Dirty Modernism: Ecological Objects in American Poetry

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Graduate Program in English
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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DIRTY MODERNISM: ECOLOGICAL OBJECTS IN AMERICAN POETRY

(Monograph)

by

Michael Douglas Sloane

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how early-to-mid twentieth century American poetry is preoccupied with objects that unsettle the divide between nature and culture. Given the entanglement of these two domains, I argue that American modernism is “dirty.” This designation leads me to sketch what I call “dirty modernism” – a sort of symptom of America’s obsession with cleanliness at the time – which includes the registers of waste, energy, animality, raciality, and sensuality. Reading these registers, I turn to what I call “ecological objects,” or representations of how nature and culture come together, which includes trash, natural resources, inanimals, and tools. Undergirding my study is the notion of dirt. Dirt is potential junk, but something of value. It is this tension that I use as a heuristic for reading how American modernist poetry brings aesthetics and environment together. Drawn to things, American poetry is a receptacle for a wide range of nonhuman, inanimate objects, and modernist poetics has an ambivalent obsession with the persistence of this inanimacy. Through an ecocritical mode of analysis, one that understands that nature is not just green, I introduce dirty modernism with the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. In chapter 1, I turn to William Carlos Williams’ relationship with waste and explore what it means to be a literary dumpster diver, or someone who analyzes debris with specific attention to trash-like forms. In chapter 2, I explore the energy humanities and show how natural resources inform Gertrude Stein’s poetry. In chapter 3, I theorize what I call the “inanimal,” which registers the tension between life and death through an exploration of animal objecthood in a wide range of modernist poetry. In chapter 4, I read the work of Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, and Jean Toomer to investigate a crisis around the interchange of African American workers and their labour and tools. Here, I explain how a sticky form of relationality informs an ecopoetics that provocatively brings together human, object, and environment in a racialized, American context. To conclude, I return to the Baroness and offer some final thoughts, which are followed by a coda on dirty modernism’s plastic futures.
Keywords

American Literature, modernism, poetry, ecocriticism, objects, dirtiness.
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Dung and dirt more admirable than was dream’d…

–Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”
Introduction: Dirty Modernism

She wore trash. Adorned with tomato cans, celluloid rings, teaspoon earrings, American stamps, and a taillight, the German-born Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven walked the streets of New York during the early twentieth century (Gammel, *Baroness Elsa* 3). The Baroness is remembered as William Carlos Williams’ notorious lover, who attacked him on more than one occasion, but is otherwise forgotten.\(^1\) Compared to Williams, she is at the margins of modernism.\(^2\) I start with this figure, however, because the Baroness’ turn to trash as adornment lays bare the gritty strain of modernism, one that understands how “the world is largely messy” (Law 3). In my thesis, I uncover the significance of this gritty strain through an exploration of what I call “dirty modernism,” which intervenes in the current scholarship around the intersection of American literature, modernist studies, and ecocriticism. For a nation obsessed with cleanliness,\(^3\) its artworks are surprisingly scuzzy.

Dirty modernism demarcates the different ways in which early-to-mid twentieth century American poetry is drawn to and informed by the uncharacteristic, often nasty side of nature. As Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer put it, “[n]ature is so much filth” (253). With reactions ranging from admiration to abhorrence, modernist writers are preoccupied with the ostensibly unnatural object world.\(^4\) Although I employ an ecocritical approach to understanding this preoccupation, I do so by acknowledging that nature is not just green. Caught up in the romantic, pastoral, and georgic, a green understanding of nature – “the favored color of ecocriticism” (Cohen xx) – over-invests in sustainability. Typically, ecocriticism results in an environmentally oriented analysis of literature and culture that focuses on how nature is represented in a text and how humanity exists within an imagined natural world (xx).\(^5\) As a result, green readings reproduce “a split between nature and culture” despite “constitutive and intractable hybridities” (xx).\(^6\) To avoid reproducing this split, one also evident in the scholarship on modernism,\(^7\) I shift the very “nature” of the debate by being dirty, by not drawing any clean-cut lines between nature and not-nature. What I am calling dirty modernism unsettles such divides and, importantly, engages and depicts the entangled matter in the
mess that is modernity. Dirty modernism is, I argue, especially concerned with what I call "ecological objects," or representations of things that straddle the supposed line between nature and culture, which, for this study, involves trash, fuel, inanimals, and tools. Well below the sizable "hyperobject," and more specific than the capacious "quasi-object," an ecological object is a topos with traces of tension and dirty forms of nature and culture encoded or built into an entity existing within relation. An ecological object can be nonhuman, inanimate, agential, inactive, useful, useless, or any combination of these traits, while also being directly or indirectly in dialogue with an outside. Through the representation of ecological objects, then, a handful of writers show how nature is dirty. Specifically, the poetry of dirty modernism demonstrates an understanding of how "ecology for its part gets attached to everything" (Latour, Politics of Nature 21).

Ranging from matter to morality, dirty modernism is "dirty" in all senses of the word. I focus on dirty modernism’s registers of waste, energy, animality, raciality, and, occasionally, sensuality. Whether erotic, earthly, or otherwise, dirty modernism is grounded in forms of tension because, as Mary Douglas puts it, “dirt is essentially disorder” (2). “Dirt offends against or der,” she writes, and so, too, does dirty modernism. It registers an entanglement of entities that are precariously a part of, yet apart from, their relations, which not only reveals a sense of tension, but also shows how categorization is not as easy as it seems in modernism and modernity. That “there is no such thing as dirt” (xvii) complicates things, too, because that which is "dirty" is founded on a strained relation with its surrounds: “no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit” (xvii). Here, dirt is just as much about form as it is about content. Take, for instance, Louis Zukofsky’s “To my wash-stand.” With its sanitary subject matter, Zukofsky’s poem comes off clean, but overflows with filthy forms. With its phallic “base” and “shaft” and yonic oval bowl, the poem’s libidinal energy comes from and to a head and spills out on the page: “a flow which / if I have called a song / is a song / entirely in my head” (52). The poem also makes a mess when the anaphoric apostrophe “To my wash-stand” is washed out and disappears after the fourth stanza. “To my wash-stand” is tangled, too, as it does not know right from left. With the words “right” and “left,” Zukofsky employs a “chiasmic structure” in the fifth stanza that produces a “totalizing admixture” (Jennison 183).
Similarly, the typography reveals the tension of a dirty, messy form. After marking up Zukofsky’s “To my wash-stand,” its knotted nature appears:

To my wash-stand
in which I wash
my left hand
and my right hand

To my wash-stand
whose square is marble
and inscribes two
smaller ovals to left and right for soap

Comes a song of
water from the right faucet and the left
my left and my
right hand mixing hot and cold [.

With a prime meridian demarcating the poem’s left and right hemispheres, “To my wash-stand” ends up exhibiting a tension around the different orderings of the words “left” and “right.” When they first appear, for instance, “left” is on the right side, and “right” is on the left side. As the poem’s messy nature continues, as the dirt of “left” and “right” swirl around the sink and make their way down the drain, we are witness to one of many forms of dirty modernism. Zukofsky’s seemingly hygienic basin also recalls dirty modernism’s “sexy dirt on a pedestal” (Bochner 204) – Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* – which is, really, the perfect example of that which is dirty, as it is both lewd and “matter out of place” (Douglas 50).

Although Douglas argues that there is no such thing as dirt, it still exists. We all know what dirt is when we see it. It turns out that the very concept of dirt is an unclean, messy one. Dirt is everything, yet nothing: what is dirty entirely depends on what is or is not around. This paradoxical tension points to how and what dirt is according to its context, which makes it an inherently ecological form, one that recognizes an entity in relation to its surroundings. Primarily reading things as things, as ecological objects, then, I
explore American modernism’s “vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a
definite center or edge,” which exhibits a “radical intimacy,” a “coexistence with other
beings, sentient and otherwise” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 8). Here, my project on
dirty modernism discloses the “otherwise” with its ecological objects.

Dirty modernism’s ecological objects are not exclusively American. But the
objecthood of American natures is not unfounded. In 1925, constructivist Boris Arvatov
noted that, “‘americanism’ includes both a positive side—‘Thing-ness’—and a negative
one—alienation from nature” (127). Formed by a relation of separation, one of tension,
American thingness is more natural than we would have expected. Perhaps
unintentionally, then, Arvatov’s conceptualization of Americanism discloses a built-in
tension between nature and culture, an entanglement of ecological objects. What I am
calling an ecological object is also more pronounced in American culture because of its
political landscape, which facilitates a “democracy extended to things” (Latour, *We Have
Never Been Modern* 12). A testament to this is how Whitman – a poet of lists of things
whose long shadow extends into the modernist period – uses “America and democracy as
convertible terms” (*The Portable Walt Whitman* 396). Like Whitman, American
culture, especially modernism, exhibits a “democracy extended to things,” which means
that, “all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally” (Bogost 11). While this is an
ontological rather than a political argument, America brings these two areas together.
The republic of America is tied to the “res” in “res publica,” which means “thing.” As
Martin Heidegger explains, “[r]es publica means, not the state, but that which, known to
everyone, concerns everybody and is therefore deliberated in public” (172), and,
importantly, “[t]hat which concerns man is what is real in res” (173). Modifying the
notion of democracy, I turn to what is “real in res” in America and explore a political
ecology of messy things that emerges in and is registered by American modernist
poetry, for “poetry is made of things” (Bruns, *The Material of Poetry* 79).

In this regard, I engage the new materialisms to explore how they affect and
compel an expanded way of reading modernism that considers more that just the
human. This involves, for instance, contemplating “a vitality intrinsic to materiality as
such” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* xiii). Here, the “point is not that we should think objects
rather than humans,” but instead understand how “there is only one type of being:
objects” (Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* 20). “As a consequence,” writes Levi R. Bryant, “humans are not excluded, but are rather objects among the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities” (20). In part, then, dirty modernism names an unacknowledged ecology of common and crass, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic entangled things in American poetry. How these things are represented reflects the blurred and fraught relationship between the seemingly separate domains of nature and culture, a tension that is manifest in dirty modernism’s different registers. Digging up the dirt on modernism, I show how it is always already sullied and complicated by everyday things.

To start, the Baroness helps us get our hands dirty by offering an illustration of the stakes of this approach to modernism. From 29 June 1910 to 18 April 1923, the Baroness spent most of her time living in New York, where she made her mark as the “first American dada” (Gammel, *Baroness Elsa* xvii, xix; Heap qtd. in Gammel, *Body Sweats* 331). Often living in squalor, her work was borne out of waste. In his misogynistic account of an encounter with the Baroness, Williams describes her place on Fourteenth Street close to the Hudson River where she lived for several years at “the most unspeakably filthy tenement in the city” (Gammel, *BE* 231; *Contact* 11). “Romantically, mystically dirty, of grimy walls, dark, gaslit halls and narrow stairs,” writes Williams, “it smelt of black waterclosets, one to a floor, with low gasflame always burning and torn newspapers trodden in the wet. Waves of stench thickened on each landing as one moved up” (11). Williams could not stomach it because he did not have the guts: “you lack entrails,” writes the Baroness to him in an undated letter, “you have all your life been disemboweled” (“Letter to William Carlos Williams” n.p.). Dwelling in debris, in modernism’s melting pot tenement living, the Baroness lived in a room full of ironware, tires, gilded vegetables, hungry dogs, celluloid paintings, and ash cans (Biddle in Gammel and Wrighton 796). Truly a scavenger of “Earthrubbish” (*Body Sweats* 127), to borrow from one of her poems, the Baroness made a remarkable mess in modernism with her grimy collages, assemblages, poetry, criticism, and performances.

Take, for instance, the Baroness’ Dadaist “Performance Poem 2.” I turn to it to foreground the messy intersection of modernity, ecology, and dirtiness in dirty modernism. Here, the Baroness’ penchant for “a provocative but purposeful scatology
radically challenges the purified rationalism of modernism” (Gammel and Wrighton 803). “Performance Poem 2” reads:

Merdelamerdelamerdelamerdelamerdelamerde…

de l’a A merique! (Body Sweats 89)

With the poem’s pun on “merde,” “mer,” and “Amerique,”27 its use of epizeuxis, or the emphatic repetition of a word or phrase, and its excision of space between letters, we read of the close crashing waves of excrement inundating America. The Baroness’ poem presents a nation subsumed by a sea of shit. As she put it, “[b]eauty is ever dead in America” (291). Given its title, “Performance Poem 2” gestures to how this flood of filth took another form, too.

“Performance Poem 2” is a fragment of Elsa, Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, Shaving Her Pubic Hair (1921), a film collaboration between the Baroness, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp (Gammel, Baroness Elsa xix). Although the film was ruined,28 an artifact of it remains. Included in a letter from Man Ray to Tristan Tzara postmarked 8 June 1921, there is an image of the Baroness, who is naked (290). With her head shaved, pubes exposed, right arm up and bent behind her head, left arm akimbo, and legs forming the letter “A,” the image of the Baroness is a provocative piece of sexual iconography (290).29 Above, to the right, and to the left of the image is the following, respectively: “MERDELAMERDELAMERDELAMERDELAMERDELAMER,” “de l’a,” and “merique” (290). We can read “de l’a” and “merique” as “de l’Amerique,” but the separation of the two by the image also suggests that the Baroness’ legs articulate the “A” in “Amerique” and “Art,” too, because the Baroness’ “exuberantly bared body represented Dada’s provocation against puritanical America” (Reiss in Gammel, Body Sweats 350; Gammel, Body Sweats 350). Perhaps the “A” is for how America is “Anal” as well.

Writing about the Baroness, Irene Gammel and John Wrighton unpack a “theory of Dada ecopoetics” (798), which gestures to dirty modernism. For them, “the Baroness’s poetry reinvigorates the integration of nature and art in her radical proclamations of the body as site and source of artistic production, informed by, responding to, and incorporating the congestion of filth, noise, detritus, and refuse that corresponded to modern urban life and its emergent technologies in the first decades of the twentieth
century” (798). As they note, Dada ecopoetics explores a number of themes, which include: the breakdown of the boundary between nature and city; the reclamation of rubbish through trash aesthetics; a multisensorial, immersive perspective resulting in a link between perceiver and perceived; an antipastoral aesthetic; and an extreme ecopoetic liminality, or threshold crossing (798). Gammel and Wrighton show that through “dismantling boundaries of the urban and rural, the animate and inanimate, the organic and technological, the Baroness projects a new kind of ‘nature’ into the city space” (798). Importantly, it is this “new kind of ‘nature’” that dirty modernism reveals. “Opening a new field at the intersection of poetry, ecology, and Dada” (798), Gammel and Wrighton investigate “a poetics of porous boundaries within a progressive and transgressive aesthetic” (799), which contributes to “reconfiguring modernism’s avant-garde and its relationship to the environment” (799). Dirty modernism is found in this “new field,” too, but it includes a broader literary history, one left unexplored until now. With an acute attention to dirty modernism’s ecological objects, then, I take seriously “the making in language of a place that is not exclusively ‘nature’ but which recognizes that everything including art, urban life, and modern technology, is part of the environment” (811).

“Ecology permeates all forms” (The Ecological Thought 11), writes Timothy Morton, which are often quite dirty. Before we can “suck at the tit of Mother Dirt” (288), to borrow from Carl Sandburg, however, it is necessary to turn to the dimensions of dirt and dirtiness. My new “nature” is full of dirty ecological objects and their forms. Dirt is “matter out of place,” that is, it is that which leaks out, that which cannot be contained. Covering the earth, dirt sullies the world and registers a grittiness that, while often hidden, is, at the same time, everywhere. A permanent stain, dirt irks as the residuum. Dirt drives this dissonant remainder into both stuff and style to reveal that there is something rather than nothing. An activity, a force, dirt is always un-cleaning the world over. “Dirt,” however, “is also organic and fertile” (Kaprow 18), it does not just make a mess, but also affects what belongs to whom. Dirt is all around, even underground near things, like Anne Sexton’s “Earthworm,” where a “Slim inquirer” finds “a grocery store there down under the earth” that is “well stocked with broken wine bottles, / old cigars, old door knobs and earth” (505).
From sensual to sticky, then, dirt takes many forms. In addition to being matter out of place, dirt as energy is lively, empowering, and disruptive. Dirt also marks the tension around the thresholds and slippages between human, animal, and object, which often disclose problematic forms of objectification. With these associations in mind, I explore the degrees of dirtiness throughout dirty modernism’s different registers of waste, energy, animality, raciality, and sensuality. In one of his poems, Hart Crane writes, “preferring laxatives to wine / all America is saying / ‘how are my bowels today?’” (103). The American body politic is intoxicated with cleanliness, but if it is full of shit that gets flushed out, then where does it all go? We know that “the janitor’s poems / Of every day” make their way to the dump, which is “full / Of images” (201), to borrow from Wallace Stevens’ “The Man on the Dump,” but dirt does not stay hidden. Even if “One rejects / The trash” (202), forms of excrement appear and pile up. For instance, Stevens’ repeated use of the word “dew” and its variations (“dewed” and “dewiest”) mirror the accumulation of waste. Indeed, “dew, dew” (202) sounds a lot like “doo-doo.” In the vein of a new type of American studies, Dirty Modernism analyzes the nature of these messy moments.

Overall, Dirty Modernism aims to give a poetic, ecocritical edge to current conversations in material culture like thing theory, vital materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology. Responding to the so-called “object turn” with feminist theory, Sara Ahmed thinks of “subjects and objects as parts of worlds in which we are entangled; these ‘tangles’ make worlds too messy to start with things assumed as apart from other things” (Willful Subjects 211n4). With Ahmed in mind, I explore the ecological nature of “tangles” in modernist American poetry, tangles that exhibit emergent things tied to their environs to varying degrees. Indeed, poetry proves to be the place of matter out of place.

There is a long history of poetry and materiality, one that dates back to Aristotle and, of course, includes the well-known poem by John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Modernist poetry foregrounds materiality, too—take, for instance, the title of Stevens’ poem, “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself.” As Gerald L. Bruns notes, “modernist […] poetry comes down on the side of things” (“Obscurity” 175). Even now, poetry is rendered thingly as an object of allure, a causal, nonhuman agent, or a text-
Despite this long history, literary critic Bill Brown chooses to write a “prehistory of the modernist fascination with things” (A Sense of Things 14) with infrequent references to poetry. It is time to look at modernist poetry proper, especially from an ecocritical angle rather than an anthropocentric one. Even Douglas Mao’s landmark Solid Objects (1998) needs an upgrade. Mao argues that modernism’s objects are in a state of crisis, but focuses only on the side of production. Here, wasted things are passed over. More broadly, then, modernist studies have been itching for something dirtier and more ecologically aware. With the proliferation of new materials today affecting ecological crises, we need this analysis as much as modernist studies does. My project offers thought and perhaps action to a wasted world, one that does not need to clean up dirt per se, but understand the very dirtiness of entities and existence. Dirty Modernism, then, is divided into four chapters. The first one is on waste, and it requires some detailed explanation.

“When you think about where your waste goes,” writes Morton, “your world starts to shrink” (Ecology without Nature 1). Morton refers to the infrastructure of waste disposal to evoke our nearness to excrement. While pushed to the periphery, the truth of trash is that it does not just disappear. The repressed returns in a process that I call “litterality,” or the intersection of real, mimetic, and formal forms of waste. Litterality initiates a mode of analysis that takes seriously literalism when it comes to trash. But litterality also accounts for the ways in which forms of waste enter cultural production to varying degrees. Trash is flexible, liminal, and vague. The indeterminacy of garbage helps us to conceptualize trash as a threshold, one where aesthetic, environmental, ethical, social, political, and other domains intersect. Fast or slow, trash is always already transforming; thinking it as a threshold opens it up to both the actual and the virtual. While some are hesitant to reconfigure waste, there is no reason why we should not experiment with refuse because, as Barry Allen notes, “[t]rash is generated where knowledge ends” (204). Instead of an anthropocentric reading of trash, then, we could follow Williams’ alternative way of thinking about it: “That which should be / rare, is trash; because it contains nothing of you” (Paterson 123).

Chapter 1 turns to the work of William Carlos Williams to explore what it means to be a literary dumpster diver, or someone who analyzes debris with specific attention to
trash-like forms. Dumpster diving is the fulcrum for what I call the “waste commons.” The waste commons signals the way in which waste belongs to no one and everyone. Trash ties us together because we all waste. Waste is not only in the commons, but it also creates them, if not another form of them. If garbage is liminal, a threshold – both inside and outside a system of value and exchange – then it marks a node in a dispersed material network. Something is operative within capitalism that is not capitalistic. Dumpster diving is a phenomenon that works against, but cannot exist without capitalism. This reciprocal relationship appeals to sustaining the status quo. But it does not preclude the possibility of change – change that is perhaps already underway through waste – given the power of the scavenger to affect the system. In fact, turning to trash is a form of critique, one that opens up the social sphere. As I see it, literary dumpster divers implicitly, if not explicitly, critique the hegemonic political economy.

To be clear, capitalism produces an antithetical world. Here, scavengers, dumpster divers, and trash are in between, a part of, yet apart from capitalism. Scavenging as such is polyvalent, it does different things simultaneously, like “removing, processing, and reintroducing materials back into the system” (Rufus and Lawson 91) while also generating newfangled ways of knowing and living based on use and misuse. Within rather than without, here rather than beyond, the waste commons names an alternative political economy at work. Indeed, waste commons – a public material network – is always already coexisting in the social and constituted by litterality, or the actual trash that manifests itself in and through multiple forms and mediums given the liminal nature of waste. To engage the waste commons, the literary critic needs to be a dumpster diver, and America is the perfect place to dig, especially at the turn of the century, which is a period when the fundamental shift to “the empire of the ephemeral” was underway (Strasser 199).

If “[e]conomic growth during the twentieth century has been fueled by waste” (15), then what else is a byproduct of “waste energy” (Williams, Imaginations 175)? For me, “waste energy” contributes toward the cultural production of poetry. Christopher Nealon argues that “the workings of capitalism are a central subject matter of twentieth-century American poetry in English” (1) where “matter” means “less a metaphysically substantial ‘content’ lodged in the abstraction of ‘form’ than a question returned to through different
topoi, in different forms, and different genres” (1). Accordingly, capitalism’s excrement – the remains of consumption – is the stuff of modernist poetry. If, as Williams writes, it “behooves a poet […] to pay close attention to what poetry there is in the world and of what it is made” (Embodiment of Knowledge 39), then it follows that the waste around Williams is the poetry with which he works.

Expanding on Williams’ “waste energy,” chapter 2 turns to the energy humanities in order to explore how resources inform Gertrude Stein’s poetry. With Whitman’s materiality in mind, I consider Stein’s energy consciousness and her petropoetics, or the relationship between art and oil. In this regard, I foreground how energy fuels Stein’s work and world. Reading Stein’s latent, yet manifest energetic materiality enables me to interpret her aesthetics as material relations that disclose the entanglement between nature and culture. Considering the energetic materiality of poetic expression, then, I explore representations of wood, coal, and electricity in Stein’s writing, which leads me to uncover the transformative, powerful, and sensual or erotic nature of energy. Following this, I discuss Stein’s petropoetics in a number of ways, which gesture to the importance of considering the embodiment and representations of energy around Stein’s car.

In chapter 3, I theorize what I call the “inanimal,” or inanimate animals, a necessary intervention into modernist animal studies that is preoccupied with the relationship between humans and animals. Instead, I argue that there is a specific kind of animality in modernism, one that involves the tension between life and death. It is this tension that I find and explore in the context of animal objecthood, or the interaction between animals and objects. For me, the inanimal is a representation and blurring of the point and time between life and death, which affects how the animal takes shape and form in modernist poetry. There are several different modes in modernism that evoke the inanimal. These include, among others, commodity and ethical rights, rendering, prolepsis, technical innovations, vitalism and violence, and animals and race. Turning to a wide range of poets that constitute modernism’s bestiary, I show how animals are objectified in modernism. There is, indeed, a material-semiotic relation in and around animals in modernist poetry that has been left unexplored, one that captures how an animal is object-like, an object is animal-like, or an animal or object is transitioning from one to the other.
These tensions register the entanglement between nature and culture found in dirty modernism’s ecological objects. The push and pull between vitality and inanimacy leads me to my last chapter on the relationship between humans and objects situated in labour-oriented environs, which reveals a racial register of dirty modernism.

Turning to poets like Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, and Jean Toomer, chapter 4 investigates a crisis: the extent to which the interchange of African American workers with their tools troubles the reverence of labour. Here I argue that the notion of race as a problem in the twentieth century, following W.E.B. DuBois’ account of the colour line, is, in part, linked to the tense relationship between the representation of African American workers and their tools. We are aware of how the representation of a racialized labourer can be and often is objectified, but the concept of stickiness helps unpack the ecological dimensions of this process. Writing about stickiness, Ahmed offers a different way of thinking about it. Her form of stickiness foregrounds the relationality and history of contact between surfaces and signs, humans or otherwise. Drawing on Ahmed’s form of stickiness, this chapter explains how a sticky form of relationality informs ecopoetics, which provocatively brings together human, object, and environment in a racialized, American context. Looking at scenes of labour through what Bryant calls “black ecology,” I focus on a racial tension around degraded workers using tools who are, in turn, tools. The embodiment and racialization of tools foregrounds both the power and precarity of an objectified black body and its parts. This registers an uncanny form of alienation where the worker is not just a human or a tool, but both simultaneously. There is, I argue, a messy ecology of sticky black tools in modernism, one that discloses a rhetorical register of racialization involving objects. I follow my last chapter with a handful of closing remarks and a coda on dirty modernism’s plastics.

Having opened with the Baroness, we can start to see just how dirty things can be, and just how much there is to be done to think through modernism’s relationship to the environment. To borrow from the Baroness again, there is so much “Earthrubbish” to be sifted through. Indeed, the Baroness herself could not even dispose of waste. In her provocative, smart, and scathing review of Williams’ *Kora in Hell* (1920), the Baroness referred to the “Education of W.C. trash” (*Body Sweats* 310), where “W.C.” stood for “water closet” (1), an early type of toilet. The Baroness’ pet name for Williams is not just
a joke. While Williams the doctor is quite clean, Williams the poet ends up being rather dirty, trashy even.

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As a child, I was drawn to household wastebaskets. For whatever reason, I was especially interested in collecting toilet paper rolls. I recall making telescopes out of them. To this day, I am an avid thrift shopper and occasional dumpster diver. It makes sense to me that I would write a dissertation on dirty things. Frank O’Hara taught me how we are “all jumbled / together like life in a Jumble Shop,” one full of things that we can and should take seriously. It is never too late to look through a telescope made out of trash to see not only the world, but also the universe of things.
Notes


2 One of the earliest publications on the Baroness is Robert Reiss’ “‘My Baroness’: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven” from 1985. Since then, only about a dozen or so critics have written about the Baroness, and Irene Gammel has authored a majority of the publications. As early as 1993, Gammel has been steadily working away on the Baroness to great success. From a monograph to an archive to several articles, Gammel has made some groundbreaking inroads on the Baroness’s life and work by touching upon topics of intimacy, female sexual confession, sexuality, bodily performance, biography and life writing, New York Dada, (eco)poetics, and sound poetry (see Gammel 1993, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2011, 2013). Other writers on the Baroness include Richard Cavell, Tanya Clement, Kerry Driscoll, Paul Hjartarson, Amelia Jones, Rudolf E. Kenzli, Linda Lappin, Klaus Martens, Adam McKible, John Wrighton, Eliza Jane Reilly, Robert Reiss, and Suzanne Zelazo (see Bibliography).

3 In *Chasing Dirt* (1995), Suellen Hoy traces a history of America’s pursuit of cleanliness starting in the early nineteenth century through to the 1950s (xiv).

4 As Bill Brown notes, modernism “has increasingly been recognized as an inquiry into the fate of the object world, an account of how objects produce subjects, and an effort to encounter or effect a kind of thingness” (“Materialities of Modernism” 282).

5 In his introduction to *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), editor Jeffery Jerome Cohen cites *The Green Studies Reader* (2000) for an overview of how green as such figures into ecocriticism (xxxi n8).

6 Cohen gestures towards Bruno Latour’s “Great Bifurcation” (xx) and intimates that his work influences *Prismatic Ecology* (xxxi-xxxii n9).

7 While Bill Brown acknowledges how modernism attempts to blur nature and culture, subjects and objects, people and things, he ultimately casts doubt on this endeavour by suggesting that we cannot “accept such knowledge as a fait accompli” (“Thing Theory” 12).
In terms of nomenclature, there is much to be said when it comes to “objects” versus “things” (Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” offers an excellent overview). Someone like Graham Harman notes how “Heidegger’s own distinction between ‘objects’ and ‘things’ is irrelevant” and thus “we can use the single term ‘object,’ simply because that was the term used by phenomenology when it first revived the philosophical theme of individual things” (“The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 187). Conversely, Jane Bennett prefers “‘thing’ or ‘body’ better as a marker for individuation, better highlighting the way certain edges within an assemblage tend to stand out to certain classes of bodies” (“Systems and Things” 231). Indeed, for Bennett, “the frame of subjects and objects is unfriendly to the intensified ecological awareness that we need if we are to respond intelligently to signs of the breakdown of the earth’s carrying capacity for human life” (231). This conversation between Harman and Bennett is but a sample of the debate. For me, “ecological objects” brings together the best of both worlds by specifying the nature of my interest with the adjective “ecological” while also alluding to the history of phenomenology with “objects.” Moreover, I want to hold onto “objects” because, as I note later, I agree with Levi R. Bryant’s notion of onticology in Democracy of Objects (2011) where all entities are objects (20); such a formulation greatly expands the parameters of critical thinking within the environmental humanities.

My thinking about the relationship between nature and culture here is indebted to two thinkers, among others, namely, Donna J. Haraway and her idea of “natureculture” and Bruno Latour and his discussion of “nature-culture” (see Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature [1991], The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness [2003], and When Species Meet [2008]; and see We Have Never Been Modern [1993]).

In Hyperobjects (2013), Timothy Morton’s writes about “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). These hyperobjects are “‘hyper’ in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not”; take, for instance, things like black holes, biospheres, the Solar System, nuclear materials on Earth, or even Styrofoam and plastic (1).
In *The Parasite* (2007), Michel Serres explains how a “quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; is it also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject” (225). Elucidating Serres, Bruno Latour writes that, “[q]uasi-objects are much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the ‘hard’ parts of nature, but they are in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society. On the other hand they are much more real, nonhuman and objective than those shapeless screens on which society – for unknown reasons – needed to be ‘projected’” (*We Have Never Been Modern* 55). Smartly critiquing this, Ronald E. Day writes the following: “the ‘quasi-object’ in its constituted/constituting duality is nothing other than that which is defined within a set of institutions and signs to play a central role in establishing such-and-such institutions and signs a domain over materials. […] The quasi-object is a semiotic marker crossing liberally heterogeneous institutions and ontological types that are conjoined and held in place by their sharing of a code or a series of codes for locating and defining an object and its functions” (82).

In this regard, we could think of how “[a] poem is […] a nonhuman agent” (Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry” 215; see notes 33, 39).

Or, to borrow from Levi R. Bryant, “one object is simultaneously a part of another object and an independent object in its own right” (*The Democracy of Objects* 214).

On April 9, 1917, the Society of Independent Artists met at Grand Central Palace in New York for a private viewing of the “Big Show.” Of the 2,500 works presented by 1,200 artists, one piece stood out: a urinal signed “R. Mutt 1917.” Its title simply read *Fountain*. After much debate, the Independent’s committee rejected *Fountain* despite having claimed that the Big Show would be devoted to artistic openness. At the time, no one on the committee knew that one of its members, Marcel Duchamp, was the artist behind *Fountain*, which he had submitted under the pseudonym Richard Mutt. In response to the anti-democratic sentiment of the committee, Duchamp resigned his post on April 10—without, however, disclosing his intimate connection to the piece in question. Following this, *Fountain* found its way to Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. Having only been on display for a brief time at 291,
Duchamp’s readymade mysteriously disappeared. Regardless of its short stay on the art scene, *Fountain* exposed a new American materialism at work. For a full account of this, see Jay Bochner’s *American Lens* (2005).

15 I am indebted to Bill Brown’s “Materialities of Modernism” for this quotation; however, it is worth noting that Brown does not quote Arvatov’s “negative” side of Americanism—namely, the “alienation from nature.” Bringing this notion into the fold helps us to think through the ways in which what I am calling dirty modernism circumscribes and includes ecological objects, too.

16 Of course, for Whitman, democracy is not just political. “Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name?” (*The Portable Walt Whitman* 423), he asks. “I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs—in religion, literature, colleges, and schools—democracy in all public and private life” (423). Here, democracy has to enter into and encompass everything in order to be more than just a “cavil,” or petty objection (398). In this regard, Whitman puts stock in the poet as a voice of democracy. “Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man” (*Leaves of Grass* 8). It is Whitman’s “American bard” (15) and the “poets of the kosmos” (18) that explore the inclusive nature of democracy.

17 It is odd to extend democracy to include what Whitman himself calls, at one point, “dumb real objects” (*Leaves of Grass* 10). Elsewhere, however, Whitman does advocate deriving “inspiration in real objects” (25); in a version of “A Song for Occupations,” moreover, he writes about how “Your person and every particle that relates to your person” includes “Everyday objects” like “the housechairs, the carpet, the bed and the counterpane of the bed” (94-96).

18 Although back-to-back, Bogost does not fully follow Latour’s work (see Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology* 6-7, 19). In fact, object-oriented ontology is at odds with actor-network theory (see Graham Harman’s *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and*
Metaphysics [2009]). And so I juxtapose the two for the express purpose of gesturing towards and illustrating an alternative way of thinking at work here.

19 Referencing Bogost, Levi R. Bryant explains his phrase “democracy of objects”: “The democracy of objects is not a political thesis to the effect that all objects ought to be treated equally or that all objects ought to participate in human affairs. The democracy of objects is the ontological thesis that all objects […] equally exist while they do not exist equally. The claim that all objects equally exist is the claim that no object can be treated as constructed by another object. The claim that objects do not exist equally is the claim that objects contribute to collectives or assemblages to a greater and lesser degree. In short, no object such as the subject or culture is the ground of all others” (19).

20 For a thorough discussion and deployment of “res publica,” please see Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel’s Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy (2005), where they note at one point that, “the prestigious phrase Res publica includes the word res, thing, and the pragmatic tradition has centered around pragmata, that is, things once again. Whether in Latin or in Greek, the same questions is raised: What would politics look like if it became a politics of things?” (249).

21 Here, my thinking is in sync with Jane Bennett’s suggestion that “the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs” (Vibrant Matter 109). Here, she explains how it is that the more and less than human matter in this context: “Theories of democracy that assume a world of active subjects and passive objects begin to appear as thin descriptions at a time when the interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense. If human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) ‘public’ coalescing around a problem” (108).
Here, I am alluding to Bennett’s subtitle to her book, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), that is, “a political ecology of things.” With special attention to materiality, then, Bennett defines “politics as a political ecology and a notion of publics as human-nonhuman collectives” (xix). For a detailed discussion of this, see Bennett’s chapter “Political Ecologies” in *Vibrant Matter*.

I use this term loosely to gesture towards a surge of movements and modes of thinking over the past couple of decades, like actor-network theory, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology. Also, the term “new materialism” has a specific history: “‘New materialism’ as a term was coined by Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti in the second half of the 1990’s. New materialism shows how the mind is always already material (the mind is an idea of the body), how matter is necessarily something of the mind (the mind has the body as its object), and how nature and culture are always already ‘naturecultures’ (Donna Haraway’s term). New materialism opposes the transcendental and humanist (dualist) traditions that are haunting cultural theory, standing on the brink of both the modern and the post-postmodern era. The transcendental and humanist traditions, which are manifold yet consistently predicated on dualist structures, continue to stir debates that are being opened up by new materialists […]. What can be labeled ‘new materialism’ shifts these dualist structures by allowing for the conceptualization of the travelling of the fluxes of nature and culture, matter and mind, and opening up active theory formation” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 48).

Here, I am, in part, indebted to Peter Sloterdijk’s “‘dirty’ materialism,” which is an answer to how an “exaggerated idealism of power […] undervalues the rights of the concrete” (105). However, I want to expand the scope of how dirty materialism’s “core is existentialism” (105) to include nonhumans and inanimate objects.

Indeed, the Baroness used everyday refuse to make sculptures; take, for instance, the following description of one of her artworks: “under a glass bell, a piece of sculpture that appeared to be chicken guts imitated in wax” (Williams qtd. in Gammel, *Baroness Elsa* 264).

“‘As for the *merdelamerde* pun on America,’” writes Gammel, “the Baroness had a preoccupation both with *merde* and *America*. And while Man Ray would have known the meaning of *mer* and *merde*, the grammatically complex use of possessive article (*de la* and *de l’*) and the elegant French play would also suggest Duchamp’s possible hand in the pun” (Gammel, *Baroness Elsa* 463n7).

Gammel explains this by quoting Calvin Tomkins’s *Duchamp: A Biography* (1996): “‘[W]hen they tried to develop the film themselves in the dark, winding it around radiating circles of nails that Duchamp had patiently hammered into a plywood disc, then immersing the disc in a garbage can lid filled with developer, the film stuck together and was ruined’” (*Baroness Elsa* 290).

Gammel offers an excellent reading of the Baroness’ pose (*Baroness Elsa* 290, 292-293).

See, for instance, Serres’ *Malfeasance* (2011), where he argues that “appropriation takes places through dirt” (3).


In *American Body | Politic* (2010), Bernd Herzogenrath offers “another revision of American studies” (18), one that considers the “‘real,’ the ‘other’ of culture—materiality and the body, or what Deleuze and Guattari call the rhizomatic and ‘immediate connection with an outside’” (19). Herzogenrath’s focus is “*in between* culture and nature, representation and production, physical body and body politic” (19) in America. This frame is similar to what I am doing with dirty modernism's ecological objects, albeit less anthropocentrically, in that I am focusing on the aestheticization of inanimate objects.
in American modernist poetry and, in turn, gesturing to the way in which the material “outside” often affects representation in an ecological fashion.

33 Morton’s does something similar in “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry.” He notes, for instance, how “anthropomorphism is not as big a deal as some ecological criticism thinks” and, in turn, notes that “everything is itselfpomorphizing” where “all entities whatsoever constantly translate other objects into their own terms” (207). One implication of Morton’s point is that there is so much more to bring into the fold when it comes to ecocriticism, and it is with this in mind that I investigate dirty modernism’s ecological objects.

34 For a discussion of thing theory, see Brown’s “Thing Theory” and A Sense of Things (2003). On vital materialism, consult Bennett’s Vibrant Matter (2010), which highlights “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (ix). Bennett’s project advocates a vital materialism because, as she sees it, the “figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (ix). Thus, Bennett wants to “promote greener forms of human culture and more attentive encounters between people-materialities and thing-materialities” (x). For a discussion of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (OOO), see, for instance, Graham Harman’s Tool-Being (2002) and The Quadruple Object (2011), Quentin Meillassoux’s After Finitude (2008), Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman’s edited collection The Speculative Turn (2011), Bryant’s The Democracy of Objects (2011), Bogost’s Alien Phenomenology (2012), and Morton’s Realist Magic (2013). Much of the conversation and debate here revolves around and develops from the notion of what Meillassoux calls “correlationism,” which entails “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (5).

35 In response to Harman’s critique of genealogy in The Speculative Turn (2011), one that suggests that genealogy reduces an object to its history, Ahmed argues that the object turn and object-oriented ontology is guilty of an “object fetishism” that separates an object from its history (Willful Subjects 211n4). For her, this is an iteration of how the
“feminist critique of the subject is a critique of the concept of autonomy: of how the male subject is separated from the world (including the mother’s body) in order to represent itself as giving birth to itself” (211n4).

36 If, as Aristotle writes, “art […] completes what nature cannot bring to finish” (Physics 199a9-199a19), and if “a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it exists in actuality than when it exists potentially” (193b7-193b12), then aesthetics are intimately tied to and share a reality with materiality. Indeed, one feature of Aristotle’s notion of form registers materiality: he notes how “from art proceed the things of which the form is in the soul” and, subsequently, qualifies “form” by explaining that it means “the essence of each thing and its primary substance” (Metaphysics 1032a27-1032b21). See also Gerald L. Bruns’ chapter “Poetic Materialism: the Poet’s Redemption of Everyday Things” in his The Material of Poetry (2005).


38 For Harman, allure is “the key phenomenon of all the arts, literature included” and it “alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world” (“The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 187). In making these remarks, Harman works towards distinguishing what would be an object-oriented criticism from New Criticism, New Historicism, and deconstruction. In turn, he offers a “countermethod” that moves away from “dissolving a text upward into its readings or downward into its cultural elements” and towards the idea that “we should focus specifically on how it resists such dissolution” (200). Calling for “the death of the culture,” Harman suggests that rather than “emphasize the social conditions that gave rise to any given work, we ought to do the contrary, and look at how works reverse or shape what might have been expected in their time and place, or at how some withstand the earthquakes of the centuries much better than others” (201). For him, then, “[w]e must be fully aware of nonconnections in any consideration of cultural influence on literature” (201).
In “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” Morton explains how “causality is aesthetic” (205) and, in turn, notes the following: “To study a poem […] is to see how causality itself operates. A poem directly intervenes in reality in a causal way” (206). Following this, moreover, Morton points out that a “poem is not simply a representation, but rather a nonhuman agent”(215), which leads him to suggest that, “poetry simply is causality” (216).

In response to Harman and Morton, Bennett writes about systems and things and, in closing, turns to poetry, where she considers “a text as a material body” (232). For her, a text-body not only gestures toward “a something more than itself,” but also functions as a “distributive network of bodies” that includes “words on the page, words in the reader’s imagination, sounds of words, sounds and smells in the reading, etc.” (232). Explaining a text-body, Bennett writes: “Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trace” (232).

In A Sense of Things (2003), Brown continues his exploration of how material culture affects the literary imagination, or how the “sensuous encounter with the physical world” yields “textual residues” (16-17). In this regard, he specifically turns to investigating “the imaginative technologies for lifting and redeeming” (17) what he calls “the material unconscious,” or “literature’s repository of disparate and fragmentary, unevenly developed, even contradictory images of the material everyday,” which illuminates the “shards of the past” and, in turn, reassembles them into a “recognizable form” (The Material Unconscious 4, 18). In A Sense of Things, then, a key question for Brown is, “[w]hat are the rhetorical strategies by which fiction works to convince us not just of the visual and tactile physicality of the world it depicts but also of that world’s significance?” (17).

Granted, Brown discusses William Carlos Williams on several occasions in A Sense of Things (2003), but his conceptualization of the modernist poet is problematic. Brown’s modernist poet is a savior: “the modernist poet, whether addressing natural or technological objects, feels the need to rescue them – to extract them in their real nakedness […] – not from consumer culture so much as from rationalism, symbolism,
and language itself” (“Materialities of Modernism” 289). This overly redemptive frame of modernist poetics keeps things too clean; indeed, it does not consider how forms of filth and filthy forms affect poetic production, too.

One example of Brown’s anthropocentrism can be found in the following quotation: “What first reads like the effort to accept things in their physical quiddity becomes the effort to penetrate them, to see through them, and to find…within an object…the subject” (A Sense of Things 12). Writing on thing theory, moreover, Harman notes how it is anthropocentric, or how it “shows symptoms of a correlationism in which the human-world duet is always central” (“The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 193).


Consider, for instance, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch: “that location in the Pacific Ocean where currents bring all the plastic, non-biodegradable flotsam of our global consumer society, where it bunches and groups together and is now said to cover an area the size of the United States itself” (Canavan, Klarr, and Vu 23).

“Garbage is liminal,” writes Christopher Todd Anderson, it is “an evocative substance, both patently material and psychologically resonant” (36). Indeed, “[g]arbage is the formlessness from which form takes flight,” writes John Scanlan, “the ghost that haunts presence” (14). For Scanlan, garbage is inherently vague; he suggests that there cannot be a definitive notion of garbage as such (14). On this, he writes: “If this outline of ‘garbage’ makes one thing clear it is that there is no determinate and singularly applicable concept of ‘garbage’. Indeed, there is no ‘social theory’ or concept of garbage at all; nor is there a readily accessible literature that lays bare the intellectual parameters for a discussion of, or investigation into, the possibility that such a concept might eventually be elaborated” (14).

Here I am thinking of Gilles Deleuze, who might offer a provocative way to read waste given the relationship between the actual and the virtual; as he puts it, “[p]urely actual objects do not exist. Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images” (148). What this might mean for waste is worth exploring. Unpacking the relationship between the actual and the virtual, Constantin V. Boundas writes, “the virtual and the actual are two mutually exclusive, yet jointly sufficient, characterisations of the real. The actual/real are states of affairs, bodies, bodily mixtures and individuals. The virtual/real are incorporeal events and singularities on a plane of consistency, belonging to the pure past – the past that can never be fully present. Without being or resembling the actual, the virtual nonetheless has the capacity to bring about actualisation and yet the virtual never coincides or can be identified with its actualisation” (300). Although I will not get into this idea here, I think that reading waste through Deleuze’s conceptualization of the actual and the virtual would be productive because it would emphasize the way in which different states of trash or decomposition are actualizing waste matter; indeed, along the “plane of consistency,” we might even locate the existence and operation of what I am calling litterality, or scrap poetics.

Scanlan is hesitant to rethink rubbish: “the act of conceptualizing garbage actually transforms it into something else” (14-15). “To repeat,” he writes, “garbage is neither one thing nor another, but instead is the remainder of such neatness, and this is one reason
why it could be a dubious exercise to reconfigure it, to bring it back into our thinking – to make it something to us” (16).

51 Take, for instance, someone like Greg Kennedy who suggests that an “ontology of trash is ultimately self-exploration” (x).

52 Part of my thought process here resides in the fact that it is not illegal in America for anyone to take trash from the curb; citing the case California v. Greenwood (1988), Strasser notes how “the Supreme Court declared that the borders of the household do not encompass the contents of trash cans, in a case that involved evidence found in a drug dealer’s rubbish. The Court maintained that citizens may not reasonably expect their trash to be private and that law enforcement officers looking for evidence do not need a warrant to search the trash” (7). Of course, 1988 is not a watershed year by any means, because the act of scavenging trash dates back to time immemorial. That being said, the codification of this phenomenon helps us to think through how there is, in fact, a sort of waste commons always already in existence.

53 “It might be strange to call it culture, but a great and subversive work of art, an immensely complex collage, is made and remade every day on the street and everyone participates in its fabrication. Trash […] is something which people make collectively, and not quite inadvertently” (Stallabrass 407).

54 “Scavengers needs capitalism, and capitalism needs scavengers” (91), write Anneli Rufus and Kristan Lawson. “Without your castoffs and junk, “ they write, “we’d have nothing to scavenge. And without someone removing, processing, and reintroducing materials back into the system, the capitalist economy would eventually run out of raw materials” (91). This phenomenon is called “scavenomics,” which they explain in more detail in the following quotation: “If there is overproduction, and everybody buys too much stuff, then sooner or later some of that stuff will be discarded; and if enough gets discarded, then people will see that the products they used to pay for can now be acquired for free through scavenging; and once a sufficient number of people become scavengers, they stop buying new stuff, and production will thereby slow down to sustainable levels. The opposite is also true: If everybody starts scavenging, then production will cease entirely because no one is buying; but if nothing is being produced, then the inventory of
scavengeable material will eventually disappear and there will once again be a demand for new stuff, and production will start up again. This process, in a nutshell, is how scavenomics works” (82).

55 “To look to destruction for the positive, and for critique in garbage,” writes Stallabrass, “is one way of saying how bad things are” (417). Taking “rubbish as an allegory of contemporary capital,” Stallabrass suggests that trash “may be read as revelatory of the operation of capitalism” (417), because it exhibits the “symbolic pose of the commodity as a sham” (417)—that is, the commodity is “just stuff” (416). “When the commodity form is stripped away,” writes Stallabrass, “something may be revealed of the social relations which are immanent in the objects and which bind people and their fates” (419). John Roberts – one of Stallabrass’ detractors – notes that “[h]e replays […] one of the most routinised aspects of early modernism’s romantic-primitivism: the idea that the unformed, the grotesque, the anti-aesthetic can provide a utopian glimpse beyond the limits of capitalist order and linearity” (17). I do not disagree with this critique of Stallabrass’ utopic sentiment; however, I think that Roberts is overstating his case. It is unclear as to whether or not Stallabrass discusses trash to push beyond capitalism. On the one hand, he notes that “a certain liberation can be found in aspects of trash” (Stallabrass 420); on the other hand, he ends with saying that “[a]ll this is not of course been to claim that there is some radical, popular power to littering” (423).

56 Jeff Ferrell writes that, “America’s engorged [d]umpsters confirm what many already suspect: the culture and economy of consumption runs on waste” (28). Indeed, from the late nineteenth century to the early-to-mid twentieth century, attitudes towards, and practices of, waste and wasting changed (see Strasser 12-13, 15, 126, 199-200). “Toward the end of the nineteenth century,” writes Strasser, “disposal became separate from production, and Americans’ relationship to waste was fundamentally transformed. Trash and trashmaking became integral to the economy in a wholly new way: the growth of markets for new products came to depend in part on the continuous disposal of old things” (15). The rhetoric of the new consumer culture “transformed Americans’ relationship to waste and, in general, to the material world” (201). By 1929 it was clear that “the ideal of the durable and reusable was displaced by aspirations of leisure and
luxury, ease and cleanliness” (201), which, implicitly, required a higher degree of disposability.
Chapter 1: Dumpster Diving William Carlos Williams

Williams is clean. He found the form of “old poetry” to be “inadequate” and “lousey with mediaeval filth” (“Belly Music” 31). Williams dismisses old poetry as filthy, as what must be thrown away. For him, poetry is instead, “[c]lean, new! Clean as the tread of a locomotive wheel” (31). This fittingly reflects Williams’ healthcare profession’s demand for sterility. More broadly, Williams’ approach to aesthetics also parallels what Susan Strasser refers to as the “new ideals of cleanliness” (200) unfolding in the 1920s. Around this time, Williams is spick-and-span when it comes to content and form. In Sour Grapes (1921), “The Thinker” features the speaker’s wife’s pristine “pink slippers”: “My wife’s new pink slippers / have gay pompons. / There is not a spot or a stain / On their satin toes or their sides” (1: 167). In the same collection, we come across the succinct, sharp, and sterile “Lines”:

Leaves are greygreen,

the glass broken, bright green. (1: 159)

Although far from fertile given the pallid “greygreen” leaves, this poem’s lively luminosity – the gist of its radiance – is refracted in the “bright green” broken glass, fragile fragments that form the very nature of a couple of “Lines.” For a poem that is as clean as can be, however, it is strange, if not jarring, that it contains waste. Although the poet declares, “I: clean / clean / clean” (1: 200), there is “a girder, still itself among the rubbish” (107), to borrow from Charles Reznikoff.

This chapter suggests that while Williams’ poetry may be overtly concerned with cleanliness, a closer look reveals a fascination with waste. Williams writes, “I touch the words and they baffle me. I turn them over in my mind and look at them but they mean little that is clean. They are plastered with muck out of the cities” (Imaginations 175). This tension between clean and dirty in the creative process plays itself out as early as “Le Médecin Malgré Lui,” a poem published in 1918 in Poetry whose title alludes to “a Molière comedy based on a fable about a woodcutter who, to avoid a beating, pretends he is a doctor” (Litz and MacGowan qtd. in Williams 1: 490). It opens as follows:

Oh I suppose I should
wash the walls of my office
polish the rust from
my instruments and keep them
definitely in order
build shelves in the laboratory
empty out the old stains
clean the bottles
and refill them, buy
another lens, put
my journals on edge instead of
letting them lie flat
in heaps—[.] (1: 122)

Williams is “spoofing the medical establishment” (Crawford 107), but this poem also aims to assuage anxiety about contamination while ultimately lingering in filth given the speaker’s deferred desire to clean (“Oh I suppose I should”). The hyperbolic ending evokes a blissfully pristine blank slate: “I might be / a credit to my Lady Happiness / and never think anything / but a white thought!” (Williams 1: 122). Left unresolved, this poem’s rusty, stained mise en scène gestures toward how waste informs Williams’ work.

If there is any doubt, then one need only read “Construction,” published in Sparrow in 1961, two years before Williams’ death, which finds the speaker arrested by a form of ejaculatory expenditure:

on the sidewalk
in front of the funeral home

where the high school kids gather
at night

there was a used condom squashed
Writing about a purged prophylactic, Williams includes waste in his work from beginning to end.

Trash inspired Williams more than he would like to admit. As he put it in a letter published in 1946, “we live out of manure heaps” (“Letter to an Australian Editor” 12). In 1916, thirty years earlier, Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others* published Williams’ “Epigramme” (1: 479), a poem that presents another “manure heap”:

Hast ever seen man
Dig gold in a manure heap?
Then open two eyes
For digging among these,
Our fellow townsmen,
I turn up this nugget. (1: 52)

Williams’ poem raises a number of issues that are relevant to an analysis of waste matter as a trope that resonates throughout his poetry.

What little has been said about “Epigramme” focuses on the question of what is valuable to whom through an antagonistic classism, evident in the alienated speaker’s condescension of his or her “fellow townsmen.” The supercilious speaker opens with an incredulous question: “Hast ever seen man / Dig gold in a manure heap?” Yet, the speaker is, in fact, “digging among” his or her “fellow townsmen,” too, which exhibits an engagement with and a concern for the commons. This seemingly strained social relation is stronger than it appears. The inclusive possessive “Our” in “Our fellow townsmen” brings together the blind and the seeing with what they share: waste. In “Epigramme,” waste recalibrates the social; it yields an unclean community and poetry, or “this nugget” of “gold.” Williams’ poem shows us how dirty he can be as his poetic coprophilia foregrounds a handful of filthy features: the shameful, yet aesthetically arousing phenomenon of sifting through feces; the identification with the hobo scouring scraps; the rejection of middle class decorum through a transgressed taboo; the desire to search for value in detritus; and the recognition of expired poetry that is no longer “good.” With regard to this last point, the poem’s retrieval of the archaic “[h]ast” – a scavenged scrap of the past – is a symbolic gesture. It indicates how Williams not only recognizes that
what is left behind or discarded still exists within a system of use and value, but also, paradoxically, acknowledges that trash is an aesthetic, aneconomic object.

Named what it is, moreover, “Epigramme” is an epigram. Williams’ poem uses this genre’s form to foreground the permanence, yet ephemerality of waste. The word “epigram” means “inscription” (Mackail 1). Originally, inscriptions were in verse, and even with the popularization of prose over time, the metrical form remained because it was striking and indelible (1). Historically, inscriptions were engraved on monuments, and as inscriptions became epigrams – a short, concise poem with a pointed turn, witticism, or verbal fancy (4-5) – they retained part of their material history. A trace of what a monument is and means has impressed itself upon the genre: “the first part of such an epigram fulfils the monument’s function by elaborating a verbal symbol with its attendant mystery in such a way as to excite a curiosity to be satisfied in the last part of the epigram which explains that mystery” (Russell 283). In Williams’ poem, the mystery of a monument is transformed into a manure heap, which, surprisingly, reveals a nugget in the rough. While this pile of shit stands in for Rutherford, New Jersey, it is also a reference to the real monuments of trash in New Jersey’s Meadowlands, which are a part of Williams’ world. Here, we get a sense of the permanence of waste, yet, thanks to the ephemeral form of the epigram, trash is made out to be temporary, too. This tension marks Williams’ intimacy with waste, a relationship that I explore by dumpster diving his body of work.

Williams digs into the matter of poetry and finds inspiration and aesthetic material among the very waste that he claims to reject. In this chapter, I employ the figure of dumpster diving as a hermeneutic for reading Williams’ writing. As a methodology, dumpster diving involves sifting through ostensibly useless traces of materiality in order to find an object of value, one that enhances an understanding of a text. Moreover, it considers how the act of creative imagination rehabilitates trash from its apparent worthlessness. For me, dumpster diving is a restricted form of close reading that focuses on marginal things that establish or reestablish a relationship with waste and wasting. It is also an approach that explores how a text engages with waste as a resource for creative production, which brings word and world, text and trash, together in provocative ways. Turning to thresholds, the critical practice of literary dumpster diving encourages the
process of confronting and examining levels of discomfort and disgust in response to trash, and, subsequently, considering how these affects influence textual analysis, let alone the work as a whole. And so dumpster diving helps to dirty rather than green the canon while suggesting that scholarship return to or uncover minor or unknown works and things. But dumpster diving is also about embracing contingency. You do not know what you will find. And if and when you find something, you do not know if it will work. Open to failure, the critic as dumpster diver explores the unproductivity of waste, too, and wonders what happens – if anything – when trash is just trash. In this manner, dumpster diving is an extension of ecocriticism. Exploring the gross rather than the green, dumpster diving analyzes representations of nonhuman, often inanimate, organic and inorganic things and how they function or malfunction in a larger system or network of material relations. Dumpster diving roots and rummages through dirty modernism, which reveals a grimy genealogy composed of gradations of fertility and sterility, vitality and inanimacy of unclean, base things in American poetry.

For this reason, I turn to how trash is a material resource for modernist poetry, especially the ways in which the content and form of waste affects Williams’ writing. Dumpster diving him, I find and scrutinize forms of filth and filthy forms that are a part of an ecology of trash. In doing so, I argue that Williams’ writing exhibits a trash poetics. Williams’ trash poetics is not only influenced by the waste in his surroundings, but also involves an attention to how common and crass things are dirty in different ways, and how they appear in broken, fragmentary forms that produce messy lyrical collages or assemblages that often refuse the orderliness of rhyme. Indeed, Williams’ trash poetics are tied to a tension or ambivalence around waste. Reading Williams in this way, I take my cue not only from Walter Benjamin’s point about how “poets find the refuse of society on their street and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse” (Charles Baudelaire 79), but also from his friend, Theodor W. Adorno, who writes that “the poetic process declares itself to be a process of wastage” (261). Thus, I set out to situate Williams within the history of trash and the cultural artifacts that this history produces with the aim of exhibiting a facet of dirty modernism in the U.S., as revealed in his poetic practice.

Drawing on the method of cultural materialism, this chapter begins with an
exploration of how waste makes its way into Williams’ life and work with a discussion of New Jersey’s polluted Passaic River and messy Meadowlands. It is necessary to investigate the material history of Williams’ local landscape and how he experienced these gritty geographies because his poetry is located within this important space. Reading the intersection of Williams’ world and work, I delve into dirty modernism and discover how the poet reveals intimate engagements with and ambivalence about waste in selections from his oeuvre. The chapter concludes with my discussion of Williams’ connection with other writers and artists with regard to poetry, trash, and collage, which is followed by a reading that captures both Williams’ and dirty modernism’s trashy nature.

In 1883, Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, a borough in “The Garbage State,” which was “forever to be known as the open trash can at the foot of the great Big Apple” (D. Wheeler 57). In The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (1951), the author reflects on the rural area where he grew up, a place with little to no sanitary infrastructure (279). Referring to his childhood home at 131 West Passaic Avenue, Williams notes how he had “cesspools in the backyard and outhouses as on any farm” (279; Neumann 98). Consciously or not, Williams’ exposure to filth at a young age stuck with him given the proliferation of trash in his writing. “Garbage. / Half the world ignored” (2: 86), writes Williams, but he could not ignore that half of the world given his surrounds.

In November 1913, Williams and his wife Floss moved into 9 Ridge Road in Rutherford, which is a two-minute drive or a nine-minute walk from Williams’ childhood home and a three-minute drive or a nineteen-minute walk from what he called “the vilest swillhole in christendom, the Passaic River” (AG 195; Ahearn 20; “Rutherford, New Jersey”). During his life, Williams did not stray far from what he called a “stink hole” (6) in his short story, “Life Along the Passaic River” (1938). With waste nearby, Williams could not ignore it; his olfactory descriptions were not inaccurate. As a result of the population increase at the turn of the century, the Passaic Valley – from the Great Falls at Paterson to below Newark – yielded seventy million gallons of sewage discharge daily, which “constituted a public nuisance, a health menace, and a growing threat to property interests” (Benidickson 224). The area was known for its odors: carrying untreated
sewage, filth, and industrial waste, the Passaic River’s strong tidal flows led to stagnation (Revell 131). In “the warmer months of 1899, conditions reminiscent of London’s Great Stink compelled residents living up to half a mile from the Passaic shore to close their windows against the stench; homes closer to the river were virtually uninhabitable” (Benidickson 225). Williams could not avoid the stench from “[t]he Passaic, that filthy river” (1: 34), as he put it in his poem “The Wanderer: A Rococo Study.”

In March 1914, Williams published “The Wanderer” in The Egoist, and a revised version of it appears in Al Que Quiere! (1917) (1: 477). Referred to as his “artistic coming-of-age,” “The Wanderer” consists of seven subtitled sections exhibiting aesthetic religiosity, pseudo-biblical rhetoric, his grandmother Emily Dickinson Wellcome as a muse, and a “laboratory of styles” ranging from “comic bombast” to “earnest prophecy” to “hortatory romantic sentiments” (Leibowitz 31-33). “The climax of this peculiar poem is the poet’s baptismal immersion in the filthy waters of the Passaic River” (33), notes Herbert Leibowitz. Here is the apex:

Then the river began to enter my heart
Eddying back cool and limpid
Clear to the beginning of days!
But with the rebound it leaped again forward—
Muddy then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its filthiness,
And sank down knowing this was me now. (Williams 1: 35)

“How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?” (1: 28), asks the speaker at the outset of “The Wanderer.” Although not explicitly answered, we can take his or her dirty baptism – one Williams experienced, too, having plunged into the Passaic – as a commitment to contact with the world. Indeed, the environs have changed since Thomas Ward’s idyllic antebellum collection Passaic, a Group of Poems Touching that River (1842), which references the “clear streams” (22) of the river. After the Civil War, as Martin V. Melosi notes, the Passaic river became “a classic illustration of how factories defiled their environment” (Effluent America 27). The pervasive pollution of the Passaic at the turn of the century and beyond indicates how much the local waterway was littered with
industrial waste. With the messy Meadowlands nearby, too, domestic debris hit close to home for Williams, for at “one point very recently in its history the Meadowlands was the largest dump in the world” (Sullivan 16).

The Meadowlands were infamous: for three hundred years – since European settlement\(^\text{18}\) – the Meadowlands were treated like trash, which is uncannily on par with how they were first and foremost nature’s junkyard.\(^\text{19}\) The Meadowlands were regarded as “‘wastelands’”: “[t]hey were viewed as unpleasant, unhealthy, unproductive places that ought to be ‘improved’ out of existence as rapidly as possible” (Marshall 6). In 1867, a journalist wrote that the Meadowlands were “blurs upon the fair face of [n]ature” and “worthless” (qtd. in Marshall 6). Overlooking how the Meadowlands function as a “hydrological kidney” (Sullivan 16),\(^\text{20}\) this journalist saw nothing but an eyesore. Surely, this was Williams’ vast, grey desolate field (1: 150). Exacerbating this eyesore, the Meadowlands became an actual wasteland. In 1870, the Meadowlands’ unnatural nature was appropriated for what would be “‘a century of waste disposal’” (\textit{The Hackensack Meadowlands Comprehensive Land Use Plan} qtd. in McGurty 34).\(^\text{21}\)

In 1907, a federal engineer who surveyed the Meadowlands declared that the “‘marsh in its present condition is not only worthless, but is a detriment to public health and a nuisance to the residents of the adjacent upland’” (Marshall 7). Land reclamation proposals treated the Meadowlands like a receptacle. Developers suggested technologies of dredging and filling in that would use fodder from rivers, bays, excavation and construction debris, and municipal trash (10). In the early 1900s, development actually began: companies started to transform land between the mouth of the Passaic and Hackensack Rivers using fill that included “garbage transported in barges from New York City” (11, 13).\(^\text{22}\) While the Newark Meadowlands were filled in between 1914 and 1974, the Hackensack Meadowlands were left undeveloped for some time (11).\(^\text{23}\) But this did not mean that they were dump lands in waiting. “By the mid-20th century,” writes Stephen Marshall, “even garbage not being used for land-making projects was brought to the Meadowlands” (13). “It was simply deposited in open dumps, and later, in sanitary landfills” (13), he adds, which led to the mere “disposal of garbage in a manner that simply polluted” (13).\(^\text{24}\) It is important to explain the difference between an “open dump” and a “sanitary landfill” to understand how Williams came across waste. In an open
dump, municipal solid waste is deposited in or on a pre-existing excavation, a piece of unused land, or a hillside, and it neither separates waste from soil or rock strata nor covers the refuse to avoid or protect against odors, scavengers, or weather of all sorts (Blight 470). Conversely, a sanitary landfill is situated on a sealed base and, in turn, covered with a drainage system that collects seepage emanating from the waste (470). Early on, “sanitary landfills were layered: garbage was covered with ashes, street sweepings, rubbish, or dirt; then another layer of garbage; and so forth” (Melosi, The Sanitary City 162). In the history of sanitary landfills in America, there were attempts to implement them in the 1910s in Seattle, New Orleans, and Davenport, Iowa, but they were not really employed until after World War II; by the end of 1945, for instance, nearly one hundred cities in America had adopted the sanitary landfill (127, 162-163). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then, from open dump to sanitary landfill, garbage was dumped in the Meadowlands, making messy monuments very visible. It makes sense why Eileen McGurty notes how it “had become impossible to think about the Jersey Meadowlands without thinking first and foremost about garbage” (31). Importantly, the Meadowlands were basically in Williams’ backyard. Given his fondness for walking, he encountered them.

To get a sense of what Williams witnessed, we need to turn to one of his excursions. On 2 January 1921, for the first time, Williams encountered Kenneth Burke in what Matthew Josephson referred to as “the great swamp” (75; East xiii). Burke, Josephson, and Robert McAlmon spent “a Sunday with Williams in the New Jersey countryside” (Josephson 72); Josephson describes the surrounds from their “long walk” (73) in the following passage:

We had grown weary of tramping for hours amid the dun winter scenery and pungent stench of the Great Swamp of New Jersey [. . .] We had been walking through mean streets of the industrial suburbs, past dilapidated factories and warehouses, grimy railway yards, coal bunkers, and mountains of rubble and tin cans; in short, one of the ugliest and most blighted areas in all America [. . .] we had all the panorama of American junk that is to be seen on the outskirts of all our great cities. (76-77)

New Jersey was a notorious dump with garbage gathering in the Meadowlands. For most
of his life, Williams eyed “the panorama of American junk.” Indeed, it was always there because it was not until the Hackensack Meadowlands Reclamation and Development Act of 1968 – five years after his death – when an actual effort was made to stop landfillsing the surrounds (McGurty 32). In fact, up until the 1960s, “[m]ore than a tenth of the area was zoned as open dumps that accepted 35 percent of the state’s solid waste from 121 municipalities” (Salmore 348). Observing the open dumps, the “mountains of rubble and tin cans”, and “one of the ugliest and most blighted areas in all America,” Williams observed and walked through a wasteland. His sludgy surrounds seeped into what and how he wrote.

A year after moving into 9 Ridge Road, Williams published “Invitation” in The Egoist in 1914 (1: 478), the first poem not only to address his “townspeople,” but also to gesture to the filthy “ochred patches” and “meadow things” in the Meadowlands:

We live in this flat blue basin,
We and the meadow things, my townspeople,
And there beyond where the snow lies
In ochred patches float the smoke-grey towers.
Has it never struck you as curious
That we do not all leave this place?
Surely we are blest
With a noteworthy wisdom, my townspeople!
Let us be conscious and talk of these things. (1: 40)

There are a number of explicit references to wastelands and dumps in Williams, and so the “meadow things” in this poem can be many things ranging from wildlife to waste. The “meadow things” could be the “townspeople”, too, troglodytes living a rote life. Not unlike the ostensible condescension evident in “Epigramme,” the speaker in “Invitation” takes umbrage with “Rutherfordian torpor” (Ahearn 59) when he or she asks, “[h]as it never struck you as curious / that we do not all leave this place?” Williams’ “meadow things” mean “townspeople.” This reading is not necessarily incorrect, but, if we look closely at the poem, it becomes apparent that “meadow things” gestures to something else, too, because the townspeople are already accounted for in it. When the speaker directly addresses his or her audience – “my townspeople,” a punctuated apostrophe – it
is clear that they are included in the pronoun “we.” Moreover, the definite article in “the meadow things” separates them from speaker and townspeople.

Surely, there is an abyss between human and waste, but, paradoxically, there is also a connection – a connection through separation – that appears when we turn to and away from trash. “For separation is a relation,” writes Gay Hawkins, “it is not the opposite of connection; to experience ourselves as separate from rubbish is still to be in a relation with it” (41). We are “enmeshed in rubbishy things whether we like it or not” (80). Detritus is discarded, but not entirely: there are varying degrees of attachment and detachment when it comes to debris. In Williams’ “Invitation,” the relation of “[w]e” to “meadow things” with the conjunction “and” signifies both connection and separation. Rather than a fantasy of cleanliness, then, there is an understanding of how humans in the environs share their space with waste. In “Invitation,” Williams does not record or describe what was just around the corner; rather, he opts for the vague phrase, “meadow things.” They are unlike the way in which “[o]ne by one objects are defined” (1: 183) in “Spring and All (By the road to the contagious hospital),” another poem that refers to “the / waste of broad, muddy fields / brown with dried weeds” (1: 183) in the Meadowlands. There are, to be sure, specific scraps in Williams: “a flash of juncos in the field of grey locust saplings with a white sun powdery upon them and a large rusty can wedged in the crotch of one of them, for the winter, human fruit, and on the polished straws of the dead grass a scroll of crimson paper—not yet rained on” (1: 299). Despite this specificity, Williams’ use of the ambiguous “meadow things” marks a familiarity, yet disgust with waste, an ambivalence toward rampant dumping given the norms at the time, and an overall tension tied to modernity’s transition between an ideology of reuse and one of disposability. Far from idyllic, romantic, or nostalgic, the “meadow things” of the Meadowlands marks Williams’ exhibition of and engagement with a sort of putrescent pastoral, a place and state of decay and debris where the dirty reality of modernity appears in the poem.36

Williams’ scraps include a manure heap, broken glass, rusty instruments, a squashed condom, the filthy Passaic, meadow things, muddy fields, a rusty can, dead grass, and crimson paper. But he gets dirtier. Turning to things like “three baskets / of dried flowers in the high // barroom window,” “the dirty snow,” or “the stubble of old //
weeds” (2: 108-109) in “Approach to a City” published in Briarcliff Quarterly in 1946, Williams’ speaker finds grime to be galvanizing: “I never tire of these sights / but refresh myself there / always for there is small holiness / to be found in greater things” (2: 109, 468). Perhaps part of a general rather than restrictive economy, or what Williams would call the “dirt” of “poor economy” (Embodiment 186), the following list of “greater things” – one that is by no means exhaustive – shows us how Williams picks through society’s seedy underbelly. Dumpster diving his body of work, we find things like scorched ground, blue February waste, tobacco smoke, the stink of stale urine, a lice comber, gnats on dung, an outhouse, a dirty white coat, rank odors, slime, dirt colored men, an ash can, a carcass, someone soiling their pants, black fungus, slobber, a jaundiced woman, the corpse of a suicide, pimples, urination, bestiality, and a plague. The dirty waste of the world does not just enter Williams’ work, however, it also acts on the form of the poem itself.

Williams is aware of how the real affects poetic form. In a letter to poet Henry W. Wells dated 12 April 1950, Williams writes the following:

> The poem to me (until I go broke) is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression. Thus it is social, the poem is a social instrument—accepted or not accepted seems to be of no material importance. It embraces everything we are.

> The poem (for I never if possible speak of poetry) is the assertion that we are alive as ourselves—as much of the environment as it can grasp […] (Selected Letters 286)

Well before Morton argued that the ideological construct “Nature” obscures and obstructs how ecological forms affect culture, Williams understood how the environment is built into cultural production, and how poetry grasps and expresses as much of the environment as it can. And, for Williams, the nature of this environment is dirty. Of course, this is not to say that Williams consciously composed with explicit ecological forms in mind. Rather, his awareness of how the poem subsumes the surrounds compels us to consider how things – maybe “meadow things” – in the environs permeate the form of his work. If anything, his conviction that the poem is a “failing experiment,” one that
asserts itself with “broken means,” is an indication of just how fundamental trashy forms of fragmentation are to his poetics. “Nothing is any pleasure but misery and brokenness” (Imaginations 57), he writes in Kora in Hell (1920). A poem brings broken things together like a dump does garbage: “[t]hus a poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being” (16-17). For Williams, poetry pulls in scraps to emphasize how that which is beyond repair still matters, even in its unproductivity.

Three years after Kora in Hell, Williams published Spring and All, which is perhaps the most conspicuous example of a shattered style given its overall fragmentary form. According to Williams and a number of critics, Dadaism influenced Spring and All, and, surely, we can read this influence as a variation of trash poetics. Ian D. Copestake offers an overview of Spring and All that nicely captures its formal chaos: “[t]he placement of the poems in Spring and All were designed to interrupt the chaotic flow of his prose, a prose characterized by its disruption of logical argument, its use of incomplete sentences and rapid switches of focus that took its debates in unannounced directions” (3). Interruption, chaos, disruption, incompleteness, rapid switches, and sharpness—surely, Spring and All is formed by scrambled scraps, not to mention a strange psyche. “The prose is a mixture of philosophy and nonsense” (I Wanted 37), reflects Williams. “It made sense to me, at least to my disturbed mind—because it was disturbed at that time—but I doubt if it made any sense to anyone else” (37). Order is disordered, too, as Williams randomizes the enumeration of chapters and poems; he even prints a title upside down.43

Spring and All’s macroscopic scraps are also mirrored in its microscopic ones. Excerpts from “Young Love (What about all this writing?)” – a poem that also happens to feature a messy melting pot of the other as trash – exhibits clutter with irregular stanzas, claustrophobically condensed words without spacing, repetition, ellipsis, indentation, lists, and the jarring and jolting use of line breaks:

What about all this writing?

O “Kiki”
O Miss Margaret Jarvis
The backhandspring

I: clean
clean
clean: yes . . New-York

Wrigley’s, appendicitis, John Marin:
Skyscraper soup—

Either that or a bullet!

Drunk we go forward surely
Not I

beds, beds, beds
elevators, fruit, night-tables
breasts to see, white and blue—
to hold in the hand, to nozzle

It is not onion soup
Your sobs soaked through the walls
breaking the hospital to pieces

Everything
—windows, chairs
obscenely drunk, spinning—
white, blue, orange
—hot with our passion

All I said was:
there, you see, it is broken

..............................

Clean is he alone
after whom stream
the broken pieces of the city—

flying apart at his approaches [...] (1: 200-202)

Williams’ use of the words “breaking” and “broken” to describe hyperbolic, catastrophic images – the breakdown of the hospital, let alone the city – foregrounds the poem’s fragmentary form. Even the typography is a type of trash. The plethora of em dashes scattered throughout “Young Love” – not to mention the three hundred and thirty-four spread throughout Spring and All – are forms of cut up scraps. In this vein, Spring and All’s errata are also instances of litter on the page—for instance, “rythm,” “occured,” “yed,” “existance,” “writter,” “playes,” “agregate,” “acurately,” and “Dont’t” (S&A [2011] 95-96). These are moments when signification fails or falters; a misspelled scrap stalls the reader’s perception and comprehension. With Williams’ “assertion through broken means,” we read and consume forms of trash. Surveying the entirety of Spring and All, moreover, reveals the diction of twists, turns, and textures of scraps and scrap heaps. Take, for instance, the following words: contact, repellant (1: 177), endways, sideways, frontways, fringe, (1:178), destroy, crumble, ruin, mounds (1: 179), transpiercing, reaching, split, plunging (1: 184), cutting, broken, fragile, moist, half-raised, cold, precise, touching (1: 195), pungency, fragmentary (1: 199), excrementa, folded (1: 215), juxtaposition (1: 229), and jostling (1: 231). These are but some of the ways in which Williams’ rhetoric explores forms of filth and filthy forms.

Full of forms of waste, Spring and All is a scrapbook. Writing about it, Webster Schott, editor of Imaginations (1970), notes how Williams “once and for all abandoned the imagism and Keatsian classicism of his three first books of poems” (86). “Gone from Williams’s poems are the reflex-action rhetoric and symbols of the nineteenth century” (87), writes Schott. Instead, Williams “shows us [...] that some of the old symbols may have the means of making new associations—with the junkyards of the United States or the universe itself, depending on the imagination” (87). Schott’s nonchalant comparison of Spring and All to “the junkyards of the United States” is no accident. Although he does
not expand on this relative to waste, Schott offers an example of old symbols made new in “The Rose is Obsolete,” which opens with the following stanzas:

   The rose is obsolete
   but each petal ends in
   an edge, the double facet
   cementing the grooved
   columns of air—The edge
   cuts without cutting
   meets—nothing—renews
   itself in metal or porcelain—

   whither? It ends—

   But if it ends
   the start is begun
   so that to engage roses
   becomes a geometry—
   Sharper, neater, more cutting [. ] (1: 195)

Like the remains of a consumed good turned into garbage, the rose is now rubbish, or “obsolete.” The organic is inorganic: “Somewhere the sense / makes copper roses / steel roses” (1: 195). The geometric shape of the cutting rose petal slices up the negative space around it with sharp line breaks: “The rose is obsolete / but each petal ends in / an edge” or “The edge / cuts without cutting / meets—nothing.” The line breaks not only show off a shattered style, but also fracture “the reflex-action rhetoric and symbols of the nineteenth century” rather than just jettisoning them. “By the brokenness of his composition the poet makes himself master of a certain weapon which he could possess himself of in no other way” (Imaginations 16), writes Williams. Thus, he uses a rose to abuse the rose. Surely, this rose’s form is from “the junkyards of the United States,” especially the ones in Rutherford. Spring and All marks a moment when Williams’ work is trashy. Litter scatters throughout his writing; it takes different forms, perhaps the most important of which is his triadic line.
What Williams called “an assembly of three-line groups” (Selected Letters 321) appeared in the 1950s in The Desert Music (1954), Journey to Love (1955), and parts of Paterson V (1958). Aiming to express “the American idiom,” his work featuring triadic lines – three steps of variable feet – is “more conventional and more accessible than Williams’s earlier style and contributed to his widening readership” (MacGowan 49). In Paterson II (1948), we witness the stirrings of this style in a section that would be reprinted as “The Descent” in The Desert Music:

The descent beckons

As the ascent beckoned

Memory is a kind of accomplishment [.] (Paterson 78)

The triadic line is very visual. Eleanor Berry notes that, “when he first employed it in the ‘descent’ passage of Paterson, the stepped triadic line was clearly a nonce form for a particular poetic occasion—a representational form, presenting a visual image of descent” (380-381). This “descent” appears to go on endlessly. Williams’ triadic lines are not composed of stanzas, but paragraphs: “[s]tanzas strike a reader as neat, closed units; stepped triads grouped in paragraphs give an appearance of running on continuously” (382). Instead of stanzaic organization, then, there is stichic accumulation (380). Grossly piling on top of one another, Williams’ triadic lines materialize the eternal return of rubbish. Here, layers of fragments litter the page. Seemingly, this reading is against the grain, especially when Kenneth Rexroth notes how Williams’ “metric flows as smoothly as water” (qtd. in Berry 371). Yet, turning to “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” – “the culmination of Williams’ work in the triadic line” (Berry 384) – waste appears.

From Journey to Love, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” is Williams’ confessional, an apology to his wife Floss for his infidelities (Leibowitz 17). In the following excerpt, we read of worldwide waste:

The measure itself

has been lost

and we suffer for it.

We come to our deaths
in silence.

The bomb speaks.

All suppressions,
from the witchcraft trials at Salem
to the latest
book burnings
are confessions
that the bomb
has entered our lives
to destroy us.

Every drill
driven into the earth
for oil enters my side
also.

Waste, waste!

dominates the world.

It is the bomb’s work. (2: 324)

The bomb laid the world to waste, and it broke the poem. For the first time, the poem is cut up according to vertical indentation, which troubles convention as his triads are neither stanzas nor lines exactly (Berry 378). This ambiguity marks Williams’ dirty work. Looking closely, the enjambment at the end of this excerpt – “Waste, waste! / dominates the world” – depicts the domination of debris, too, as if the excess of the exclamatory sentence takes over. Although enjambment has a different effect with Williams’ triadic line, it is hard not to see how the explosives affect the form of the poem and gesture to a world in shambles. The very repetition of the word “waste” points to how replete the world is with it. And the repetition of both “waste” and the triadic line reveals another filthy form in Williams: recycling, or “downcycling” (56), to borrow from William McDonough and Michael Braungart, which I explain shortly.

Today, recycling is utopic. It has been rhetorically rendered clean as can be—“reduce, reuse, recycle.” This ideology is not new. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel *Herland* (1915), for instance, there is no such thing as waste: “These careful culturists
had worked out a perfect scheme of refeeding the soil with all that came out of it. All the scraps and leaving of their food; plant waste from lumber work or textile industry; all the solid matter from the sewage, properly treated and combined; everything which came from the earth went back to it” (104). Gilman’s world without waste exhibits a desire to clean up modernity’s mess through a radical form of recycling. This desire was warranted. At the turn of the century, more and more waste matter was merely disposed of rather than reused. Indeed, by 1899, Thorstein Veblen was writing about conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste. Trash was and continued to be on the rise. A century or so later, Americans disposed of nearly five hundred billion pounds of refuse in one year (Rogers 2). With all this waste, one would think that “reduce, reuse, recycle” would save the day. But recycling is not salvation. Rather, “most recycling is actually downcycling; it reduces the quality of a material over time” (McDonough and Braungart 56).

Although neither Gilman nor Williams were familiar with downcycling as such, the phenomenon itself has a long history. We can read Williams’ triadic line as a sort of loop leftover from the reuse culture at the turn of the century, one that formally downcycles through its descent taking each and every subsequent scrap with its movements. Describing the effect of reading the triadic line, Berry writes that when “a sentence concludes at the end of a first or second step, the diagonal thrust carries the reader on to the next step(s). At the end of a third step, syntactical expectation is needed to carry the reader back to the left margin—unless a definite full stop is warranted” (377). Perhaps not as paradoxical as what Douglas Hofstadter calls a “strange loop,” Williams’ triadic line is a downward spiral that sends the reader circling around poetic scraps. From his early poetry to Spring and All to the triadic line and beyond, the waste around Williams shapes his style.

Williams is not alone with waste. There are a number of writers who take up trash like Mina Loy, Carl Sandburg, John Dos Passos, Wallace Stevens, and T.S. Eliot. Most of these writers briefly refer to debris, but Eliot tarries with waste a little longer. As early as “Preludes” from Prufrock and Other Observations (1917), we read of “grimy scraps” (12), “newspapers from vacant lots” (13), “muddy feet” (12), and “soiled hands” (13), and, in “Rhapsody on Windy Night,” a “broken spring in a factory yard” (14). In The
Wasteland (1922), moreover, there are lines that exhibit ambivalence toward trash. In “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot writes the following: “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. / The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are / departed” (42). The “[s]weet Thames” is unpolluted, but its cleanliness is complicated by the way waste materializes itself through what Tim Armstrong calls a “negative catalogue” (71). The Thames comes to be defined by the waste it could, but does not actually, contain. Eliot’s refuse is odd: the “[s]ilk handkerchiefs” hint at a haunting affluence that registers conspicuous consumption and valuable waste. The Waste Land is dirty, but Eliot “thinks of waste in deeply antithetical ways” (73). Indeed, the poem “bespeaks a simultaneous fascination with, and revulsion from, waste” (71). While Williams’ representations of trash are not unlike Eliot’s ambivalently rendered detritus, there is, nonetheless, more of an attachment to and an acceptance of the unclean in Williams’ writing. The sentiment behind this attachment to waste is apparent in Williams’ letter to Louis Zukofsky dated 22 August 1928 where Williams embraces the brokenness of a typographical error: “My typewriter has not been idel. (again I refuse to correct)” (Correspondence of Williams & Zukofsky 14). Williams’ poetry displays an intimacy with waste that Eliot’s does not, one that revels in a raw aesthetic.

Williams’ poetry is a part of the history of trash. While Christopher Todd Anderson sketches the lineage of the American garbage poem, he more or less leaves out modernism. Although he starts with Whitman and mentions Eliot and Stevens, Anderson primarily focuses on postwar poets. Of course, his scope is sound, but, considering Williams’ wasteland, there are circumstances throughout the first half of the twentieth century where waste works its way into modernism, and these messy moments warrant critical attention. More pressing, however, is that which has been overlooked when it comes to trash poetics: collage. A form unique to modernism, collage is an aesthetic symptom of trash.

Aware of the history of collage, Williams and other modernist poets often employ iterations or traces of it in their work, which is an aesthetic engagement with the form and matter of waste. Surprisingly, the connection between collage and trash has not been acknowledged in this context. Pablo Picasso, one of the first collagists with his Still Life
Chair Caning (1912), said the following in conversation: “The purpose of the papier collé was to give the idea that different textures can enter into a composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature. [...] This displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness” (qtd. in Perloff 44; 46). Picasso’s “displaced object” resonates with rubbish. “Nothing is inherently trash” (5), writes Strasser, riffing off of “dirt as matter out of place.” The very form of collage – etymologically, the “pasting, sticking, or gluing” (Perloff 46) – resembles a refuse heap. Collage is, in part, born out of modernity’s waste. And thinking through collage as a form of trash radically affects how we read the work of modernism. From the scraps on the street to the open dumps, modernity made its own collage, one that informed artworks throughout the twentieth century including Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. The defining ecological form of collage in modernism is modernity’s surge of scraps; indeed, waste as such affects many modernist mediums.

Collage is first and foremost “a visual or spatial concept, but it was soon absorbed into the verbal as well as into the musical realm” (72), notes Marjorie Perloff. She points to the well known Futurist F.T. Marinetti’s widely disseminated and translated Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature (1912) and Destruction of Syntax—Wireless Imaginations—Words-in-Freedom (1913) as illuminating a collage aesthetic relative to literary discourse (56). Perloff explains how Marinetti demanded a new verbal art, one that would respond to modernity’s new means of communication, transportation, and information; for him, verbal art needed to restrict or jettison adjectives, adverbs, finite verbs, punctuation, and free verse (57).“Poetry,” explains Perloff, quoting Marinetti, “becomes ‘an uninterrupted sequence of new images,’ a ‘strict net of images or analogies, to be cast into the mysterious sea of phenomena’” (58). Although Marinetti never used the word “collage,” notes Perloff, he describes this artistic form with his emphasis on “‘ever-vaster gradation of analogies’” and “parole in libertà,” or “words-in-freedom” (58). Discussing Marinetti’s own literary collage Zang Tumb Tuuum (1914), Perloff offers other examples including Williams’ Kora in Hell (72), which is aesthetically similar to Spring and All, not to mention Paterson.61

Williams is indebted to collage given his work’s juxtaposition of prose and
poetry, but even at the level of the poem we witness Marinetti’s “uninterrupted sequence of new images” in a poem like “The Agonized Spires,” which includes the following:
crustaceous wedge, sweaty kitchen, rock, thrusts of the sea, waves of steel, swarming backstreets, shell, coral, electricity, lights, lakes, twilight, triphammer, nitrogen, pasture, motorcar, arm, leg, spire, peace, stanchion, ventricle, and sunburnt fingers (1: 211-212).  
Although not strictly adhering to Marinetti’s criteria, Williams’ unpunctuated, untamed aggregate poem exhibits a form of collage containing a “net of images.” Williams’ collage work reveals him to be a bricoleur.  
Through a scrappy style founded on the surrounds, he shows us how collage and trash are inextricably linked.

From the start, I set out to dumpster dive Williams’ work. At this point, I want to end with one more dive. Turning to Williams’ “Between Walls,” I dumpster it to exhibit the tension around trash in dirty modernism with specific reference to my ideas of litterality and waste commons, which, as noted in my introduction, involve literal and mimetic forms of waste relative to a public material network. Williams’ poem reads:

Between Walls

the back wings
of the

hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken

pieces of a green
bottle [...] (1: 453)

The speaker experiences a one-on-one with waste, and trash takes over. Like the broken
bottle, nearly all shreds of subjectivity are shattered. Indeed, it is Williams who impressively nears the impossibility of a poem leaving its speaker behind (Pickard, “Williams” 91), which emphasizes this poem’s broken bottle. And so the short, sharp stanzas are shards of poetic waste left behind for us to find. There is a message in this broken bottle. This poem shows us a scene of litterality lying in the waste commons. Starting with the title, the tangibility of matter is felt through the poem’s form, which anticipates the real trash to come. It is unclear as to whether or not “Between Walls” is the title or a line, if not both. In one recorded reading of the poem, Williams introduces it and says, “This is… just a… just a few more. This has no title” (“Between Walls”). Perhaps playful, Williams’ reading still gestures to the ambiguity of the so-called title. This impasse affects the reading of the poem. That is, the “title” is included in and excluded from the remainder of it. In the latter case, the word “[w]alls” in the title interrupts what could have been a syntactically correct sentence. As such, “[w]alls” is an obstacle, one that produces – if only momentarily – a semantic, sonic, and typographic disjuncture. Re-writing the poem’s opening lines gives us a better sense of the nature of this obstruction or intrusion (the first is the original and the next two are variations): (1) “Between Walls the back wings of the hospital”; (2) “Between Walls Between the back wings of the hospital”; and (3) “Between Walls Between the walls of the back wings of the hospital.” We also run into other walls in Williams’ poem, ones that continue to manifest a sense of materiality. Given the plural in the title, how many walls are there? Deformation helps us to answer this question. Following Jerome McGann’s point that “imaginative work has an elective affinity with performance” and thus “it always lies open to deformative moves” (113), I want to read Williams horizontally. “A deformative procedure puts the reader in a highly idiosyncratic relation to the work,” writes McGann, which “sends both reader and work through the textual looking glass” (116). Thus, “Between Walls” looks like this:

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Between Walls
the back wings of the hospital
nothing will grow lie cinders in which shine the broken pieces of a green bottle
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Including the title, the stanzaic structure of “Between Walls” suggests that there are six walls. But perhaps five is the correct answer. If stanzaic breaks stop us, then perhaps each negative space in between signifies one wall, adding up to five. The stanzas themselves mimic “fragmented objects” (Markos 136) like shards of glass or cinders that lie between the white walls. Read this way, the lines accumulate like waste in a space where presumably “nothing // will grow.” However you count and read it, “Between Walls” foregrounds through its form the materiality of the messy stuff in the middle. Here, we have literal, yet liminal litter in this “no-man’s-land” (Crawford 64) that belongs to no one and everyone. To think through the trashy threshold of this waste commons, we can turn to what Michel Serres says about the border, or the “dividing line [that] strangely consists of three layers” (43):

The first is on the inside and protects the inhabitant with its softness; the exterior one threatens possible invaders with its hardness. The layer in the middle is riddled with pores, passages, portals, and porosities through which, often by semiconduction, a living being or a thing enters, is locked in, leaves, transits, attacks, or waits hopelessly. The prepositions in, for, to, from describe the first layer; out of and against the third strip; between and through the intermediary one. To defend, protect, forbid, or let through: this is the threefold way in which a border functions. (Malfeasance 43)

Serres’ prepositions for the “middle” or “intermediary” layer – “between and through” – resonate with “Between Walls.” Imagining Williams’ scene, there is an inner and an outer layer or wall, and in between them is the intermediary or liminal trash “riddled with pores, passages, portals, and porosities.” This garbage generates an iteration of the waste commons. As property is pushed aside, waste is in the commons; the speaker is privy to a relation manifested and mediated by refuse. One could argue that this common waste does not warrant such attention. After all, it is just a bottle. But this bottle raises many questions.

How and why did this bottle break? Where is it from? What was in the bottle? Medicine from the hospital? Or was it a bottle of booze? Why is the speaker transfixed by trash? We can endlessly ask questions about Williams’ bottle. For now, however, what is important is how the poem exposes trash to be a part of a shared world of brokenness and
failure, one that is not as desolate as it sounds. Once a commodity is consumed, it is but a material shell; however, afterwards, as Stallabrass notes, “there hangs about [trash] a certain air of embarrassment, a reminder of some promise unredeemed” (408). Indeed, “loosed from exchange and use value,” he continues, “it takes on an apparently more genuine aesthetic air” (408). Strangely, something like this happens in “Between Walls.” While it is but a bottle, we need to note how Williams uses an indefinite rather than a definite article: “a green / bottle” instead of “the green / bottle.” While the latter would suggest some sort of significant, symbolic value, it is the former that foregrounds indifference. This indifference is evidence of apathy for the surrounds, but it is also a form of resistance. With an indefinite article, trash is positioned in a way where it resists fetishization—again, it is not “the bottle,” but “a bottle.” Although its singularity is sidelined without a definitive article, Williams’ bottle is still an entity that is a part of a larger system like the waste commons. This container’s liminality is also highlighted by the fact that the bottle is both broken and whole. Indeed, “the bottle is insistently there—somehow prior to the poem” (Crawford 63). The word “bottle” is intact, yet it is broken. There is something semantically, syntactically, and synchronically suspicious here. On its own, the word “bottle” refers to an unbroken one, but this is not the case; presumably, an unknown external agent smashed it. And so the poem prefigures a bottle while simultaneously presenting it in shards. The “before” and “after” of the bottle is rather bizarre because we read the word “broken” before the word “bottle.” By the time we get around to “bottle,” we imagine an unbroken one, if only for a moment; however, given the qualifier, this is incorrect. And so we effectively break the bottle, arriving at it with “broken” in mind. Seemingly, effect precedes cause. But there is no cause, or, rather, one is not mentioned. Instead, the object is just broken, which suggests that things are always already vulnerable and on the verge of being trash. Here, the reader vacillates between viewing the bottle as broken or whole. That is, the vague, amorphous notion of trash begins to take over the bottle’s objecthood, but never entirely. As this happens, the refuse in the text registers different states of rubbish. For instance, the poem contains and is a container – it does the work the broken bottle cannot – while also breaking itself and the bottle up through a number of sharp line breaks like “green / bottle,” one that singles out the object from its nature, its colour. Here, the poem’s line segmentation singles out
waste and puts us in touch with trash, which demonstrates how “Williams points to the way in which the simplest facts of objecthood—the relation to light, the spatial arrangement—are a form of life and action” where “every object […] has its own designs on us as observers, if only we quiet down and pay attention” (Pickard, “Williams” 96).

Lastly, in “Between Walls,” waste begets waste. There is a history of a trashed metaphor. In one of the early drafts, the poem – organized in three-line stanzas – ended in the following way: “the broken / pieces of / a green / bottle / are / flowering” (Markos 137). Williams handwrote the words “are / flowering” in pencil and later crossed them out (138). “By crossing out the explicitly sentimental ‘are / flowering,’” writes one critic, “Williams left his main idea submerged and more powerful, that idea having to do with the power of the imagination to discover a living, restorative beauty in fragmented things” (140-141).67 Oddly, after being plucked from the poem, the flower lives on; the rhetoric of beauty and restoration trumps trash. And so the reality of refuse is lost. But what if Williams’ excision is an act of denial rather than affirmation? Perhaps the waste on the page resists, if not refuses, figurative appropriation. Here, literalism matters; the disposable does not just disappear.

Dumpster diving Williams, I have uncovered one dirty side of modernism with its forms of filth and filthy forms. Now, taking my cue from Williams’ speaker looking out at “the weed-grown / chassis / of a wrecked car” in “View of a Lake” from 1935, it is time to consider the waste of technology and that which fuels it, like oil. In 1940, for instance, Williams published a poem called, “Sketch for a Portrait of Henry Ford,” which gets dirty with discrete parts of a car while exhibiting “a heavy sludge / of oil” (2: 13).68 Another admirer of Ford – Gertrude Stein – does something similar. In the next chapter, I explore the ways in which cars, oil, and energy inform Stein’s style and reveal the charged tensions of dirty modernism’s natural resources.
Notes

1 See T.H. Crawford’s *Modernism, Medicine, & William Carlos Williams* (1993), 100.
2 See also Carl A. Zimring’s *Cash for Your Trash* (2005), 41 ff.
3 For a juxtaposition of clean and dirty, see *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920), 46 in *Imaginations*.
4 For a historical contextualization of this letter, see Peter Schmidt’s “Introduction to Williams’ ‘Letter to an Australian Editor’ (1946).” In this letter, Williams discusses his attitude towards the issue of “the present-day writing of poetry” (“Letter” 8). Using his old friend Ezra Pound as a point of comparison, Williams makes a distinction between what he calls “‘translations’” (9) and “the direct approach” (10). For Williams, Pound is a translator, one who implicitly or explicitly subscribes to the idea that “[m]inds beget minds” (8). Here, translators are interested in “bringing down the riches of the ages either by direct translations from the classes […] or using that for the fixed basis of their divagations, forever dragging in the accomplished works of the ancients […]” (9). “Their work is bred androgynetically from the classics which father their every thought” (9), writes Williams. Strictly speaking about the forms of art, Williams suggests that those translators who engage the classics reproduce the “complexion of the past” (10) and, ultimately, “wish in their heart for political, social and economic autocracy” (10).

Alternatively, “the direct approach” – Williams’ way – is another literary source that develops the greatness of the past “from the present, from the hurley-burley of political encounters which determine or may determine it, direct” (10). As Williams puts it, “the direct approach is the spectacle of our lives today, raised if possible to the quality of great expression by the invention of poetry” (10). Qualifying this further, he writes: “I look for a direct expression of the turmoils of today in the arts. Not about today in classical forms but in forms generated, invented, today direct from the turmoil itself—or the quietude or whatever it might be so long as it is generated in form direct from the form society itself takes in its struggles” (10-11). Compared to translation, the direct approach is contextual, historical, and, implicitly, democratic. Importantly, Williams explains how this pertains to poetry: “new modes of poetic form […] arise from the society about him of which he is […] a part […] Let me insist, the poet’s very life but also his forms originate in the
political, social and economic maelstrom on which he rides. At his best he transmutes
them to new values fed from the society of which he is a part if he will continue fertile”
(11). Also, in this letter, Williams compares himself to Pound. He suggests that Pound cut
himself off from the social – a source of “fertility” (12) – which led to his “literary
sterility” (12), an effect of the “scholarly thing […] adopted frequently out of disgust for
the raw odors and other aspects of the manure heap” (12). Williams’ words against Pound
are not unfounded. “The weeder is supremely needed if the Garden of the Muses is to
persist as a garden” (ABC of Reading 17), writes Pound. Pound’s approach to aesthetics –
the necessary removal of unsightly “weeds” – is but one example of his disgust of the
manure heap. (Of course, we can also think of the terse lines of Pound’s “In a Station of
the Metro” or his editorial excisions done on T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land [1922]; see
Armstrong 69-70.) To be clear, a “weed” is a construct—that is, a “‘weed’ is not a kind
of plant, only the wrong kind in the wrong place. Eliminating weeds is obviously a
‘problem in gardening,’ but defining weeds in the first place requires cultural, not
horticultural analysis” (Garrard 5-6). And so through Williams’ trash poetics, he
challenges the stigma attached to “weeds,” or that which has little to no value, and, in
turn, embraces the productivity and unproductivity of waste.

5 For a discussion on what has been said about “Epigramme,” see Barry Ahearn’s
William Carlos Williams and Alterity: The Early Poetry (1994), 59-63; also, see John
Marsh’s “‘Thinking/ Of the Freezing Poor’: The Suburban Counter-Pastoral in

6 Etymologically, “dumpster diver” is linked to the invention of the Dempster Dumpster
in 1934 (well after Williams started his creative career). That is, in 1934, George Roby
Dempster, a native of Knoxville, Tennessee, invented the Dempster Dumpster, which
was a “‘large steel container fully enclosed with a curved steel top, entry doors, and
dump release bottom, […] designed to be hoisted mechanically onto a truck for transport
to the dump site’” (Jacobson qtd. in Weinberg et al. 95n12; Weinberg et al. 95n12; W.
Wheeler 73).

7 For a more contemporary discussion of waste poetics, see Christopher Schmidt’s The
Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Goldsmith (2014). Also,


9 Adorno is writing on Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957).

10 For a discussion of Williams’ nativism, see Walter Benn Michaels’ *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995), 82-95.


12 For more details, see *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, 279.

13 “In 1896,” writes Jamie Benidickson, “a commission examining sewerage along the Passaic Valley concluded that the lower Passaic constituted a public nuisance, a health menace, and a growing threat to property interests from the Great Falls at Paterson to below Newark. The district population had risen by 43 percent during the 1880s and a further 22 percent between 1890 and 1895, when the daily discharge of sewage reached seventy million gallons. A state sewerage commission established shortly after release of the Passaic findings declared existing arrangements to be wholly inadequate” (224).

14 In the later version of “The Wanderer,” the word “filthiness” is replaced with the word “rottenness” (1: 116).

15 Paul Mariani writes about Williams’ plunge into the Passaic: “Williams also remembered idyllic moments frustrated, of swimming bare-assed with the boys at Santiago Grove on the Passaic and the Vreeland girl swimming with them, also nude, under that watchful eye of her big brother, whose look threatened to kill anyone who dared to so much as touch his sister” (21). And, of course, Williams’ *Paterson* would be loosely structured by the river, too: “From the beginning I decided there would be four books following the course of the river whose life seemed more and more to resemble my
own life as I more and more thought of it: the river above the [Great] Falls, the catastrophe of the Falls itself, the river below the Falls and the entrance at the end into the great sea” (Paterson xiii). If and when it appears in his long poem, Williams maintains the dirty details: “Half the river red, half steaming purple / from the factory vents, spewed out hot, / swirling, bubbling. The dead bank, / shining mud” (36).

16 Williams’ emphasis on contact is apparent in the opening of Spring and All; however, this theme has a history. For instance, the January 1921 issue of Contact contains a blurb by Williams (one of the editors) regarding their modus operandi; he writes: “We, Contact, aim to emphasize the local phase of the game of writing. We realize that it is emphasis only which is our business. We want to give all our energy to the setting up of new vigors of artistic perception, invention and expression in the United States. Only by slow growth, consciously fostered to the point of enthusiasm, will American work of the quality of Marianne Moore’s best poetry come to the fore of intelligent attention and the ignorance which has made America an artistic dessert be somewhat dissipated. We lack interchange of ideas in our country more than we lack foreign precept. Every effort should be made, we feel, to develope [sic] among our serious writers a sense of mutual contact first of all. To this also we are devoted” (n.p.).

17 Melosi tracks this transition of the Passaic river when he writes: “The ‘death’ of New Jersey’s Passaic River in the late nineteenth century was a classic illustration of how factories defiled their environment. Before it became badly polluted, the Passaic was a major recreational area and also the basis for a thriving commercial fishing industry. As urbanization and industrialization expanded after the Civil War, the volume of sewage and industrial waste that poured into the river forced the city of Newark to abandon the Passaic as a water supply. Pollution also ruined commercial fishing in the area, and soon homes along the waterway disappeared. During hot weather the river emitted such a stench that many factories were forced to close” (Effluent America 27). The “death” of the river led to the establishment of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission (PVSC) that same year followed by the Newark Bay Treatment Plant in 1924 (Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission). Even with this initiative, however, the Passaic seemed doomed to be plagued with pollution. In 1918, The New York Times reported on how the river
caught fire because it was the “receptacle for the waste of many industrial plants,” accumulating a number of “combustibles” (“Passaic River Afire”), which, retrospectively, seems like a harbinger for what was to come—namely, the Diamond Alkali Company’s Agent Orange. This company, notes Kenneth T. Jackson, “made pesticides along the Passaic River from 1951 to 1969, as well as ingredients for the chemical defoliant Agent Orange” (201). “During the Vietnam War,” Jackson continues, “when the firm was operating twenty-four hours a day, Diamond Alkali and other companies released dioxin, a cancer-causing compound that is a byproduct of chemical processing, in the water, putting the lower Passaic River on the Environmental Protection Agency’s list of the nation’s most endangered waterways” (201).

18 For information on the Meadowlands prior to European settlement, see Stephen Marshall’s “The Meadowlands Before the Commission: Three Centuries of Human Use and Alteration of the Newark and Hackensack Meadows,” 4-5.

19 For a brief historical account of the Meadowlands, see Robert Sullivan’s Meadowlands (1998), 16.

20 Ibid.

21 “In 1970 it was the human practice of dumping garbage into the wetlands that hindered development. According to the HMDC plan, waste was the central obstacle to developing the Hackensack Meadowlands. ‘The map, which summarizes a century of waste disposal, is as much a determinant of future lands uses in the Meadowlands the map of its geology, which summaries ages of momentous natural history’” (McGurty 34). Following this chronology, I do the math to get 1870 (I subtract a century from 1970).

22 “‘New York rubbish is being turned into Jersey soil by scow after scow from Manhattan’” (Marshall 11), one Newark newspaper reported in 1909.

23 Stephen Marshall explains this in more detail when he writes the following: “Although construction of Teterboro Airport started during World War I, most of the development of the Hackensack Meadows came several decades later, and in much smaller increments than the giant construction projects of Port Newark and Newark Airport. However, from the 1920s through the 1960s, more than half the acreage of the Meadowlands lying north of Newark Bay was filled in to make new upland” (11-12).
Marshall notes some of the factors for why this happened: “The most important factor was the growing population of New York City and adjacent municipalities, which generated ever-increasing amounts of garbage. In addition, the automobile revolution of the 1920s also provided relatively inexpensive trucks to transport garbage out of the city to the Meadowlands on the growing network of paved streets and highways” (13). And there is, of course, a history of illegal dumping associated with the Meadowlands, too. “In 1957,” writes Marshall, “New York City stopped providing municipal garbage removal for commercial firms, which required companies to hire private garbage collectors. Some of these private haulers were associated with organized crime and chose to eliminate the expense of garbage dump ‘tipping fees’ by simply depositing refuse at any available unwatched location. Its highway access to the city, as well as its low population density and corresponding difficulty of identifying illegal dumpers, made the northern portion of the Meadowlands attractive for unregulated garbage dumps. The explosive growth of the local garbage collection industry after 1957—and corresponding increase in the frequency and quantity of illegal dumping in the Meadowlands—created a situation that might be called the Tony Soprano version of the tragedy of the commons” (13-14).

For more information on sanitary landfills and the inventor of them, Jean Vincenz, see Melosi’s *The Sanitary City*, 162-163.

“Anyone who has made the trip along the upper gullet of the New Jersey Turnpike as it disgorges traffic toward the George Washington Bridge is familiar with the Hackensack Meadowlands” (81), write William Rathje and Cullen Murphy. As Rathje and Murphy note, moments manifesting “the awesome sweep of this wetland in its nativity” are “rare” (81). One sees, instead, the “massive mounds of garbage, some of them fifteen stories high, that have been dumped in the Meadowlands” (81). Rathje and Murphy not only gesture towards a long history of dumping in the Meadowlands, which, at one point, involved more than a hundred communities, but also offer a helpful archaeological tool to understand the nature of this mess (82). To get a better sense of these mounds, they refer to the Australian archaeologist Rowland Fletcher’s term “MVSes,” or “Monstrous Visual Symbols,” and note that the “Hackensack Meadows are a potent reminder that the largest MVSes in American society today are its garbage repositories” (82). Compared to the
largest prehistoric MVS in the New World – the seventy-five million cubic feet Pyramid of the Sun in Mexico – the “garbage dumps in the Meadowlands exceed that volume many times over, as do most big-city landfills” (82).

27 McGurty notes how “[g]arbage has been dumped in the Meadowlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet shifts in American’s [sic] relationship to waste during the postwar period propelled the garbage problem to new levels” (34). After quoting Strasser to emphasize how the postwar economy came to rely on the disposal of old things, McGurty quantifies the “new levels” of the “the garbage problem” when she writes: “In 1960 the United States generated a total of 88.1 million tons of municipal solid waste, which amounted to 2.68 pounds per person, per day. Within only ten years, the total amount of municipal solid waste generated had increased by 37.5 percent to reach 121.1 million tons. While population growth accounted for some of the increase, the per capita waste generation had increased 21.3 percent to reach 3.25 pounds per person, per day. All projections predicted more and more waste because waste and wealth went hand in hand” (34).

28 Williams’ world included the Meadowlands. There are many municipalities with land in the Meadowlands, one of which is East Rutherford; the others include Secaucus, Newark, Harrison, Kearney, North Arlington, Lyndhurst, East Rutherford, Carlstadt, Wood-Ridge, Moonachie, Little Ferry, Teaneck, Teterboro, Leonia, Ridgefield, Ridgefield Park, North Bergen, and Jersey City (Sullivan 20-21). Technically, Williams lived in Rutherford, not “East Rutherford, ’cross the track, divided from us by the railroad” (1: 156), as he put it. However, his house at 9 Ridge Road is only a one minute drive or a seven minute walk – 0.3 miles, or 528 yards, or 1584 feet – from Erie Avenue, a border street where Rutherford turns into East Rutherford (“East Rutherford, New Jersey”; “East Rutherford”). As Robert Sullivan puts it, however, “Secaucus is the Meadowlands’ most conspicuous address” (20), not East Rutherford. For Williams, Secaucus was further away: it was approximately 5 miles or an hour and a half walk – if not more – from his house (“Secaucus”). But at the turn of the century the Meadowlands would be Williams’ backyard. In 1896, a state geologist’s survey noted how the Meadowlands extended from northern Hackensack to southern Elizabeth, covering a
large area compared to later in the twentieth century (Marshall 5). A hand-drawn map from the same year shows how Rutherford is adjacent to the western perimeter of the Meadowlands, which is – measuring from Williams’ home to an area near Rutherford Park and Berrys Creek – about a mile, or just over a twenty minute walk (22; Google Maps; N.B. Stephen Marshal credits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services for the hand-drawn map [“1896 Map of Hackensack Meadows”]). Between 1896 and 1913 – the year Williams settled into Rutherford – the acreage of the Hackensack Meadowlands more or less stayed the same. Indeed, the development of the land would not begin until the 1920s (Marshall 12). And so the remains of Williams’ neighborhood junkyard remained.

Williams was a walker, one who traveled through trash. Williams’ son – William Eric Williams, M.D. – notes how his father, uncle, and grandfather “walked hundreds of miles for the fun of it” (qtd. in Laughlin 29). Referring to his father, Williams junior writes how “[h]e would take a trolley out of town 8 or 10 miles and then walk home” (29). (See William Eric Williams’ recently published Williams Carlos Williams: an American Dad [2014], too.) Attesting to this footwork, Williams – in a letter addressed to his brother Edgar Irving Williams dated 1 August 1910 – recalls walking what ends up being forty-one miles in one week. Williams writes the following: “On Tuesday of this week Pop and I took a fifteen mile walk back toward Great Notch, then along the old Canal and then home via Delawanna. On Wednesday we read and chopped wood and gardened but on Thursday we did twenty one miles starting from Haledon and ending up just south of Oradel where a man picked us up in his carriage and carried us into Hackensack. Toward the beginning of the walk we were picked up by a fellow in an auto who drove us about three miles on our way, we were lucky weren’t we. On Friday we did the Bronx which almost finished us both altho we only walked ten miles […]” (WCW&EIW 233). In this particular case, Williams’ destinations on Tuesday and Thursday were west of the Meadowlands; however, on Friday, walking eastward to the Bronx, Williams could not avoid the Meadowlands. Despite the details, though, this anecdote is an indication of how Williams’ penchant for perambulation places him in an 8, 10, 15, or 21-mile radius of Rutherford, which, of course, encompasses the Meadowlands, remembering that they are only a mile from his home.
Specifically, during this walk, they traveled and “they saw the Hackensack River, eastward, winding through the meadowlands below; to the west, closely parallel to the roadway, the Passaic River headed toward its union with the Hackensack into Newark Bay” (East xiii).

Discussing the history of the Meadowlands, specifically the effort to stop landfilling, McGurty details the Hackensack Meadowlands Reclamation and Development Act of 1968, which formed the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission (HDMC). The HDMC’s purpose was to “provide for urgent needs for more space for industry, commerce, residences and public recreation” (32). Given that the landscape was laden with waste in 1969, waste accumulated over the decades, the HDMC needed to address the issue of trash disposal (32), especially because, as McGurty notes, slightly expanding Sullivan’s list of municipalities in the Meadowlands, “[g]arbage disposal had become an overriding concern of the fourteen municipalities within the district as well as the eighty-six additional towns in New Jersey that depended on the Meadowlands for disposal of all their waste” (35).

Oddly, however, thirty years after his walk in the Meadowlands with Burke, Josephson, and McAlmon, Williams – in one of the rare references to the Meadowlands – decides to nostalgically note his childhood memories of the “romantic ground” of “The Meadows”; in his Autobiography, he writes:

The Meadows, the marshland separating the ridge where Rutherford lies from the next ridge, a continuation of the Palisades in Weehawken, was romantic ground for us growing boys. We didn’t dare go into the dense cedar-swamps that flourished there in which blueberry pickers in the fall were often lost; the mosquitoes were so thick you could almost grasp in the air at random about your head and kill a half-dozen of them. (283)

The abject is absent. Although he alludes to “the dense-cedar swamps,” Williams’ revisionism and censorship conceals what was referred to as “blurs upon the fair face of Nature” in 1867 and “worthless,” “detriment,” and “nuisance” in 1907. The remainder of Williams’ remarks about the Meadowlands includes observations about flora and fauna (283).
Take, for instance, “a rubbish heap / aflame” in the “dead weeds” (1: 292) from *The Descent of Winter* (1928), the “miscellany” of “garbage dumps” (1: 364) in “Our (American) Ragecademicians” published in *The New English Weekly* in 1933 (1: 535), and the “dust-/hung acreage” (2: 84) and “the polluted stream and dump / heap” (2:85) near a “monastery in / the suburbs” (2:84) in “The Semblables” published in *Partisan Review* in 1943. (The editors note how the monastery referred to in “The Semblables” is in Secaucus, New Jersey, and it is close to the Giants football stadium, a munitions works called “Black Tom,” and a garbage dump that fed the “most foul-smelling piggery on the East Coast” [2: 464].) (For a discussion of the history of Secaucus’ pig farming see Robert Sullivan’s *The Meadowlands* [1998], 22-23.)

For a discussion of “Invitation,” see Ahearn, 59.

“We are born into a detritus-strewn world” (323), writes Patricia Yeager in a similar context, one where she discusses what she calls a “rubbish ecology,” which “can be defined as the act of saving and savoring debris” (329). In her article, Yeager explores how the “old opposition between nature and culture has been displaced in postmodern art by a preoccupation with trash” (323). “Trash becomes nature, and nature becomes trash” (332), she writes. I engage Yaeger in my article, “Poetry, Garbage, Gift: Scrap Poetics in Contemporary North American Poetry,” which I cite in another note.

This idea of a putrescent pastoral – a pastoral presenting us with a dirty object orientation – is a part of and indebted to John Marsh’s discussion of Williams’ counter-pastoral, which involves representations of abject rural labour and country life (100).

The word “greater” in the last line of “Approach to a City” is changed to “braver” in *The Collected Poems of Williams Carlos Williams: Volume II, 1939-1962* (2: 468).


In one of his philosophical essays – “Waste and Use” – from *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams writes: “Thus we can say that ignorance, since it ignores laws it cannot know, is always poor economy, and since dirt seems dependent upon ignorance, personal filthiness I mean, why then dirt must be poor economy. Then it is economy to be
clean and if it is economy it is law and inevitable if we will survive. This is a mere example. And so all excess is plainly poor economy” (186-87).

40 The page references of this litany are as follows: 1: 65, 69, 72, 81, 82, 84, 89, 92, 97, 101, 101, 106, 107, 145, 215, 216, 226, 251, 457; 2: 139, 200, respectively.

41 In Ecology without Nature (2007), Morton argues that the very notion of nature is an ideological construct, which obscures and obstructs “ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art” (1). As he puts it elsewhere, however, he contends that, as I have previously noted, “[e]cology permeates all forms” (The Ecological Thought 11). For him, “[e]cology has overlooked the way in which all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its form” (11). Boldly stated, “all texts—all artworks, indeed—have an irreducibly ecological form” (11).

42 Williams writes the following in I Wanted to Write a Poem: “The pieces in this book [A Novelette and Other Prose] show the influence of Dadaism. I didn’t originate Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write it. Spring and All shows that” (48). Indeed, Williams did go through a “Dada phase” (qtd. in Boone 2), notes Dickran Tashjian in Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde (1975), “one of the first scholars to note that Dada had never been sufficiently explored in relation to Williams’s work in general” (Boone 2). “Williams was acquainted personally with the Dadaists who lived and worked in New York from 1915–21,” writes April Boone, “including Marcel Duchamp, Walter and Louise Arensberg, Man Ray, and Francis Picabia” (Boone 3). Tashjian, in William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920-1940 (1978), moreover, discusses how Williams was “attracted to Dada” (56), but, ultimately, he “remained ambivalent toward Dada” (58). “Williams was clearly intrigued by and influenced by what the Dadaists were doing, yet he never came to agree with the segment of Dadaism that would decry the value of all art, and he resisted the term ‘anti-art’ sometimes applied to his own projects” (Boone 4).

43 The “order” is as follows: Chapter 19, Chapter XIII (printed upside down), Chapter VI, Chapter 2, Chapter XIX, I, C I, III, IV, V, VI, VIII, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVI, and XXVII. Although the typography is not altered in The Collected Poems of Williams Carlos Williams: Volume I,
1909-1939, Williams references *Springs and All*’s strange typography in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*: “Chapter headings are printed upside down on purpose, the chapters are numbered all out of order, sometimes with a Roman numeral, sometimes with an Arabic, anything that came in handy” (36-37). Also, New Directions recently published *Spring and All* (2011), a facsimile that includes the original interior of Williams’ well-known work; as such, it maintains all of the typographic idiosyncrasies like the inverted “Chapter XIII.” Williams himself remarks on this aleatory assemblage, too, in *Spring and All*: “I realize that the chapters are rather quick in their sequence and that nothing much is contained in any one of them but no one should be surprised at this today” (1: 182).

44 As Ahearn notes, Williams’ poem presents us with an other—namely, Margaret Blake Purvis: “the principal ‘other,’ an emotionally upset woman, as Margaret Blake Purvis, a student nurse at the French Hospital during the time Williams served as an intern. It seems there was a brief romance between Williams and Purvis. She appears thinly disguised in the poem as ‘Miss Margaret Jarvis’” (148). Also, the poem’s reference to “Kiki” most likely refers to the “notorious model-whore of Montparnasse” (Leibowitz 103)—that is, Alice Ernestine Prin.


46 In 1959, Williams surveys the scene: “During the past ten years modern poetry has got completely over the ‘free verse’ phase. Measure is the sine qua non of verse. But our recourse to loose meters which we adopted in the last fifty or sixty years had its uses. Whitman’s practices were the practices of, at times, a great poet however much he went astray. He introduced to us a new spoken language, the American idiom, which brought in its train the variable foot” (2: 511-512). “For a fuller account by WCW of these

Berry classifies all of the interpretations of the variable foot; they include understanding it as a temporal unit, a stress-based unit, a syntactical unit, a unit of meaning or attention, a unit of phrasing in reading, and, as noted, a visual unit (364). For Berry, however, what is missing is the “intonation unit” (365). Reviewing the work on intonation as such, Berry concludes that “the divisions in Williams’ triadic-line verse typically delimit syntactical/semantic units that, in a performance of the text, could be intonation units, set off by pauses and each containing an accented syllable with a pitch obtrusion” (368).

Berry footnotes Paul Fussell, Jr.’s *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (1965). According to Stephen Adams, “stichic” is a type of continuous form that includes verse paragraphs (26).

As Berry notes, “[i]n the triadic-line arrangement, however, the same enjambment has a very different effect—making one triad flow over into the next, with no particular tension” (384).

Eleven years before *Herland*, Gilman published *The Home*, which features passages that address domestic waste; she writes, for instance, the following: “We, in our far larger homes, with our far more elaborate processes of living, and with our ancient system of confining women to the home entirely, have evolved a continuous accumulation of waste matter in the home. The effort temporarily to remove this waste is one of the main lines of domestic industry; the effort to produce it is another” (25-26).

As Strasser points out, the “demise of the system that recycled waste materials […] is an integral part of the history of American mass production and distribution at the end of the nineteenth century” (108). Indeed, American changed: “By the close of the nineteenth century,” writes Carl A. Zimring, “material reuse in the United States had undergone several important transformations. Reuse of old materials in the household began to decline amid concern over hygiene and affordable alternatives in mass-produced goods.
As American households began to throw away more materials, American manufacturers began to seek out more discarded materials” (35).

On these phenomena – the connections between consumption and waste – Thorstein Veblen writes the following: “Throughout the entire evolution of conspicuous expenditure, whether of goods or of services or human life, runs the obvious implication that in order to effectually mend the consumer’s good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable it must be wasteful” (67).

“Americans became more affluent in the last quarter of the nineteenth century,” writes Zimring, “enjoying a standard of living that continued to improve into the early twentieth century. With affluence came waste; more goods available meant more refuse. Solid waste disposal escalated. [...] Other metropolitan areas saw their garbage increase to the point that many engineers, chemists, city officials, journalists, and sanitarians voiced concern over excessive waste being a problem. [...] Consumption at the turn of the century was on a much smaller scale than that of the throwaway society of the late twentieth century, but the trend of consumption and disposal was rising” (41).

As an example of downcycling, William McDonough and Michael Braungart write the following: “When plastics other than those found in soda and water bottles are recycled, they are mixed with different plastics to produce a hybrid of lower quality, which is then molded into something amorphous and cheap, such as a park bench or a speed bump” (56). More broadly, Heather Rogers notes how recycling is not as effective as we think: “Recycling was presented as a solution to the garbage crisis, but it can’t keep pace with the staggering output of throwaways. About 80 percent of U.S. products are used once and then discarded. Although there are more than 9,000 curbside recycling programs in the country, many towns do not collect the stuff. And even if the dutiful separate their metal from glass, much of it still ends up at the landfill or incinerator, having found no buyer on the other end. If substances sent to recovery centers can’t compete with lower-priced ‘virgin’ materials, they get dumped. And, further limiting the expansion of recycling, U.S. producers are not required to use reprocessed materials even though most manufacturers now stamp their containers with the eco-friendly recycling symbol” (6).
Recall my earlier discussion in the introduction about how Williams was in the middle of a transition from reuse to disposal throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; also, see Strasser’s *Waste and Want*, 12-13.

Hofstadter defines a “strange loop” as follows: “What I mean by ‘strange loop’ is…not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive ‘upward’ shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out” (101-102).

Specifically, Loy’s “Love Songs to Joannes” first published in *Others* in 1915 opens with Pig Cupid’s “rosy snout / Rooting erotic garbage” (91); Sandburg’s “Population Drifts” from *Chicago Poems* (1916) depicts how “six children / played on the stones and prowled in the garbage cans” (15), and in *The People, Yes* (1936), he writes of “women and kids […] searching alleys and garbage dumps for scraps” (484); Dos Passos wrote a play called *The Garbage Man* (1926), which marginally includes the titular character and focuses on the bourgeois; and Stevens’ metaphysical meditation “The Man on the Dump” from *Parts of a World* (1942) is rooted in waste, but, ultimately, it disavows debris: “Between that disgust and this, between the things / That are on the dump (azaleas and so on) / And those that will be (azaleas and so on), / One feels the purifying change. / One rejects / The Trash” (202).

Tim Armstrong lists some of the dirty corporeal features of *The Waste Land*; he writes: “The materials of abjection include bodily parts (dirty ears, hands, feet; teeth, parted knees, bones, hair), clothing (underwear), places (dead land, desert), animals (scorpions, bats), acts (rape, abortion, copulation), and actors. The draft is particularly productive of dirt though Pound and Eliot’s editing intrudes here: in ‘The Fire Sermon’ the ‘dirty camisoles’ of the draft lose their adjective; the young man’s hair, ‘thick with grease, and thick with scurf’ is excised; his urination and spitting are cut” (69).

With both breadth and depth, Anderson acutely attends to traces of trash littered in and around the canon starting with Walt Whitman’s “This Compost.” Anderson explains how representations of trash and waste places like dumps and compost heaps are positioned as sites of self-reflection and spiritual and ecological renewal (37). Anderson argues that these poets avoid reiterating ecopoetry’s hackneyed tropes – condoning the beautification of wild nature and condemning environmental destruction – and instead pursue the way in which waste mediates and networks nature and culture: “garbage serves as a meeting point of human culture, the natural world, and the spiritual realm” (37). Anderson’s analysis implicitly, if not explicitly, expands the parameters of what constitutes ecopoetry by positioning and subsequently exploring the garbage poem from an ecocritical framework.

“It should not be surprising that several garbage poems appeared during the economic boom of postwar America, for the underside of that era’s prosperity was the rampant wastefulness of an emerging throwaway society” (Anderson, “Sacred Waste” 41). This line of reasoning is not uncommon. In an earlier article on poetry and trash, Gyorgi Voros says something similar to Anderson’s emphasis on trash in the latter half of the twentieth century: “In its material versions, it takes on special significance for post–World War II American consumer culture, whose garbage, both because of sheer volume and because of its unbiodegradability, threatens altogether to clog both the physical and metaphysical cycles of degeneration and renewal” (162-163).

Peter Halter also points out that, “Paterson is unthinkable without the collage form” (7).

For an in depth discussion of Williams and collage see Nicole Cooley’s article “‘The Act is Disclosed by the Imagination of It’: Frottage, Collage, and the American Origin in the Work of William Carlos Williams” in Sagetrieb 13.3, 1993, who explores “the alliance of Williams makes here between language, ‘words,’ Surrealism, and the notion of ‘locality’ in order to delineate the points of intersection between Surrealist writing practices and Williams’s texts” (31).

“When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you,” writes Williams, “he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which
would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn’t what he says that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes, […]” (2: 54-55).

After the fact, the verb “lie” brings the title back into the fold (Townley 118).

Alternatively, this poem could have repeated the word “between” in order to follow the laws of syntax (Halter 186-187); however, this does not happen, which creates a gap between the “title” and the rest of the poem.

Here, I am adapting this configuration from Halter’s discussion of “Between Walls” (186-187).

And here I am adapting this version from Perloff’s analysis of “Between Walls” (The Dance of the Intellect 106).

Ultimately, Markos seems to kowtow to authorial intention in his reading of “Between Walls” when he references the following excerpt from one of Williams’ letters: “‘All it means as far as I know, is that in a waste of cinders loveliness, in the form of color, stands up alive’” (Williams qtd. in Markos 138).

For a discussion of the relationship between Williams and cars see Cecelia Tichi’s Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America (1987).
Chapter 2: Energizing Gertrude Stein

“In the Twentieth Century you feel like movement” (How Writing Is Written 153), writes Gertrude Stein. Compared to the nineteenth century – one that “didn’t feel that way” (153) – Stein insists that “you feel movement all the time” (153). For her, America had the first instance of what she calls, “Twentieth Century writing” (153), where “the American thing is the vitality of movement” (Writings 1932-1946 292), which appeared in the work of Walt Whitman.¹ Stein’s Whitman is a surveyor of America’s “sacred industry” (Whitman, Leaves of Grass 344), one who celebrates the “thud of machinery” (343) with “the latest connections” of the “inter-transportation of the world” (347), including steam power, the great express lines, gas, petroleum, and the Pacific Railroad (347-348). Not unlike Whitman’s attention to industry, Stein suggests that the “Twentieth Century conceived an automobile as a whole, so to speak, and then created it, built it up out of its parts” (How Writing Is Written 152-153). We know that the car is central to Stein and her style.² Indeed, she named her Fords “Aunt Pauline” and “Godiva.”³ Without gas, however, the car stays still. This chapter looks at gas and the ways that this resource informs Stein’s poetry.

In doing so, I respond to Patricia Yeager’s ruminations on the ecology and energy of literature, specifically when she asks, “what happens if we sort texts according to the energy sources that made them possible?” (“Literature” 305). How, she adds, do “we think about utility and poetry together?” (310). To address these questions, I explore forms of energy – primarily oil, but also wood, coal, and electricity – in Stein. Doing so may seem strange, because her poetry seldom comes up in ecocritical debates.⁴ While it is a critical commonplace to remark on Stein’s energetic experiments with language, scholars stop short of heralding her as a prophet of energy. Yet, a close consideration of excerpts from her oeuvre reveals a largely overlooked concern with the materiality of natural resources. This sentiment most directly appears in “Work Again” when she writes: “In leaning can we encounter oil” (Geography and Plays 399). Here we have the “Oil Encounter.”⁵ This allusion to oil provides a useful direction for reading because
Stein’s encounters with oil were oblique, whether leaning near linseed oil paintings gracing the walls of 27 rue de Fleurus or over the engine of her Ford.

The energy humanities is a growing field. There is, however, a gap when it comes to research on the modernist avant-garde. This is especially strange because, as Imre Szeman notes, modernism is either “a small subset of a long period of oil literature” or “anticipates and participates in the birth of the hegemony of oil” (“Literature and Energy Futures” 324). Szeman’s explanation is that, like every contemporary social narrative, literature participates in rather than challenges the fiction of surplus energy (324). Yet, as I show, Stein does not necessarily have a “faith in surplus” (325); rather, she is acutely aware of the nature of energy and, in turn, this affects her own cultural production. While Stein might be one of Szeman’s “exceptions,” like Upton Sinclair’s Oil! (1927), we can and should scrutinize modernism’s avant-garde aesthetics if we are to address and perhaps rectify our “epistemic inability or unwillingness to name our energy ontologies” (324). Starting with Stein, I am interested in reading the “difficult” modernists with energy in mind. After all, their forms are fueled by something, and their experimental poetics might offer us some answers.

Energy and natural resources preoccupied Stein as early as “Normal Motor Automatism” (1896). “As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on,” writes Stein, “but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is the essence of its going” (Writings 1932-1946 305). Here, “essence” is the French word for “gasoline.” Aware of energy, Stein needed it, too. Nearly a thousand pages, The Making of Americans – started in 1903, finished in 1911, and published in 1925 – is but one example of Stein’s prolific nature.

Yet, the materiality of Stein’s energy is overlooked. Instead, she is often seen as a conceptual artist experimenting with language or a self-conscious scribe engaging irresistible dictation. When considered in this way, the view of Stein’s approach to “language as a living, moving, acting entity” (Meyer 147) loses sight of the natural resources and labour that go into her cultural production. “I am occupied by coal” (As Fine As Melanchta 63), Stein writes, and, elsewhere, she refers to the act of “cranking my machine” (Bee Time Vine 194).
This chapter, then, recovers the energy of Stein’s Whitmanian side. Indeed, we see her channeling his celebratory side, too, in a poem about Aunt Pauline when she exclaims, “Hurrah for America” (Geography and Plays 392). And so we see this Stein, for instance, in “Yet Dish” from 1913, which is a playful poem – “Yet Dish” is “Yiddish” – composed of sixty-nine numbered stanzas with anywhere from one to seven lines; the fifty-second stanza reads: “Leaves of gas, leaves of get a towel louder” (Writings 1903-1932 370). From Leaves of Grass to “Leaves of gas,” Stein shows off her Whitman, the one who admires “the great derrick” (Leaves of Grass 360) in “A Song for Occupations.” Moreover, she gestures to how the uncanny nature of oil as millennia old organic matter (“Leaves”) constitutes the biochemical make-up of petroleum. Stein’s playfulness is part of a petropoetics, a relationship between art and oil that I unpack in this chapter through a close reading of her works. This petropoetics is evident, for example, elsewhere in “Yet Dish”:

Nice oil pail.
No gold go at.
Nice oil pail.
Near a paper lag sought.

What is an astonishing won door. A please spoon. (Writings 1903-1932 367)

In this subterranean Stein, it is an astonishing wonder (“won door”) what can be found underground as “Nice oil” slips into sounding like “soil.” Indeed, there are other dirty, dripping sounds resonating throughout Stein’s work, as in “Guillaume Apollinaire” from 1913, which reads:

Give known or pin ware.
Fancy teethe, gas strips.
Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pour state at.

(A Stein Reader 279)

As the strange “gas strips” sounds like “gas drips,” we might take a lesson from Stein and keep our eyes and ears open for the sights and sounds of her energy consciousness.

By attending to this energy consciousness, I tell a largely unknown story of Stein, one which foregrounds the energy that fuels her work and world. This overlooked
fascination with oil and other resources in Stein’s writing points to an incipient energy consciousness that does not flourish until much later. Analyzing samples of Stein’s oeuvre, I explore her latent yet manifest energetic materiality. This enables us to account for how Stein’s famously complicated style engages a system of material relations in modernism that is not necessarily ecologically or environmentally oriented per se, but still foregrounds the ways in which nature and culture are entangled. Her work helps us to think about the stuff that goes into poetry, the objectness of poetics, and the energy of poetic expression. Accordingly, I explore the characteristics of her energy consciousness through representations of wood, coal, and electricity, which, ultimately, exhibits the transformative, powerful, and erotic nature of energy. Moreover, I focus on features of Stein’s petropoetics, an idea I explain later, with special attention to representation, form, temporality, agency, and biotechnology. To close, I turn to the notion of the embodiment of energy in and through the figure of Stein’s car. Like dumpster diving, my attention to petropoetics here sustains an interest in how a text engages with the material world; however, unlike dumpster diving, petropoetics focuses more on the oblique ways in which the sensuousness of a substance affects the work based on varying realities and forms of surplus and scarcity. Garbage does not generate energy, but oil does, and so the latter permeates the world in a different way. Yet, energy can be and is wasted, too. Similar but different, waste and oil, dumpster diving and petropoetics, both register a tension around the entangled relationship between nature and culture in dirty modernism.

In 1874, Stein was born into oil. A native of Allegheny, Pennsylvania (now Pittsburgh), she spent her early years in the home of the first oil well in America, or what is known as “The Oil State.” Black gold made its mark on her. Indeed, Stein famously collected oil. Once in Paris, she encountered it daily while living at 27 rue de Fleurus, which on Saturday nights doubled as an upstart artists’ salon (Mellow 6). Shocking the senses, avant-garde art covered the walls, but, more importantly, the salon’s spotlight on oil painting discloses the link between petroleum and culture. According to one biographer, the sheer quantity of paintings was overwhelming: Gertrude and her brother Leo collected “so industriously that the three available walls of the studio […] were crammed with pictures hung row above row” (6-7). Indeed, the oils spilled into nearby rooms (7). Although this metaphor – an oil spill of art – is slippery, I invoke it to draw
attention to the resources of these artworks. Whether or not Stein singled out the relationship between oil painting and oil as a resource is less important than the fact that this scene illustrates the importance of teasing out the tension between art and the production of it, especially when it comes to the energetic materiality of oil in Stein’s writing.

Where does Stein find the energy to write the way she does? At times, her stamina is surprising. In “An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men,” she writes the word “one” a hundred times (*Writings 1903-1932* 484). Also, the level of concentration required by Stein to play with the semiotics of one word is extraordinary. Ironically, the following excerpt from “Play” reveals just how much work Stein puts into what Ulla E. Dydo describes as “an exercise in disciplined writing with a reductive vocabulary” (*A Stein Reader* 147):

Play, play every day, play and play and play away, and then play the play you played to-day, the play you play every day, play it and play it. Play it and remember it and ask to play it. Play it, and play it and play away. Certainly everyone wants you to play, every one wants you to play away, to play every day, to play and play, to play the play you play every day, to play and remember it and ask to play it and play it and to play away and to play every day and to-day and all day. (147)

“Free time is shackled to its contrary” (187), writes Theodor W. Adorno; indeed, he continues, “free time is nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labor” (194). Stein’s freewheeling play is work, which requires energy. The effort of Stein’s labour lives in each and every sentence, like this one from “Patriarchal Poetry”: “To be we to be to be we to be to be we to be we to be to be to be to be to be to be we we to be to be to be we to be to be we to be to be we to be” (*Writings 1903-1932* 575). Surely, this is an iteration of the Steinian sentence – a ubiquitous type – but it also gestures to Stein’s awareness of the work of reading her writing. The repetition of the infinitive with the inclusive pronoun foregrounds a shared existence and exertion of energy between reader and writer. Stein is conscious of energy operating in her writing and world as she forgoes mimesis or realism and opts for materializing the stuff of work.
Self-reflexive about consumption, Stein’s energy consciousness is fueled by economic forces like scarcity. In a letter postmarked 23 February 1917 to Carl Van Vechten, she reports that she is “running a little Ford into the country for the American relief committee and […] enjoying it,” while also noting that, “Paris is nice, looking for coal is exciting and now we have it” (1: 58). Twenty-four years later, Stein is still cognizant of resources; in a letter to Thornton Wilder, she writes: “I am having my car changed to burn alcohol [sic] instead of essence [gasoline], we can make alcohol, and the days and weeks go by so quickly” (285). Her artworks reveal this, too. In “Painted Lace” she writes: “The search for food and fuel became secretly cooking potatoes” (Painted Lace 2). The frustration of trying to find resources yields the shame of consuming the poor person’s potato. An awareness of the economy of energy is evident, especially in “A Sonatina Followed by Another”: “We do not use coal, we burn wood, we find it more economical and pleasanter. Before the war we used to wish that we could afford to burn wood instead of coal, now that we are no richer and wood is dearer we find it more economical to burn wood” (Bee Time Vine 5). Often, the rarity of a resource is reflected by a marginal reference in a poetic list:

Offal slow.
Slowly.
With fern.
Deal term.
Reckless manner.
Naughty spoon.
Murder.

.......... 
Spit.
Tender toe binder.
PAPER coal gas. (119)

Seemingly inconsequential, there is energy around natural resources in the unpunctuated line, “Paper coal gas.” Writing about commas in “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein says, “for a long time I felt very definitely about them and would have nothing to do with them” (Writings 1932-1946 320). For her, “commas are servile and they have no life of their
own” (320); a comma, moreover, “keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it” (320). Ultimately, “a comma is a poor period that it lets you stop and take a breath but if you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath” (321). Without commas, then, the line, “Paper coal gas” produces a short burst of energy. The syntax of this line also shows us how paper is Stein’s natural resource, which is equal to coal and gas; moreover, it gestures to an inverted order of events. Paper does not grow on trees; rather, it comes from them. Through multiple steps and mediations, the energy derived from coal and gas yields a product to write on. Reading forward – from left to right – we are going backward: we trace the truncated path of paper back to the earth all within the span of three words. In this poem, energy materializes around object relations. Surely, Stein is a writer who is conscious of how she consumes the energy of the environs, which is perhaps best articulated with the opening of “Americans”: “Eating and paper” (Writings 1903-1932 373). “To step outside of petromodernity would require a step outside of media, including the contemporary book” (“The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!” 64), writes Stephanie Le Menager. At some level, Stein is aware of “the inescapability of petroleum infrastructure” (64)—that is, how “[e]lectricity, fuel oil, and natural gas have kept press equipment running” (64).

“There are very many who are very serious ones in going to be doing something in the way of artistic creation. There are very many who are working many hours every day with serious intention” (The Making of Americans 693), writes Stein, who is one of these “very serious ones.” Thinking about “working many hours every day,” I want to focus on the transformative, powerful, and erotic nature of energy in Stein through wood, coal, and electricity, respectively. Turning to these areas of analysis helps us to explore the characteristics of Stein’s energy consciousness.

“It is snowing all day, and I have cut wood all day” (qtd. in Mellow 443), writes Stein in a letter to William Rogers, or the Kiddie, as she chops away at the block elsewhere, too: “Cut wood cut wood” (A Stein Reader 328). From kindling to a basket of wood to the fireplace, Stein spent time with nature’s bounty. With her woodwork in mind, we can consider how there is a transformative energy in her wordplay. That is, a form of energy can be found when similar sounds produce possibility within the realm of meaning. Wavering between one signified and another, the work of the pun generates a
brief, yet frenetic act of signification. While the push and pull of puns are everywhere in Stein, producing a range of affects, it is the “would” of “wood” that is at the core of her energetic wit. “Wood has not that meaning” (*Geography and Plays* 108), she writes. Like wood’s ability to be otherwise, Stein’s philosophy of the “would” for words is one of possibility, condition, and intention. Experimenting with encoding, Stein opens up decoding to more movement and activity. At every turn, she seems to ask, “What would this mean if I did that?” For this reason, Stein loves wood for its energy-to-be really or linguistically other:

In This Shape Wood

Indeed I do love wood.
And coal.
And speak of horses.
We do not mind coughs.
You mean of a machine. (*Bee Time Vine* 208-209)

In this early poem dated around the arrival of Stein’s Ford (c. 1917), one that anthropomorphizes the car’s horsepower, the title tells all with its reference to the shape of wood, or what “would” be. Here we find Stein’s transformative energy in terms of both pun and potentiality. As Stein writes elsewhere, there is an “Object that is in wood” (*Writings 1903-1932* 322) – one that is inward (“in wood”) – to be pulled out of the plane of possibility. Iterations of Stein’s wordplay, then, point to a polysemic transformative energy.

Stein’s energy consciousness also registers the power of coal, which is, perhaps, felt in its heft—“coal is tonny” (*Geography and Plays* 87). As a biochemical entity, coal works wonders. In “Turkey and Bones and Eating and We Like It,” a character named “Anthony and coal” says, “I believe that coal is better than wood. If coal is good it burns longer. In any case it is very difficult to get here” (*Writings 1903-1932* 397). For Stein, the resource’s radiant luminosity reveals its energy: “Colour is in coal. Coal is outlasting roasting and a spoonful, a whole spoon that is full is not spilling. Coal any coal is copper” (330). The hue and heat of this fuel receives preferential treatment as a commodity on the marketplace in Stein’s “Advertisements”: “I do not want the gas stove. It has a round
oven. It does not bake. We use coal by preference” (Geography and Plays 344). Stranger than Stein’s direct endorsement of how “Evian water is very good” (346), coal is still a “natural thing” (344). There is, however, a dirty side to this lauded lump of combustible carbon. On more than one occasion, we find coal paired with coffee in Stein—for instance, a passage from “A Piece of Coffee” reads as follows: “A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal color than altogether” (Writings 1903-1932 315). A form of fuel, coffee and coal are comparable, yet the “clean mixture” that is “not coal color” conceives of the rock as a contagion. This dirty dissonance also rings out in “Third Day Not Thirsty”:

Clamor in coal.
Coal white.
And wood.
Wood sore.
And lambs.
Put in bouquets.
You think I am fooling. Not at all. Sheep put in bouquets.
This is that door.
They are perfectly capable of eating their mutton. (Bee Time Vine 183-184)
The noise or “clamor” found in coal with the suggested tension between black and white in “Coal white” expresses an intensity, one that is amplified by the subtle suggestion that the sheep are fed their own flesh (“mutton”). Coal is powerful, but precarious; indeed, Stein gestures towards its coup de grâce in “IN,” a poem that is primarily “a study in vowel contrasts and consonant relationships” (44):

(A.H.A.) A brew sue, portal.
Breathe, breathe little plain page with collapse with collapse thick it.

A never in knee needles.
Coal lapse, coal it, will he.
A leave center pill to lent. (48)
The sonic similarity between “collapse” and “Coal / lapse” reveals the remnants of a pun, one that fails like a lapse in memory and, importantly, evokes the collapse of a coalmine. In 1903, Stein arrived in Paris where she would live for the rest of her life, aside from periodic travels. Three years later, Europe’s worst mining disaster happened less than half an hour away from where Stein resided (“Courrières”; “Courrières mine disaster”). While Stein never mentions the Courrières mine disaster, it is hard to believe she would not know about it given the gross number of casualties. A source of energy and a cause of death, coal comes off quite powerfully in Stein’s writing.

“I do not understand electricity” (Geography and Plays 246), writes Stein in one of her plays. Elsewhere, she suggests that there is no need to comprehend it because it is autonomous: “Electricity takes care of itself” (Bee Time Vine 9). But she is enthralled by the “blaze of electric light” (Writings 1932-1946 577) that we see surrounding the lead in Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights (1938). Indeed, Stein’s energy consciousness features the erotic poetics of electricity. In 1914, Stein upgraded the infrastructure of 27 rue de Fleurus: “We planned that we would have a little passage-way made between the studio and the little house and as that entailed cutting a door and plastering we decided that we would paint the atelier and repaper the house and put in electricity” (The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 140). Around this time, Stein’s poetry is electrically and erotically charged, especially in “Sacred Emily.” This poem – the one where Stein’s rose first appears – is known for its erotic and amatory nature. Analyzing it, one critic notes how, “Stein links sexuality and textuality in a poem that makes sacred the union of women” (Ford 82); moreover, it is “a poem that legitimizes femininity” (83). This is quite clear given the opening line’s reference to “beds” (Writings 1903-1932 387), the pun on peignoir with “pin nor” (387), the illocutionary line, “I do love honor and obey I do” (387), and the sexually suggestive repetition of the word “cunning” eight times (389, 392, 394, 395). Yet, “Sacred Emily” has not been read through the frame of the energy of electricity, which is strange given that one of its lines contains what could be read as a “tender button”: “Electrics are tight electrics are white electrics are a button” (389). Additionally, there are references to luminosity, wires, and humming (393, 395, 388).
And so the intimacy of electricity, or “tight electrics,” reveals the poem’s erotic nature, which is immediately underscored by the following phrase, “Singular pressing” (389). As the speaker writes, “we are one and indivisible” (388), it is clear that “Sacred Emily” expresses a sexualized friction, which is also apparent in its moments of repetition and juxtaposition:

- Next to barber.
- Next to barber bury.
- Next to barber bury china.
- Next to barber bury china glass.
- Next to barber china and glass.
- Next to barber and china.
- Next to barber and hurry.
- Next to hurry.
- Next to hurry and glass and china.
- Next to hurry and glass and hurry.
- Next to hurry and hurry.
- Next to hurry and hurry. (389-390)

This climactic crescendo captures the momentum of desire with its anaphoric phrase “Next to,” which gestures to an intimate proximity between bodies. Connected and energized by rhyme, the repetition of “hurry” – sparked by “bury” – highlights a libidinal energy that is driven by and drawn towards the fear and erotic nature of death. We also hear the sonic sexuality of Stein’s poem in this line: “Push sea push sea push sea push sea push sea push seapush sea push sea push sea push sea” (387). Surely, “the sensual auditory sibilance” of this line points to “the erotic motion of advancing and retreating waves,” which can be read as “lovers moving together or experiencing waves of pleasure” (Ford 80). Read aloud, moreover, the propulsive energy and repetition of the phrase “push sea” transforms it into “pussy” – a word repeated three times in the poem (Writings 1903-1932 395) – which is Alice’s nickname,18 not to mention a “tender button.” Stein’s style of writing is charged with an energy consciousness, one that presents us with a petropoetics, too.

“It is oil’s saturation of the infrastructure of modernity that paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation” (81), notes Peter Hitchcock. Yet, if
and when oil appears, however obliquely, we can discern a petropoetics. Simply put, petropoetics is an aesthetic oriented towards the ways in which oil and its forms enter and affect a work. Perhaps peculiar, petropoetics involves a stereoscopic mode of looking at both word and world. With material production in mind, one considers how objects of energy fuel and form our reading and knowledge of texts. In this regard, Yaeger writes that

energy sources also enter texts as fields of force that have causalities outside (or in addition to) class conflicts and commodity wars. The touch-a-switch-and-it’s-light magic of electrical power, the anxiety engendered by atomic residue, the odor of coal pollution, the viscous animality of whale oil, the technology of chopping wood: each resource instantiates a changing phenomenology that could re-create our ideas about the literary text’s relation to its originating modes of production as quasi-objects. (“Literature” 309-310)

Petropoetics places aesthetics and environment in dialogue; it explores how the “fields of force” are represented in the very make-up of the text. Whether simmering, seeping, or gushing, Stein’s work exhibits a petropoetics in modernism, a phenomenon that has gone largely unrecognized because the cultural logic of oil is defined and dictated by concealment, at least until catastrophe strikes.\(^{19}\) Up until the spectacle of an oil spill, say, energy is unconsciously (mis)understood as power ex nihilo: energy that appears out of nowhere, a form of fuel with a forgotten history. Oil is ancestral, however, an age-old substance from time immemorial uncannily removed and rendered usable today. Unrecognized until now, Stein does, indeed, have a relationship with this substance; she is well aware of its iterations, too:

Arouse yourself you are dormant. Arouse yourself land of promise. Be proud of oil, olive oil, wood oil, ground oil, cotton seed oil, ginger oil, palm oil, and gushing oil. Be proud of yourselves all of you together and sing peaceably. Gather yourselves together for an education. Read the notices. Decide the parts. And be gracious. If you must do it do it graciously. (Painted Lace 7)

From “Coal and Wood” (1920), Stein gestures towards oil above and below ground and arouses an energy through pride around that which is dormant but soon to be a geyser like the Lakeview Gusher in 1910.\(^{20}\) As oil appears, it affects her style, too. In “Why Are
There White To Console,” Stein writes: “When I was young I suddenly decided not to smother grass with water or oil with water not to smother oil with water or water with water. I decided not to smother oil or grass or water or any other addresses” (As Fine As Melanctha 200). Although the speaker decides, “not to smother,” the sentence still does through its repetition of different pairs of grass, water, and oil. Moreover, Stein’s syntactical stutters disorient the reader’s apprehension, if not comprehension, of the passage, which produces a sense of being overwhelmed, smothered even, by oil. While the “opportunity to think of oil as nature and/or art opens broad possibility for thinking about how oil has expressed fundamental notions of humanness” (Le Menager, “Fossil, Fuel” 378), I am, instead, interested in how oil as such operates in Stein.

In Stein, there is a sense of puzzlement around representations of petroleum. “How can oil be thick and thin” (Bee Time Vine 6), she asks. Bewildered by its viscosity, Stein still asserts the integrity of oil as an entity: “A drop of oil remains just what it is” (Painted Lace 35). Pondering its properties, moreover, Stein is fascinated with oil’s fluidity:

One.
An oil in a can, an oil and a vial with a thousand stems. An oil in a cup and a steel sofa.

One.
An oil in a cup and a woolen coin, a woolen card and a best satin. (Geography and Plays 199)

From can to vial to cup, oil is capable of taking the shape of its container. Oil’s ability to shape-shift speaks to Stein’s penchant for sonic play, too. “Oil in join, oil in join show, oil in join shoulder shoulder show” (Bee Time Vine 174), she writes. Here, we enjoy (“in join”) the sound of the oil engine (“in join”) on the shoulder of the road. The odd ways in which oil operates fascinates Stein, especially given its form of formlessness. Slipping and sliding around, Stein’s writing is energized by oil.

The form of petropoetics is also evident in slick, sticky, and slippery “Susie Asado” written in 1913 and published in 1922. Although the poem does not explicitly refer to a resource, I propose that we can read it with the form of oil in mind, a mode of
interpretation that might be useful in turning to the energy of modernism to uncover the aesthetics of an influential infrastructure. “Susie Asado” reads:

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.

Susie Asado.

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.

Susie Asado.

Susie Asado which is a told tray sure.

A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers.

When the ancient light grey is clean it is yellow, it is a silver seller.

This is a please this is a please there are the saids to jelly.

These are the wets these say the sets to leave a crown to Incy.

Incy is short for incubus.

A pot. A pot is a beginning or a rare bit of trees.

Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles, bobbles which shade and shove and render clean, render clean must.

Drink pups.

Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see it shine and a bobolink has pins. It shows a nail.

What is a nail. A nail is unison.

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea. *(Writings 1903-1932 362)*

Critics turn to “Susie Asado” to talk about a wide range of themes, including Cubism, Stein’s muse (the Flamenco dancer Antonia Mercé y Luque, or “La Argentina”), and conversational relations and friendship, but not oil, not petropoetics. 21 This poem shows how profoundly oil seeps into and shapes Stein’s consciousness and style. From sticking to the constant consonance of “sweet” so “sweet tea” sounds like “sweetie”; to sensing the sticky and slippery side-by-side “slips slips” that slides into, yet slips up, the metre of the two lines yielding the rhyme, “sure” / “hers”; to encountering the insoluble clusters of doubled words or phrases (“pot,” “trees,” “bobbles,” “render clean,” “drink pups,” and “nail”), Stein is aware of the substantial and sonic sensuousness of oil, especially as the
sibilants signify oil dripping. It seems like part of the allure here is oil’s strange temporality. Stein’s petropoetics highlights how the time of oil is odd, uncanny even. Oil is simultaneously past and present; its eons spent underground mix with the present moment when the repressed returns by the derrick’s drill. Stein’s energy consciousness registers the synchronicity of oil’s temporality in the following excerpt from “Natural Phenomena”: “Let us consider coal and wood and candles. Let us consider paper and stones and oil. Let us consider chances and distance and origin. Let us consider it all at once” (Painted Lace 168). What links these disparate materials is their origin in the ground; bringing them together discloses a synchronic relation that pursues the impossible (“Let us consider it all at once”). Rather than a mere litany separated by commas, Stein forms groupings that group relations and sub-relations at once with a conjunction. Paper, stones, and oil: paper and stones; paper and oil; stones and oil. Here we have a sort of Steinian set theory that seeks to subsume the surrounds while maintaining an awareness of how each entity exists independently and collectively at the same time. As this synchrony sounds itself out, it is clear that intentionality is shared between human and nonhuman: we intend things, things intend us, and things intend things. Existing in an odd kind of time, Stein’s strata of stuff suggests that they have a life of their own.

In Stein’s writing, oil is alive and agential, even if it happens to be dormant. To varying degrees, her writing exhibits the energetic livelihood of oil. At a telling point, for instance, the poem “Oval” – “an abstraction full of rhymes, puns, and other wordplays” (Bee Time Vine 119) – instructs us to “Respect oil will” (119). Here we have some mixed messages. On the one hand, this line suggests that oil is an agential entity with a will of its own. Like our relations with humans, we need to respect the reality of a co-existence with the organic and inorganic in our environs. On the other hand, this line appears antithetical to an environmentally conscious disposition: the word “will” is a misspelling of the word “well” as in an “oil well.” This reading is not implausible because Stein got it right elsewhere: “Oil well is a well” (A Stein Reader 330). Thus the imperative to “Respect oil will” ironically undercuts itself as it disrespects that which it claims to
respect through its deliberate misspelling. Stein reveals an anxiety around this strange substance, one that is oddly animated elsewhere in “Oval.”

“Oil sleeping. / Oil sleeping sleeping” (Bee Time Vine 132), writes Stein. The anthropomorphization of oil situates it as animate, yet temporarily inactive. Although asleep, oil is alive, and it can geyser up from the underground when we wake it from its slumber. Oil is in potentia. “Oil sleeping sleeping” complicates this narrative, however, because it suggests that the very idea of oil sleeping is asleep. Typically, we do not think about oil, but if we do, then it is readily in reserve. Up until the point when fossil fuels appear to energize us, oil idles in the unthought. At the same time, however, these lines show off how oil is in action even if we are not thinking about it. As oil sleeps, it spreads: the repetition of “sleeping” suggests that dormant does not necessarily mean inactive. There is an insomniac under our feet. Both asleep and awake and neither asleep nor awake, oil is a strange subterranean substance that slips and spills in and out of any dichotomous understanding when we analyze it anthropomorphically.

“Oval” expresses the diffuse energy of oil, too, as an agent attached to everything in one way or another. We see this in the following passage:

Or white.
Or white.
Or white.

Oil.
Oily.
Not oily.
Not beside.
More.

More. (Bee Time Vine 139)

The repetition of the phrase, “Or white” is important because it frames the subsequent references to and readings of oil by foregrounding a polarity. When we read or hear, “Or white. / Or white. / Or white,” it is hard not to think about the expression “black or white.” Because most of “Oval” consists of a narrow column that includes short one to four word lines, “Or white. / Or white. / Or white” not only directs us to how there is white space to the left of each iteration – indeed, the white space performs the poem’s
references to whiteness – but also compels us to imagine the word “black” in this white space to the left of the type. The reader fills in the blanks with the word “black” and, in turn, recognizes the dialectic of black and white, which demonstrates how “Oval” represents oil’s black gold as all around. To emphasize this, the poem encircles oil to reveal its all-encompassing capabilities through the aligned “O”’s or circles as “Or white” continues. (To visualize this, we can alter the text: “Or white. / Or white. / Or white. / Oil. / Oily.) The behind-the-scenes “black” rears its head in another form—oil.

Following the correspondence between black and white, oil is in the margins, but it is not necessarily marginal. “Oval” reminds us that something can be pervasive, yet invisible, ubiquitous, but underground. And the antithetical or negating lines, “Not oily” and “Not beside” support this reading because they encourage the act of negation and dialectical thinking. As the shift from the repeated “Or white” to “Oil” to “Oily” suggests that attempts at masking modes of production actually manifest them, “Oval” asks us to consider if there are circuitous routes in which oil seeps into the social.

The biotechnology of oil marks the entanglement between nature and culture, or a hybrid moment when a source of energy comes into contact with a cultural object in some way, shape, or form. This happens in Stein’s “Tillie”:

Tillie labor Tillie labor eye sheds or sheds, Tillie labor Tillie labor late in shells ear shells oil shells, Tillie labor Tillie labor shave in sew up ups ups, Tillie Tillie like what white like white where, like, Tillie labor like where open so or Tillie labor. Tillie lay Tillie laying Tillie laying, Tillie lime, Tillie Tillie, next to a sour bridge next to a pan wiper next to ascent assent, next to, assent, assent. (Bee Time Vine 173)

One of Stein’s editors suggests that this piece “may be a portrait” (173). Although it cannot be verified, there is reason to believe that Stein’s “Tillie” refers to Tillie Lerner Olson (1912-2007), a revolutionary, writer, war-relief patriot, crusader for equal pay, figure in the Civil Rights, and feminist icon (Reid 3). In fact, Stein and Olsen crossed paths on more than one occasion. If “Tillie” is Olsen, then Stein’s repeated references to “labor” make sense. Of interest here, however, is the reference to “oil shells.”

According to a blurb in an issue of Popular Science from May 1921 entitled, “Oil Shells to the Rescue,” an oil shell is a shell full of oil fired from a coast guard station’s life-line
gun to calm the waters around a stranded ship (72). Apparently, an “ideal oil shell would be one that could carry a gallon of oil” (72). Seemingly coincidental, Stein was attuned to nautical matters; at one point, a character in one of her plays asks, “Why does the german boat give out oil” (*Geography and Plays* 225). Although speculative, we can read Stein’s portrait as a document that archives a biotechnological object of oil.

Energy brings nature and culture together in Stein’s “One Sentence,” too, a piece that has received next to no critical attention except for its reference to Stein’s falling out with her brother. Indeed, there is a weird line that appears out of nowhere: “Gas roses” (*As Fine As Melanchta* 95). What happens when we stop and smell the roses? Like the pressure put on organic matter under the earth’s surface that slowly turns it into future fuel, and like the work of metaphor superimposing two images together, “Gas roses” is a rhetorical condensation of the olfactory vapors emitted from roses that we can smell, if not natural gas heating a room. A pleasant odor, sure, but I smell a trace of petroleum—did Stein as well? “Gas roses” is a strangely succinct juxtaposition that evokes some surreal images. The first image – gas made of roses – contains disparate and temporally distant entities that are causally connected despite the incalculable gap. That is, gas made of roses makes more sense than roses made of gas because the former follows a biochemical logic where the gas we burn today is a descendant of dinosaur roses. However, the second image – roses made of gas – is the byproduct of what happens when repressed organic matter returns, when a rose turns pitch black and is burnt up. A vaporous rose is impossible, but not unfathomable. Roses made of gas is the doppelgänger, the uncanny other of gas made of roses, for the former imagines a twisted temporality through syntax that reverses the order in which petroleum is typically produced—roses then gas rather than gas then roses. As strange as the second image is – roses made of gas – it yields a critique. “Gas roses” gives off an air of energy-to-be, it exhibits the way in which we see nature as enframed, a standing reserve to borrow from Heidegger. My gaze sees nothing but gas. It is not about the flower, but the future of it. “A rose is rose is a rose is a rose”, sure, but a rose will be gas, too. Stein’s floral figuration features the biotechnology of oil that, sure enough, fuels and foregrounds the embodiment of energy in the car. To fully understand the material nature of Stein’s
energy consciousness, then, we need to turn to how it is mobilized through a mode of transportation, which starts with looking at Stein’s own experience as a driver.

Stein started learning how to drive in 1916 when her American artist friend William Cook gave her lessons in his Renault taxi beyond the fortifications of Paris (Mellow 226-227). Once Stein had a grip on the wheel, she and Alice contributed to the war effort by working for the American Fund for French Wounded (A.F.F.W.) in 1917. After soliciting $550 from her cousin Bird Gans in New York to purchase and ship a Ford van to France, Stein and Toklas transported medical supplies to hospitals around Perpignan, Nîmes, and, later in 1919, Alsace (Mellow 226; Burns 1: 58; Tylee 36). And so Stein served the A.F.F.W. with style. Her Ford was named “Auntie,” or “Aunt Pauline” after her aunt because she “always behaved admirably in emergencies and behaved fairly well most times if she was properly flattered” (The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 172). Anthropomorphizing “Auntie” not only signals a materteral relationship with materiality – “materteral” is the opposite of “avuncular” – but also points to how Stein’s car is alive, and how it embodies energy.

In “The Work” – a poem printed in the A.F.F.W. Bulletin (Bee Time Vine 189) – Stein gestures to an intimate knowledge of the mechanics of her car: “we know how much oil we use for the machine” (189). Here, Stein implicitly registers how “Auntie” is a vehicle of energy when she writes about the loss of its lifeblood in “Won”:

Thousands of trucks.
And hundreds of marines.
And in between then.
Aunt Pauline losing oil.
We will see.
Can you think about a dish.
We will have a dish.
Radish.
That is good as food.
Aunt Pauline will justify herself. (187-188)

Here, the metaphorical blood – accentuated by the red radish – and the hesitant sentiment in the line “We will see” expresses an awareness of what is required to win the war.
Indeed, Aunt Pauline will sacrificially “justify herself.” Witnessing the trauma and tragedy of the war, the speaker – and surely Stein – direct their psychic energy into a sympathy for Aunt Pauline. The car is a synecdoche for the dehumanized soldiers who were injured or lost their lives in the war. Also, this poem reveals an understanding of the material expenditure and wreckage war yields, human or otherwise. And so “Won” notes a reliance on human and nonhuman infrastructure and resource to fuel action.

Of course, when it comes to technology and energy, one cannot help but think of Futurism, especially the work of F.T. Marinetti. “We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness” (“The Founding” 51), writes Marinetti in his enumerated manifesto of Futurism. We see this “habit of energy” play out in his poem “To My Pegasus,” which is rife with dromological, demonic rhetoric; the first stanza exhibits Marinetti’s electric eloquence:

Vehement god of a steel race,
Automobile thirsting for space
shuffling and trembling in anguish,
pulling at the bit with strident teeth!
O formidable Japanese monster,
with a forge’s eyes,
fed by flames and mineral oils,
hungry for horizons and sidereal preys…
I will set free your heart with its diabolical beat
and its gigantic pneumatic tires,
for the dance that you will lead
on the white roads of the world!… (425)

Here we have Marinetti’s macho car, a formidable figure fixated on domination with its “strident teeth” that are “hungry for horizons and sidereal preys.” Marinetti’s “crazed monster” (426) of a car tempts the speaker to “Let go of the breaks” (427) and experience the “bottomless Infinite” (426) and, in turn, celebrate having “No more contact with this disgusting earth” (427). Veering away from this vertiginous aesthetic, Stein is grounded:

Little axes.
Yes indeed little axes and rubbers.
This is a description of an automobile.
I understand all about them. (*Writings 1903-1932* 428)

This scene shows off an intimacy and identification with the car. It circumvents Futurism’s Romantic flourishes in favour of featuring an actual participation in and with an aggregate of nonhuman objects in the world. And, importantly, her energy in and around the car is earnest:

The Ford

It is earnest.
Aunt Pauline is earnest.
We are earnest.
We are united.
Then we see. (*Bee Time Vine* 183)

Far from a work of Futurism, Stein’s energy is sincere; it is embodied through interpersonal and technological immersion. “We are energetic” (*A Stein Reader* 309), she writes in a piece that puns on Marinetti entitled, “Marry Nettie, Alright Make it a Series and call it Marry Nettie,” which “evokes a comic but also mercilessly satiric portrait of the impresario of Futurism” (Perloff, *Wittgenstein* 100). As Marjorie Perloff notes, “the text cleverly replaces one word (‘Marinetti’) by two (‘Marry Nettie’), as if to say that the domineering *chef d’école* of Futurism must be replaced by two women in dialogue” (100). Less masculine and more feminine, Stein’s work demonstrates a different kind of energy, one that is driven by circularity.

“Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (*Writings 1903-1932* 395), writes Stein. “Gas roses” fuel Stein’s energetic line. Like a car wheel going round or a feedback loop of sound, Stein’s roses figure into the form of her energy throughout her work.²⁶ We are told in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that Stein composed in her car:

During these early restless years after the war Gertrude Stein worked a great deal. Not as in the old days, night after night, but anywhere, in between visits, in the automobile while she was waiting in the street while I did errands, while posing. She was particularly fond in these days of working in the automobile while it
stood in the crowded street. [...] She was much influenced by the sound of the streets and the movement of the automobiles. (206)27

That Stein was “influenced” by “the movement of the automobiles” is perhaps an understatement. The first edition of this circularly informed work – one where Stein writes as Toklas writing about herself and Stein – has an insignia of Stein’s roses in the shape of a circle on the cover.28 This iteration of “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” reflects its own repetition through circularity, a geometry that gestures toward a genuine geometria, or earth-measuring, as it outlines a poetic earth with her words. Surely, Stein’s “The World is Round” attests to this given that it begins with a section called, “Rose is a Rose” and the following sentence: “Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around” (Writings 1932-1946 537). Stein did not drive in circles, but they drove her. Her A Circular Play / A Play in Circles – composed around the time Stein started to experiment with writing in her car29 – features one hundred instances of the word “circle” in one form or another. One passage reads:

Consider a circle.

In the car there are four three if you like and outside two, four if you like. Four necessarily more than. Two necessarily more than two.

Four if you like.

Expressly a circle.

Were we at home. In messages, in sending messages, in quarreling, in shooting, in endangering, in resolving and in destroying there is a course of events. Honeysuckle grows and peas. Can you sing together. (A Stein Reader 332)

Stein’s circles encircle us; the indeterminate number of circles – two, three, or four – marks the movement of the vehicle. Also, reading the line, “In the car there are four three if you like and outside two, four if you like” produces a sense of movement given the stutter “four three.” Here, the reader experiences the energy of the machine in and through Stein’s writing.

Stein registers an energetic materiality in her lesbian love poem “Lifting Belly,” too, which is driven by “roses and carnations” (Writings 1903-1932 423), or “a nation of cars” (Mark xx).30 In the poem, we see Stein’s proto-product integration generating an
assembly line of brand name references. She namedrops “Ford” a number of times: “Can you buy a Ford,” “It is necessary to have a Ford,” “We can have a pleasant ford,” and “We are in our Ford” (436, 447, 447, 448, respectively). While Stein admired Ford, these cultural references register ambivalence towards masculine mass production given the symbolic typographical demotion of the name “ford.” The materiality of this cultural signifier gets picked up with an interesting misuse of car parts, which surely emphasizes the relationship between aesthetics and environment. With what is most likely a reference to Stein and Toklas’ ten-day stay in Avila, Spain, “Lifting Belly” exhibits the evolution of sandals made out of car tires: “Using old automobile tires as sandals is singularly interesting. It is done in Avila” (424; The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 115-116). Citing Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Zimmer points out how exaptation – how an old structure gets used to perform a new function – applies to technology with the example of tire sandals in Nairobi (377). Taken aback by this exotic object, the speaker in “Lifting Belly” is incredulous: “Did you believe in sandals. When they are made of old automobile tire.” Importantly, “Lifting Belly” presents car parts, but it is also part car. Although “Lifting Belly” limits its allusions to the automobile, the poem functions as one. Later in “Lifting Belly” there is a one-word line that stands out—namely, “Motor”:

Lifting belly shines.
Lifting belly nattily.
Lifting belly to fly.
Not to-day.
Motor.
Lifting belly for wind. (Writings 1903-1932 445)

“Motor” is only mentioned once, but its mechanisms are manifest through the repetition of the poem’s title four hundred and sixty-seven times. It is painfully obvious that “Lifting belly is a repetition” (422), but this redundant, yet reflexive line asks us to acknowledge the way in which the word “Motor” drives the repetition machine that is “Lifting Belly.” This moment pushes us to reflect on how the iterations of “lifting belly” simulate the perpetual perspectival shifts one experiences while driving. Through the energetic materiality and repetition in “Lifting Belly,” Stein works away at embodying
automobility. Her poem is a sort of song about Aunt Pauline (458), for we see her looking
at a new world through the windshield in motion:

    How do you like your Aunt Pauline.
    She is worthy of a queen.
    Will she go as we do dream.
    She will do satisfactorily.
    And so will we.
    Thank you so much.
    Smiling to me.
    Then we can see him.
    Yes we can.
    Can we always go.
    I think so.
    You will be secure.
    We are secure.
    Then we see.
    We see the way.
    This is very good for me.
    In this way we play.
    Then we are pleasing.
    We are pleasing to him.
    We have gone together.
    We are in our Ford.
    Please me please me.
    We go then.
    We go when.
    In a minute. (448)

With short little speedy sentences, the speaker – or speakers – are on the go, pleasurably
seeing what they want, when they want “In a minute.” “In speeding I speed” (Geography
and Plays 399), she writes. Without a doubt, Stein encoded the way in which the
“automobile offered the eye new challenges” (Duffy 161); in this regard, the blur in the following passage exhibits a visual energy:

And yes and yes and better and yes and more and yes and better and yes, and yes
and yes and more and yes and better and yes and more and yes and yes and yes
and more and best and yes and yes and better and most and yes and yes and more
and better and best and most and yes and yes and most and better and yes and yes
and most and more and yes and yes, and more and yes and yes and better and yes
and yes and most and yes and yes and better and yes and yes and better and yes
and more and yes and best and yes and better and yes and more and yes and most
and yes and more and yes and yes and better and yes and yes and most and yes
and yes and best and yes and yes [……] (A Stein Reader 489)

Enda Duffy notes how “it was in the interface between the human eye and the car as viewing mechanism that the mutual dependence of machine and body was most evident, and most fraught with tension” (192). Given her aesthetics of excess, it is clear that Stein’s senses were overwhelmed. Behind the wheel, Stein felt and witnessed the frisson by the speed and energy embodied in her car.

In this chapter, I have addressed the ways in which different forms of energy enter into both Stein’s work and world, which gestures to a preeminent awareness of energy well before our current conversations and concerns about it. Scrutinizing Stein’s body of work, I have demonstrated how her aesthetic practice materially engages her surrounds in a way that does not draw any hard or fast line between nature and culture. Reading her representations of wood, coal, and electricity, then, I have shown how energy is rendered transformative, powerful, and erotic. Importantly, I have explored Stein’s petropoetics, which involves a specific way of writing about energy that requires an energetic form. Petropoetics pays heed to oil’s characteristics and technologies like the car, and how they affect the nature of a text, especially when it comes to ideas of representation, form, temporality, agency, and biotechnology. Reading Stein in this way, its evident how dirty modernism is chalked full of animated, intensified forces and forms that reveal an energized tension at the core of a messy modernity.

At the outset of this chapter on Stein’s emergent energy consciousness and the embodiment of it, we encountered Stein encountering oil. As a sort of reprise, I want to
return to this scene to conclude my discussion of Stein because it gestures to something strange happening in modernism that I take up in the next chapter. In “Work Again,” Stein writes:

In comparison what are horses.
Compared with that again what are bells.
You mean horns. No I mean noises.
In leaning can we encounter oil.
I meant this to be intelligible.

We were taking a trip. We found the roads not noisy but pleasurable and the shade there was pleasant.
We found that the trees had been planted so as to make rows. This is almost universal. (Geography and Plays 399)

Here, we have an odd scene that equivocally relates horses with cars. Leading up to oil, we read an awkward analogy: “In comparison what are horses. / Compared with that again what are bells. / You mean horns. No I mean noises.” The missing referent – “car” – is evoked through a number of negative analogies – a car is not a horse, a car’s horn is not a bell, and a car’s horn is not a bull’s horn – and, as a result, produces a collage effect characteristic of Stein’s Cubist portrait mode (Watten 121). One analysis of this passage points to how the absent, yet present car forms the crux between verse and prose, or between portrait and landscape writing, which not only signals a transition from the car as object to the car as a vehicle for viewing, but also marks the displacement of a Fordist assembly line form of repetition onto nature as the rows of trees are “almost universal” (121). Instead of displacement, however, there is entanglement; instead of juxtaposition, there is superimposition. Here, nature and culture are one. The heteroglossic line, “You mean horns. No I mean noises” establishes that there is a confusion – one that remains unresolved – between the speaker’s and his or her interlocutor’s meaning. This impasse is noise. Or, reflexively, this impasse is noise about “noises.” This noise disrupts and distorts any chance of clear communication. But this is not to say that nothing is said at all. There is an extra-linguistic dimension to this noise: horses, bells, horns, and cars make noise; all of these entities make noise or “noises” together. The car’s engine is as
alive and loud as the horse. This monstrous cacophony expresses not only a materiality in and around oil, but also a weird transformation between animal and object.

“A object a little dog called Basket” (Last Operas and Plays 178), writes Stein in Paisieu (1928). In 1928, Stein purchased a new Ford and a poodle she named Basket (Shaughnessy xii). A year later, we read of Stein writing to Virgil Thomson from Bilignin: “Here we are and very nice it is even nicer and Basket and the car and the country and the house and everything has been so xcitings” (The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson 113). Such a scene ends up in one of Stein’s film scripts, too, which features a car, two women, and a white poodle: “Ils sont tous les trois alors ensemble et tout à coup elle passe, l’auto, avec les deux dames et il y a avec elles un vrai caniche blanc et dans la bouche du caniche est un petit paquet” (The Gertrude Stein Reader 437). So, what is the relationship between animal and object exactly? This might seem like an off-kilter question to ask of Stein; however, in the recently published To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays (2001), she writes about an interesting horse named “Active”:

...Active forgot everything and he said ploughing was not so bad, and he could always be glad, and anyway, what was the use of saying anything since everybody did what they pleased with him. So he said he thought an automobile, just one day he said he thought he would be an automobile not a new one an old one and he was one, he was an automobile and an automobile never has a name and it never has a mane and it has rubber shoes not an iron one and finding rubber shoes does not mean anything like finding iron horse-shoes did and that was the end of everything. (8)

Through the power of his will, Active turns into an automobile with “rubber shoes” instead of “iron horse-shoes.” Once this transformation occurs, it is “the end of everything.” This is a scene showcasing a tension between animacy and inanimacy, one that registers what I call in the next chapter “the inanimal.”
Notes

1 “You see it [the vitality of movement] first in Walt Whitman. He was the beginning of the movement” (How Writing Is Written 153), writes Stein.

2 In The Constructivist Moment (2003), Barrett Watten notes that there is a profound identification with Ford in Stein’s work. From the product to the mode of production, Watten contends that the “Ford and the automobile are sites of a periodic meditation on mass production, social mobility, and repetition for Stein, a synecdoche for social modernity as interpreted in the process of her work” (119).

3 See Watten’s The Constructivist Moment, pages 118-126.

4 In The Ecology of Modernism (forthcoming), however, Joshua Schuster employs the concept of ambience to read Stein’s natures.

5 “Try to imagine a major American writer taking on the Oil Encounter. The idea is literally inconceivable” (140), writes Amitav Ghosh. Yet, perhaps Stein does, in fact, take on the Oil Encounter, but in an oblique way.


7 In “Normal Motor Automatism,” Stein and Leon M. Solomons report about “automatic powers of the normal subject” (492). Specifically, they question the “limit of automatism” and consider its relation to consciousness (492). Here, we have an interest in energy at the level of the psyche.

8 See Stein’s letter to Thornton Wilder on 6 March 1941, which I cite later in my chapter. Moreover, the word “essence” appears in the context of it as a fuel resource in the early poem “The Work” from 1917; Stein writes: “Then say the essence. Here I must confess I
am introducing my own troubles. There is always a certain amount of trouble in getting essence but everybody is so kind” (Bee Time Vine 190).

9 In Irresistible Dictation (2001), Steven Meyer contextualizes Stein’s writing relative to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s notion of “irresistible dictation.” And so Meyer suggests that in “tracing Stein’s highly self-conscious, although no less contextually sensitive, compositional practices, one may better understand not just the organic mechanisms that operate in her own compositions but also those investigated by several generations of radical empiricists in very different, yet not altogether different spheres” (124). For him, moreover, Stein “reconfigured science as writing and performed scientific experiments in writing (xxi).

10 “Guillaume Apollinaire” is jarring and odd, but I take my cue from Dydo. She offers a brief but convincing analysis of the piece, especially when she emphasizes how we have to move from sense to sound when reading it: sense is found in the sound of the poem as the first line resembles the resonance of the name “Guillaume Apollinaire,” for instance (A Stein Reader 278-279). Interestingly, however, she does not offer an interpretation of what “gas strips” phonetically signifies. Also, Dydo points out that the word “teethe” is from Stein’s manuscript rather than her typescript and, in turn, speculates as to what the implication might be of having two verbs rather than an adjective modifying a noun (279).

11 For a discussion of energy and waste, see Allan Stoekl’s Bataille’s Peak (2007).


13 See A Stein Reader (232, 244, 358, 388) and Geography and Plays (87).

14 See “No” (1915) in As Fine as Melanchta (38).

15 Although Stein’s chapter entitled, “My Arival in Paris” from The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas opens with the year 1907 (6), she was there earlier—that is, in 1903 (Will 21).
16 Dydo dates this play’s composition around February to June 1938; it was published in *Last Operas and Plays* (1949) (xi).

17 “According to a letter Picasso wrote to Stein on August 8, 1914, he went to rue de Fleurus while she was in London to see how the pictures were hanging in the newly repainted studio, which had just been equipped with electricity and connected to the pavilion” (Giroud 38).

18 “Miss Stein calls Miss Toklas ‘Pussy’” (qtd. in Burns 1: 352n3).

19 My evocation of concealment as a defining feature of the cultural logic of oil is, in part, an allusion to a Heideggerean understanding of resources that are enframed and, in turn, relegated to the backdrop of a world of equipment only to appear when something is amiss, like an oil spill. In “The Cultural Politics of Oil,” moreover, Imre Szeman gestures to one feature of the cultural logic of oil, which emphasizes just the absence, yet presence of oil. He notes how oil is “everywhere, connected to everything” (34), and yet “something [is] missing” (34). Szeman points out how, despite the proliferation of writings on petroculture, “it still seems to be difficult to capture the fundamental way in which access to petrocarbons structures contemporary social life on a global scale” (34). That is, as foundational as oil is as energy resource, history, and ontology (34), there is something very “inaccessible” about it; as he puts it, oil is “the structuring ‘Real’ of our contemporary sociopolitical imaginary, and perhaps for this reason just as inaccessible as any noumenon in the flow of everyday experience from the smoggy blur of sunrise to sundown” (34). For a discussion of oil and modernism, see Schuster’s *The Ecology of Modernism* (forthcoming).

20 In 1910, the Lakeview Gusher spewed a total of 9.4 billion barrels over a period of 18 months in Taft, California, which is more than the Gulf War spill in the Persian Gulf and the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Read 48).

21 Writing on “Susie Asado,” Marjorie Perloff’s *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981) nuances the typical reading of Stein’s style relative to Cubism through a discussion of verbal planes (phonemic, semantic, and erotic codes, for instance) to suggest that the poem is “not at all ‘about’ the Flamenco dancer whose performance she and Alice Toklas admired on their trip to Spain” (73), but, instead, that “*Susie Asado* has no fixed center”
and is another instance of the way in which her style parallels “the instability, indeterminacy, and acoherence of Cubism” (77); Felicia McCarren’s *Dancing Machines* (2003) notes the tension between the representational and the musical and a present yet absent dancer, experimentation with exactitude (or as Stein puts it in *Lectures in America*, “[t]he strict discipline […] of never using a word that was not an exact word all through the *Tender Buttons* and what I may call early Spanish and *Geography and Plays* period finally resulted in things like Susie Asado […]” [qtd. in McCarren 84]), a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world, and the contentious interpretations of words like “wet” (84-86); and Dana Watson’s *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens* (2005) focuses on recuperative conversation, repairing relationships, food, the sound of social intercourse, a Shakespearean allusion to *Macbeth*, and meaning-making and miscommunication (83-88).

22 See Panthea Reid’s *Tillie Olson* (2010) (95, 102, 105, 107).

23 Following up on the tenuous relationship between Gertrude and Leo one year after the latter left Paris’ 27 rue de Fleurus for Italy, Brenda Wineapple cites American novelist and playwright Neith Boyce Hapgood’s journal – specifically an entry from 1914 when she was visiting the patron of the arts Mabel Dodge’s Villa Cuornia in Arcetri, Italy where Stein and Toklas often frequented – where Hapgood recounts a conversation she had with Dodge about Dodge’s talk with Leo about Gertrude (352, 385). According to Hapgood’s account of Dodge’s account of Leo’s remarks about his sister, Leo said that, “Alice was making herself indispensable. She did everything to save Gertrude a movement” (386), and it was this – Alice’s subservience – that Leo took umbrage with. Wineapple then offers another, more succinct and less labyrinthine account – and this is where “One Sentence” comes in – where the American inventor and art collector Albert Barnes recounted Leo saying that “‘Gertrude is crazy’” and “‘I can’t stand her anymore’” (386), for which Wineapple makes the connection that this sentiment finds its way into “One Sentence” with the lines, “I believe she is crazy” and, directly after this one, “He was as he often is extremely disagreeable” (Stein qtd. in Wineapple 386 from *Melanctha* 75).
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion of the avunculate in *Tendencies* (1993) has overshadowed its cousin concept: materterality, or what is characteristic or typical of an aunt. In another project, I explore and theorize this concept through Gertrude Stein’s stylized work regarding Aunt Pauline, her Ford car named after her father’s brother’s wife. Stein’s car marks a non-normative network or familial framework that features human and nonhuman object relations under the rubric of an affinity with the aunt as such. This reveals an unorthodox genealogy of materiality in modernity. “Aunt” is without an object of desire and thus without relationality, argues Sedgwick, but this is not a drawback; rather, “aunt” is opened up. Thinking etymologically, I suggest that “materterality” creates a connection to the strange stuff in the surroundings and reconfigures relations with the real through an unfamiliar family. “There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing” (133), writes Stein in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937), a remark not unlike Sedgwick’s exclamation to “Forget the Name of the Father!” (58). Turning to Stein’s lesbian love poem, “Lifting Belly,” I am interested in a different, deviant kind of family, one that includes atypical things.

In *Bee Time* Vine, the editor dates “Won” as 1917; however, in Stein’s papers, it is 1919, which creates an odd discrepancy given the subject matter of the poem: the celebration of the end of World War I.


After this excerpt from *The Autobiography*, Stein lists a number of the “experiments” (206) – pieces composed in the car – which includes, “The Birthplace of Bonnes,” “Moral Tales of 1920-1921,” “American Biography,” “One Hundred Prominent Men,” and “Mildred’s Thoughts.”

In addition to the first edition of the cover of *The Autobiography*, Stein’s circular roses appear on a plate she had made for Carl Van Vechten, and as a wax seal on the bottom of
a miniature statue of the Madonna with child (The Autobiography 137-183; Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Series IX, Objects, Box 163, Folder 4304, YCAL).

29 See note 23; also, A Circular Play / A Play in Circles is dated between May and June 1920 (A Stein Reader vii).

30 Rebecca Mark’s creative reading of the line, “I do love roses and carnations” in “Lifting Belly” underscores the ways in which Stein – consciously or not – tapped into the technology of her milieu. Mark, an editor of an updated edition of “Lifting Belly,” makes the point that Stein’s use of repetition frees words up so that they can be comprehended orally (xx). With this in mind, Mark notes how the word “carnations” “becomes a flower and a nation of cars” (xx). Mark’s reading is interested in Stein’s “linguistic miracles” (xx), specifically in terms of how they exhibit female creativity and liberation (xx). While this is not necessarily my focus, I think that Mark’s gloss of “carnations” as “nation of cars” is quite sharp and compels us to consider a material and historical context of the car in conjunction with what and how Stein writes.

31 Arguably, exaptation works at the level of language, too, which is, in effect, part of Stein’s program when it comes to anything from repetition to sound. In the case of “Lifting Belly,” though, tire sandals signal a misuse value: “[t]ires make very good sandals, but one would never argue that Goodrich (or whoever) built the tires to provide footwear in Third World nations. Durability for sandals is a latent potential of auto tires, and the production of such sandals defines a quirky functional shift” (Gould qtd. in Zimmer 377). (I am borrowing my usage of phrase “misuse value” from Bill Brown’s A Sense of Things [2003]; see 75-76.)

32 This is not a reduction. See Levi Bryant’s “Black” in Prismatic Ecology (2013) and Hasana Sharp’s Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization (2011).

33 “They are all three then together and all of the sudden she passes, the car, with the two ladies and they have with them a real white poodle and in the mouth of the poodle is a small package” (my translation).
Modernism is a menagerie. Its poetry is full of flourishing figures of animals. “O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie, inside my ribs, under my bony head, under my red-valve heart” (101), writes Carl Sandburg in “Wilderness,” a poem that presents the vitality of animality. Likewise, Marianne Moore’s body of work includes a wide-ranging cast of creatures: a jerboa, swan, pelican, buffalo, fish, monkey, snake, mongoose, octopus, snail, peacock, whale, pangolin, paper nautilus, wood-weasel, elephant, chameleon, jellyfish, arctic ox, giraffe, tiger, fox, lion, bear, mouse, and rat.

More broadly, modernism is swarming with animal life and death. Moore’s “real toad” (267) is met with an octopus of “ice” (71). Indeed, given that the “Curious Cat” in T.S. Eliot’s “The Rum Tum Tugger” “will do / As he do do / And there’s no doing anything about it!” (153), we are oriented to the (other) end of the animal. More explicitly, consider the opening of Richard Eberhart’s “The Groundhog” first published in 1934 in *The Listener*:

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog lying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
And mind outshot our naked frailty.
There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close maggots’ might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick. (743)

“If there is a subgenre of the dead animal poem in twentieth-century American poetry,” writes Jerry Harp, “then Eberhart’s ‘The Groundhog’ may well be the exemplar text”
This scene shows off both growth and decay as maggots feed off of the groundhog’s corpse. Encountering his or her shared “naked frailty” with the groundhog, the speaker’s anxiety is displaced onto the “angry stick” poking and prodding mortality.

In modernism, there is a specific kind of animality, one that encompasses the tension between life and death. I call this inanimality, or the inanimal. The inanimal is a representation and blurring of the point or duration between life and death, which relates to the interaction between animal and object. Such an interaction occurs through different modes, which designate how the inanimal takes shape in modernist poetry. Thus, I turn to these modes and discuss them and the significance of the inanimal through close reading selections of modernist poetry. Specifically, I look at commodity and ethical rights discourses in Marianne Moore and Edward Breck; rendering in Elinor Wylie; prolepsis in Elizabeth Bishop and Marsden Hartley; technical innovations in William Stafford and William Carlos Williams; vitalism and violence in e.e. cummings and George Oppen; and animals and race in Daniel Webster Davis. Turning to these poets and others like Langston Hughes and Mina Loy, I show how animals are objectified in modernism.

In doing so, I advance animal studies beyond its preoccupation with the relationship between humans and animals and, instead, focus on the frisson or unease around animal objects. Indeed, animals and objects share a history, one that warrants attention in literary criticism and animal studies. In modernity, animals became not only commodities in a capitalistic marketplace full of goods, but also figures embedded in cultural production, a phenomenon that Akira Mizuta Lippit calls “incorporated animality” (187). More specifically, Lippit, in Electric Animal (2000), nuances one of modernity’s clichés – human progress leads to the loss of nature – and suggests that modernity sustains the disappearance of animals at a constant state (1). Theorizing a new mode of existence for modernity’s animal, Lippit argues that animals never entirely vanish; instead, they exist in a state of perpetual vanishing: modernity’s animal is not sacrificial, but spectral (1). Undergoing a transformation between the Industrial Revolution and the end of World War II, the animal began to vanish from the empirical world and evolved into a lost object to be mourned (3). Ultimately, animal being enters discursive structures; however, the animal is more than a merely ubiquitous figure: the animal is modern subjectivity (25-26). During the modern period, the animal – denied the
status of a conscious subject – not only offered escape from a history in crisis, but also served as an ideal form for a destabilized subjectivity (25-26). And so animal being brings about an excess or surplus that exceeds the subject and haunts myriad forms (26). Yet, this argument about modernity’s undead animals veers away from recognizing the materiality of what I am calling the inanimal, which, for me, moves away from spectrality and towards substance, or the representation of animal embodiment in and with its material surrounds. Thus, I turn to how modernism appropriated “actual and phantasmatic resources of dead animals” (“…From Wild” 125), despite what Lippit says.

“The animal is the very first thing to be ruled out of modernism’s bounds” (20), writes Steve Baker. While Baker focuses on contemporary art and performance, his study locates a gap in modernism that compels us to consider how, if at all, the arts address the animal and its objecthood. Baker’s hypothesis is that there was “no modern animal, no ‘modernist’ animal” (20). “Between nineteenth-century animal symbolism,” writes Baker, “with its reasonably secure hold on meaning, and the postmodern animal images whose ambiguity or irony or sheer brute presence serves to resist or to displace fixed meanings, lies modernism at its most arid” (20). Modernist poetry, however, presents animals oriented towards objects and objectification. Despite this marked orientation, the objectification of the animal has not been accounted for in modernist studies.

Animal studies and literary modernism leaves questions concerning animals and objects more or less unaddressed, yet “modernity finds animals lingering in the world undead (Lippit 1). The field is, instead, engaged with the relationship between humans and animals. “At its core,” writes Colleen Glenney Boggs, “animal studies asks what happens when we include other species in our understanding of subjectivity” (3).

Offering an overview of animal studies, Boggs explains how there are two strands: first, the social sciences, which derived from the animal rights movement, and, second, the humanities, which emerged out of poststructuralism (3). “Whereas the animal rights movement argues that our understanding of subjectivity needs to include animals,” writes Boggs, “post-structuralist analysis uses animals to deconstruct our notions of subjectivity. One strand of animal studies has a firm investment in the subject, whereas the other has an equally firm investment in erasing the subject” (3-4). In this regard, Peter Singer’s ideas form one end of the spectrum and Jacques Derrida’s, the other.³ Both strands of
animal studies painstakingly problematize the human via the animal. Of course, we cannot preclude the human, but perhaps it is time to move on and acknowledge “accepted wisdom” (Pick 1)—namely, “that the distinctions between humans and animals are conceptually and materially indecisive” (1).

Critics turning to animals and modernity like Randy Malamud, Philip Armstrong, Carrie Rohman, Nicole Shukin, Mark Payne, and Anat Pick take up a range of issues including anthropocentrism and exploitation, cultural history of humans and animals, animal construction of the so-called human, animal and economy, affect and aggression, and vulnerability of the animal body, respectively. Despite this concern with the ontology of animals, a full account of their objecthood and of their ends has yet to be provided. “I don’t believe ecocriticism has begun, in any systematic way,” writes Christopher Todd Anderson, “to address the varied meanings of animal death and representations of animal death” (“Roadkill Theory” 1). Following Boggs’ Animalia Americana (2013), I introduce the concept of the inanimal as a way of taking up Anderson’s challenge to nudge the conversation in a different direction. To start, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the tension around the inanimal and how it is often caught between life and death.

The cessation of animal life serves as an occasion for poetic experimentation that draws on interruption to make the emptiness of death visible. Take, for instance, Hughes’ uncollected poem “Dying Beast”:

Sensing death,
The buzzards gather—
Noting the last struggle
Of flesh under weather,
Noting the last glance
Of agonized eye
At passing wind
And boundless sky.
Sensing death,
The buzzards overhead
Await that still moment
When life—

Is dead. (1: 205-206)

Barely alive, the dying beast is abstracted and disembodied. The unspecified species amounts to nothing more than “flesh under weather” and an “agonized eye.” With “buzzards overhead” in what we imagine to be a barren, desert wasteland, the dying beast is basically carrion. In the end, its life is not even its own. The last two lines shift the focus from singular existence to life as such. Hughes’ poem formally represents the point or duration between life and death with the white space between “When life—” and “Is dead.” While the em dash gestures towards the interruption or cessation of life, the subsequent white space encodes liminality. That is, seemingly, there is a strict divide between life and death, but this space – perhaps the space of the inanimal – signals an in-between state or transition where phenomena are a part of a continuum. With its “last struggle” and “last glance,” “Dying Beast” is a death rattle sounding off an afterlife, a poem with a speaker projecting an imaginary, yet real, moment in which the animal’s “agonized eye” observes the unending “passing wind” and the infinite “boundless sky.” Hughes’ creature is in the “still moment” between being and nothing where time seems to stop.

Between life and death, the inanimal in modernism is fragile. In *Creaturely Poetics* (2011), Anat Pick discusses the “corporeal reality of living bodies” (3). Working with the thought of Simone Weil, Pick considers the creature to be a living body that is material, temporal, and vulnerable (5). Focusing on the body and embodiment, she considers what it is like for thought and action to be oriented towards vulnerability as a way of existence and exposure (5). The foundation of Pick’s argument deviates from Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of bare life, or zoë, the simple fact of living common to all beings (1), given that Pick “do[es] not regard animal life as absolutely bare” (15). Instead, for her, “ideas of bare life act more as a permanent but permeable threshold than as a foundation upon which life’s other functions are built and to which life returns when these are taken away. *All* life is bare in the sense of being susceptible to the interventions of power” (15). Pick’s deviation from Agamben is key to understanding the inanimal’s fragility. To borrow from and play with Pick, the inanimal is not only a “permeable threshold” – the barely alive
and the nearly dead – but also the corporeal reality of nonliving bodies, or the materiality of inanimate animals.

The emergence of the inanimal in modernism – a figure foregrounding the unease around animal life and death – is tied to objectification. In this regard, we can read Mina Loy’s “Parturition,” which also teaches us an important lesson about rhetoric. Published in *The Trend* in 1914, “Parturition” is about childbirth, a ceremonial inauguration into maternity, or “The-was-is-ever-shall-be / Of cosmic reproductivity” (70). Childbirth is also a figure for the creation of artworks: “parturition” means both the “action of giving birth to young” and the “action of or an act of bringing something into being,” especially “of a literary or imaginative nature” (*OED*). The two senses of creation come together when Loy’s speaker connects the physiological and psychological pain of creation: “The sensitized area / Is identical with the extensity / Of intension” (67). Intension, or the “internal quantity or content of a notion or concept” (*OED*), is born, literally and figuratively. There are two stanzas towards the end of the poem that follow the speakers’ reflection on the “Stir of incipient life” (70); here the animal emerges as a “subconscious / Impression”:

Rises from the subconscious
Impression of a cat
With blind kittens
Among her legs
Same undulating life-stir
I am that cat

Rises from the subconscious
Impression of small animal carcass
Covered with blue bottles
— Epicurean —
And through the insects
Waves that same undulation of living
Death
Life
I am knowing
All about
Unfolding (70)

In the first stanza, Loy’s speaker identifies with the image of a female feline and her new litter (“I am that cat”). Subsequently, the speaker sees a perverse inverse of the cat and its kittens – a “small animal carcass / Covered with blue bottles” – while waxing poetic about how pleasure and pain, life and death transverse all forms of life from insects to humans. Loy’s image of an animal carcass swarming with bluebottle flies warrants our attention. To unpack this image we need to follow the poem’s logic. If Loy’s speaker identifies with the cat and its kittens, and if the fly-covered carcass is the uncanny cat and its brood, then the speaker foresees her part in the full spectrum of maternity, one that spans the living and the dead. Honing in on this corpse, it becomes apparent that it serves as a symbol for a shared state of inanimacy between animal and object.

This scene in Loy’s poem reveals the rhetoric of the inanimal. Rhetoric has cast aside the interaction between animals and objects. Anthropomorphism addresses human-like animals and objects, and zoomorphism, or theriomorphism, takes up animal-like humans, but there is no rhetorical term for the relationship between animals and objects, until now, the inanimal. Perhaps the closest is “mechanomorphism,” but the attribution of machine-like qualities to someone or something is a narrow phenomenon, and it does not exclusively work with and between animals and objects. While “metaphor” offers a possible way of capturing this sense of the relationship, it lacks specificity and misses the material history of animals and objects. Something like Lippit’s “animetaphor” sounds appropriate, but it is a thinly veiled vitalism that transcends and ignores animal objects. Yet, animal objects are in dialogue with the world; inanimals register a material-semiotic relation. An animal is object-like, an object is animal-like, or an animal or object is transitioning from one to the other. Such phenomena appear in many different contexts in dirty modernism, and often reveal the tension associated with ecological objects and their entanglement in both nature and culture, which is especially evident in the context of animal goods.

The life and death of the animal and its objecthood appears in and through modernism’s commodity and ethical rights discourses. These discourses often evoke a
clear stance when it comes to the mistreatment of animals, yet represent animal objects as both absent and present, which is a symptom of their fragility. In this context, we can consider the opening of Moore’s poem “The Arctic Ox (Or Goat)”:  

To wear the arctic fox  
you have to kill it. Wear  
$qiviut$—the underwool of the arctic ox—  
pulled off it like a sweater;  
your coat is warm; your conscience, better.  

I would like a suit of  
$qiviut$, so light I did not  
know I had it on; and in the  
course of time, another  
since I had not had to murder  

the “goat” that grew the fleece  
that made the first. (193)  

Causally connecting furs with murder, the speaker uses the word “kill” to communicate his or her conviction: the speaker’s opposition to and indictment of the fur trade. There is a sense of superiority here, too, given the speaker’s appeal to the notion of a “better” conscience. You are a better person if you wear qiviut, or muskox’s wool, rather than an arctic fox scarf. Moore ends her poem with a gesture towards justice and corporeal punishment, one that clearly situates the speaker’s stance on the commodification of animals: “If we can’t be cordial / to these creatures’ fleece, / I think that we deserve to freeze” (195). Moving beyond Moore’s moralizing poem, however, the inanimal is more or less absent. Other than a reference to wearing an arctic fox and to how “Chinchillas, otters, water-rats, and beavers, / keep us warm” (193), the inanimal is surprisingly silent, if not silenced. The majority of Moore’s poem functions as an “advertisement” (195) for qiviut, which is problematic in its own right given its uncritical proselytization of the production of animal goods, even if the animal does not suffer.  

Pushed to the periphery, the inanimal’s marginal materiality is rarely registered, yet
undeniably present. That is, the qiviut as an actual animal object is not reflected on; rather, it is used as a means to an end, as a conduit for the speaker’s critique. This ambivalence around animal goods appears elsewhere in modernity, too.

In 1925, shortly after witnessing a black bear’s death from a spiked jaw trap, Edward Breck (1861-1929) founded the Anti-Steel Trap League, an “organization vehemently opposed to the cruel death inflicted on fur-bearing animals by the use of steel traps” (Beers 113; Gillmeister 41). While World War II ended its efforts in 1942, the League accomplished a lot during its seventeen year run by way of education, persuasion, coalitions, and lobby groups, which resulted in the reformation, limitation, or banning of trapping measures across America (Dunlap 93-94). Of course, the League made compromises given that it was not against trapping or killing animals per se; rather, it aimed to minimize pain (94), which is still a utilitarian gesture. Ethically thinking about animals, moreover, the League launched art. Breck secretly wrote poetry. A San Francisco born German-American who went on to be an American Naval Intelligence officer, scholar, and naturalist, Breck published a number of poems through the League’s widely circulated literature under the alias “F.F. van de Water” (Gillmeister 33, 41). For instance, Breck’s pseudonymously penned “To a Fur Scarf” captures an unnamed animal struggling to survive “the steel jaws” when a Christ-like figure redeems and releases him from his mortal coil:

His struggles ceased; he lay at last
With wide, uncomprehending eyes,
And watched the sky grow dark above
And watched the sunset turn to grey.
And quaked in anguish while he strove
To gnaw the prisoned leg away.
Then day came rosy from the east,
But still the steel jaws kept their hold,
And no one watched the prisoned beast,
But fear and hunger, thirst and cold.
Oppressed by pain, his dread grew numb,
Fright no more stirred his flagging breath.
He longed, in vain, to see him come
The cruel hunter, bringing death.
Then through the gloom that night came One
Who set the timid spirit free;
“"I know thine anguish, little son;
So once men held and tortured Me." (qtd. in Gillmeister 41-42)\textsuperscript{10}

Breck’s poem offers insight into ethical movements in modernity. It is an artifact that highlights the anxiety around animal life and death by way of a glaring absence: the poem does not directly address the animal commodity referred to in its title. Exclusively using masculine pronouns and the word “beast,” the poem’s animal is anthropomorphized to evoke the reader’s sympathy. From the ominous dimming of the sun and sky to the animal’s last-ditch efforts to his utter resignation and redemption, this poem is sentimental. Aside from the first two lines, the poem’s \textit{abab} rhyme scheme substantiates the artifice of this dramatic scene. But the incongruous, unrhymed opening – the exception to the \textit{abab} rule – complicates this poem. “His struggles ceased; he lay at last / With wide, uncomprehending eyes,” writes Breck. As a result of the lines that do not follow the rhyme scheme, we are drawn to the poem’s juxtaposition between “last” and “eyes.” “To a Fur Scarf” opens with the animal’s last eyes, or what it sees leading up to its end. Here, the unrhyming opening is an ethical appeal that attempts to resist the aestheticization to come—that is, of the poem itself and the fur scarf. Instead, the poem’s opening gestures towards, if not simulates, an actual encounter with a suffering animal through synchronized sightlines: we vicariously see the animal’s last sight as we read its last eyes.

The title, “To a Fur Scarf,” is also significant. Although such a title is associated with an ode, Breck’s poem is not an ode proper. Instead, his poem plays off of the ode genre as it takes seriously its subject matter and, interestingly, exhibits an alternative form of apostrophe – an empty, absent apostrophe – that ironically addresses its object without addressing it at all. As a result, the ethical inanimal is present, yet absent. Breck’s titular fur scarf does not make its way into the poem as such, and yet his poem paradoxically features and foregoes fur through an implied causal connection: the unknown animal will become a fur scarf. Here, “To a Fur Scarf” presents an ethics of
omission. Aside from the proleptic title with its foregone conclusion, Breck’s poem refuses to aestheticize a fur scarf and, instead, focuses on the end of a life leading up to the production of a commodity, one that is ultimately concealed. Modernism frames the inanimal through a tenuous ethics, one that is neither quiet nor loud, absent nor present.

Occasionally, however, the animal commodity appears in the foreground through a process of rendering. As Nicole Shukin notes, rendering is the mimetic act of making a copy and the industrial process of boiling down and using animal remains, which is related to what she calls “animal capital” and its mode of production (20). Here, Shukin brings together aesthetics and economy in order to show how biopower, or “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 140), literally and figuratively reproduces life through both the biological capital of species and the symbolic capital of animal signs (Shukin 20). Shukin’s smart critique is useful for turning to poetic animal objects. Rendering resonates with the very genre of poetry because its form foregrounds the production of animal objects with the economy of the line and word. Regardless of the length of the line, the genre staple of segmentation signifies a form of industry violence, and the laborious process of determining the diction of the poem parallels the way in which rendering boils down and distills the animal body and its fats into products. More specifically, though, we can turn to how the inanimal is an iteration of rendering, which is evident in Wylie’s poem “Parting Gift” from Black Armour (1927):

I cannot give you the Metropolitan Tower;
I cannot give you heaven;
Nor the nine Visigoth crowns in the Cluny Museum;
Nor happiness, even.
But I can give you a very small purse
Made out of field-mouse skin,
With a painted picture of the universe
And seven blue tears there in.

I cannot give you the island of Capri;
I cannot give you beauty;
Nor bake you marvelous crusty cherry pies
With love and duty.
But I can give you a very little locket
Made out of wildcat hide:
Put it into your left-hand pocket
And never look inside. (95)

Here we have two gendered animal objects – a field-mouse skin purse and a wildcat hide locket – that are presented as potential parting gifts from the speaker to his or her interlocutor. Both inanimals are products of rendering. They exemplify the use of animal skin to create a commodity and exhibit an aestheticized, replicated representation of animal objects through the repetition of rhyme (“purse” / “universe” and “pies” / “hide” / “inside”). Moreover, “Parting Gift” positions the inanimal in an economy – somewhere between a gift economy and capitalism – that reflects its indeterminate nature. The first four lines of each stanza itemize that which the speaker cannot give to his or her interlocutor including the Metropolitan Tower, heaven, Visigoth crowns, happiness, the island of Capri, beauty, and lovingly made cherry pies. This litany does three things. First, it downplays the value of the purse and the locket; second, it distracts one’s contemplation of animal objects through impossible, implausible, and ironic commodities and services; and third, it evokes the pretense of humility or inferiority to conceal two lavish, garish gifts. The poem offers a critique of the absurd products capitalism yields—namely, two kitschy inanimal accessories. With the first gift, a field-mouse is turned into a container for currency. Its interiority is emptied out and replaced with an otherworldly representation, “a painted picture of the universe.” This presents an unending economy driven by the desire to consume everything with little to no repercussions other than “seven blue tears” standing in for the animal’s pain. With the second gift, a wildcat’s wildness is caught, commoditized, and encrypted. Here, the inanimal is inaccessible. The locket is both an object of and a device for concealment. The speaker not only instructs his or her interlocutor to take what is typically worn around the neck and place it in “your left-hand pocket,” but also ensures that the sentimental keepsake inside remains unopened, unseen. The speaker’s secrecy about the locked locket seems to gesture to that which exceeds representation. In this case, the way in which the often-violent process of
rendering results in the inanimal as such. The spirit of the fetish is absent: the animal is not inside. The wildcat skin hides the truth of its production. Undergirding the economy of the inanimal is its temporality, too.

Another way the inanimal appears in modernism is through prolepsis. Here, the animal’s death is prefigured or imagined, but it may or may not be realized. In this moment, the animal straddles two temporal registers at the same time, which produces a paradox that evokes a tension between animal life and death. One obvious example of this is in the opening line of Anne Sexton’s “Hog,” which reduces the living animal to what it will be: “Oh you brown bacon machine” (498). This phenomenon can be subtle, too. For instance, Elizabeth Bishop’s “tremendous fish” – one “breathing in / the terrible oxygen” – lives to see another day; however, the speaker hints at an alternate ending. “The Fish,” first published in the Partisan Review in 1940 and later collected in North & South (1946), opens with these lines:

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn’t fight.
He hadn’t fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. (42)

Narratively, very little happens in this poem: a fish is caught, described, and released. “Generally,” writes Zachariah Pickard, “The Fish’ is read in psychological terms as an exercise in perception and description, and, in this way, the locus of meaning is shifted from fish to fisher” (Poetics of Description 25). Bishop’s fish is often overlooked. Returning to it, however, we find something fishy. Although released, the fish’s end is presaged. In the excerpt, there is a pun that reveals the inanimal. The speaker’s use of the word “battered” not only points to the repeated violence experienced by Bishop’s bruised fish, but also imagines it in a culinary context covered in milk, flour, and eggs ready to eat. With a forlorn foreknowledge, the poem’s fish is featured as future food. Alive and
dead, if only for a moment, this animal’s inanimacy is evident. In addition to figuring the fate of the fish, the poem presents us with a speaker whose hunger is sublimated through language, which assuages any anxiety around the mistreatment or consumption of animals. Pickard gestures towards feasting on the fish, too, when he writes that “although [Bishop] foregoes keeping and eating him on the literal level, this does not prevent her from serving up his ‘white flesh / packed in like feathers’ to her readers on the level of imagery” (31). Given the poem’s proleptic punning on “battered,” the inanimal appears in a strange twist of time.

Similarly, Marsden Hartley’s “Mole” opens with muscle framed as meat:

Little morsels of smoothed grey energy
learning the secret of fresh burrowing
called to other order by major dip
of claw–
Blindness is nothing to a mole
it is the terrible gift of seeing that
hurts,
it is not alone legs that ache–it is
press on breast bone
all done for–without even lustre of
desire.
Mole cannot catch earthworm nor means
of light involve
so may face terrible beauty keeping eye
open too long
and you–what possible use could you
be having for it? (229)

Generally, Marsden’s “Mole” is a critique of what we lack by way of the mole’s mythic blindness. While moles are not blind, their eyesight is poor. When a mole scopes things out, it painfully and paradoxically sees a “terrible beauty.” Relative to its underground world of darkness, though, what the mole sees is magnificent. Comparatively, the speaker’s use of direct address – “what possible use could you / be having for it?” –
implies that we do not appreciate aesthetics, or sense impressions. That is, we do not “use” it to see the “terrible beauty” in the world. More importantly, however, it is the first line – “Little morsels of smooth grey energy” – that matters here because of the word “morsels”, which denotes a “bite or mouthful; a small piece of food” (OED). Here, the speaker synecdochically describes the mole with a reference to its meaty muscles read as morsels. It is unlikely that the speaker desires to masticate mole meat, but Marsden’s diction dissects the animal. Moreover, given that “morsel” also means a “small piece or amount” that is “cut or broken from a mass” (OED), the form of the poem presents us with cut-up poetic morsels of meat with its sliced sentences and missing articles: “it is not alone legs that ache–it is / press on breast bone / all done for–without even lustre of / desire.” The poem’s jilted style gestures to the animal’s fragmented future. As time is spent – perhaps even lost – on modernism’s animal, we are left with looking at the objects around it, some of which are technological.

Modernity’s technological innovations feed into the formation of the inanimal. Alongside the mass production of many different gizmos and gadgets, representations of animals were affected by a burgeoning material culture. Often, in these instances, there are intimations of violence or objectification. Take the opening line of Wallace Stevens’ “Certain Phenomena of Sound”: “The cricket in the telephone is still” (286). Unpacking Stevens’ metaphor, the cricket-like sound of the phone’s dial tone is absent. Seemingly, technological breakdowns silence the animal, disrupting our ability to pay heed to the other. The cricket’s stillness is a euphemism for inanimacy, but it also signifies the idea of something being “temporarily out of order”: an animal-object connection that once was and could be. Unraveling cross or cut wires leads to a world of poetic animal and object relations, which includes – perhaps more gruesomely – roadkill.

Roadkill signifies a fleeting moment when human, animal, and machine meet. For Mike Michael, this meeting marks the moment when automobility and animobility intersect: when cars on roads run into species on verges (282, 292). Michael’s metaphor for this moment is frottage – an artistic practice perfected by surrealist Max Ernst – that captures the collision of automobility and animobility (292). Michael unpacks his metaphor in the following passage:
The process of rubbing and the transfer of matter (particles of the thing that is rubbed or does the rubbing—wood or paper or crayon) and form (indentation in the paper, erosion of brass plates, blunting of the crayon) across the two surfaces suggest both the movement of material stuff (animal bodies, appropriate plants on verges) and signs (notions of species and corridor, signals of danger, and care). Roadkill lies at the hub of this, or rather is the “moment” at which the surfaces of animobility and automobility frottage. (292)

As automobility and animobility meet, there is a juncture in which the cultural, natural, semiotic, and material combine (278). Michael’s scope is sociological; however, given that frottage foregrounds an exchange between mediums, we can consider how roadkill rubs up against the poem. For instance, in 1962 William Stafford published a collection of poems entitled Traveling Through the Dark; the titular poem opens with this stanza: “Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road. / It is usually best to roll them into the canyon: / that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead” (11). The remainder of the poem details the speaker’s ethical dilemma, or a “narrow” (11) road: what to do with a dead doe whose unborn young are still alive. Ultimately, the speaker mercifully “swerves” and makes “more dead”: “I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, / then pushed her over the edge into the river” (11). While the accident is absent in Stafford’s poem – the speaker arrives after-the-fact – there is still a trace of frottage. The speaker’s idling car gestures to the vehicular predator: “The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; / under the hood purred the steady engine. I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red” (11). Moreover, the form of the opening stanza features the friction of frottage. From one line to the next, from life to death, the line break between “deer” and “dead” signifies and simulates the instantaneous moment when car collides with animal. To be clear, the speaker does not witness this collision, but it is formally encoded in the poem. The post-positive adjective “a deer / dead” (rather than “a dead deer”) ironically communicates the chronology of events – the deer is alive then dead – while simultaneously swerving from what would be the “proper” order of syntax. This disjunctive grammar is a form of frottage.

With the development of infrastructure and the automobile industry, other roadkill poems appear in the latter half of the twentieth century, too, ones that carry with them a
modernist sentiment. For instance, Gary Snyder’s “The Dead by the Side of the Road” from *Turtle Island* (1974) and Robert Penn Warren’s “Going West” from *Rumor Verified* (1981).¹⁵ For me, it is the graphic lines of Williams’ “The Sparrow” from *Journey to Love* (1955) that really recognizes and represents how the inanimal encounters technology in this context. The poem’s ending reveals the roadkill scene:

```
flattened to the pavement,
wings spread symmetrically
as if in flight,
the head gone,
the black escutcheon of the breast
undecipherable,
an effigy of a sparrow,
a dried wafer only, […] (2: 294)
```

Herbert Leibowitz notes that the poem is dedicated to Williams’ father; the speaker looking over the dead sparrow sings a homily to an imagined congregation of mourners (50). Mark Payne reads “The Sparrow” as an analogy for how particular forms of expressive behaviour are expended in humans and animals (54), but he does not address the cause of the bird’s death.¹⁶ As figurative as we find “The Sparrow,” it is, nonetheless, a representation of roadkill: a decapitated, “flattened to the pavement” inanimal. There is something tragically beautiful about this bird because its death is a form of flight. “The Sparrow” presents the production of roadkill as a form of art: the bird is flattened to fit on the road’s canvas in a surprisingly symmetrical way. The aesthetics of roadkill abound in “The Sparrow,” with the self-reflexive flattening of the bird into the word, the ironic use of the word “escutcheon,” or shield, to describe a broken breast, the “undecipherable” hermeneutics surrounding this pièce de résistance, and the metafictional sparrow “effigy” as a reminder of artifice.

Modernism’s inanimal also reveals an antithetical relationship between vitalism and violence.¹⁷ We can understand this paradoxical pairing in and around modernism’s conflicted creature if we turn to the spurious species line. As Shukin notes, “the meaning of the animal fluctuates with the vicissitudes of culture and history and, more
particularly, with the vicissitudes of a species line that can be made either more porous or impregnable to suit the means and ends of power” (15). This phenomenon affects the aestheticization of modernism’s animals. Back and forth between vitalism and violence, life and death, modernism’s animals are in a Sisyphean state. This oscillation reflects an anxiety around what constitutes the human as such, the dissolution and reinscription of the divide between human and animal, and the slow unveiling of an unknown nonhuman, inanimate world through domains such as art and science. With all this tension in the air, the undead animal appears.

Cummings poem “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” from No Thanks (1935) exhibits an instance of both vitalism and violence through its fragmented form. It reads:

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
who
a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
PPEGORHARASS
eringint(o-
aThe):l
cA
!p:
S
(a
(r
rlvInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)
to
rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
.grashopper; (396)

As Stephen Adams puts it, cummings’ poem is “unpronounceable” (166). Adams notes that cummings uses language to simulate “the gradual coming into visual awareness of the startling blur” (166). Jumping around from “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” to “PPEGORHARASS” to “gRrEaPsPhOs” to “grashopper,” cummings’ poem replicates recognition through rearrangement and reveals the signifier. The poem does the work for you, but it solicits your labour, too. When the reader comes across the first iteration of
grasshopper, he or she will either decipher or gloss over it. Decoding “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” produces a sense of lag. After a brief glimpse of the poem prior to reading it, the reader knows that this puzzle continues after the word “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”; deciding to solve it, the reader experiences delay, unable to keep up with what he or she will come to know as a lively, leaping grasshopper. Scanning “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” creates a sense of speed, too. Encountering the obfuscated grasshopper, the reader skims over it with the expectation that the signifier can and will be inferred after finishing the poem.

Consequently, the reader’s eyes race over each disparate letter, which mimics the grasshopper’s leap. Either way we read the poem, something escapes us, something stays behind or jumps ahead. And so the inability to pin down the insect points to its precarity. Belabouring the phenomenology of reading cummings’ “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” helps us to understand how we do not fully see it. What we do see, however, in cummings’ nearly inscrutable poem is fragility.

Based on its critical history, cummings’ poem has been and continues to be met with difficulty. How “[r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r]” works is another question,” writes Jen Webb, “and one that people still wrestle over (is it a sonnet, though arranged oddly on a page? Is it an acrostic? Is it an attempt to represent the movement of a grasshopper gathering itself to leap?” (42). Webb’s answer is that “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” is mimetic: “It doesn’t tell, but shows and in this is closer to resemblance than the representative mode” (43). Webb argues that the reader extracts the portrait of the grasshopper by the way in which his or her brain must hop around the jumbled letters, phrases, and words (43). In relation to the nonsense words, Webb notes the nonsense sounds: “Try to read those lines out loud: what you will probably hear yourself doing is fumbling, straining, stretching out sound – moving erratically; in short, your voice will ‘do’ a grasshopper” (43). If you cannot see the insect, then you might be able to hear it. Trying to sound out a strange signifier like “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” produces a noise, one that signals the residual materiality of the evasive grasshopper. Here, there are only traces of the creature. Semantically and sonically, the animal is thinly spread across the page with scattered signifiers, which is a form of violence to the whole of the animal. The aestheticization of the grasshopper veers towards vulnerability as cummings’ fragmented figure disassembles the animal. This is exacerbated by the way in which the poem exhibits an
entity that is many. How many grasshoppers appear exactly? There is no definitive answer, but cummings’ poem hints at moving from gestalt to group as the singular is pluralized through difference and repetition. There is no indication that each iteration of “grasshopper” refers to the same insect. The speaker’s focus is directed at one (nearly) leaping grasshopper, but this does not preclude others. Moreover, the poem’s form casts doubt on the speaker’s assertions, ones based on shifting stimuli. The possible multiplicity of this poem points to an unease surrounding the speaker’s encounter with an animal other – or others – that avoids absolute appropriation. Overall, cummings’ poem exhibits a blurred bug existing as an echo of the unpronounceable “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r,” one that is alive and active, yet violently stretched across the page to the point of defamiliarization.

Another poem that presents us with the push and pull between vitalism and violence is Oppen’s “Psalm,” one that appeals to verisimilitude with the speaker’s description of a wild deer sighting. It reads:

*Veritas sequitur* . . .

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down—
That they are there!

Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
Tear at the grass

The roots of it
Dangle from their mouths
Scattering earth in the strange woods.
They who are there.
Their paths
Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
Hang in the distances
Of sun

The small nouns
Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out. (20)

The vitalism of “Psalm” takes the form of immanence. There is a life force found in how the deer are in their environment: words like “Nuzzle,” “Tear,” “Dangle,” “Scattering,” and “Nibbled” point to “bites or jerks of energy” (Swigg n.p.). The “crux of the poem lies in the absolutely simple recognition of the ‘primary fact’ ‘That they are there!’” (Nicholls 73).

Oppen’s unfinished epigraph attests to this, too. Following “Veritas sequitur,” or “the truth follows,” the Thomas Aquinas quotation reads, “esse rerum,” which means “the existence of things” (Swigg n.p.; Nicholls 73). Given Oppen’s omission and ellipsis, however, it is the poem to come that is. Richard Swigg notes how the poem’s “open ended dots” lead into “a moment-by-moment test of truthfulness in uttering a continuity beyond human predetermining” (n.p.). “Psalm” simulates that which exists outside—the life of the other. Commenting on the epigraph, Lyn Graham Barzilai notes that Oppen’s poem attempts “to reveal the truth of those rare occasions where one seems to have been immersed for a moment in a dimension of experience not normally encountered” (57).

This “dimension of experience” is signified by the space after the ellipsis and in between the stanzas; here, the reader enters a lively world with wild deer. But the poem’s vitality vanishes when “Psalm” self-reflexively reveals its artifice (“small nouns”), which disrupts our suspension of disbelief. “The wild deer” are but marks on the page. Self-aware, “Psalm” problematizes the very existence of the deer “who are there,” but this does not discount the poem’s representation of animal vitality. In fact, the poem enlivens the animal through the reader: the vitality of the animal manifests through reading as
“Psalm” registers a vital connection between poet, text, reader, and animal in the last two lines: “In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out.” Back and forth and between intersecting sightlines and gazes, we share in this moment of vitality.

Oppen’s poem is vital but also violent. Language and representation are not neutral here. Rather, this poem’s violence emerges when realism meets reflexivity, a shift that abstracts animal materiality. Even though Peter Nicholls notes that Oppen’s deer are “figures for a non-symbolizing, non-appropriative approach to the world” (73-74), they are still “figures,” ones that have been rendered. While my objection is true for any signification of an animal, it is Oppen’s reflexive “small nouns” that gestures to the built-in violence of representation. When Barzilai writes that “Oppen has captured an essential ‘moment of being,’ a primary experience in a wood” (58), I am inclined to read “captured” in a different light. And so the violence of “Psalm” appears in the last stanza, which features a scene of disruption and threat.

Leading up to the end, the scene is serene: the deer are at peace with their effortless eyes and soft lips. But language, a predator, frightens the calm creatures. “For as if roused by the cry,” writes Swigg, “the wild deer ‘Startle and stare out’ – out indeed from the close-knit intrication of human language, as verb jolts free from verb and the animals gaze right beyond the page into the yet-unspoken and unknown” (n.p.). This “unknown” affirms and negates the animal. As noted, the deer’s gaze establishes a vital relation with the reader. Finishing the poem, however, the reader puts an end to the existence of the deer; they are silenced by space. While the wild deer are embedded (“bedding down”) and rooted (“roots”) in the world (Weinfield 188), the animal is nearly nothing. Roots are uprooted, torn from the ground by the one who is and is not: “the alien small teeth / Tear at the grass // The roots of it / Dangle from their mouths / Scattering earth in the strange woods.” Indeed, Oppen’s ostensibly innocuous, yet insidious poem sings a song of both vitalism and violence around the inanimal.

The inanimal also emerges out of the relationship between animals and race. Often, modernism features instances of racialized anthropomorphism. In Rosalie Jonas’ “Ballade des Belles Milatraisses” – a poem about “Octoroon Balls in New Orleans” – an unmixed black man is named, “Cocodrie,” or crocodile, and an octoroon man is named, “Trouloulou,” or turtle (22). Or consider Hughes’ “Me and the Mule” where the speaker
identifies with the animal: “I’m like that old mule— / Black / And don’t give a damn!” (2: 33-34). Such a phenomenon continues with animal objects. To explore this, I turn to the poem “Hog Meat” from 'Weh Down Souf (1897) by the relatively unknown African-American poet Daniel Webster Davis.20

Taking issue with the easily satisfied or shiftless figure (Sherman 471), Davis’ “Hog Meat” reads:

Deze eatin’ folks may tell me ub de gloriz ub spring lam’,
An’ de toofsumnis ub tuckey et wid cel’ry an’ wid jam;
Ub beef-st’ak fried wid unyuns, an’ seazoned up so fin’—
But yo’ jes’ kin gimme hog-meat, an’ I’m happy all de tim’.

When de fros’ is on de pun’kin an’ de sno’-flakes in de ar’,
I den begin rejoicin’—hog-killin’ time is near;
An’ de vizhuns ub de fucher den fill my nightly dreams,
Fur de time is fas’ a-comin’ fur de ’lishus pork an’ beans.

We folks dat’s frum de kuntry may be behin’ de sun—
We don’t lik’ city eatin’s, wid beefsteaks dat ain’ don’—
’Dough mutton chops is splendid, an’ dem veal cutlits fin’,
To me ’tain’t like a spher-rib, or gret big chunk ub chine.

Jes’ talk to me ’bout hog-meat, ef yo’ want to see me pleased,
Fur biled wid beans tiz gor’ jus, or made in hog-head cheese;
An’ I could jes’ be happy, ’dout money, cloze or house,
Wid plenty yurz an’ pig feet made in ol’-fashun “souse.”

I ’fess I’m only humun, I hab my joys an’ cares—
Sum days de clouds hang hebby, sum days de skies ar’ fair;
But I forgib my in’miz, my heart is free frum hate,
When my bread is filled wid cracklins an’ dar’s chidlins on my plate.
'Dough 'possum meat is glo’yus wid ’taters in de pan,
But put ’longside pork sassage it takes a backward stan’;
Ub all yer fancy eatin’s, jes gib to me fur min’
Sum souse or pork or chidlins, sum sphar-rib, or de chine. (16-18)

Composed of regular six-beat accentual lines with an aabb rhyme scheme, Davis’ poem opens with a clear cultural divide between the speaker and the haughty “eatin’ folks” symbolized by two different classes of food: lamb and turkey versus hog meat. Clearly, the speaker values hog meat; however, he or she also subscribes to the ideology of the “eatin’ folks” by employing morally good rhetoric to describe their meat: “de gloriz ub spring lam’” and “de toofsumnis ub tuckey.” As simple as this sounds, the speaker’s conscious or unconscious value judgment is, actually, problematized by the dialect. As Michael North argues, despite the existence of actual black speech, acted, sung, and published versions of it are “white products” (24). “Hog Meat” is a “white product’, but it is also a “black product.” “Davis worked seriously at his dialect poetry,” writes Joan R. Sherman, in order to present “limited portraits of antebellum black life ‘weh down Souf’” (475). Indeed, ’Weh Down Souf ends with a glossary that “translates” sixty-nine words from dialect to “standard” English (134-136), which attests to how he aimed for something more than blackface on the page or an essentialized racial discourse. With the illusion of authenticity, then, Davis articulates a voice for the racialized other that is more than a laughable parody; it is, instead, an empowered voice, one that is in dialogue with the hegemony.

After stating his or her preference for hog meat, the speaker anticipates what “hog killin’ time” yields. The speaker’s excitement exceeds his or her waking life, too. Hyperbolically playing with the pretense of prescience, or “vizhuns ub de fucher,” the meat-minded speaker dreams of “de ’lishus pork an beans.” As if to justify this fetishistic fantasy, the speaker moves on to qualify the noted cultural divide by way of a rural (“kuntry”) versus urban (“city”) split. Acknowledging, yet advancing from a form of primitivism – the implied darkness of “behin’ de sun” – the speaker’s stance stands out through the voice of solidarity: “We don’t lik’ city eatin’s.” While making a concession to the city’s splendid mutton chops and fine veal cutlets, the speaker notes how they pale in comparison to “a sphar-rib, or gret big chunk ub chine.” A case of personal preference,
yes, but the speaker’s taste is contingent on class, too. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, “it is
probably in tastes in food that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark of
infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or collapse of the
native world and most durably maintain nostalgia for it” (79). For the speaker, hog meat
is home. The speaker is willing to sacrifice “money, cloze or house” for “plenty yurz an’
pig feet made in ol’-fashun ‘souse.’” The speaker’s hedonistic happiness is fundamentally
tied to hog meat, for even hearing someone talk about it induces pleasure: “Jes’ talk to
me ’bout hog-meat, ef yo’ want to see me pleased.” Self-consciously aware of his or her
hog meat mania, the speaker is sincerely “humun,” too. Affected by the ups and downs of
life, susceptible to other emotions like hate – after all, the speaker has enemies (“in’miz”)
– he or she is still able to find happiness from a full plate.

The pig is the panacea. Of course, this exaggerated sentiment is unrealistic;
however, it profoundly points to the speaker’s investment in history through a cultural
artifact, even if it is ostensibly at the cost of reductively equating the racialized other’s
sole pleasure to the consumption of meat. As the poem comes to a close, the by now not-
so-subtle class antagonism mediated through different forms of food is clear. To be sure,
there is a tone of disdain in the speaker’s phrase, “fancy eatin’s.” Along with this class
divide, there is, as noted, a racial one, too. “Pork was clearly the main source of meat for
slaves” (96), notes Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eismach in What the Slaves Ate (2009).
They point out that slaves ate possom, too; in fact, it was considered a delicacy (120), as
the refrain of the following slave song demonstrates: “Carve dat ’possum, / Carve dat
’possum, chillum. / Carve dat ’possum, / Oh, carve ’im to de heart” (121). Yet Davis’
“Hog Meat” hints at a hierarchy. For the speaker, “’possum meat” takes a “backward /
stan’” to “pork sassage.” Hog meat is higher than possom. In fact, it is elevated above
and beyond the modifications of Davis’ speaker’s dialect: the unadulterated word “hog-
meat” is only mentioned twice in the poem. Here, the category of “hog-meat” is clean,
uncontaminated, as it were, by an “impure” form of English. But we cannot say the same
about the synonyms of this swine. Aside from the words “pork” and “pig feet,” all the
other parts of the pig are subject to the speaker’s dialect—specifically, “chine,”
“chidlins,” “sphar-rib,” and “sassage.” As North notes, “dialect is a ‘chain’” (11). It is a
“constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery and of the political and cultural
repression that followed emancipation” (11). Davis’ poem exhibits a contested site where a history of violence intersects with the identity politics of food.

In “Hog Meat,” then, the inanimal is aestheticized through a racial discourse, a history of objectification. Hog meat is not of the same caliber as lamb, turkey, beefsteak, muttonchops, or veal. Rather, it is both above and below these meats depending on one’s point of view: the speaker or the “eatin’ folks.” Here, hog meat is the reification of racial and social domains and tensions. As the pig is parsed out piecemeal in the poem – flesh, backbone, entrails, ribs, sausage, and feet – we start to see how the inanimal is subject to fragmented and disembodied forms like the marginalized, racialized other. But the repressed returns. “Hog Meat” presents us with a pun: Davis’ word for “for” is “fur” (“Fur de time,” “fur de ’lishus pork,” “Fur biled wid beans,” and “jes gib to me fur min’”). Davis’ poem features byproducts once belonging to animals, some of which were furry. Inanimal remains remain. Through the aesthetics of Davis’ dialect, then, we see how the inanimal is racialized.

This chapter’s focus on modernism’s representations of the inanimal through different modes reveals a tension between animal life and death through processes of objectification. The inanimal is a figure and a form of relation between animal and object. That is, the inanimal is a site of intersecting registers and phenomena that disturb and disrupt modes of being and knowing. Grounded and uprooted, thing and concept, real and imaginary, the inanimal occupies a strange space because it is a mediator between life and death, word and world. Built into a material-semiotic matrix, the inanimal marks the point at which representation and referent blur given that it is an assemblage of language, animality, and materiality. Importantly, the inanimal is part of a larger phenomenon in modernity—namely, animal reification. This process points to how animality is literally or figuratively abstracted, assimilated, and impressed upon objects, like the way in which “the social characteristics of men’s labour” appear as “objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx 164-165). By exploring the relationship between animals and objects, my aim was to provide a way of taking account of the objecthood of dirty modernism’s bestiary.
Notes

1 I came up with the word “inanimal” prior to reading José Saramago’s novel *The Double* (2004), which is about a history teacher named Tertuliano Máximo Afonso who sees his doppelgänger in a film. Shocked to see his uncanny twin, Tertuliano sets course to find him. Saramago’s novel features an omniscient, self-reflexive, metafictional narrator with a penchant for digression. In one tangent the narrator briefly theorizes the inanimal: “everything that is animal is destined to become inanimal and that, however great the names and deeds inscribed by human beings on History’s pages, it is from the inanimal that we come and toward the inanimal that we are going” (66). Alluding to and playing with evolution and the death drive, the narrator emphasizes the inclusive way in which animality undergirds humanity. Ultimately, the narrator’s reflection on the inanimal is only a parallel for the protagonist’s quest. Saramago’s inanimal does not reappear, but there is more to be said about it. I agree with Saramago’s Freudian proposition, but I am interested in exploring a different dimension of the inanimal.

2 When Lippit talks about “incorporated animality,” he is talking about something when, say, “horse-drawn carriages gave way to steam engines, plaster horses were mounted upon tramcar fronts in an effort to simulate continuity with the older, animal powered vehicles” (“…From Wild” 124). For other examples featuring figures like James Watt, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Walt Disney, and Erwin Schrödinger see also “…From Wild Technology to Electric Animal,” 131-132n7-10.


5 Boggs’ study brings together American literature, animal representations, and biopolitical subjectivity in groundbreaking ways. For instance, she unsettles anthropocentrism by arguing that the human is a relational category that cannot be cut off from the animal, which leads her to move away from mapping a history of human-animal
ontology to delineating a genealogy of human-animal sexuality (27, 25). Importantly, although Boggs changes the nature of the conversation to human-animal sexuality, she does take the time to question and comment on animals and objects by way of Bill Brown’s thing theory. Specifically, in discussing her idea of biopolitical objects, Boggs asks, “how we might read the animal as a ‘thing’ in a way that is not associated with—or at least not limited to—the denial of subjectivity but rather is productive of alternative subjectivities. If one of the conditions of biopolitics is not just the control over but also the commercialization of animal life, how might we locate alternative subjectivities at its very core in those processes of objectification?” (162). In this section of Animalia Americana, Boggs suggests that “animal autobiographies locate us at the nexus between these different ways of thinking about objects—as the ‘mere’ objects of commodity culture or as the recalcitrant transitional objects that function as biopolitics’ vexing and exhilarating surplus” (164). Ultimately, however, Boggs brings in the humans; she is interested in exploring subjectivity, or subject-object relations in a biopolitical context when it comes to the animal’s life because, as she puts it, “[b]iopower blurs the distinction between subjects and objects” (161). Given that I turn to animal objects, Boggs’ focus is different than mine. And while I think we can, yes, read the inanimal in and through biopolitics, which I do later in this chapter relative to Nicole Shukin’s arguments in Animal Capital, I wonder if something like thanatopolitics or necropolitics would be helpful as well.

For Lippit, animals in modernity are perpetually vanishing and undead (1): “Since animals are denied the faculties of language, they remain incapable of reflection, which is bound by finitude, and carries with it an awareness of death. Undying, animals simply expire, transpire, shift their animus to other animal bodies” (187). And so Lippit qualifies what he calls the “animetaphor” in the following passage from Electric Animal (2000): “One finds a fantastic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor—the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal. Together they transport to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression: animal and metaphor, a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition not a
metaphor, antimetaphor—‘animetaphor’” (165). Nicole Shukin’s Animal Capital (2009) critiques Lippit’s overly idealistic configuration and analysis of the animal (see 40-41).

7 What I am gesturing towards here is not unlike what Carol J. Adams calls the “absent referent,” which is a process that “permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity. […] The absent referent is both there and not there. […] We fail to accord this absent referent its own existence” (51-53).

8 “In ‘The Arctic Ox (Or Goat),’” writes Randy Malamud, “people are ridiculed for the way we exercise the seminal act of imperial dominance over animals, naming them (as Adam did in Genesis)” (70). Here, Malamud gestures to how even without a trace of physical violence, there is, nonetheless, a different kind of injustice. Like Malamud, I am gesturing towards how the non-violent consumption of animals still implicates the consumer in a speciest ideology. Or, perhaps exaggeratedly, Moore’s speaker is an animal rights activist, but not a vegan.

9 Thomas R. Dunlap notes that the League “sponsored or wrote at least ninety-nine anti-trapping measures introduced in eighteen states. Five states and municipalities either banned trapping or the leg-hold trap. Where it could not get a ban it sought other, lesser measures with considerable success. Thirty-seven states passed new trapping laws that ranged from new regulations on seasons to requirements that trappers check their lines at regular intervals (93).

10 Gillmesiter does not name the poem; however, in Thomas R. Dunlap’s Saving America’s Wildlife (1988), the poem is quoted – specifically, the last four lines – and referred to as “To a Fur Scarf” (94). Moreover, there are some textual variations with Dunlap’s last four lines—that is, he quotes Breck’s poem’s conclusion in the following way: “Then through the gloom that night came ONE / Who set the timid spirit free: / ‘I know thine anguish, little son— / So once men trapped and tortured ME” (93-94). Dunlap citation is as follows: “Theodore W Cart, ‘The Struggle for Wildlife Protection in the United Sates, 1870-1900: Attitudes and Events Leading to the Lacy Act’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1971), 115. Poem in Edward Breck, ‘Blood Money for the Audubon Association,’ 2, credited to F.F. Van Water; copy in Folder 24, Box 291, Rosalie Edge Papers, Conservation Center, Denver Public Library, Colorado. It
later appeared on the back of the stationery of Defenders of Wildlife (1963); example in Olaus J. Murie Papers, Denver Public Library, Box 265, ‘Predators—Coyotes’ file. See also Gentile, ‘The Anti-Trapping Movement,’ 62” (201n41).

11 Nicole Shukin’s argument in Animal Capital (2009) takes an unwavering materialist approach to animal studies and turns to market discourses that attempt to produce a perfect mimicry of animal and capital (6-7, 15). In her book, she develops unorthodox genealogies when it comes to the imbricated relationship between animals and capital in the twentieth and twenty-first century with the aim of foregrounding “capital’s terrestrial costs” (7, 14). And so Shukin historicizes cultural and material processes that have produced animals as forms of capital (7). That is, her idea of animal capital turns to both animal representations and referents – signs and substances – and emphasizes the existence of a biopolitical entanglement between the economic and symbolic capital of the fetishized currency of animal life (7). As for biopolitics, it enters Shukin’s argument through speciesism. Discourses and technologies of biopower rely on an ambivalent rather than absolute line between humans and animals, which results in the consistent and paradoxical dissolution and reinscription of the species divide (11). Scrutinizing the system, Shukin suggests that it is founded on a feedback loop: “capital becomes animal, and animals become capital” (16). The idea of animal capital is not only a metaphor for the way in which capital subsumes and copies nature, but also a material history that hones in on paradoxical phenomena in pursuit of making capital animal (17-18).

12 Part of her biopolitical critique, Shukin explains how that which is materially and metaphorically rendered from animals circulates as capital (24). Moreover, she situates rendering as both a hegemonic discourse and a critical practice (28). As diagnosis and directive, rendering is a stereoscopic mode of analysis where the critic needs to look at both literal and figurative features of animal capital to foreground how they are contingent and related (24).

13 For a discussion of philosophy, temporality, and animals, see Lippit’s Electric Animal, 43 ff.

Snyder’s poem depicts “a great Red-tailed Hawk […] on the shoulder of / Interstate 5” (7) and Warren’s exhibits a “fool pheasant” (26) that hits the speaker’s windshield in a “bloody explosion” (26). As early as 1919, moreover, we start to see casualties connected to the car with Williams’ “Romance Moderne” (see *Others*, 5.3, 1919 or *Sour Grapes* (1921) in *Collected Poems* [1: 147-150]). Indeed, there is a certain kind of “roadkill” in this poem: “A car overturned and two crushed bodies / under it” (Williams *CP* 1: 150).

In *The Animal Part*, Payne offers a thorough reading of Williams’ “The Sparrow.” Starting with the sparrow’s identification with sexuality, Payne points to something other than instinct: Williams’ sparrow enacts certain behaviours (52-53). For Payne, the emphasis placed on performativity in the poem foregrounds the way in which actions and characteristics of individual animals emerge against the backdrop of their species’ norms (53). From Williams’ poem, then, according to Payne, we are to consider how experience can and does take on a specific shape, which, ultimately, recognizes a life lived by a particular individual, human or otherwise (53). Teasing out the interplay between general and specific, Payne notes how the form of the “The Sparrow” underscores the idea of individuality: for Payne, the dried wafer sparrow body is only understandable because of Williams’ verse form, a form that is both an achievement within the genre of poetry and a device for featuring particularity—that is, the particularity of one sparrow’s life (53-54).

For a discussion of animal violence, see Richard Iveson’s *Zoogenesis: Thinking Encounter with Animals* (2014).

As early as 1960, “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” is translated as follows: “grasshopper, who, as we look, now upgathering into himself, leaps, arriving to become, rearrangingly, a grasshopper” (Friedman 123). This critic is taking liberties with the poem because the word “himself” does not appear. Granted, “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” offers many interpretive opportunities, tempting the reader to endlessly entertain one after another, but any prosaic translation of cummings’ poem risks losing too much materiality. For instance, the quasi-superimposition of “become” and “rearrangingly” offers two alternatives that can and should be concurrently considered while reading the poem. Specifically, “to /
rearrangingly become /,grasshopper;” and “to / become rearrangingly /,grasshopper;”:
these options coexist and create a sense of change or becoming that are attributed to the
animal. What does not change, however, is, again, the complexity of cummings’ poem.

19 For a work on race and animality, see, for instance, Kalpana Seshardi’s HumAnimal: 
Race, Law, Language (2012) or Christopher Peterson’s Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, 
and Animality (2012).

20 For more information on Davis’ life and critical reception, see Joan R. Sherman’s “Daniel Webster Davis: a Black Virginia Poet in the Age of Accommodation” in The 
Virginia Magazine of History and Biography. 81.4 (1973): 457-478. Also, for other 
remarks on Davis, see James Weldon Johnson’s The Book of American Poetry (1922), 81; Sterling A. Brown’s Negro Poetry and Drama, and The Negro in American Fiction 

21 Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach write the following in What the Slaves Ate: 
Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives: 
“Opossum was abundant in the South and popular among southern whites and African 
Americans. Archeologists have often found opossum remains near the slave quarters 
[…]. Because opossums were nocturnal, they were an ideal animal for slaves to hunt 
because they came out when the slaves were home from the fields. They were easy to tree 
[sic] and, because they feigned death, were effortless for hunters to capture. […] They 
were typically prepared by roasting and served with sweet potatoes and brown opossum 
gravy” (120).

22 Chine is the “backbone and immediately adjoining flesh of a bacon-pig, which remains 
when the sides are cut off for bacon-curing” (OED); chidlins are, according to Davis’ 
glossary, “hog’s entrails” (134); sphar-rib is, of course, spare-rib, or “a cut of meat, 
[especially] of pork, consisting of the ribs somewhat closely trimmed” (OED); and 
sassage is, clearly, sausage, or “finely chopped pork, beef, or other meat” (OED).
Chapter 4: Sticky Black Tools

It is not just animals that are objectified in dirty modernism. Material figures like tools become a handy, yet problematic means of racialization, too. Daniel Webster Davis’ *Weh Down Souf* (1897), for example, features a poem called, “Stickin’ to de Hoe,” which opens with this stanza:

Dar’s mighty things a-gwine on,
   Sense de days when I wuz young,
An’ folks don’t do ez dey did once,
   Sense dese new times is kum;
De gals dey dresses pow’ful fin’,
   An’ all am fur a sho’,
But de thing dat I’ze in favor ub
   Is stickin’ to de hoe. (57)

Davis’ poem features a speaker who is witness to a sea change. Observing a shift from manual to intellectual labour, the speaker questions the value of education when it is at the expense of experiential knowledge. While the speaker prefers to see “de cullud gal” ironing, scrubbing, and cooking, and the boys sawing, he or she acknowledges that, “Larnin’ is a blessed thing” (57-58). As noted in the previous chapter, Davis uses stereotypical dialect with a reactionary sentiment for different purposes. Likewise, this ambivalent poem draws on dialect to exhibit one facet of the complex relationship between African Americans and labour. With slavery in the not so distant past, Davis’ titular phrase “stickin’ to de hoe” is evocative, if not unsettling. His title is a synecdoche for an agrarian way of life, which conjures a pastoral scene of a worker gripping a hoe and tilling the field. This image attempts to exalt labour, but it actually harbors a harsh reality. If one is “stickin’ to de hoe,” then one is stuck to it, and the phrase not only gestures to a paradox of progress and stagnation, but also reveals a relationship between race and objects. Through a kind of stickiness, the speaker’s tenacious attachment to the tool discloses a process of objectification and racialization. Written at the turn of the
century, Davis’ poem anticipates modernism’s engagement with labour and the materiality of race.

In this chapter, I address a crisis in the dirty work of modernism: the extent to which the interchange of African American workers with their tools troubles the valorization of labour. The relationship between race, labour, and tools in modernism has not been thoroughly investigated. This is surprising given the abundance of “hammer” songs and other work-related artifacts in the early twentieth century, like “Take this Hammer.” Indeed, the very notion of race as a problem in the twentieth century, following W.E.B. DuBois’ account of the colour line, is, in part, linked to the tense relationship between the representation of African American workers and their tools. We are aware of how the representation of a racialized labourer can be and often is objectified; however, we have not fully considered how and why this happens in modernism, which is peculiar given just how often object and objectification come together. Turning to the intersection of race, labour, and tools in modernist poetry, then, I investigate the idea of stickiness in order to explore a black ecology, a dark side of dirty modernism, which offers one way of thinking through the tension around the materiality of race. Reading the poetry of Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, and Jean Toomer, I consider how a sticky form of relationality informs an ecopoetics of exploitation, which provocatively brings together human, object, and environment in a racialized, American context. Looking at scenes of labour through both ecocritical and phenomenological frames, I focus on a racial tension around degraded workers with and as tools. The embodiment and racialization of tools foregrounds both the power and precarity of an objectified black body or body part; this registers an uncanny form of alienation where the worker is not just a human or a tool, but both at the same time. Here, the lessons of Marx lead us to a messy ecology of sticky black tools. Writing about stickiness, Sara Ahmed offers a different way of thinking about it. Her form of stickiness foregrounds the relationality and history of contact between surfaces and signs, human or otherwise, which I engage in my analysis of race, labour, and objects in American modernist poetry.

Sticky is gross. This association is not uncommon, but “not all sticky things are disgusting” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 89). Nuancing the notion of stickiness, Ahmed shifts the focus from “using stickiness to describe an object’s surface”
to thinking of “stickiness as an effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs” (90). Ahmed explains her qualification of stickiness: “To relate stickiness with historicity is not to say that some things and objects are not ‘sticky’ in the present. Rather, it is to say that stickiness is an effect. That is, stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object” (90). For Ahmed, there is no simple distinction between literal and metaphorical stickiness, between sticky surfaces and sticky signs (91). In turn, she argues, “stickiness involves a form of relationality, or ‘withness’, in which the elements that are ‘with’ get bound together” (91). Importantly, forms of stickiness range from bindings to blockages, from holding things together to stopping things from moving (91).

Here, the tenacity and stagnation of stickiness provocatively resonates with the history of African American labourers enslaved to being and using tools—recall Davis’ speaker “stickin’ to de hoe.” Moreover, Ahmed notes how “stickiness becomes disgusting only when the skin surface is at stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us” (90). A sticky threat to the skin means so much more in the context of reading representations of the relationship between race, labour, and tools. As Ahmed answers the question of how surfaces become sticky, which includes skin, she implicitly opens up the possibility for thinking about sticky black tools.

It is difficult to determine how things become sticky because “stickiness involves such a chain of effects” (91). But, generally, things become sticky through encounters, transferences, and incorporations with other sticky things (91). Indeed, “to get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky” (91). As these processes occur, sticky surfaces change, and degrees of stickiness fluctuate. As Ahmed notes, however, “the stickiness of [a] surface still tells us a history of the object that is not dependent on the endurance of the quality of stickiness” (91). Sticky or not, then, surfaces register traces of relations. The skin of the surface is deep, and it gets deeper. “In the event of being cut off from a sticky object,” Ahmed writes, “an object (including the skin surface) may remain sticky and may ‘pick up’ other objects” (91). Stickiness does not stop. Importantly, as Ahmed gestures to sticky skin, and how things continue to stick to it, we can consider how stickiness establishes and facilitates a racial relation between a human and an object, and how they affect one another. “Stickiness then is about what objects do to other objects”
(91), or, for instance, what an African American does to a tool, and what a tool does to his or her body. Importantly, this sticky racialization of worker and tool involves “othering [...] as a form of extension” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 115). “What is other than me is also what allows me to extend the reach of my body” (115), writes Ahmed. Here, the “body extends its reach by taking in that which is ‘not’ it, where the ‘not’ involves the acquisition of new capacities and directions—becoming, in other words, ‘not’ simply what I am ‘not’ but what I can ‘have’ and ‘do’” (115). By way of extension and stickiness, then, objects can acquire racial impressions. That is, one effect of the ways in which the body reaches to and is extended by objects is racialization. This is evident when Ahmed uses the notion of “second skin” (131) to talk about “what bodies ‘take in’ as objects that extend their bodily motility” (131). Although Ahmed does not talk about second skin in racial terms, the implication is there, especially when she notes how “objects [...] become extensions of bodily skin” (132). Indeed, if “the skin of the object ‘impresses’ the skin of the body” (164), then the inverse of this is true, too: race extends itself and leaves a sticky impression on an object. After all, “[o]bjects also have their own horizons: worlds from which they emerge, and which surround them” (147).

If an object has its own world, then it is one that can be and often is coloured by race, as in a black ecology. Studying stickiness is a way of exploring a black ecology, which is, like stickiness, also stuck to relationality. In “Black,” Levi R. Bryant explores the titular colour and, in turn, describes what he calls a “black ecology.” Black ecology studies the relations and interactions between entities, attends to perspectives of other entities and how they encounter the world, views relations as precarious, or that which can always be broken, and acknowledges how nature is indifferent and prone to disequilibrium and equilibrium (294, 293, 303, 307-308, respectively). “Black ecology calls for us to think the manner in which signs, signifiers, ideologies, technologies, foods, energies, natural organic and inorganic beings, institutions, and economies are intertwined” (299), explains Bryant.

The colour black is used for theorizing a black ecology in a number of ways. First, black’s connotations of despair and abandonment suit the nature of current ecological crises (291). Second, black gestures to issues involving race, minoritization, and the way in which the oppression of human populations is often connected to social
and natural ecological relations, like how second- and third-world countries are affected by climate change (291, 294). Third, black takes in all frequencies of light and, in turn, does not reflect or emit light that we are able to see, which is a metaphor for how entities in mediation affect, modify, and transform one another (292). This nonreflective characteristic of black points to how humble, innocuous entities can surprise us with their often mysteriously hidden powers, which encourages attitudes of humility that help us to move past anthropocentrism (292-293). Importantly, then, black ecology intervenes in the conversation about ecology without nature.\(^5\) Focused on an unnatural nature, black ecology facilitates my ecocritical analysis of sticky black tools for the sake of unearthing a darker, dirtier modernism.\(^6\)

“What might happen if we elaborate a genealogy of modernism in Anglo-American literature that puts African American culture, and African American artists, at its center? What particular issues might be cast into relief? Where might such an investigation lead?” (4), asks Geoffrey Jacques. With an interest in “an understanding of modernism that sees a singular project, cutting across cultural lines” (4), Jacques suggests “not only that African American culture is a constituent part of modernism but that modernism cannot be fully understood unless its African American element is fully explored” (25). In response, I inspect modernism’s “African American element” with an examination of race, labour, and tools. In doing so, I expand, in an explicit way, the work of a number of critics that obliquely gesture towards this topic,\(^7\) like Margaret Ronda who has analyzed Paul Laurence Dunbar’s georgics and how the “master trope of labor bears a racial inflection” (864). Moving away from the depths of the material unconscious,\(^8\) however, my phenomenology\(^9\) reads the surface of modern American poetry for what we have overlooked all along—sticky black tools.

If, in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon says, “I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (109), then my intervention involves exploring the racialization of those “other objects” with regard to the relationship between labour, tools, and African Americans in modernist poetry. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on African Americans and their tools through a brief exploration of the visual rhetoric of modernism’s literary magazines, and a close reading of McKay’s “Harlem Shadows,” Brown’s “Southern Road,” and Toomer’s “Reapers.” Here, I consider the implications of
Ahmed’s thoughts on stickiness when it comes to the representation of race through different forms of racialization, which include the following: the embodiment of a tool, the way in which the skin of the body impresses upon and extends to the skin of the object, and vice versa, and the paradoxically empowering, yet disempowering process of objectification.

Perhaps nowhere is the stickiness of black tools more visible than in the visual rhetoric of modernist literary magazines. Consider *The New Masses*, which was “the principle organ of the American cultural left from 1926 onward” (Foley 65). Picking up where *The Masses*, *The Crisis*, and *The Liberator* left off with their visual rhetoric,¹⁰ *The New Masses* was keen to feature both racial and social injustice in America. Take, for instance, the following images:¹¹

Plate 1: *The New Masses* June 1931, YCAL
Plate 2: *The New Masses* March 1930, YCAL

Plate 3: *The New Masses* March 1930, Hugo Gellert, 36, YCAL
Here we have representations of provocative, if not unjust, circumstances that gesture to a tension surrounding race, labour, and tools. This is clearly evident in the graphic violence of plate 1 with the depiction of the execution of a black body. The other two figures also illustrate this tension, but in less obvious ways.

From the March 1930 issue, plate 2 depicts a worker using a drill on a girder: the human tool. An exemplary modernist image, the artist’s angular style veers away from verisimilitude and, instead, moves towards a lower visual modality. Stripped of any sinuosity, this worker is a bulky stick person. Leaning his weight into his work, moreover, this figure’s bodily axis clashes with the upright girders around him. Neither parallel to nor perpendicular with the girders, the labourer’s body is slanted. From the bottom left to the top right corner, the worker’s body is the hypotenuse of what would be a right angle triangle. Ultimately, however, he falls short of making this shape because of his downturned head, and so the right angle triangle that the worker’s body resembles is incomplete. The unfinished right angle triangle signals that something is awry: this oblique body is less human and more machine. In fact, it is difficult to discern a divide between the worker’s hand and his drill. This mechanical man’s entire arm is aligned with it, too, which exemplifies the tool’s defining function as an “extension of the body that expands the functional range of a limb” (Greif and Needham 52). Here, we have “the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools” (Wolfe xv), or one sense of the posthuman. Moreover, the style of shading – a form of pointillism – draws a comparison between the worker’s body and the similarly shaded girders. With a skeleton made of steel and a drilling arm, the worker is empowered, yet dehumanized given his embodiment of a tool. This human as tool reveals a scene of exploitation.

In plate 3, race enters the picture with what appears to be a scene of solidarity that still registers a sense of tension. Back to back, the white and black workers wield their tools together in support of each other. The caption is a quotation from Karl Marx’s *Capital* (1867), which reads: “Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself when labor with a black skin is branded.” Although misquoted, this excerpt from the chapter called “The Working Day” underscores how class is inextricably linked with race. Writing on America, Marx said, “every independent workers’ movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic” (414). Of course, the image of the
back-to-back workers is after Emancipation, but its seemingly anachronistic citation of Marx is part of the point. Writing on “human reification,” or “where people appear to be no more than things” (180), Bill Brown notes how “reification discloses the invisible persistence of the ontological effects of slavery” (181). Rather adeptly, then, Hugo Gellert’s illustration of tooled workers exhibits Brown’s point by gesturing to how both labourers are “no more than things” subjected to and subjugated by an exploitative political economy. While Gellert’s image of bodily contact is a rally cry for comradeship, it also – paradoxically – conveys the “ontological effects of slavery” as it alludes to racial tension. One could argue that the racial tension of this image is apparent given that neither worker faces the other. Indeed, their bodily positioning evokes the beginning of a pistol duel: after standing back to back, each person takes a set number of paces and then turns around to face his or her opponent. Interestingly, the white worker’s pickaxe is more lethal than the black worker’s wrench, which seems to suggest an imbalance. Although this is a contrary reading given The New Masses’ political program, it nonetheless gestures toward a latent tension surrounding the relationship between race, labour, and tools in modernity. The visual rhetoric of The New Masses foregrounds the question of how and why modernism takes up representations of the materiality of race, a question that applies to poetry, too. Published in the magazine’s February 1931 issue, the appropriately titled poem, “Song of the Masses” by Norman MacLeod attests to this. It reads:

The bodies of machines are black,
   dark as the reach of a race from Africa
but the future of communistic industry
   is a sun to light the world,
and whether the skins of men be white
or black, the song of the masses
in the gloom is a ruddy glow. (17)

In the interest of a revolutionary “ruddy glow,” MacLeod’s poem employs chiaroscuro to reveal the dark, mechanical African labourer, a figure that marks the sticky intersection of racialization and objectification by way of the black bodies of machines. Such a phenomenon appears in the work of well-known writers, too, like in Langston Hughes’
“Migrant,” which features a racialized foundry worker entangled with inanimacy: “Iron lifting iron / Makes iron of chocolate muscles / Iron lifting iron / Makes hammer beat of drum beat” (2: 213). It is here that we get an inkling of what is to come in a study of the ways in which labour, race, and tools are represented in modernist American poetry, and to what end. To illustrate the nature of sticky black tools, then, I start with McKay’s “Harlem Shadows,” which shows us how the black body becomes and is a tool.

Published in Harlem Shadows (1922), McKay’s titular poem about prostitution reads as follows:

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire’s call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth’s white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street. (22)\textsuperscript{15}

McKay’s “Harlem Shadows” features a speaker who stalks sex workers like a sticky shadow. The poem opens with a depiction of the ways in which the speaker identifies and subsequently portrays the sex workers in “Negro Harlem.” Following this, the poem
describes the passing of time during the “long night” in order to underscore the strenuous, tiring nature of working in the sex industry, which includes the logistics of “trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.” While we should question the innocence of the speaker, “Harlem Shadows” ends with the speaker lamenting the sex workers’ circumstances because they have fallen victim to a “stern harsh world.”

The figure of the sex worker in “Harlem Shadows” is represented as both immaterial and material, disembodied and embodied. The title of the poem not only gestures to how the women are surrounded by and shrouded in darkness, but also functions as a metonym for the sex worker’s ghostly presence. As a shadow, the sex worker is dehumanized and disembodied—if anything, her self is less her’s and more Harlem’s. Given the time of day, the sex worker is cloaked in darkness, which reduces her to the colour of her skin, a shadow. Although one of the sex workers is out of sight, the speaker identifies the invisible “lass” by the sound of her “halting footsteps.” The verb “halting” suggests that the lass slows down. The poem, however, does not specify if she has come to a complete stop, but the form of it implies otherwise. The sex worker does, in fact, come to a halt; this is represented by the enjambment and end stop between “veil” and “I see.” Spread across three lines, then, the opening sentence simulates how the sex worker slows down and, eventually, comes to a stop. Indeed, the end stop interrupts the flow of the first stanza’s iambic pentameter, which highlights the cessation of motion. Like the speaker hearing the halting lass, we, too, hear her abrupt stop. Importantly, these formal phenomena demonstrate how the poem materializes and embodies the sex worker as a thing, a tool. Although unseen, the lass’ presence is felt; this is but one example of the paradoxically existent, yet elusive sex worker. Indeed, the break between and juxtaposition of “veil” and “I see” is symbolic of how what the speaker sees will be partially or completely obscured. The speaker’s gaze grounds the figure of the sex worker when he or she finally sees the “shapes of girls,” but they are still silhouettes, abstractions, and fragments.

Surely obscured, the sex worker is still embodied. Responding to “desire’s call,” the speaker sees girls who actively “pass,” “bend,” and “barter,” which demonstrates the agency of an empowered body at work. Of course, one could argue that the sex worker is disempowered and under duress. Between a rock and a hard place, she has little to no
agency. After all, McKay’s poem suggests that the sex worker is subjected to an unwanted lifestyle of “poverty, dishonor and disgrace,” especially given how she is characterized as diminutive, vulnerable, and youthful with words like “little,” “timid,” “lass,” and “girls.” This is valid, but the poem also presents the sex worker as a force to be reckoned with. The speaker’s use of the word “prowling” to describe how the “little dark girls” traverse Harlem evokes the image of a nocturnal predator stalking his or her prey. (Ironically, the sex worker is both hunter and hunted given the stalking speaker.) Problematically, though, “prowling” primitivizes and zoomorphizes the sex worker; however, it articulates an individual adaptively using her body as a tool to solicit money in exchange for sexual acts in an urban environ, a black ecology. The nature of her work is demanding; certainly, she is subject to entropy. From “prowling” to “trudging” to “wandering,” the sex worker’s body is a tool that can be and is worn down step by step.

Perhaps ashamed to look up, the speaker focuses on feet as the sole source of labour. Interestingly, in a poem about prostitution, the defining nature of the sex worker’s labour is omitted. There are little to no explicit sexual references or innuendos. Granted, an exposed image of Mother Nature is evoked with the poem’s reference to “earth’s white breast.” The whiteness of the heavenly “last snow-flake” falling on “earth’s white breast” gestures to racial purity, innocence, and cleanliness, and, in turn, denigrates anything to the contrary. Ultimately, though, this poem circumvents any depictions of the erotic labour of the sex worker. The absence of any representations of sexual acts forestalls the reader’s vicarious experience of pleasure. Of course, the imagination is free to run rampant and fantasize about what happens during “the long night,” but the poem’s parameters preclude graphic scenes of exploitation. The poem, instead, guides the reader to sympathize with the plight of the sex worker. This occurs through the ways in which the speaker foregrounds the sex worker’s feet, which involves racialization and fetishization.

As noted, the racialized title alludes to the corporeality of the African American, which defines the setting of the poem—again, “Negro Harlem.” Indeed, “when the night lets fall / [i]ts veil,” it is the “Veil of Color” (Du Bois 146). The sex workers are “little dark girls” who have feet that are “slippered,” “gray,” “dusky,” “tired,” “thinly shod,” “sacred,” “brown,” “timid,” “little,” and “clay.” Synecdochically, these descriptors – for
the most part—pejoratively characterize the African American sex worker as fragile, autochthonous, or from the soil, and dirty. Wearing “thinly shod,” or worn down slippers outside, the sex worker is in an uncomfortable, if not vulnerable, position. For an evening of walking, she is ill equipped, which appears to be a result of economic destitution or a sartorial norm. The sex worker’s fragile feet suggest that she is on the cusp of collapse. “Autochthonous,” or “born out of the earth” (OED), moreover, the African American sex worker is represented as mythically connected to nature with her “feet of clay,” which is also a biblical allusion denoting “a fundamental weakness in someone supposedly of great merit” (OED; see Daniel 2:33). Weakened by stereotype and scripture, the sex worker is but a lowly, earthen substance. Indeed, before hardened, clay is pliable, which means that it can be moulded into any shape. With her “feet of clay,” then, the sex worker is presented as a product of things beyond her control—it is, after all, the “stern harsh world” that has “pushed the timid little feet of clay.” Affected by external forces like classism and racism, then, the African American sex worker is warped into a subjugated role that keeps her feet on the street as the refrain at the end of each stanza makes clear with its end rhyme, “feet” / “street.” Walking around, the sex worker’s feet get dirty, too. They are described as “gray,” which is a product of filthy city streets and wear and tear. In this context, moreover, the sex worker’s gray feet not only point to a lack of vitality—“tired feet” and “timid little feet”—but also a mechanical nature. The embodiment of a tool, then, the sex worker’s weary feet endlessly walk from street to street. The speaker of “Harlem Shadows” feels for the sex worker; however, the nature of this sympathy is oddly, if not problematically, framed and informed by fetishization.

In part, pleasure is anathema to the politics of this poem, yet the speaker fetishizes the sex worker’s feet. Given the sympathetic speaker, this form of sublimation is puzzling, if not problematic. A fetish is an inanimate object imbued with supernatural powers. Referring to the sex worker’s feet, the speaker uses the word “sacred” and exclaims how they belong to “my fallen race!” Like a fetish, the sex worker’s feet are animated with a life of their own: they “know no rest,” and they are “tired,” “timid,” and “weary.” Although framed as an automaton, the sex worker’s feet are enlivened to a degree. Alive yet lifeless, the sex worker’s feet are sacred and profane. To a certain extent, the speaker’s fetishization of the sex worker’s feet compromises the nature of his
or her sympathy. While the speaker’s fixation is problematic, it is also instructive. The speaker’s acute attention to the sex worker’s feet registers a blind spot. Namely, the speaker is unable to confront, fully comprehend, or articulate the emotional and psychological magnitude of what it means to prostitute one’s self. As a result, the speaker’s parochial scope of the sex worker’s feet is, in fact, productive, because it indirectly signifies the ineffable nature of the unpleasant sex industry. Ironically, it is the sympathetic, socially conscious speaker’s sublimated desire cathecting on the sex worker’s feet that reveals an implicit critique of the sex industry, which is evident in the form of the poem, too.

Given the poem’s concern with feet, it is no surprise that meter is important. As noted earlier, “Harlem Shadows” does not explicitly represent the erotic labour of the sex worker; rather, it is the poem’s irregular rhythms that communicate the toil of prostitution. “Harlem Shadows” is set to iambic pentameter. Take, for instance, the first stanza, which exhibits a consistent rhythm and flows with its stressed (ʹ) and unstressed (−) syllables:

_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass

_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_

In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall

_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_

Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass

_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_

To bend and barter at desire’s call.

_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_

Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet

_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_ʹʹ_

Go prowling through the night from street to street!

This stanza’s regular rhythm suggests that there is an overall sense of harmony and control despite the illicit nature of the scenes. This rhythmic equality also produces a momentum that emphasizes the powerful, “prowling” sex worker, which is accentuated by the speaker’s exclamation, too. This is a nightly occurrence in “Negro Harlem,” and,
ostensibly, nothing is awry. In fact, there is a system, an economy of exchange in place: “I see the shapes of girls who pass / to bend and barter at desire’s call.” Things change in the second stanza, however. Instead of an iamb, it opens with a trochee and continues to diverge from the established pattern:

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth’s white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

From trochee (“Through the”) to spondee (“long night,” “feet know,” and “lone night”) to anapest (“heaven upon”), the second stanza is riddled with rhythmic variations. Cumulatively, these variations disrupt the flow of the first stanza’s iambic pentameter and, in turn, represent the use and depletion of energy required by the sex worker to perform sexual acts over the course of the evening. Put differently, the poem encodes the sex worker’s “weary, weary feet” through rhythmic disruptions, which signify a felt difficulty and fatigue. For the most part, it is the second stanza that signifies the behind-the-scenes labour of the sex worker. In the last line of the last stanza, however, there is a pyrrhic variation on “wandering.” This deviation sonically draws out how the sex worker is adrift, and it alludes to and applies the notion of the pyrrhic victory to this situation: the sex worker can and will sustain herself, but at a devastating cost. This poem’s metre and rhythm work to register and critique the unpleasant, strenuous labour of the sex worker and, importantly, materialize the embodiment of a tool through the sex worker’s feet in the poem’s form. Throughout “Harlem Shadows,” then, the notion of agency and determinism – the “prowling” sex worker who is “pushed” by a “stern harsh world” – are
in conflict and, ultimately, left unresolved. Moreover, this tension is intensified because McKay’s poem contradictorily pairs the tropes of black autonomy with a dehumanizing vocation where black beauty is stuck to and situated in the sex trade. A similar tension is found in the way in which tools are racially coded in and through a sticky relation between human and hammer in Brown’s poem, “Southern Road.”

Before taking a close look at the sticky black tools in “Southern Road,” however, it is necessary to contextualize it as a work song. Describing this genre, Mark A. Sanders notes how it is historically linked to field hollers and slave work songs, which are informed by laborers, or chain gangs, using their bodily actions to create a rhythm. Typically, such a scene includes a leader calling out lines with the group singing the chorus, and the song itself maintains a steady rhythm with guttural punctuations like the word “hunh” (55). More specifically, Brown himself notes how the song’s “rhythm is timed with the swing back and down and the blow of broad-axe, pick, hammer, or tamper. The shore [sic] lines are punctuated by a grunt as the axe bites into the wood, or the hammer finds the spike-head. The leader rings countless changes in his words and melody over unchanging rhythm. When he grows dull or forgets, another singer takes over” (qtd. in Sanders 55). One example of a work song is “Chain Gang Blues,” which is from Negro Workaday Songs (1926); it starts with these stanzas:

Standin’ on the road side,
Waitin’ for the ball an’ chain.
Say, if I was not all shackled down
I’d ketch that wes’ bound’ train.

Standin’ on the rock pile
Wid a hammer in my hand,
Lawd, standin’ on rock pile,
Got to serve my cap’n down in no-man’s land. (78)

Surely, the work song registers a scene of restriction and exploitation, which, as Lawrence Gellert notes in The New Masses, continues beyond incarceration: “Chain gangs get no compensation. They’re what you might call ‘free’ labor. One day I encountered a ragged, hungry Negro plodding along the highway. He had been released
from jail that morning. Served eighteen months. And didn’t even have the price of a railroad ticket back to his home” (6). Brown borrows from and builds upon the harsh reality of the work song in “Southern Road”:

Swing dat hammer—hunh—
Steady, bo’;
Swing dat hammer—hunh—
Steady, bo’;
Ain’t no rush, bebby,
Long ways to go.

Burner tore his—hunh—
Black heart away;
Burner tore his—hunh—
Black heart away;
Got me life, bebby,
An’ a day.

Gal’s on Fifth Street—hunh—
Son done gone;
Gal’s on Fifth Street—hunh—
Son done gone;
Wife’s in de ward, bebby,
Babe’s not bo’n.

My ole man died—hunh—
Cussin’ me;
My ole man died—hunh—
Cussin’ me;
Ole lady rocks, bebby,
Huh misery.
Doubleshackled—hunh—
Guard behin’;
Doubleshackled—hunh—
Guard behin’;
Ball an chain, bebby,
On my min’.

White man tells me—hunh—
Damn yo’ soul;
White man tells me—hunh—
Damn yo’ soul
Got no need, bebby,
To be tole.

Chain gang nevah—hunh—
Let me go;
Chain gang nevah—hunh—
Let me go;
Po’ los’ boy, bebby,
Evahmo’…. (52-53)

Starting in media res, “Southern Road” features both the description and action of manual labour. Like a sort of speech act where what is said is done, the speaker’s instruction to “Swing dat hammer” is carried out. Indeed, the “hunh” signals the exertion of energy as the “hammer finds the spike-head,” as Brown puts it, and it gestures to other things, too, like time keeping, a sexual-like grunt, interjection and questioning, and resignation. Here the speaker’s speech act is directed at his or her interlocutor, who is, presumably, young and inexperienced given both the appellation “bo’” and the suggestion to recalibrate his or her speed to a “Steady” tempo because the end is nowhere in sight. As the poem continues, the speaker reveals that he or she was sentenced to life and a day, which implies a serious offence like murder. Although it is not stated explicitly, this is most likely the case because the speaker vaguely references what could have been a violent
event – namely, how “Burner tore his […] / Black heart away” – and, moreover, he or she is “Doubleshackled.” In it for the long haul, the speaker laments what has been left behind: an abandoned mistress, a wayfaring son, a pregnant wife, an angered father, and a miserable mother. Tethered to a “Ball an chain” with a “Guard behin’,” the speaker is not only subjected to surveillance, but also berated by a form of white supremacy mobilized through religion (“White man tells me […] / Damn yo’ soul”). Although the poem leaves off on a depressing, deterministic note – “Chain gang nevah […] / Let me go” – it nonetheless gestures to a sense of resistance, let alone solidarity. For instance, in the first stanza, the speaker’s suggestion to find a moderate pace challenges a productive work ethic and, in the penultimate one, he or she rejects the hegemonic ideology: “Got no need, bebby, / To be tole.” Typically, as Sanders notes, this poem is read as “a statement of resignation and defeat, the African American male hopelessly confined to oppressive circumstances” (57); however, he explains how this interpretation is limiting because it “misses entirely the figurative implications of Brown’s poetics, the artistry of the idiom, and the transportive possibilities of ritual” (57). Instead, Sanders argues that it is, on the one hand, “a tragically typical scene in the South” and, on the other hand, “a vocal incantation of the blues ritual, […] which] asserts the road as psychic flight, a cultural means of resisting oppressive circumstances” (57). Like Sanders, I want to open up “Southern Road” to another interpretative register, one that involves the racialization of sticky tools.

In “Southern Road,” the speaker and the hammer are stuck together and, as a result, the human is objectified and the tool is racialized. To borrow from Brown, what we have here is a “strange legacy.” In his poem “Strange Legacies,” he references how John Henry’s “steel driver’s pride” “taught us that a man could go down like a man, / Sticking to your hammer till you died” (86). Although a hammer is only mentioned once in the first stanza of “Southern Road,” it materializes each and every time the speaker utters a guttural grunt, which, in turn, reinforces the sticky relationship between labour, tools, and race. Indeed, appearing fourteen times, the “hunh” sounds out how the hammer’s hit never misses a beat. More specifically, the interaction between race and tools is apparent at the outset of the poem. From the beginning, “Southern Road” establishes the connection between an African American labourer and a tool through
dialect, work song, and typography (“Swing dat hammer—hunh”). As the opening line evokes the racialized worker, it employs an em dash to simulate the extension of the body and its attachment to the tool, which racially codes the object. The typographic mark on the page links “hammer” with “hunh” like a hand holding a hammer, which signifies not only a history of contact between human and tool, but also bridges the past with the present and evokes exploitative forms of labour like slavery. The em dash also constantly interrupts the flow of the poem. Granted, its steady appearance is part of the production of an overarching cadence; however, it still creates a visual and aural interruption as we read and listen to the poem. This interruption, then, created in part by the em dash, reminds us of the relationship between race, labour, and tools, which emerges as a sticky blockage. In “Southern Road,” then, there is not only a tenacious relationship between the racialized labourer and tool, but also a sticky, goopy solidity that has some weight to it. This messy hand and hammer relation slows down the poem and, in turn, powerfully presses race and tool together. As a result of the hammer-holding worker, race is reified. In addition to the reification of the human, there is racial reification, too: inanimate objects exhibit a racial inflection or impression by way of whom they are near or in contact with. This phenomenon plays itself out in Toomer’s “Reapers” with the added notion of power, or a lack thereof.

Exhibiting a rather graphic scene of sticky black tools, Toomer’s “Reapers” reveals racialized, objectified labour. It reads:

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones  
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones  
In their hip-pockets as a thing that’s done,  
And start their silent swinging, one by one.  
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,  
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds.  
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,  
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade. (5)

“Reapers” depicts a speaker observing two scenes of labour. The first scene involves black workers sharpening their scythes on hones, or whetstones. Once ready, they place the hones in their pockets and use their tools to begin harvesting the crops. The second
scene entails black horses propelling a mower through weeds, which cuts a field rat that squeals in pain and stains the blade with its blood. Formally, “Reapers” is made up of two quatrains or four sets of couplets. There are, as noted, two distinct scenes, which can be grouped into two quatrains. Without the stanzaic break, however, the poem’s form is fluid, and it facilitates, if not encourages, a reading of how the speaker juxtaposes the reapers and horses.

In the poem, the speaker is unidentified. With the repetition of “I see,” he or she could be a supervisor who is intently watching the reapers start their work “one by one.” Moreover, the speaker’s use of “black” to describe the workers and the horses effects a comparison. Noting what is not white, the speaker is superior to the racialized, dehumanized reapers who are nothing but animals at work. Alternatively, the speaker could be a black, white, or racially othered worker. Sympathizing with the subservient horse and injured rat, the speaker self-reflexively critiques his or her own oppressed life. Ultimately, however, the speaker’s identity is unclear.

Compared to the speaker, the black reapers stand out. As Toomer’s title suggests, the reapers are the subject matter of the poem, and they emerge in and through the speaker’s essentialist description. Stripped of their subjectivity, the speaker reduces the labourers to nothing but the colour of their skin and occupation. The sole function of the worker is to be a reaper: a person who reaps, or cuts and gathers grain with a sickle or scythe (OED). The speaker’s appellation “black reapers” confines the workers within a social or racial script, or “a thing that’s done” to borrow from Toomer. Paradoxically, “black reapers” is a nominal – if not actual – restriction that also registers a form of empowerment. That is, the workers’ appellation alludes to the grim reaper, the personification of death who is often seen wearing a dark cloak and wielding a scythe used to harvest the living. Interestingly, however, this reading undercuts the reapers’ sense of empowerment because they are reaping their own death from overwork. As a result, the workers are both instruments of labour and symbols of otherness; in this configuration, they are less and more than human. Powerless and powerful, they are figures embodying a tension that is reflected in the opening of the poem.

Although repressed, the black reapers still find a form of expression. Ostensibly, the workers are muted. If they have a voice, then it is mediated by what the speaker sees
and says. Describing their labour as “silent swinging”, for instance, the speaker downplays the nature of their work and portrays them as acquiescent. Yet, what would be said is heard instead. Here, silenced voices speak through sibilance. The poet’s successive use of consonance is audible at the outset of “Reapers” given the attack of the words “sound,” “steel,” “stones,” “sharpening,” and “scythes.” This sibilance is significant because the poem embodies and expresses the labourer and his or her work through breath. Here, too, the repressed workers are expressed through the sound of the tool: the sharpening of a scythe articulates a semblance of the reapers’ subjectivity and effort. Although speechless, the reapers are voiced through their tools. Moreover, the poem materializes the tangibility of workers and tools. For instance, the phrase “the sound of steel on stones” not only voices the racialized other, but also makes the noise of what it signifies—the repetition of “s” sounds translates bodies hitting steel on stone. In this scene there is a tension as the tools are instruments of both objectification and humanization; indeed, with tools in hand, the black reapers are paradoxically silenced and voiced.

The complex relationship between worker and tool is emphasized by the poem’s syntax, enjambment, and metaphor. The syntax of the opening line presents part before whole; it mentions a characteristic of the tool before naming it as such: “Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones / Are sharpening scythes.” Not unlike seeing “black” before “reapers,” we get “steel” before “scythe,” which momentarily abstracts the specific from the general. The surface of skin and the substance of steel bring worker and tool together. This comparison, however, is interrupted by the poem’s enjambment. The enjambment produces a rift between subject and object: the endstop between “scythes” and “I” resists the homology between worker and tool. Encoded in the poem’s grammar, then, this disruption reveals a sense of agency in an otherwise oppressive scene. The relationship between worker and tool is also problematized with the metaphoric, racial slur “shade” at the end of the poem. As the poem comes to a close, the speaker notes how the mower’s blade continues to cut weeds and shade after injuring the field rat. Because one cannot cut shade, the poem’s ending refers to how the weeds that are cut lessen the field’s shaded areas, even if weeds only offer so much shade. Here, the loss of shade suggests the loss of a space of respite, which gestures to the continuation of strenuous,
potentially exploitative work. Moreover, the shade is racialized as it points to the black reapers. Reducing both weeds and shade, the workers and their tools cut blackness, too. Without being reductive, then, this scene seems to gesture to a form of self-imposed violence as the “shade” of the other is cut away, which implies that fertility and reproduction is found through the hegemony of whiteness via the sun’s light. If we read the workers as self-destructive, then the very tools that expressed their voices are, in fact, working against them. This reading is valid, but it underestimates the circuitous nature of power. Indeed, this poem cannot be reduced to the exhibition of masochistic workers unconsciously subscribing to an anti-black ideology. Instead, there are many levels of mediation that mask the source of violence including the speaker, the tools, and even the sublimated scene of the injured field rat. In Toomer’s poem, then, we witness the powerful and powerless conflict around processes of racialization and objectification, which, ultimately, reveals the tension tied to sticky black tools.

I want to conclude with MacLeod’s autochthonous “Sons of Soil,” published in *The New Masses* in 1931, which presents us with the dirty side of the materiality of race in modernism; it reads:

Color of soil is on their faces now,
their knowledge the cool long curse of the loam
in productive hearing:
they are at home
with the tradition of life germinating
as men progress from the past into the future,
and their muscles can ripple
as their brains for social thought. (17)

This poem reveals a struggling Übermensch fighting for a generative mode of being in the world cognizant of past, present, and future while working towards the development of community. With faces covered in dirt, the sons of soil are racialized, regardless of whether or not they are racial others. Typically, soil is thought of as black or dark brown, which is, of course, true; however, under the right conditions, soil can exhibit a spectrum of colours like gray, white, red, yellow, and green (Brady and Weil 95). There is, then, possibility with this wide array; this poem presents a provocative pretense—namely, an
unusual form of blackface. In vaudeville, blackface is from burnt cork, but here in “Sons of Soil” we get a blackface from the earth. Indeed, human, dirt, race, and relation emerge, and with them comes an outgrowth of “life germinating” from “the loam / in productive hearing.” Indeed, with a “productive hearing,” we can and should listen to dirty modernism’s sticky black ecology of objects, one that calls upon us to reconsider what could be racial things, like Ezra Pound’s “Petals on a wet, black bough” (*New Selected Poems* 39) or Zora Neale Hurston’s “brown bag of miscellany” of “a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant” (2161).
Notes

1 For a broader analysis of the relationship between race, technology, and media, see, for instance, Joel Dinerstein’s *Swinging the Machine* (2003), Mark Goble’s *Beautiful Circuits* (2010), or Katherine Biers’ *Virtual Modernism* (2013).

2 An early manuscript version of this song was published by Newman Ivey White in *American Negro Folk-Songs* (1928) who heard it between 1915 and 1916; the opening stanza reads as follows: “This old hammer killed John Henry, / But it can’t kill me. / Take this old hammer, take it to the Captain, / Tell him I’m gone, babe, tell him I’m gone” (261; “Take this Hammer”). Later, in the 1940s, Huddie William Ledbetter, or Leadbelly, recorded a version of this song, and he added a distinctive “haah” at the end of each line (“Take this Hammer”). Also, for a thorough discussion of John Henry, the mythical story of the steel driver man who died with a hammer in his hand, see Scott Reynolds Nelson’s *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (2006).

3 Here, Ahmed is alluding to her discussion of “impression” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which involves an emphasis on the “‘press’ in an impression” (6).

4 This piece is from an edited collected entitled *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), which addresses “the speciousness of reducing ‘ecology’ or ‘ecocriticism’ to ‘green’” (Buell ix). More specifically, Lawrence Buell notes how “the problem with ‘green’ is […] that it has been oversold as a lumping term, thereby foreshortening one’s sense of other spectrum/spectral possibilities” (ix), and so one consequence of this is that “[e]cology as green […] perpetuates the implication of binary nature-culture separation (simplistic for both sides of the human-nonhuman divide) and understates the potential for self-intoxicated fetishization of greenery as such” (ix-x).

5 Responding to Morton’s central argument in *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Bryant reconfigures the way in which we can think about the relationship between nature and culture; he writes the following:

Morton advocates abandoning the notion of “nature” as it gives rise to connotations of an *elsewhere*, an “over there,” that is outside society; but it seems that this risks reducing the natural world to *cultural constructions*. The winning
move, it seems, would lie not in abandoning the concept of nature but in abandoning the idea that culture is something outside nature. The advantage of this move is twofold: it undermines the human exceptionalism implicit in the distinction between nature and culture, and highlights the manner in which social and cultural formations are imbricated with broader material domains. (295-296)

Bringing together nature and culture, Bryant’s black ecology challenges the status quo, or a green understanding of nature. As he puts it, “the central idol a black ecology must shatter is that ecology is solely about nature, and that ecotheory is a form of theory distinct from theory about society and culture” (294).

Surprisingly, however, Bryant’s exploration of black ecology only offers a handful of preliminary remarks on the question of race in the age of ecology, which is, in fact, a rather unexplored topic. In “Black Nature: the Question of Race in the Age of Ecology,” Britt M. Rusert, however, makes an important intervention. Writing on the question of race in the age of ecology, Britt M. Rusert aims to redeem and mobilize the notion of “black nature,” which gestures to how blackness wields the ability to disrupt limiting or problematic conceptualizations of nature (150). She advocates that in “turning to ecology and race we might begin to disentangle nature from the ‘natural,’ the naturalized, or even the biological” (161). Here, Rusert seems to suggest that there is much, much more to nature, as if “society and culture are formations of nature” (Bryant 299). Instead of an “[e]cocriticism [that] incorporates race on identitarian terms” (161), Rusert proposes a “different kind of engagement, one that proceeds from blackness itself, [which] might ultimately move accounts of race and environment beyond the horizon of identity politics” (161). For Rusert, “[r]ethinking ecology though blackness emphasizes the radical nonidentitarian quality of the environment while questioning the limits of an anthropomorphic ecology” (161). Rusert’s intervention is important because it offers a number of inroads into thinking through the relationship between race and ecology; however, it only scratches the surface by setting the parameters for a different approach, but not necessarily detailing a methodology. And so in this I keep her work in mind because it serves as a useful springboard for how I am considering the materiality of race when it comes to the question of an ecopoetics of exploitation. For more of a literary
investigation of race and ecology, see Kimberley Ruffin’s *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010).


8 For a discussion of the material unconscious, see Brown’s *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, & the Economies of Play* (1996), where he suggests that it is “literature’s repository of disparate and fragmentary, unevenly developed, even contradictory images of the material everyday” (4), which illuminate the “shards of the past” (18) and reassemble them into a “recognizable form” (18). In “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” Brown develops this and addresses the question of race. Brown turns to a number of cultural artifacts and addresses the uncanny nature of an ontological scandal, which involves the ambiguity between human and thing in a racial, post-slavery context. For a critique of Brown’s argument, please see Joseph Jonghyun Jeon’s *Racial Things, Racial Forms* (2012), which claims that Brown’s historical materialism is ahistorical with its over-investment in the uncanny (xxiii-xxiv).

9 Until recently, there has been little to no analysis of race from a phenomenological standpoint, at least not nominally. This has changed, however, given the publication of *Living Alterities* (2014), a collection of essays on phenomenology, embodiment, and race,
which highlights the importance of materiality and race and adds to the sparse history on this topic (see Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952] or Lewis Gordon’s *Bad Faith and Antibalck Racism* [1995]; also, see Linda Martín Alcoff’s “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” where she discusses how “[r]ace is real” [15], and see Charles W. Mills’ “Materializing Race,” where he notes how “[r]ace is indeed material” [38]). And so, in *Living Alterities* (2014), editor Emily S. Lee notes how we can – and should – think ontologically about race as a way of navigating through the often confused positions on race (7-8). As its title suggests, then, *Living Alterities* only deals with the living, but “a phenomenological framework recognizes that all contact with the world occurs through negotiations between the intentions of the subject and the givens of the world” (8). Thus, I bring those “givens of the world” – things – into the mix.

Running from 1911 to 1917, *The Masses* was devoted to the working class. From the harsh reality of realism to the emotionality of expressionism, the iconography of *The Masses* represents the weathered worker who harbored brute strength, too. A voice of and for the working class, *The Masses* functioned as a tool in itself with its socialist editorial machine “owned and published co-operatively by its editors” (*The Masses* 4.5 February 1913 2). While its graphics were geared towards scenes of labour, conspicuous signs of race were absent. This gap was made up for in *The Crisis*. In 1910, W.E.B. Du Bois founded *The Crisis*, which was the magazine for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Addressing race and social injustice in America, the magazine often depicted African Americans in a manner that emphasized childhood innocence, the celebration of athleticism, hardship, and nationalism. The style was politically aligned with *The Masses*, an important left-wing publication that emerged, as a part of a larger workers’ movement. However, the images in *The Crisis* are different from its labour movement predecessors in one key way. They are less interested in depictions of labour and more interested in representations of uplift. Seemingly, in response to racial prejudice and oppression, *The Crisis*’ covers primarily feature portraiture of African Americans, which, one could argue, function as a reparative measure by highlighting the individual’s autonomy. While *The Masses* and *The Crisis* take up class and race, respectively, they are acutely aware of how these issues are not mutually exclusive.
Nonetheless, there is more or less a gap here when it comes to the representations of the materiality of race, but that changed, as I point out with *The New Masses.*

11 YCAL, Za+Zn299, Box 8.


13 Another, similar idea regarding the posthuman is found in the work of Bernard Stiegler. Turning to things, the body, and parts of the body, become “instruments” or tools, too, which registers prostheticity. “Prostheticity,” writes Bernard Stiegler, “is a putting-outside-the-self” (146), or “exteriorization” (148) where the “body of the living individual is no longer only a body: it can only function with its tools” (148). Elucidating Stiegler, Carrie Noland writes that, “insofar as working with objects gives muscular shape to the hand, the hand is not born but made, fabricated like a tool through its interactions with external matter. Interaction thus transforms an organic limb into a kind of prosthesis, rendering it external to itself” (108). Here, an appendage is always already a tool.

14 In *The New Masses*, the misquoted caption – the word “where” is switched for the word “when” in the magazine – references this passage from *Capital*: “In the United States of America, every independent workers’ movement was paralysed [sic] as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (Marx 414).

15 Not unlike “Harlem Shadows,” McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) is interested in the sensual side of the sex trade while also critically thinking through the violence, too.
Conclusion: Uncleaning Modernism

Finding the U.S. too clean, the Baroness critiques the nation in a crass essay-poem ironically titled, “The Modest Woman,” which was published in The Little Review in 1920 (Gammel, Baroness Elsa 252). She writes: “America’s comfort: – sanitation – outside machinery – Has made American forget own machinery – body!” (Body Sweats 287). For her, American industry has obscured, if not concealed, the unpleasant nature of corporeality, like how “[t]oilets are made for swift cleanliness” (287). As an outsider, the Baroness witnessed some of the ways in which the United States sanitized the unclean, but she had nothing of it. “Thou art not acquainted / With thineself before thou not / Experienced feeling of tender / Affection towards thine excrements” (169), she writes in “Lofty Logic.” As much as one can, then, the Baroness avows the abject. “Why should I – proud engineer – be ashamed of my machinery – part of it?” (286), she asks. Unashamed of her machinery, the Baroness engineers a body of work that is less orderly and more chaotic. While she would come to admire America’s “sweet soil” (225), the Baroness never would have expected American modernism to be dirty. She would be surprised to find one of her poems offering up a different kind of constitution in the United States, one that discloses a dirty modernism.

Composed circa 1924 to 1925, the Baroness’ “Constitution” is a poetic proclamation rallying against determinism, which, in turn, gestures to an alternative, messier way of thinking about things. Its loud uppercase subtitle, “INDESTRUCTIBILITY OF COSMOS – WHAT FATE!” announces the antagonist, which is also identified in the opening stanza:

Still
Shape distinct –
Resist
I
Automatonguts
Rotating appetite –
Still a distinct shape, the speaker asserts his or her agency through form as body and poem come together. Resisting being but a machine with “Automatonguts” or a “Manikin” (173), the speaker challenges “Insensate systems” – the personification of a “Remorseless fate” (173) – that swallows time whole with its “Cutchew” capabilities while “annihilating” pleasure as such, or, in the Baroness’ words, “Phallic act’s / Vacuity – !” As the poem continues, it describes how fate forces one to “Live soulless” (173) while trapped in a “Mortalitycast” (173). Fighting against the “Indestructibility of cosmos” (173), the speaker taunts fate by claiming it is powerless in the face of his or her pride; the poem ends with this exclamatory challenge:

I
Taunt
Thy
Teeth
Into –
Slashing
Me –
Ghoulpit –
Impotence
To
Shred
Pride:

_Eternityshit!_ (173)
A coup, a slap in the face: eternity is shit. The idea that nothing ever ends is false. Paired with feces in a portmanteau, the speaker debases the idea of eternity and suggests that things like fate and the indestructible cosmos are not without fault. The clean cosmos – the “world or universe as an ordered and harmonious system” (OED) – is a utopian fantasy because there is and will be waste. There is an eternity of shit, hyperbolically speaking. Through the Baroness’ creative portmanteau, moreover, we encounter a dirty world full of entanglements like the very form of the portmanteau itself, which is an untidy hybrid that transgresses linguistic convention. Instead of an orderly cosmos, an unsullied world, the Baroness’ poem presents a messy constitution made of things like automatonguts, bloodthrobs, soulpants, and spiritembryos (171-172), a poem that points to the “kakosmos,” the soil of dirty modernism.

“What is a cosmos?” (“Which protocol” n.p.), asks Bruno Latour. “As we know from the Greek and from the word cosmetic it means a beautiful arrangement, the opposite of which being a kakosmos, a horrible shamble” (n.p.). Or, as he puts its elsewhere, a kakosmos is “a horrible and disgusting mess” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 481). Elucidating this, Jeffery Jerome Cohen writes that “Latour coined the ‘dirty’ term kakosmos to describe the tangled, fecund, and irregular pluriverse humans inhabit along with lively and agency-filled objects, materials and forces” (xxiii). Indeed, as Jed Rasula reminds us, “chaos has always been with us, intrinsic to cosmos if not cosmology (words about the world)” (43). This dirty, disorderly way of thinking about and being in the world is not only what the Baroness and her writing bear out. It also captures the core of American modernism.

In this thesis, I have shown how modernism is full of messy, gross, creepy, lively, rotten, stinky, driving, icky, gooey, slick, hairy, scuzzy, and yucky things and forms, which exhibit the tension and entanglement of nature and culture. Despite this proliferating list of things and forms, I have only skimmed the surface of a trashy, oily, furry, sticky, and sexy modernism. We can and should continue to unclean modernism and explore the tensions and entanglements of nature and culture by, as a first step, looking at dirty ecological objects. Indeed, dirt is much more fundamental than we could have ever imagined. Noting how anything that is real can be regarded as an object, Graham Harman argues that there are objects “withdrawn absolutely from all relation”
As I see it, that which withdraws is that which cannot be cleaned up. At the level of ontology, there is dirt and dirtiness, that which is always uncleaning. All things can be and often are dirty. Cleanliness cannot compete with messy worlds. Whether it is dirty modernism’s dumpster diving, petropoetics, inanimals, or stickiness, we can and should keep digging for ecological objects because dirtiness is all around, and there is much to learn from it. To borrow from Williams, it is as if the earth under our feet were an excrement of some sky and we degraded prisoners destined to hunger until we eat filth.

**Coda: Plastic Futures**

In 1970, well after modernism is usually thought to have ended, Allen Ginsberg sings the swan song of poetry in “Friday the Thirteenth.” Asking, “What can Poetry do” (547) in the wake of worldly crises, Ginsberg gives us a blunt answer: “poetry obsolete” (548). We are but “Slaves of Plastic!” (548), he bemoans. Here, the poet personifies plastic and presents it as master of the twentieth century. Indeed, by 1960, the annual production of plastic in America exceeded six billion pounds (Meikle 1-2). With things like appliance housings, artificial Christmas trees, Barbie dolls, Bic pens, garbage pails, laundry baskets, Saran Wrap, Styrofoam egg cartons, Tupperware, and vinyl floors, Ginsberg not only observed how the “postwar generation grew up with plastic” (1), but also witnessed the fulfillment of Roland Barthes’ prophecy that “the whole world can be plasticized” (99).
Though put to use in the production of consumer goods, plastic also plays a part in the creation of art. Noting how the “new plastics made one, above all, modern” (608), Judith Brown considers “cellophane as the objective (and material) correlative to many of the aims of modernism” (610). Crisp, smooth, hygienic, superficial, impersonal, and a pure form, cellophane is a metaphor for some of modernism’s formal ideals (609-611). While Brown offers a strong reading of cellophane in the production of Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*, when we look closely at this work, she only scratches the surface of how other types and forms of plastic manifest themselves in modernism. To borrow from Carl Rakosi, what else can we find in the “city wrapped in cellophane” (20) that is modernism? How can we think about “the plastic parts of poems” (197), as Wallace Stevens put it? That is, if plastic is “less a thing than the trace of movement” (Barthes 97), then what about the poetics of plasticity in modernism, one that considers the materiality of mutability, change, exchange, morphing, metamorphosis, and transformation in and around object matter?

Indeed, dirty modernism’s plastic futures surge forward. Take, for instance, William Carlos Williams’ brown, celluloid, tortoiseshell eyeglasses (1: 205); Hope Mirrlees’ “Scentless,” “Icy,” and “Plastic” roses (8); Edna St. Vincent Millay’s metaphor that, “nothingness is plastic” (492); Muriel Rukeyser’s suggestion to “pour plastic down / men’s throats” (474); William Faulkner’s description of Southern California as “the plastic asshole of the world” (qtd. in Baldwin 35); and even Ezra Pound’s friend and twenty-five year correspondent Kit-Kat, or Kitasono Katue, whose “plastic poetry” consisted of photographs of everyday objects (Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning*, 275; “The Hooking of Distant Antennae” 119). These lyrical references to plastic in modernism raise the question of plastic poetics.

Picking up on this in a different context, Christian Bök notes how the “invention of plastic has given birth to a celluloid spectacle” (93). He suggests that the unified imagination of the Romantics has been displaced by an “injection-moulded mentality” that is “pliable and durable as any blob of polypropylene” (93), or polymer used in moulded plastics (*OED*). Like the Romanian modernist writer Lucian Blaga’s “plastic metaphor” bringing plasticity and language together, Bök asks, “[h]as not the act of writing simply become another chemically engineered experience, in which we
manufacture a complex polymer by stringing together syllables instead of molecules?” (93). While Bök’s remarks are directed to contemporary thought and aesthetics, his point still stands for a much needed analysis of modernism. As Brown points out, “[w]e’ve lost, in the intervening decades, the ability to read the early-century semiotics of plastics” (606). In this regard, we can consider how plastic is less fixity and more flux and look at the repetition and difference in Stein, the sound poetry of the Baroness, and the linguistic hybrids in Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, say. We could even consider F. Scott Fitzgerald’s poem, “A Slave to Modern Improvements” from 1914 as an early form of plastic surgery, where the speaker’s father is a physician who wants to become a celebrity by replacing his son’s “parts with junk” like a silver chest, crystal eye, platinum lung, aluminum fingers, asbestos toes, and trash (7-8).

This is just the beginning of dirty modernism’s plastics. The longevity of mermaid’s tears reminds us about the ubiquity of plastic and its poetics. The term “mermaid’s tears” refers to plastic waste subjected to photodegradation, which affects petroleum-based products. Here, the sun breaks down plastic into fragments that end up in the ocean for long periods of time. Mermaid’s tears are also chemical pollutants that function like sponges for insoluble, toxic chemicals like DDT, ones that enter into and negatively affect feeding chains (Guins 490-491). This is dirt, “matter out of place.” Like plastic, dirt does not just go away.

Today, we are living in the “Plastic Age.” From the bottom of the ocean to the top of the ivory tower, plastic is everywhere, and it is as invasive as ever. In this regard, Myung Mi Kim offers a contemporary poetic diagnosis when she writes, “tons millions plastic skin fused” (12). It is, however, unlikely that the vindicated Ginsberg could have ever anticipated the discovery of Frankenstein’s monster, “plastiglomerate.” Plastiglomerate is a hybrid of melted plastic, beach sediment, basaltic lava fragments, and organic debris, which marks the Anthropocene (Corcoran et al. 4). This is surely one of my ecological objects, as it registers the entanglement of nature and culture. Indeed, plastic has a history that dates back to 1869 when the American mechanic John Wesley Hyatt introduced celluloid (Meikle 5). Following celluloid, many different types of plastic were produced throughout the twentieth century, which included Bakelite, nylon, and cellophane (Brown 610). Often, these innovations were presented as pristine and
sanitary in advertisements: “Dust, dirt and the germs on inquisitive hands are kept out by…Cellophane” (Fenichell 114-115). Within the wasteland of modernity, plastics were pure, but also impure, unnatural, a “disgraced material” (98), as Barthes puts it. Plastic is wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used” (99), writes Barthes, but “the quick-change artistry of plastic” (97) gestures to something glamorous, too.

By looking back to modernist poetics and its plasticity, we can be more attuned to how its aesthetic innovations and ecological sensibilities anticipated its plastic futures. The concept of dirty modernism, in this sense, enables us to grasp the complexities of these plastic futures, as the very stuff of waste on which culture is made. This is but one possible direction for ecocritics to take that connects dirty modernism with another epochal shift: the crises of postmodernism. With a new nature in mind, one made up of ecological objects, it is time to consider, if not reconsider, a range of things, like the permutations of plastic, the unrecyclability of radioactive waste, or any other “new thing under the Sun” (710), as Ginsberg writes in “Plutonian Ode.”
Notes

1 For a discussion of the context of “The Modest Woman,” see Gammel’s *Baroness Elsa*, 252-253, which explains how the poem is a response to James Joyce’s controversial chapter “Nausicaa” from *Ulysses* (1922).

2 As Julia Kristeva notes in *The Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1982), our relationship with the abject, by its very definition, is precarious and oppositional; she writes, “being opposed to I” (1), “what is abject […] the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2).

3 In “The Baroness in little magazine history,” Tanya Clement notes how the Baroness’ “Purgatory Lilt” “uses America as a trope for a hopeful future” (n.p.; N.B. *Jacket* 2).

4 Dated around this time, Gammel notes how “[t]here are at least four English variants of this poem titled ‘Constitution’, ‘Immortality’, ‘Hellcast’, and ‘Hell Pride’” (*Body Sweats* 367-368).

5 I have adapted this litany of plastic objects from Jeffrey L. Meikle’s *American Plastic: a Cultural History* (1995), 1-2.

6 For a discussion of Katue’s plastic poetry, see Solt’s *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning* (1999), 267-291.

7 In *The Metaphysics of Religion* (2006), Michael S. Jones elucidates Blaga’s notion of the plastic metaphor; he explains that the “[p]lastic metaphor attempts to side-step the limitation of human language in referring to empirical objects. Plastic metaphors do not add to the understanding of the objects to which they refer. They attempt to complete the expression of some empirical fact that the speaker is unable to completely express, but substituting a second term in place of the first, transferring the meaning of the second onto the first and thereby completing the expression” (177). For more information on the plastic metaphor, see Jones, 177 ff.

8 For a discussion of the shift from “Machine Age” to “Plastic Age,” see Meikle 63-64.

9 See Raiford Guins’ “Mermaid’s Tears” and Catherine Malabou’s work on plasticity.

10 The Anthropocene is, as Morton succinctly explains, “a geological time marked by the decisive human ‘terraforming’ of Earth as such” (*Hyperobjects* 4). For more information
on this, see the defining article by Paul Crutzen and E. Stoermer entitled, “The Anthropocene.”

11 Explaining celluloid, Meikle writes that it “came from a doughy mixture of nitrated cellulose (obtained from pulped paper or cotton) and camphor (from the bark of the Formosan camphor tree). Pressed into blocks under heat and pressure, it was sliced into thin sections and then, after being partially resoftened by heat, was cut, stamped, pressed, or molded into inexpensive goods” (5). Typically, celluloid “imitated the layering of ivory, the mottling of tortoiseshell, the hard translucency of amber and semiprecious gems, the weave of stitching of linen, [and] the veining of marble” (2).

12 “Plastic became a household material during the years between the world wars” (63), notes Meikle, who goes on to record its proliferation throughout the twentieth century (1-2; 63-64).

13 In Mythologies, Barthes compares plastic with rubber and metal: “In the hierarchy of the major poetic substances, [plastic] figures as a disgraced material, lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal; it embodies none of the genuine produce of the mineral world: foam, fibres, strata. It is a ‘shaped’ substance: whatever its final state, plastic keeps a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of Nature” (98).
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