

Article

Poems in the World: The Ecopoetics of Anne Waldman's *Life Notes*

Rona Cran 

Department of English, College of Arts and Law, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK;
r.cran@bham.ac.uk

Abstract: This essay argues that Anne Waldman's 1973 selected poems, *Life Notes*, articulates a vision of the environment that is positively and reparatively enmeshed with language and culture. Embracing the paradox at the heart of the best environmental writing, *Life Notes* reveals our natural environments to be at once legible and unknowable, and embodies this through experimental forms, language, and typography. This collection of poems, which has yet to be paid significant critical attention (despite Waldman's renowned status as a poet), artfully mediates the relationship between word and world, giving voice, shape, and form to what we might call the poet's 'ecology of knowing', per Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation. Through a sustained process of imaginative elision of the human and nonhuman, I argue, Waldman illuminates the ways in which the 'natural' world is almost always touched by the human, and refutes the widely-held cultural fantasy that nature is self-evidently restorative or redemptive and thereby somehow at a remove from humankind. *Life Notes*, I suggest, is a 'dissipative structure', critically entangled with the everyday environment out of which it emerges and with which it remains 'involved in a continual exchange of energy' (Waldman).

Keywords: Anne Waldman; ecopoetry; ecocriticism; green reading; Beat women; New York School; New American Poetry; poetry; reparative reading; environment; environmental humanities; Black Mountain



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The cover of Anne Waldman's second book of selected poems, *Life Notes*, published in 1973 by Bobbs-Merrill, is a watercolor by her friend and collaborator, the artist Joe Brainard. Brainard's drawings also appear inside the book, and his cover was one of the first designs by an openly queer artist to appear on a book put out by a major publisher. It features a solitary yellow pansy emerging from a ground of verdant foliage, the deep greens and dark blacks igniting the buttery flower so that it seems to transcend its apparent enmeshment with the page, rising toward the reader and followed, just below, by the words 'LIFE NOTES', in yellow handwritten caps, and then 'Anne Waldman', in Waldman's own yellow cursive. The cover is shimmeringly vivacious, and unmistakably aligns the book not just with the natural and the living but with the rooted (plants) and the kinetic or processual (Waldman herself, as suggested by her handwriting, and by the idea of 'notes', often written in haste or underpinned by the promise of return and development). The title juxtaposes gravity ('life') with levity ('notes', suggestive of attentive ephemerality, of musings, jottings, reminders, or passing thoughts). In doing so, it indicates Waldman's refusal (in a manner emblematic of both Beat and New York School writing) to parcel off the serious from the light-hearted. But beyond this, it also gestures toward her belief in the critical entanglement of culture with existence, or 'language ritual as open-ended survival', and to her view of herself, and indeed 'all living things', as 'dissipative structures ... involved in a continual exchange of energy with the environment' (Waldman 1996, p. 127). Like Brainard's flower, Waldman, too, is enmeshed with both culture and nature, and the joy she takes in both suggests that the two are powerfully connected. 'I am interested in the power language has, and particularly in how I use it out of this female body and

awareness to change my own consciousness and that of the people around me', she writes in 'I is Another: Dissipative Structures', an important essay on 'feminine energy' and open systems in poetry which anticipates Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, published in *Fast Speaking Woman* in 1996 (128). These, then, are her notes for life.

What is at stake for Waldman in *Life Notes*? The book appeared halfway through her tenure as Director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, and relatively early in what has been a long and successful career as a poet, activist, performer, teacher, and cultural organizer, whose work has been associated with the Beats, the New York School, and Black Mountain, in addition to being both framed and acknowledged as 'Outrider' and fundamentally experimental. Typically of Waldman's work in poetry across her oeuvre, *Life Notes* is informed in various ways by a broad intersection of her political, philosophical, and creative preoccupations. Dedicated 'to all the lively ladies', *Life Notes* announces itself as a feminist project, in keeping with its author's modelling of feminism-through-practice in her leadership of the Poetry Project and editorship of *Angel Hair* and *The World* magazines, as well as her subsequent clear positioning of texts including the epic poem *The Iovis Trilogy* Waldman (2011) and *Trickster Feminism* Waldman (2018) as feminist undertakings. The collection pre-dates by about a year Françoise d'Eaubonne's coining of the term 'ecofeminism' in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), but it shares d'Eaubonne's understanding of the intractable enmeshment of patriarchy and the oppression of both women and the natural world, and puts into dialogue Waldman's views on the rights of women and her attentiveness to her environment. It is also underpinned by her Buddhist sensibilities (she first became a student of Buddhism in the late 1960s) and by her related critique of war and industrialization. Thematically, *Life Notes* is aligned with the New American Poetry in its 'powerful hunger for closer contact with the most taken-for-granted and familiar aspects of the quotidian, a desire for greater knowledge [. . .] of our daily lives' (Epstein 2016, p. 4). Formally and stylistically, it is experimental, employing what Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies elsewhere in Waldman's work (to my knowledge, *Life Notes* itself has not until now been approached critically) as 'tactics of heterogeneity of diction and allusion, and an enhanced textuality as the page of poetry holds more than usual—more space, marks, non-letters, pictures, gestures, diagrams' (DuPlessis 2006, p. 180). In its emphasis on close observation, its efforts to fuse word and world, and its flowing composition by field (an approach Waldman describes as 'really catching the world as it flies with its minute particulars' (Waldman 1998, n.p.)), *Life Notes* also bears the influence of Charles Olson's paradigm-shifting manifesto 'Projective Verse' (1950). This manifesto, like *Life Notes*, emphasized the rejection of received poetic structures and argued for the elevation of sound over sense and for the transmission of movement and breath through a poetic engagement with typography and shape. Of course, with its numerous references to 'men', 'boys', 'brothers', and so on, in 'Projective Verse', as DuPlessis notes, 'poetry and poetics are gendered male . . . and the speaking female is missing' (DuPlessis 1996, p. 46). Waldman's *Life Notes* (in addition to her more canonical works such as *Fast Speaking Woman* and *The Iovis Trilogy*) can also therefore be read as a feminist re-imagination or re-enactment of Olson's manifesto, asserting the existence of a fluid poetic energy engaged in complex and active thought about the relationship between language, gender, personhood, and the environment.

The cumulative effect of writing at such an intersection is a collection of poems that is more than the sum of its parts—*Life Notes* is a moving, witty, and attentive examination of the environment (human and nonhuman, or more-than-human) in which Waldman writes and lives. It too is a 'dissipative structure': 'a flowing apparent wholeness, highly organized but always in process' (Waldman 1996, p. 127), and akin, in its radical decentering of human consciousness and 'dense, rhizomic web of inputs and interactions among all life forms' (Fazzino 2016, p. 22), to Jakob von Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt* (or environment). More than this, it breaches the gap between word and world, giving voice, shape, and form to what we might call the poet's 'ecology of knowing', per Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation. Waldman, like Sedgwick, 'doesn't want to draw much ontological distinction

between academic theory and everyday theory', and 'has a lot of concern for the quality of other people's and [her] own practices of knowing and experiencing' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 145). The result, given this, and (perhaps unsurprisingly) also given Waldman's feminist, Buddhist, anti-war, and anti-industrialization credentials, is an ecopoetic, ecofeminist text that enacts a 'poetics of presence' (Knickerbocker 2012, p. 8)—in other words, it manifests a quiet green politics in calling attention to our everyday environments and asserting or revealing them as being worth paying attention to.¹

Life Notes takes note—abundantly but without sentimentality—of the nonhuman world, from the cattle, fish, and birds of the untitled opening poem, to the moths, bees, and beetles of the titular long poem 'Life Notes', via lakes, mountains, stars, and the elements. Waldman's poems are not always directly about environmental or ecological degradation, but they are rarely *not* about that either—her attention to and celebration of her environments can be read as a model for how to productively engage with our surroundings, even when those surroundings (and the animals within them) appear mundane or banal. Waldman's ecology in *Life Notes* is not one of Siberian tigers or polar icecaps; in the poems, the more dramatic or eye-catching aspects of nature are suborned to what humans tend to see as less interesting, including insects, snakes, worms, germs, fish, shells, and coral. (Elsewhere in her oeuvre, however, we do encounter the kinds of creatures and environments that the human world is conditioned to think of as spectacular, particularly in the context of her writing about humankind's exploitation of nature—including the barracuda of *Iovis II*, the 'mysterious manatee, the endangered mammal of coastal waters, and the grey wolf' (Waldman 2009, p. i) which inspired *Manatee/Humanity*, the plutonium-ravaged environs imagined in the 1982 video-poem *Uh Oh Plutonium*, and the 'Extinction Aria' of (Waldman 2020)'s collaborative album *Sciamachy*. This, however, is not the project of *Life Notes*.) Ecopoets, as J. Scott Bryson reminds us, 'render their conceptions of the world in such a way that their poems become models for how to approach the landscape surrounding us so that we view it as meaningful place rather than abstract space' (Bryson 2005, p. 12)—in other words, framing our environment as somewhere where we might *stop* and *be*, rather than simply as phenomena *through which we move*. That said, Waldman conceives of space as that which moves *around and through her*—and her model of space is not one of abstraction, but is closer to Foucault's view that 'we do not live in a homogenous and empty space, but in a space that is saturated with qualities' (Foucault 1984, p. 46). She meaningfully inhabits (and, like Brainard's yellow pansy, is rooted within) her qualities-saturated environment, placing herself and her poems in the world in order to mediate and better understand her (and our) relationship with the nonhuman. In repeatedly eliding conceptions of the human and the nonhuman, as I will discuss, she illuminates the ways in which the 'natural' world is almost always touched by the human, and refutes the widely-held cultural fantasy that nature is self-evidently restorative or redemptive and thereby somehow at a remove from humankind (she does not 'go to it'—the natural world is always already a part of where she is). *Life Notes* manifests the ecocritical notion of the world as a precarious community of creatures that, tenuously and never straightforwardly, includes humans. As Bryson explains, in *The West Side of Any Mountain*, drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan's famous dichotomy of space and place,

¹ As this special issue of *Humanities* suggests, ecocritical or 'green' discussion of Beat writing remains an emergent field. Environmental scholarship in this area has historically tended to focus on those writers whose pastoral and/or environmental visions have been more explicitly articulated or have formed a focal aspect of their work, notably Gary Snyder, Joanne Kyger, Michael McClure, and, to a lesser degree (despite their more canonical status), Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Anne Waldman. However, this frame of enquiry is expanding its focus to include both canonical and marginal texts which take a variety of environmental political positions (from *Naked Lunch* to *Life Notes*) that have hitherto escaped attention. Recent scholarship exploring the relationship between Beat writing and ecological and ecocritical matters, or (more broadly) reading Beat work for its treatment of the natural world, includes Sarah Daw's *Writing Nature in Cold War American Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), Chad Weidner's *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecocritical Mind* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), Jimmy Fazzino's *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* (Dartmouth College Press, 2016), and Paige Tovey's *The Transatlantic Eco-Romanticism of Gary Snyder* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). As I have indicated in this essay, Waldman's oeuvre is consistently ecofeminist, ecopoetic, and ecodidactic, warranting further critical discussion in this regard—not least of the key works including *Uh Oh Plutonium* (Waldman 1982), *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), *The Iovis Trilogy* (2011), *Gossamurmur* (2013), and *Extinction Aria* (2017).

ecopoets offer a vision of the world that values the interaction between two interdependent and seemingly paradoxical desires, both of which are attempts to respond to the modern divorce between humanity and the rest of nature: (1) to create place, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us; and (2) to value space, recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable (8).

Although Waldman's environment as presented in *Life Notes* is indeed such a fusion (and acknowledgement) of the known and the unknowable, enacted through her language and poetic forms, she also asks us to move away from a dichotomous, human-centred understanding of space and place, not least through her consistent troubling of a stable, human, lyric subject. She shares Nieuwenhuis and Crouch's view of space as 'multiple, differential, personal, experiential, and playful' (Nieuwenhuis and Crouch 2017, p. xix). She also anticipates feminist geographer Doreen Massey's argument, posited some twenty years after *Life Notes* was published, that the 'view of place as bounded [. . .] as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity' is fundamentally inaccurate (Massey 1994, p. 1), contending instead that places should be viewed as 'open and porous', with 'unfixed, contested and multiple' identities (Massey 1994, p. 5). Because of this, Waldman engages in a form of writing that ecocritic Scott Knickerbocker terms 'sensuous poesis', or 'the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature'. Such writing, Knickerbocker argues,

undo[es] simple oppositions between humans and nature; sensuous poesis operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are both distinct and inseparable from the rest of nature. Rather than attempt to erase the artifice of [. . .] poems (to make them seem more natural and supposedly, then, closer to nature), [such poetry] unapologetically embrace[s] artifice—not for its own sake, but as a way to relate meaningfully to the natural world (2).

Waldman uses figurative language and experimental forms and typography in an ecopoetic ambition to 'help us experience the world as more than inert, unresponsive matter' and 'to deepen thinking about the relationship between language and nature' (Knickerbocker 2012, pp. 6, 8). She personifies or part-personifies nonhuman actors in her poetry, giving voice to insects, birds, even to the moon, suggesting (perhaps following, perhaps expanding on Uexküll) that all natural phenomena should be understood as subjects. She manipulates her forms, which are motile, expressive, and energetic, so that her poems *look like* nature as well as being *about* nature, modelling (however abstractly) ecological processes (not least through her use of echoes, patterns, and repetition, as well as line placement and drawings). She disintegrates, fragments, or disorients the lyric subject—per Olson, she 'get[s] rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego' (Olson 1997, p. 247)—in order to simultaneously assert and disavow monolithic authorial positionality, blending the poetic self with her environment (the human as both distinct and inseparable from nature, the poet as both distinct and inseparable from her readers or listeners). In this way, the gap between world and word is mediated and broken down, 'the interconnections between nature and culture' held up to the light (Glotfelty 1996, p. xviii), the world read ecologically and as a poem, laying 'bare the contingency between poem and world; both are environments in which we live' (Selby 2013, p. 128). Poem and world, culture and nature, *Life Notes* insists (akin to Bruno Latour's conceptualisation of the hybridity of 'nature-culture' (Latour 1993, pp. 7, 87)), are non-dichotomous and at once real and constructed.

Such writing is inevitably demanding and disorienting in its deviancy. Reading it, our position is continually—and productively—uncertain. At times, we are situated in the role of a listener, as when we 'hear' the long poem 'Life Notes', a poem which, Waldman writes, is 'meant to be sung' (Waldman (1973, p. 35), and which even gives us something to sing along to in a section that reframes the well-known spiritual 'Dem Bones' ('mountain bone connected to the valley bone/valley bone connected to the soil bone' (55)). We are also,

of course, ‘singing’ ‘Life Notes’ ourselves, as we read, and this shifts us simultaneously into the tenuous liminal space of the ever-precarious lyric ‘I’, the poem functioning as thought-writing which we as readers must articulate. Sometimes we appear to be the object of direct address; sometimes, per John Stuart Mill, to be overhearing ‘the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind’ (Mill 1976, p. 12);² and sometimes to be *looking* (at the ‘enhanced textuality’ of the pages or at the drawings, by Brainard, George Schneeman, and Waldman herself, that punctuate the text). Waldman’s poems enact what Timothy Clark, in *The Value of Ecocriticism*, calls the ‘art of the human limit or border’, in which ‘language and thought become defamiliarised precisely as they move towards experiences beyond the human scales and norms which they usually express’ (Clark 2019, p. 62). This is, of course, one of ecopoetry’s crucial ambitions. To borrow from Leonard M. Scigaj, ecopoetry aims ‘to challenge and reconfigure the reader’s perceptions so to put the book down and live life more fully in all possible dimensions of the moment of firsthand experience within nature’s supportive second skin and to become more responsible about that necessary second skin’ (Scigaj 1999, p. 41).

Life Notes bears out Scigaj’s notion of the challenge and reconfiguration of readers’ perceptions of their everyday lives that he sees as integral to ecopoetry. Such challenges and reconfigurations indicate the need for readers to approach poems differently, rejecting the view that they are mysteries waiting to be solved using preconceived ideas and perceptions or that they somehow offer what Arthur Davison Ficke, in a 1912 sonnet, called ‘a refuge from the stormy days’ (Ficke 1912, n.p.)—in other words, an escape from the ‘real’ world. Instead, like Sedgwick, *Life Notes*—in its ‘flowing apparent wholeness, highly organized but always in process’ (Waldman 1996, p. 127)—asks that we position ourselves ‘reparatively’ in order to maintain an openness to the ‘realistic and necessary’ possibility of experiencing surprise (Sedgwick 2003, p. 146). A reparatively positioned reader, in Heather Love’s useful take on Sedgwick’s theory, ‘stays local, gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions [. . .] prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy and making whole’ (Love 2010, pp. 237–8). Reading *Life Notes* reparatively, in this way, consolidates the collection’s ecopoetic credentials and reveals it to be more than just American nature writing, even if human exploitation, destruction, or abuse of the natural world—or what Juliana Spahr refers to as ‘the bulldozer off to the side’ (Spahr 2011, p. 69)—isn’t always clearly visible or expressly articulated in the poems. This is because reparative reading is contingent on the surprise of hope. As Sedgwick explains:

Because there can be terrible surprises [. . .] there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did (146).

Life Notes, fractured and full of part-objects that readers must try to organize, is energized by the cohering hope engendered by good surprises: from the aural image of return in the ‘distant haunting sounds of geese/retracing paths across northern skies/at sunset’ (2) to the smile-inducing purring of a cat (‘motor of cat/cat motor’ (44)) subtly introduced as a counterpoint to the ‘obnoxious’ accumulated sound of boat engines on Lake Owassa; from the ‘(silent)’ speech of the moon (68) to the surprising revelation that

A late autumn honeybee
entering a period of relative inactivity

² In his 1833 essay, Mill writes: ‘Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener’.

within the winter hive
may stay alive for 6 months or more (38).

Such hope, such surprises, suggest the possibility of an ecological and environmental future quite different from the one we are always already on the cusp of experiencing—indeed, bringing to pass. In this world—and also, crucially, in the world of *Life Notes*, of Anne Waldman's New Jersey childhood, summers spent at Lake Owassa at the foot of Kittatinny Mountain; of Anne Waldman's adulthood, summers in Bolinas, California or the Caribbean islands—not only is a new kind of futurity possible but the past is suggested to 'have happened differently from the way it actually did'. 'Life Notes' begins with an incantatory, even polyphonic, evocation of the landscape, as if Waldman is attempting a kind of spell, in order to conjure it into existence for readers. 'The Lake Beyond the Hill', or Lake Owassa, and Kittatinny Mountain, which feeds it and which 'rises/rises/rises', are introduced in a section which ends with the word 'means', repeated three times, the words placed one above the other on the page (36–7). If ecopoetry "'mean[s]" the world around us' (Lysaght 2011, p. 82), then it holds that the world around us also 'means' poetry, as here, each giving meaning to the other—and the world in both contexts, therefore, matters, signifies, and has value. The incantation, the 'meaning' of Lake Owassa, is swiftly intruded upon by the sound of a 'loud indoor TV', by the sight of a 'horrible stinking swimming pool' (37), and, before too long, by the 'incredible roar' of 'the noisy obnoxious motorboats/pulling along these hotshit guys going/water-skiing' (43–4). The poem ends with an oblique meditation on the possibility of 're-entry'—of reclaiming not just the future, but the past too, through a process of revisitation of experience and phenomena in the hope that they might be, or become, different:

Man grappling with wasp, Bolinas Summer 1968
is not the same man grappling with the same
wasp, Bolinas Summer 1971
same man, different wasp
*
Beware the different wasp
& his bite
*
I bite into my sandwich with gusto
put my swim suit on
& reenter (72)

Here, Waldman gestures to the repeated failures of humans to meaningfully encounter the animal world—year after year, people feel the need to 'grapple' with summer wasps. Counterpointed with this 'same man', who is unable to learn from past encounters, to change, or to adapt, is a 'different wasp'—literally, the wasp is different, but Waldman, in warning of what she calls 'his bite' rather than, as we might have expected, of his sting, suggests that he is also a kind of hybrid wasp, a wasp species that has evolved and grown teeth. The 'man', meanwhile, has remained the 'same'. It is here that Sedgwick's notion of hope and surprise is apposite. The wasp's surprising 'bite' becomes Waldman's own, as she bites into her sandwich, partially eliding the distinction between the human and the nonhuman, before she dons her 'swim suit' and prepares to 'reenter'. We are not told into what or where she plans this re-entry, but the implication is that she's going back in the water, once again immersing herself in that very different world (which is also, of course, a part of 'our' world) in which very different creatures exist much more successfully than humans ever could there.

There is a clear connection, here, between this moment of re-entry into the water at Bolinas and the bodies of water with which the poem began—'The Lake Beyond the Hill' and the 'horrible stinking swimming pool'. Is she bound to re-swim in both? Perhaps—

such is the trauma of hope. Yet 'reenter' also suggests motion, connection, and repetition, as does Waldman's implied correlative link with those earlier moments in her poem, and this further unravels the damaging separation of humankind from nature, implicit in much environmental writing. She writes in 'I is Another': 'look at the way nature is [. . .] alive with pattern. [. . .] At the deepest level of nature, nothing is fixed' (Waldman 1996, p. 127). Waldman's pattern of behavior, and pattern of language, re-entering the water in the world of the poem, evokes those unfixed but nonetheless patterned aspects of the natural world: 'insect colonies, cellular interactions, pulsar and quasar stars, DNA code, memory patterns in human minds, and the symmetrical exchanges of energy in the collision of subatomic particles [. . .] highly organized but always in process' (Waldman 1996, p. 127). To 'reenter' also suggests determination and commitment, and there is a further tonal connection here to the untitled opening poem of *Life Notes*, in which, in contrast to a sequence of innocently somnolent 'cows', 'fish', and 'birds', Waldman is watchfully, determinedly, emphatically, worriedly, (and, in italics) '*not sleeping*' (1), as indeed she is at crucial moments in 'Life Notes', too ('I'm not sleeping but/I'm being still/I'm being still/I'm being very still' (52)).

Waldman's preoccupation with the spirit of determination, commitment, and repetition associated with the idea of re-entry and the mysteries of the natural world emerges at intervals throughout *Life Notes*. The imagist three-line poem (it is not quite a haiku) 'Distant Haunting Sounds of Geese' evokes the ethereal, but nonetheless relatively common (in North America), sound of migrating geese. The poem presents an auditory moment, an image that is heard as well as seen:

DISTANT HAUNTING SOUNDS OF GEESE

distant haunting sounds of geese
retracing paths across northern skies
at sunset (2)

Just as the geese return from migration, 'retracing paths across northern skies', so too the poem's title retraces itself in the first line, enmeshing the returning flight of the geese with the language in which they are evoked. The poem's form also suggests movement and return—not only are the lines placed in such a way that they draw our eyes across the page but they also leave open the possibility of reading in reverse, of retracing our readerly path through the poem: 'at sunset/retracing paths across northern skies/distant haunting sounds of geese'.

In 'Icy Rose', a poem preoccupied with the idea of 'feeling space' (11), form similarly shapes meaning: once again, Waldman's 'tactics of heterogeneity' draw our eyes back and forth, up and down, across the page, as motile, unfixed, fragmentary lines intrude upon or meet one another, and meet, too, with extended spacing, multiple repeated question marks, unclosed parentheses, lines presented in caps, and assorted dashes and lines. The poem addresses the mysteries and ultimate unknowability of the natural world, asking determinedly:

but WHO ARE YOU?
& why do you dress so strange?
& who are your parents?
& whence have you come? (13)

The poem intimates themes of loss and disappearance, yoking language to the loss of biodiversity through yet more freighted questions:

where has that last sentence (speaking—you were speaking—gone?)
& where have the birds really gone?
& where is the Ice Age now?
& who does this poet think he is? or she is? (11)

The questions preoccupying the speaker are of a piece with the experience of reading 'Icy Rose', which feels abstract, provoking more questions than it answers (the poem

contains 27 question marks). Once again readers are offered an opportunity to engage in the ‘fracturing’, ‘traumatic’, but also surprising and hopeful project of organizing ‘the fragments and part-objects’ we encounter (this approach also occupies *The Iovis Trilogy*). What does it mean to ‘feel space’? How *does* one ‘feel space’? Who is the ‘I’, ‘this poet’, the ‘you’ in this poem? Waldman’s mercurial lyricism, multi-positionality, polyvocality, and multiple angles enable her to blend herself with others, human and nonhuman, both within the context of the poem and externally, and, of course, with her environment (‘I danced with the big brown bear . . . I ran thru the snow like a young puppy’ (12)).

There is hope in the simultaneous ambition of both return and of progress—of the past meeting the future in a spirit of attentiveness, of ‘being affected, taking joy, and making whole’ (Love 2010, pp. 237–8)—and in the possibility of the removal of obstructions between the demonstrably interdependent human and nonhuman worlds. In a section near the end of Part One of ‘Life Notes’, Waldman suggests that ‘Health/Long Life/Peace’ are not only associated with ‘birds/flowers/big rain showers’, but are actually dependent on them for survival.

Health
Long Life
Peace
birds
flowers

big rain showers

Sailors whistling for a wind

Hopis dancing for the beans to sprout

& they do sprout

for you see

Man is Alone
but he has Nature around him
if he sees

&

if he doesn’t
he’s through (51)

The poem’s ‘enhanced textuality’ and form is key to this section, which is once again fragmentary and motile, the lines placed at erratic intervals across the page, a graphical ensemble over which our eyes must widely roam, again requiring ‘the reparatively positioned reader [. . .] to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters’ (Sedgwick 2003, p. 46). It is suggestive of contingency, and also, therefore (again), of hope (‘if he sees’)—hope that the future might be different from the past, that the past itself ‘could have happened differently from the way it actually did’, that ‘Man’ (‘connected to the sun bone’ (56)) might learn to meaningfully engage with the nonhuman world, and that readers might yet learn to live reparatively, to ‘put the book down and live life more fully in all possible dimensions of the moment’, becoming ‘more responsible about that necessary second skin’ (Scigaj 1999, p. 41).

Waldman’s sense of the possibility of a synergetic relationship with the nonhuman world—that ‘necessary second skin’—is articulated in different ways in several key poems in *Life Notes*. In the eponymous poem, in a clear instance of the urban pastoral, we read of ‘the timeless bird’, existing in the context of ‘asphalt’, ‘a school built recently’, and ‘Avenue A’:

the timeless bird
& now I hear little sparrow

New York City

...

he is always

in some city long ago (54)

The lines 'he is *always*/in some city *long ago*' confirms the bird's 'timeless' quality: like the wasp, 'he' is of course not the same bird that is 'always in some city', but the poem transfigures him into a kind of mythic, immortal creature whose existence transcends that of the human inhabitants of the city.³ In 'Crazy Without You' (22–25), Waldman evokes a human relationship mediated by its connection with, observation of, and attentiveness to the natural world, cosmic order, and weather patterns. The poem, which opens with a twenty-line celebration, in the form of a descriptive list, of the very brightest stars in the galaxy, from 'the ruby-red Beta Pegasi' to the 'bright white diamond dog-star Sirius', has at its heart an image of

you & I

arms around each other

trying to understand

what is happening (23)

The poem is marked by a yearning to connect, physically and emotionally, across distances (both real and metaphorical) and to use natural phenomena to do so: 'how long does it take for me to get to you?/star/& why so hard?' the speaker asks. They also press for meteorological details, enquiring 'raining where you are?/is it snowing?/cloudy?' This poem, too, frays the margins between human self and wild creatures. Inhabiting the wolf, the speaker proclaims: 'I'll be in/(howling Yosemite moon)'—the parentheses here suggesting an awareness of the ultimate inviolability of such a boundary (more of which later in this essay). The margin between human selves and the cosmos is also blurred, as the poem ends with a couplet that imaginatively transcends the toil (emotional, literal) of 'fighting thru the dark years', in which the couple in question have become stars themselves:

me the purple troubled one

& you the bluest of the blue (25).

In '26', Waldman uses a wind motif to weave a connection between the human and the nonhuman. 'warm in bed', there is 'no more wind', and yet the poem itself belies this, moving like the wind, back and forth across the page as Waldman evokes another relationship that exists both *with* and *because* of the natural world. 'no more wind' could be a plea or a statement: the ambiguity evokes the intensity of wind, and, by extension, the elements; and, further, as the poem indicates, the togetherness and the synergy that the elements enable.

I see us as being at one point

in the wind

I see us as being at one point cloudy

at one point clear & bright

I give myself to you

before the light

I see us as being together

before the wind (21)

³ He is also related to the 'Wood Thrush', who also appears in 'Life Notes' and who is similarly abiding, being the subject of poetry by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Browning, Hardy, Dickinson, Thomas, Lorde, and Hughes, among others.

Once again, the nature of the lyric 'I', 'us', and 'you' remains abstruse, frayed, and fugitive, whilst beings here are framed as skies (stars and clouds) and the effect of the lines '*before the light*' and '*before the wind*' (my italics) is to animate and part-personify the elemental, giving it life, giving it subjectivity, and again blurring the boundary between human and universe.

An early poem in *Life Notes*, 'Pressure' (3–10), works to achieve this effect in a different way. 'Pressure' is a list poem that declaims 'no way out' of, 'no way off', or 'no escape from' over 150 natural, semi-natural, and fully human-made (both physical and social) environments, asking us to wonder about the connections between such a range of places of apparent irrevocable entrapment. The places and spaces listed, both tangible and incorporeal, include the mundane ('the motel room', 'the department store', 'the print shop'), the magisterial ('the formidable mountain', 'the glistening valley', 'the Great Barrier Reef'), the galactic ('the moon, the sun's radiant energy' 'the cosmic mudhole'), the urban ('the noisy bar', 'the World Trade Center', 'the glossy IBM retail showroom on William Street'), the rural ('the barn/the farm, the chicken coop'), the academic ('the doctorate the MA the BA', 'the history of music', 'structural anthropology'), the cultural ('the Donizetti opera', 'Joan Sutherland's astounding voice', 'the numerous art galleries of New York and L.A.'), the animal ('the barking dogs chasing the deer weakened from/a long winter', 'whippoorwills swallows gulls'), the social ('the family dinner/the cocktail party/the birthday celebration'), the specifically unspecific ('amazing grace', 'my sneakers', 'progress'), and more. As the poem's form suggests, 'pressure' is something that builds, accumulates, and often needs to be released: the poem's length, quick pace, and the relentless following of one seemingly inescapable environment with another, over and over, creates the sensation of being on a fast-moving train, unable to get off. From the cosmic mudhole' to 'the telephone booth', 'the White House' to 'the Amazon', Waldman moves swiftly, explanations for connections between environments sometimes immanent in the poem (for example, 'the starry night' is followed by 'the Louvre', gesturing to Van Gogh, the suggestion being, as on Brainard's cover, that art or culture is the connection between the natural and the manmade worlds) but always intuitively and never explicitly. The extraordinary levelling effect of this—placing a widely divergent range of environments in the same linguistic space and suggesting that it is possible to experience 'pressure' at being in or on all of them—enacts a refusal to fetishize the natural or to see it as somehow disconnected from or inherently better than the manmade or the human (as much nature poetry has tended to do, from Wordsworth's *Prelude* onwards). This is the quintessential poem in the world. Natural environments, from the earthly to the galactic, are shown to be inextricably entangled not just with physical manmade environments but with art and history and politics ('the history of Russia no escape/China, Japan/the history of music, no escape/the voices of Pygmies singing in the rain forest'). From 'the rain forest' to 'the Met', these are our contexts, the things and places and spaces we live with and in and around and because of and for:

the Great Chain of Being, no escape
the Magnetic Field, no escape. (9)

Waldman returns to this theme in 'Life Notes', in which, as I have suggested, human and nonhuman contexts are once again enmeshed in various compelling ways. Early in the poem, the 'young & amorous' speaker asks

Can you lend me money?
Can you lend me music?
Can you lend me ear?

'I need I need', she continues;
I need you, outer space
I need you, deciduous forest
& you, California sunshine

& you, the wise old owl (Robert Nighthawk) (38)

Waldman frames her need for the trappings of humanity (from money to music to simple human contact) as being just as significant as her need for natural wildness (space, forests, sunshine, and wildlife), drawing an illuminating parallel between the 'wise old owl' and legendary blues musician Robert Nighthawk. Later in the poem the lines 'ok kids/my name is Joanne/* /ok kids my name is Ocean' (43)⁴ further destabilize both lyric ego (per Olson) and the human-centred hierarchy educed by the water-skiing frat boys on Lake Owassa. This levelling elision between human and ocean works to present the world as a community that is, to borrow from Bryson, 'just that, a community, rather than a world of creatures and natural beings with whom the privileged human self interacts' (3). Time and again, Waldman uses her poetry to examine the possibility of stepping outside of the role of privileged human being self-interacting with nature, as we can see in these lines, also from 'Life Notes'.

Unless a woman approaches the things that matter
with quiet in her heart
with singleness of heart
leaving herself outside the door
How can her mind enter the rain or the sun
the corn or the snake
without breaking down that door?

*

of course

but *no* door

*

dance the Dance of Life! (49)

Once again, she is, here, 'leaving herself outside the door', working to move between the human and nonhuman worlds, the world of doors and the world of rain, sun, corn, and snakes ('but *no* door') in an effort to remove barriers between the human and nonhuman ('with quiet in her heart/with singleness of heart'), wanting to be at one with, to be a part of, 'the rain or the sun/the corn or the snake'. It is worth noting again that, like Rachel (Carson 2000) in *Silent Spring* (first published in 1962), Waldman is interested in thinking about the importance of the generic, non-specific, and undramatic parts of the nonhuman world, the crucial implication being that the small, the local, and the unglamorous aspects of nature are equally as valuable to the sustenance of all life on earth ('the Dance of Life!') as those more immediately beautiful or vulnerable creatures or environments that tend to inhabit the imagination more strongly when we think about conservation or habitat destruction. Waldman variously refers to herself as both animal—'Lucky animal!' (40)—and vegetable—'vegetable silence indicates vegetable "ME"' (47)—further disrupting the human/nonhuman binary hierarchy. In doing so, she enacts a version of Jakob von Uexküll's imaginary stroll through a flowering meadow, 'vividly imagin[ing] ... each animal's environment' in the understanding that in doing so 'the previous surroundings of the subject are completely reconfigured' (Uexküll [1934] 2010, pp. 43, 70). Finding a moth in her closet, she not only personifies her as a 'pretty dusky maid' (70) but she describes her using the same phrase she used earlier in the poem to evoke *herself* as a child—'spacey & free'—once again collapsing the distance between human and nonhuman by placing herself in the same referential frame as an animal. Just as Waldman was 'spacey & free' as a little girl, so the moth is now, suggesting both meaningful philosophical kinship and a kind of mutual spiritual inhabitation. This moment in *Life Notes* anticipates the

⁴ This is likely a reference to Joanne Kyger, who as Waldman notes in her Introduction to Kyger's *Strange Big Moon*, was nicknamed 'Miss Kids' in 'the highly competitive gossip community around The Place, a bar in North Beach' (Waldman 2000, n.p.).

similar minute detail and breadth of range in Waldman's *Iovis Trilogy* (the end of chapter XV, Book II), in which she inserts a prose story by her son Ambrose, called 'A Day in the Life of a Malaria-Carrying Mosquito', told from the perspective of a female mosquito who drinks some blood, suffers an insecticide-related bereavement, and eventually dies (swatted). As Alice Notley has suggested, this could be 'any being's life story, insect, fish, mammal, perhaps even star' (Notley 1998, p. 123). In sharing the identity of the moth and assuming the identity of the mosquito, these poems explore the notion of a meaningful estrangement from self—not in the sense of being unmoored, but, rather, as an opportunity for cross-species empathy and identification.

The 'pretty dusky maid' is the second moth to appear in, and shape, the narrative of 'Life Notes'. Some twenty pages prior, a different moth, 'careening in air', flits manically 'at my window screen', yet another instance of the nonhuman world colliding, in this case literally, with the human.

he want the light & he want it now
 so pretty
 so dumb
 so blind
 uncontrollable muscle urge to LIGHT
 brief light go out when I sleep
 brief life go out
 batting my screen
 ah flippy so flippy!

*

I comment on the animals
 & they withhold comment (48)

Waldman's evocative depiction of an experience so common as to render it otherwise unremarkable exemplifies Andrew Epstein's observation that the 'New American poetry differs from modernism in that it inaugurates a new, more extreme orientation to everyday life as everyday, in terms of both form and content' (8). It is also an illustration of the close, empathetic attention Waldman pays to the less obviously spectacular aspects of the natural world. The act of making her environment, and the animals within it, a meaningful part of her everyday is also an act of both empathy and love. Here, the moth is again personified, the nonhuman is again given voice and subjectivity, these lines suggesting a concerted effort to approach and to imagine the psyche of the 'batting' moth, to understand his motivations, his 'uncontrollable muscle urge to LIGHT'. As with the later moth, who 'stares out' at her from the closet space, Waldman attempts to see, and to depict for her readers, per Uexküll, the world as it appears through insect eyes.

This isn't easy, or even possible, as well she knows. 'I comment on the animals/& they withhold comment', she writes, acknowledging that this iteration of the 'ecology of knowing', of human relationships with the nonhuman, is, as far as we can tell, often an overwhelmingly—and frustratingly—one-way process. Part way through 'Life Notes' there is an empty page, save for two words: 'tap tap' (41). The sheer amount of empty space on this page is a further example of yet more 'enhanced textuality', and the words 'tap tap' (keeping in mind that this poem 'is meant to be sung') are disorientingly liminal—we simultaneously *hear* and *read* them. This is, in Clark's formulation, 'art of the human limit or border'. In defamiliarising language and thought in this way, 'precisely as they move towards experiences beyond the human scales and norms which they usually express' (62), Waldman indicates that the attempt to communicate with that which withholds comment, which will not or cannot communicate back in the way we desire, which is in all kinds of ways beyond human experience, is akin to the wildly popular nineteenth-century practice of table-tapping—a fantastical group effort to communicate with the spirits of the dead.

And yet the phrase ‘withhold comment’ suggests agency and choice on the part of the animals—it implies the possibility that an active *decision* has been made, somewhere, somehow, to remain silent, inscrutable, and out of reach. Humans, by contrast, are shown in the lines immediately following this couplet to rely on the nonhuman, on ‘the animals’, in order to articulate key aspects of themselves:

BIRDS, BEES & STORKS is an animated film
in which the narrator provides the voice of
an embarrassed father struggling to tell his
teenage son the facts of life. He manages
to communicate very little information (49)

Here, Waldman ironically gestures toward the ways in which humans use the nonhuman to articulate natural processes of life: too uncomfortable with our own animality, we repeatedly, sometimes nonsensically, turn to the nonhuman world in an effort to explain it. As Bryson has argued, ecopoets are faced with a paradoxical challenge: to make ‘a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us’ whilst also ‘recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable’. Knickerbocker, too, draws attention to this paradox, noting that ‘humans are distinct yet inseparable from the rest of nature’. For Waldman—whose *Life Notes* embodies just such a paradox—language and culture, specifically the ‘field’ of the poem (even poetic terminology tends to be green), hold the key to broaching what can seem like an inexorably inalienable divide between the human and the nonhuman, in order to envision, if not ensure, the survival of both.

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