

Hyperobjects and Affect Theory: Understanding the End of Nature in Juliana Spahr's "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache"

Claudia Alea Parrondo

Abstract

This article studies the use of Affect theory in relation to the notion of hyperobjects to explore if the latter can help transform complex environmental processes into culturally comprehensible concepts. Taking the notion of hyperobjects as a starting point, the cognitive effects of narrative are examined as a source of empathy, for the display of emotional content is one of the qualities of fiction. The article inquires if it can inform audiences' responses and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the essay explores the affective connection between human and non-human entities by applying the aforementioned theoretical concepts to a close reading of work by the contemporary American poet and critic Juliana Spahr, in particular her poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005/2011).

Keywords

Ecocriticism – Ecopoetry – Hyperobjects – Affect Theory – Narrative

Introduction

In these contemporary times when the effects of global warming and its consequences are evident, it seems more urgent than ever to understand these changes in order to raise awareness about some of the most pressing issues. Thus, this article explores if poetry can be used to transform environmental processes into culturally comprehensible concepts. It will propose a discussion of key concepts related to environmental and eco-critical theories that have emerged in the Anthropocene, in particular the notion of *hyperobjects*. Next, it will focus on Affect theory as well as on the cognitive implications of narratives. In this way, this article proposes narratives as a way to make these processes more understandable and to raise awareness of aspects that need pressing solutions. The first sections deal with the explanation of why and how emotions – as seen by cognitive researchers – can help us inhabit other realities through fiction. Furthermore, this essay will show the connection between Affect theory and hyperobjects, relating both to new perspectives on materiality with the so-called New Materialism. The article also examines their relation to Environmental Studies and continues by applying the state of the art and of the theories presented to a close reading of Juliana Spahr's poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005/2011). In her poem, Spahr presents various aspects that can be discussed from the



perspective of the aforementioned theories. Ultimately, I suggest that “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache” provides an example of how poetry can be used as a source of emotional explanation of the Anthropocene and its consequences.

The Anthropocene and Hyperobjects

Nature is a cultural and historically specific term that has been evolving and changing, affected by how we, as humans, conceptualize our identities and relations with the outside world. Thus, depending on the cultural paradigm of the time, nature could mean and stand for different things. Throughout history, issues such as industrialization and the exploitation of natural resources have changed human relationships with nature. These human-made processes of exploitation and alteration of the environment are now considered irreversible. As Nicole Merola states, “we have made the irrevocable shift from reading the ‘great stone book of nature’ to writing it” (26). As a consequence, we find ourselves living in the time of the Anthropocene, a term coined by Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s, popularized by Paul Crutzen in 2000, and formally proposed by the geologist Zalasiewicz in 2008 as a geological period (Rafferty). The Anthropocene, or “recent age of man,” implies that human actions have non-reversibly altered “Earth’s surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling” (Rafferty). Thus, it seems necessary to re-think how we, as humans, relate and bond with nature in this new paradigm where we have a new role, as we are the agents of these irreversible changes in nature. As stated by Merola, “[t]he pressures the Anthropocene puts on how to conceptualize humans, other nonhumans and other things also strains how to think amount the contours and roles of cultural forms and their work” (26).

For instance, British climatologist Mike Hulme explains how the weather has been understood as something moral, related to the divine plans, and how this concept is still present in our Western cultures (13-14). In this way, he argues that understanding climate change as “an imaginative idea [...] constructed and endowed with meaning and value through cultural practice” (14-15). This implies that understanding these processes would be as important for the understanding of climate processes as are meteorology and other sciences. However, this poses a problem because understanding large, global processes is nearly impossible for the human mind. For this reason, Merola states that contemporary times are “a period when we must find ways to think about things and processes that are too big, nebulous, diffuse, and complicated to easily apprehend or comprehend,” as the Anthropocene is “a period that simultaneously produces and demands scale confusion,” a period in which “linear time and progressive narratives are undercut by the effects of the material persistence of things we thought would disappear (carbon emissions, plastics)” (26).

In his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010), British philosopher and critical theorist Timothy Morton introduces the idea of “hyperobjects,” a concept that he expands in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013). According to Morton, “Hyperobjects” are products that will exist for a long duration, on a scale beyond human time. He explains that “these materials confound our limited, fixated, self-oriented frameworks” (*The Ecological* 19) because they have such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that we are unable to comprehend them. Morton claims that the existence of hyperobjects – such as climate change – marks the end of the world because traditional concepts such as “world,” “nature,” and “environment” are no longer relevant to human events. Moreover, he adds that two of the main properties of hyperobjects are viscosity, as they “stick” to other objects, and nonlocality, as they are so vast that they cannot be attached to a particular place (*Hyperobjects* 1). Similarly, hyperobjects cannot be located in time, so they inhabit

a “temporal undulation,” which is to say that their massivity and transdimensionality surpasses human parameters (55). Finally, hyperobjects possess the property of “interobjectivity,” as they are formed from interrelationships between objects (24).

Alexa Weik von Mossner adds that one of the main reasons why humans cannot understand the Anthropocene or global warming is that these processes are too vast to “allow for easy visualization,” so that when we discuss them, we are trapped within the limits of our imaginations (*Affective Ecologies* 139). Weik von Mossner is among the contemporary theorists who claim that one of the possible solutions for the understanding of the complex processes taking place in the Anthropocene, as well as their consequences, is the use of narrative. The “narratological revision” of humanity’s relationship with nature is an issue of crucial importance that, according to her, can help “[o]ur awareness and emotional reaction [...] shape our expectations and, potentially, our actions” (*Affective Ecologies* 140). The human capacity to react – and, in consequence, to act – is intrinsically tied to our capacity to understand, for, as Weik von Mossner notes, “storytelling serves evolutionary purposes” (“Imagining Geological Agency” 83).

In turn, this awareness of the problem that hyperobjects pose beyond human time could help humanity understand the long-term damage caused to the planet (“Imagining Geological Agency” 84). Thus, Weik von Mossner highlights storytelling as a contribution to raising awareness, since narratives act as a means of transportation to alternative universes, allowing us to “live” different situations (84). The act of imagining thus becomes “crucial for understanding” (85). Weik von Mossner’s claims are also supported by work from the cognitive sciences. For instance, Keith Oatley’s *The Passionate Muse* (2012) argues that reading fiction can help people understand and navigate complex social situations by providing a space to practice empathy. Oatley, a cognitive psychologist and novelist, draws on research in psychology and neuroscience, as well as on literary studies to support his argument, as reading fiction can enhance readers’ empathy, theory of mind, and other cognitive and social skills (Aldama 83-84).

The Power of Narrative

If art and fiction can help humans to understand complex processes such as global warming and its consequences, then it is worth examining how this can happen, and how we are able to relate to external elements through narratives. This article argues that affects are at the core of our understanding, as they allow us to relate to others and to our environment, and they can be projected into narratives that then come back to us when we consume them. For the past 30 years, Affect theory has explored how humans relate to their reality through emotions – that is, through cognition and embodiment. Affect theory is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the ways in which emotions, feelings, and sensations shape human experiences and behaviors. It emerged as a response to traditional approaches to emotion and cognition that emphasized rationality and conscious thought. Instead, affect theorists emphasize the role of unconscious processes, bodily sensations, and social and cultural contexts in shaping human affective experiences.

Brian Massumi is one of the most influential critics in Affect theory and is considered to be one of the founders of this field. Being the translator of the Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s postmodernist classic *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Massumi draws on the work of the two philosophers to describe affect as “an ability to affect and [to be] affected” (xv). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain that “[f]lows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation,

microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject” (162), vindicating the affective quality of humans as something essential.

In 2018, literary scholars Jennifer Ladino and Kyle Bladow edited the volume *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, in which they state that “[a]ffects are at the center of contemporary biopolitics and are more public, more powerful, and more pertinent than ever” (1). Bladow and Ladino highlight the impact of narratives on our lives, stating that “reading is one instance in which affect begins at the ‘micro-scale’, and scholarship that draws on cognitive science to account for what happens affectively in readers is an area of growing interest” (3). Like other writers in the field of ecocriticism who, like Spinoza, have opposed Cartesian dualism, Bladow and Ladino highlight the importance of emotions as they were “theoretically suspect before the affective turn” in the same way as “‘nature’ was just suspect prior to the emergence of ecocriticism” (4). Narratives are so powerful because the brain does not distinguish between our own emotions and ‘borrowed’ ones. Emotions are thus a collective experience rather than an individual one. As Italian neurobiologists Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia explain in their volume *Mirrors in the Brain: How our Minds Shape Actions and Emotions*, “emotions, like actions, are immediately shared; the perception of pain or grief, or of disgust experienced by others, activates the same areas of the cerebral cortex that are involved when we experience these emotions ourselves” (xii). Therefore, according to Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, “affects should not be understood, as individualized emotion[s] [...] but rather, in a Spinozist fashion, as the increase or decrease in capacities for action” (75). Similarly, Susanne Knaller emphasizes the collective aspect of emotions, adding that “behavioral patterns [are] closely linked to the acquisition of communicative and practical competencies within a social group” (18).

This “Spinozist” perspective implies a consideration of emotions as “thoughts of the body” (Davidson et al qtd. in Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 11). Indeed, Spinoza already defined *affectus* as “force of existing” (11). Thus, affects are an *embodied* experience, since we cannot separate feeling from experience – that is, the brain and soul from the body. As an expanded definition of affect, Heather Houser proposes that

“affect” designates body-based feelings that arise in response to elicitors as varied as interpersonal and institutional relations, aesthetic experience, ideas, sensations, and material conditions in one’s environment. Though there is a relation between affect and eliciting conditions, the relation is not determinate. That is, the same elicitor can excite different affects in different people, and sometimes affect has no specifiable catalyst. The embodied and the cognitive mingle in affect. The feeling grounds one in the present, but it is also coded by past experience and impinges on the future. (3)

Affect Theory and Ecocriticism

More recently, ecocritics have reshaped Affect theory through new materialist approaches that explore how humans relate to the environment and non-human elements (animals, plants, algae, but also rocks, rivers, etc.). This article suggests that narrative studies can provide valuable insights and tools for such new materialist approaches to the environment. Narrative studies can also help to reveal the ways in which material and discursive practices are intertwined. By examining stories about nature and the environment, we can better understand how these narratives shape our attitudes and behaviors towards the natural world. This can be particularly useful for new

materialist approaches, which often emphasize the need to move beyond a purely discursive understanding of the environment and to acknowledge the material forces that shape it.

Several collections are being dedicated to the study of ecocriticism from the perspective of Affect theory. For instance, the aforementioned *Affective Ecologies* (2017), Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino's volume *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018), or the special issue *Poesia contemporànea i estudis afectius / Contemporary Poetry and Affect Theory*, co-edited by Margalida Pons Jaume and Caterina Calafat for the journal *Cultura, Llenguaje y Representación / Culture, Language & Representation* (vol. 29, 2022). In these publications, affect is explored as the main element through which humans engage with narratives and, consequently, with the environment in which we inhabit these narratives. Drawing on these studies, this article explores ecopoetry, a genre of poetry that focuses on the natural world and the human relationship to the environment, as well as how that relationship has changed. Ecopoetry may reflect on issues such as climate change, species extinction, and human impact on the natural world. Drawing on twentieth-century poetic traditions such as Language Poetry, ecopoets, such as Juliana Spahr, also seek to explore new forms and techniques in order to reflect the complex relationships between humans and nonhumans. Ecopoetry can be seen as a form of environmental activism, as it seeks to raise awareness of environmental issues by denouncing and reflecting on the damage that humans cause to nature.

Indeed, affect comes from our ability to project ourselves and embody the cognitive experience through narrative, as Weik von Mossner explains: “[W]e use our bodies not only to understand human characters but also for our grasping of the environments that surround them” (*Affective Ecologies* 3). In this way, “affect is ecological ‘by nature’, since it operates at the confluence of environments, texts, and bodies – including nonhuman and inanimate bodies” (Bladow and Ladino 8). This also includes the category of environmental narrative as “any type of narrative in any media that foregrounds ecological issues and human-nature relationships” (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 3). As a consequence, Affect Theory would be key to “identify[ing] the emotions that circulate around environmental issues today, to clarify[ing] how that circulation works, to acknowledg[ing] the powerful role environments themselves play in shaping affective experience, and to identify[ing] new affects emerging in our contemporary moment” (Bladow and Ladino 3). Moreover, this would help us to reevaluate familiar aspects by reconceptualizing environmental affects that “can be understood [...] through the lens of ecocritical theory” (6). According to the literary scholar Marco Caracciolo, who specializes in the phenomenology of narrative, these processes, which extend approaches beyond anthropocentrism to include non-human actors, are based on a conceptual reattribution in which “biological, climatological and geological processes” are not seen as independent actions but as close to humans (313).

As an example of how ecopoetry can serve as a cultural product that promotes environmental awareness through emotion and narration, the following section explores Juliana Spahr's “Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache.” Juliana Spahr is an American poet and scholar. She combines her poetry production with her works as a literary critic, sometimes mixing the two. In her “Poetic Statement,” Spahr establishes her view of poetry when she states that “poetry is a troubled and troubling genre, full of desire and anger and support and protest” (131). The poets and scholars Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell explain Spahr's concern with the social and political aspects of poetry, as well as her interest in the “unreliability of the language as it is used to convey information, observations, political and personal realities” (3). According to Rankine and Sewell, Spahr combines the possibilities of the lyric tradition with a characteristic sound and rhythm to create an accumulative and hypnotic musicality – a style that evokes the tradition of avant-garde poets such as Gertrude Stein (7). On a thematic level, Rankine and Sewell also note Spahr's

“obsessive engagement with American life and Western culture,” which she equally criticizes and celebrates. Some authors, such as Dianne Chisholm (2014), compare Spahr and Whitman with regard to her themes and use of the refrain. However, as the poet and environmental critic Tana Jean Welch points out, Spahr’s message is “clearer” than that of the Language poets. As a post-language poet, Spahr “wants her poems to *mean*, to make certain points not *about* meaning, but about material-semiotic shapings” that are grounded in both the shapings and in the “interactive flux and flow” of the material world, while carrying an obvious political valence (Welch 4).

“Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache”: An Affect-Theoretical and Ecocritical Analysis

The poem “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache” explores the relationship between humans and nature over time, from the emergence of humans (both as a species as well as individuals) to the conquest of nature and its subsequent disappearance. It is divided into a sequence of five distinct parts named after the number of their appearance. Although this poem was first published in the literary journal *Tarpaulin Sky* in 2005 and then collected in Spahr’s poetry collection *Well Then, There Now* (2011), it provides thematic and stylistic cohesion for her book. In this collection, Spahr explores economics, society and, especially ecology. Each poem in the book is located at a point in American geography that is closely related to Spahr’s life, as indicated by the coordinates that accompany each poem’s title. For instance, “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache” (from here referred to as “Gentle Now”) is located in Chillicothe, Ohio, where Spahr was born and spent her childhood. As Spahr stated in her “Poetical Statement,”

The town I grew up in was ugly and dirty. The town was dirty because it had a barely environmentally regulated papermill [...]. Because the town was dirty, whenever I read poems about the beauty of the English countryside or New England woods, they made little sense to me. So then I went and found by accident this stuff that didn’t seem to be some sort of weird lie, and because this stuff by Stein was so weird it at the least didn’t seem to be lying in the usual ways, I clung to it. (132)

This quote illustrates Spahr’s commitment to eco-poetics as well as social and political poetry. In *Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another*, Spahr explains that she was suspicious of Nature Poetry as it only represented natural elements, such as birds or trees, but it did not capture the threats, the “bulldozer [...] that is destroying that bird’s habitat” (69). Later, Spahr adds that when the poet Jonathan Skinner began publishing his journal *Ecopoetics*, she realized that eco-poetics was what she was looking for, defining it as “a poetics full of systemic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture” (71). Eco-poetry, as explained by the environmental researcher Nuno Marques, “examines the fractures caused by natural destruction in language, questioning poetry’s capability to mourn and become a regenerative practice” as it works with “the embodiedness and materiality of poetry” (35).

In “Gentle Now”, Spahr explores the relationship between the human and the nonhuman through the lens of dichotomous but unordered concepts such as nature/human, big/small, birth/death. These concepts create connections and, at the same time, the absence of connections that can be comprehended through an affective perspective of oppositions and ramifications. In this poem, Spahr’s main themes can be identified through the poem’s “engagement with human entanglement in large-scale ecological, economic, geopolitical, and social systems” (Merola 26),

dealing with what Merola calls “Anthropocene affects,” those emotions such as “interpersonal hope, dis-ease, distraction, irritation, grief, anger, rage and ‘west melancholy’” (31).

As for her poetic strategies, the most prevalent is experimentation, which Spahr uses to “question, encounter, materialize, and wrestle with the epistemological and ontological pressures that accrue to the newly self-reflexive, anxious position into which the Anthropocene interpellates us” (Merola 26). Another strategy used in “Gentle Now” would be fragmentation, which “could describe both the way language is arranged [...] and a once-continuous habitat shattered into non-contiguous pieces” that would reflect the “scale confusion” the Anthropocene by definition presupposes (26). It also serves as a way to emphasize the place of the human as an agent in one of the main processes of the Anthropocene, mass extinction (32), which is arguably the central theme of the poem. In order to emotionally communicate mass extinction, Spahr relies on the refrain, the repetition of lines, and references to animal species that we should mourn because they are dead. In this respect, Perloff states that repetition is essential to remark “the rhythm in human exchange” and to show how each relationship evolves, so that “the composition must begin over and over again; the same words [...] and the same sentences are repeated with slight variation, and gradually everything changes” (93).

As mentioned previously, in the printed edition, the poem begins with the geographic coordinates of Spahr’s birthplace in Ohio. This will set the tone for the entire poem, as the location of Spahr’s hometown will intrinsically connect the poem to emotion and affect. In the poem, Spahr presents us with a timeline of the relationship between humans and nature. The poem is divided into five parts, which can be identified with different themes that present a progression of nature’s pollution. This progression goes hand in hand with the division of nature, encompassing all living and non-living beings, and delves into the dichotomy of nature versus culture, where humans and the humane are conceptually assimilated to culture in our contemporary times.

The part labeled “one” is organized in the form of a creation-like scene in which humans appear in an omnipresent nature that was there before their arrival, as they “come into” it (Spahr 124). The deictic pronoun “it” acts as a referential expression for nature, intensifying its existence and extension, implying that “it” covers and contains everything. In this first section of the poem, the use of colors adds sensory information and increases the emotional content as the reader can identify this place as their own birthplace:

The brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the
ocean is there.
Salmon and eels are moving between the brown and the
brown and the blue.
The green of the land is there. (124)

The poem presents nature as something that, at the same time, involves everything, but that also is the home of animals such as “Salmons and eels.” Moreover, the amount of sensory information also indicates a stage before culture and civilization. In this way, natural elements are characterized by raw information obtained through the senses, mostly about color. This supposes that one of the most basic and first layers of information is obtained in the process of perception, without the need for any interpretation. The fragment thus remits the reader to a pre-individual stage, as all will receive the same sensory information, as if nature were a womb, reinforcing the idea of home.

The concept of home is also used in discussions of cultural identity, where ‘home’ can refer to a particular community, emphasizing the importance of the pronoun “we.” As Chisholm notes,

Spahr's use of the universal pronoun "we" can be compared to Whitman's use of pronouns and search for the "communal" in American identity. Likewise, John Shoptaw suggests that "Gentle Now" mirrors Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth" (399). The use of "we" enhances the engagement of the reader with the poem by implying that this place is the birthplace of all humanity. However, this use of "it" and "we" also implies the assimilation of humans into Nature and of Nature into humans – Nature is everywhere and everything. In this way, "one" focuses on humans just "being" part of Nature:

We come into the world.

 Elders and youngers are there.

 And we begin to breathe.
 We come into the world and there it is.
 We come into the world without and we breathe it in. (124)

In the above lines, the verbs that relate to humans are subjects are "come," "begin," and "breathe." Consequently, humans do not have any remarkable agency. They simply inhabit nature and are a small part of it. The lines also suggest a sense of connection between the individual and the world around them, highlighting the act of breathing as a fundamental way of interacting with the environment. The verse "we come into the world and there it is" suggests that the world is already present, existing independently of our arrival. The idea of breathing into the world implies a reciprocal relationship between the individual and their environment, in which the individual inhales and exhales air, participating in a cycle of exchange and renewal. This metaphorical use of breath as a way of connecting to the world is also present in some of Spahr's other works, such as her poetry collection *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), in which she explores connections between humans and non-humans without any boundaries or hierarchies. As in this poem, the idea of the pre-existence of the world and the act of breathing it suggests that human beings are part of a larger system and that our individual actions are shaped by our experiences and relationships to that system.

The notion that the individual is shaped by their environment rather than being an entirely autonomous agent is a key theme in various philosophical and critical approaches, including some forms of environmental and ecocritical thought. While in part "one," emotions, senses, and being are the main themes, in part "two," the poetic voice expands this connection between humans and nature: "The stream was part of us and we were a part of the stream and we/ were thus part of the rivers and thus part of the gulf and oceans" (125). Similar to the way in which salmon navigate rivers and oceans in part "one," human beings are merely another integral piece of Nature. However, the line "And we began to learn the stream" (125) foreshadows a breaking point in what follows, as humans become different from nature by "learning" it. In this section, the learning process is sustained by a symbiotic relationship, exemplified by the absence of separation between nature and human, as expressed in the lines "We put our head together./ We put our heads together with all these things." The poetic voice enumerates a number of animals and plants, native to Spahr's birthplace. This could be interpreted as a critique of the dichotomy of Reason and Emotion, as the poem states that "the stream was various and full of/ information with its rotten with its cold," but humans still loved the stream as "we couldn't help this love because we arrived at the bank of the/ stream." In this way, emotion is what binds us to nature, and emotion can

remind the readers of the importance of nature by empathizing with the text. However, as noted earlier, the future rupture is foreshadowed by the use of the past tense in this fragment.

In part “three,” the reader envisions a process of mourning that precedes the fragmentation between nature and humans. Consequently, the relationship between humans and other living beings is described by means of feelings, and the evolution of the relationship is marked by the use of the passive mode, which would change to a passive one that could indicate reciprocity.

This is where we learned love and where we learned depth and
 were we learned layers and where we learned connections
 between layers.

.....

Our hearts took on new shapes, new shapes everyday as we went to
 the stream every day.

.....

We let ourselves love...

.....

And we shaped our hearts...

.....

We immersed ourselves in the shallow of the stream. (126-28)

Accompanying the previous verses, Spahr enumerates a list of animals, such as birds, fish, insects or larvae, plants, and algae. By stating this, love is shared without hierarchies among natural elements and without making any distinction between the human and the non-human, as the poem considers culturally marginalized animals like insects, or algae, elements that today’s Western cultures usually find repulsive. The mention of “connections” is a core part of the meaning of the poem. The way in which the connections are created and maintained reflect Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical concept of the rhizome. As Deleuze and Guattari state, “[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (6) that are not hierarchically ordered, as “[t]here are no points or positions in a rhizome [...] only lines” (7). Thus, Spahr’s approach to nature in the poem would resemble the structure of a rhizome, since it does not maintain any order among its elements. Each element, from the stream to the larvae, is equally important. This lack of hierarchy encourages the affective relationships between the elements of the rhizome, as well as the affective response of the reader. The reason for this is that by the eliminating order, empathy is easily fostered.

As Chisholm explains, the use of repetitions “orchestrates a rhythm of developing affection” (129). This rhythm is what resembles the creation of connections in the poem; while the action develops, emotion is what ties it all together, as humans learn to love non-human elements, and the readers can develop the same feeling through the act of reading. The poem creates a web of connections both inside and outside the text, mediated by affection and emotion. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain (*ritournelle*) can be used as a way of “reterritorialization” (11). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explore the use of the refrain on music, something that can be extrapolated to poetry because of its use of rhythm. In this way, “Members of the same species enter into rhythmic characters at the same time as different species enter into melodic landscapes” (373). Deleuze and Guattari suggest using the rhizome in writing in order to increase the affective territory, as the rhizome deterritorializes the text (11). As they note, a territory “is

constituted at the same time as expressive qualities are selected or produced” (367). Consequently, the act of “deterritorialization” implies “an act of rhythm that has become expressive” (367). Spahr’s usage of the refrain thus corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of the refrain and how it creates affective relations through the repetition of the rhythm.

Following lists of Ohio’s native species, the poem rephrases some verses that were also mentioned in part “two,” with some differences:

We immersed ourselves in the shallow stream. We lied down on the
rocks on our narrow pillow stone and let the water pass over us and
our heart was bathed in glochida and other things that attach to the
flesh. (128)

The verses remark on the power of the stream as a soothing experience, using verbs that remark on sensory experiences. The use of the word “immersed” in the first stanza suggests a deep and complete engagement with the stream, and the reference to the “narrow pillow stone” implies that the speaker feels comfortable in the stream and has developed a relationship with it. However, the poem begins to sing a lament that reflects the mourning of human’s separation from nature:

And as we did this we sang.
We sang gentle now.
Gentle now clubshell,
don’t add to heartache. (128)

The refrain “Gentle now ... / don’t add to heartache” is repeated fifteen times, mentioning the species that appeared earlier in the poem, as the poetic voice mourns all the animals and plants already quoted. In this way, as previously stated, the speaker anticipates the rupture that will potentially trigger the endangerment – and even the extinction – of these beings. As Swensen and St. John note, with these repetitions Spahr “turns a given bit of language over and over until it opens from the inside out, becoming talismanic” and resembling a ritual that seeks more social repair rather than social critique (406). This ache of the heart, which gives the poem its name, is repeated at the end of part “three”:

Gentle now, we sang,
Circle our heart in rapture, in love-ache. Circle our heart. (130)

These lines end with a call for reunion, as humans “ache” over the loss of nature. Here, grieving is a communal state, a feeling experienced and shared in the human group since the loss of nature affects all humans. In this way, the reader also becomes part of this group, as the grieving process is transmitted through this lament. As Chisholm states, as the living and non-living organisms quoted in the poem are native to Spahr’s birthplace, they would “shape this habitat of the heart” (126). By losing them, the poetic voice loses part of its identity. However, as the speaker uses the universalizing pronoun “we,” the readers are reminded of the nature of their respective hometowns. In this way, the poem works through connections of emotions conveyed by belonging, whether to a physical place related to the emotional realm of childhood and memories or to the textual emotional plane of the poem. Thus, sharing emotions would serve as a link in this exploration.

In part “four,” this announced rupture becomes evident, as it is introduced in the first line, stating that the previous Eden-like situation is coming to an end, as it was previously announced:

It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.
 It was a brackish stream and it went through the field beside our
 house.
 But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of it also. (130)

This section places us in the present, enhancing the simile of nature as a home, as Spahr points out that the stream was, in fact, close to her home. Now we enter a more material part of the poem, where waste invades the emotional planes and destroys the connections previously described. To achieve this, Spahr recurs to an enumeration of plastic waste elements that can be found anywhere, as opposed to the native Ohio species mentioned earlier. These plastic elements will eventually replace the natural non-human elements present in nature, as plastics will be there for multiple generations of humans until they decompose. As Marques notes, this substitution can be considered a reevaluation of “the aesthetic connection with the natural as a relation of contamination” (37). The speaker then, as if asking for responsibility, enumerates the situations that have produced these consequences as

We let the run off from agriculture, surface mines, forestry...

 and roadways into our hearts. (Spahr 131)

After this list of human activities, the poetic voice specifies the kind of polluting elements and waste dropped:

We let chloride, magnesium, sulfate, manganese, iron....

 [...] and lead go
 through our skin and into our body tissues.
 We were born at the beginning of these things, at the time of
 chemicals combining, at the time the stream run off.
 These things were a part of us and would become more a part of us
 but we did not know it yet. (131)

This passage establishes the end of nature as it was described in “one.” Nature has lost its agency, as man-made materials repopulate the stream and replace the animals previously listed by the poetic voice. As a consequence, chemical waste has also invaded us, polluting our systems and our bodies. However, we are unaware of this process of contamination as the poem establishes that “we did not know it yet” but it will get worse as it “would become more a part of us,” but as the speaker states, “Still we noticed enough to sing a lament” (131). From here, the poem will again list almost the same species, but this time as a way of announcing their death and extinction. Humans are also directly affected by this, as the poem explains that the chemical waste enters “through our skin and into our body tissues” (131), recalling the notion of the hyperobject. As aforementioned, when discussing the properties of hyperobjects, Morton explains that the hyperobjects are “nonlocal” because they are so massive that they cannot be placed in a specific space (*Hyperobjects* 1). Morton

explains that “endocrine disruptors penetrate my body through my skin, my lungs, and my food” (38), regardless of where he is. Consequently, chemical waste cannot be traced nor located. Nonlocality can also be linked to the property of “viscosity”; hyperobjects “stick” to other objects, absorbing them, as Morton explains “[t]he mirror itself has become part of my flesh [...] I have become part of the mirror’s flesh, reflecting hyperobjects every-where” (*Hyperobjects* 8).

In “five,” the universalizing pronoun “we” is replaced by the pronoun “I”; not only are humans outside of nature, they no longer form a community. In this way, humans inhabit a completely disconnected and isolated world. As a result, emotions are no longer shared. Instead, a list of artificial products called “stream” replace the speaker’s knowledge of nature:

I replaced what I knew of the stream with Lifestream Total
Cholesterol Test Packets, with Snuggle Emerald Stream Fabric
Softener Dryer Sheet ... (132)

Other products with the word stream are connected to the verbs “use,” “put,” “keep,” and “buy” (Spahr 132). Thus, capitalism and consumerism substitute Ohio’s natural elements, which are being indirectly killed in order to sustain the economic system. Now, the poem presents the readers with a new scenario, set in the Anthropocene, in which human actions shape nature, especially through its destruction. Again, a link between waste and plastic and the end of nature can be argued through the presence of plastic, a hyperobject. As Morton explains, hyperobjects are based on interobjectivity, that is, hyperobjects rely on the interrelationships between objects (*Hyperobjects* 81). In the case of the verses above, the relation between the stream, the anaphoric name of the products, and the fact that it is now waste that inhabits the stream shows how interobjectivity works. Plastic replaces the river not only by taking its name, but also by indirectly inhabiting it. Moreover, by using brands that can be found all over the United States, this stream becomes part of a hyperobject, as it could be anywhere, unlike when the stream was populated by Ohio’s native species, referring to the property of nonlocality.

The speaker, then, realizes these deaths that were already hinted in the middle of the poem, and tries to restore the connection by repeating an action that has already been done, as she “put[s] [her] head together on a narrow pillow” (133). By repeating an action conducted previous to the existence of the Anthropocene, the speaker attempts to stop the process of destroying nature. However, this process cannot be stopped because it has already started, as evidenced by the fact that she can no longer sing the lament, she can no longer mourn – there is no nature left to be lost.

Conclusion

Human exploitation of natural resources has permanently altered humans’ relationship with the environment, and consequently, the concept of nature. Taking control of the human role in our contemporary world seems more relevant than ever. The concept of hyperobjects serves as a tool to conceptualize and frame these problems of understanding massive processes and their consequences. To address this, narratives have been proven to be a powerful source for inhabiting different spaces and developing empathy, which then influences our responses and relationships as individuals. As our actions are shaped by our emotions, Affect theory allows us to understand how fiction can help us navigate our place in this changing world. In this way, understanding the affective dimensions of our engagement with hyperobjects can inform our responses, actions, and decision-making processes. Combining the concept of hyperobjects and Affect theory enables us

to acquire a more profound perception of the emotional dimensions of how hyperobjects behave and the consequences that they can have. Therefore, these aspects impact our views, experiences, and reactions to such phenomena. In Spahr's poem, the usage of refrain reflects the changing relationships between humans and nature, and the complex affective interconnections between human and non-human elements. In this way, the poem reflects how plastic – a kind of hyperobject – begins to replace the native species of the stream. Through the use of the refrain, the poetic voice is allowed to grieve and, ultimately, to communicate the end of nature to the reader.

Author Biography

Claudia Alea Parrondo is a graduate student of the Literature Studies Program in Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). In 2019, she received a bachelor's degree in Graphic Design by the Camilo Jose Cela University, and, in 2023, she graduated with honors from the bachelor's degree in English Studies from Complutense University. Her research interests are in the fields of Cultural Studies, Medical Humanities and Contemporary U.S. poetry.

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