Beyond Flexible Nature: Raymond Williams after Post-Fordism

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> The more relentlessly socialization commands all moments of human and interhuman immediacy, the smaller the capacity of men to recall that this web has evolved, and the more irresistible its natural appearance.
>
> Theodor W. Adorno (2003: 358)

> Critique only runs out of steam if thinking becomes the handmaiden of its natural surroundings, only if the world of networks is taken to be the one and only network-world.
>
> Alexander Galloway (2015: 10)

In his 1972 essay "Ideas of Nature", Raymond Williams argues that "it is not primarily ideas that have a history; it is societies. And then what often seem opposed ideas can in the end be seen as parts of a single social process" (1980: 78). Nearly a half-century later we can begin to understand the implications of this historical materialist insight into the 'ecological era' that Williams himself helped to introduce. As a thinker of conjuncture and transition, Williams provides a methodology for situating transformations of nature and culture within changing social contexts. He did so politically, in essays on socialism and ecology; as a critic, in works like *The Country and the City*; and as an author, in novels that explore the confluence of extraction, culture, and the *longue durée* in the Black Mountains. Today, one such idea of Nature resides in the metaphors and models for interaction and creative flexibility in the post-industrial imagination, as well as the entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberalism in its deregulatory (as opposed to disciplinary) guise. By pairing "Ideas of Nature" with "Images of Society", an earlier concept from *The Long Revolution*, this essay considers how these figures have reinforced one another in the late twentieth century. It asks, in a world seemingly overflowing with naturalized and flexible networks, what explains this dominant image, and where might the sources of its successor be located as we enter new conjunctures of political power across the geological scales of climate change and urbanization?

Turning to Williams allows us to historicize the recent past and to ask how a particular "idea of Nature" has come to both narratively legitimate and challenge post-Fordist transformations. Flexible nature refers not only to the organizational imagination of networked contingency but also to substance, as the material stuff of the world is increasingly described in aleatory terms. The concept draws on David Harvey's historicization of the postmodern condition as a shift to regimes of flexible accumulation through finance, short-term contracts, and unstable reference, and similarly on what post-autonomists call the social factory (later the ecological factory), in which immaterial labor, proliferating reference, and biopolitical production subsumes conceptual distinctions between culture and environment (Harvey 1990; Negri 1989). These historical accounts differ from science studies theorists like Bruno Latour whose ontological hybridizations (e.g. natureculture) lack the immanent dialectics of Adorno's "natural-history" which takes into account historical changes in the natural world and historical changes in the concepts of nature and culture (2006). As a Marxist, Williams is in the latter tradition, understanding that materialism lies not only in scientific descriptions or discrete locations, but in the development of contending classes and technological forces that produce abstractions like Nature and Society. Instead of passing judgement on true or false images or positing a correct image that will reconcile social relationships with the environment, Williams focuses on its *uses*, bringing into relief the terrain (real and imagined) in which struggles over ownership and organization are waged. While it may seem perverse to describe recent decades of accelerated environmental destruction as the ecological era, it nevertheless names a moment in which the environmental contradictions of global capitalism lend ideas of Nature a metaphysical cachet beyond simple greenwashing. As ecology becomes the dominant figure for contingent social relations (and vice versa), flexible nature retroactively appears as a cultural response to the environmental crisis under neoliberalism. It combines a deregulatory ethos and naturalized figures of entrepreneurial agency with Romantic notions of creative disruption and spontaneous order. It is a contradictory expression that says as much about the creation of market societies, as it does about the absence of a left capable of articulating individual freedom with the need for democratic control over socio-ecological relations of production and reproduction.

Williams' account of cultural change helps us to recognize and move beyond this impasse. In what follows, I draw on Williams to think through corresponding images of Nature and Society from the 1970s to the present. First, by understanding how an idea of Nature has emerged in a particular conjuncture to reconcile a variety of ideological (which is to say material) interests; and second, to look for emergent environmental sensibilities with the understanding that changes in ideas are constituted by changes in production. Williams' methodology allows critics to compare developments across different fields to discover shared affinities, enabling narratives, and implicit values that

operate in a given moment. His formula of dominant, residual, and emergent culture has been expanded by scholarship that highlights additional dimensions of cultural politics (e.g. incorporated, alternative, and oppositional) that make use of dominant images (Jones 2004: 73). This generates a variety of potential articulations, but most relevant are the oppositional features of emergent environmental and middle-class countercultures that are incorporated into the dominant through shared images of Society in transition. Despite the biological origins of the term, Williams proposes *homology* as a method for connecting these types of *correspondences* between literature and society (Williams 1977: 103; Jones 2004: 82). To illustrate the emergence of flexible nature as part of the broader environmental crisis, I highlight parallel developments in the sciences alongside literature. I conclude by suggesting that Williams' critique of anti-humanism and critical affirmation of democratic communication offers a practical hope for an era in which geological and posthuman frameworks signal technocratic futures.

Within ecocriticism, Williams has been offered as a corrective to idealist tendencies. According to Lance Newman, the field's activist energy leads to an idealism in its account of historical change, while its ethical and voluntarist framings result in a "cranky pietism" that would be better served by a materialist and eco-social outlook (2002: 20). Williams also serves as a bridge between the affirmational and post-critical reading embraced by the environmental humanities, and the continuing relevance of symptomatic reading put forward in critiques of new materialism in recent volumes such as *Literary Materialisms* (2013), and *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017).[1] To distinguish between what might be called 'infrastructural' new materialism from 'worldview' new materialism, would enable ecocritics to separate the actual workings of society from the production of new descriptions that aestheticize the world behind a sublime sheen of becoming. It would likewise guard against uncritical appropriations of indigenous ontologies and the erasure of euro-modernity's anticolonial and emancipatory traditions (Brennan 2014; Todd 2016). In *The Long Revolution*, Williams poses "images of Society" as a practice of mapping material affinities between organization and imagination as it stretches across changes in agricultural, industrial, and post-industrial societies (1961: 102). The present conjuncture allows us to look back at the transformations of post-Fordism and its imaginary of networked contingency as a dominant image of Society in the countries of the global north. As it did in previous centuries, a shared figure continues to naturalize social relations while carrying an unfulfilled ideal.

In denaturalizing inherited ideas of Nature, environmental criticism must also historicize the passage to new replacement ideas, images, and metaphors. "What is often being argued", Williams suggests, "in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this not

[1] In particular, see contributions by Leerom Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Towards an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory" (2013), and Min Hyoung Song, "The New Materialism and Neoliberalism" (2017).

only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies" (1980: 71). For Williams, historical images of Society are embedded within ideas of Nature. This is unavoidable and necessary, as they are carriers of social norms and critical ideals. In his 1982 essay "Socialism and Ecology", Williams challenges the notion of a non-political nature that anticipates the post-political "end of history" that was to follow (1989). "A singular name for the real multiplicity of things and living processes may be held, with an effort, to be neutral", he writes, "but I am sure it is very often the case that it offers, from the beginning, a dominant kind of interpretation: idealist, metaphysical, or religious" (1980: 69). These interpretations may be openly reactionary or progressive but operate most effectively, that is *ideologically*, as neutral descriptions. For example, media philosopher Alexander Galloway argues that the dominant image of the contemporary world is the network.

> Who says everything is a network? Everyone, it seems. In philosophy, Bruno Latour: ontology is a network. In literary studies, Franco Moretti: Hamlet is a network [...] Art, architecture, managerial literature, computer science, neuroscience, and many other fields – all have shifted prominently in recent years toward a network model. Most important, however, is the contemporary economy and the mode of production [...] It claims that whatever exists in the world appears naturally in the form of a system, an ecology, an assemblage, in short, as a network. (2014)

As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello observe, the redescription of everything as a network contains a contradiction as it operates simultaneously as a *method* for describing relationships, and as a crypto-normative *ideal* to be achieved (1999: 149). So ubiquitous is this image that, according to Galloway, it results in a "network pessimism" resembling the end of history (or "new dark age") that cannot think beyond its own metaphors. It falls prey to the "reticular fallacy", which is the belief in both popular culture and cultural theory that horizontal and non-hierarchical networks prohibit the exercise of control (2014). What remains is a kind of 'vulgar 68ism' that mistakes updated organizational styles of exploitation for a change in the relations of production. In the era of post-naturalist constructivism, which 'denaturalizes' without historicizing the models that authorize its own gesture, the idea of nature as an ecology without content precisely *is the content* such that it operates best under the guise of ontological neutrality. Its grey interactionism is at home in the 'no collar' workplace as much as in high art galleries. It finds a home in corporate environmentalisms that have given up on state regulation made possible by legal constructions like wilderness, in favor of so-called novel ecosystems, and the sidewalk-crack-and-garbage-pile ecologies of deindustrialized cities that use the free labor of anarchists and community gardeners to generate value for real estate developers.

In this account, the network image of society replaces questions of exploitation with questions of inclusion and exclusion, eliding the fact that inclusion is a prerequisite for

exploitation. The aesthetic that embodies this "connexionist" paradigm, as Sianne Ngai argues, is post-Fordist "zaniness" (2012: 10). As the hyper-active workplace requires a new character-formation to match the contingencies of life and labor, feelings are likewise put to work by opportunistic subjects in a "world turned environment" (Sennett 1998; De Carolis 1996: 45). As Sam Binkley writes in *Getting Loose*, flexibilization was a strategy to participate in the new lifestyle cultures of the sixties and seventies where "one had to loosen oneself into the world by overcoming the technological drive to instrumental mastery of nature" (2007: 6). Nancy Fraser observes a similar "cunning of history" in elements of second-wave feminism that end up advancing the deregulatory goals of neoliberalism (2013: 209). What was once experienced as liberation is now compulsion to opportunistically adapt to a naturalized market. What Ngai calls "the zany science" of post-Fordist culture results from middle-class tensions between individual autonomy and a technical relation to society. This zaniness is the performance of a contradictory set of demands on individuals made to feel responsible for systemic relations that have become a general ambience. The corresponding idea of Nature is implicated insofar as ecology becomes the figure for unthinking society (e.g. mediating structures and social determination) through flat accounts of agency that terminate in the network swamp.

1989: Beyond Network Pessimism

This passage is illustrated in three texts from 1989. The first is Carolyn Merchant's *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*. In it, Merchant argues ideas of Nature "arise from changes, tensions, and contradictions that develop between a society's mode of production and its ecology, and between its modes of production and reproduction" (1989: 3). Despite the historical materialist approach, which informs her influential analysis of early New England culture, Merchant concludes by suggesting that a change in the organizational imagination of production would make post-industrial society more sustainable and reduce alienation. The bureaucratic storehouse model of the environment, she maintains, should be replaced by the decentralized and multi-agential models informed by the network imaginary of ecology and computer technologies. In 1989 Merchant was unable to account for the way that the utopian image of networked contingency would come to dominate the digital economy, the text nevertheless falls prey to Galloway's "reticular fallacy". Likewise, Merchant's prescription substitutes an effect for a cause. If past ideas of Nature emerge from historical organizations of production, it is likely that our present ideas of Nature do too. As environmental scientists reach for social metaphors to describe or model their findings, techno-capitalism appropriates environmental figures to naturalize itself. Identifying this re-description as a hybridity is only the first step in historicizing the

metaphors at work *in the work*, and their influence on popular understandings of society and environment over time. In other words, the idea of Nature, in New England farming economy as in digital economy today, continues to reproduce the relations of production precisely by combining what Williams called ideas of Nature with an historical image of Society. Capitalist production has already arrived where the ecological thought imagines itself to be.

That same year, Antonio Negri declared that "the class struggle takes place in the ecological factory" (1989: 94). In *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, Negri builds on Mario Tronti's concept of the social factory, which describes the movement of value production from the factory to society, into the activities of social reproduction that include household work, services, and communicative labor. In the ecological factory, the organization of production expands beyond the social into "new spatial and temporal determinations of production", e.g. other nonhuman and biopolitical spheres, across a multitude of "ecological dimensions" (1989: 94). "What we have, then, is not nature, but 'second nature'", he writes, "not the factory but the environment, or the ecological Umwelt" (1989: 93). Negri adapts Lukács' term to describe a later moment of capitalist subsumption of the built environment. In doing so, he anticipates the turn to ecosystem services, genetic technology, hybrid (domesticated) beings, disaster capitalism, and forms of accumulation based on unwaged "biopolitical" production. The latter are constituted by activities that generate information (knowledge work), by cultural production, and by the regeneration of both environmental and social conditions for future exploitation in the metropolis (2018: 16). Capitalist development requires the redescription of the world in ways that capture potential value, and that make these relationships seem natural through environmental metaphors. Negri's concept of the ecological factory historicizes this development and serves as a critique of naturalizing figures. "One of the most incisive effects of recent technological development", observes Massimo De Carolis, "has been to subvert this distinction between community and environment – first by rendering ever weaker the ties of community, then by colonizing the environment in an ever more massive way, and finally by generating theoretical and practical paradigms capable of being applied indiscriminately to social reality no less than to the environment, that is, to nature" (1996: 46). Whereas Gramsci saw Fordism as a wholistic organization of production portending the animalization of humans, the "Italian" critique of post-Fordism is perhaps best summarized by The Invisible Committee: "ecology isn't simply the logic of a total economy; it's the new morality of capital" (2009: 78). The drive to emulate horizontal networks seems only to bring society closer to contemporary managerial theory than to any existing ecology or sustainable behavior.

A text that simultaneously theorizes and enacts this subsumption is Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* (2008 [1989]), which describes the neoliberal redevelopment of New York City by a familiar species:

> [M]en like Donald Trump are permitted to proliferate freely, like another species of algae, taking over entire districts of New York and Atlantic City; he "redevelops" them by raising rents, thereby driving out tens of thousands of poor families, most of whom are condemned to homelessness, becoming the equivalent of the dead fish of environmental ecology (2008 [1989]: 29).

Guattari's three ecologies – environmental, social, and cultural – connect the metaphors and models that traverse practices to form a pragmatic cartography against an Integrated World Capitalism. This transversality is another approach to what Williams called homology, an interpretive act that identifies a parallel movement or context-crossing image that produces a recognition of resemblance across difference. As capital moves beyond the factory into society and the environment, it is tempting to view this as a unidirectional process of subsumption. However, the long view offered by Williams draws on the Marxian insight from the *Grundrisse*: it is production that produces distinctions between humans and the earth (culture and nature), opening up both a metabolic and an ideological rift. In other words, this process is far older than the present in that every historical society *continuously re-inscribes* the relation between humans and the earth through cultural production. This is highlighted in the revised edition of *Keywords*, which adds "ecology" alongside keywords like liberation, racial, and sexuality. Here, ecology is defined in relation to political economy and household (*oikos*) rather than through particular images brought to it by social movements of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries (1983: 111).

The career-spanning collection of Williams' writings, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (1989), includes his 1982 essay, "Socialism and Ecology", based on his 1980 talk, "Ecology and Socialism". Throughout the essays contained in the volume, Williams not only addresses the post-industrial situation of workers, but speaks to the potential of the new social movements, women's movements, anti-imperialism, anti-nuclear, and greens (1989: 168). This anticipates the coalitions that define climate and environmental justice movements from alter-globalization to pipeline protests. Reading this today, it raises questions about the investment in particular ideas of Nature adopted by environmental critics as utopian images of emancipated society. What kind of mimesis is at play? This may also hold an answer to the question posed by environmental historian Donald Worster, who asks why "deep ecology" exists when there is no "deep entomology" or "deep Polish literature" (1993: 156). Williams offers a path through the present crisis by consistently framing environmental imaginaries in the context of production in society.

Science, the Deregulatory Sublime

The corresponding fields in the sciences have shaped popular and critical descriptions of the self and world in the wake of Fordism. Through a process in which "forms of capitalist production accede to representation in each epoch" we can observe how "concepts and tools that were initially developed [...] in the theoretical sphere or in the domain of basic scientific research" are taken up for different purposes (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 46). This "naturalization effect" is accomplished through homologies that align social, economic, and biological, conceptions of the self with the demands of contemporary institutional interests and popular idioms. In the realm of subjectivity, Catherine Malabou traces a shift in cognitive science in which the bureaucratically organized brain is replaced by plasticity. Malabou situates these shifting descriptions within organizational imaginaries, observing that "neoliberal ideology today itself rests on a redistribution of centers and a major relaxation of hierarchies". As "the hierarchical principle is demolished" and organizations are restructured to maximize connections, synergies, and adaptive singularities, Malabou asks: "How could we not interrogate the parallelism between the transformation of the spirit of capitalism (between the sixties and the nineties) and the modification, brought about in approximately the same period, of our view of cerebral structures?" (2008: 41). Joseph Tabbi expounds on Malabou's historicization of metaphor: "the mind is a mirror; a projector; a computer; an economy; it is a self-creating ecology, a wheat field blown by a correspondent breeze"; either way, "we are the ones who possess the minds that make metaphors" (Malabou 2008, back cover). These metaphors mark research paradigms as belonging to specific compositions of interests, institutions, and imaginations.

Changes in the environmental sciences have most directly brought ideas of Nature in line with the neoliberal image of Society. Donald Worster, environmental historian and historian of ideas about the environment, attributes the shift from an ecology of order to an ecology of chaos to the rise and convergence of reductionist methods imported from evolutionary biology and an entrepreneurial view of the world, beginning in the 1970s. "Every generation", he argues, "writes its own description of the natural order, which generally reveals as much about human society and its changing concerns as it does about nature. And these descriptions linger on in bits and pieces, often creating incongruous or incompatible juxtapositions" (1985: 292). One of these incompatibilities lies in a fundamental change in the purpose of ecology as a science. Worster notices a post-Keynesian shift in the ecological sciences from a regulatory managerialism to a deregulatory disequilibrium that limits itself to managing risk. The new accounts displace the earlier project of studying cross-species metastabilities that enable the reproduction of relations for purposes of environmental management. In its place, ecologies are remodeled as assemblages of species understood as disruptive and individualistic entrepreneurs. The ecology of chaos, with its focus on the primacy of

disturbance, is a significant step in historicizing the ideal of an unchanging, balanced nature. However, it quickly becomes an altogether different metaphysical image that contains a different image of Society. "For some scientists", he writes, "a nature characterized by highly individualistic associations, constant disturbance, and incessant change may be more ideologically satisfying" (1993: 165). He quotes historian Thomas Söderqvist who concurs that "the transition from ecosystem ecology to evolutionary ecology seems to reflect the generational transition from the politically conscious generation of the 1960s to the 'yuppie' generation of the 1980s" (1993: 166). Worster's underlying economic argument has not yet been fully appreciated by environmental critics who interpret this as a romantic nostalgia for harmony rather than an analysis of a historical shift between modes of regulation (Philips 2003: 66). This disciplinary shift signals a political move away from large-scale reformism. Chaos too contains a romanticism that resembles the sublime appearance of the market.

Adorno characterized Aldous Huxley's Fordist dystopia as a "mythical mirage of eternity", whereby administrative planning "purge[s] the life-process of all that is uncontrollable, unpredictable, incalculable in advance and thus deprive[s] it of what is genuinely new, without which history is hardly conceivable" (1983: 125). However, this vision of managed stability has been replaced by managed instability. In *Life as Surplus*, Melinda Cooper argues that the biogenetics industry adopts neo-vitalism in its theory of life at the same time as speculation becomes the disruptive basis for the financialization of the economy. These homologous moves reconfigure the relationship of life, subjectivity, and society, and reposition the market as a chaotic sublime that emerges beyond productive agencies of individuals. "The new political economy of nature", she writes, "sounds suspiciously like the new political economy of neoliberalism" (2008: 42). The rhetoric of complexity becomes a means of deferring political decision and regulatory responsibility that likewise implicates cultural theory. Drawing on Foucault's critique of "the economic rationality of liberalism" that sees limits to knowledge as governmental limits, Jodi Dean finds "the appeal to complexity [as] a site of convergence between despotic financialism and critical theory", each of which "displaces accountability onto knowledge" in ways that naturalize this deferral (2013: 149). In the literature of this period, this flexible nature can be read as an attempt to manage the contradiction between a deregulatory ethos and the need for social control over production as it moves from the social to the ecological factory.

Naturalizing Narratives

The contradictions of flexible nature are exemplified in two intergenerational writers on the left, Edward Abbey and Mary McCarthy. In *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Abbey, the red-diaper anarchist and veteran, documents his time as a park ranger through polemical

essays on the industrialization of eco-tourism and the imperialist state. Concerned with simulation and authenticity in postwar consumerism, Abbey inhabits the contradictory position of managing a wilderness space while critiquing the very state that makes such wilderness possible. Faced with the increasing fungibility of individual experience and commodified space, the nonhuman environment becomes the last guarantor of an authentic encounter of selfhood and otherness across deep time. Abbey considers the fate of the commons under state regulation, while Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America* (1971) considers the prospect of the exhaustion of this model of the commons. Written in Paris between 1967 and 1971, McCarthy's New Left bildungsroman follows an idealistic college student who prizes wilderness and art museums as spaces where the natural and cultural commons are preserved for popular edification. He encounters the limits of these models, between preservation and dissemination, realizing that regulated consumption eventually destroys the experience. Influenced by her participation in the May '68 events, McCarthy recognizes the coming dissolution of storehouse models of the commons, which her protagonist believes to be the sole repository of the good, the beautiful, and the true, against philistine consumerism. Suffering a hallucination from an infected swan bite, the main character has a vision of Immanuel Kant, who ends the novel by announcing that "Nature is dead" (1971: 344). What is dying here is the Fordist model of nature and culture as a storehouse that is gradually being replaced by a productive model of the commons in need of continuous regeneration.

In Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), this dying model extends to the biological realm when a coal billionaire's model of conservation marks hundreds of small plots as bird sanctuary, assembling an archipelago of forest and extraction sites incapable of providing an integrated habitat the birds require to thrive. Powered by narratives of resilience and adaptability, one might call this cobbling together of habitats the gig model of conservation. Set against the backdrop of the second Iraq war, the failure to either regulate or transform the energy economy leads the baby-boomer main character, Walter, to adopt a failed politics of population control. In this failure lies Franzen's critique of the impasse of late liberal politics, which can only think in the registers of a voluntarist freedom (e.g. individualization of environmental crises) or a technocratic management of human populations. Williams observes that "romantic individualism and authoritarian and abstract social thinking have […] tended eventually to interlock". It is a wish for power that is "ultimately rationalized by despair" (1961: 111). The main character ends up living a life of cranky pietism on the margins of society, campaigning against local cats, who not only threaten bird populations but whose name provokes Walter's displaced resentment toward Katz, a friend who had an affair with his wife. Franzen's literary realism foregrounds the role of libidinal and affective investments in environmental politics and is framed by a generational failure to change the world that in hindsight appears as generational hubris.

Petroculture critics have associated the flexible ontologies of this period with the "stratigraphy of oil capital" (Boetzkes and Pendakis 2013). This relation between petrochemical science and consumer identity was recognized by Roland Barthes, for whom plastic is "more than a substance", but the embodiment of "infinite transformation" (1972: 97). In *Gravity's Rainbow* we discover "plasticity's central canon: that chemists are no longer to be at the mercy of Nature. They could decide now what properties they wanted a molecule to have, and then go ahead and build it". Thomas Pynchon describes "Plasticity's virtuous triad", which consists in "Strength, Stability and Whiteness (*Kraft*, *Standfestigkeit*, *Weiße*)" (1973: 253). These racialized qualities of pure potentiality are transferred onto idealized matter, and onto social subjects as interchangeable, clean, and flexible: the ideal of human capital. The global waste of this petrocultural plasticity reappears in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) in the figure of the Matacão, a magical realist substance, both black and shiny, as a seemingly infinite fount of malleable wealth (Loughrey 2017). The Matacão of the rainforest is "fertile in a different way" than biological fertility; at times magnetic, hard, sticky, fluid, its speculative value lies in its potential for spontaneous generation and evolutionary change (Yamashita 1990: 77). It lies adjacent to an abandoned parking lot in which "nature had moved" to actively "accommodate" and "make use of" the wreckage, as local species such as butterflies are found to have changed color "nested in the vinyl seats of Fords and Chevrolets" amidst waste water (1990: 100). These ecological eccentricities are mirrored by the characters whose fantastical accidents of personal biology anticipate Ngai's description of zaniness as a constitutive feature of post-Fordist subjectivity.

With an epigraph that reads "a rat becomes the unit of currency", Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) provides a quintessential illustration of flexible nature through the breakdown of the value form. Its narrative details the postmodern condition in which "money has lost its narrative quality" (2003: 24). The end of Bretton Woods and delinking of the dollar from gold reintroduces the problem of the value form in a social world, where measure is outstripped of immaterial and ecological production. In the era of high finance, DeLillo describes the transformation of currency into an autonomous source of value through biological figures of virality, decay, and overbreeding. The novel centers on Eric Packer, a young billionaire traveling in a limo across Manhattan for a haircut, and Benno Levin, the man planning to kill him. *Cosmopolis* stages this as a struggle between the failure to transcend Nature and Society through finance, and an all-encompassing rhizomatic materiality that enmeshes the opposing characters in a state of violent delusion. Packer describes what he sees: "the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planets' living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole" (2003: 24). Levin draws connections between the violent frictions that produce this

sublime, from minute interactions (communicating foot fungus) to global flows of oxygen, toxicity, and sweatshops (2003: 202). Each position expresses a failure – the first of transcendence, the second of immanence – illustrating that these seemingly opposed ontologies are dialectically related in what Williams might call a single social process.

Interlocutors of Williams like Cornel West and Edward Said point to his "incomplete efforts" to include race and empire in his cultural histories (West 1992: 6). Indeed, in the accounts drawn on so far to explain the rise of flexibility deriving from economic changes and middle-class sensibilities of scientists, managers, and artists, an implied whiteness might only consider race as a limit to flexibility. Narratives of passing often prefigure what are held to be postmodern sensibilities toward race as a denaturalized social construct, or what the Fields call "racecraft" (2012). Black, indigenous, and queer writers have likewise removed race, gender, and sexuality from the category of nature, so flexible nature in this regard simply does not apply; or, if it does, it is only in the descriptive sense in which writers and artists play with naturalizing tropes. However, flexible nature in the sense of the nonhuman environment has been addressed by scholars focusing on the transmission of environmental experience in African American literature (Ruffin 2010). This environmental memory (e.g. ocean, forest, farm, river, levee, prison, kitchenette, house) carries counter-images of Society and ideas of Nature. Similarly, geographer Clyde Woods theorizes a "blues epistemology" of improvisational idioms that transmit knowledge, experience, and existential strategies for navigating past and present environments of racial capitalism (2017: 25). In each, the form is flexible and open to revision precisely in order to re-member actual environmental histories in a living tradition of critique. We see examples of this in Percival Everett's *Watershed* (1990) which becomes a metafictional space for restaging the settler-colonial inscription of land through legal decree and scientific representation, linking a black geologist with indigenous struggles over water rights. Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), depicts multiple generations haunted by environmental dispossessions of the Mississippi Flood of 1927, Parchman prison, and Hurricane Katrina, yet transform the landscape into a source of power: "I stand until the forest is a black-knuckled multitude" (2017: 283). These counter-images of Nature and Society are themselves a flexible response to the dominant discourse that seeks to continuously rewrite social and environmental history in the interests of accumulation.

These U.S. examples illustrate the emerging idea of a flexible and accommodating nature and a critique of this flexibility in response to ongoing socio-ecological crises of post-Fordism. Looking beyond the U.S. provides further critical examples. *Fordlandia* (1997/2000) by Argentinian novelist and economist Eduardo Sguiglia illustrates Henry Ford's failed project to organize a rubber plantation in the Brazilian Amazon on the basis of a Michigan town that is eventually brought down by tree disease and revolts of the

indigenous workforce. It follows a recruiter down the river whose indirect narration variously evokes epic and modernist genres. This self-conscious confusion of periodization and genre anticipates current efforts to address difficulties of periodization after post-Fordism in the turn to the *operations* of capitalism, e.g. logistics, extraction, and finance (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). Where accounts of global Fordism often focus on the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, Sguigla's novel turns on the North/South axis of infrastructural procurement. Moreover, it dramatizes the historical breakdown of logistics and extraction by an un-accommodating environment and an insurgent workforce whose integration into the capitalist world-system has yet to proletarianize them on the model of the industrial mass worker.

In Japan, Hiroko Oyamada's novel, *The Factory* (2019) depicts a mega-factory subsuming the community and surrounding ecosystem. What the factory produces is unclear as the three characters work in different areas: one proof-reads until words become "unstable things", another continuously shreds paper in document destruction, and a third conducts perpetual research on lichens and invasive species so they might become of potential value to the company (2019: 54). Oyamada's fictional factory brings together figures not unlike those anticipated by Negri's ecological factory. These include hyper-resilient lichens that can survive in ice and volcanos (2019: 46); mosses that reproduce through spore dispersion rather than agricultural cycles of plant-based seed production (2019: 49); and invasive species like black cormorants and grayback rodents, that only thrive in the interstices of the factory's river, grasses, and drainage systems (2019: 70). These flexible figures accommodate themselves to the margins of the factory, operate through rhizomatic reproduction, and swarm with numbers that threaten to overwhelm its operations. And yet, the dream of an innately active biological excess for capital to capture and extract is undermined by the *exhaustion* of the characters. "I was hoping for a natural disaster, but it was a beautiful day", observes one, "I forced myself out of bed and went to work" (2019: 89). They describe their alienation: "everything feels so disconnected. Me and my work, me and the factory, me and society. There's always something in the way. It's like we're touching, but we're not" (2019: 90). Amidst the factory, a multispecies assemblage teeming with novel ecologies, these connections are disrupted by the alienating nature of work: "the grayback and factory worker inhabit the same space, but rarely meet" (2019: 80).

Conclusion

These figures of flexible nature enact a melancholic accommodation, but they need not be our only figures. As Williams reminds us, "when I hear that nature is a ruthless competitive struggle I remember the butterfly, and when I hear that it is a system of ultimate mutual advantage I remember the cyclone" (1980: 70). If post-Fordist nature

suggests that ecology is now and evermore a flexible network open to creative adaptation, it signals both an ideological and a material crisis. It is ideological in that we have accepted a dominant idea of Nature that corresponds with the ideals of a particular regime of production, out of sync with the scale of environmental crisis produced by global capitalism. It is material in that as twenty-first century societies undertake vast rural development (richly illustrated in Rem Koolhaas' *Countryside: A Report*), adopt new forms of platform production, and transition away from fossil fuels, the network model may prove itself an outmoded form for understanding relations in the world, environmental or otherwise. To the extent that this "network pessimism" is exported by western scholars and critics, it may one day appear as a form of colonialism.

The salience of Raymond Williams today is that he is a materialist thinker of transition, conjuncture, and unevenness, who recognizes that ideas are shaped by changes in society. If the idea of Nature as a dynamic and flexible assemblage of resilient agents is the idea of Nature that corresponds to post-Fordist society, its incongruities are exposed in the accelerating extinction of nonhuman life alongside the endangerment of human life, health, and well-being. Reading these changes alongside Williams may also highlight the thwarted aspirations and utopian hopes expressed by these figures of flexibility as ideals that have been unevenly integrated into the dominant geo-cultural order.

In the dialectical vision of *The Long Revolution*, there is no final image of Society or Nature except that which is progressively realized through democratic and communicative exchange. The task of transforming production in sustainable directions is bolstered by Williams' cultural materialism, which integrates beliefs about the environment into socio-economic critique. If developments in postmodern culture have made it seem like the latter determines the former, emerging realities in the Anthropocene may prove otherwise. What is emerging "beyond" flexible nature suggests a potential move away from novel, network rhetorics and micro-assemblages to large-scale approaches of rural development and planetary systems, with a new set of dangers and possibilities. These will not be resolved with a new idea of Nature but with the material transformation of society.

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