

Postmodern Ecocritical Poetics: Contemporary Responses to Romantic Aesthetics of the Sublime
and the Picturesque

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Abstract

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This essay explores the ways in which contemporary poets critique and reappropriate the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque in nature poetry. I examine how contemporary poets use craft to expose suppressed histories of violence situated in a particular landscape while retaining, transforming, or disavowing the pleasure of sublime awe. I examine the ways contemporary poets Ed Roberson and Brian Teare transform the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and picturesque into a postmodern sublime which is collective, mediated, and intersectional. I give an overview of Romantic versus contemporary definitions of the Sublime and the Picturesque and discuss some of the transformations that contemporary poets are making to Romantic aesthetics by doing close readings of Roberson's "be careful" and Teare's Companion Grasses.

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Introduction

In this essay, I will explore the ways in which contemporary poets critique and reappropriate the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque in nature poetry. I am particularly interested in examining how contemporary poets use craft to expose suppressed histories of violence situated in a particular landscape while retaining, transforming, or disavowing the pleasure of sublime awe. I will examine the ways contemporary poets Ed Roberson and Brian Teare transform the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and picturesque into a postmodern sublime which is collective, mediated, and intersectional. I will first give an overview of Romantic versus contemporary definitions of the Sublime and the Picturesque, and then I will discuss some of the transformations that contemporary poets are making to Romantic aesthetics by doing close readings of Roberson's "be careful" and Teare's *Companion Grasses*.

Definitions of Sublime Awe

Although I'll develop a more complex definition of the Romantic sublime through examining Longinus, Edmond Burke, and the British Romantic poets, I'll begin with Joanne Feit Diehl's definition of sublime awe in her book *Women Poets and the American Sublime*. Compiled from psychoanalytic theory, Thomas Weiskel's theories of the Romantic sublime, and

Diehl's own analysis of American transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman, Diehl formulates the sublime through the steps of solitary communion with nature, overpowering awe of nature, and reintegration with society as a prophet of sublime experience. In the different phases of Diehl's sublime, the male poet experiences the sublime in solitude where he feels one with the world. He opens himself fully to the power of the natural world and then comes to embody it. He then assumes authority of cosmic law. In the transcendental sublime, man is fully permeable and sign and signification are one. In contrast, Diehl proposes that women poets have a more troubled relationship to the sublime, as they can't as fully identify with power (power which threatens to overwhelm their agency is threatening because their agency is already contested in society) and don't reintegrate as easily because it is more difficult for them to claim the role of prophet in a society which oppresses and alienates them. I will keep these steps of identification, transformation, and reintegration in mind as I explore how contemporary poets who are troubled by the power dynamics of the sublime tradition transform that tradition to accommodate their vision.

Methods

I'm interested in understanding how our contemporary cultural paradigms for nature are informed and influenced by Romantic paradigms for nature. Using theories of metaphor from the field of cognitive poetics and theories of structural and cultural violence from cultural studies, I will examine the power structures inherent in Romantic constructions of the sublime and the picturesque in order to define a set of tropes and assumptions that contemporary ecopoets often transform or critique in their work.

I'll examine power structures implied and culturally perpetuated by romantic notions of the sublime and the picturesque by grounding my analysis in theories that show how implied

metaphors in ordinary statements can exhibit cultural values. In *Metaphors We Live By*, linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain how the metaphors that permeate our everyday language (language that isn't even generally conceived of as figurative) depend upon certain assumed values relating to our survival such as standing up being associated more positively than lying down and having more being seen as more favorable than having less. As Lakoff and Johnson explain, these values are culturally inscribed: some cultures might refer to time as in front of you and some might conceive of time as behind you; some might conceive of argument as war while others might conceive of it as a dance. In this essay, I advocate for a contemporary poetics that exercises self-awareness of the poet's own associations of their language in the context of their audience, of historical systems of oppression, and of their own complex relationships to oppression and privilege in institutional structures of power.

I'll connect Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor with Johan Galtung's work defining and revealing the inextricable relationships between what he calls "personal violence", "structural violence," and "cultural violence" in order to argue that cultural violence perpetuated through metaphor in art, while not equivalent to other kinds of violence, is inseparable from them. Galtung defines violence as "avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally *life*, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible. Threats of violence are also violence" (Galtung "Cultural Violence" 292). I want to emphasize this point that threats are, in themselves, violent, as they exert psychological limits and prevent the realization of full potentialities through coercion. Galtung himself makes an observation on the significance of metaphorical violence in a culture when he writes "Incidentally, it is interesting that such English words as 'hurt' and 'hit' can be used to express psychological as well as physical violence: this doubleness is already built into the language" ("Violence, Peace, and

Peace Research” 169-70). Throughout his 1969 essay “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, Galtung establishes the definitions of “direct violence” (violence perpetuated by an individual person or entity directly on an individual person or community) and “structural violence”, which is less easy to identify and determine guilt for, since it is insidiously institutionalized and culturally condoned. Galtung defines structural violence as perpetuating inequality through the following strategies: linear ranking order, acyclical interaction pattern (benefits of the system mainly flow one direction), correlation between rank and centrality, congruence between the systems (hierarchies preserved across systems), concordance between the ranks, and high rank coupling between levels (“Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” 176). In this essay, I’ll examine how metaphors of the sublime and the picturesque manifest cultural violence through their connection to these aspects of structural violence. Galtung argues that any study of peace studies must address both types of violence simultaneously, because if peace is the absence of violence, those working toward peace must address both personal and structural violence (“Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” 186). Two decades after this article was published, Galtung focuses a new article on the topic of “Cultural Violence” and its relationship to personal and structural violence. This definition will be important to my argument about the stakes of cultural paradigms of power which perpetuate violence:

“‘Cultural violence’ is defined here as any aspect of culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form. Symbolic violence built into a culture does not kill or maim like direct violence or the violence built into the structure. However, it is used to legitimize either or both, as for instance in the theory of a *Herrenvolk*, or superior race” (291).

Galtung positions these three types of violence in a triangle relationship, each type perpetuating the other types (294). In another example, Galtung uses a geologic metaphor for the relationship between these concepts: direct violence is an *event* (like an earthquake), structural violence is a *process* (like the movement of tectonic plates), and cultural violence is “an invariance, a permanence” (like a faultline) (“Cultural Violence” 294). In this essay, I’ll be most interested in cultural violence and how its “permanence” can be disrupted in art that resists the norms of violence that have been deemed “acceptable” in a culture over time. Using Galtung’s theory, I do not mean to suggest that cultural violence is *equivalent to* direct or structural violence, but I do base my argument on his claim that they are connected, and that all types must be altered in pursuit of peace (equitable absence of violence). As this essay is concerned with poetry and the creation of poetic craft, I will focus on how to disrupt the assumptions of historically situated cultural violence, particularly in examining cultural assumptions about power coded into our paradigms of the sublime and the picturesque. I’m particularly interested in examining literary traditions that support paradigms that perform the cultural role Galtung calls “cosmology”, which is “designed to harbor that substratum of deeper assumptions about reality, defining what is normal and natural (Galtung “Cultural Violence” 301). How do the paradigms of the sublime and the picturesque perpetuate cultural values which, when enacted in structural and direct violence, perpetuate inequality and narrow possibilities for historically targeted people? How do these paradigms enact cultural violence on nature itself? And how can contemporary ecopoets use poetic craft to engage with the poetic tradition in ways which interrogate, critique, and transform these problematic power structures?

Sublime Paradigms: Longinus

In order to define the Romantic sublime, I will begin with a discussion of Longinus, the Roman philosopher whose text *On Great Writing* (sometimes referred to as *On the Sublime*), inspired the Romantic-era aesthetic philosopher *Edmond Burke* who published his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. These works were foundational to the Romantic poets' conception of the sublime. An overview of Longinus, Burke, and the Romantic poets will help us develop an understanding of the sublime tradition giving us a framework with which to examine how contemporary ecopoets are now responding to that tradition.

There are four main points of Longinus's text that I would like to examine in order to establish the aspects of Romantic aesthetics that contemporary poets need to grapple with if they are to formulate a postmodern sublime which can challenge existing power dynamics inscribed in culture: first, Longinus's description of the sublime as overpowering rather than persuasive; second the contradictions inherent in Longinus's description of who can experience the sublime; third, his insistence on amplification and hiddenness in regards to rhetorical figures; and fourth, his belief in the necessity of passion.

Longinus's preference for writing which overwhelms the reader's will by force is troubling for contemporary poetics, given Galtung's definition of violence as "that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual" ("Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" 168). In examples of direct or structural violence, the exertion of force deprives oppressed people of their potential to act according to their own agency. In examples of cultural violence, force may be used to alienate a subject from their own culture or to require them to adopt the culture of the oppressor (Galtung "Cultural Violence" 293). In my analysis of Longinus, I am applying Lakoff and Johnson's theories of metaphor to Galtung's notion of

“cosmology” in order to see how metaphor can enact violent cultural assumptions which help prop us structural violence. Longinus’s treatise values power over agency and equates power with aesthetic greatness. Longinus demonstrates his privileging of power over agency when he writes “Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself” and he uses a metaphor of mastery and dominance when he describes the relationship between the role of the aesthetically great writer and the role of the awe-inspired reader (4). According to Longinus, the function of great rhetoric is “...above all...to master the hearer rather than persuade him” (26). As contemporary readers of poetry, we might question whether it is even possible to “take the reader out of himself,” as our experiences and interpretations of texts are so influenced by our own subject positions. Nevertheless, this ambition to “take the reader out of himself” is still more palatable than the assertion that mastery is greater than persuasion. The call for an aesthetic which has the ability to invoke empathy and take us out of our ego, while limited and never entirely possible, still retains some interest for contemporary writers who wish to dismantle violent cosmologies. The call for an aesthetic of mastery however, must be rejected outright in contemporary poetry, given the culturally violent ramifications of metaphors which rely on the assumption of the “naturalness” of hierarchies. Here we see one of Galtung’s characteristics of structural inequality, linear ranking order, conveyed through metaphor: in a violent power dynamic, “the ranking is complete, leaving no doubt as to who is higher in any pair of actors” (“Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” 176). The ecocritic Rob Nixon writes in his book *Slow Violence*, (praising postcolonial theorist Edward Said) that Said is a vital voice in postcolonial theory because he is “alive to the high-stake worlds of persuasion and coercion, alive to the political doublespeak and to the worldly costs of verbal camouflage” (X). Following Said’s standard, ecocritical perspectives which take postcolonial theory into account must distrust and

resist any aesthetic which aspires to take us by force. Longinus's language, when examined through the lens of theories of metaphor and cultural violence, sounds too much like the language of the colonizer, the despot, the rapist. Longinus is not alone in these tropes in Western culture, but that is the point: his language reveals culturally inscribed values through metaphors that are so common as to be generally accepted. Contemporary poets who wish to embark on the slow task of changing this cosmology of the unquestioned primacy of the powerful, must begin to critique and dismantle these generally accepted assumptions. Longinus's text embraces power as a sign of greatness rather than as a sign of danger: "The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and the persuasive...amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience" (4). Here Longinus privileges amazement over persuasion *purely for the reason that amazement is more powerful*. In contemporary poetry, can we find ways to keep amazement (the expansive feeling of wonder in something "beyond" ourselves) but find a more resonant argument for its importance? Longinus again accepts power as inherently great when he attests: "This is natural enough; when two things are joined into one, the stronger diverts to itself the power of the weaker" and "Just as dimmer lights are lost in the surrounding sunshine, so pervading grandeur all around obscures the presence of rhetorical devices" (27; 29). For Longinus, it is "natural" that the strong should overtake the weak, and there are no questions about the justness of how the powerful achieve their so-called "strength". Cosmology is about what we, as a culture, deem "natural", and I am advocating for an ecocritical approach which critiques our assumptions of naturalness. Why should we accept the cultural assumption that the "strong" "naturally" overpower the "weak"? These assumptions implicitly justify inequity of "the real level of needs satisfaction" in contrast to "what is potentially possible" (Galtung "Cultural Violence" 292). By using the categories "strong" and "weak", Longinus relies on an

ableist metaphor for the so-called “naturalness” of political domination, a cultural assumption which our political rhetoric still often relies on to justify imperialism and militarism. This is not to say that Longinus is consciously advocating for imperialism per se, but that he is perpetuating a metaphor which makes imperialism possible and equity less possible. As Galtung writes, “Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel right – or at least not wrong” (“Cultural Violence” 291). Through this paper, I hope to advocate, in opposition to Longinus and the cultural assumptions his metaphors share with cosmologies which prop up structural violence, for a contemporary sublime which retains and transforms the experience of awe by elevating the voices of the oppressed and consciously resisting historic abuses of power. This divergence from the Longinian sublime will become important to my analysis of contemporary postmodern ecopoetry.

In order to examine how Longinus impacted a Romantic aesthetics, I’ll next look at his contradictory claims about who can experience the sublime. Longinus claims that the sublime is universally accessible to “all men at all times,” yet elsewhere he claims that it can only be appreciated by those who have been born into “natural high-mindedness” and who have cultivated, through education, a “noble mind” (10; 11-12). Here, Longinus again bases his claim on an appeal to authority by claiming: that which is universally agreed upon “...requires an authority so strong that the object of its admiration is beyond dispute” (10). Again, we see a metaphorical manifestation of Galtung’s definition of structural violence through linear rank. In this example, Longinus claims that aesthetic authority comes through universal consensus. Yet what can we make of “natural high-mindedness...inborn rather than acquired” (12)? Perhaps when Longinus’s writes “all men at all times,” he actually only refers (as is often the case in Western culture) to those born and educated as the ruling class.

Of the Romantics, Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime," (as Keats called it) most embodies this contradiction ("Letter to Richard Woodhouse" 211). Wordsworth claims to use ordinary language, "the very language of men," yet he also opposes anything that seems to him crude or exaggerated—entertainment which appeals to the masses ('Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* 3). He lambasts "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" or anything which he considers "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" ('Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* 8). In my estimation, Wordsworth is only one example of the way false populism plagued Romantic poets and painters, particularly in picturesque depictions of marginalized people popularly categorized as "destitutes" (as in Wordsworth's "The Discharged Soldier"). Although Wordsworth and Coleridge initially supported the French Revolution, they were horrified at the extremity of direct violence perpetrated in pursuit of greater structural equity. English Romantics' fear of cataclysmic class war on the scale of the French Revolution led to an aesthetics that aimed to domesticate the lower classes while valorizing them for their "unconscious suffering," as is seen in Ruskin's picturesque admiration for the Tower of Callais (Ruskin qtd. in Modiano). As Galtung observes, "topdogs" in oppressive power structures can maintain control not only through punishing the "underdog" but also "by rewarding him when he does what the influencer considers right" ("Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" 170). Additionally, "The object of personal violence perceives the violence, usually, and may complain – the object of structural violence may be persuaded not to perceive this at all" (Galtung "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" 173). In picturesque literature and painting, silent sufferers are revered for their patience and fortitude because silent destitutes do not foment revolution.

In addition to Longinus's false universality, Longinus's language frames education through a patriarchal metaphor of an active male acting upon a passive female: "we must nevertheless educate the mind to greatness as far as possible and impregnate it, as it were, with a noble exaltation" (12). Coleridge is to echo this language very closely in his *Biographica Literaria* when he describes the effect of great writing on readers: "poetry impregnates them with an interest not their own" (35). Again, this metaphor is not unusual in Western culture, but that is exactly why I want to challenge it—to make it less ubiquitously accepted. Galtung includes the metaphor of penetration in his typology of violence under "identity needs" along with segmentation, marginalization, and fragmentation:

"A violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit...impeding consciousness formation and mobilization, to conditions for effective struggle against exploitation. *Penetration*, implanting the topdog inside the underdog so to speak..." ("Cultural Violence" 294).

If rape perpetrates direct violence, then a culture in which metaphors of rape are generally acceptable perpetuates cultural violence. Longinus's contradictory arguments about who can experience the sublime continue to problematize his infatuation with forceful power, since the Romantics translate these contradictions into conciliatory populism and misogyny. Again, these criticisms are not only true of the Romantic poets, but by putting pressure on this specific cultural influence and identifying exactly which parts of the Romantic sublime enact cultural violence through metaphor, we can begin to challenge the cultural legacy of these tropes in contemporary poetry.

The Romantic poets mimic another contradiction of Longinus's: the contradiction between naturalness and artifice: "For art at its best is mistaken for nature, and nature is

successful when it contains hidden art” (33). As we have already seen, Longinus equates greatness with what he sees as the “natural” proclivity of power to eclipse weakness. He also asserts that the ability to experience the sublime is, in part, due to “natural” nobility of mind. Longinus’s concept of power and his concept of noble mind are both propped up by this assumption of the primacy of naturalness. Yet elsewhere in the text, he praises amplification over naturalness—so long as it isn’t noticed as amplification. Longinus defines amplification as “...the development of commonplaces, emotional intensification, emphasis on facts, stylistic elaborations, the rearrangement of subject matter, or emotional appeals” and “In general terms, amplification means expatiating upon the various aspects and topics involved in a situation; it strengthens and elaborates a description by dwelling upon it” (19, 20). He begs the question, asserting that amplification is useless if it is “divorced from greatness” (19). According to Longinus, amplification is necessary for greatness, yet amplification is only effective if greatness is somehow already attached to it. Lastly, and most importantly, he states “...the best use of a figure is when the very fact that it is a figure goes unnoticed” (29). Longinus’s qualification that figures are only effective if they’re hidden raises an important question for me in regard to contemporary aesthetics: what replaces this “hiddenness” of rhetorical devices in self-conscious postmodern poetics that purposely reveals its tricks? Associative leaps? Surprise? Emotional honesty? Pastiche? I will return to these questions in my analysis of postmodern ecopoetry.

The fourth and final point of Longinus’s that I want to examine—and perhaps the most helpful in our hope of recuperating awe in the postmodern sublime—is Longinus’s emphasis on passion as a necessary ingredient for greatness. As Longinus writes, “For I would make bold to say that nothing contributes to greatness as much as noble passion in the right place; it breathes frenzied spirit of its inspiration into the words and makes them, as it were, prophetic” (11). For

Longinus (and for the Romantics) passion is most convincing in writing when it is constructed to appear spontaneous: “Passionate language is more moving when it seems to arise spontaneously and not to be contrived by the speaker” (30). Longinus advocates for writing that mimics the movement of a mind aroused by intense emotion:

In real life men who are angry, frightened, resentful, under the influence of jealousy or the like...always jump from one subject to another, mention one thing and then often rush to something else, throw some irrelevant statement in between, and then once come round again to their startling point, as their vehemence, like a changing wind, drives them in every direction... (33).

Although contemporary poetry is less concerned with the hiddenness of rhetorical figures (as we will see by the way Brian Teare deliberately highlights the historical, cultural contexts and materiality of language), Longinus’s assertion that great writing manipulates leaps from subject to subject to mimic the mind in motion in order to convey emotion as a felt experience holds true for contemporary poetics. Longinus praises Demosthenes for employing the figure of apostrophe in a way which makes his use of rhetoric “suddenly inspired and, as it were, god-possessioned...” (27). Could we perhaps formulate postmodern awe as a self-conscious portrayal of sincere passion rather than as mastery by tyrannical amazement? In the following close readings, we will see how Paul Roberson and Brian Teare demonstrate sincere reverence for nature while interrogating and redefining the power dynamics of the sublime.

In summary, Longinus’s definition of the sublime is problematic for contemporary poetics in that he privileges amazement simply for its absolute power over a subject; he contradictorily asserts that the ability to experience the sublime is both inborn and cultivated by education; and he uses the primacy of “naturalness” as central to his arguments about power and

noble minds, simultaneously alleging that nature is nothing without amplification, and amplification must be *a priori* attached to greatness. Additionally, he believes amplification is only effective if it is hidden and *seems* like nature, linking back to his original argument that great writing must overpower readers rather than persuade them—i.e., subjects must be out of their own control, unaware of the mechanisms of their thrall. Longinus’s connection to passion, however, might give us a way to salvage sublime amazement from its dependence on the so-called “natural” primacy of power.

Sublime Paradigms: Edmond Burke

Moving from Longinus’s *On Great Writing* to Edmond Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, we see how Burke adapted Longinus’s ideas for eighteenth-century consumption. Burke’s sublime is initially based on a response to terror rather than on a response to power. Burke differentiates the sublime and the beautiful by defining the beautiful as smooth, easy, and within our control, while the sublime is defined as terror verging on (but not consumed by) pain that produces a kind of pleasure. Although Burke advocates for aesthetic experience for its own sake, rather than as a manifestation of virtue, he does verge on a more utilitarian argument when he distinguishes the physiological effects of the sublime as distinguished from beauty. Beauty leads subjects to stagnate in luxury, resulting in “melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder,” while the sublime enervates subjects to transformative action, prompting us to “exercise or labour; and labour is a surmounting of difficulties, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain” (108). Burke’s distinction between beauty and the sublime may rest on a Longinian scale of power, but rather than praising power for its own sake, Burke develops the psychology of power to attest that what we have control over what is useful to us can only be merely beautiful. The sublime must be

more powerful than the subject (and therefore more powerful than the beautiful) because of its relationship to pain: anything which is able to impose pain on us must be more powerful, because we would never choose pain willingly (53-54). The Romantic poets defy this part of Burke's definition: they often seek sublime revelation by their own volition; however, they confirm Burke's theory in that they can only fully attain the sublime by getting lost—as in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (“...we had crossed the Alps”), or by being overwhelmed—as in Shelley's “Mont Blanc” (*Prelude* 591). In “This Lime Tree Bower My Prison” Coleridge is thwarted from pursuing the sublime in nature because an injury prevents him from accompanying his friends on a walk, yet the sublime still finds him when he gleans inspiration from the imagination instead. Diehl argues that the sublime is only accessible to those in a position of great privilege; women have a harder time accessing a sublime that is defined by the breaking up of discontinuities and reassemblage because they don't necessarily have the confidence that they can survive, that they can *be* reassembled (2). As Galtung writes,

“Both direct and structural violence create needs-deficits. When this happens suddenly we can talk of trauma. When it happens to a group, collectively, we have the collective trauma that can sediment into the collective subconscious and become raw material for major historical processes and events” (“Cultural Violence” 295).

When a group of people has been historically disenfranchised, loss of agency is the norm rather than the momentary profound experience, and sublime power is something to be wary of rather than taken on as prophetic authority.

Burke's sublime is primarily built on scope and extremity: the scope must exceed our understanding and the sensations must be sudden and violent—sensations such as size, sound, brightness, suddenness, color, and proportion must all be shockingly large or shockingly small or

shockingly sudden. As Paul Guyer points out in the introduction to Oxford University Press's 2015 edition of *A Philosophical Inquiry*, the connection isn't immediately obvious between Burke's assertion that the sublime must be caused by terror and some of his categories of the sublime, however Burke's explanation of extremity makes the connection clear: "For once he has explained the experience of the sublime as a heightening of tension in our nervous system, he can classify as sublime whatever produces that kind of tension, even if it does not involve danger" (xxiii).

How does Burke's definition of the sublime help us address the questions we have raised thus far about Romantic versus contemporary poetry? While Longinus privileges amazement simply for its absolute power over a subject, Burke privileges extremity because he claims that the passions associated with it create more violent sensation. (Here, violent refers to extremity, not to Galtung's definition of violence). Burke identifies "astonishment" as the primary passion aroused by the sublime. Astonishment is:

that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree or horror.

In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force (Burke 47).

This example is significant because while Burke takes up Longinus's language of "irresistible force," he doesn't value astonishment simply because of its power. He also ventures a psychological proposition about how astonishment obtains its power to override the mind—through obsession activated by the emotion of horror, which he sees as a physiological response to terror. If Burke had restricted the sublime to that which could impose *actual* pain and terror,

then we would not be left in a much better place than Longinus has left us: the sublime would still be synonymous with domination and torture. But since Burke *does* extend the sublime past the point of actual pain toward anything which excites the senses in a way *like* the excitement of the nerves in response to terror, he is able to extend the sublime to varieties of awe which do not depend on problematic power structures; rather they depend on intensity.

In another example, Burke's subject is still taken out of himself, but due to confusion rather than power: "The mind is hurried out of itself, by a croud of great and confused images; which affect because they are crouded and confused" [sic] (Burke 51). In this example, Burke associates Longinus's idea of a mind "taken out of itself" with Longinus's observation that minds fraught with passion leap about in a confused manner; Thus, for Burke, the mind is "hurried" rather than "taken" out of itself, and it's hurried by the power of passion rather than power *de facto*.

Burke takes up Longinus's example of light as an example of power; but Burke's argument is based on the senses rather than restricted to the value of power in and of itself. In Burke, the light of the sun "overpowers the sense" but an inferior light is not automatically absorbed by greater light (65). "Light of an inferior strength to this, if it moves with great celerity, has the same power; for lightning is certainly productive of grandeur, which it owes chiefly to the extreme velocity of its motion" (65). And it's not just light, but also darkness which can be sublime: "A quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect" (65). While Longinus considers it "natural" that greater light should absorb lesser light, Burke is not concerned with which is greater or lesser, more or less powerful—he's concerned with extremity of light or darkness; even a small light can be extreme if it appears with shocking suddenness, causing the senses to respond with a tension of the nerves akin to fear

(Longinus 29, Burke 105). While Burke's focus on the sensual can be helpful to us, his description of "Blackness" is abhorrent. Although when he refers to "coloured bodies" versus "black bodies," it seems that he is referring to objects and not people, his language still contains dangerous assumptions inscribed in white supremacy (117). A cultural fear of blackness exists here in metaphorical form, but as Galtung shows in his interdependent triangle structure of cultural, structural, and direct violence, violence on any point of the triangle contributes to violence in the other two points ("Cultural Violence" 294). Burke's language that black bodies are "so many vacant spaces...vacuities" which always contain "some measure of the horror and sternness of their original nature" must be rejected as a racist metaphor which depends on a violent assumption of the "otherness" of blackness. As Galtung writes, "'With the violent structure institutionalized and the violent culture internalized, direct violence also tends to become institutionalized, repetitive, ritualistic, like a vendetta'" ("Cultural Violence" 302). In my reading of Paul Roberson's poem, we will see how Roberson frames his aesthetic as the task of a black writer to reclaim language damaged by violent histories.

Burke is more in line with contemporary poetics than Longinus, in that contemporary poetry often praises work that we call "visceral", work whose effects are felt in the body—at least this is my preferred variety of contemporary poetry. Other contemporary poets prefer language games that show the arbitrariness of language and meaning making; others prefer poems that ironize our late-capitalist world. I am interested in some elements of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry and some elements of the ironic postmodern satire, but I'm not willing to relinquish passion and awe entirely (and neither is Roberson); I'm looking for a poetics that can perform human passion while *also* critiquing the histories of oppressive power and environmental destruction which plague the language we use to express that passion.

Therefore, in Burke's proto-physiological argument for the value of amazement, I find a more compelling seat of amazement than in Longinus's insistence on power. In Burke, the sublime is still overwhelming, but overwhelming because it produces psychological effects of obsession and tension rather than due to its implicit dominance.

Another difference between our two foundational figures is that Longinus believes that the ability to experience the sublime is both inborn and cultivated by education, while Burke believes that the sublime is created by what we *do not* understand. Burke posits: "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions... The ideas of eternity and infinity are among the most affecting we have, and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little" (50-51). Burke uses this concept of the unknown to posit a "beyond" that passes the border of human understanding: "...hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds" (52). Contemporary ecocriticism would reject this fetishizing of nature as "the beyond" for its human-centric ideology. While human centrism is an important and valid concern that we will consider more in our discussion of the postmodern, I believe that this idea of "the beyond" can still be productive as postmodern writers self-consciously position themselves through an awareness of the bounds of their subjective experience.

In comparison to Longinus's contradictory claims about nature versus amplification, Burke claims that we make a majority of our meaning through "associations" which are based on a few primary experiences of "natural" reactions. He argues that "many things affect us after a certain manner, not by any natural powers they have for that purpose, but by association" yet "some things must have been originally and naturally agreeable or disagreeable, from which the

others derive their associated powers” (104). While contemporary poetics would add that what is considered “naturally agreeable or disagreeable” is culturally inscribed, the rest of Burke’s theory of association holds up to contemporary cognitive poetics, as formulated by Lakoff and Johnson’s theories of metaphor.

In regards to Longinus’s claim that amplification is only effective if it appears natural, Burke is even less aligned with contemporary poetics than Longinus. While contemporary poetics usually sees the opposition between nature and artifice as a false distinction, many poets still value the ability of language to create emotionally vivid felt thought through specific detail. Burke, however, dispenses with particulars: it is poetry’s role to impact the mind by *ideas* rather than particulars, since words are less effective at description than painting (136-37). And in regards to Longinus’s idea of passion, Burke agrees that passion is important, but he believes that abstracts are more effective at producing passion in the reader than are Longinus’s recommendation of particular language which mimics the impassioned mind in motion. Burke argues that the sounds of words stir our passions through association with those sounds, and that we are more likely to be moved emotionally by the social sympathies we associate with the sounds of words than by the so distantly mimetic capabilities of language for description (137-40). In this, Burke couldn’t be further from our present idea of effective language. Contemporary poetry values particulars and rejects abstracts. In poetry workshops, it is common to question whether or not a few abstracts have been “earned” by the poet’s use of specific detail, or whether there isn’t enough particularized, visceral description in the poem to warrant the miserly use of a few generalities. Burke’s preference for abstracts now seems preposterous to me, but it helps me better understand the predilection of the Romantic poets for abstracts over description.

For the Romantics, eighteenth-century empiricism had endangered the very foundations of poetry: language and metaphor. As Angela Leighton explains in her book *Shelley and the Sublime*, Truth, for eighteenth-century empiricists, could only be found in what could be visually perceived and measured. The Romantics saw a vastness in certain aspects of the natural world which could not be wholly perceived. This experience alerted them to an intuition of things beyond human understanding, prompting them to challenge empiricism. As Empiricism was based on the particulars of visual perception, the Romantic use of large abstract ideas which may seem daunting to contemporary readers, was actually a reaction against the empirical impulse toward classification. So while abstraction may seem like an uninspired choice to a contemporary reader, for the Romantics, abstraction was a way of preserving a sense of the vast, the unknowable, the sublime in an intellectual climate which often judged the aesthetic value of landscapes by overly categorical, empirical methods.

While the Romantic sublime aesthetic rebels against empirical philosophy through the use of transcendent language and symbolic imagery, the contemporary sublime revolts against all totalities through fragmented structure, specific imagery, and a focus on the historically situated constructedness of language itself (as we will see in Roberson and Teare). For example, Shelley's images are symbolic or grandly general. Mont Blanc is a particular location but Shelley pays far more attention to its largeness than its uniqueness. Shelley has cast away institutionalized Christianity, but he still believes in universals—the universal truths of empiricism. And although he acknowledges that there are things beyond our understanding, he still believes that these things play a specific role in the universe. For example, Shelly refers to an ineffable subject when he opens Mont Blanc with the line, “The everlasting universe of things”; however, he also claims to know that an ineffable force functions as “The source of

human thought” (1; 5). These concepts pertaining to the symbolic and imaginative value of Mont Blanc are what interest Shelley. As we will see in the following sections, the contemporary poets I will examine are more interested in the precarious ecological relationship between humans and nature which are particularized through historically situated (and colonially impacted) language.

Contemporary Ecopoetics: Ed Roberson

Ed Roberson’s poem “be careful,” responds to the Romantic sublime by positing an anti-sublime, making traditionally sublime natural objects miniature and delicate and the human speaker a giant with all the terrifying power of ecological destruction. In rejecting the traditional sublime, Roberson gives it new life, creating a new kind of out-of-proportionality and a new kind of terror and awe. In “be careful,” Roberson reappropriates familiar language to ground his work in the Romantic tradition, then defamiliarizes this archetypal language in order to complicate traditional categories of the human and the natural. “be careful” deconstructs cosmologies of human domination over nature (such as Adam’s dominion over the Garden of Eden) by deconstructing the linear ranking between human and nonhuman nature. Roberson reverses Romantic tropes of vastness, power, and terror by describing nature with delicate adjectives, replacing nature with humans as the destructive force of Burkean terror in the sublime paradigm. Roberson nonetheless maintains a sense of awe for nature through the delicacy of his lineation and syntax and for the way his riffs on the traditional metrical structure of a sonnet tiptoe forward to enact a sense of ecological precarity.

Brent Hayes Edwards, a professor at Columbia University, writes in his essay “Black Serial Poetics: An Introduction to Ed Roberson” published in *Callaloo* in 2010 that scholarly work on Roberson’s unique oeuvre is long overdue. He describes Roberson’s poetics as “incisive attention to the complexities of black life in the United States,” and describes Roberson’s

“singular formal complexity—in overlapping syntax and unsettling enjambment designed to suggest multivalence and multivocality” (622). As Edwards points out, Roberson’s work has been widely recognized for its excellence, receiving awards from Atlantic Monthly Poetry (1962), Pitt Poetry Series (1970), Iowa Poetry Prize (1995), Reader’s Digest (1998), the National Poetry Series (1998), the Academy of American Poets (1998), and the Poetry Society of America (2008), yet Roberson has received very little scholarly attention (621). In my research, nearly the only scholarship I could find on Roberson was published in *Callaloo*, a literary journal of Black Diaspora writing—i.e. – despite Roberson’s lifetime of literary achievement, he is mostly only receiving critical attention within the black literary community. He was anthologized first in Camille Dungy’s *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009) and then in two other anthologies of nature poetry edited by white poets, *The Arcadia Project: North American Post-Modern Pastoral* (2012) and then in *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. As Camille Dungy argues in the introduction to her anthology, scholars and editors need to reconsider the genre of Nature Poetry to better acknowledge the contributions of black poets.

In my analysis of Roberson’s appropriation of Romantic aesthetics, I do not want ignore his links to African and African American traditions, (traditions which he also draws from and responds to), but to examine the ways in which he desires to reclaim the English lexicon, entrenched in histories of white supremacy and colonial exploitation. As Galtung writes,

“The category of ‘alienation’ can be defined in terms of socialization, meaning the internalization of culture. There is a double aspect: to be desocialized away from one’s own culture and be resocialized into another culture – like the prohibition and imposition of languages” (“Cultural Violence” 293).

Roberson uses archetypal language in English purposely in order to creatively reclaim it. In his own words, Roberson explains:

I knew I had to write in such a way that readers knew the poem carried its own definitions within it, its own grammar, its own dictionary since the white dictionary has blacked out certain levels of words. Trying to speak fully, clearly is what gets me labeled experimental. I'm trying to get a fully honest and open emotional and psychological reading of the language that's already here, but dishonestly read; unlike a lot of folks in the room, I'm not creating a new language" (qtd. in Bianchi qtd. in Edwards 625).

In "be careful," Roberson does not use the particularized diction that's usually most valued in contemporary poetry: he doesn't refer to specific species of animals or to a specific place ("grizzlies" are the one exception); instead, he uses archetypal words like "Fish", "bear", "mountain", "eagle", and "wilderness" (6, 8, 11, 12, 13). In an essay introducing the first section of the *Black Nature* anthology, Roberson elaborates: "The lines from 'must be careful...' came out of a job located geographically in Alaska, but come first from a place where the unknown, uncontrollable aspects of bears and mountains step around the word *Alaska* to map me in the barely mapped nature of earth" ("We Must Be Careful 4). Roberson's wilderness, like the Romantic Wilderness with a capital "W" is not a particular place but an idea.

Roberson transforms the Romantic idea of Nature by defamiliarizing archetypal language, attaching adjectives and verbs to the "wrong" nouns. In "be careful," it is the lake that is "snared"—not the bears. Words—not mountains—are "snowcapped". This poem amends the Romantic sublime's idea of Wilderness as vast, monolithic, and terrifying; instead, Wilderness intermingles categories of human and natural, fish and bear, human and fog. The human does not merely gaze upon the landscape; neither does the landscape merely gaze upon the human. This

poem actually passes a kind of eco-poetical Bechdel Test: “deer after deer / crossing on the spines of fish who look up and stare / with their eyes pressed to the ice” (5-7). Here we get the fish looking up through the ice at the deer with no human present. Roberson rearranges anthropocentric cosmology by centering nature itself rather than human experience of nature. As Roberson writes in his essay, “My place in nature could be to feed an animal life as well as to be fed the nectarine and the peach of [Andrew] Marvell’s poem... Against the eternal idyll of Romantic poetry, I had to place the idea of subjective limit, of de-centered mortality” (“We Must Be Careful” 4). For Roberson, the great chain-of-being is also the great-chain-of death; the earth and everything on it is subject to this threatened relationality.

Yet of course, for the reader, the human is still present in the poem, even when it describes a silent meeting between fish and deer—the poem is still made of language. Roberson is aware that the human is not outside of the natural. In lines eleven and twelve Roberson writes that he must [be careful not to] “...avalanche the fog or the eagle from the air”. Here, the human, not the mountain, has the power to cause an avalanche. Furthermore, “avalanche” becomes a verb. Roberson’s purposeful confusion of nouns for verbs and man for nature creates a new sublime terror in an era of ecological crisis: man.

In Roberson’s new sublime landscape, humans are the dangerous, wild, powerful force that have the power to crush the tiny, vulnerable earth. Roberson uses surprisingly delicate adjectives to describe the impressive, mountainous landscape: oaks are “thin-grained”; grizzlies are “quiet” and “scared”; wilderness is “gentle”; and mountains are “fragile” and silhouetted against a sky that Roberson leaves out entirely, replacing it with the gorgeously delicate epithet “paper farness”. Yet Roberson retains a sense of awe for the landscape, despite the terror of the human threat:

Those are *my* words carrying *my* carefully chosen deer, my grizzlies, not Nature's. Like stuffing and mounting them on the wall, I appropriate the grizzlies without active appetites or teeth, for a quiet, nonlethal poem. The teeth stay behind in Nature. The missing appetite and teeth reinforce my sense that human experience of nature differs from Nature, that there is always an unknowable, hidden aspect of Nature. This mystery beyond words is our mythology, our religion, our poetry...there is no outside of Nature" (Roberson "We Must Be Careful" 3).

After reading Roberson's poem many times, I was surprised to go back to his essay and see this mystical statement. For me, the poem "be careful" reads as a reversal of traditional sublime power. In the world of Roberson's poem, Nature is delicate and humans are destructive; nevertheless, I now see that the very delicacy which Roberson devotes to his descriptions of the natural world demonstrates a kind of reverence. Although Roberson accepts the ecocritical stance that "there is no outside of nature," he still conceives as nature as a sublime "beyond", that "there is always an unknowable, hidden aspect of nature". Despite Roberson's training in science and his acceptance of the human as part of rather than outside the natural, his awareness of the precarity of nature becomes the source of his reverence for its threatened mysteriousness.

Roberson uses form to convey his postmodern recuperation of reverence. The poem, written in the form of a free-verse sonnet, is contained in the familiar fourteen-line block that still signals "sonnet" to readers of free verse. Although sonnets were used frequently by the Romantics, the Romantics, of course, are not our first association with the form. Sonnets harken back to Shakespeare and the Italian Troubadors, both of whom used the sonnet primarily for the purpose of love poems honoring or entreating a beloved. Viewed in this tradition, Roberson's use of the sonnet form signals his devotion toward the subject of his poem—nature. But as we have

seen through the above analysis, Roberson doesn't merely replicate Romantic effusion for the landscape; he transforms it.

His devotion is deft and powerful in its craft, yet delicate and tiptoeing in its execution. The form of the poem enacts Robertson's imperative to "be careful" by creating a form that walks softly and holds its breath. The poem is punctuated but doesn't use capitalization. Instead, Roberson leaves gaps in the text between sentences, which appear in all lines except lines one and six and happens twice in lines seven and fourteen. These gaps are of unequal length. They portray a tentativeness that is deliberately and confidently crafted into the poem's structure.

Most lines begin with iambs, the traditional poetic foot of the Shakespearian sonnet, and the most common and comfortable meter in English. But mid-way through the line they dissolve: in many cases, they dissolve in a substitution, and then a switch to trochees, the more emphatic, spell-like foot. Both gaps and substitutions make the poem stumble slightly as it tiptoes, haltingly moving forward like someone who is navigating their way around furniture in a darkened room, trying not to stumble and wake someone up. The lines mostly stay between eleven and thirteen syllables, just barely overshooting the expected ten-syllable pentameter—just enough to make us lean out over our tiptoes, poised awkwardly between the desire to tread gently and the desire to move forward. The lines increase in length from eleven syllables in lines one and two, to two twelve and thirteen syllable lines in the middle of the poem, reaching an aberrant height of fourteen syllables in line twelve and fifteen syllables in line thirteen, before winding back down to the original eleven syllables with two emphatic gaps between the sentences composed of diminished feet in the final line. We feel the precarity in the way the lines reach past pentameter and vary in length, winding down to their slowest and softest at the end, when Roberson writes "of the gentle wilderness i must set the precarious / words. like rocks. without one

snowcapped mistake” (13-14). In Roberson’s poem, gentleness replaces dominance as a cultural prescription for how humans should relate to nature.

While Roberson reappropriates familiar landscape language in “be careful” to reverse the power dynamic of the Romantic sublime, he also reappropriates the conventions of the sonnet tradition in order to rehabilitate our sense of awe for the landscape. In Roberson’s postmodern sublime, humans are terrifying and dangerous, but so is Nature—terrifying because Nature could destroy us, and terrifying because we are in eminent danger of destroying it. As Slavoj Zizek writes in book *The Sublime Ideology*,

“Hegelian dialectics ‘sublates’ all the inert objective leftover, including it in the circle of the dialectical mediation: the very movement of dialectics implies, on the contrary, that there is always a certain remnant, a certain leftover escaping the circle of subjectivation, of subjective appropriation-mediation, and *the subject is precisely correlative to this leftover*” (209).

In Roberson’s poem, the human is included in the Natural, and neither category is exempt from the other, though there is something left over (to use Hegelian terms) in our relation to nature, something we can never know or have access to, just as we can never entirely know or have access to ourselves.

Contemporary Eco-poetics: Brian Teare

In our next exploration of the contemporary nature poetry, we’ll examine Brian Teare’s *Companion Grasses*. An award-winning author of five full-length collections of poetry, Teare lived in the bay area for many years before his current Assistant Professorship at Temple University in Philadelphia. His fourth book, *Companion Grasses*, responds to the transcendental sublime of Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau by replacing the romantic trope of the prophetic

male vehicle for the sublime with a queering of the landscape through attentiveness to direct experience. As Joanne Feit Diehl, applying the theory of Thomas Weiskel, points out in her book *Women Poets and the American Sublime*, Emerson positions man as first a passive receiver of overpowering sublime awe, but Emerson's sublime subject is then transformed by the power that overtakes him; the cosmic force imbues him with its power, and he reassimilates himself back into the ordinary world as an empowered prophet (Weiskel qtd. in Diehl 3). In Teare's sublime, however, the subject is full of awe for nature but is constantly alienated from it. As Žižek writes in his book *Tarrying with the Negative*, explaining the dialectic of nonequivalent exchange in Hegel,

“...when we reach the apogee of this dialectic, ‘absolute freedom,’ the exchange between the particular and the universal Will, the subject ‘gets nothing in exchange for everything.’ He passes into an empty nothing; his alienation becomes an abstract negation which offers no positive, determinate content in exchange” (22).

In *Companion Grasses*, there is no assimilation of the self into nature. There is no resolution of the sublime. The subject must continue to wrestle with the multiplicity of gaps between word and thing, thing and thing, nature and self.

Teare's sublime critiques a cosmology of heteronormative, misogynist cosmology by positing a queer alternative vision of profound attentiveness to the full scope of difference (rather than binary sexual difference) represented in nature. As Diehl notes, Whitman claims prophetic power through sexuality and reproduction. “Whitman's poetics presents an especially frustrating double bind: at once offering the woman of imagination a potential equality while committing her, within his own work, to an archetypal, hence restrictive role as a procreative force” (Diehl 9). Although Whitman's desire is queer, his vision restricts women to a reproductive role. Brian

Teare, in a 2013 panel with Nathan Brown, Jed Rasula, and Evelyn Reilly titled “Environmental Dreamscapes and the Heedless Sublime,” explains:

“I mean that work by feminist ecocritics as various as Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood and Rebecca Solnit suggest that Emerson, by positing Nature’s prime function as an endless reproductive circuit whose fruits (as capital or future citizen) fall rightly into the hands of man, demonstrates the analogical link between the political fate of Nature as commodity and that of women’s reproductive health within our sociocultural imaginary. I mean that anthropocentrism is also always phallogocentrism, which suggests that a deep-seated misogyny is also one of the cultural preconditions for the emergence of the rhetorical trope of nature” (“Ecopoetics Talk” 2).

Teare notes that ecological crisis and homophobia are both results of misogyny based on the commodification of women’s reproductivity framed as “natural”—thus framing queer people as “unnatural” (“Ecopoetics Talk” 2-3). This is Galtung’s “cosmology”: deeply entrenched and almost invisible assumptions in a culture about what is natural (“Cultural Violence” 301). In Teare’s explanation of the common root of ecological destruction and homophobia, we see the consequences of Longinus’s reliance on supposed “naturalness” as an ethical justifier for power. Teare sees direct experience in all its fragmentation, multiplicity, specificity, and unknowableness as a queer alternative to heteronormative concepts of creation in nature. (“Ecopoetics Talk” 5). Teare opposes heteronormative models of reproduction and commodification by negatively illuminating the sublime “beyond” of Roberson’s “the surrounding life” which cannot be contained in language (Roberson qtd. in “Ecopoetics Talk” 5).

In contrast to Longinus’s dictum that successful rhetorical figures must be hidden, Teare crafts a sublime of self-aware constructedness and precarious materiality. Teare rejects Burke’s

imperative that successful associations are created by abstractions rather than detailed description of numinous phenomena, yet enacts Burke's concept of the sublime "beyond" by calling our attention to the limitations and deceptions of language. In poems like "Susurrus Stanzas," and "Quaking Grass" Teare uses sonic assonance and sensory detail to create a felt landscape of "what surrounds" the human in nature (Roberson qtd. in "Brian Tear's Eco-poetics Talk" 1). Tear also critically excavates grammars, forms, and taxonomies to destabilize the language we use to describe nature. Furthermore, he utilizes the language of arts such as architecture, painting, and photography to highlight the materiality of our thinking about nature.

Teare's musicality and complex juxtapositions are pleasurable and awe-inspiring, yet I think he falls short of creating a truly critical eco-poetics which incorporates evidence of the disastrous human impact on natural ecologies. Teare explains that although he sympathizes with "righteous antisocial anger" such as philosopher Lee Edelman's queer critique of the heteronormativity of futurity based on commodification of reproduction and sympathizes with the indignation of midcentury poet Robinson Jeffers's inhumanist critique of the anthropocentrism of human morality, Teare explains that he chooses not to engage in direct critique in his poetry because he is hesitant to participate in our language's legacy of violence: "I mean to hold close to feminist ambivalence about language and rhetoric and their power to do violence, especially when deployed by men in service of their own agendas of political critique" ("Eco-poetics Talk" 5). Instead, Teare states his preferred eco-poetical agenda:

"I would rather suggest that 'the surrounding life' remains the best 'radical challenge to the value of the social itself' because it cannot be essentialized and its ontological strangeness remains unknowable in totality" (Roberson and Edelman qtd. in "Eco-poetics Talk" 5).

I find this a compelling explanation of Teare's choice to focus on sensory detail rather than explicit critique, yet I would still argue that he falls short in what he chooses to train his gaze on in regards to "the surrounding life" in *Companion Grasses*. In a few instances, Teare gestures toward the human realities of tourism, pollution, and ecological destruction that permeate the specific California landscapes he writes about, but he largely chooses to focus on the sensual beauty and construction of language categories in a landscape rather than letting his gaze take in the full scope of human violence in these places. Teare doesn't directly take on ecological destruction or indigenous genocide in a sustained way until twenty pages into his long poem "Atlas Peak" in the final fourth of the book. Even then, his critique of "money, / beauty, hunger manifest / destiny, all the myths of the West" and the devastation they wreaked on indigenous people is frustratingly generalized in the context of the particularity of his admiration for nature and the level of attention he gives to linguistic constructions (87). Teare's exquisite attention and queering of nature starts toward a new ecocritical cosmology, but I wish *Companion Grasses* could go a little bit further toward revising colonial cosmology and the dichotomy between the urban and the "natural" as well.

The early poems in *Companion Grasses* are the most lyric: highly musical with short lines, while the poems toward the end of the volume are more narrative and less musical (though they still make use of his postmodern devices of fragmentation and pastiche). Early in the book, in the poem "Flatsedge Notebook," Teare doesn't choose to focus on the violence and violatedness of nature. He idealizes Point Reyes, neglecting to dig into the human impact there (other than a brief mention to a vista point). He describes the beauty in the supposed wildness of the protected land of Point Reyes National Seashore in contrast to the tragedy of homelessness and addiction in the urban landscape of San Francisco. Teare's implied distinction between

natural and urban landscapes leaves out environmental impacts of fishing, oyster farming, dairy farming and tourism at Point Reyes and fails to acknowledge the presence of urban ecologies within the bounds of the city of San Francisco. Teare's ecopoetics uses sensory detail and self-aware pastiche to push back against the heteronormative, misogynist, and anthropocentric tendencies of our cultural metaphors for nature, but his gaze misses opportunities to notice certain less-beautiful aspects of what typically gets "left out" of dominant frameworks. Nevertheless, he constantly interrogates language and meaning-making itself, bringing a necessary skepticism and sublime terror into each moment of his sensory enjoyment of the beautiful.

Teare uses sonic beauty in his poems both as a tribute to human encounters with beauty in nature and a self-aware linguistic punning that highlights and interrogates the constructedness of language. Slippage of meaning follows the logic of sound rather than the logic of narrative to move the poem, as in "Susurrus Stanzas" when Teare writes "*stanza* as in stance as in / a way of standing" and "the eye lichen a line to horizon" (18). The "st" sounds in "stanza" becomes "stance" which becomes "standing: the word becomes the body. The repeated long "i" sounds in "eye", "lichen", "line", and horizon represent the relationship of the human gaze with nature through a movement represented by the idea of a line—a mathematical construction. Stanzas are constructions in language, lines are constructions in space. Teare's use of fragments and caesurae both enact the catalogical variety of human perception of nature and highlight the role of language in mediating our perception. The body stands. The body sees. Lichen is not a line, although humans, limited by the bounds of our perception, knowledge, and language, might conceive of it as one. When Teare writes "to write sight is itself / site's re-vision a visitor's / signature" the repetition of "i" and "t" sounds and the slippage between "vision" and "visitor"

enact the disintegration of perception. Rather than complying with Weiskel's framework of transcendental synthesis, Teare's hyphenation of "re-vision," refers to the way we rearrange when we conceptualize landscapes and put them into language. (20).

Nature is absorbed into art but not through hidden artifice as Longinus prescribes. Here, Teare's artifice highlights both slippage and gap. His craft gives pleasure through wordplay while relentlessly exposing human inadequacy in the face of the sublime "beyond".

Teare's slippage becomes humorous when he uses philosophical vocabulary and framing to suggest

"...isn't
it *a priori* 'essentially
mortuary' to stand
at an edge so entirely
contingency" (21).

Teare undercuts his philosophical pose with the humor and unexpectedness of the rhyme between "*a priori*" and "mortuary". Having tickled our fancy, Teare doesn't stop but keeps the rhyme chain going with the repeated "d" sounds in "stand" and "edge" and with the continuation of the same humorous juxtaposition between philosophy and rhyme in "entirely" and "contingency". The pleasure and goofiness of the rhymes keep Teare's philosophizing from seeming pedantic, and the questions themselves cause us to feel a sincerity which peeks through both philosophical posing and lyric clowning. Burke's awe over extremity peeks over the "edge" of height and depth at the terror of the unknown, the terror of death. Teare's "edge" is postmodern because it's not just the poet's personal edge; it's also the edge of an entire civilization "...so far west / imagination ends / each day in pre-fab / ruin America / this place

that outlives / its own demise” (21). Teare reappropriates the Romantics’ obsession with ruins to associate twenty-first century America with the decadence of Europe’s romantic nostalgia for remnants of the Roman Empire. Teare’s edge, unlike Coleridge’s personal revelation on the mountaintop in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” or Shelley’s in “Mount Blanc”, reflects the edge of America’s history of settler colonialism and capitalism; however, as I’ve argued above, I think he could push that edge past an examination of language toward a more diligent critique (such as the critiques made in poems by Layli Long Soldier, Camille Dungy, Alexandra Teague, Robert Hass, and Brenda Hillman).

Teare juxtaposes sensual nature imagery with human methods of organization to examine methods of meaning-making and organization such as seeing, painting, photography, and language in order to explore and disrupt the ways in which our creative re-visioning and voyeurism in witnessing nature impacts the way nature gets organized. Organized, that is, in anthropocentric ways, as it is perceived. As Zizek writes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, “...if we conceive language as the medium of the social relations of domination, its objective counterpart is of course wealth as the embodiment, as the materialization of social power” (212). Teare emphasizes the materiality of language in order to demonstrate its constructedness and performativity: language is both creative and inscribed in violent cultural paradigms.

Human methods of organization such as stanzas (“...a stanza open / to weather the pool’s rim”), paint (“still tinted an ‘aquatic’ blue”) and architecture (“architechure its structure” and “mortar undoing and undone”) (18-20). Unlike Longinus’s claim that amplification can only succeed if it is hidden and seems natural, Burke highlights artifice and materiality:

“to stand I want to get

closer to where material
 touches language 'impatient
 with ruins' its obviate
 architecture its structure
 lung grammar sung
 mortar undoing and undone" (19)

Here, Teare not only highlights the materiality and constructedness of language, nature, architecture, and the human body, but he also riffs off the Romantic trope of the "ruin" popular in picturesque painting and landscape architecture. The contemporary poet, critic, and editor David Baker describes the Romantic sublime as "...emerg[ing] from that sense of personal peril amid cultural ruin or folly" (171). Here, I think Baker is referring to a kind of picturesque decadence more than to the Burkean sublime of extremity, although extremity is relevant in Baker's definition in the form of extreme age – the extreme age of ruins. The ruins of California are not as ancient as the Roman ruins fetishized by the Romantics in Europe. The Sutro Baths were constructed in the late 1890s by Adolph Sutro, a wealthy entrepreneur and former mayor of San Francisco. The baths struggled economically due to high operating and maintenance costs. In 1966, the baths were destroyed by a fire caused by arson while the buildings were in the process of being demolished ("Sutro Historic District"). While the Romantics fetishized (and even manufactured) ruins for their air of extreme age and picturesque "unconscious suffering", cultural criticism can be brought to bear on this Romantic obsession to reveal cultural institutions of false populism and nostalgia for (and aspirations of) imperialism. In "Sussurus Stanzas", however, Teare invokes a romantic trope to juxtapose the decadent imperialism of Europe with the decadent imperialism of the American doctrine of manifest destiny. Baker attributes the

difference between the American Transcendental sublime and the European sublime of one of scope versus age: the European sublime comes from decadence and decay, while the American sublime of Whitman comes from endless expanses of so-called open space: “Europe found its sublime problem in its terrifying heights and decay; America has its own aesthetic problem: it never stops” (Baker 174). This is the culturally violent myth of manifest destiny. But of course, it *does* stop: Teare’s poem uses metaphors of materiality to indicate that the American sublime has now also become one of decadence: the edge of a continent, the failure of building projects, the decay of settlements founded by settlers acting on the imperative of manifest destiny. Teare connects the picturesque trope of the ruined landscape to Burke with “this need to lead to ruin / it’s beautiful isn’t it / this used-up ‘seascape’ / and isn’t it also terror” (20-21). Teare admires the beauty of “what surrounds” at the same time as experiencing sublime terror at the ruins. He doesn’t fully unpack his definitions of beauty or of terror for us, but the juxtaposition suggests an ambivalent blend of pleasure in the sensory beauty of the landscape in the present moment and the terror at the human and ecological cost of our arrogant past and at the precarity of our future. For Teare, grounding description of nature in the materiality of language and exposing human artifice isn’t just a stylistic pose of postmodernity; it’s a deeply skeptical and ambivalent critique of the decadence to which the American sublime trope of vast “empty” land has led us.

In summary, Teare’s “Sussurus Stanzas” uses sonic beauty, fragmentation, cesurae, sensual imagery, and emphasis on the materiality of both nature and art in order to interrogate the constructedness of human meaning-making and to highlight and challenge our anthropocentric relationship with nature. Teare’s sublime constantly reminds us of human beings’ inability to assume the power of the cosmic law. As Diehl writes, quoting Bruce Clarke’s essay, “Sublimation and Sublimity in Home at Grasmere,” published in the Fall 1980

issue of *Studies in Romanticism*, “those moments of confrontation, risk, trial, or terror, at which point one’s great lessons are learned. Yet efficacy of sublimation will determine our relative ability to convert the experience of sublimity to daily use” (qtd. in Diehl 2). In Teare’s poetry, perception and language constantly fall short. The signifier is slippery, playful, pleasurable, and the signified is illusory. Teare’s sublime “beyond”, like Roberson’s is the gap between the human and the natural. Physicality, difference, and the poet’s constant interrogation of the gap create a sublime that is at once deeply skeptical and full of awe.

In the poem “Quaking Grass”, Teare uses erotic doubling between man and nature, a reverent yet critical approach to taxonomy and etymology, and metaphors taken from the material practice of photography to posit a troubled, queer sublime in opposition to heteronormative transcendental paradigms for man in nature. In Diehl’s formulation of the transcendental sublime, a solitary man is overtaken by the power of nature; he then takes on the power that has overtaken him and returns from his unique and unrepeatable experience endowed with prophetic power (2). In opposition to this paradigm, Teare’s speaker is not alone in nature, nor is he overpowered by it; instead, Teare’s speaker enters the natural landscape of Point Reyes with a male partner, and is overcome by eros—homosexual, tender, and reciprocal. Teare’s images for the river meeting the ocean mirror the images homosexual sex in the poem: “because the river entered ocean”, “we waded out, we saw tide / Lift river & slip in—” and “the privacy of being entered is / What I felt privy to—” (29, 30). The river enters the ocean and the ocean slips into the river, just as the two men enter and slip into each other, just as Teare’s language enacts slippage and doubling. Teare troubles binaries of linear cause and effect and of passive versus active roles. Although we would normally think of the river as emptying into the ocean, conceptually smoothing out the more complicated reality of water meeting in an estuary, in

Teare's poem the complication is embraced: river and ocean both enter each other at the edge where they meet. In the following lines, punning and enjambment join imagery as methods of doubling:

“Water swelled within itself—
 more forceful than the river
 entering itself
 was pressure against my skin—
 as when I held his cock & his body
 bodied forth there—
 Tender force
 rivering—
 his need to enter me” (31).

The first time we read the line “more forceful as the river” we can assume that “water”, the subject from the line above, is what is being referred to as “more forceful”. That is until we read the next two lines when it becomes clear that what is “more forceful than the river / entering itself” is the inversion “was pressure against my skin—” (31). Again, reading this we might assume that the water is what is causing pressure, until we receive, in the next line “as when I held his cock” (31). Just as the fresh and salt water mingle in the estuary where the poem takes place, and just as the bodies of the two characters join in anti-heteronormative ways, the poem's enjambment and dashes constantly displace the supposed antecedent, repeatedly surprising us with an unexpected referent. To his doubled images and disorienting enjambment, Tear adds the playful punning of “his body / bodied forth there—” and “Tender force / rivering— / his need to enter me” (31). Just as Roberson's speaker fears his own human power to “...avalanche the fog

or the eagle from the air”, Teare’s speaker also is overwhelmed by the mingling of the human and the natural. In this poem, “rivering” isn’t just something a river does; it’s something a man does, and it is both elicited by and acted out upon another man. Teare shifts the paradigm for what is “natural” both in nature and in erotic poetry. In both the joining of river and ocean and the joining of the male lovers, Teare subverts our expectations of the sublime by confusing cause, effect, actor, and acted upon.

“Quaking Grass” also subverts the sublime power dynamic by employing a reverent yet critical approach to taxonomy and naming. In several parenthetical notes, Teare explores etymology. The first two instances carry a tone of joy in language, yet signal a colonial history: “(pretty word—Spanish—‘evergreen oak’)—” and then “‘riparian’ gleaned from signage / (prettier even—*ripa*—‘bank’)—” (28, 29). In the third instance, Teare surprises us with a more openly violent explication: “(Raptus from rapere, ‘seize’ or ‘rape’) — / its passing shadow triggered / chill as it touched us—” (31). Again, Teare’s interest in the roots of language and language play aren’t merely play, though play makes them pleasurable to read. He uses etymology and taxonomy in this poem to excavate what he calls in his “Ecopoetics Talk” “the imperialism of naming” (7). Teare highlights etymology in order to make explicit the often unexamined histories of colonization and patriarchal domination present in the language we inherit. Midway through the poem, after the couple sees the hawk, “the little book fell open, broken-spined”, and the poem returns to this phrase in the last stanza of the poem “The book fell open on its broken spine” (32, 35). The book that lists the names of birds is “broken”, it’s taxonomy, and therefore its language, is limited and it has a “spine”, in parallel to the “spine of shadow” they see mirroring their human bodies as they walk (32, 29). Teare follows the list of hawk species from the naturalist book with a leap away from taxonomy toward description and

imagination: “I imagined its passage over the field / a ring of blackened grass— / rust-colored tail broad, fanned, tipped with white—” (32). Here Teare contrasts the collapsing, abstracting effects of naming with the imaginative elucidation of description. We cannot escape from naming (the book falls open without Teare’s effort or permission), but Teare is more interested in attention and imagination, in focusing on “what surrounds” us. Roberson and Teare face a similar dilemma: an affinity with and joy in language, and a simultaneous distrust of the violent histories fossilized in and perpetuated by language. As the contemporary poet Terrance Hayes writes in his poem “Snow for Wallace Stevens”, “I too, having lost faith / in language, have placed my faith in language” (16-17). Contemporary poets who wish to challenge unequitable cosmologies fossilized in cultural violence must take a critical approach to language, yet language is the tool we use to do so. In “Quaking Grass,” even identifying taxonomies with their limitations and troubling histories become acts of imaginative looking: “the attention taxonomy requires / amounts to a species of singing”; thus, a list of names while trying to identify a swallow becomes “a list of possible swallows” (32, 33). Names, offered up before they are narrowed down, are a gift of the possible, not yet narrowed down from imagination to classification. If Galtung defines violence as an unnecessary narrowing of possibilities, then here Teare resists the violence of the human gaze on a landscape attaching a signifier to a signified; he engages in naming but also resists it, creating an imaginative space within the poem where “a list of the possible” can exist. Teare places an emphasis on speech, absence of speech, and language-making: “no one had said ‘love’ yet—” when this poem takes place, yet is already a “little grammar of attraction” (28, 35). Additionally, Teare engages with the critic Roland Barthes throughout the poem, repeatedly asking “(what is ‘lyric’?)—” (31, 32, 35). For Teare, this question is bound up with implicit questions of “what is human?” and “what is natural?” and

“what is language?”. How can we define “lyric” when the distinctions between the human and the natural are blurred and questioned, especially since both are only knowable through the “context” (another repeated word throughout the poem) of language and culture? The poem’s ending calls us back to its title, ending with the poem’s most significant plant name “‘It’s quakinggrass,’ I said—” (35). By ending with this simple declarative identification, Teare conjures the whole history of the sublime, taking us back to Burke’s emphasis on terror and extremity, reframed in Teare’s self-aware language play and affectionate queer re-visioning of the natural.

As in “Sussurus Stanzas”, Teare also highlights the materiality of language in “Quakinggrass”—this time through the medium of Barthes’s study of photography in his book *Camera Lucida*. While “Quakinggrass” is about the mingling of bodies of water as well as the mingling of human bodies, it’s also about cutting and framing and loss, about what can be perceived and known and what can’t be, about what lies outside the frame. Teare uses the word “cut” numerous times, as in the first stanza “I’ve cut from summer— / as if a swatch were possible— / not collage exactly—” (28). This poem, then, is self-consciously framed as a chosen vignette—one day of summer or a compilation of days collaged into one, representative and yet incomplete. The next instance of the word “cut” is applied to the river: “I’ve cut from it— / the way the photographer knows what lies / Beyond the frame—” (29). In “Quakinggrass”, the transcendental “beyond” of the vast power of nature is transformed. The poet is not overcome by the power of nature; instead the poet is an active surgeon self-consciously cutting, assembling, and splicing observation and feeling from the vast reaches of the possible. The poem’s speaker does not seem to feel much terror of nature itself. The speaker does not seem to be in danger of being swept away by the river’s current in Big Sur Lagoon or feel overwhelmed by the height of

the Santa Lucia mountains or by the vastness of the Pacific ocean. Indeed, the speaker seems to identify with nature without having to go through the steps of terror, awe, and reintegration.

Unlike the transcendental and Romantic sublime in which the speaker trades terror for power upon reintegrating with the world after a sublime experience, Teare's speaker experiences loss and terror *after* the experience, in the writing of the poem which limits, "cuts" and frames the infinitude of experience into articulable pieces:

"Beyond the frame—
 context is terrible weight—
 to describe the water's texture of
 Gestures would never end—" (29).

Teare cannot restore all the context that is lost through the narrowing down of experience into language, but he can make us aware of its loss. "Each image cropped but the frame— / a lifetime— / a coastline—" (30). In "Quakinggrass," the sublime beyond is that which cannot be put into words, which exceeds our ability to see or describe. Teare returns us to the romantic trope of ruins by punning "What is meant by context: to pose / ruins the shot with intention—" (30). The human gaze both "ruins" the thing-in-itself by viewing it through the lens of human intension and documents the ruin that humans have wreaked on the land and on language itself. The sublime subject in Teare's poetry remains permanently alienated, integrating with the sublime not through prophetic authority but through awareness of the violence of authority, the fragmentation and anthropocentrism of perception and description. In "Quakinggrass," the couple resists proclaiming their love for each other in words, lest the words execute the metaphorical violence of narrowing down possibilities: "the camera's aperture opened— / neither one of us would say, had said it— / kept trying to stop meaning / from taking final

shape— / a series, a story” (34). Teare constantly frustrates the desire to narrow the natural world, the human world, and the emotions down into reducible definitions and narratives. His poetics challenge cosmologies of linear narrative and cosmologies of separation between human and human, human and nature, language and perception.

Conclusion

Just as Teare resists narrowing possibilities down through definitive description, I resist concluding this essay, as I see this essay as only the beginning of my exploration of these topics, an opening up of possibilities. There are many more contemporary ecopoets and aspects of the sublime and the picturesque that I would like to explore and examine. Particularly, in future work I hope to apply theories of metaphor and cultural violence to works such as Honoree Fannon Jeffers’s “Blues Aubade (Or Revision of the Lean Post-Modernist Pastorale)” which reframes the Romantic pastoral of destitutes through a black mother’s revolutionary perspective. I’d also like to look at D.A. Powell’s examination of the metaphorical disease of ecological crisis juxtaposed with disease of HIV/AIDS and his transformation of the pastoral tradition in relation to ecocritical perspectives and the queer body. Overall, I am interested in poetry that is working to redefine what is “natural” in our contemporary cosmology. As Galtung writes, “...the opposite of cultural violence would be ‘cultural peace’, meaning aspects of a culture that serve to justify and legitimize direct peace and structural peace” (“Cultural Violence” 291). By drawing attention to the violent power dynamics in our conceptions of the naturaland in seeking poets who challenge these power dynamics by offering a variety of alternatives, I hope to bring attention to poetry which is embarking on the slow work of changing cultural cosmologies of nature to create a more inclusive and ecologically hopeful paradigm.

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