s engagement with oceanic materiality foregrounds its affective potential. Wheatley’s “On Messrs Hussey and Coffin,” for example, addresses the sea’s ability – in the form of a hurricane – to impact both mental capacity and emotional control. Demonstrating Wheatley’s deliberate attention to nuances of meteorological detail, as well as her fascination with weather, the poem traces her intimate oceanic knowledge and her boundless curiosity. Likewise, in exploring the presence of oceans in a number of Wheatley’s elegies written for children, I suggest that Wheatley’s oceans function not as symbolic tropes but as literal sites of earthly attachment and intimate mourning.

I then turn to two poems concerning Wigglesworth’s travel between Boston and London in 1773: “A Farewel to America” and “Ocean.” This period has interested critics in the context of Wheatley’s publication of Poems on Various Subjects later that year and in relation to the 1772 Somerset case regarding the legal status of enslaved persons in England, but the poems themselves have been largely overlooked. In my reading, I focus in detail on the ocean’s production of both “astonish’d eyes” (“Farewel” l. 27) and experiences of wonder: “thy winds restrain,” Wheatley writes in “Ocean,” “[a]nd let us view the wonders of the main” (ll. 27-28). I subsequently expand this focus on wonder to encompass its relation to Wheatley’s broader theory of imaginative practice and its connections to material sensation. While “wonder” is not an unfamiliar term with regard to Wheatley studies, it has predominantly suggested Wheatley as
(a) wonder. Wheatley’s own capacity for wonder, however, has not been comparably explored—and in tracing Wheatley’s oceanic attentions to “the wonders of the main,” I argue that her cultivation of affective and imaginative wonder both places her within broader transatlantic conversations of the eighteenth century and meshes with more contemporary notions regarding the ecological potential of wonder as such.

Yet even in turning to this broader “wonder” as an undercurrent of ecological thought flowing through Wheatley’s work, my readings are never far from the ocean—just as Wheatley herself never was. In this sense, my argument runs counter to Monique Allewaert’s claim that what is “particularly notable” about Wheatley’s poems, particularly with regard to the natural world, are their “disappearances”: “When her [Wheatley’s] poems acknowledge the colonial natural world—the hurricanes of the tropics, the plants tossed by these hurricanes, New England’s cold, or Jamaica’s rocks and ‘fervid shores’—it is as bare locative facts that quickly give way to spiritual or metaphysical abstractions” (115). Rather than reading Wheatley’s poems as “systematically attempt[ing] to convert the material into the ethereal,” as Allewaert does, I argue that Wheatley neither seeks abstraction nor “favor[s]…the immaterial” (116-117). Rather, I understand what Allewaert terms “acknowledge[ments]” to form the core of Wheatley’s work: her poems in fact never “turn ethereal.” Wheatley’s repetition of maritime and marine imagery in representing passages from physical to metaphysical, life to death, and body to spirit exceeds, rather than repeats, generic conventions and popular tropes. Such practices evince her material interest in oceanic movement—not metaphor. Cresting and crashing with the vibrancy and presence of the Atlantic, Wheatley’s poems always refuse to “give way.”
Wheatley’s “open boat”

In both “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England” and “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Phillis Wheatley makes explicit reference to the experience of “being brought” highlighted by the title of the latter poem. In “Cambridge,” she writes:

’Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, ’twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes. (ll. 3-6)

Likewise, “On Being Brought” references this experience in its opening line: “’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land” (l. 1). Yet despite the fact that these poems reference an event, the Middle Passage, that is explicitly transatlantic, few critics have given serious thought to the presence of the sea in either. Instead, their focus has been on the terrestrial: the land of errors or the pagan land. Thus, although the image of the “native shore” suggests a littoral perspective, the view from a ship, and Wheatley’s “being” privileges the action itself rather than its completion or memory, these poems continue to be read as physical and moral contrasts between two names land masses: Africa and America.60

Wheatley’s oceanic geographies, as well as her relationship to the African continent itself, are “fraught with discourses of dispossession” – a critical lacuna with both historical and theoretical causes. In Wheatley’s case, the most particular historical cause of this narrative remains the persistence of Margaretta Matilda Oddell’s Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, published in 1834.61 In the Memoir, Oddell writes that Wheatley “does not seem to have preserved any remembrance of the place of her nativity, or of her parents,” save for “the simple circumstance that her mother poured out water before the sun at his rising – in reference, no
doubt, to an ancient African custom” (431). Offering an explanation for this absence, Oddell suggests that “there are some circumstances…which would induce us to suppose, that in the case of Phillis, this faculty [of memory] did not equal the other powers of her mind” (431). Oddell then reveals these “circumstances” to be Wheatley’s “being brought” – or the Middle Passage – itself:

We cannot know at how early a period she was beguiled from the hut of her mother; or how long a time elapsed between her abduction from her first home and her being transferred to the abode of her benevolent mistress, where she must have felt like one awakening from a fearful dream. This interval was, no doubt, a long one; and filled, as it must have been, with various degrees and kinds of suffering, might natural enough obliterate the recollection of earlier and happier days. (431-432)

Oddell’s implication here is that the “suffering” of Wheatley’s oceanic “interval” both enacted a particular trauma to the memories of the events themselves and categorically destroyed Wheatley’s powers of “recollection” as such. Consequently, Oddell extends the “obliteration” of Wheatley’s brain into the future. She doesn’t deny Wheatley memory in its entirety – writing, for example, “upon duly considering the point, we cannot suppose that Phillis could have made such rapid progress in various branches of knowledge, if she had not possessed a retentive memory” (436-437). Rather, this “obliteration” was limited to “the creations of her own fancy,” which, Oddell argues, she “did not seem to have the power of retaining…for a long time, in her own mind” (436):

Most persons are aware that, by a mental effort, (and there is no operation of the mind more wonderful) they can recall scenes and events long since forgotten; but Phillis does not seem to have possessed this power, as it respects her own productions – for we
believe this singularity to have affected her own thoughts only, and not the impressions made upon her mind by the thoughts of others, communicated by books or conversation.

(437)

Even in the aforementioned memory of her mother, the allowance of this one image as “the solitary exception which held its place so tenaciously in her mind” ultimately serves to suggest the impact of the ocean and oceanic experience on Wheatley in a particularly limited way. Wheatley’s recollection of her mother’s ritual, Oddell writes, “was probably renewed from day to day through this long season of affliction…every morning, when the bereaved child saw the sun emerging from the wide waters” (431-432). Within this oddly idyllic notion of the Middle Passage, Oddell suggests that recollection doesn’t come from Wheatley’s “power” or “mental effort” but through the hypnotic “wide waters” and painful glare of “the sun emerging” – reducing Wheatley to a process, thinking the same singular thought until her “obliterated” brain is marked indelibly with its impression as if literally burned.63

The lingering effects of Oddell’s argument – Wheatley’s own “On Recollection notwithstanding – have profoundly shaped Wheatley’s reputation as well as perceptions of her oceans and critical evaluations of her poetic engagements with the natural and material world. Scathing critiques of Wheatley by writers such as Addison Gayle, Jr. and Amiri Baraka are a direct consequence of Oddell’s denials – but so too is the legacy of reading Wheatley’s “On Imagination” as an exercise in earthly escapism and abandonment. Yet contemporary theories of transatlanticism attract equal – if unwitting – culpability in this narrative. As a representative example, consider the influence of Paul Gilroy’s canonical The Black Atlantic in which Gilroy proposes “the shape of the Atlantic as a system of cultural exchanges…one single, complex unit of analysis” (4). This critical model offers both an “explicitly transnational and intercultural
perspective” and a much-needed “alternative to…the dogmatic focus on discrete national
dynamics which has characterized so much modern Euro-American cultural thought” (4).
Gilroy’s work has proven crucial to the “hemispheric turn” of early American studies
popularized by scholars such as Anna Brickhouse64 – and The Black Atlantic made David
Armitage’s claim, whether sincere or ironic, that “[w]e are all Atlanticists now” both a
possibility and a reality (13).

Of particular interest to early American studies is the initial focus of Gilroy’s opening
chapter: “the image of the ship.” As he writes:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the space between Europe, America,
Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my
starting point. The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in
motion…immediately focus[es] attention on the middle passage, on the various projects
for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as
well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone
records, and choirs. (4)

But while this image calls attention to the networks of circulation and exchange that defined the
early modern Atlantic world, the ship’s centrality also suggests a limit to Gilroy’s transnational
formulation. Figuring ships as “living, micro-cultural, micro-political system[s] in
motion…mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they
connected (4, 16), Gilroy’s Atlantic model remains bound to land – points of departure and ports
of arrival – while the “mobile element” of the ship itself is detached from its surrounding
environmental matrix: the material, elemental Atlantic Ocean.65 After all, it’s not just “spaces”
that are “shifting” – it’s salt water.66
In reframing an oceanic Wheatley and understanding her oceans as about the “being brought,” rather than arrival and departure points alone, where do her poems display evidence of this? Honorée Fanonne Jeffers proposes one answer to this question via renewed attention to Wheatley’s language of “mercy.” In readings of both “On Being Brought” and “Cambridge,” Jeffers focuses on Wheatley’s use of “mercy” – a word that critics typically endow with religious sentiment: “That word ‘mercy’ kept bothering me, with its bland happiness. I kept coming back to ‘mercy’ because…I had a feeling Phillis Wheatley was trying to tell me something important, something I was missing but that I would get if I would only story and pay attention to her.” Jeffers’ “feeling” inspires a difference conclusion regarding “mercy”: “this particular ‘mercy,’” she writes, “is not what causes Wheatley’s kidnapping, but one that allows her survival in transit, a journey she survived in ‘safety.” Thus, Jeffers concludes, “‘dark abodes’ seems to refer to the Middle Passage, and not Africa” (“Phillis Wheatley’s Word).67

This reading of “mercy” reframes Wheatley’s poems not only in the sense of their religious sentiment but also by shifting their location from the terrestrial to the oceanic. When we understand Wheatley as locating or “feeling” mercy “in transit,” we in turn read the “dark abodes” of Atlantic waters – and of “mercy” itself – first and foremost as literal, physical experience, a bodily sensation that returns to Wheatley’s opening line (“‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land”) and its deliberate repetition of “brought from” not as an opposition of terrestrial locations by as oceanic meditation itself. Thinking of references to “mercy,” to “being brought,” and to “dark abodes” as direct markers of the ocean, rather than as evidence of the ocean’s power to absent persons or obliterate memory, reframes later lines of the poem as well. In the second and third lines of “On Being Brought,” Wheatley writes that “mercy” – not divine phenomena but earthly experience – “[t]aught my benighted soul to understand/That there’s a
God, that there’s a *Saviour* too.” Here, her doubling of “God” and “Saviour” suggests that they are not necessarily indicative of the same thing. “God” implies the divine, and thus signifies the static, the timeless, and the noumenal. “Saviour,” however, plays on the active verb of *saving*, suggesting the phenomenal while evoking the embodied, the earthly, and the corporeal.68

In a broader sense, then, what Wheatley’s oceans propose is less of a “mobile element” or an “organising symbol” and, instead, something closer to what Glissant terms “the open boat.” In contrast to Gilroy’s “figure of the ship,” Glissant’s “open boat” emphasizes intense and disorienting bodily sensation and presents both an explicitly environmental model and an ecologically inflected paradigm. Note the stark differences between Oddell’s portrayal of Wheatley watching the sun rise from the deck of a slave ship and Glissant’s imaginative imperative: “Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crowded. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo, this dizzying sky plastered to the waves” (5-6).

Glissant demands that the black Atlantic be understood not in the language of systems and exchanges, as a metaphor of fluidity for processes of transnational and global circulation, nor as an historical absence, but as a physical – and perhaps unimaginable or unrelatable – experience: “Imagine, if you can.” Likewise, he emphasizes the ocean’s material doubleness:

Navigating the green splendor of the sea – whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers* – still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains… [T]he entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing
in the end into the pleasures of sand, makes one vast beginning, but a beginning whose
time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (6)

Both Glissant’s “open boat” and Wheatley’s “mercy” adopt “the sea as a proprioceptive
point of inquiry,” foregrounding Hester Blum’s injunction that “[t]he sea is not a metaphor”
(670-671). They resist reading oceans as either “intervals” (Oddell) or “symbols” (Gilroy).
Instead, they figure the sea as a set of tangible and bodily sensations – and suggest that, rather
than obliterating Wheatley’s recollective process, such sensations serve to heighten her
awareness of the ocean’s doubleness, “green splendor” and “dark abodes” as “one vast
beginning,” and her appreciation of the ocean’s physical power. Moreover, they reframe
Wheatley’s poetry in terms of the environmental: the “gracious hand” as literal wind and ocean
current, the “mercy” that “brought” Phillis (as well as the *Phillis*) “from Africa to America” as
the waters of the Atlantic Ocean itself.

**“the groundless Gulph…the raging Sea”**

Many of Wheatley’s ocean poems focus on displays of extreme weather. In “To a Lady
on her remarkable Preservation in an Hurricane in *North-Carolina,*” for example, Wheatley is
captivated by a “storm[’s] tumultuous roar” as she imagines a wind that “madden[s] all the
sea…[a]nd strows with planks the wat’ry element” (ll. 4, 12, 16). Likewise, in “Ode to Neptune,”
Wheatley describes how “raging tempests shake the shore/While *AE’lus* ’thunders round us roar”
(ll. 11-12). Throughout such poems, Wheatley incorporates an array of maritime language – and
her fascination with extreme weather often coincides with her frequent poetic attentions to
littoral space: shorelines and coastal areas.
Throughout the autumn of 1767, New England experienced a series of coastal storms. One of these storms in particular was especially severe. Though precise details are scarce, the *Providence Gazette and Country Journal* reported, “[t]he oldest Seamen say they never experienced a more terrible gale” (qtd. Robinson 129) – suggesting that the storm likely rivaled in both strength and size the Southeastern New England hurricane of 1761, considered at the time to have been the “most violent storm in 30 years” (qtd. Ludlum 24). On December 21, 1767, the *Newport Mercury* published a poem based on the experience of two sailors “in a schooner, loaded with oil” who had been caught in the storm and “cast ashore…on the back of Cape Cod” (qtd. Robinson 129). The poem, entitled “On Messrs Hussey and Coffin,” was accompanied by an introduction entitled “To the Printer” which explained that the text had been “composed by a Negro Girl (belonging to one Mr. Wheatley of Boston)” (Wheatley 73). Phillis Wheatley’s first published poem: the story of a hurricane.

Despite its significance as Wheatley’s initial publication, “Hussey and Coffin” is neither widely read nor widely anthologized today. In terms of her “early” work, the roughly-contemporaneous “Cambridge” and “On Being Brought” have received far more popular and critical attention. We might even conjecture that Wheatley herself came to overlook the place of “Hussey and Coffin” within her larger body of work. Though she advertised it under the title “On two friends, who were cast away” in her 1772 proposal for *Poems on Various Subjects*, she ultimately chose to exclude it from the final volume. Yet the poem remains of particular interest not only because of its continuity with poems such as “Cambridge” and “On Being Brought” but also because it establishes – within her earliest poetic endeavors – the relationship between Wheatley’s environmental observation and her ecological imagination.
The prefatory “To the Printer,” probably written by Susannah Wheatley, does not mention Phillis by name, identifying her only as “a Negro Girl” and, later, “this Negro Girl.” Subsequently, the introduction dismisses the notion that Wheatley was the intended audience of Hussey and Coffin’s “Relation” itself: “Messrs Hussey and Coffin…upon their Arrival, being at Mr. Wheatley’s, and, while at Dinner, told of their narrow Escape, [and] this Negro Girl at the same Time ‘tending Table, heard the Relation, from which she composed the following Verses” (Wheatley 73). But in doing so, “To the Printer” not only foregrounds Wheatley’s unintended hearing of – and compulsory presence at – the “Relation” but also emphasizes the closeness of the storm itself to Wheatley’s own person and the unique intimacy with which she must have experienced it. Such accounts – Wheatley’s poem, Hussey and Coffin’s “Relation,” the newspaper articles quoted above – emphasize that everyday life in early America, particularly in New England, was in constant contact with the ocean; indeed, was, in many ways, dependent on the ocean. Furthermore, the specific comparisons between this storm and the 1761 hurricane that such accounts highlight are a reminder that that storm, which occurred in late October, was one of Wheatley’s first experiences of America following her arrival in Boston on July 11, 1761.

Wheatley’s fascination with hurricanes, particularly with the force of their winds, is especially significant for several reasons. Hurricanes, as Dan Brayton notes, were – in a European context – a “quintessentially New World phenomenon” (167). Moreover, Brayton writes, “the hurricane signifies a radical inversion of the dominant European conception of wind: it is a wind from nowhere, a natural force that defies representation by dint of its sheer excess and then-unknown origins” (191). At the risk of anachronism, however, this notion of “unknown origins” draws a connection to Wheatley’s own conditions. While the “wind from nowhere” narrative served early modern European and Euro-American writers in centering hurricanes as
sublime forces, events that offered material signals of just how unlike or unconnected the New World was from the Old World, we certainly know now what writers from Shakespeare to Wheatley did not know – but might have somehow intuited – then. Atlantic hurricanes, after all, do not come “from nowhere”: they come, in fact, from Africa.70

Despite the occasional language of her title and the suggestion that she “composed the following Verses” from the overheard “Relation,” Wheatley begins the poem by posing a series of questions to – rather than “on” – Hussey and Coffin, who she combines temporarily into a singular “you”: “Did Fear and Danger so perplex your Mind/As made you fearful of the Whistling Wind?” (ll. 1-2). These lines consider the impact of natural phenomena on both mental capacity (“perplex your mind”) and emotional content (“made you fearful”). Likewise, they serve to focus the poem on additional questions of oceanic experience. Wheatley further situates the poem at sea as she interrogates the two men about the storm itself – particularly with regard to “the Whistling Wind”:

Was it not Boreas knit his angry Brow
Against you? or did Consideration bow?
To lend you Aid, did not his Winds combine?
To stop your passage with a churlish Line,
Did haughty Eolus with Contempt look down
With Aspect windy, and a study’d Frown? (ll. 3-8)

Here, Wheatley’s interest in the “Aspect windy” of the storm serves as a broader demonstration of her deliberate attention to the nuances of meteorological detail and a suggestion of her own intimate oceanic knowledge. Her investigations regarding wind velocity – the distinction between Boreas, the north wind, alone versus “his Winds combin[ing]” with those of “haughty
Eolus” – and the relation between winds and ocean currents – the “stop[ping of] your passage with a churlish Line” – engage, and even anticipate, key questions of atmospheric and climatological sciences. Likewise, we can extrapolate quantifiable data from Wheatley’s use of pathetic fallacy: the differences between an “angry” wind and a “churlish” one, especially given the esoteric and often anachronistic, as well as colorful, nature of maritime vocabulary as a whole – shouldn’t be reduced to matters of linguistic choice or poetic license alone.

But Wheatley’s focus on “the Whistling Wind” also surpasses either anthropomorphic or naturalistic rendering by thinking of Jeffers’ reconsideration of Wheatley’s “mercy” as well. While Wheatley doesn’t use “mercy” directly in “Hussey and Coffin,” as she does in “Cambridge” and “On Being Brought,” she insists on corresponding references to both “Consideration” and “Aid.” Because the poem shifts in these lines to combine the direct interrogation of Hussey and Coffin with the external motions of a ship at sea, we can read these references as drawing both on Wheatley’s general oceanic knowledge and on her specific experiences of the ocean as such. Furthermore, in highlighting the seemingly-paradoxical simultaneity of the wind’s “Consideration” and its “angry Brow,” Wheatley foregrounds the unique multiplicity of the Atlantic – its “doubleness” or “depths” – emphasized by both Gilroy and Glissant.

The poem then transforms into a meditation on this trope of doubleness, generating a vibrant sense of the oceanic from within the liminality of littoral space. Wheatley returns to the “on” of her title by replacing the direct address of “you” with “they” while simultaneously marginalizing the actual details of Hussey and Coffin’s “Relation” in favor of a hypothetical scenario:

Suppose the groundless Gulph had snatch’d away
Hussey and Coffin to the raging Sea;
Where wou’d they go? where wou’d be their Abode?
With the supreme and independent God,
Or made their Beds down in the shades below
Where neither Pleasure nor Content can flow (ll. 11-16)

These lines introduce oppositional binaries – land and sea, life (above water) and death (below water), body and soul, heaven and hell – that figure the ocean’s doubleness. At the same time, however, they continue to emphasize the sea as a tangible and material fact. Wheatley’s ascription of agency – “snatch’d away” – to “the groundless Gulph,” for example, highlights the power of “the raging Sea” but it also suggests its place in her own experience. In “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” Wheatley describes being “snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” (l. 25). While critics often read this as a reference to her abduction, Wheatley’s notion of the ocean’s ability to “snatch,” combined with her question in “Dartmouth” – “And can I then but pray/Others may never feel tyrannic sway?” (ll. 30-31) – suggests that her lines both there and in “Hussey and Coffin” are haunted by the “tyrannic sway” of the powerful littoral moment that opens “Cambridge”: “’Twas not long since I left my native shore” (l. 3).
Likewise, Wheatley’s explicit separation of souls from bodies in response to the question “Where wou’d they go?” – “To Heaven their Souls with eager Raptures soar” (l. 17) – reads as a religious reference but also suggests that the “Beds down in the Shades below” refer to what Glissant calls “the violet belly of the ocean depths” (7): a seafloor of bodies “snatch’d away…to the raging Sea” but also, to use Glissant’s phrase,” bodies “coming to light like seaweed” in the poem. As such, Wheatley’s vast Atlantic ebbs and flows, crashes and waves, not only with the memory of the Middle Passage but also as an enduring site of literal (and littoral) presence.
**Wheatley’s elegiac oceans**

In *American Elegy*, Max Cavitch asserts that “[e]legies are poems about being left behind. They are poems…that are themselves left behind, as…material legacies (1). I take Cavitch’s awareness of elegies as “left behind” to signal both their existence as “material” and their attachment to the world – or the earth (including the ocean) – as such. While Cavitch argues that “[e]legy is a genre that enables fantasies about worlds we cannot yet reach, even as it facilitates investments in a world that will outlast us” (1), my argument reverses this construction – while simultaneously affirming both halves. Elegy, even in its “fantasies” about the supernatural and the otherworldly, is ultimately a genre that invests us in the world. Likewise, elegy implicates, or to use Cavitch’s terms, “catches” readers in its operations (16) – while intertwining subjects, authors, and readers with the natural world. Yet while Cavitch proposes that, in late eighteenth-century America, elegy was emerging primarily as the predominant form of *national* mourning, I argue here that Wheatley’s elegies, for all their popularity, including in terms of the emerging nation, represent a counterdirection to the trend that Cavitch identifies. Wheatley’s elegies, as I will show, are not a national mourning but a *natural* mourning. As such, while my specific argument focuses on Wheatley’s employment of the elegy in addressing the broader oceanic concerns I identify throughout this chapter, my larger argument is an expansive one about genre as well: the elegiac is, in fact, ecological.

Wheatley frequently invokes oceanic imagery, especially of storms and hurricanes, in her elegies for children and those she identifies as “young.” In this use of oceanic imagery, Wheatley presents, as Dan Brayton writes of the ocean’s presence in Shakespeare’s works, an “articulation of human life as a condition deeply but obscurely connected to the marine environment” as well as “the near impossibility of fathoming its fluid vastness” (166). By
connecting this oceanic imagery to the process of elegizing the young, Wheatley’s usages play with traditional Western perceptions of oceans as “timeless” in the sense of eternal or unchanging. In each of the instances I discuss here, Wheatley’s oceans are employed precisely to mourn those who are “timeless” in a different way—those that had little to no time on earth and whose lives seem to have retreated as quickly as they appeared, like a tide or a wave or a storm. Thus, while Wheatley begins in the form of the elegy, this metaphorical excess causes the elegiac results to generate more radical conclusions: the ocean itself becomes the elegy, the mourning, the storm, and the memory. As such, the storm—not the poem alone—rescues lives from obscurity in oceanic, earthly, and material fashion. Rather than rendering us timeless, then, the ocean places a life in time.

Cavitch argues that “[i]n the elegy, Wheatley discovered possibilities for managing the unmitigated alienation of slavery and the ungrievable…losses she sustained as a stolen child” (187). Her child elegies, however, add a new level of complexity to this biographical reading. For Wheatley, taking on the role of elegist for a predominately white audience, as well as a designated mourner for predominately white subjects, is one thing. Many critics read this as a calculated project of assimilation, a conscious choice that allowed Wheatley to find a voice in colonial culture while calling attention to her legally defined exclusion from that culture. Yet Wheatley’s child elegies move beyond this. Cavitch hints at this facet of the poems when he writes: “Through her child elegies, Wheatley had access to the hearts and consciences of parents…she may have found in these elegies an opportunity to speak to or on behalf of her own parents, thereby surreptitiously enshrining their mutual loss and her anger at them for losing her” (190). But it’s what Cavitch doesn’t explicitly mention here that transforms Wheatley’s child elegies from a mournful to an ecological project and binds them inextricably to the physical and
natural world. If her elegies ask readers to consider the left-behindness of her own African parents, then they also figure an elegist who embodies the other half of this relationship: the child lost over the ocean.

In one sense, we can read this as direct commentary on the connection between slavery (or social death) and physical death. “Slavery,” writes Frederick Douglass, “does away with families” (27) – and while critics don’t often describe these elegies as anti-slavery projects, this method suggests a more productive reading of Wheatley as a meaningful precursor to antislavery writings of the nineteenth century. Yet Wheatley herself is not lost over the ocean; rather, she remains both present and “left behind.” In this way, Wheatley’s elegies also ask readers to consider the idea that the dead never truly abandon the world, just as the living never truly abandon them. Accordingly, while the “curtailment of mourning” featured in many of her elegies can be read as prefiguring “[o]ne of the salient themes of [nineteenth-century] antislavery elegy,” we can also consider its direct connection to the ecological notion that nature repeatedly preserves life itself, thus coopting a project of human mourning while invigorating an active presence of being (Cavitch 215). In this sense, Wheatley – like Cavitch’s Whitman – uses the liminal spaces of the littoral and oceanic as “sites of longing for a referentiality that would somehow restore the subject to these points of departure…[as] sites both for regression and for creativity, for conservation and for protest” (Cavitch 251). In “catching” both subject and reader alike in the mesh of these literal and physical “points,” Wheatley foregrounds the natural and its connection to the human in both death and life.

The earliest of Wheatley’s child elegies is “On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age.” Wheatley opens the poem with a familiar reference to “dark abodes” (l. 1) – and closes the poem by comparing life itself to an oceanic experience:

Calm in the prosperous, and adverse day,
Adore the God who gives and take away;
...
Till having sail’d through life’s tempestuous sea,
And from its rocks, and boist’rous billows free,
Yourselves, safe landed on the blissful shore,

Shall join your happy babe to part no more. (ll. 29-30, 33-36)

Monique Allewaert argues that the focus of this poem is the “fair ethereal light” of its opening line, which performs what she terms “an absolute etherealization [that]…sublimat[es] the worldly…in favor of the immaterial” (116-117). It is important, however, that in attending to this “fair…light” we not lose sight of how the sea functions in these lines and in the poem as a whole. Throughout the poem, Wheatley generates a series of cyclical, rather than teleological, processes: the aforementioned dark to light, framed as cyclical by subsequent reference to morning and night (“Her morning sun…the gloom of night”) in lines 11 and 12, as well as cycles of song (ll. 19-20) and the movement of emotions from happiness to sadness, from anger to grief, and so on. In each case, these processes are cyclical because the transition between states (light to dark, for example, or happiness to grief) doesn’t obliterate the memory of the previous state or foreclose the possibility of return. In instructing the grieving parents to “bow resign’d,” in line 27, for example, Wheatley doesn’t encourage them to forsake material being but to return to an earlier state of it. Despite the employment of elegiac conventions, Wheatley’s elegies in these cases never “favor…the immaterial.” Rather, they cling to the natural world, the felt world, as the answer to grief and mourning. Wheatley doesn’t “sublimat[e] the worldly” – she embraces and encourages it. Thus, in the above lines, when Wheatley returns to the ocean and the “dark
“abodes” of the poem’s opening and its dual narrative of adversity and prosperity, God appears as a constant give and take, a rise and fall or an ebb and flow. God, in other words, appears to look very much like an ocean wave and to act very much like the ocean’s tides. Though Wheatley makes reference to “sailing through,” her elegy acts as a reminder that in death, as in life, we are never removed from our relation to “the blissful shore” and thus to the “unknown beatitude” (or “mercy”) of these dark abodes themselves (l. 4).

In “On the Death of a young Gentleman,” Wheatley merges her poetic voice more directly with the materiality of the ocean. “To still the tumult of life’s tossing seas,” she asks, “what shall my sympathizing verse impart…to heal so deep a wound?” (ll. 16-17). Again, Wheatley compares life itself to the ocean – and again we can read her insistence in relation to the literal. If life is an ocean, it remains, in certain senses, perpetual (though not unchanging.) And if the ocean contains all the elements of a life as well as life itself, then it is a life marked by an inability to abandon the earthly or transcend the material. Here, Wheatley presents her “sympathizing verse” as if itself material; her desire to “impart” her verse into this “deep” likewise signifies a desire to immerse the words themselves into “the tumult of [the] tossing seas.” Thus, she ends the poem via an invocation of “gracious Spirit” better read as a worldly muse than an ethereal abstraction. She instructs “Spirit” to “thy full joys into their bosoms pour,” as if her words are not only material in general but also liquid in particular:

The raging tempest of their grief control,
And spread the dawn of glory through the soul,
To eye the path the saint departed trod,
And trace him to the bosom of his God. (ll. 21-24)
“The path” is represented as an ocean, and Wheatley parallels the “tossing seas” of life to “the raging tempest of…grief.” But in suggesting that “gracious Spirit” can “pour” and control this tempest, as well as illuminate the oceanic nature of life itself, she suggests not only that the work of the poem can reframe the temporality of grief but also that this can be accomplished by “eyeing” the ocean: the time of the raging tempest refigured as both the time of mourning and the time of nature itself.

Wheatley return to the oceanic as the driving animation of nature, as well as the idea that the ocean animates both grief and life itself, in “To a Lady and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother.” Here, she addresses the potential – and danger – of grief to interrupt life in both human and non-human forms: “Th’ unhappy mother sees the sanguine rill/Forget to flow, and nature’s wheels stand still” (ll. 11-12). The mother’s unhappiness interrupts life in all directions: blood “forget[s] to flow” and nature refuses to move. Wheatley employs the oceanic, however, to avoid annihilation while preserving both the ability to mourn and the need to do so. Throughout the poem, she parallels the familiar notion of death as an ocean voyage with the materiality of salt water in the form of “flowing tears” described as “crystal brine” (ll. 3, 6). Likewise, Wheatley concentrates on physical acts of mourning that mirror the repetition of the ocean. The breast “heave[s]” with “sighs on sighs” that suggests grief moving in tidal or wave-like fashion (l. 4). Throughout the poem, Wheatley uses the language of water – “the…sorrow sprung,” the “flowing tears,” the “swell” and “droop” of bodies (ll 2, 3, 6, 7) – to reinforce this crossing, returning to such characterization as she addresses the living:

No more in briny show’rs, ye friends around

...  
No more for him the streams of sorrow pour,
But haste to join him on the heav’nly shore,

On harps of gold to tune immortal lays,

And to your God immortal anthems raise. (ll. 23, 27-30)

Yet her reference to “immortal lays [and] anthems,” as well as a “heav’nly shore” aren’t, I think, necessarily indicative of the poem’s religiosity – or, at least, of its reliance on a transcendental afterlife. Rather, it encourages the “lady and her children” to turn to the natural world that surrounds them – rather than continue an inward collapse of self – to find the mourning that they seek: an “immortal” one. In other words, it asks to see the ocean as a continuation of our own tears and thus not as a force of otherness but as a sympathetic entity. The ocean takes over mourning without exhausting itself; not bound to the “sanguine rill,” the sea pours its “streams of sorrow” while never “stand[ing] still.”

Wheatley’s most extensive exploration of the ocean’s elegiac power, however, comes in the elegy closest to her own person: “To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady’s Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, aged one Year.” Wheatley opens the poem, as she does several others, with a focus on herself and the particular inspiration she feels in embarking upon the elegy. In this particular case, however, her focus is considerably more toward the material world; moreover, it’s rendered more separate from its occasional audience than in the case of other elegies. Wheatley begins by announcing that: “On Death’s domain intent I fix my eyes” (l. 1). This emphasis on “fix[ing her] eyes” directly suggests that “Death’s domain” is material, a physical space to be engage in bodily relation with (or looked at) rather than a state of mind. To resolve the specific nature of “Death’s domain,” however, we must look to another of Wheatley’s elegies, entitled “To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations,” which is roughly contemporaneous with her composition of “Avis.”
In the opening stanza of “Three Relations,” Wheatley introduces the question of “trac[ing] the pow’r of Death” (l. 1) – and Death, described as “dark realms,” appears quite like the ocean itself. Death “shake[s] the solid world [and]…rules the spacious whole” while its “trembling nature rocks from pole to pole” (ll. 6-7, 8). Wheatley continues this focus on Death’s action in the opening line of the poem’s second stanza: “Awful he moves, and wide his wings are spread” (l. 9). In each case, Wheatley’s associations between the moment of death and the movement of the ocean focus attention on the natural world in order to make sense of the event. Death shakes our world; its trembling, “awful” movement rocks us like a wave-tossed ship on the “spacious whole” of the sea.

Wheatley continues to develop the relation between the ocean and death throughout “Three Relations.” The fourth line of the poem, for example, announces that death “blacken[s] Phoebus, and dissolve[s] the sky” – and while this absence of light suggests, on one hand, the death of the body and a corresponding loss of sight and sense, it also suggests, on the other, the way oceanic depths “blacken” as well as the way in which the horizon “dissolve[s] the sky” into the ocean itself, making the two virtually indistinguishable and, thus, concomitant with the depths below and their contents. Likewise, Wheatley revisits her portrayal of death as an oceanic voyage. The deceased, “the exulting spirit” of line 11, “flies [b]eyond Olympus, and these starry skies…to earth…never… [t]o return” (ll. 11-12, 14). While seeming to be initially transcendental in its reference to the deceased “flying,” when we consider Wheatley’s regular conflations of flight with sailing, we see the deceased not as vanished by as one who now lives a different sort of material life: an oceanic, rather than a terrestrial, life, one in which “to earth” (that is, to land) one “never must return” (l. 14). Wheatley emphasizes this oceanic transformation in the opening two lines of the poem’s final stanza, in which she compares persons to plants: “As a
young plant by hurricanes up torn/So near its parent lies the newly born” (ll. 19-20). The plant “torn” by the storm isn’t vanished or even dead. Rather, it has been changed in terms of place – or, more accurately, in terms of its foundation. Stripped of its foundation, the plant has been made rootless by the hurricane – and its traditional associations with earth are also stripped. The plant’s state thus becomes defined by its attachment to the hurricane itself.

The practice of mourning also becomes associated with the ocean in several ways. Grief comes in waves: the “fair mourner” of line 15 “feel[s] the dart [o]f Death” (ll. 15-16), the point of impact of a wave or a storm, but also feels cyclical grief constantly anew: “and with fresh torture,” the poem continues, “rend thine heart” (l. 16). “Three Relations” encourages the mourner to embrace, rather than resist, these sensations. The dead, Wheatley argues, “wish thine happy mind [t]o rise with them, and leave the world behind” (ll. 17-18). Yet this configuration seems impossible while the mourner remains tethered to land. “Three Relations” acknowledges this impasse while suggesting a radical reconfiguration of mourning itself:

Then, mourner, cease; let hope thy tears restrain,
Smile on the tomb, and sooth the raging pain.
On yon blest regions fix thy longing view,
Mindless of sublunary scenes below;
Ascend the sacred mount, in thought arise,
And seek substantial and immortal joys;
Where hope receives, where faith to vision springs,
And raptur’d seraphs tune th’ immortal strings
To strains extatic. Thou the chorus join,
And to thy father tune the praise divine. (ll. 24-32)
Wheatley’s elegy encourages the reader to abandon traditional notions of individual mourning and suggests the restraint of displays of grief, rather than their expression. This is not grief or grieving denied; rather, it is grieving relocated. The mourner is encouraged to “fix thy…view” on “yon blest regions” and “[s]mile on the tomb” in order to “sooth” their own “raging pain.” In other words, as in “To a Lady and her Children,” the reader is urged to turn – literally – to the sea.

This oceanic mourning follows a different pattern: it becomes “mindless.” Rather than an intellectual process of reason and interpretation, it follows rhythms and cycles of sense and sensation. The human subject releases her autonomous and unilateral responsibility for grieving. Instead, she cedes to the action of waves that “ascend” and “Arise” and conclude themselves in “strains extatic.” While Wheatley’s elegy initially focuses on the sounds of human mourning, the “rend[ing]” and “weep[ing]” and “raging,” it ultimately acknowledges the incompleteness of such mourning – “we mourn [i]n vain” – in its dependence upon equally incomplete and fragile human mourner. Wheatley’s elegy thus concludes by focusing on the true sound of mourning: the sound of the sea. The human subject participates in this mourning by “fix[ing]” her “longing view,” but the ocean bears the full and ultimate weight of such responsibility. We “the chorus join” but the ocean’s “raptur’d seraphs tune th’ immortal strings.” Our dead have set sail, gone over the ocean, yet they are always with us in the sea’s “extatic” strains – in the water that endlessly abandons us and yet perpetually returns to shore.

We return, then, to “Avis” within this context of Wheatley’s elegiac oceans and their practice of oceanic mourning. With eyes fixed on the sea, Wheatley’s “view” frames a decidedly Glissantian perspective (l. 6). The oceanic “domain,” this “drear abode,” is transformed into a “vast ruin” – and “Avis” searches below its surface to discover the true nature of its contents.
The initial focus here is on the spoils – and waste – of empire: the “spoils” of “the great conqu’ror,” even “nations” and “[w]hole kingdoms,” are contained within the “gloomy den” of the dark waters (ll. 1-8). Yet so too are more intimate connections: “the offspring of six thousand years” (l. 5). “See here a brother, here a sister spread,” Wheatley writes, “[a]nd a sweet daughter mingled with the dead” (ll. 11-12). This “mingling” of human bodies with bodies of water transforms the sea from inert substance to vital element. Human nature lies in nature itself, in the “gloomy” waters and the “primeval dust” of the ocean floor, returned to the place from which life emerged. The ocean, or “the ample tomb,” is thus figures as not only an historical place or a place of history – but as history itself. In the opening stanza of “Avis,” the ocean is all-encompassing. It contains “the offspring of six thousand years” – the offspring of all human history, or the “endless numbers” Wheatley cites in the following line. Likewise, the ocean is “primeval” – before history – but it “is the present...the age to come” as well (l. 10).

In this sense, Wheatley’s elegy frames its oceanic context outside of the poem’s immediate subject – the deceased family – even as it returns to them in the first stanza’s closing lines. The ocean is thus both the specific location where the “gentleman and lady” to whom the elegy is addressed can “see” their dead relations and a general perspective from which they can stand in sympathy with the vanished persons of the world: past, present, and future. As elegist, Wheatley serves as interpreter of the ocean. Fixing both sight and “pensive mind” on the sea’s presence (l. 3), she transforms the oceanic void, the blank space of the Atlantic, into vibrant community as her closing lines of this stanza take imperative form: “See here a brother, here a sister” [emphasis mine]. Wheatley’s “see here” calls the reader to attention as it highlights the dual and paradoxical nature of engagement with the sea: its immediacy and its distance, each
creating the other. The sister is here; like the “sweet daughter,” however, she is “mingled” there as well.

The poem’s second stanza enacts the transition from “my” to “your,” or from elegist to audience, earlier than in similar elegies. Rather than putting the elegist in place of the audience, as if having shared sympathy, Wheatley juxtaposes – and ultimately contrasts – the two perspectives. Focusing particularly on the “lady” of the title, addressed now as “Madam,” Wheatley chastises the excessive grief on display while, at the same time, pointing out its inevitable incompleteness and ultimate failure:

But, Madam, let your grief be laid aside,

And let the fountain of your tears be dry’d,

In vain they flow to wet the dusty plain,

Your sighs are wafted to the skies in vain,

Your pains they witness, but they can no more,

While Death reigns tyrant o’er this mortal shore. (ll. 13-18)

The double emphasis on vanity – vain tears as well as vain sighs – emphasizes, in turn, the double vanity of individual grief. The poem encourages the woman to “let [her] grief be laid aside” – in the passive voice – not because the subject is unworthy of being grieved for nor because the woman’s grief is insincere as such. Rather, the elegy suggests that individual grieving is categorically insufficient. Wheatley demonstrates this insufficiency by drawing examples from the natural world: tears juxtaposed with the whole of the “dusty plain” and the “wafts” of sighs compared to the wind of the skies. Because of this discord in scale, the natural world can “witness” but “can [do] no more,” the elegy implies, as long as the individual insists on acting as the primary mourner. Imploring that “grief be laid aside,” the urging of the poem is
thus for the individual to stop mimicking nature on a small and ineffectual scale and to “lay aside” – that is, to give grief and responsibility for its expression over to the natural world itself and instead take on a role as “witness” for herself. The ocean, co-mingled with death, “reigns tyrant” not in its obliteration of grief but in its sovereign power of mourning for its whole kingdom, the entire “mortal shore.”

As with many of her poems – elegies and otherwise – Wheatley leaves “Avis” on a literal (and littoral) shoreline. She opens the final stanza with an image of the ocean at night and its reflection of the night sky: “The glowing stars and silver queen of light/At last must perish in the gloom of night” (ll. 19-20). Juxtaposing the moon, the “silver queen of light,” with the “tyrant” realm of the ocean that “reigns…o’er,” Wheatley suggests natural unity – a celestial and material whole. In suggesting its wholeness, she likewise suggests its continuity and, by extension, implies its inescapability and eternal continuation. If the ocean is the “tyrant” that not only “reigns…o’er” but also contains the material body of the moon itself, the “queen of light,” then Wheatley’s elegy casts doubt on the ability of any material body – including the human body – to escape or transcend salt water. The moon perishes in the ocean at the “gloom” of each night and rises from the ocean at each night’s birth. Like the human body, itself having emerged onto land from salt water in both Biblical and evolutionary terms, the moon is born of the sea, as are the stars.76 The moon and the stars – like both Wheatley and the planet itself – carry the ocean with them forever in their memories, in their bodies, and in their hearts.77

Thus Wheatley’s elegiac argument continues: the ocean holds the dead as well as the living and we “fix our eyes” on its vast domain in order to know our selves and to ensure the dead are mourned and memorialized. Thinking now both of her extended trope of death as a sea voyage and her imperative toward littoral presence, she commands the gentleman and lady
toward the ocean as physically before them: “Resign thy friends to that Almighty hand/Which gave them life, and bow to his command” (ll. 21-22). Wheatley again reminds readers that life comes from the ocean – now in the Glissantian sense that the ocean produces shorelines upon which we land – upon which we “land” ourselves – and upon which we learn to live or, in some cases, learn to live again after the death of the body or the death of the slave ship. Our “friends” are materially “resigned” to the “hand” of the ocean currents. Wheatley suggests we “bow to his command,” but this gesture is not suggestive of passivity or resignation toward the sea. Rather, while Wheatley encourages us to “[r]esign thy friends,” our selves may choose to bow. This suggests chosen acquiescence, rather than a forced one – and I argue as such in relation to the ocean’s own “bowing” in the form of waves. Ocean waves constantly rise, then bend, then crash: the ocean is endlessly bowing. When we bow to the ocean, then, the ocean bows back to us: it announces its reciprocity. As we mingle with the ocean, as we bring our mourning to it, the ocean acknowledges our grief and assures us that it will not forget.

Wheatley’s elegy concludes with an important poetic turn toward Avis herself. While in the poem’s first stanza the three deceased persons, the brother, the sister, and one-year-old Avis, are given roughly equal time and attention, with Avis’ death only slightly emphasized through the adjective “sweet,” Avis receives nearly the entire attention of the final twelve lines of the poem. Just as the gentleman drops from the second stanza via Wheatley’s “Madam,” the brother and sister are here entirely occluded, as if the bow of line 22 has acknowledged their physical absence while dismissing their poetic presence. In enacting this shift, Wheatley’s elegy becomes more tangibly oceanic. She encourages the couple to “[t]hine Avis give without a murm’ring heart/Though half thy soul be fated to depart” (ll. 23-34) – and her use of “murmur,” in contrast with the louder and more pronounced sounds of the sea highlighted elsewhere in the poem,
continues the discouragement of individualized, private mourning developed in the second stanza as the “murm’ring heart” echoes the sounds of “the fountain of…tears” and the soft “wafting” of the woman’s sighs. Likewise, Wheatley’s use of “depart” at the end of line 24 foregrounds the death-as-voyage trope once more, while establishing intimate connection between the mother and Avis: “half thy soul.” This suggestion of incompleteness reiterates the insufficiency of personal mourning, but its foregrounding of the “departure” endured – in different ways – by both mother and daughter emphasizes the explicitly gendered aspect of the elegy and its more intimate connections to Wheatley herself.

In the proposal for a second volume of her poetry, published in the *Boston Evening Post and General Advertiser* on October 30, November 6, and November 27, 1779, Wheatley, now Phillis Peters, is described as such: “the ingenious author…a *Female African*, whose lot it was to fall into the hands of a *generous* master and *great* benefactor.” The proposal continues with the following appeal to prospective readers:

> The learnd and ingenuous as well as those who are pleased with novelty, are invited to encourage the publication by a generous subscription – the former, that they may fan the sacred fire which, is self-enkindled in the breast of this *young* African – The ingenuous that they may by reading this collection, have a large play for their imaginations, and be ex[c]ited to please and benefit mankind, by some brilliant production of their own pens. – Those who are *always* in search of some *new* thing, that they may obtain a sight of this *rara avis in terra*… (169)\(^{78}\)

This portrayal of Wheatley as a *rara avis*, as “some *new* thing,” is directly related to the characterization and promotion of Wheatley and her work as an astonishment – or a wonder – discussed below. Yet the seeming coincidence of these two “Avis” mentions also gestures at a
different significance. Throughout her life, Wheatley was consistently referred to in the language of difference, exceptionality, and strangeness. The above use of *rara avis* consciously echoes familiar terminology applied to Wheatley in both Boston and London – and it’s probable not only that perception of Wheatley as an *avis* predated her composition of the “Avis” elegy but also that Wheatley appropriated such terminology in order to conceive of herself in such terms.

As previously discussed – and as expanded upon below – Wheatley’s consistent link between sailing and flying is well established. Reflecting both on her 1761 experience as well as her crossing to and from England in 1773, Wheatley must have thought – even felt – something like a bird, and was certainly aware of the perception of her own bodily strangeness, as well as her intellectual exceptionality, as demonstrated in poems from “Cambridge” to “Dartmouth.”

The most provocative link between “Avis” and Wheatley’s sense of herself as *rara avis* is found in her hymns to the morning and evening, both composed between the spring of 1772 and the summer of 1773. Birds figure prominently in both poems. In “An Hymn to the Morning,” the sunrise encourages “[h]armonius lays the feather’d race [to] resume” (l. 9), while in “An Hymn to the Evening,” the sunset generates a similar avian response:

> Majestic grandeur! From the zephyr’s wing,
>
> Exhales the incense of the blooming spring.
>
> Soft purl the streams, the birds renew their notes,
>
> And through the air their mingled music floats. (ll. 3-6)

In both poems, Wheatley parallels herself with birds. The “harmonious lays” of “the feather’d race” find their analogue in Wheatley’s “my lays” and “my strains” of lines 1 and 2 of the morning poem. Her emphasis on the bird’s “painted plume” echoes the attention paid to her own body from her “labours” in writing (l. 2) to the “pleasures [that] in my bosom rise” (l. 16) to the
closing sensation of the sun’s “fervid beams too strong” and Wheatley’s exclamation, “But Oh! I feel [them]” (l. 19). Likewise, in “An Hymn to the Evening,” Wheatley matches avian responses to sunset – “renew[ing] their notes” and “mingl[ing]” their “music” with the “zephyr,” or westerly wind – with her own sensory observation and creative impulse:

Through all the heav’ns what beauteous dies are spread!

But the west glories in the deepest red:

So may our breasts with ev’ry virtue glow,

The living temples of our God below! (ll. 7-10)

Wheatley’s birds – like Wheatley herself – demonstrate preference for the littoral, for interstitial and border spaces. Both Wheatley and her birds, for example, are inspired to song by sunrise, the natural event that joins (while separating) day and night and establishes a line dividing dark and light. Importantly, however, neither is inspired by the day itself. Wheatley notes in the concluding lines that, while the sunrise “awake[ns] the sacred lyre,” the “rising radiance” of the sun “concludes th’ abortive song” while it still “scarce begun” (ll. 13, 18, 20.) And in “Evening,” Wheatley notes that song begins, both for herself and birds, once the sun begins to set – but emphasizes that once sunset has definitively resolved itself into night, the song ends again:

“Night’s leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes/Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora rise” (ll. 17-18). Thus song – or poetry – emerges for both the birds and Wheatley from these less-defined spaces, a crossing that explains her attraction to the oceanic, her identification with birds, and the particular resonance of the avis/“Avis.”

Wheatley’s attention to Avis as a site of correspondence intensifies once she (Avis) has “waft[ed] triumphant through the seas of air” (l. 26). “Consign[ed]” to the “shining guards” of the sea, Avis becomes expansive and all-encompassing. With “[h]er soul enlarg’d,” she now
“feeds on truth and uncreated things” (l. 28) – yet still seems corporeal, at least to Wheatley. Following this initially-strange allusion, Wheatley switches the focus of the elegy from direct address to an internal account of her own relation to Avis. “Methinks I hear her in the realms above,” Wheatley writes, “[a]nd leaning forward with a filial love/Invite you there to share immortal bliss” (ll. 30-31). But while she calls attention to Avis’s “invite” by referring back to the “lady” (now as “you”), she doesn’t pair this with a suggestion of action, as in the previous “let your grief be laid aside.” In fact, once Wheatley hears Avis, she is unable to return the elegy to its given purpose and structure. The missing “you” of the final two lines, implicit when it should be explicit, obscures the ways in which her own affective sense of Avis has overwhelmed her responsibility to the gentleman and lady and flooded the elegy itself.

These closing lines both reinforce a sense of the poem’s oceanic underpinning and generate the sensation of the ocean itself. When Wheatley insists that Avis now “feeds on truth and uncreated things,” we can understand the oceanic nature of this mysterious phrase in two ways. The ocean exists as truth if we conceive of truth as originary or primordial. The ocean as “uncreated thing,” however, speaks to the struggles with form and order that the ocean presents. Timeless but always changing, constantly in motion but forever in place – the ocean “uncreates” itself as soon as it creates, as do its constitutive parts and identifiable features, such as waves.

This is likewise the case for littoral spaces. The ocean is always uncreating the coast as we think we know it, changing its shape, its substance, its composition. The ocean saturates the sand, changes its density until what was once land seems – temporarily – other. Swamps, bogs, marshes, bayous: these topographical features as well are made “uncreated things” by their association with the sea and salt water. Yet while traditionally thought of as “waste” spaces, Wheatley’s precise location of Avis there changes such ideas – foregrounding them instead as
spaces of utmost importance. When Wheatley says that she hears Avis “in the realms above,” she also means that she hears Avis in the ocean. Avis leans forward in the ocean’s tides and waves toward the shore as we fix our eyes on the “wat’ry” element with which she is now mingled. She invites us to share this immortal leaning by reconfiguring ourselves to a more oceanic rhythm, a sea-pace of life – and encourages us, in fact, in the final two lines, to live like the ocean itself.

“With tow’ring hopes, and growing grace arise,” Wheatley concludes, emphasizing the expanse of space the sea presents, and “seek beatitude beyond the skies” (ll. 33-34). Here, Wheatley points her elegy toward the horizon, toward the point where the ocean seems to end, seems to become sky, but where we know – regardless – that it continues. At sea, we find “half [our] soul” – there, we find “beatitude,” grace, truth, and love.

“astonish’d eyes…wond’rous acts”: “the wonders of the main”

In reading Phillis Wheatley’s elegy for George Whitefield, Max Cavitch devotes particular attention to Wheatley’s “emphasis…on fateful transatlantic crossings” and “the crossing motifs that abound in Wheatley’s verse” (49-50). In noting that “[w]ith her trip to London in 1773, Wheatley got a taste of the astonishing free mobility that characterized Whitefield’s circumatlantic ministry,” Cavitch also emphasizes an important aspect of Wheatley’s sensibility prior to this 1773 moment: “But prior to that momentous trip, she had already begun to imagine, with the elegist’s characteristic, if unconscious, grandiosity, taking Whitefield’s place” (50). While Cavitch’s focus ultimately lands on what he terms “an implicit logic of substitution at work here, whereby Whitefield’s death – his silencing – enables the music of the poet’s tongue” (50), I want to identify another logical association that follows from Cavitch’s observation: the idea that Wheatley’s elegy for Whitefield also reveals her
appropriation of his “circumatlantic” nature. Wheatley, in other words, is also a mariner – she is the one who sails.

In *Shakespeare’s Ocean*, Dan Brayton notes that, like Glissant’s doubleness of the sea itself, sea voyages are also double: they are “both horizontal excursions across the surface and vertical passages into the depths” (63). In this section, I move from readings of Wheatley’s ocean storms and her elegiac oceans to highlight her attention to the ocean as a space of and for travel. In many ways, this builds from Wheatley’s trope of death as a sea voyage. If we read her Whitefield elegy as a process of substituting her body for Whitefield’s, for example, we’re immediately drawn to her image of Whitefield as “wing[ing] with rapid course his way/And sail[ing] to Zion through vast seas of day” (ll. 13-14). Yet in such cases, Wheatley’s oceanic fascination manifests in different ways as well. In contrast to her focus on the ocean as a site of mourning, as in her elegies, or as a site of history and memory, as in her attention to the hurricane of “Hussey and Coffin,” Wheatley’s attention to ocean travel evokes the sea as a site and space of wonder – particularly in the case of the two poems, “A Farewel to America” and “Ocean,” that bookend the 1773 travel emphasized in the passage quoted above. This development of the ocean as wondrous speaks directly to Wheatley’s development of an unique theory of imagination and places her in conversation with contemporary theories of the ecological that stress the importance of wonder in generating ecologically-minded engagements with the natural world and nonhuman nature.

As mentioned above, the idea of wonder frequently contacts Wheatley criticism with regard to the person of Wheatley herself: Wheatley as *rara avis*. This is not only the case in the proposal for her second volume of poetry. Rather, we hear similar echoes in Wheatley’s reminder to her audience that she is “[a]n Ethiope…black as Cain” (“Cambridge” l. 28; “On
Being Brought” l. 7) and in various adjectives used by others to describe both her writing and her bodily presence in New England. John Wheatley’s November 14, 1772 letter, for example, describes her as “an utter Stranger” who provokes “great Astonishment of all who heard her” (7), while the “To the Publick” statement that affirmed Wheatley’s authorship of her poems at the beginning of Poems on Various Subjects both emphasizes her “Disadvantage of serving as a Slave” and foregrounds her previous status as “An uncultivated Barbarian from Africa” (8). Yet while “Wheatley herself represented such an object of wonder during the Enlightenment: an African slave who could use language better than her master” (Billingsley 164) – and while Wheatley herself was likely complicit in such portrayals, in part as a strategy for marketing and publicizing her work – my particular interest is in Wheatley’s more active use of wonder. Thus, rather than focusing on how Wheatley’s own position as rara avis encouraged white audiences to extend that characterization to her poems themselves, judging them as “marvels” for the reason of their mere existence, my emphasis is on how Wheatley cultivated her own sense of wonder, how she expressed those practices of wonder in her work, and how they came to define her relationship to a variety of oceanic encounters.

In her study of Wheatley and wonder, Jennifer Billingsley writes: “What is important is that Wheatley was not just an object of wonder” (170). Rather:

She takes possession of the cultural apparatus that appropriated the new world and uses it for her own purposes in her poetry. She exercises the faculty of wonder in her poetry, making classical references and invoking the supernatural, utilizing natural wonders to invoke the sublime, and using even herself as one of these wunderkinds, thence investing race with a new sense of wonder in an attempt to redeem that original sense of wonder.
that induced observers to test their tautologies and view the world in more complex
terms. (170)

Thus Billingsley reads Wheatley – in terms that I return to throughout this section – as
generating both “an object-oriented wonder” (175) and a “poetics of wonder” (181). She argues
that Wheatley enacted a purposeful antagonism between classical models that embraced wonder
as “a basic faculty, the very prerequisite of thought” (163) and the Age of Reason’s skepticism of
wonder: “As wonderful discoveries eventually became subsumed into the ordinary as they were
naturalized and assimilated into new scientific systems, the Age of Reason disputed not only the
value of wonder as a prerequisite of agency but the very facticity of an object of wonder”
(Billingsley 168). Accordingly, Wheatley’s wonder is properly understood from an
epistemological standpoint. It is not simply that the contents of her poems are wonders – though
they often are. As Billingsley writes in reading “Thoughts on the Works of Providence,”
Wheatley “calls upon natural wonders to assist her poetic impulse and to induce her reader to
wonder and view the world in more complex terms” (171). Nor, of course, is it simply that
Wheatley herself is a wonder. Rather, Wheatley’s wonder generates a different – and particularly
contemporary – mode and method of thinking itself. To quote again from Billingsley, “[f]or
Wheatley wonder is that subjective faculty that can breach the gap between man and the world”
(170). By “evok[ing] a faculty superior to the natural order of things…wonders allow the mind to
‘unfold,’ not necessarily to collapse in on itself” (177, 178). Ultimately, Billingsley concludes,
Wheatley’s “faculty of wonder destabilizes accepted tautologies by triggering ontological
questions as well as epistemological ones” (185).\textsuperscript{81}

Though the epistemological and ontological importance of wonder should not be
understated, my primary concern here is not that wonder is epistemological but, rather, that it is
explicitly ecological as well. Rachel Carson addresses this potential in *The Sense of Wonder* as she discusses the generation of “spine-tingling response” to “a world of elemental things” (9, 10). For Carson, wonder is not merely aesthetic appreciation or “an unfailing antidote against…boredom and disenchantments” (43). Rather, “noticing and responding to the magic” of the natural world has three essential consequences (39). First, wonder prepares us to think. As Carson argues, “[o]nce the emotions have been aroused – a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love – then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning” (45). Feeling, in other words, precedes thinking. Indeed, the impulse toward thinking is made possible by the emotional arousal that Carson cites: there is, in fact, no such thing as disinterested thinking in this way. Second, wonder enables pleasure. Pleasure is an essential component of the ecological because of its connection to love and its love of connection. The important of pleasure, moreover, can often supersede the possession of knowledge where the natural world is concerned. As she writes of watching the night sky, “[a]n experiences like that, when one’s thoughts are released to roam through the lonely spaces of the universe can be shared…even if you don’t know the name of a single start. You can still drink in the beauty, and think and wonder at the meaning of what you see” (55). And third, wonder enables acceptance – which, in turn, develops a more relational view of the self. Beauty makes objects into things, and love makes those things dear, but wonder allows us to accept them in relation to our selves.

In turning her attention specifically toward Wheatley’s oceans, Billingsley contrasts a Kantian perspective of the sea to Wheatley’s perspective. “The ocean,” she writes, “was not necessarily a representation merely of the sublime for Wheatley.” Rather, she argues, “it conveyed personal wonder.” As such, “the ocean…did not represent the unattainable” (177). As
I’ll begin to demonstrate now, Wheatley – though often couching her discussion of the oceanic in classical terms and references – developed a relationship to the sea that was both approachable and intimate in contrast to both conventional early American portrayals and dominant philosophical thought of the eighteenth century.

“A Farewel to America”

On May 8, 1773, Phillis Wheatley left Boston Harbor aboard the London Packet, a ship owned by John Wheatley. Upon departure, her poem “A Farewel to America” was published in the Massachusetts Gazette, the Boston Post-Boy, and the Boston Weekly News-Letter.82 The poem opens with a wistful tone, as if already nostalgic for land the speaker hasn’t yet left and for oncoming markers of spring she fears she will miss:

Adieu New England’s smiling Meads,

Adieu the flow’ry Plain:

I leave thy op’ning Charms, O Spring!

To try the Azure Reign. (ll. 1-4)

Interestingly, Wheatley stylizes her place of departure in order to focus on the natural world she is departing from – and it doesn’t seem as if the poem holds any attachment to the built environment of Boston. She definitively places the poem in New England and displays a keen sensitivity to that environment. Yet she doesn’t extend her sentiments to the city itself: no streets, no stores, no churches, no houses. This contrasts with the poem’s later desire to see the built environment of London: “the mantl’d Town to View” (l. 39). Here, Wheatley speaks of the natural world as an impediment to her experience of London itself. In other words, as many writers before and after her have done, she writes of the fog:

Deep in a Vale, where London lies,
With misty Vapours crown’d;

Which cloud Aurora’s thousand Dyes

And veil her Charms around (ll. 33-36)

In this way, “Farewel” highlights New England as nature’s space – but it also parallels Wheatley’s oblique references in “Cambridge,” “On Being Brought,” and “Dartmouth” to the littoral space of West Africa and Wheatley’s experiences of leaving the land and shoreline there under decidedly other conditions.

Rather than anticipating her arrival in London, Wheatley spends much of the poem’s first half imagining and recording what she’ll miss while absent from New England. In addition to the “smiling Meads” and “Flowrets,” she notes that:

In vain the feather’d Songsters sing,

In vain the Garden blooms,

And on the Bosom of the Spring

Breathes out her sweet Perfumes (ll. 21-24)

Wheatley’s perception that nature will happen “in vain” if she is not present to witness it speaks to her particular relationship with the natural world. By gesturing toward the “vanity” of blooming flowers and singing birds, Wheatley isn’t merely indulging her own vanity – as if such things won’t happen or will go completely unnoticed. Rather, it’s that no one else will notice – or experience – them in Wheatley’s particular way and with her particular sensibility. These lines thus highlight Wheatley’s own awareness of how her perception of nature differs from that of her New England readers and lament that no one will fill her role while she is away. Susanna, after all, may mourn and lament, but only for the absence of Phillis herself.
Thus while Susanna is revealed as a mourner in the poem’s fourth stanza – “Susanna mourns, nor can I bear/To see the Christal Show’r/Fast falling, – the indulgent Tear/In sad Departure’s Hour!” (ll. 13-16) – Wheatley also “mourn[s] for Health deny’d” (l. 8), a reference to her own health and that of the world around her. This focus on figures of mourning, along with the poem’s use of language such as “Adieu,” “leave,” “languish,” “Grief,” and “Groan,” places Wheatley’s “Farewel” in conversation with a different sort of “farewell” poem: her oceanic elegies. Particularly in the fourth and fifth stanzas of the poem, Wheatley turns to similar elegiac tropes – the “Christal Show’r” of the “Tear” over the horizon, for example, while her admonishment to “curb the rising Groan for me/Nor Sighs disturb thy Breast” (ll. 19-20) addresses the same imperative that Wheatley’s elegiac speakers often give to the living who grieve for the dead. Yet in assuring Susanna of her return, Wheatley offers the same assurance as her elegies: that the ocean preserves life, rather than destroying it.  

But Wheatley’s “Farewel” isn’t simply a binary tension between nostalgia and anticipation, or nature and culture, within a juxtaposition of these terrestrial locales of America and England – and it its careful attention to the ocean’s materiality, the poem surpasses Gilroy’s model of the Black Atlantic just as “On Being Brought” does. The simple present “I leave,” rather than progressive “I am leaving” or future “I will leave,” centers the poem always already at sea. This opening stanza sets the poem adrift in the “Azure Reign,” where it directs farewells at one coast while waiting to arrive on “Britannia’s distant shore.” Likewise, the occasional nature of the poem, its composition and publication upon Wheatley’s departure as well as the inclusion of her imagined arrival, insists that we also read it in the time of Wheatley’s transit (or “trying”) itself – that we think of an Atlantic interval that is dynamic, not static, timely, not timeless.
Wheatley’s use of “Azure” bears particular significance in this way. On one hand, “azure” designates “the clear blue colour of the unclouded sky, or of the sea reflecting it” (“Azure”). Here, to describe the sea as “azure” approaches the tautological – the ocean is the color of the ocean – while asserting both autonomy and materiality. At the same time that it describes the sea, however, “azure” comes from the sea – it’s oceanic language – as a word “used…as an epithet of sea- and river-deities and things belonging to them” (“Azure). Moreover, this duality would have been especially prominent in both Wheatley’s eighteenth century and in many of the neoclassical texts with which she was familiar.85

I want to consider, though, how “azure” defines the Atlantic, rather than an ocean simply borrowed from classical and neoclassical literature, through an argument about color. Despite frequent transpositions in other contexts, on a color wheel, “azure” is not synonymous with “blue.” Rather, it shades toward blue-green cyan on the more modern RBG wheel – or toward what older models, such as the Newton-inflected color circles of the eighteenth century painter Claude Boutet identify as verd de mer: sea-green.86 As an abstract concept, of course, “the sea” is not necessarily green. Neither are all specific oceans: the Pacific, for example, is blue. But the Atlantic Ocean is green – and to this point, we can recall Glissant’s “green splendor of the sea” as well as Whitman’s “transparent green-wash of the sea” (“This Compost” 496) and Winslow Homer’s paintings of the North Atlantic.87 This coloration results from a variety of factors, from water depth to the presence of algae – and in the coastal areas to which Wheatley’s work is especially attentive, this green, or “azure,” is influenced by tides, waves, and storms as well. Thus, Wheatley’s “azure” is an important point of linguistic and environmental intersection – a meeting of the categorical and the particular. Likewise, in linking the quality of Atlantic waters
with various deities, classical and pagan as well as Christian, Wheatley generates a sense of the marvelous and the enchanted – the “Azure Reign” of the Atlantic as wondrous water.

Wheatley also ascribes vibrancy to the open ocean itself, rather than the coastline alone. Her opening stanza uses “plain” with regard to the New England landscape, linking it with the preceding line’s “smiling Meads” and the birds and gardens of stanza 6. This “plain” is welcoming and inviting, “smiling” and “Sweet,” and responsive to human attention: “for me,” Wheatley writes, “the Flowrets rise” (l. 5). In stanza 7, she repeats the term, but in reference to the sea: “We sweep the liquid Plain” (l. 26). Juxtaposed with extended descriptions of New England’s “plains,” Wheatley resists reading the two spaces in opposing fashion. Her characterization asks readers to consider how the ocean might mirror familiar elements of the terrestrial world such as plains and meadows – how land and water might, in fact, have more “liquid” relations with one another.

Correlations abound from such associations. Ecologically speaking, meadows – or Wheatley’s “Meads” – mediate traditional distinctions between nature and culture. Meadows are more “natural” than pastures, for example, but still bear traces of human influence and interaction. Likewise, plains often function as more intensive agricultural areas, even as they continue testifying to the elemental forces of their creation: wind, water, ice, lava, and so forth. Populating terrestrial plains with plant and animal life, then suggesting that the ocean is also a “plain,” Wheatley points toward correspondence: open oceans are neither voids nor alien spaces. Moreover, such gestures challenge established feelings related to the ocean. If the music of “feather’d Songsters” provokes such fervent emotion, then why not the sounds of fish? If the “sweet Perfumes” of “gaudy Flowrets,” then why not the salt and brine of the azure Atlantic?
Between May of 1773, when “Farewel” was published in Boston, and July, when it was published in the *London Chronicle*, Wheatley made a number of changes to the text, including to both sections discussed above. In addressing these particular alterations, I suggest that such changes are not disinterested aesthetic choices but, rather, conscious responses to Wheatley’s six weeks at sea that emphasize the ocean’s affective power – particularly as it relates to wonder. Likewise, I’ll entertain a palimpsestic notion of the poem – both for contemporary readers and eighteenth century ones, who may have known multiple versions of “Farewel” as well. In this sense, I am thinking of these revisions as additions or constitutive parts, rather than as substitutive replacements or erasures.

In the Boston version(s) of the poem, lines 3 and 4 read as follows: “I leave thy op’ning Charms, O Spring!/To try the Azure Reign.” In the London version, however, they appear as such: “I leave thine op’ning charms, O spring/And tempt the roaring main.” This new line, in its switch from “try” to “tempt” and its substitution of “roaring main” for “Azure Reign,” makes important assertions about Wheatley’s oceanic encounter. “Trying” emphasizes the ocean’s inherent risk, but also conveys the sense of a passive object, an inert body waiting to be tried. “Tempt” suggests seduction – but also that the sea itself can be “tempted,” entangling us with the ocean in a more active sense of relation and intimacy. Moreover, if we consider this “tempt” in more religious context, we can especially consider the Old Testament use of “tempt” – not in the sense of the Genesis story of temptation (and, thus, the Fall), but in God’s use of tempt and temptation to demonstrate worthiness, faithfulness, and honesty, as in the tempting of Abraham. In this sense, to tempt the ocean would be an explicit endeavor to prove its goodness.

Wheatley’s shift from “Azure Reign” to “roaring main” presents additional complexities. Both phrases poeticize the sea itself, but shifting from sight to sound, color to noise, gives the
ocean a vocal capacity that carries intention and agency. The volume of “roaring,” associated with danger, peril, and animality, connects the poem to the open ocean as well as the littoral and places the reader in a different position than visualization of “azure” alone – this is part of what is so “perplexing” about hurricanes as well. Wheatley’s switch from “reign” to “main” likewise moves toward more direct and affective language. While “reign” suggests the metaphor of a sovereign “azure,” “main” revises this trope in order to foreground the material ocean itself. While “Azure Reign” gives a placid sense of the imagined and anticipated ocean, revising to include the “roaring main” remains increasingly faithful to the lived experience itself. Moreover, because “roaring main” alerts attention to its sound, it generates a reading sensibility more aware of the changes Wheatley makes through the remainder of the poem.

The other dramatic change is to the poem’s seventh stanza. In the Boston version, it reads:

While for Britannia’s distant Shore
We sweep the liquid Plain,
’Till Aura to the Arms restore,
Of this belov’d Domain. (ll. 25-28)

In London, however, Wheatley published:

While for Britannia’s distant shore
We sweep the liquid plain,
And with astonish’d eyes explore
The wide-extended main. (ll. 25-28)

Rather than rushing toward terrestrial return, Wheatley’s revision leaves the stanza at sea. While the poem longed previously for land’s “Arms,” it now yearns for the “wide-extended,”
emphasizing the sea’s physical vastness. Likewise, the repetition of “main” senses the ocean’s complexity and metamorphosis: sometimes the ocean roars and sometimes it doesn’t. Moreover, it is here that Wheatley engages most directly in what Elaine Scarry calls “the everyday fact of staring” (5). These “astonish’d eyes,” a bodily response, are wonderstruck – then open wide, as they literally “explore” their surroundings.

**Wheatley’s imagination**

Critics don’t often pay attention to these “astonish’d eyes,” but they are a key element in understanding both Wheatley’s theory of imagination (as outlined in “On Imagination”) and how her imaginative practice is explicitly shaped by the oceanic. “On Imagination” begins by representing imagination as an “imperial queen” and imagination’s “various works” are correspondingly figured as tangible—embodied objects, or “bright…forms…deck’d with pomp,” that “we see” (ll. 1-2). The opening stanza continues to stress this physicality, or thing-ness, of imagination through repetition of visible and sensory characteristics of these “works”: variety (“various”), “order,” and “potent[cy]” (ll. 1, 3, 4). Its description of imaginative objects as “bright” suggests their possession of what Jane Bennett calls “thing-power” (*Vibrant Matter* 2) and the poem’s third line, which indicates that these “various works” are simultaneously “wond’rous acts,” further suggests their capacity for generative and independent agency. These “works” demonstrate their potentialities as actants as they “stand” in “beauteous order” and “attest” to the “potent” nature of imagination’s “hand,” their brightness and beauty coalescing into precisely this “wond’rous” sense (ll. 1-4).

The poem’s third stanza stages a sustained encounter with the “wond’rous” via a conception of material vibrancy – beginning with its address of “fancy” (l. 9). Fancy is defined primarily by mobility – “Now here, now there, the roving *Fancy flies*” – and this idiosyncratic
“roving” from “here” to “there” insists upon its own autonomy. Fancy’s mobility, in turn, generates its own detachment. As it “roves,” it conceives of its environment as an external matrix in which to exist, plotting points on a map rather than inhabiting a mesh of shared space. As consequence, fancy remains disembodied and ironically static, suspended in a flight that never ends.

As the stanza continues, it is the thing-power of the “lov’d object” that ultimately interrupts “roving Fancy”:

Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies,
Till some lov’d object strikes her wand’ring eyes,
Whose silken fetters all the senses bind,
And soft captivity involves the mind. (ll. 9-12)

Though initially perceived as the inert recipient of love, the “lov’d object” actively “strikes” the eyes of fancy and irrevocably alters the cognitive and physical relationships between the two. Stunned, even temporarily blinded, fancy is all at once held rapt by the object. But rather than enacting a simple reversal of subject and object, or the process of an object “becoming” subject, the final lines of the stanza, with their paired “binding” of the senses and “involving” of the mind and the parallelism of “silken fetters” and “soft captivity,” gesture toward more categorical rethinking of subject-object relations as such – what Billingsley means in speaking of wonder’s power to “break the gap between man and the world.” This experience of wonder alters the ontology of the poem itself. Moreover, the limitless “force” of imagination celebrated by the poem – “Imagination! who can sing thy force?” (l. 13) – is generated not by “fancy” but specifically by things. Imagination, in other words, like wonder itself, comes from outside the mind; indeed, from outside the body as well.
There is direct correspondence, then, between these “wand’ring eyes” that “bind” the “senses” and the “astonish’d eyes” that “explore” until they meet the “wide-extended” ocean—the “plain” of which “strikes” the eyes as a “lov’d object” of beauty and wonder. Once Wheatley engages the “force” of imagination directly, she cannot help but speak of it in oceanic language. She describes, for example, “the swiftness of thy course,” “surpass[ing] the wind,” “the rolling universe,” “measure[ing] the skies,” and, most tellingly, in the final lines of the fourth stanza of “On Imagination”: “There in one view we grasp the mighty whole/Or with new worlds amaze th’ unbounded soul” (ll. 14, 17, 18, 20, 21-22).

“Ocean”

Having left England on July 26, 1773, Wheatley arrived in Boston on September 13, two days after Poems on Various Subjects was released for sale in London. I conclude this study of her “vast Atlantic,” then, with the first poem composed upon her return. Dated September 1773, it provides a logical counterpoint for “Farewel” and a bookend for her travel experience itself. Likewise, we might imagine that the poem began, at least in its imaginative origins, before this moment of arrival itself. In either case, the poem strikes a particularly oceanic note, one well-suited to its title: “Ocean.”

Though “Ocean” makes extensive use of classical references, the poem remains in striking contact with the materiality of the natural world. Wheatley begins the poem by invoking a sense of the imaginative muse. Here, however, she makes an interesting admission: “In vain my Eyes explore the “wat’ry reign/By you unaided with the flowing strain” (ll. 5-6). We recognize the “wat’ry reign” here as the “Azure Reign” of “Farewell” and we are familiar with Wheatley’s exploring eyes, which found astonishment in “[t]he wide-extended main” weeks before. Wheatley’s attempt to return her eyes to the ocean, the site of her previous astonishment,
is telling. As Elaine Scarry writes, this compulsion to return to, or “replicate,” such experiences is a direct result of an encounter with beauty: “What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication…Beauty brings copies of itself into being” (3). This, then, is the effect of having been “struck” by the “lov’d object”: “At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering…When we come upon beautiful things…we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before…we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us” (111-112). In exploring the sea again, the poem doesn’t just seek aesthetic inspiration, as the invocation of artistic muses might imply. Rather, it searches for experience: the “soft captivity” that will bind “all the senses.” Where previously Wheatley looked to be “struck” by “some lov’d object,” now she looks to be touched by “the flowing strain” – by imaginative sensation that will act and feel like the ocean itself.

Following this prefatory invocation, Wheatley turns attention from literary creation to the ocean’s place in earthly creation. With both classical and religious echoes, Wheatley imagines the “Chaos” (l. 7) and “Confusion” (l. 9) of “the boundless whole” (l. 8). This “Chaos,” she continues, is resolved by the “divine Command” (l. 9) that “[o]n floating azure fix’d the Solid Land” (l. 10). Wheatley’s distinction between “Solid Land” and the mutable ocean, which “floats”, frames her understanding of elemental and geological differences in terms of animation: oceans move, change, and morph, while land is “Solid” and offers escape from this uncertainty. Yet Wheatley’s imaginative sensibility prefers the ocean in both “On Imagination” and in the opening lines of “Ocean.” If one seeks “struck” eyes, then one can’t remain exclusively on immobile land. Even in Wheatley’s resolution of this chaos and confusion, the “Solid Land”
“fix’d” “on floating azure,” she continues to privilege both the ocean and the oceanic quality of floating” as the underpinning of earthly experience: the solidity of “Solid Land” is a myth. “Solid Land” only seems solid in relation to the underlying ocean, which continues to impart to it a salty sort of floating. “Solid Land,” as such, is actually littoral – a coast or marsh – imbued with the possibility of becoming (or re-becoming) oceanic perpetually haunting its solidity with “deepest glooms” (l. 13).

Wheatley continues to address both the earth’s oceanic origins and the misconceptions of terrestrial attachment in the following lines. In a momentary departure from her focus on land’s oceanic nature, Wheatley first embodies more conventional land-centric views of the ocean, portraying land as “walls” outside of which the ocean’s “surges roll” (l. 14). These lines likewise echo traditional otherings of the sea by setting it in a subordinate role to land: “With instant haste the new made seas complyd/And the globe rolls impervious to the Tide” (ll. 15-16). Yet this momentary entertaining of the notion that seas are subservient to the safe “walls” of land and that “the globe” operates independently of (or “impervious to”) oceanic forces – with their reminders of “Eternal Night” and “deepest glooms” – is, in fact, a sharp rebuke of disenchanted Enlightenment thought and a scornful glance at the hubris of European colonialism. A predominate, even defining, interest of Wheatley’s poetry is the oceanic uncertainty of material and earthly existence. Hussey and Coffin, Avis, Wheatley herself, are all bodies continually “snatch’d” by the sea. The idea popularized by the Age of Exploration that oceans can be tamed, or made inert, via conquest is blatant falsehood – and Wheatley’s lines gather strength here to exemplify this point.

Thus, beginning with line 17, after indulging the colonial European fantasy of “the new made seas complyd,” Wheatley refutes it by turning the poem on a simple “Yet”:
Yet when the mighty Sire of Ocean frownd
“His awful trident shook the solid Ground.”
The King of Tempests thunders o’er the plain,
And scorns the azure monarch of the main,
He sweeps the surface, makes the billows rore,
And furious, lash the loud resounding shore.
His pinion’d race his dread commands obey,
Syb’s, Eurus, Boreas, drive the foaming sea!
See the whole stormy progeny descend!
And waves on waves devolving without End (ll. 17-26)

Wheatley emphasizes the precariousness of life on “shore” in reminding her audience of the oceanic power that can emerge at any moment. As in many other places, her focus here is on one of her preferred sites of natural contemplation: the ocean storm. Life on land is “fix’d,” but oceanic chaos is beyond its control, threatening at any moment to shake its solidity. Yet Wheatley doesn’t portray oceanic violence as arbitrary. In rejecting European notions of terrestrial domination and unchallenged faith in “solid Ground,” she’s not proposing a world in which human life trembles in the shadow of the ocean and waits for arbitrary, inevitable destruction. The scene here has a cause – the reason that Neptune, “the mighty Sire of Ocean frownd” – even if it is a cause we cannot wholly know. In marking the lurking violence of the ocean, Wheatley’s lines serve as a reminder of why the ocean is often characterized negatively. This lingering trace of chaos, the threat of “devolving,” continue to evoke the sublime. When we have experienced the “shook…solid Ground,” we fear being stripped of our terrestrial protection, our life on “this ample Ball” (l. 13), and being forced toward an elemental life immersed in “the
whole stormy progeny” and the disorder of “foaming seas.” As the same time, however, the lines themselves don’t repel us. Rather, we’re held in wonder by the power and force, the “thunder” and “rore,” that Wheatley describes. Above all, what remains is the ocean’s hypnotic beauty and enchantment – the “silken fetters” and “soft captivity” of the “waves on waves…without End” that “involve the mind” and “all the senses bind.”

Wheatley’s poem then turns again. Just at the moment that it casts us out into the “furious” Atlantic with the command in line 25 to “See,” Wheatley asserts her own oceanic sensibility by directly addressing – and influencing – the sea and its storms. “But cease Eolus,” she exclaims, “all thy winds restrain/And let us view the wonders of the main” (ll. 27-28). The first half of the poem concludes by refocusing on the ocean as “blue abode,” a space of shelter and welcome (l. 29). Wheatley manipulates the address of the poem, from the linguistic play of her command “see” to her direct confrontation of the wind to the welcoming plural “us”: “let us view the wonders of the main.” The language reassures as it invites us to commune with oceanic nature. Likewise, the attention to “the wonders of the main” asks us to reconsider previous notions of the sea as other. These wonders are not static objects but vibrant things that strike our senses. Here, Wheatley invites us into the perception of ocean as active wonder that has always been hers.

The second half of “Ocean” displays an attention to the sea that is rarely found in Wheatley’s poetry: a scene of first person witness about a current moment. These are a remarkable thirty-five lines – and they conclude with a timeless environmental parable. They begin, fittingly, with Wheatley’s return to wonder: “Again with recent wonder I survey” (l. 35). Here, the poem surveys the ocean with a personal sense of wonder, rather than in an attempt to
identify its wonders. Nonetheless, the result of this wondrous survey is, indeed, the appearance of a wonder – in the form of a whale:

The finny sov’reign bask in hideous play

(So fancy sees) he makes a tempest rise
And intercept the azure vaulted skies
Such is his sport: -- but if his anger glow
What kindling vengeance boils the deep below! (ll. 36-40)\(^93\)

Wheatley’s oceanic impulses here are less couched in the poetic conventions and classical motifs that endeared her to colonial New England audiences. Returning to Boston with her book in preparation for the London press and with either knowledge or a promise for her manumission, “floating” and untethered from the “solid Ground,” Phillis Wheatley sees a whale – and she loves it. Amidst conjecture over Wheatley’s biography, misleading sources such as Oddell’s *Memoir*, poetic misattributions, and the difficulties of tracing histories of enslaved persons, this remains one of the incontrovertible facts of Wheatley’s life.\(^94\) She records the actions of the whale, the “finny sov’reign,” as if anticipatory of Melvillian attention. Likewise, she recognizes the whale as literal embodiment of the sublime, emphasizing its paradoxical impressions (the “hideous play”) and uneasy negotiation between “sport” and “Anger.” She sees the whale’s inherent danger – what “makes a tempest rise” might at any moment “boil the deep below” – but doesn’t allow this to alienate her from the whale’s wonder or turn the whale or the sea itself into antagonistic figures.

The next subject of her attention meets a much different fate. From the whale “bask[ing]” in the water, Wheatley shifts her sightline from sea to air and announces “Twas but e’er now an Eagle young and gay/Pursu’d his passage thro’ the aierial way” (ll. 41-42). Wheatley, however,
is not the only person whose attention is drawn to the bird. Calef, the ship’s captain, notices the eagle as well, and in two jarring question-and-answer lines, Wheatley ponders, then confirms, the bird’s fate: “He aim’d his piece, would C[ale]f’s hand do more/Yes, him he brought to pluto’s dreary shore” (ll. 43-44). The quick slaughter of the “Eagle young and gay” juxtaposes this flat, affectless narration (Would he shoot him? Yes.) with lines that render the bird’s physical agony in minute detail: “Slow breathed his last, the painful minutes move/With lingering pace” (ll. 44-45). Wheatley then imagines the bird’s father commanding his son “[t]o fix dominion on some distant shore” (l. 48). Likewise, she imagines the son’s “reprove” of his fate, either of his “rashness” or his disobedience: “had I staid,” the eagle exclaims, “[o]r swift my Father’s mandate had obey[’d]” (ll. 46, 49-50). Yet amidst this anthropomorphizing soliloquy, Wheatley interjects the onomatopoetic sounds of animal pain: “Ah!” and “Oh!” in line 49 and “ah!” again in line 51.

While Calef, the bird-murdering captain, has long vanished from the poem, Wheatley is not alone in her attention to the dying eagle. Rather, she describes how, while “stroak[ing] his hoary tresses,” the “Old Ocean heard his cries…and replie[d]” (ll. 51-52). For thirteen lines, Wheatley transcribes the dialogue between the ocean and a dying bird – the eagle speaking in “plaints” and a “distressful moan” (ll. 53, 54) and the ocean’s “voice str[iking] terror thro’ the whole domain” (l. 57). The ocean seeks both the cause and the meaning of the eagle’s pain – and while the bird, like Wheatley, is unable to address what his death means, he is able to convey the cause, pointing the ocean to “a tall and Gallant ship… [w]ith pompous form from Boston’s port” (ll. 59, 61) and describing “the dauntless Chief” and “[h]is fatal musket” (ll. 63, 65). Then, following his indictment, the bird dies: “Faint with his wound Iscarius said no more” (l. 67).
The poem’s ending befits its title. Bearing witness to the bird’s doubleness in death – “[h]is spirit sought Oblivion’s sable shore” while the body remained earthbound (l. 68) – the ocean “with a hollow groan/Resum’d the azure honours of his Throne” (ll. 69-70). This unresolved ending, ominous in tone, suggests more questions than answers. Earlier in the poem, Wheatley dwells on the destructive power of the ocean when it “frowns.” We might suspect, then, that Neptune’s “hollow groan” here is indicative of similar displeasure and anticipate nature’s oceanic revenge on Captain Calef and the “pompous” ship. In this way, “Ocean” becomes an environmental parable. Wheatley, who coexists with the natural world, is rewarded with the wonder of a whale sighting, while Calef, who destroys nature for sport, is likely to feel its “scorn” and “fury” – is apt, in other words, to be punished for his environmental sins. As such, this reading derives an effective ecological sensibility through this moral from Wheatley herself.

But I also prefer to end with the ocean. In highlighting “the green splendor of the sea,” Glissant also suggests its tendency toward the melancholic. Yet is it not only that the sea makes us melancholic – though, of course, it does – but also that the sea itself is melancholic. The sea is “one vast beginning,” but it is also a “hollow” repository of history and memory. It’s the elegy that outlives all elegy, the language that resists appropriation, the matrix that preserves the material. The ocean animates our lives, remembers us when we can’t remember ourselves, comforts us in our time of dying, and mourns our death forever. In a world of elemental things, the ocean fills our lives with wonder.
Chapter Four
Samson Occom’s Hymnodic Ecology

“Some Say, I cant Talk Indian”95

“But I think they can’t help understanding my talk; it is common, plain, every-day talk…Further, as it comes from an uncommon quarter, it may induce people to read it, because it is from an Indian.”96

“Pursuant to 25 CFR 83.10(l)(2), the Department publishes this notice that the Brothertown Indian Nation (BIN), Petitioner #67, is not an Indian tribe within the meaning of Federal law.”97

For both European and Native communities, hymns played important spiritual roles in the evangelical movements of eighteenth-century New England. For Native peoples, however, the practice of hymnody took on additional meanings that were not exclusively religious. Joanna Brooks notes, for example, that “hymn singing was a beloved activity among Christian Indian towns in southern New England…as a ritual of community celebration” (Occom 94). Likewise, Drew Lopenzina argues that, for Native writer during the colonial period, the “tools and circumstances” of Christian evangelism offered “a strategy for survival” – an opportunity for “cultural continuance” that operated as what Gerald Vizenor terms survivance (Red Ink xi).98 And, as I examine here in the case of the Mohegan writer and minister Samson Occom, hymns were a form of performative spiritual discourse that remained materially engaged and environmentally aware – conduits between religious affections and experiences of the natural
world that occupied a central role in defining and navigating what Occom called “this great Wilderness…this Boundless Continent…this Great Indian World” (149, 151).

Throughout his life, Occom’s writing displayed careful attention to the natural world. His 1754 “Herbs and Roots” demonstrates detailed knowledge regarding the medicinal properties of local plants: wintergreen and honey for a sore throat, poplar root for rheumatic fever (44-47). Like many eighteenth-century Americans, both Native and European, Occom was well-versed in farming and agricultural practices. In the 1768 version of his “Autobiographical Narrative,” he writes: “I took all opportunities, to get Some thing to feed my Family Daily, – I planted my own Corn, Potatoes, and Beans; I Use to be out whoeing my Corn Some times before Sun Rise” (57).

Likewise, his journal entries frequently address the use of natural resources for recreation, as well as for subsistence. Occom was, for example, fond of fishing, celebrating the activity as both a means of sustenance and a source of pleasure.

Occom’s religious prose has been similarly, albeit briefly, recognized for its natural attentions. W. DeLoss Love, for example, termed Occom “the missionary of the wilderness” and asserted that his sermons had “the indescribable scent of the forest in them” (249, 137). Yet critical studies rarely extend this same awareness to Occom’s hymns, his other major form of public religious expression – and it is this gap in attention that the present study is intended, in part, to remedy.

Scholars of early America tend to address questions of hymnody in typological and symbolic terms. Such methodologies fail to adequately consider the relationship between hymns and environmental conditions. Moreover, they do particular disservice to Native writers such as Occom. As John J. Kucich writes, “[t]he environment, for Occom, is not an empty screen upon which he can project a theological typology…he can’t afford such a purely theological
relationship to the land. For Occom, the environment is, instead, a space of intense negotiation” (12). Kucich’s argument dovetails with Lopenzina’s claim that “the better part of indigenous religion, lore, and tradition speaks of an intimate relationship with the earth that transcends a simple equation of reliance and subsistence” (Red Ink 35) – as well as with the broader tendency of Native epistemologies to eschew reductive binaries and resist totalities of belief (Red Ink 21, 38). Environmental attention to Occom’s hymns, then, intervenes in critical perceptions of both Occom himself and colonial-era Native encounters with the natural world precisely because it emphasizes moments and spaces of “intense negotiation.” By detaching the composition and performance of hymns from wholly theological motivations, in other words, such an approach highlights the ways in which they draw upon knowledge of shared material landscapes on the part of composer, singer, and audience alike. Likewise, treating hymns as relational and conditional forms of discourse enables a clearer understanding of the entanglement of Native hymnody with everyday and secular life, as well as religious practice.

In this chapter, I examine how Occom appropriated various conventions of eighteenth-century evangelical hymnody in order to generate a syncretic and ecological portrayal of “this great Wilderness.” I begin by addressing Occom’s broader interest in hymnody, as well as his general theories regarding singing and the particular circumstances that lead to his initial attempts at original composition. Via his hymn “The Sufferings of Christ,” or “Throughout the Saviour’s Life We Trace,” I then explore Occom’s invocations of the natural world’s materiality, or “matter,” and consider their implications for reading nature’s presence throughout his body of writing. Here, I argue that the attachment generated by evangelical discourse that remains materially engaged and environmentally aware both exceeds the traditional theological and
generic capacities of hymns and posits a different – and fundamentally ecological – relation between Native subjects and the natural world.

I then shift attention from the environmental content of Occom’s hymns to his interest in their performance. I consider the frequent descriptions of Native singing found throughout his letters and journals – and I turn to his hymn “A Son’s Farewell” in order to highlight his correlation of the New England wilderness with “the Gospel’s Joyful Sound.” Here, I read the way in which this “gospel sound” both navigates and animates the physical world. Moreover, while I echo Joanna Brooks’ argument that Occom’s hymns resignify “wilder ness as a space of freedom” (American Lazarus 82), I also suggest that, as Occom navigates early America via hymnodic “gospel sound,” it’s precisely the generic potential of the hymn itself that makes possible these resignifications of colonized spaces as “free” for Native bodies and Native persons.

I conclude by addressing the “slow traveler” introduced by Occom’s hymn of the same name. Here, I explore the figure of the “slow traveler” as one who lingers, with pleasure, in the physical world. At the same time, I examine the performance of “slow travel” itself – and consider how, for Occom, hymnodic performance is entangled with this posture of bodily slowness and earthly deliberateness that his hymns repeatedly cultivate.

“Get me a Singing Book”

For Samson Occom, 1771 was a year marked by crisis. Upon his return in June 1768 from a three-year fundraising mission to England, Ireland, and Scotland on behalf of Eleazar Wheelock’s Indian Charity School, Occom suffered a series of hardships both personal and professional. During the return voyage, Occom was “severely handled” by illness. In a letter to Robert Keen, he noted that he “was in delirium for some days” and his remark that “the Captain
expected nothing by to cast me overboard in a short time” suggests that he was near death (83).

Occo had raised over thirteen thousand pounds for Wheelock’s cause, but he returned to Connecticut disillusioned by the lack of support he had received from members of the British clergy and suspecting that, as he wrote in a 1768 letter, “they don’t want the Indians to go to Heaven with them” (86). In the winter of 1768-1769, Occom faced public accusations of “hav[ing] been shamefully over taken with Strong Drink” (87), writing to Wheelock in March of 1769: “I dont remember that I have been overtaken with strong drink this winter, but many White people make no bones of it to call me a drunkard, and I expected it, as I have many enemies round about here, yea they call me a lyar and rogue and what not, and they curse & damn me to the lowest Hell” (89). Occom then concluded his letter with a melancholy postscript: “PS. I never was so discouraged as I am now” (89).

Though he desired a return to the missionary work that took him throughout New England and upstate New York during much of the early 1760s, writing to Wheelock “I do fully determine to go into the wilderness as soon as I can,” his “duty” repeatedly prohibited such travels (89, 83). This “duty” was a product, in part, of his wife’s poor health and the death of his oldest son in the winter of 1771, but it was also the result of inadequate funding for such a “wilderness” return (83, 97). Indeed, letters written in early 1769 find Occom repeatedly asking for clothing, horses, and money in order to resume his missionary efforts (89-90).

Occo’s return from this fundraising mission likewise began the rapid decline and ultimate dissolution of his relationship with Wheelock. In 1769, Wheelock “removd…far up into the Country to the Distance of 150 miles,” where he used the funds Occom raised in England to establish Dartmouth College, rather than continuing the Charity School’s mission of Native education (Occo 95). This “remove” occasioned a series of epistolary exchanges between the
two men, including Occom’s statement in June of 1770 that “Our Friendship I believe is grown old and Rusty.” These exchanges culminated in the summer of 1771 with Occom’s accusation in a July 24 letter that Wheelock’s “alma Mater,” the newly-established Dartmouth, was “too alma mater to Suckle the Tawnees” (92, 98-99).

However, in the midst of this “period of despondency” (Love 182), Occom was also preoccupied with thoughts of singing. On March 4, 1771, he wrote to Benjamin Forfitt, who he had met in London, addressing these thoughts at length: “I carried over to America a number of your Charitable Society Books…amongst which Several Sorts of Hymn and Psalm Books were found, and I have disposed of them all among the poor Indians…and they have been of great Use and Benefit” (94). Occom continues by requesting that Forfitt “be so Condesending as to Send Some [more] Books to me,” assuring him that he “should be very thankful and…will Exhort and Encourage the Indians to make good Use of them” (95). The following day, Occom composed a similar request in a letter to Susannah Wheatley – and while the bulk of this letter concerns Occom’s financial difficulties, Occom affixed the following postscript: “P.S. Madam I have a favour to beg of you that is, to get me a Singing Book” (97).

In both cases, Occom’s letters are particular about his desired content. He identifies the “Singing Book” requested from Wheatley, for example, as one that “was Printed at Salem lately price, I was told 8,” while from Forfitt, he asked for three volumes in particular which he described as “very Pleasing to the Indians”: “Little Hymn Books Design’d for the Negroes, Printed by John Oliver…and Mr Masons Songs and Penetential Hymns” (95, 97). Likewise, both letters gesture toward his established relations with musical instruction and performance, while indicating a more categorical Native facility with song. To Wheatley, Occom writes that “my Children are much Inclin’d to Singing and I would encourage them in Time” (97-98). In
his letter to Forfitt, Occom notes that “[t]he Indians are greatly Delighted and edified with Singing, it is Judgd by the White Peop in this Country, that the Indians have most Melodius voices of any People, and…the Indians in their Religious meetings around here, Sing more than any Christians” (94). This type of aesthetic characterization is prominent throughout Occom’s work. His journal entries frequently describe the “sweet[ness]” of Native singing, as well as its effect – usually tears – on Native and European audiences alike. In a September 26, 1784 letter to Solomon Welles, for example, Occom described a recent trip to Albany, New York as follows: “I never did see the Dutch People so pleased With any Indians they ever saw; the Indians that were there, were all good Singers, in Psalms, Hymns and Anthems, and the people Would have them sing every Evening” (124). Moreover, Occom’s rhetoric, as well as his urgency in gathering these “Singing Books,” marks the decisive turn toward Native audiences and Native concerns that would characterize the remainder of his life. In September 1772, Occom acquired newfound visibility following his delivery of A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, An Indian. The following year, he helped to found the Brotherton community in upstate New York, where he eventually settled with his family in 1785. And, on April 6, 1774, Occom published his own “singing book” – a volume entitled Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs – which included hymns curated from the books he had requested from Forfitt and Wheatley, as well as six original hymns composed during the previous three years.

“perfect Harmony”: The Form and the Spirit

Occom’s Collection is a curiously hybrid text, blurring formal and generic lines between the two predominant types of sacred music publications in early America: the hymnal, which consists of written text alone, and the tunebook, which includes both text and music. As hymnologist Harry Eskew notes:
The hymnal was produced primarily for church use, whereas the tunebook was produced for a greater variety of uses – for the church, the singing school, and other social occasions. In addition to pieces of music, the tunebook also contains an introductory section on the rudiments of music for use in singing schools. The basic distinction between the two types of books is primarily one of emphasis: in the hymnal the emphasis is on the text, and in the tunebook, on the music. (19)

Occom’s volume appears without music; as such, it emphasizes the written text in the ways a hymnal would. In fact, the initial advertisement for the Collection, printed in the New London Gazette, referred to the book as “Mr. Occom’s Collection of Poems,” instead of a collection of songs or hymns (qtd. in Love 179). Yet, in his role as an itinerant minister, Occom would have had little use for a book designed for confinement within a single physical space. Rather, the Collection both intended and used in practice as a mobile volume, able to be easily transported and well-suited for the same “variety of uses” as a tunebook, particularly within Native communities.

Though without musical notation itself, Occom’s text places great emphasis on music nonetheless. His preface to the Collection engages in a variety of musical language and wordplay. It notes, for example, the “Various Metres” and “uncommon Measures” of Occom’s individual inclusions (233). By highlighting both the variety and the novelty of his volume, Occom makes a convincing argument for its practical value. He indicates that the Collection is not merely a condensation of popular hymnals of the day; rather, through its careful curation, it represents an improvement on those volumes that will translate into positive results for purchasers and performers alike. Indeed, the preface closes with a series of musical puns to this
end: Occom’s sentiment and assurance that these “cordial Hymns” will “strengthen you through
the various Changes of this Life” until “you…sit down in perfect Harmony” (233).

Moreover, the lyrics of Occom’s hymns themselves often double as a sort of embedded
musical – rather than spiritual – instruction. Consider, for example, the final verse of “The
Sufferings of Christ”:

Shout, Brethren, shout in songs divine,
He drank the Gall, to give us Wine,
To quench our parching Thirst;
Seraphs advance your Voices higher;
Bride of the Lamb, unite the Choir,
And Laud thy precious Christ. (234)

In this verse, the song shifts from the hymn’s dominant content, Christ’s crucifixion, to focus on
the performance of that content. The lines identify different singers, represented as “Brethren,”
“Seraphs,” and so forth. Likewise, it conducts these figures in terms of both volume (“shout”) and
pitch (“advance your voices higher”). In the penultimate line, the address to the congregation
as a whole, signified by Occom’s use of the phrase “Bride of the Lamb,” is echoed by the
hymn’s call to “unite the Choir.” The final line, in turn, urges the singers to continue
“Laud[ing],” or singing, “thy precious Christ,” referencing both the religious content and the
song itself, with “Christ” serving as a kind of shorthand for the hymn’s full title. The hymn in its
entirety, then, is made “precious” not just by the subject material but also by the skillful
performance of the singers themselves, a fact that Occom foregrounds as the basis for the
musical education that the preface provides.
Of particular interest in the preface is Occom’s assertion that “[t]here are two Parts of Singing”—the “outward Form,” which he also terms “Method,” “Rule,” and “Understanding,” and the “inward Part,” or “the Spirit,” “as St. Paul informs us, in I. Cor. 14.15” (233). He writes: “[T]he People ought not to be contented with the outward Form of Singing, but should seek after the inward Part...To sing without the Spirit, (though with good Method) is like the Sound of a musical Instrument without Life” (233). Occom’s distinction here between “Form” and “Spirit” serves, in turn, to demonstrate their interdependence, rather than their opposition. Occom’s “Form” signals the technical and aesthetic aspects of singing—and while the passage emphasizes the insufficiency of form alone, it likewise asserts the necessity of form as such. The cultivation of “good Method” forms the prerequisite for “seek[ing] the inward Part” because “Form” bears responsibility for animating the “musical Instrument” of the body as a precondition for the discovery of “Spirit.” Rather than suggesting that one might ignore the role of “Form” in relation to hymnody, then, Occom’s exhortation implies that one should only avoid contentment with forms or surfaces in and of themselves; that is, without a sense of their relation to deeper affective possibilities and potentialities. Once “Form” has been “contented,” the “Spirit” can be “[sought] after.”

This entanglement of “Form” and “Spirit” becomes further apparent in turning to the context of 1 Corinthians 14 from which Occom derives his terms. This section of Paul’s letter concerns the act of prophecy and, in particular, the phenomena of “speaking in tongues.” Verses 6 to 11, in fact, specifically discuss spirit’s need for form in order to properly compel both attention and emotion:

Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? It is the
same way with lifeless instruments that produce sound, such as the flute or the harp. If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves; if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many kinds of sounds in the world, and nothing is without sound. If then I do not know the meaning of a sound, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.

Thus, as Paul continues in verses 13 to 15, Occom’s immediate citation in the Collection’s preface: “Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.”

In these passages, Paul insists that the spirit manifested by speaking in tongues must seek the form of “distinct notes,” of a sound with meaning (or “the meaning of a sound”), in its efforts to benefit both speaker and audience alike. Occom’s construction, as explored above, reverses this dichotomy: the “distinct notes” in search of “the inward Part” of “Spirit.” Yet the two formulations coalesce, rather than diverge, in their shared conclusion that, although “nothing is without sound,” song – or singing – is something more than dull (or “lifeless”) sound alone. Occom shares with Paul a conviction that song’s ambition is the production of multisensory experience, the simultaneous response of both feeling and thinking. Such production, then, is not merely “revelation”; rather, it instigates a set of felt circumstances that alters the singer and the listener individually – but also the relations between the two. Engaged in a reciprocal bond in
which they are no longer “foreigner[s]” to one another, they emerge as new forms of affective communities generated by a “sing[ing] praise” that involves tongue, mind, and spirit alike.

Occom further develops this relation between “Form” and “Spirit” within the broader process of “cultivat[ing] Psalmody” in his clarification that “[t]o sing with the Spirit, I understand Paul further to mean, to sing with spiritual Matter” (233). Occom’s shift from metaphysical “Spirit” to the materiality of “spiritual Matter” is a crucial distinction. It emphasizes the tension between Form and Spirit without positioning them in antagonism to one another – much like harmony itself. This suggests that what Occom seeks from the process and practice of hymnody is the free play between the two, the constant entanglement and meshing of their qualities, as well as their coalescence in and emergence from the material body. As Joanna Brooks writes, “[i]t is as though he [Occom] conceived of hymnody as a perishable body to be inhabited, enlivened, and actualized by a spirit that precedes and survives it” (American Lazarus 71-72). This reading emphasizes the thorough materiality of spirit as both animating substance and constant flow. Occom’s “Spirit,” then, is not a metaphysical concept, but a bodily affect that grounds the singer in and to the world: a literal “sitting down” (in harmony) through song.

From this point, the preface continues to stress the affective potential of Occom’s Collection and its contents. It notes, for example, that the hymns he had “taken no small Pains to collect” – while noteworthy for their inclusivity, featuring a variety of authors and denominations – have been selected and arranged as a deliberate set and progression of affective experiences. Occom writes: “I have, in the first Place, chose out some awakening and more alarming Hymns, next to them penitential, then inviting, and then consolating Hymns” (233). The Collection itself, in other words, is structured not by theme but by feeling. In addition to their “awakening,” “inviting,” and “consolating” natures, Occom notes a number of other
specific feelings – “comforting, refreshing, and edifying” – produced by these “Songs of Zion, when they are sung with the Spirit.” Likewise, he notes that they will directly engage, or be “convincing” to, the “carnal World.” In combination with his reference to their “imperfect[ion],” as well as his insistence that these hymns will “comfort you in your weary Pilgrimage… [and] assist…you…till you shall all safely arrive to the general Assembly Above” (233), Occom establishes his *Collection* as explicitly earthbound – a text that both helps one travel in the world and mediates the feelings produced by such travel.

Occom explicitly reiterates this affective power of the gospel conceived as sound and absorbed in the form of song in his hymn “Conversion Song,” or, “Wak’d By the Gospel’s Joyful Sound.” Here, the hymn’s text is structured by the repetition (or refrain), with slight variation, of the line: “The sinner must be born again.” Upon being “Wak’d” by “Sound,” the listener experiences “guilt,” “thrall,” and “woe,” visceral feelings that recur throughout the hymn’s narration of the experience. Upon the first “loud proclaim’d” instance of this repeated phrase, the listener is “[s]urpris’d” as well as disoriented. The second time the phrase “sounded in my ear,” the resulting experience is again one of “guilt,” as well as “pain” and “no relief.” The third time, the phrase comes “loud as thunder” and the “heavy load” of “guilt” intensifies, while the fourth occurrence brings continued disorientation (“could not see”) in anticipation of the “misery” and “gasping…dying breath” occasioned upon the fifth utterance (237).

Upon the moment of conversion (“Christ Jesus I did spy”), the refrain changes from “must be” to “then was”: “The sinner then was born again.” This conversion introduces a new set of affective relations to the hymn: “grace,” “rapture,” and “love.” Yet the idea of song as a vehicle conveying such experiences remains constant: “And glory, glory, I did sing/To Jesus Christ my Lord” (237). In the final stanza, then, the position of the hymn’s narration shifts. Once
the “sinner [who] must be born again,” the voice now both claims a superlative place among this designation (“Since I the chief of sinners am”) and calls to the unconverted as a group apart: “Come, needy sinners, hear me tell/What boundless love in Jesus dwell” (238).

“Conversion Song,” then, not only models the conversion process from a spiritual perspective; rather, it also demonstrates how the affective qualities of hymns are central to this process. The hymn uses repetition of regular form – the refrain line – to both construct the vehicle by which the progression of bodily sensations can be charted, from disorientation to guilt to pain, and show how, through repetition of this formal element, the spirit is allowed to enter the body of the song and the body of the singer itself. This “perishable body” of the hymn is “enlivened,” to cite Brooks’ term above, and simulates the conversion of the body and soul itself. Yet the genre of the hymn as such – and this is a point I examine in more detail below – enables each particular hymn to surpass this symbolic conversion alone. Because each individual singer (or collective of singers) is asked to embody, as well as provide, the voice of the hymn – a categorical difference from the modern lyric’s detachment – singing requires an embodiment of the affective process as well. The “I” and “my” of the hymn simultaneously belong to the lyric subject and to each actual singer. Likewise, these affects, from pain to rapture to love, are not merely narrated but are also felt in the performance of the song. The form generates a feeling of the spirit, while the spirit expresses itself through the possibilities of form.

The “gospel-sound” of Occom’s “wilderness”

Both lyrically and performatively, Occom’s hymns encourage keen attention to the material – or the “matter” – of the world. In addition to its embedded musical instruction, for example, “The Sufferings of Christ” presents a visceral portrayal of Christ’s dead with a pronounced emphasis on physical torture: the “Blood-drops…[t]hrough ev’ry open’d Pore…His
Back with Lashes…tore” that culminates in his “Anguish on the Tree” (234). This emphasis parallels Occom’s prescriptive remarks from the preface that hymns can serve as consolation until “all Sorrow, Grief, Trouble and Pain shall forever cease” (237). Likewise, as Joanna Brooks notes, in “tracing” Christ’s walked path from the Garden of Gethsemane to crucifixion at Golgotha, Occom’s hymn is structured both by Christian belief and the “Mohegan spiritual motif of the trail or beautiful path” (American Lazarus 79). Here, Brooks proposes that the hymn “encourages Native singers to identify with the physical and spiritual sufferings of an embodied Jesus Christ” and argues that “His being ‘push’d’ ‘here and there’ on the path to Calvary parallels the path of displacement and resettlement walked by emigrants to Brotherton.” This “suggests,” Brooks writes, “that Occom and other Christian Indians understood sacred song as a way to build and renew the relationship between the individual and the community, the dead and the living, the past and the present” (Occom 232).

But while Brooks’ reading focuses on how these details of suffering “encompass experiences familiar to tribal communities: criminalization, forced displacement, and state-sponsored violence” (American Lazarus 79), I’m drawn to the hymn’s concluding question – “What Tongue his Grief can tell?” – and its subsequent turn not to the divine or the Scriptural, but to nature:

The shudd’ring Rocks their Heads recline,

The mourning Sun refuse to shine,

When the Creator fell. (234)

In closing the hymn with this scene of natural mourning, Occom presents a vision of an animate and responsive world. The rocks and sun are anthropomorphized, “vailed in Humanity” just as Christ was, and the hymn equates their “shudd’ring,” “reclin[ing],” and “refus[ing] with a
“tongue” – a bodily organ – that “tells Grief” (234). The parallelism here carries several important ramifications for perception of the natural world. Throughout, the hymn’s emphasis is on Christ’s physical body: its movements (kneeling, falling, crying), its structures (pores, temples, bones), and its feelings. Likewise, the hymn frames itself as a “trace” of this physical life – and repeatedly asks both listeners and performers (“we”) to perform this act of tracing Christ’s life through visual consideration:

Stanza 1, line 3: No period else is seen
Stanza 2, line 1: On the cold Ground methinks I see
Stanza 3, line 3: Till one the Bones might see
Stanza 4, line 4: Can you see the mighty God [?] (234)

Thus, when the hymn “vails” the natural world “in Humanity” and suggests that it may hold some commonality with or insight into the divine – knowing Christ’s grief before telling it, in other words – it also suggests looking to the material environmental present with more careful attention and in more detail. If, as Brooks suggests, the hymn encourages Native peoples to identify “an intimacy with the embodied, persecuted Christ” (American Lazarus 79), then it does so by establishing Christ not only as a target of state violence, but also as a figure of subsistence, wilderness, and itinerancy – a figure at home within the natural world writ large. Moreover, this parallel suggests that the hymn’s resonance lies in its invocation of the wilderness’s physicality, the literal paths and trails of southern New England – not in the possibilities of spiritual motif alone. Here, one might “trace” the contours of the natural world in order to see beyond the surface. These hymns, Occom suggests, can thus teach one to look at the form until one feels the spirit.
Likewise, by invoking this motif of the path, “The Sufferings of Christ” also calls attention to Occom’s frequent use of navigational language. The life “traced” here – or any life, for that matter – is spatial and geographical as much as it is temporal or metaphysical. Just as the hymn’s attention to the “cold Ground” and “heavy Tree” visualize a landscape of New England wilderness, Occom’s repetition of “throughout” and the directional markers “here and there” and “up the Hill” inhabit, occupy, and traverse that landscape – imaginatively as well as sonically (234). This method of “walking” in song is a core experience of this hymn as well as others. Occom’s “A Morning Hymn,” for example, encourages listeners to consider the “Rising up and sitting down/Going out and coming in” that occurs at various times of day – sunrise and sunset, in particular – in connection with the action of “Keep[ing] our haughty passions bound” (235-236).

While “The Sufferings of Christ” suggests how hymns can be directed toward environmental engagement, Occom’s “A Son’s Farewell,” or, “I Hear the Gospel’s Joyful Sound,” addresses this potential in direct fashion. In this hymn, the speaker proclaims that, inspired by “the gospel’s joyful sound,” they will “forsake [their] parents and their house/And to the wilderness betake” – upon which “[a]n organ I shall be…sound[ing] forth redeeming love.” “Then thro’ the wilderness I’ll run,” the hymn announces, “[p]reaching the gospel free” (236). At first glance, these constructions rehash typical European perceptions of Native conversion, including the “forsaking” of traditional family and community affiliations in favor of a Christian, or “gospel,” life. Occom himself presents such a construction in the opening of both versions of his “Autobiographical Narrative”:

…and my Parents in particular were very Strong in the Customs of their fore Fathers, and
they led a wandring Life up and down in the Wilderness… [and] thus I liv’d with them, till I was sixteen years old. [1765] (51-52)

I was Born a Heathen and Brought up In Heathenism till I was between 16 & 17 Years of age…my Parents Livd a wandering life… [1768] (52)

In hymnodic form, however, Occom reverses the spatial and geographical terms of that construction. In both “A Son’s Farewell” and “Conversion Song,” the literal sound of the hymn (or gospel) has physical, as well as spiritual, results. In “Conversion Song,” the listener is “Wak’d” (237), while in “A Son’s Farewell,” the body is “call[ed]” (236). Rather than abandoning “a wandring Life up and down in the Wilderness,” the “gospel’s joyful sound” pulls the speaker into wilderness, twinning “gospel sound” and “wilderness” in an inversion that suggests them both as tangible things, rather than as concepts or symbols.

Joanna Brooks suggests that “A Son’s Farewell” in particular is an “important…resignification of ‘wilderness’ as a space of freedom for Native” persons (American Lazarus 82). I would add to her analysis the suggestion that it is precisely the genre of the hymn, as well as Occom’s attention to sound and song, that renders this natural space both familiar and unencumbered – or “free.” The hymn begins with the experience of hearing – I hear the gospel’s joyful sound. The repetition of sensory language, the use of both “hear” and “sound,” establishes the hymn’s emphasis on its performative as well as its material qualities. Likewise, the characterization of that sound as “joyful” resonates with Occom’s discussion of both form and content: the sound is joyful in and of itself because of its formal qualities, while the sound makes one feel joyful because of its soul, or spirit. Rather than silently meditating upon sound’s meaning, the immediate response is an active return of sound: a “sounding forth,” or the
becoming of “an organ.” Becoming an organ calls back to the “musical Instrument” reference of Occom’s preface, while the stated intention – “I shall be” – is both a broad desire to make sound and a specific commitment to practicing and perfecting the act of making as such. The speaker, in other words, affirms their commitment to sing with Spirit and with Life, and “not to be contented with the Outward Form” alone, when they make plain their intention to “sound forth redeeming love” as well as “sinner’s misery” (236). The hymn sets aside previous affective commitments – “My due affections I’ll forsake” – in favor of “betak[ing]…to the wilderness,” and accepts the new feelings that will arise and emerge from such physical, as well as sonic, experience (236).

By entangling religious sounds with the sounds of the natural world, Occom reinforces the argument of “The Sufferings of Christ” that, when it comes to sound and song, the boundaries between form and spirit, or between material and divine, are fluid and permeable. The call of gospel-sound has numerous results: the desire to become “an organ,” the departure from “[m]y parents and their house,” and the “forsak[ing of] my chiefest mates” (236). But this “call” of the gospel (or, alternately, of “My Jesus) is not a call to isolation or retreat. Rather, it is an active and encompassing turn outward – and it is a turn to wilderness. The speaker is drawn to the wilderness because that is where the gospel-sound, the call of “my Jesus,” emanates from – a quality of the natural world that coalesces in the speaker’s assertion that they will wait “in the field…upon the Lord” (236; emphasis mine). The “farewell” that the hymn performs, then, is not a farewell of abandonment, but one of embrace – one that lets go of certain earthly moorings not in order to transcend to a heavenly realm but to manifest, or sing, love “thro’ the wilderness” – a “running” through the world that never leaves that world and that desires only the exponential growth of that love. “To see them love the Lord,” the hymn explains, “’Twill more than
recompense my pain” – the pain, that is, of a life itself spent in full communion with “the field” (236).

The “sound[ing] forth” that the hymn and each of its singers performs also transforms the wilderness path of “The Sufferings of Christ” into something like a songline. Rather than identifying the location of particular geographical features and historical markers, though, the songlines formed by Occom’s hymn suggests that the natural world is made tangible and navigable through the processes of making sounds and songs. Weaving the human and the natural into a mesh of reciprocity and relation, this attribution of “gospel sound” to the wilderness generates an attachment to the physical world that exceeds the theological function of the hymn itself. Hymns see beyond surfaces: as in the “The Sufferings of Christ,” they show the singer Christ “[o]n the cold Ground” and transform discrete objects – hills, trees, rocks – into vibrant matter. Hymns guide: as in the preface, they “invite” and “assist” in one’s safe “arrival.” Moreover, hymns connect places, as Occom describes in “Come All My Young Companions, Come.”

“Come All My Young Companions, Come” begins with an invitation by the singer for others to “hear me boldly tell, / The wonders of Redeeming Love” (238) – a reference to the song itself as much as to its religious message. Throughout the hymn, Occom repurposes a number of images from other pieces. The speaker, for example, can “find…no Comfort” until they “was Willing to forsake” their past life and sinful ways (“leave all my Sin behind.”) This is accomplished, however, in a moment that seems to connect with the description of “The Sufferings of Christ”:

The Lord was Strong he bowd my Will,

And made me this to See,
Nothing but Jesus Crusified,
Could Save a wretch like me.
O then I viewd mount Calvery,
With gods eternal Son,
Who on the Cursed Tree did Die,
For Sins that I had done (238)

If we understand Occom’s reference to “the Lord” as synonymous with the “Spirit” that hymnody seeks, then the narrative here mirrors the action of “The Sufferings of Christ”: the “Spirit” of the hymn “bow’d” the “Will” until “Nothing but Jesus Crusified” is apparent (or, from “The Sufferings of Christ,” “No period else is seen”). Again, this “Spirit” enables the speaker to “trace” Christ’s life and death in material and environmental terms. The following line then acts in double fashion as in “The Sufferings of Christ’s” wordplay between mourning/morning and Sun/Son. The speaker now views Christ embedded in the landscape: “on the Cursed Tree” that “grows” from “mount Calvery” in the same way as Christ is “Press’d by the heavy Tree…up the Hill.” At the same time, the perspective is shared with “[t]he mourning Sun” that “refuse[s] to shine” – a sun which is also “gods eternal.”

Following this moment, the hymn continues to describe a moment of affective transformation:

O how Rejoic’d I Was to think,
A Saviour I had found,
It turnd my Sorrows into Joy,
To hear the Blessed Sound.
Salvation from my God on high,
So pleasantly did Ring,
It Sot my Soul at Liberty,
To praise my heavenly King (238)

Again, this moment occurs via “Blessed Sound,” a “Ring” of “Salvation” that creates “Joy.”

Occom’s hymn demonstrates how sound and song create chain reactions – transforming listeners (or audience members) into performers (or singers.) The “pleasant” quality of “hear[ing] the Blessed Sound” not only generates private joy; rather, it frees the listener’s “Soul” (or Spirit) and “Sot[s it] at Liberty [t]o Praise” and make “Blessed Sound” as well. As the final stanzas of the hymn reveal, this “praise” specifically takes the form of a song: “I Shall Sing that blessed Song/Free grace and Dying Love” (238).

Moreover, song acts as a bridge between places both spiritual and geographical:

And while I dwell on Earth below
I’ll praise my Jesus here,
And then go to Yonder World
And praise my Jesus there (238-239)

We can examine how hymns enable singers and listeners alike to navigate the natural world and the New England wilderness by considering Occom’s description of his arrival at the Brotherton settlement in October of 1785:

Monday Octr 24: Some Time after Breakfast Brother David Fowler and I Sot of to go thro the Woods to our Indians new Settlements and presently after we Sot out it began to Rain and it Rain’d all the way…it was extreemly bad muddy riding, and the Creeks were
very high…and we were over taken with Night before we got in, and Some places were
very Dark where Hamlock Trees were our Eyes did us by little good, we travild a bout a
mile in the Dark, and then we arrivd at Davids House as we approach’d the House I hear
a Melodious Sin[gl]ing, a number were together Sin[gl]ing Psalms hymns and Spiritual
Songs, we went in amongst them, and they all took hold of my Hand one by one with Joy
and Gladness from the Greatest to the least, and we Sot down a While, and then they
began to Sing again (306)

Though not explicitly noted in the journal entry, Occom’s use of the exact phrase from the title
of his Collection, “Psalms hymns and Spiritual Songs,” suggests that they are singing from his
book, perhaps even one of his own hymns. Here, Occom’s prose intertwines, without transition
or distinction, the landscape, the weather, and the presence of these “Psalms hymns and Spiritual
Songs” – a cycle from place to weather to song that occurs frequently in his journals. Noting that
“our Eyes did us but little good,” the hymns reveal another sensory path through the wilderness,
a “Melodious Sin[gl]ing” that makes sense of the natural world as it guides the two men from the
darkness of the “Hamlock Trees” to interior “Joy and Gladness.” The hymn connects, rather than
separates; grounds, rather than transcends. Light and dark, inside and outside, are mediated by
the hymn’s resonance in – and in between – both spaces.113 Lastly, these hymns enact the
promise of Occom’s preface. They transform the singular melody (or “Melodious Sin[gl]ing”) into a moment of harmony (“they all took hold of my Hand one by one”) and, finally, into a
“sitting down” (“we Sot down a While”) – not in terms of a Christian or a divine space, but, rather, in a uniquely sovereign Native space, a “new Settlement” of song. To “sit down” in a
Native space, in Native nature saturated by Native sound, is a moment of survivance and
environmental reclamation. The ways in which these hymns translate and mediate experiences of
early New England wilderness both reflect the broader ecological texture that underlies their hymnodic construction and define the sensible and sensory conditions of Occom’s “Great Indian World.”

Occom’s “slow travel”

Many of Occom’s hymns, including “The Sufferings of Christ” and both “gospel-sound” compositions, demonstrate how hymnody animates experiences of nature and functions as a form of material navigation without such landscapes. Occom’s “O Happy Souls How Fast You Go,” however, addresses the practice of being in the natural world through the specific figure of “the slow traveller” (235). I consider Occom’s “slow traveller” – and the act of “slow travel” as such – as both corollary to Occom’s hymnodic goal of “sit[ting] down” in song and central to his broader appropriation of hymnodic conventions toward goals of Native sovereignty and Indigenous survivance. Occom’s “slowness,” I argue, is an assertion of presence; moreover, it generates a practice of thinking and a posture of deliberateness that engenders an ecological relation to the “great Wilderness” of the natural world.

The hymn begins with “the slow traveller” addressing “happy Souls” who “go…fast” toward “Worlds above.” The voice initially seems to encourage this rapid pace, urging others to “leave me here behind/Don’t stop for me” and assuring them that “I’ll come after you” (235). In this sense, the “running” toward salvation is an ardent, but metaphorical, striving for the ultimate product of Christian religious practice: the material Heaven. Here, the slow traveler functions as a bodhisattva figure, able to access salvific welcome but willing to delay it “at length” for the benefit of others. If we read the hymn informed by autobiography, then, we might speculate that this is how Occom perceived his ministerial role. Likewise, even in approaching the hymn’s content more literally, a biographical reading remains tempting, as in the case of “A Son’s
Farewell.” Much of Occom’s life, after all, was occupied by slow travel: on foot, on horseback, and by boat. These experiences would have been shared by the majority of audiences and, as such, parallels between eighteenth-century wilderness travel and the trials of spiritual enlightenment would forge natural and effective rhetorical constructions.

But while Occom consistently uses the language of navigation to suggest that hymns and the performance of songs offer a strategy for negotiating both spiritual and physical worlds, the figure of the slow traveler provides a more explicit model of how to move one’s body in the world: slow. This cultivation of slowness defends against typology and teleology by encouraging deliberate attention and presence. The world is not to be rushed through; rather, it should be lingered – or “sat down” – in. Likewise, if hymns represent strategies in their relations to ideas of space, then the relation of “slow travel” to questions of time and temporality signifies a tactic embedded within this larger hymnodic strategy.

As a philosophical or theoretical premise in Western traditions, slowness is often linked to post-Enlightenment thought and the aesthetics of literary modernism. As Lutz Koepnick notes, however, its “history [is] much older and widespread” (218). Koepnick’s work links slowness most explicitly to Rousseau’s practice of walking, but his argument regarding its broader potential, as well as his sense of its “widespread” nature, resonates in Occom’s cultivation of slow travel as well. Rousseau’s walking, Koepnick writes, “emphasiz[es] the interconnectedness of thinking and walking, of developing complex ideas and traversing natural landscapes” (218). Likewise, “the slow art of walking endows the walking subject with a sense of spatial and temporal continuity…Its deliberate, measured, and unhurried pace emplaces the body in its physical surrounding as much as it situates mental activities within the corporeal base…a practice not only defining thought and perception as deeply embodies, but situating the human
sensorium as a reliable compass for the relationship of space and time” (219). This notion of “emplacement” finds its echo in Occom’s attachment to familiar landscapes and in the emphasis places on the “here” of his declarative “leave me here behind.” Because this practice of slowness both generates various “lateral modes of looking” (220) and “perceive[s] the world as one structured by open-ended potentialities and principally unpredictable relationship” (221), it is inherently sympathetic to the relational perception that lies at the heart of ecological thought as such. For Occom, then, the framework of slow travel allows for both depictions of the natural world through specific place-based content and his interest in the production and performance of sound in specifically Native contexts. Rather than linking “slowness” to a particular intellectual tradition, moreover, as in Koepnick’s discussion of Rousseau, Occom’s hymns allow us to see not only a Native perspective on the practice but also the uniquely Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies that give rise to such awareness.

While imploring others to “[d]on’t Stop for me,” “O Happy Souls” emphasizes both the “ahead-ness” of the “fast” and “happy Souls” and the simultaneous rooted-ness of “me.” In the encouragement to “leave me here behind,” emphasis on the absolute here, in conjunction with the relational behind, highlights a speaker who chooses motionlessness – planted in a fixed location, rather than moving at relatively slower speed but still with a desire to get there. The discrepancy between “Souls” in the first line and simply me, rather than “my soul,” in the second line further emphasizes the corporeal nature of the hymn’s voice. Even when, in the first line of the second stanza, the hymn does mention “my soul,” it appears anthropomorphized. It speaks, or “Says go,” and maintains this disjunction. Here, “my soul” says to “you” (rather than “your soul”): “I’ll Come after you.”
Once again, Occom fills his lines with the language of navigation. “[R]un,” the hymn instructs, “[a]nd keep your footsteps right,” invoking both the treacherous New England wilderness that Native travelers encountered and the multiple implications, literal and spiritual, of the “path” discussed above. Likewise, the hymn maps out various possibilities of navigating such landscapes. The speaker’s reference to “A long that way I Stear,” for example, suggests multiple options, or paths, for travel while simultaneously highlighting stable reference points and markers of time and space, topography and travel: “When you get home, Your Journey’s done.” Even at moments when the hymn relies heavily on the language of vision –

“You are not out of Sight”

“And all his Glory See”

“Then look you out for me”

– it remains intertwined with the “Sing[ing] Hosanna” that the slow traveler performs. As such, the hymn seems to anticipate the very scene of Occom’s arrival at Brotherton, a moment in which he will “Be one amongst You there” and “together we Shall be/Together we will sing.”

But despite biographical connections, the “slow traveller” is not simply Occom alone. Nor is the hymn a lyric voice in the modern sense of the detached subject. Rather, we should consider the hymn, both individually and as a genre, in terms of performance – the ways in which hymns ask singers, both singularly and collectively, to embody their voices and perspectives, or points of view. This is the uniqueness of the hymn as such. Hymns encourage communal and collective performance – as well as individual embodiment and appropriation of the lyric persona. Hymnodic pronouns become self-referential when we sing them. They become our voice, and we, in turn, claim the “I,” the “me,” and the “my” in hymns for ourselves. This is
particularly the case when they engage in certain speech acts: not only when they claim identities as personal ones but also, and namely, when hymns make promises.

As with several of Occom’s other hymns, this is not a song that addresses the divine; rather, it is a song that addresses its audience and its fellow singers alike. A singer of the hymn is asked to embody the voice and claim the “I” for themselves. The hymn performed does not ask us to see Occom as the “slow traveller” or to construct an imagined “slow traveller.” Instead, it asks us to imagine ourselves travelling slow, lingering in the world, abandoning the anxious desire to “get home” and “Stear[ing]” instead in the world “at length.” Likewise, through its construction, it encourages us to make the further promise, individually and in the collective first person, that we, as a “choir,” will all linger together – will travel slow together.

The slow traveler, or the act of slow travel, proposes a particular affective mode of being in the world. The hymn distinguishes between “happy Souls” and the slow traveler’s “Soul.” These happy souls, Occom’s hymn tells us, are fast souls (“how fast you go”); by contrast, if rate of travel is connected to the soul’s emotional state, the “slow” soul of the slow traveler seems unhappy. It evinces a kind of sadness: a contemplative melancholy. While happy souls survey the “Glory” of the world from “Worlds above” as they “look you out for” the slow traveler’s arrival, the slow traveler is here, living and lingering in the midst of the physical and natural world – on the way (or path), footstep by deliberate footstep.

For Samson Occom, hymns played a crucial role in the definition and transformation of attitudes toward and relations with the environmental conditions of eighteenth-century New England. As vehicles for depictions of the natural world, hymns became syncretic documents of Christian rhetoric and Native epistemology that established embodied and relational environmental perspectives. At the same time, Occom’s willingness to adapt European standards
of hymnody to Native needs exemplified their power as forms and strategies of material
survivance for Indigenous communities under constant threat from colonial and imperial powers.
As performed and performative texts, hymns served as literal forms of navigation, negotiating
distances and distinctions between places, spaces, objects, and bodies. As such, Occom’s hymns
express the possibility of colonial spaces resignified to inscribe the full presence of Native voices
and Native persons – a wilderness constituted of boundless sound and song and a “Great Indian
World” in which to “sit down,” “travel slow,” and run free in “perfect Harmony.”
Notes

1 As canonical examples of this critical tradition, see Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* and Roderick Nash’s chapter “Henry David Thoreau: Philosopher” in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (84-95).

2 As in any ecocritical study, the terminology of “nature” is both essential and elusive in definition. It is “perhaps the most complex word in the language…[and] it is necessary to be especially aware of its difficulty” (Williams 224). In one sense, “nature” is shorthand for what we now qualify more particularly as “nonhuman nature”: “The phenomena of the physical world collectively; *esp.* plants, animals, and other feathers and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations” (“Nature”). Many of the figures cited in this study, both literary and critical, understand the term in this way – and in referring to such physical phenomena, I incline toward this sense of “nature,” as well as a cluster of related terms, including “nonhuman nature,” “natural world,” and “environment.” At the same time, “nature is as much an idea as a fact” (McKibben 60) – a “transcendental term in a material mask” (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 14). This “nature” (or “Nature”) is an ideological construction formed in contrast to the “culture” inherent in the *OED*’s reference to “human creations” – and it is against the pervasive influence of this Nature/nature that ecocritical scholarship strives. Perry Miller’s references to the “misguided cult” and the “sinister dynamic of Nature” indicate this sense of the term (“Nature and the National Ego” 216), as does Bill McKibben’s distinction when, in declaring “the end of nature,” he clarifies that “[b]y the end of nature I do not mean the end of the world” (7). Likewise, Timothy Morton’s call for an “ecology without nature” invokes dual implications of the term: “Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art” (1).

3 Timothy Morton makes this connection more broadly in *Ecology without Nature*: “The nation all too often depends upon the very same list that evokes the idea of nature. *Nature* and *nation* are very closely intertwined. I show how ecocritique could examine the ways in which nature does not necessarily take us outside society, but actually forms the bedrock of nationalist enjoyment” (15).

4 Think here, for example, of the railroad in Thoreau’s *Walden* (114-118). The opposition Miller identifies in this passage grounds his reading in the antebellum nineteenth century, rather than colonial or pre-Revolutionary America. Likewise, it has implications beyond the immediate purview of this study. The identification of “America with Nature…in opposition to…the city” suggests a lens through which to read postbellum critiques of urban life by novelists such as Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane as well as the rhetoric of cities as suspiciously “un-American” that persists to the present day. Likewise, nineteenth-century landscape architecture movements – the rural cemetery movement as exemplified by Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery and Baltimore’s Green Mount Cemetery, for example, or the development of urban parks as in the work of Frederick Law Olmstead – can be read as efforts to recuperate American cities and, by extension, their populations as more properly “American.”

5 This is in direct contrast to the eighteenth century when, Miller asserts, “one could be an ardent American without…having to insist that there were special reasons in America, reasons not
present in other lands, why citizens must inordinately love this nation” (“The Shaping of the American Character” 9).

6 As Miller writes: “[W]as not a further reflection bound to occur to a nation that was, above all other nations, embedded in Nature: if from vernal woods (along with Niagara Falls, the Mississippi, and the prairies) it can learn more of good and evil than from learned sages, could it not also learn from that source more conveniently than from divine revelation? Not that the nation would formally reject the Bible. On the contrary, it could even more energetically proclaim itself Christian and cherish the churches; but it could derive its inspiration from the mountains, the lakes, the forests” (“Nature and the National Ego” 209). In this sense, changing perspectives on the natural world are implicated in various declension arguments regarding the transition from colonial America to the early national period. Miller continues in similar fashion: “That is what is really astounding: most of the ardent celebrators of natural America serenely continued to be professing Christians. Or rather, the amazing fact is that they so seldom – hardly ever – had any intimation that the bases of their patriotism and those of their creed stood, in the slightest degree, in contradiction. Magnificent hymns to American Nature are to be found among Evangelicals and Revivalists as well as among scholarly Episcopalians. If here and there some still hard-bitten Calvinist reminded his people of ancient distinctions between nature and grace, his people still bought and swooned over pseudo-Byronic invocations to Nature. It was a problem, even for the clearest thinkers, to keep the orders separate” (“Nature and the National Ego” 210-211). See also Haller 170. I discuss these “distinctions between nature and grace” as well as the “problem” in “keep[ing] the orders separate” most directly in Chapter Two of this study.

7 For these reasons, Miller writes, America “need not fear the debauchery of…the urban [and] the civilized” (“Nature and the National Ego” 211).

8 In a nineteenth-century context, this indefinite “progress…into an expanding future” is conceived in explicitly spatial and geographical terms – from the Louisiana Purchase and the Jacksonian doctrine of Indian Removal to the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas. As Miller writes in “The Shaping of the American Character”: “Here was indeed the answer to the problem of American self-recognition! We may have come to the land by an act of will, but despite ourselves, we have become parts of the landscape. The vastness of the continent, its very emptiness, instead of meaning that we are blank and formless, makes us deeply interesting amid our solitudes” (11).

9 Although contemporary usage makes clear distinction between “nature” and “wilderness” in both connotative and denotative meaning, Nash’s use of these terms, as well as their usage by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers he discusses in these opening chapters, is less delineated. As evidence of this overlap, we can turn to the antepenultimate paragraph of Walden. Here, Thoreau begins by declaring that “[w]e need the tonic of wildness” (317) – but soon shifts to the announcement that “[w]e can never have enough of Nature” (318). Perry Miller addresses this conflation in his prefatory remarks to “Nature and the National Ego” in succinct fashion: “Nature – not to be too tedious – in America means the wilderness” (204).
As in the case of Samson Occom, who was educated at the Indian Charity School run by Congregational minister Eleazar Wheelock before his own ordination as a Presbyterian minister.


From Haller: “The light of nature could not in itself save, but when aided by the light of faith as revealed in Scripture, which everybody should therefore read, and in preaching, which everybody should therefore attend, it was all that any man needed” (170). “Nature,” writes Haller, “leaves us no excuse for unbelief” (171) – a point corroborated by Miller: “Natural knowledge, such as all men can attain, cannot make a man holy, but it can at least render him inexcusable, and God is exculpated from the charge of injustice in His condemnations” (“The Marrow of Puritan Divinity” 78). In other words, the ability to receive and understand the tenets of faith required only simple attention: “As university graduates and ordained clergymen, the preachers still insisted upon intellectual culture and academic learning as necessary for the preaching of the word. But for the understanding of the word, for conversion to the faith, they were equally insistent that nothing was required but the natural capacities of the lowliest, most ignorant and least gifted of men” (Haller 170).

Inasmuch as such studies conflate “Puritan” with the broader category of “early American,” judgments made about Puritan worldviews have long been made to speak in more totalizing fashion for the attitudes and beliefs of the historical period as a whole.

Miller make a similar claim in “Nature and the National Ego” (see 208-212), while also citing “the crucial difference between the American appeal to romantic Nature and the European”: “In America, it served not so much for individual or artistic salvation as for an assuaging of national anxiety” (211). Inasmuch, then, as Miller and Nash both implicate particular literary movements and forms of literary expression in shaping positive (and, by extension, negative) predispositions toward the natural world, my study intervenes in this linkage when it comes to reading early American poetry in relation to early American life.

Abbey makes a similar argument: “A man could be a lover and defender of the wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, powerlines, and right-angled surfaces. We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. We need a refuge even though we may never need to go there. I may never in my life get to Alaska, for example, but I am grateful that it’s there” (129).

See also Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*, especially 3-9 and 148-160.

See, in particular, Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.”

Scott Slovic writes that “[o]ne of the abiding ecocritical impulses during the past decade and a half has been the effort to move ‘beyond nature writing’” (215). In their introduction to *Beyond Nature Writing*, in which Branch’s text appears, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace’s claim that “ecocriticism offers a critical perspective that can enliven any literary and theoretical field” is representative of a transitional moment for the discipline (3-4). Yet while the volume’s
essays address poetry from John Milton to Michael S. Harper, they elide discussion of any American poetry written prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. For more recent examples of this effort to expand “beyond nature writing,” see Lawrence Buell’s *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, especially 22-26, in which he critiques his own emphasis on nature writing in *The Environmental Imagination*. Timothy Morton, in *Ecology without Nature*, likewise critiques “conventional ecocriticism” as “heavily thematic” and argues that current “[e]cocriticism is too enmeshed in the ideology that churns out stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use. Indeed, ecocriticism is barely distinguishable from the nature writing that is its object” (13).

19 My impulse in projecting these observations and intuitions into present and future scientific frames is encouraged in part by recent work on Henry David Thoreau that operates in a similar vein. See, for example, Kristen Case’s work on Thoreau’s *Kalendar* in “Thoreau’s Radical Empiricism: The *Kalendar*, Pragmatism, and Science” and “Knowing as Neighboring: Approaching Thoreau’s *Kalendar.*”

20 This passage also exemplifies how the risk of anthropomorphizing nonhuman nature – the fishes that feel angry – can generate a positive and ecological response (in this case, leaving the ova alone), rather than one that obscures their status as separate and unique from the human, a critique often leveled at gestures of anthropomorphism. I further discuss this question of anthropomorphism in relation to the ecological in Chapter One.

21 Thoreau’s use of “economy,” as in the title of the opening chapter of *Walden*, reminds us of the shared origins of “economy” and “ecology.” Thoreau’s economy is ecology, and his version of the ecological is, in turn, economical as well, inasmuch as both are directly related to practices of dwelling in the natural and material world alike.

22 There is, on one hand, the “infinitely slow” time of geological process that McKibben foregrounds – but in addition to this “secularized and evolutionary worldview,” there is also the time (or temporality) of economic structures – the standardized workday, financial markets, and so forth – that are remarkably unconcerned with questions about the human as well.

23 See, in particular, Bennett’s chapter on “Disenchantment Tales” from *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (56-90).

24 The journals of both Michael Wigglesworth and Samson Occom are similarly attentive to seasonal specificity and phenomena, particularly with regard to winter.

25 The Tin Man, of course, explicitly states his desire for a heart. The Lion, however, is equally desirous of a heart inasmuch as the courage he seeks derives linguistically from the Middle English adaptation of the Old French *courage*, which, in turn, is a derivation of the Latin *cor* – meaning *heart*. (“Courage”)

26 Portions of this chapter appeared in earlier form as “Anne Bradstreet’s Ecological Thought” in *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 290-304. They appear here
“The Flesh and the Spirit” (ll. 34-35). References to Bradstreet’s work are based on The Works of Anne Bradstreet, edited by Jeannine Hensley. For comparisons to the 1650 edition of The Tenth Muse, I have referenced the facsimile reproduction edited and introduced by Josephine K. Piercy.

28 The OED definition is appropriately broad: “manners” are both “modes of behaviour” and “the prevailing modes of life [and] the conditions of society.” Likewise, other definitions of “manners” reference (a) the affect of a particular person, animal, or thing, and (b) a method or a style of artistic composition – as well as the sense of “manners” that returns to the broader question of “types.”

29 (1) “The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.” (2) “The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.” (3) “Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.” (4) “Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.”

30 One prominent exception to this reading is Perry Miller’s claim that “Anne’s flowers are English flowers, the birds, English birds, and the landscape is Lincolnshire” (“Errand into the Wilderness” 10). In “Brain-ache: Anne Bradstreet on Sensing,” Branka Arsić notes that Miller’s analysis of “Anne’s flowers” as “English flowers” overlooks the fact that Bradstreet’s invocation of various natural phenomena in the poem is structured by its function as a response to John Cotton’s 1654 A Brief Exposition. “Even the order in which these phenomena are introduced is uncannily similar,” Arsić writes, “which suggests that Bradstreet took most of her tropes not from her nostalgic recollections of England, as Perry Miller would have it, but from Cotton, perhaps precisely in order to make her disagreement with him more obvious” (1036).

31 Both Gatta and Ziser, for example, make it a point to accurately identify Bradstreet’s fish. “Atlantic salmon would be the best bet, I think,” Gatta opines (47), while Ziser notes how Bradstreet “invests herself in the eastward flowing, ocean-going Merrimack and the fall-run anadromous fish (presumably Atlantic salmon or alewives or – less likely – sturgeon)” (100). Likewise, Ziser’s praise of “Contemplations” is accompanied by a note that explains the exclusion of the “Autumn” section of Bradstreet’s earlier poem, “The Four Seasons of the Year,” from similar consideration because it contains geographically incorrect fruit: it “confines [itself] to (southern) European seasonal conventions, ticking off the ripe lemons, oranges, pomegranates, figs, quinces, and almonds that were nowhere to be seen in New England” (202n28). By way of contrast, Ziser counters this point with a particularly prescient proof of the trees in “Contemplations” as apple trees, which has important implications for thinking about Bradstreet’s description in relation to seventeenth-century tropes of wilderness: “Assuming these lines are based on an actual experiences – and there is little reason to doubt that they are – it is probably that Bradstreet’s infectious rapture overtook her at the edge of a settlement, where the native hardwoods – spectacular in autumn – had a tendency to spring up after the clearing of white pine and other conifers. The poem’s mention of ‘leaves and fruits’ suggests that the author
is also near an apple tree...the only green, red, and yellow fruit at that season at that point in Massachusetts agricultural history. The environment she inhabits, then, would be not a virgin New World landscape but a spectacular clearing into which both European and American natures have rushed and intermingled.” (98)

32 See Gatta 40-41, 45 for his version of this debate. See also Ziser 203n36, where he makes the same observation as Gatta, citing Bradstreet’s use of the skylark as additional evidence.

33 For many critics, because poems such as the quaternions are voiced by seasons and elements instead of, ostensibly, Bradstreet herself, they read as though “her deeper emotions are obviously not engaged” (Martin 15).

34 Morton’s argument regarding the inherent ecological potential of “regard[ing] beings as people” doesn’t advocate for new forms of speciesism but, rather, for broader rethinking of ontological categories. “In an age of ecology without Nature,” he writes, “we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people” (Ecological Thought 8).

35 In Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, Jane Bennett argues for a similar sort of ecological value in her defense of anthropomorphism: “…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…A touch of anthropomorphism, then, 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” (99).

36 See Arsić 1033-1035.

37 Though often conflated in both critical discussions and colloquial usage, contemplation and meditation, two important practices for Bradstreet, are not synonymous with one another; in fact, in many ways, they are opposing practices of thought. Bradstreet addresses this distinction in lines 10-15 of “The Flesh and the Spirit”: “Sister, quoth Flesh, what liv’st thou on, / Nothing but meditation? / Doth contemplation feed thee so /Regardlessly to let earth go? / Can speculation satisfy / Notion without reality?”

38 Conversely, when dated poems celebrate the conclusion of or recovery from one of these instances, its lines are shaped by the experience, embedded with its memory, and anticipatory of its future recurrence.

39 See, for example, Hammond 85.

40 It is also, in a sense, “unnatural.” In the woods of New England, the nighttime is – literally – loud.

41 For more on fire’s power of “contact,” see Gaston Bachelard’s The Psychoanalysis of Fire, especially 7-20, 55-58, and 74-82.
Rich’s “later poems” is not a wholly chronological distinction. Rather, her phrase designates a subset of poems that adhere to particular aesthetic criteria. Rich critiques Bradstreet’s “early work” as “remarkably impersonal” (xiv) – but accords a similar designation, “curiously impersonal,” to Bradstreet’s poems on illness. These poems, first published in 1678, are chronologically “later,” yet are not considered fully representative of Bradstreet’s “genuine, delicate minor poems” by Rich, among others.

43 See, for example, Hammond 6-7.

44 My reading throughout this section owes a debt to Anne Hildebrand’s argument that “differences between [the earlier and later texts] have been overstressed” and her suggestion that “in fact there are similarities in theme, material, and method…which indicate that Anne Bradstreet is dealing with a central problem with two different approaches” (137). Though our respective conclusions differ regarding Bradstreet’s relation to the natural world, Hildebrand’s insistence on looking past aesthetic differences in placing the quaternions within Bradstreet’s larger body of work remains a persuasive argument for me.

45 See also Louisa Hall’s discussion of Bradstreet’s “broken style” in “The Influence of Anne Bradstreet’s Innovative Errors,” particularly pages 5-6. Here, Hall considers Bradstreet’s “willingness to use error to express herself” as a “stylistic choice,” arguing that “Bradstreet’s breaks were not accidental, but rather served to express the tension inherent in moments of psychic strain. In so doing, Bradstreet adapted her voice to the pressures of her life, proving herself not only an adept but an inventive poet.”

46 Compare these lines from “The Four Elements” to the closing lines of Bradstreet’s “Prologue” – “This mean and unrefined ore of mine/Will make your glist’ring gold but more to shine” (ll. 49-50) – in which Bradstreet’s poetry itself initiates transmutation.

47 Leopold 216.

48 References to Wigglesworth’s work are based on The Poems of Michael Wigglesworth, edited by Ronald A. Bosco.

49 For an account of the extensive publication history of The Day of Doom from 1662 through the middle of the nineteenth century, see Bosco x-xi and 305-306.

50 See Bosco ix-xvii.

51 Though “God’s Controversy with New-England” was not published until the late nineteenth century, it is likely that, as with the majority of Wigglesworth’s occasional verse, it circulated informally upon its composition. As Bosco writes regarding Wigglesworth’s other occasional poems, they “are essentially public statements. Though none were published during his life, there is no reason to suspect that Wigglesworth purposely suppressed any of them. Each addressed events that his audience would have been aware of and interested in and concerning which they might have appreciated a word from their poet-teacher” (xxxiii-xxxiv).
Stanzas 198 and 199 continue this pattern. Husbands “mourn no more” for their “damn’d forsaken” wives, while “tender Mother[s]…own no other/of all [their] numerous brood” (ll. 1577-1592).

By 1658, Wigglesworth had become unable to preach Sunday sermons to his Malden congregation on a regular basis due to a variety of physical ailments, including near-constant sore throats. The death of his wife, Mary, on December 21, 1659 further exacerbated these physical and emotional conditions. By early 1660, Wigglesworth’s situation was precarious on multiple fronts. Because of illness, he was not able to fulfill his spiritual obligations by performing public duties in the church, a circumstance that caused him personal distress. Additionally, his Malden congregation, while allowing him to continue living in the parsonage, had begun to withhold his financial compensation (Bosco xxxvii).

Throughout the poem, Wigglesworth makes concerted effort to frame this crisis in terms of environmental consequence in addition to its spiritual significance. Given this quality of his attention, I understand “Prosperity” as a clear reference to the material – to beings and things that emerge from sensory entanglement with the natural and the nonhuman world of seventeenth-century New England – rather than a metaphysical notion of “Prosperity” alone.

See Cronon’s discussion of a portion of this passage as well as of similar sentiments from William Wood’s New England’s Prospect (Changes in the Land 49-50).

Beyond the immediate purview of this study, this aspect of “God’s Controversy” suggests the ecological potential of the jeremiad as a poetic genre.

This passage is from Ariel’s Song, Act I, Scene 2, of Aimé Césaire’s The Tempest, translated by Richard Miller (68).

References to Wheatley’s work are based on her Complete Writings, edited by Vincent Carretta.

Moreover, such readings highlight the tendency of ecocritical studies to place primary emphasis on the “green,” or terrestrial, nature of such work. For an extended critique of this tendency, see the first chapter of Dan Brayton’s Shakespeare’s Ocean, “Backs to the Sea? The Terrestrial Bias” (15-42) as well as the “Theories and Methodologies” section of the May 2010 issue of PMLA devoted to “Oceanic Studies”: https://www.mlajournals.org/toc/pmla/125/3

Especially with regard to “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” such readings have often been disastrous for Wheatley’s critical reputation. For a survey of such critical responses, see Gates 70-85 in which he explores how “On Being Brought” “has been the most reviled poem in African-American literature” (71).

Oddell was a great-grandniece of Susannah Wheatley, and her Memoir was written and published in conjunction with an 1834 Boston reprinting of Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various
Subjects. It also appeared, anonymously attributed, as a standalone pamphlet. As William Robinson notes, “The Liberator of July 16, 1836, advertised in…costing $.25” (430).

Oddell’s Memoir argues its veracity largely through anecdotal connections – “facts…derived from grand-nieces of Phillis’s benefactress…[and] corroborated by a grand-daughter of that lady” – as well as from the fact that “the author of this Memoir is a collateral descendant of Mrs. Wheatley, and has been familiar with the name and fame of Phillis from her childhood” (449-450). As Wheatley scholars such as William Robinson and Vincent Carretta note, Oddell’s text not only lacks citations and attributions throughout, but also contains a number of factual errors, many of which have been uncritically accepted and repeated by generations of critics. It should be considered unreliable at best, including in the case of this uncorroborated and unsubstantiated claim regarding Wheatley’s memory of her mother – and I discuss it here in terms of its impact on Oddell’s thinking about Wheatley, not as evidence of Wheatley’s thinking or her actual experience itself.

I return to this example later in the chapter via my reading of Wheatley’s imagination. In one sense, Oddell’s notion that Wheatley’s thinking is conditioned by external stimuli suggests an interesting understanding of Wheatley’s relation to the natural world. As I argue, however, Wheatley’s particular relations are neither as reductive nor as passive – though sometimes as painful – as Oddell figures them here.

See, for example, Brickhouse’s “Hemispheric Jamestown.”

This critique of Gilroy’s work is not intended to diminish in any way his importance to transatlantic/oceanic studies or broader fields of literary and cultural criticism as such. In my reading of The Black Atlantic, I concur with Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s assertion that while “[t]here was ample black Atlantic scholarship before Gilroy; his work brought forward its oceanic contours, even if the ocean for him was not a material place” (32n1).

In the spirit of Gilroy’s figuration of ships as “living,” it is important to foreground the question of naming in the relation between ships and Phillis Wheatley. As many critics have noted, “Phillis Wheatley” both is and is not Phillis Wheatley’s name: “Wheatley” comes from the surname of John and Susannah Wheatley while “Phillis” was the name of the ship that brought her to Boston Harbor. This transference entangles “Phillis,” both the enslaved person and the poet, with the ship Phillis. Even when she changes her last name to Peters via marriage in 1778, she remains “Phillis.”

Jeffers’ argument here draws on her distinction between Wheatley’s explanation in “To The Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth” that “I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” and the lines from “Cambridge” quoted above (ll. 5-6). Jeffers argues that the difference between the “violence” of “snatch’d” in “Dartmouth” and the “gracious” context of “Cambridge” is Wheatley’s indication that “dark abodes” and “Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” are not synonymous references – and maintains that Wheatley’s “mercy” in “Cambridge” occurs “in a slightly different context than in” “On Being Brought,” based on the idea that “On Being Brought”’s “Pagan land” is close to her “Afric’s fancy’d happy seat” than to “dark abodes.” I argue, however, that Wheatley’s repeated use of “brought” in connection with
“mercy” connects “Cambridge” and “On Being Brought” in more direct fashion with reference to the oceanic. This connection, in turn, suggests to me a more categorical reading of Wheatley’s oceans in subsequent works. With regard to Wheatley’s being “snatch’d,” see my discussion of this passage from “Dartmouth” in the next section of this chapter.

68 Thus, even if the poem as a whole ultimately settles on Wheatley’s “expressing her genuine joy at her full embrace of Christianity” (Gates 83) – a contention with which I do not wholly concur – it still remains a poem that draws the natural, physical, and oceanic world closer than most critics have allowed for in previous analyses.

69 This attachment was particularly the case for the Wheatley family. John Wheatley was a wealthy Boston merchant, engaged in both domestic and international trade, who owned wharfage in Boston and at least one ship, the London Packet – the ship that took Wheatley to England in 1773. His son, Nathaniel, was likewise engaged in such business and eventually took over his father’s enterprises (Carreta 17). Thus we can reasonably speculate that, in addition to Wheatley’s focus on this particular account, discussion of the ocean was frequent in the household.

70 In particular, I have in mind hurricanes known as “Cape Verde” hurricanes – considered the most powerful of Atlantic hurricanes. Cape Verde hurricanes begin in the air flow known as the “Africa Easterly Wave” and result in violent thunderstorms on the west coast of Africa – a yearly occurrence that Wheatley likely experienced at least a half-dozen times. The Africa Easterly Wave sometimes pushes these storms out to sea where they gain strength from warmer waters and more humid air. Such storms then follow a trajectory between West Africa and South America roughly similar to that of the Middle Passage itself. Closer to the Americas, such storms take a number of paths – but late summer Cape Verde hurricanes are particularly susceptible, due to high pressure over the eastern Atlantic, to move north and northwest. In several significant cases, these storms have struck New England directly: The Great Colonial Hurricane of 1635 (late August), the New England Hurricane of 1938 (late September), and, more recently, Hurricane Gloria (late September of 1985). Compared to the 1635 hurricane, it’s possible that both the Southeastern New England hurricane of 1761 (late October) and the storm that nearly drowned Hussey and Coffin (late September/early October of 1767) were Cape Verde hurricanes as well. See, for example: Berry and Thomcroft’s, “Case Study of an Intense African Easterly Wave”; Carlson’s, “Some Remarks on African Disturbances and their Progress over the Tropical Atlantic”; Donnelly and Woodruff’s, “Intense hurricane activity over the past 5,000 years controlled by El Niño and the West African monsoon”; Gray’s, “Strong Association Between West African Rainfall and U.S. Landfall of Intense Hurricanes”; Landsea’s, “A Climatology of Intense (or Major) Atlantic Hurricanes”; Landsea and Gray’s, “The Strong Association between Western Sahelian Monsoon Rainfall and Intense Atlantic Hurricanes” – as well as Christopher W. Landsea’s “FAQ: HURRICANES, TYPHOONS, AND TROPICAL CYCLONES,” available at http://www.faqs.org/faqs/meteorology/storms-faq/part1/.

71 I include eight of Wheatley’s poems within this categorization: “On the Death of a young Lady Five Years of Age,” “On the Death of a young Gentleman,” “To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations,” “A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months,” “To a Lady and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother,” “To a Gentleman and Lady on the
Death of the Lady’s Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, aged one Year,” “On the Death of J.C. an Infant,” and “To the Honourable T.H., Esq; on the Death of his Daughter.”

72 Cavitch notes that Wheatley’s focus on transatlantic crossings in her elegy for George Whitefield resonates with the implicit crossing of “On Being Brought” and suggests that it resonates with the “spiritual crossings” of her other elegies (49-50). As in previous sections and in the case of “On Being Brought,” I argue here that these poetic crossings are always already material as well.

73 Douglass later writes that “I had to learn the value of my mother long after her death, and by witnessing the devotion of other mothers to their children” (31). Wheatley, I argue, inasmuch as her elegies function as political commentary and social activism, is interested in the related converse: a witnessing to the value of the African body and African personhood through the loss of their own children and a devotion to the natural world that is shared, flattening these artificial distinctions while memorializing and remembering the dead in impersonal and equal fashion.

74 Each of these elegies was included in Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects (1773). In terms of their chronology, “On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age” seems the earliest, dated 1770. Though themselves undated, “On the Death of a young Gentleman,” “To a Lady and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother,” and “To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady’s Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, aged one Year” were each included in Wheatley’s 1772 Proposal, indicating that they were likely composed (and at least conceived) prior to February of 1772. “To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations” and “On the Death of J.C. and Infant” are undated, not appearing in the Proposal but appearing in Poems itself. “A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months” is likewise undated and absent from the Proposal, but two variants of the poem were dated September 1, 1772. “To the Honourable T.H. Esq; on the Death of his Daughter” is undated, but was published in Boston in January of 1773 as well as in Poems later that year.

75 In a number of her poems, Wheatley alternates between death as oceanic and death as flight. The son in “To a Lady and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother, for example, “upon pinions swifter than the wind,/Has left mortality’s sad scenes behind/For joys to this terrestrial state unknown” (ll. 15-17.) We see this as well in, for example, “A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months,” in which “Through airy roads he [C.E.] wings his instant flight/To purer regions of celestial light” (ll. 1-2). Yet rather than reading these references as transcendental, I read Wheatley’s sailing and flying for their similarity based on sensation – again, with particular attention to the role of wind in both as generative of power, speed, and direction. We see this connection directly in Wheatley’s poem “To a Gentleman of the Navy,” published in the Royal American Magazine in December of 1174 in which she refers to ships as “plough[ing] the wat’ry main…with canvas wings they speed [t]o distant worlds” (ll. 22-24). In reading a continuity between these actions, as well as between the matrices (sea and sky) in which they occur, I emphasize the materiality and the environmentality of Wheatley’s verse and thought. Moreover, I resist reading the human as anything other than enmeshed with nature, both in life and in death – and thus, insist on the potential of nature to remember, mourn, and memorialize human lives and persons in material fashion.
Scriptural emphasis on the ocean as site of origin emerges from the opening lines of the Book of Genesis itself: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters.” As commentary in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd edition, notes, “the text does not describe creation out of nothing…Instead, the story emphasizes how God creates order from a watery chaos. As elsewhere in the Bible, the deep (Heb. ‘tehom’) has no definite article (“the”) attached to it in the Heb[rew]. Some see ‘tehom’ here to be related to the Babylonia goddess Tiamat, a divinity representing oceanic chaos.” Genesis 1.6-1.8 make clear that the difference between ocean and sky, for example, is a matter of arbitrary and linguistic delineation, rather than a matter of substance: “And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky.”

This characterization of Wheatley, which predates Odell’s biography by a half-century, directly refutes Odell’s claims regarding Wheatley’s imaginative and creative process by referring to Wheatley’s “sacred fire” as “self-enkindled.” In fact, this presentation is a reversal of Odell’s model: rather than Wheatley being “excited” by some other work, Wheatley is here figured as the inspiration that will excite the imaginations of others to generate “some brilliant production of their own pens.”

Likewise, these passages further demonstrate Wheatley’s frequent conflation of water and sky in her use of “watery” language – “streams,” “floats,” even “spring,” to describe the sky.

Rather than reading these lines as religiously instructive or typological, I understand them as paired – just as Wheatley pairs “breasts” in “Evening” with “bosom” in “Morning” – with Wheatley’s sentiment from “Morning” that “[t]he bow’rs, the gales, the variegated skies/In all their pleasures in my bosom rise,” in which these observations are generative of poetic – not religious – feeling.

In a connection deserving more sustained attention, Billingsley links Wheatley’s “subjective” and “active” wonder, “a wonder that resides in the observer” (179), to Milton’s use of wonder – particularly as manifested in Paradise Lost. Here, Billingsley writes that “Milton’s use of wonder is significant because he utilized the same forms of the word and the idea as Wheatley would later do” (179). Several critics, in addition to Billingsley, have explored links between Wheatley and Milton – especially those working in the footsteps of John C. Shields and his foundational research on Wheatley’s relation to classicism. Paula Loscocco’s Phillis Wheatley’s Miltonic Poetics is a recent book-length study of this question.

As Vincent Carretta indicates, the poem, dated May 7, 1773, was originally published in The Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Post-Boy on May 10, 1773 under the title “To the Empire of America, Beneath the Western hemisphere. Farewell to America. To Mrs. S.W.” It was published again, with a correction attached, in the Massachusetts Gazette and the Boston Weekly News-Letter under the title “Farewell to America. To Mrs. S—W—. By Phillis Wheatley.” An
introduction dated May 10, 1773 prefaced this version of the poem, indicating that Wheatley, along with Nathaniel Wheatley, had sailed for London “Saturday last.” These poems display minor differences in spelling and punctuation but are otherwise identical. While these are the initial published versions of the poem, Carretta classifies them both as variants because they are not the versions that appeared in *Poems on Various Subjects* later that year. Wheatley arrived in London on June 17, 1773, and a version of the poem, entitled “A Farewel to America. To Mrs. S.W.,” appeared in the *London Chronicle* at the beginning of July. This version displays a number of important textual changes and is the version found in *Poems*.

Wheatley espouses this conviction elsewhere as well. In “To a Gentleman on his Voyage to Great-Britain for the Recovery of his Health,” for example, Wheatley addresses the ocean directly: “O thou stupendous, earth-enclosing main/Exert thy wonders to the world again!/If ere thy pow’r prolong’d the fleeting breath/Turn’d back the shafts, and mock’d the gates of death/If ere thine air dispens’d an healing pow’r/Or snatch’d the victim from the fatal hour/This equal case demands thine equal care/And equal wonders may this patient share” (ll. 17-24).

The July publication in London, when Wheatley’s arrival has become actual, rather than imagined, further heightens this sense of the poem.

As examples, the *OED* cites authors Wheatley was quite familiar with – Dryden’s use of “azure” in his translation of Virgil’s *Georgics* and Pope’s use of the word in his translation of Homer. Moreover – and related to the sense of azure as both oceanic and transcendental – another definition of the word as “[t]he unclouded vault of heaven” cites Milton’s use of azure in *Paradise Lost* as its initial example. Likewise, Milton’s “Comus (A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle)” refers to azure as a mix of “turquoise blue and emerald green” (l. 894). In connection with Dan Brayton’s work, Shakespeare’s use of “azure” often operates along similar lines to these authors.

For Boutet’s 1708 color circles, reproduced from *The Creation of Color in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boutet_1708_color_circles.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boutet_1708_color_circles.jpg). It’s likewise important to note here the numerous histories of languages that – unlike English – do not account for perceptive differences between blue and green with corresponding linguistic differences.

As well as, from the lyrics to “Rule, Britannia,” the sentiment that “Britain…arose from out the azure main.”

Notably, the ocean has its own plains as well in the form of deep-sea abyssal plains.

It’s also more explicitly Miltonic. From *Paradise Lost*: “Who shall tempt with wandring feet/The dark unbottm’d infinite Abyss?” (Book II, l. 405)

For a broader discussion of “thing-power,” see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 1-19.

While “Ocean” was included in Wheatley’s 1779 proposal for a second volume of poetry, the manuscript was believed to be lost until the late 1990s, when it was sold to Mark E. Mitchell at
auction for $68,500. The manuscript remains part of the Mark E. Mitchell Collection of African-American history and the poem was initially printed in Julian Mason’s “‘Ocean’ – A New Poem By Phillis Wheatley.”

92 While Scarry doesn’t phrase her analysis in ecological terms, she identifies the ethical imperative that this radical decentering creates in a way that very much applies to current ecological thought: “Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness or (in the case of objects) quasi-aliveness of our own world, and for entering into its protection” (90).

93 To my knowledge, there has been no serious critical attention devoted to Wheatley’s whale. Wheatley would have been familiar with whales and the whaling industry both by virtue of living in Boston and because John Wheatley was a merchant of, among other things, whale oil. Likewise, Hussey and Coffin’s ship was carrying whale oil when caught in the hurricane that is the subject of Wheatley’s poem. Exceptions to this dearth of attention include two young adult novels written with Wheatley as the protagonist – Kathryn Kilby Borland’s Phillis Wheatley: Young Revolutionary Poet and Afua Cooper’s My Name is Phillis Wheatley: A Story of Slavery and Freedom – though it is unclear whether these mentions are a specific result of this passage in “Ocean.” Another notable exception is Nikki Giovanni’s poem “Linkage (for Phillis Wheatley)” which imagines Wheatley “[p]erhaps seeing her first…iceberg…or whale…or shark” (313).

94 See, for example, Caroline Wigginton’s “A Chain of Misattribution: Phillis Wheatley, Mary Whately, and ‘An Elegy on Leaving.’”

95 This phrase comes from Occom’s December 6, 1765 letter to Eleazar Wheelock (Occom 74). References to Occom’s work are based on The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan, edited by Joanna Brooks.

96 The excerpt is from the preface to Occom’s A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, An Indian (177).

97 Samson Occom was one of the founders of the Brotherton community movement. As Joanna Brooks notes, “[o]n Monday, November 7, 1785, Occom attended the historic organizational meeting of Brotherton, or Eeyawquitoowauconnuck, where he promised to ‘make this Town my Home and Center’” (Occom 25). This excerpt, announcing the United States’ denial of federal recognition for the Brothertown Indian Nation, now located in southeastern Wisconsin, was published in the Federal Register on September 12, 2012. For the full text of the final determination, as well as related materials, see: https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/ofa/067-brother-wi

98 As defined in Vizenor’s Manifest Manners, survivance is, most broadly, “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction.” Likewise, “Native survivance stories,” in Vizenor’s definition, “are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.” Here, Lopenzina links Native appropriations of Christian evangelism to survivance; elsewhere, he links the Brotherton emigration to the same “deliberate effort to maintain autonomy...on...contested geographical...space” (“The Whole Wilderness” 1121). Similarly, Brooks argues that, rather than an assimilationist gesture of conversion, “Christianity is but another venue through which
indigenous peoples continue their ongoing struggle for self-determination” (American Lazarus 55-56). The “ritual[s] of community” that Brooks highlights are forms of survivance as well, and Vizenor’s term is purposefully broad precisely to allow this sort of inclusion. Likewise, see the opening chapter of Bernd C. Peyer’s The Tutor’d Mind: Indian Missionary-Writers in Antebellum America, which emphasizes such “creative accommodation” (1) and “survival strategies” (5) while asserting that “Indians have accommodated to Christianity better than in just about any other realms of societal interaction…It is also doubtful whether Christian Indians ever succumbed wholesale to the missionary imperative of total spiritual transformation…not even the highly motivated and literate Protestant Indian missionaries were prepared to ignore the crass inconsistencies they encountered between religious theory and practice in the colonial situation, and consequently they had to re-form their adapted beliefs into what can be legitimately designated as a theology of liberation” (12-13).

99 These terms feature prominently in two petitions regarding Native land rights – “Brotherton Tribe to United States Congress” (148-150) and “Montaukett Tribe to the State of New York” (150-152) – that Occom composed in or around 1785. For more detail on Occom’s work in this area, see Joanna Brooks’ introduction to the “Petitions and Tribal Documents” section of The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan (141-144) and, in particular, Chapter Two of Lisa Brooks’ The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast, entitled “Restoring a Dish Turned Upside Down: Samson Occom, the Mohegan Land Case, and the Writing of Communal Remembrance” (51-105).

100 For a detailed study of this document, see Kelly Wisecup’s “Medicine, Communication, and Authority in Samson Occom’s Herbal.”

101 See, for example, Occom 277 and Occom 294. In general, my positive reading of Occom’s environmental attentions extends to his journal in contrast with both Bernd C. Peyer’s assertion that “[t]here are several indications in Occom’s journal that he had assumed the negative Puritan association with the concept of ‘wilderness’” (322n55) and Harold Blodgett’s argument that Occom had “no ear for sound, or eye for the sight and show of things” (qtd. in Peyer 88).

102 These latter two requests reference John Mason’s Songs of Praise (1683) and Penitential Cries (1695), which were reprinted, both separately and together, multiple times throughout the eighteenth century. Occom included several of Mason’s hymns in his Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs.

103 Occom had significant exposure to hymns throughout his adolescence and early adulthood, primarily through the daily music lessons he undertook at Wheelock’s Indian Charity School. Likewise, when he relocated to Montauk in 1749 to establish a missionary school of his own, he gave weekly singing lessons to both his students and the local community. Despite this familiarity with hymns, however, evidence suggests that Occom did not compose any original works until the early 1770s.

104 Occom’s reference to “my Children” gestures toward both his immediate family – Occom had ten children – and those who traveled from surrounding towns to visit him and hear his sermons. Likewise, his suggestion that he will “encourage them in Time” puns on the double meaning of
“time” to emphasize both the temporal commitments of his missionary career and his musical instruction (or musical time) in various Native communities.

105 Occom’s distinction between “the Indians in their Religious meetings” and “any Christians” supports Peyer’s claim that Native missionaries were well aware of the persistent differences between European Christianity and the ways in which Christian doctrine was practiced by Native peoples in eighteenth-century New England – and that, in many cases, Native missionaries not only tolerated, but also encouraged, such adaptations. Moreover, Occom’s enthusiasm here suggests that he endorsed, and even directly cultivated, these adaptations of Protestant tenets in pursuing various tactics and strategies of Indigenous survivance.

106 See, for example, Occom 277, 313, and 370. Also, see Lopenzina on the trope of Native “tears” as employed by European Christians and as a Native means of affective expression “perpetually misunderstood and sentimentalized by…settlers” (Red Ink 117).

107 First published in October 1772, the Moses Paul sermon was the only work of Occom’s other than his hymns, published during his lifetime. Joanna Brooks refers to this event as Occom’s “public emergence,” a moment that transformed the spectacle of Paul’s execution into “a major public statement about the consequences of colonialism” (Occom 162). Although the present study does not concern it directly, the sermon is of paramount importance in understanding the broader context and politics of Occom’s work as such. It is a clear demonstration of Occom’s embrace of “common, plain, every-day talk” and highlights his increased willingness to foreground his own indigeneity in public discourse. Likewise, it reveals a growing inclination to adapt genres both European and Christian (here, the execution sermon; soon after, the hymn) toward Indigenous purposes and goals – and the movement from his complaint that “some say I can’t talk indian” to his assertion that the sermon’s importance is precisely “because it is from an Indian” is a foundational statement of Native aesthetics and poetics.

108 See also Joanna Brooks’ “Six Hymns by Samson Occom.”

109 Eskew’s study highlights a number of important variations between the two types of publications, including physical size, printing methods, and style of musical notation. Likewise, he notes that the “distinction…of emphasis” between the two types accounts for the “double” titles of many hymns, as we see in each of Occom’s compositions. Hymnals would use the first line of text, while tunebooks would use the name of the song or melody itself as identification (19-20).

110 Occom’s reference point is Revelation 19.7: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.” Here, the figure of the “bride” represents the new Jerusalem and, as such, is necessarily a reference to a communal whole – rather than a solitary individual. Likewise, the verse itself is uttered in the form of collective song: “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns’” (Revelation 19.6).
Occom’s substitution of “Tree” for the Cross is of interest in light of Native accounts of human creation, as well as seventeenth-century speculation by some European colonists that Native peoples were born from – or believed themselves to be born from – trees. See also Lopenzina, *Red Ink* 131.

Occom’s line “Could Save a wretch like me” will be best known to most readers in the context of John Newton’s “Amazing Grace.” Occom met Newton during his missionary travels and “Amazing Grace” is roughly contemporaneous with his hymns. Significantly, Newton’s “grace,” like Occom’s “spirit,” is specifically attached to sound: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.”

Likewise, it serves as an example of how “[t]he Mohegans of Brotherton, by effectively appropriating the tool of Western literacy and honing their ability to wield it in the public eye of the colonizers, were able to deploy the discourse of western expansionism to their own advantage. They subvert…the paradigmatic containment that is meant to untether them from the land, using it instead to establish a new frontier settlement. The result is neither full assimilation nor an act of cultural extinction, but rather an illuminating and, perhaps, counterintuitive incidence of Native adaptability and continuance” (Lopenzina, “The Whole Wilderness” 1124). In this particular case, Lopenzina is looking at the land charter as the example of Western literary and literacy discourse, but when we think of the hymn as a similar “discourse of western expansionism,” then Occom’s employment of it within his more syncretic vision of Native culture is quite revolutionary – and to be greeted by his hymns is a key moment of Native environmental reclamation and an expression of the hymn’s ecological potential in saturating and refiguring this (Indigenous) environment with (Indigenous) sounds.

While methods of travel such as boat and horseback represent some of the “fastest” means available in an eighteenth-century context, Occom’s prose often doesn’t characterize them as fundamentally different or more efficient than walking. Particularly in his journal entries, they are subject to the same problems (i.e. weather) – and in the case of the expense of horses, travel is often slow in the sense that it takes Occom months to afford a horse on occasion. Likewise, I consider “slow” here not only in relation to duration but also in relation to bodily postures of deliberation.
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