Université de Montréal

“Some say that happy women are immaterial:”
Ecofeminist Materiality in the Work of Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy

Par

Alyssa Jones

Département de littératures et de langues du monde

Faculté des arts et des sciences

Mémoire présenté en vue de l’obtention du grade de Maîtrise ès arts (M.A.)

en Études anglaises, option avec mémoire

Décembre 2023

© Alyssa Jones, 2023

Université de Montréal

Département de littératures et de langues du monde, Faculté des arts et des sciences

---

Ce mémoire intitulé

“Some say that happy women are immaterial:”

Ecofeminist Materiality in the Work of Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy

Présenté par

Alyssa Jones

A été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes

Heather Meek
Présidente-rapporteuse

Jane Malcolm
Directrice de recherche

Lianne Moyes
Membre du jury

Résumé

Mon mémoire explore les représentations d'environnements matériels et naturels dans des œuvres littéraires de Virginia Woolf et Mina Loy, et comment ces écrivaines conçoivent les connections entre leurs personnages féminins et leurs environnements. À travers l'analyse de leurs œuvres respectives et à l'aide de préceptes de l'écocritique et de sujets connexes tels la matérialité, l'écoféminisme et la trans-corporalité, j'établis la possibilité de réévaluer la perception anti-nature du Modernisme et des opportunités pour enrichir les études écocritiques et modernistes. En premier lieu, j'observe l'inséparabilité entre l'humanité et ces environnements de vie dans *Between the Acts*, dernier roman complété par Woolf, et comment cela constitue une évolution par rapport à sa nouvelle « Kew Gardens ». De plus, je présente les bénéfices de cette relation pour les femmes et leurs ambitions artistiques en me basant sur les arguments de Woolf dans son essai *A Room of One's Own* et en conversant avec des études qui explorent les éléments écocritiques de l'œuvre de Woolf. En deuxième lieu, je m'intéresse à une sélection des premiers poèmes de Mina Loy pour leurs examens de thèmes féministes et leur intégration dans les représentations des lieux visités dans les poèmes. J'illustre le rôle actif d'espaces domestiques et publics dans le maintien de discours dominants du patriarcat, et donc dans la résultante subjugation des femmes à son pouvoir. Ce travail d'analyse me permet de conclure avec de nouvelles avenues de recherche pour solidifier la place des femmes modernistes au sein du mouvement à l'aide de leurs intérêts environnementaux et pour reforger les liens ignorés ou effacés entre elles.

Mots-clés : Virginia Woolf, Mina Loy, Modernisme, écocritique, écoféminisme, matérialité, féminisme, trans-corporalité, femmes de lettres, femmes dans la littérature

Abstract

My thesis explores the depictions of material and natural spaces in literary works by Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy, and how both writers conceive the interconnections between their female characters and their surrounding environments. With the help of precepts of ecocriticism and of related fields such as materiality, ecofeminism and trans-corporeality in analyzing Woolf's and Loy's respective works, I demonstrate how the misguided preconception of Modernism's contempt for nature can be reassessed to offer new opportunities for both ecocritical and modernist studies. Firstly, I observe the inseparability between humanity and its living environments in Woolf's last completed novel *Between the Acts* and how this evolved from her earlier short story "Kew Gardens." I also discuss the benefits of this relation for women and their artistic ambitions with the aid of Woolf's own claims in her essay *A Room of One's Own* and in conversation with studies which have attested the ecocritical elements of Woolf's work. Secondly, I take an interest in Mina Loy's early poetry for its exploration of feminist themes and how those intertwine with her depictions of her poems' environments. I illustrate the active role of domestic and public spaces in the maintenance of ambient ruling patriarchal discourses and the subjugation of women to their power. This work of analysis allows me to conclude with new avenues from which to solidify the places of women modernists in the movement by the means of their environmental interests and to reforge the ignored or erased affiliations between them.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Mina Loy, Modernism, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, materiality, feminism, transcorporeality, women writers, women in literature

Table des matières | Table of Contents

Abréviations | Abbreviations i

Remerciements | Acknowledgements iii

Introduction: Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy: Ecofeminist Connections in Materiality 1

Chapter 1: Material (Dis)Unity in the Natural World 10

- 1.1.The Environment of Pointz Hall 17
- 1.2. Limitless Interior Spaces 22
- 1.3. Women's Creativity on the Grounds of Nature 33
- 1.4. The Theatre of Life 45

Chapter 2: Spatial Proximities 50

- 2.1. Trans-Corporeal Possibilities of Bodily Sensations 57
- 2.2. Immobile Bodies in Active Environments 64
- 2.3. Watching Eyes in Mina Loy's Paris 69
- 2.4. The Poisoned Streets of Florence 75
- 2.5. The Housing of Women: For Virginity and Marriage 81

Ouverture: Modernist Women's Environmental Consciousness 91

Works Cited 94

Abréviations | Abbreviations

BTA	*Between the Acts*
"KG"	"Kew Gardens"
"MF"	"Modern Fiction"
Room	*A Room of One's Own*
TLLB	*The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems by Mina Loy*
TTL	*To the Lighthouse*

À celles gardées dans l'ombre.
Feel its possibilities.

Remerciements | Acknowledgements

Ce mémoire est le résultat de deux années et demie de recherche et de rédaction qui ne fussent de tout repos. Après le confinement pandémique et les cours en ligne, j'ai réalisé ce travail à mon petit bureau près de mon lit, en isolation constante avec mes craintes et enjeux personnels. Si je suis aujourd'hui fière de ce que j'ai accomplie, je dois cela aux personnes de mon entourage qui ont su m'encourager, mais aussi me laisser temps et espace pour relever ces défis.

Les plus grands remerciements vont à ma famille : Maman, Papa, petite sœur, petit frère, merci pour votre soutien inconditionnel, explicite ou non, durant ces dernières années, malgré reports, retards, et mon silence sur l'évolution de mon mémoire. Je vous aime. Un grand remerciement aussi pour tous les autres membres de ma famille, amies et collègues de travail pour votre curiosité et vos mots d'encouragement.

These past few years of redaction have not been without their hurdles, and I would not have made it to the finish line as satisfied as I am today without the guidance and support of my wonderful thesis supervisor Jane Malcolm. I cannot thank you enough for your generosity and understanding when I shared my challenges with you, and for your advice whenever I needed it. I also want to extend my gratitude to the professors I've talked to in the past few years and who encouraged me on this journey during my very few days on campus; the curiosity, advice, criticisms, and praise you expressed to me always provided me with a much-needed boost in confidence. And to my fellow students, colleagues, and friends, thank you for your encouragements and the knowledge of your experiences.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy: Ecofeminist Connections in Materiality

In 1925, two women modernists offered their critical reflections on modern writing and on the task of the writer: Virginia Woolf published "Modern Fiction," a revised version of her 1919 essay "Modern Novels," as part of her essay collection, *The Common Reader*, while Mina Loy's "Modern Poetry" appeared in the women's clothing and fashion magazine *Charm* (Conover 217). Though their intellectual formation, the art they produced, and their biographies differ greatly, Loy and Woolf were contemporaries. Both born in 1882, their essays promote similar arguments in favour of modernist writing aesthetics and techniques in both prose and poetry, as well as a shared ambition to reject the past and embrace the future and the new. Loy calls for a "rebellion against tradition" (*TLLB* 157) and Woolf criticizes many writers of the past and what she calls the archaic "materialism"[1] in their depictions of reality. Woolf instead valorizes the works of James Joyce, who portrays "life itself" in *Ulysses* by dismissing constraining conventional methods of writing, and lauds a group of Russian writers, who use their literary freedom to explore the "dark places of psychology" and empathically understand "the soul and heart" of "the human spirit," which, according to Woolf, was systematically ignored in the materialist thinking and writing of the late 19th century ("MF" 162-163). Loy expresses similar sentiments in her essay on the new poetry and the modern poet, which are both characterised by, "the direct response of the poet's mind to the modern world of varieties in which he finds

[1] For Woolf, "materialism" represents something which had to be transcended to achieve greater artistic achievements in English fiction. She affirmed about the works of materialist writers that they "ha[d] a living, breathing, everyday imperfection which bids us take what liberties with it we choose," and about the writers themselves that they "have excited so many hopes and disappointed them persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done" ("MF" 158).

himself" (*TLLB* 158). What constitutes modern poetry is the prevalence of free verse, which is formed "by the spontaneous tempo of [the poet's] response to life" (157), forgoing concerns for "technical eccentricities or grammatical disturbances" in the pursuit of the "poet's reality." Loy also associates this new poetry primarily with the United States, and especially New York, where "every voice swings to the triple rhythm of its race, its citizenship and its personality" and where English "[has] been loosened in the melting-pot" from its "God's English" form, to become "the muse of modern literature" (159). For both Woolf and Loy, "modern" writing is thus synonymous with the absence of constraints (in form and in language) and with a respect for authorial authenticity and individuality that rejects the conventions of past traditions and embraces the complexities of the human psyche in uniquely nonconformist forms.

These conceptual commonalities resonate in many of their arguments, but there is one difference that sets them apart: while Woolf criticizes the "materialism" of past generations, Loy never makes mention of such a concept or its supposed superficiality. Indeed, Loy's idea of modern poetry does not reject the realities of material life, as poets are encouraged to take in and understand every facet of their surrounding environments. She also explains the relation between "nature" and poets, which changes with each distinct individual, claiming that, "to each," nature, "must show herself in a new manner, for each has a different organic personality for perceiving her" (160). The use of "organic" implies a certain importance given to living matter and to the relationships among and intertwined with the materiality of life and the natural world, which undoubtedly involve the body. Woolf explicitly stands against materialist perceptions, rendering them unworthy of a modern writer. Of the past writers she has deemed "materialists," Woolf writes that "they [were] concerned not with the spirit but with the body" ("MF" 158), "that they [wrote] of unimportant things" and "that they [spent] immense skill and immense industry

making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (159). Woolf's vision of materialism, as uniquely concerned with the body and superficiality, certainly does not align itself with contemporary acknowledgments of this multi-faceted concept[2] which, as a tool of literary analysis and criticism, can reveal much about a wide variety of works including Woolf's. Ironically, we might observe how Woolf's ideals for modern fiction and its writers, as explained in her essay, are closely connected with arguments and ideas behind the recent material turn of ecocritical studies, a field mainly concerned with ecology, nature, and environments. Woolf writes of admirable writers:

> They attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. Let us record *the atoms* as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. (161) [emphasis mine]

She also compares the "myriad expressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" that the mind can receive from all sides to "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" (160). Woolf's use of "atoms" certainly was not to establish a connection with what she describes as "materialism," but the presence of the word nevertheless puts Woolf in conversation with Loy, with whom she shares similar critical reflections on modern writing and an approbation of an environmentally inflected form of materialism.

My thesis is concerned with the environments depicted in Woolf's and Loy's works and how they impact female characters and speakers, and will be guided by precepts of material ecocriticism, which can uncover the complexities of the interconnections between material and

---

[2] There have been many approaches and conceptualisations of materialism throughout history that have reflected the principal concerns and ideas of their respective times. As Frédéric Neyrat explains, "materialism" has no monolithic definition which can cover the wide variety of materialist ideas, and perpetually adapts to new societal challenges. Newer, contemporary conceptions of materialism stand "against the exceptionalism of the human subject" and aim to destroy dualistic ideas which separates the "human" from the "rest of the world" (3-4).

psychological life in various approaches to writing. Other subcategories of widely encompassing ecocriticism and ecofeminism will complement my explorations of materiality and further dissect the relations between humanity and its surroundings as portrayed by Woolf and Loy, such as ecophenomenology, urban ecocriticism, and trans-corporeality. My range of choices stem from the writers' shared focus on literal matter (drawn from their use of the words "atoms" and "organic") and on impressions of multiple kinds, not limited to the realms of the natural world but rather to all environments and forms of life.

The variety of critical movements comprising the field of ecocritical studies results from its relative lack of conceptual boundaries and specifications. Thus, as Greg Garrard concludes, ecocriticism can be defined as the all-encompassing "study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (5). This definition reflects the grand selection of literary works that can be subjected to ecocritical analyses beyond their traditional subjects such as Romantic poetry and American nature writings. Works of Woolf and Loy, and thus the grander movement of Modernism, have rarely been the primary subjects of ecological and environmental studies, but they represent an important expansion of this field that seeks to move beyond strict nature writings to further deconstruct the human, cultural conception of "nature" at the heart of many analyses. In 2001, Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, in their book *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, argued for the necessity of this evolution to help close the constructed, illusionary gap between humanity and the natural world:

> Founding works of ecocriticism… demonstrate that nature – and writing that expressly takes nature as its topic – is as fit a subject for literature and criticism as any other. Yet we believe that a continued focus on nature and wilderness writing within ecocriticism might reinforce this same nature-culture dualism while, this time, privileging nature over culture. A viable ecocriticism must continue to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature, and by attending to the nature-

> focused text as also a cultural-literary text. Understanding how nature and culture constantly influence each other is essential to an informed ecocriticism… (4)

Modernist literature rejected past practices of realism and romanticism in favour of new methods of representational and experimental writing and embraced the city and the fruits of industrial and mechanical innovations, which made modernist artists appear distant from the green and natural world. Movements within Modernism, such as Futurism and Vorticism, have also contributed to the idea that the entirety of Modernism had an anti-nature stance (Black 21).[3] One modernist who has defied such categorization is Woolf, whose novels and stories have garnered ecocritical interest for decades. This widely recognized aspect of Woolf's works opens the door to expanding ecocritical studies to other modernist works and helps re-assess nature and the non-human from this unique historical and cultural perspective. A growing number of studies over the past decade have illustrated how Modernism should not be defined by the rejection of nature,[4] but instead as a movement that, as Black argues, "criticized the failure of accepted forms of nature writing to recognise the complex diversity of the natural world and the human place within it," by the means of "artistic experimentation which produce[d] new ways of thinking about and representing place" (40-41).

The chapters that follow will thus explore the representations and perceptions of a variety of spaces, natural and human-centered, and the impacts these environments have on the lives of women, as depicted by Woolf, whose work has been taken up by ecocritical studies, and Loy, whose works have garnered very little ecocritical interest. This wide gap mirrors their

---

[3] Anne Raine writes, in considering the writings of Wyndham Lewis, figurehead of Vorticism, "modernism defines itself in opposition both to nature itself and to the two literary genres – realist prose and romantic nature poetry – that ecocritics tend to champion" (99). The ambitions and opinions of futurists and vorticists, or the "men of 1914," as Bonnie Kime Scott deems them, has tainted the perception of Modernism and hidden its diverse beliefs on environments by seeking "to edit nature out of modernism" (Black 45).

[4] Recent studies include Joshua Schuster's *The Ecology of Modernism* (2015), Elizabeth Black's *The Nature of Modernism* (2018), and Jeremy Diaper's *Eco-Modernism* (2022).

recognition in the modernist canon (where Woolf's work is widely read and studied and Loy's much less prolific), but also allows me to examine an array of feminist opinions regarding environmental depictions in the modernist setting. My approach places me in relation with ecofeminism, closely entangled with ecocriticism, but distinct in its shared focus on both gender and environments. As Margot Lauwers explains, "the ecofeminist movement is based on the idea that the domination of women by men and the exploitation of nature by humanity have the same conceptual basis" (106). While some would argue that ecofeminism perpetuates an anthropocentric vision of the world,[5] I believe its approaches promote a more comprehensive and inclusive ecological, environmental knowledge that strives to include all of life, human and non-human, in its discourse, from a variety of cultural perspectives, reflecting the complexities of women's experiences all around the world. The many criticisms aimed at this movement (gender essentialism, inherent closeness between women and nature…) have helped hone its development and definition, such that we now understand ecofeminism as a "denunciation of a presupposed relationship between women and nature, as well as a movement which promotes a better understanding and respect for living things" (108). Any proximity established between women and nature, and between women and their occupied spaces, results then from diverging circumstances and reflects the societal expectations of their living environments.

The combination of a feminist approach with an ecocritical analysis of Woolf's and Loy's works engages with the complexity of their feminist positions and social reputations during the transforming moment of Modernism. Their opinions and standings would have given them fluctuating perspectives on their environments and the ones they portrayed, as these spaces must have been shifting, materially or socially, to adapt to the new realities of this tumultuous time in

[5] Simon C. Estok has once claimed that "ecofeminism is first a social theory, a human-centred approach" ("A Report Card on Ecocriticism" 228), and thus not entirely in line with ecocritical theory.

history. The feminist angle of my work and my exclusive focus on two women modernists also inscribe my work within ongoing efforts to rehabilitate women's integral importance to the movement and study of Modernism, and the ongoing resistance against reducing modernist writing by women to an annexed canon of "women's literature." Bonnie Kime Scott addresses the unfair lack of recognition of women in the modernist moment, the result of "specific historical circumstances." She explains:

> It was unconsciously gendered masculine. The inscriptions of mothers and women, and more broadly of sexuality and gender, were not adequately decoded, if detected at all… Deliberate or not, this is an example of the politics of gender. Typically, both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm the small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught and consecrated as geniuses. (*Gender of Modernism* 2)

Thus, placing female modernists in conversation with one another strengthens their position in literary history and allows for connections to emerge. Such was the goal of Erica Gene Delsandro's 2020 edited book *Women Making Modernism*, in which multiple contributors sought to observe affiliations between women modernists to counter literary criticism's tendency to isolate and separate female writers to highlight their uniqueness. In this book, Delsandro provides the most recent substantial contribution to Woolf-Loy studies[6] in her chapter titled "Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy: Modernist Affiliations." The chapter does not suppress the

[6] The lack of critical works looking at Loy's and Woolf's works in tandem can be explained by the fact that the two women never met, nor mentioned each other in recorded forms according to our present knowledge. This also justifies the minor connections that are highlighted between the two in works on Modernism and on this period in history, and how they can easily be criticized. Shari Benstock, in *Women of the Left Bank*, writes that both Loy and Woolf "saw the relation between the economic value of virginity and woman's oppression" (385) and reaped the consequences of combining "feminist subject matter[s] and technical experimentation" (in the underwhelming reception for *The Years* and in Loy's small reading audience) (387). Sandeep Parmar, in *Reading Mina Loy's Autobiographies*, criticizes Benstock's analysis, finding no merit in studying these two writers in a "shared modernist discourse" because of "their separate 'circles of influence' and differences in 'class, family, maternity and marital status'" (Delsandro 197). While she refutes bringing them together in an exploration of literary modernism, Parmar still finds merit in comparing Loy's autobiographical works with Woolf's. In her essay "Mina Loy's 'Unfinishing' Self," she writes that their reflections on the constructions of the self in writing and their acknowledgement, in their own way, of a "common human model" in which one conceives and lives their lives are two points of convergence on which to base a unifying analysis of their autobiographical writings (91, 93).

writers' artistic differences and their distinct social contexts, for they "led very different lives and made their mark on the literary landscape in very different manners" (174), but instead uses these differences to highlight their connections, notably in their opinions about women's lives. Delsandro explains: "That two women with such distinct experiences can express mutually engaging gender politics in their work and life suggests that there is another story to be told about modernism, one motivated by affiliations rather than antagonisms, by synthesis rather than singularity" (175).

Woolf's and Loy's personal lives and artistic accomplishments may make them seem incompatible in the context of literary critical comparison, but their common existence during the same tumultuous historical period, for the world and for women, makes reading them together intrinsically fruitful. In the following two chapters, I will thus examine literary works by Woolf and Loy separately, to uncover how these two distinct voices of Modernism address concerns and questions of ecology, environments, and materiality from unique perspectives. The key elements of my analyses will be their respective depictions of their texts' environments, for "all narrative texts, even those that do not seem interested in the environment in and of itself, offer up virtual environments for their readers to model mentally" (Weik von Mossner 12). In the first chapter, "Material (Dis)unity in the Natural World," I will discuss Woolf's last completed novel, *Between the Acts*, and how the (natural and material) spaces in which the events of the novel take place affect the female characters, their artistic ambitions, and their roles in the actions of the novel. In the second chapter, "Spatial Proximities," I will analyze Loy's early poems and observe how material contexts and environments acted upon women's physical and psychological lives, and reflected patriarchal control over their existence which persists even in the absence of men. Placing them side-by-side will not only highlight their different approaches to modernist writing,

but it will also establish an unlikely affiliation between the two on the grounds of the similarities in their depictions and explorations of their literary works' environments and in the feminist ideals that allow them to illustrate the ecological nature of the connections between women and their surroundings. The uncovering of this unforeseen relation in turn illustrates a new myriad possibilities to survey modernist women's literature that would bring us away from canonized conventions that have long elevated men's works and dismissed or hidden women's.

Chapter 1

Material (Dis)unity in the Natural World:
At the Crossing of Humanity and Nature in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

Among the works of Virginia Woolf that have been subjects of ecocritical analyses, the short story "Kew Gardens" stands out as one of the earliest examples of modernist nature writing. Published in 1919, in the titled setting of the story, readers find themselves situated in a flowerbed, alongside a snail making its way through "[b]rown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollows, flat blade-like trees that waved from root to tip, round boulders of grey stone, vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture…" ("KG" 91-92). What would seem insignificant from a human perspective becomes immensely consequential as the singular snail journeys through its minuscule, but epic world. However, the snail is not alone in the gardens: its movements in the flowerbed, as depicted in the story, are regularly interrupted by walking and sight-seeing human beings, enjoying a day among the trees and flowerbeds in busy London.

Woolf alternates between the peripeties of the snail's journey and the thoughts and dialogues of four human couples that walk past the snail's flowerbed. This repetitive alternance can create the illusion of a separation between two distinct (animal and human) worlds in a shared location, but Woolf's prose reframes this dichotomy as an intersection, or a permeable boundary, within a shared material universe:

> Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flower-bed and were enveloped in layer after layer of green-blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere. (95)

That which made human bodies distinct from their surroundings begins to evaporate, and instead they find themselves merging with the colours and the materials of the surrounding environment, which results in a unified, heterogeneous tableau of air and biological entities. Gardens, as

liminal spaces bridging the cultural gap between humanity and the natural world, represent accessible natural environments for many to enjoy, and serve as entryways into building a stronger ecological conscience. Thus, the presumed existence of two distinct (human and other-than-human) worlds is unsustainable in Woolf's "Kew Gardens," as every element makes up an aspect of an encompassing and connected world, in constant mutual, reciprocal relation. Woolf accords the atmosphere and sensory perceptions of it a great deal of description, which falls in line with precepts of ecophenomenology outlined in the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Kelly Sultzbach notes that Woolf's text "evokes an artistic aesthetic that brings together a 'fresh sensory entity' of garden and a new 'richer meaning' of a shared organic world" (264). The story's depiction of interconnections and points of convergence between human and non-human realms subtly alter our conceptions of where "environment" begins and ends, and these shifts are felt and perceived by all sensing bodies, from the flora and the molecules composing the air to human beings and a miniscule snail.

In "Kew Gardens," Woolf transforms the uniqueness of our bodies into an illusion; the very matter that composes human bodies can be found all around us, which makes us indistinguishable from other organic elements in what Louise Westling has referred to as the "flesh of the world." Westling explains that "our very life emerges within the intertwined and cooperating cells and organs of our bodies, just as those bodies have always moved in participation with the things and forces surrounding them" ("Ecophenomenology" 129). In Woolf's story, what had defined corporeal human life is shared with the entirety of the world, which reinforces the idea that "the relations between ourselves as sensing bodies and the sensible things in the world are dynamic, continually unfolding in vital reciprocities" (129). In doing so,

albeit not in explicit terms, Woolf levels all forms of life, as human lives are no longer different or superior to other lives and ecosystems, but rather parts of them.

The reversal of traditional perspective, from human to a smaller living being, also contributes to the idea of a shared material world. It serves as a tool of equalization, rendering the snail just as worthy of agency and perspective as a person walking in the gardens. Its point of view is unique, as it can connect the animal and human world via its mollusc existence; for example, it observes that "the figures of these men and women straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed" ("KG" 90). Animal personification and anthropomorphism are familiar human imaginative modes, but the descriptions here of the butterflies' movements between the flowerbeds betray the snail's reality, which is distinctively apart from human imagination[7]. Human visitors, in their own reflections, are also enticed by the pulsing life in the gardens, which unknowingly expands their perceptive abilities, beyond what they know and understand. As Joyce E. Kelley states, these human visitors "achieve a moment of enriched perception by discovering a world beyond what is commonly seen; as they do so, Woolf encourages us to be more perceptive of the world(s) we inhabit" (164). By depicting these two principal life forms (snail and human) in alternance, it moves readers to understand their existence on the same level as all other perceptive life; their respective actions and reactions contribute to the shaping of the story, as it would not be complete without this mutuality.

[7] Anthropomorphism was a prominent imaginative mode in the literature of the Victorian era: animal characters were attributed human traits and personalities to serve narratives mostly concerned with issues of humanity, as humans would write stories that would aim to depict or understand the world "according to [their] own scale, dimensions, interests and desires" (Clark 192) through new personified representations. The Victorians were in a unique position, grappling with discoveries and ideas of Charles Darwin, presented in works such as *On the Origins of Species* (1859) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872); his ideas destabilized the established hierarchy of biological life and blurred the boundaries between humans and animals, as they made "the human more animal and the animal more human" (Morse and Danahay 2). Virginia Woolf's depiction of the snail departs from those of many of her predecessors, as the snail is not given uniquely human observations and traits.

Despite these textual elements signifying a greater ecological conscience, "Kew Gardens," through its human characters, still depicts a superficial idea of human harmony with a "nature" that is categorically passive to them, which slightly negates a meaningful recognition of the gardens' and its creatures' overall importance to all forms of life. Although the snail is not passive to readers, the human characters are unaware of its presence, and thus the connections that have been highlighted have all come from the perspective of the non-human being. The snail notices the merging colours and matter in the atmosphere, from its position in the flowerbed, and integrates human bodies in the materiality of its world. The story does not depict reciprocated observations from human visitors, as the human visitors mainly talk and think of their own memories, brought to mind by their walks through the gardens. Therefore, despite Woolf's marked ecological interest, her writing highlights a generalized human ignorance about our outsized significance in a shared material world, in which the snail is in possession of sensory abilities surpassing theirs:

> Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women and children, were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then seeing the breadth of yellow that lay upon the grass, they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue. ("KG" 95)

The burden being put on the snail does not erase Woolf's intention to depict human beings merging with their surroundings, but it diminishes the respect they bear for the environment of the gardens; they remain unaware of their material interconnections with the environment, despite the clear emotional connections they have with this natural world. None of their thoughts and observations imply recognition of their greater connection with this other, as the snail's did, but rather they serve to invoke certain memories and to achieve their desired mental and physical state. The one-sided recognition points to the anthropocentric construction of "nature" in this

story, which is a man-made-and-controlled "natural" environment, regulated by artificial garden installations. Woolf's approach to this story, while elevating the idea of a shared material (human and natural) world, cannot erase the overwhelming sentimental appropriation of nature, rid of most of its agency and subjugated to human characterization. The intent to depict an interconnected, heterogeneous world still stands, but Woolf still portrays an inequality between humanity and the rest of nature, by depicting mainly human concerns rather than using the story for more complex environmental reflections. Even if it gains a multi-faceted and fluid materiality, nature cannot fully transcend its representation as a backdrop, passive in its construction, as anthropocentrism wills it; its acknowledged value, the sentimental one, remains the only meaningful one, even if Woolf successfully paints a world of shared, vibrant materiality.

"Kew Gardens" was not Virginia Woolf's only contribution to a growing canon of modernist nature writing, as many ecocritical studies would attest; works like Christina Alt's *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (2010), Justyna Kostkowska's *Ecocriticism and Women Writers* (2013), and a number of scholarly conferences, such as 2010's 20th Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf with theme "Virginia Woolf and the Natural World," showcase the extent of Woolf's interest in nature across her oeuvre, while Bonnie Kime Scott's *In the Hollow of the Wave* (2012) and Kelly Sultzbach's *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* (2016) explore Woolf's distinctively modernist approaches to nature writing. Woolf carried her ecological interests forward, even into her final (posthumous) novel *Between the Acts*, the last manuscript she completed before her death.[8] The novel follows the members of the Oliver family and their

[8] The text of *Between the Acts* is preceded by a note from Leonard Woolf, Virginia's husband, stating that the manuscript had been completed, but not finally revised. He explains that he believed that "she would not… have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs" (*BTA* 1).

guests, in their house and on the grounds of Pointz Hall in the English countryside, during a June day of 1939, as their annual pageant takes place. Despite a separation in time of almost twenty years, *Between the Acts* displays several similar formal characteristics and ecological themes to those of the short story: both texts are set in gardens (public and private), and these settings affect the characters at the center of both the short story's and the novel's actions. In what follows, I will explore the multiplicity of crossings and tensions between the human and natural worlds, since, just like in "Kew Gardens," humans and other organisms find themselves merging as the events of the story unfold in the private gardens and natural environments of Pointz Hall. The evolution in Woolf's nature writing from her 1919 work is shown primarily through the depiction, in *Between the Acts*, of nature as decidedly active, insinuating itself into the lives of the novel's human characters and affecting their mental states and their peripeties. Through the multiple human perspectives that shape the novel, we can attest to nature's integral contributions to narrative construction and perceptions, whether it is in Woolf's writing, in the pageant produced by Miss La Trobe, or in the events surrounding this production.

This transgression of passivity challenges the anthropocentric separation that elevated humanity above its connections to its surrounding environments in "Kew Gardens." In fact, this chapter examines whether Woolf's ecological conscience in her later work, especially *Between the Acts*, pushes for its abolition or maintains a certain ambivalence. The opening scene of the novel indicates a clear distinction from "Kew Gardens," as a conversation between a group of people is repeatedly interrupted by animals heard through the windows, their sounds continually interrupting and shaping the ongoing discussion as the characters stop to acknowledge the sounds. The recognition of these agential others within the text signals an evolution, one that highlights the fragility, or even the impossibility, of boundaries, concrete or supposed, between

human beings and the natural world they are in contact with. By focusing on the action of a single day, during which characters are subjugated to a cacophony of voices, sounds and conversations that intertwine with a flurry of images, Woolf provides many details of her characters' psychological states and sensory perceptions, and the subsequent interpretations these characters make of their environments. They are affected by the always shifting incomprehensible world they inhabit (and cohabitate) and are confronted by uncontrollable animal involvements and ecological phenomena, which strengthens Woolf's recognition of the interconnectedness between all beings and things, as multiple agencies, human and non-human, complement or oppose each other in the pages of the novel.

The destabilization of the status-quo of relations between humans and nature is not without flaws, mainly in the appropriation of nature's "actions," as I will discuss in the final part of this chapter. Despite this reproach, my analysis suggests Woolf's work in *Between the Acts* recognizes the inherent interconnections within the material, natural world, through her writing and her characters' perceptive abilities. The decentering of human characters in favour of giving subjectivity to non-human (animate and inanimate) actors requires placing Woolf's writing in conversation with various approaches of ecocriticism; in dissecting the arbitrary dichotomy between humanity and nature from mainly two ecocritical approaches, material ecocriticism and ecophenomenology, I will demonstrate the inherent, equalizing sharing of materiality in an interconnected world where, as Louise Westling illustrates it, everything is "enmeshed within the visible present… both seeing and seen, touching and touched by the things around [them]" ("Ecophenomenology" 130). I will also highlight the relative importance of human perceptions in building a stronger environmental conscience and respect for the other-than-human world.

1.1. The Environment of Pointz Hall

The "environment" and "nature" at the center of this analysis mostly refer to the singular setting of *Between the Acts*, the Oliver family house and grounds in the English countryside, known as Pointz Hall.[9] It proves to be a particularly rich setting as it is the stage for many interactions between human characters and the rest of the natural world. The house is strangely situated in the landscape, as the builders seemingly rejected its ideal location on the grounds, and instead built it where they wanted: "It was a pity that the man who had built Pointz Hall had pitched the house in a hollow, when beyond the flower garden and the vegetables there was this stretch of high ground. *Nature had provided a site for a house*; man had built his house in a hollow" (*BTA* 10) [emphasis mine]. This scorn of nature is recognized by the present residents of the house; when Lucy Swithin asks her brother Bartholomew Oliver, "Why, Bart, did they build the house in the hollow, facing north?", he replies that it was "Obviously to escape from nature…" (8). The location for the house was seemingly thought as an escape from the grips of nature, and as a way to break bonds with its surroundings, but the natural elements have disturbed the lives of the house's inhabitants on multiple occasions, making them prisoners of the very thing the house was built to escape. From mud entrapping a family vehicle to a great snowstorm and fallen trees blocking movements to and from the house (8), nature is perceived as an obstacle to human comfort by refusing to maintain its beautiful, peaceful state. This reality is fed by what could be called an "ecophobic" perspective of nature, as described by Simon C. Estok. He explains: "Fear of a loss of agency does strange things to people. Fear of the loss of agency and fear of the loss of predictability are what form the core of ecophobia…" ("Painful Material Realities" 134). The loss of control over the surrounding environment and the ensuing fright imply a selfishness and a

[9] The original title for *Between the Acts* was "Poyntz Hall." Woolf refers to it as such in her diary entries detailing her writing process and the overall progress of the novel.

willful misunderstanding of human positioning in the natural world, as not above, but within. Mrs. Swithin, while being one of the characters most appreciative of the environment around Pointz Hall, gives into ecophobic thinking as she refuses to stay in the house during the winters. Ultimately, she "take[s] agency outside of [herself] as threats" (130) and behaves in accordance with her personal limits in her enjoyment of nature, which tolerate its peacefulness and subdued state, and fear its uncontrollable, frightful phenomena. Given Mrs. Swithin's overall attunement with nature in the rest of the novel, Woolf's contradictory description of her character in the first pages of the novel, oscillating between appreciation of the natural world and ecophobia, effectively introduces Pointz Hall not only as a perilous and uninviting place in harsh weather, but also as a house in constant relation with its surrounding natural environment. The initial attempt to insulate it from the influences of its exterior environs has failed, and nature now seeks to reabsorb it: it cannot be dissociated from it as it "[lies] unfortunately low on the meadow with a fringe of trees on the bank above it so that smoke curled up to the nests of the rooks…" (*BTA* 6). The picturesque countryside house is now inseparable from and framed by what it was long ago built to escape.[10]

The longevity of Pointz Hall and its passing through multiple generations points to its rich history with the land; the house and its terrain appear as a meeting point for nature and history, both important intertwining themes in *Between the Acts.* While this history is not my primary interest here, it cannot be ignored in my ecocritical enquiries, as it has shaped the

---

[10] The situation of Pointz Hall is not so different from the one of the jar in Wallace Stevens' 1919 poem "Anecdote of the Jar." The speaker of this poem places a jar on a hill in the wilderness of Tennessee and witnesses the transformation of the wilderness as the jar remains intact and impenetrable to its changing and growing natural environment. The jar modifies its environment, without controlling it: the speaker mentions how "The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild." The elements of nature cannot penetrate the intruding object, but they will continue to "exist" around it and make it part of this transformed ecosystem. Woolf reprises a similar motif in *Between the Acts*, as the Pointz Hall house, a stranger in its environment, cannot be removed from it once it has been implanted, since it has become an integral body in its larger terrain, intertwined with entities and phenomena outside of its control.

material circumstances and setting of the novel, and affects the observations made upon it by the characters. As Woolf describes, Pointz Hall is an old house in the English country landscape comporting many old houses that have been inherited through generations. The Olivers became the owners of theirs only (approximately) 120 years before the events of the novel, and the insides of its walls bear the marks of their family's ancestry. More significantly, added to their relatively brief imprint, is Pointz Hall's surrounding environment's deep connection to a past predating their ownership, and unknown by many. In the opening scene of the novel, Mr. Oliver recalls, when discussing the cesspool in their area, "that the site they had chosen for [it] was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road." He continues: "From an aeroplane… you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars" (4). The history of the land is integral to the material reality of Pointz Hall, adds context to the events unfolding in the novel, and complements the pageant's panorama of English history and literature. Serenella Iovino explains that "there is a strong, deep, and complex interrelation between the agency of natural forces and the agency of cultural practices. The landscape of discourses, words, and conceptual descriptors melts with the landscape of elements, of geology, of telluric and atmospheric agencies…" (106). Cultural practices of times past have effects on the tangible elements of the present world in the novel, which will then influence subsequent generations' cultural creations and perceptions of their environments, which are the principal intersections of culture and nature in *Between the Acts*. The history carved in the land finds itself implanted into cultural, human discourses and practices. Lucy Swithin recognizes this reality as she imagines and visualizes her memories and the tales found within her *Outline of History* from her view of the property, realizing the material past and possibilities of her environment.

However, all characters, when faced with the natural world around them, must grapple with the visible scars of history, and the uncontrollable and unpredictable forces of nature that have shaped it, as their material selves cannot be removed from it; history is but another prism through which they can define themselves in relation to their environment.

As geological history and human migration have left their marks on the grounds around Pointz Hall, the history of ownership has shaped the very foundations of the house and its interior. The architecture and constructions of the past are actualized by the characters, as they live within its walls, built centuries before they were born. Pointz Hall predates the Reformation, a reality that cannot be ignored despite the modifications that generations of inhabitants have brought in the functioning of the house. For example, what is used as a larder in the novel was once a chapel, which is still noticeable by the family and the staff, and makes it an attraction for visitors. The inhabitants and the workers have made their lives around and with this installation that precedes the sixteenth century, and thus are in constant proximity with the past. The architecture and a variety of objects are traces of history, or are imbued with it, and act upon those living there in the present time. Mrs. Swithin sees the house as a succession of memories that define what it is to her. When touring the house with guest William Dodge, she recounts the memories and historical information that awaken in her when she enters different rooms. When showing the morning room, she describes it as "where my mother received her guests" (*BTA* 69), and when entering one of the bedrooms, she recalls: "'Here,' she said, 'yes, here,' she tapped the counterpane, 'I was born. In this bed.'" (70). History, whether it is visible (in the architecture, the Victorian furniture or the ancestor's portrait) or invisible (in the stories the house bears), acts on the present and influences the way the characters inhabiting the house perceive themselves and

their living environments. Tangible facts and scars of the past are still active, even if they are sourced from another time.

Given the inescapable material presence of history in and around Pointz Hall, it cannot be dissociated from the environments, natural or not, depicted in *Between the Acts*. While it may not be my principal focus for this work, history remains an integral part of the material environments interconnected with the human characters and events. The principal event of the novel, the pageant directed by Miss La Trobe, which presents a disjointed panorama of English history and literature, constitutes the primary example of this phenomenon, as nature joins the actors in the performance. Material realities, as shaped by the past and the present, ecological phenomena, and the natural world's elements act upon the realm of human life, and vice-versa. Together, they form an indestructible and indissociable puzzle, which changes the perception that nature is passive and instead presents it as an active force in the unfolding events of the novel. Stacy Alaimo has suggested that "[v]iewing nature as an actor radically challenges the idea that nature is passive matter, there for cultural consumption" (*Undomesticated Ground* 12), and that is what Woolf depicts in *Between the Acts*, not only during the pageant—when nature defies its positioning as a theatrical stage and becomes an essential collection of "voices" in the production—but also when the characters are simply situated outside or within the walls of the house. The agentic power of the natural world around Pointz Hall shatters the boundaries separating humanity from it, but also the solid, constructed ones that form the foundation of the house. As the human characters here are aware of nature's interventions, as opposed to those in "Kew Gardens," a unity is created between all life forms within the same material and natural world that renders the walls of the house infinitely permeable.

Taking note of major arguments in the field of material ecocriticism, I will start this discussion by examining the integral importance of interior, material spaces to female characters' fulfilment, which can act upon them just as nature does, and how the women's perceptions of their personal spaces inside the house include their exteriors. They construct the "meaning" of their rooms through their perceptive abilities that allow them to feel and see beyond seemingly opaque and solid boundaries. In demonstrating this destabilizing acknowledgement, I will highlight the suppression of barriers that separated human beings from their natural environments, even elevated them above different life forms and matter. Following this section, I will then discuss events that take place outside of Pointz Hall, as nature takes an active role in the proceedings, by following mainly Miss La Trobe and Isa, two female artists in opposite standings. To conclude the chapter, I want to illustrate the ambiguities remaining in Woolf's nature writing through her depiction of her characters and the gardens of Pointz Hall, as nature appears both expressively active, but also tamed by human interpretations. Finally, I will discuss how Woolf's depictions stand apart from our contemporary ecological knowledge, and how they may lead to new, or previously ignored, perspectives of nature in the modernist context and contribute to the expansion of ecocritical studies to other modernist works.

1.2. Limitless Interior Spaces

Before the action in *Between the Acts* moves outside, the Oliver family spends time inside the walls of Pointz Hall, as they await the arrival of guests for the day's pageant. Though moments spent on the grounds, amongst the trees, flowers, and singing birds, are of interest here, the time spent inside the house is equally revelatory of the characters' relationship to spaces, both interior and exterior, and allows Woolf to create permeable boundaries between the two, much like those

that stand between humans and nature. In fact, the moments spent with Isa and Lucy Swithin interrogate the concept of interiority and reshape it as a notion dependent on an individual's complete material environment, which blurs definitions of "inside" and "outside." Indeed, Woolf has often deconstructed such separations. Andrew Thacker has observed that her work "constantly play[s] across the spatial borders of inner and outer, constructing a fiction that shows how material spaces rely upon imaginative conceptualisation, and how the territory of the mind is informed by an interaction with external spaces and places" (152-153). The solitary moments with Isa and Mrs. Swithin, when they are isolated from the rest of the family to prepare themselves for the upcoming day, serve Woolf's character-building by highlighting their desires and personalities, which they conceal in large part in the presence of others to conduct themselves according to their roles and positions in society. Additionally, and most interestingly for my purposes, they dismantle the possibility of a strict, boundary-forged interiority, of the mind and of spaces, as the characters take in all of the material world around them to feed and complement their thoughts. In moments of total freedom, their personal interiorities are completed by their environments, which awards them personal fulfillment.

Mrs. Swithin's moment of privacy allows her to enjoy her "imaginative reconstruction of the past" before she remembers her mother's words and composes herself to present herself to other people "like any other old lady with a high nose, thin cheeks, a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age" (*BTA* 9-10). Similarly, Isa can partially shed her image of a dutiful wife when she is alone with her thoughts, in her personal space. While she still acknowledges her children and husband Giles Oliver, "the father of [her] children" (14), and remembers her obligations (by ordering fish), she is free to dream and contemplate about her "inner love" for the farmer Rupert Haines. Such liberties allow her to pursue her own creativity,

which she can express without being heard and without concealing it inside her personal book, which is “bound like an account book” (15) to escape her husband’s notice. Both women avoid feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame within the interior of their rooms, where they are protected from other people’s looks, and where their creative sides can be explored freely, beyond their usual boundaries. Their personal interiority, their artistic agency and romantic imaginings are strengthened by their positions of isolation in the house, away from all undesired influences. On the notion of interiority, Suzana Zink explains that “[it] is essential to a reading of rooms in that it conflates the material interiority of built space and the inner life of the human subject” (26). Even if Woolf provides few details about the physical composition and materiality of the rooms in those scenes, she links the positioning of Isa and Mrs. Swithin inside their interior spaces in Pointz Hall with them embracing their authentic individualities. The familiar materiality of these interior spaces gives them a form of protection, shielding them from undesired “outside” forces, and is thus synonymous with accepting and liberating their true selves, freed from the constraints imposed by a more chaotic outside world.

The image of a closed bedroom in a domestic setting often ignites impressions of imprisonment and restraint for female characters, but Woolf, with Isa and Mrs. Swithin, presents this intimate space as a space of creation and potentiality, free from oppressing societal norms and repressive judgment. This aligns with the ideas illustrated in her 1929 feminist essay *A Room of One’s Own*, in which she wrote:

> Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time… Women, then, have not had a dog’s chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one’s own. (*Room* 108)

The importance given to materiality in the context of artistic creation makes it not an issue of talent, but one of comfortability; alongside capitalist necessities and their privileges, Woolf explicitly references "freedom," which is what Isa and Mrs. Swithin gain in their rooms, in addition to the time that is afforded to them by their position in society. In placing her female characters in spaces where they may embrace their artistic ambitions and hidden passions, reliant on the rooms' material compositions and protection, I would argue that Woolf tackles concepts of material feminism, closely connected to the material branch of ecocriticism, which strays away from "discursively oriented studies of human corporeality [that] confine themselves to the corporeal bounds of the human" and instead "open[s] out the question of the human by considering models of extension, interconnection, exchange, and unraveling" (Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms" 244). Woolf's writing particularly connects with ideas of trans-corporeality, as explained by Stacy Alaimo; she describes it as "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'" (238). She adds: "by emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals *the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human*" (238) [emphasis mine]. Although Woolf does not focus on the human body itself, she illuminates exchanges of a similar kind between mind-body and exterior materiality. She associates a state of mind with material conditions, which undermines the supposed boundaries that would separate the human body and mind from their surrounding environment. This association redefines both the human characters and their immediate surroundings: their rooms bear new forms of meaning and the two women's interiorities are completed by what their rooms provide to them. Isa and Lucy Swithin glimpse the possibilities of their respective rooms and connect to several centuries of forgotten potential,

> …for women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. (*Room* 87)

Their limited spaces afford them more than is possible in the "outside" world, where being seen forces them to limit their expressions and build walls around their thoughts; as both means to an end and expressive, meaningful material constructions, their rooms multiply the possibilities of their artistic creativity and imagination, and strengthen their individualities, by shutting them away from what and who would torment them in society.

Though they are reassured by the safety that their privacy affords them, Isa and Mrs. Swithin are not in complete isolation, as their interconnections with their immediate environments do not stop at the walls of their rooms. They remain aware of the natural world's elements, to the extent that they penetrate the walls and windows of Pointz Hall and continually fuel their thoughts. When preparing herself for the day, whilst looking in the mirror, Isa's attention is divided between her reflection and the exterior of the house, which she can see in her peripheral vision from her window. She is drawn to the scenes taking place outside of the house, where her children are walking with the nurses; to catch their attention, she taps on the windows, but her actions go unnoticed by those outside. This rare example of an impermeable boundary between inside and outside allows Woolf to display nature's all-encompassing presence: "The drone of the trees was in their ears; the chirp of birds; other incidents of garden life, inaudible, invisible to her in the bedroom, absorbed them. Isolated on a green island…, the innocent island floated under her window" (*BTA* 14). The nurses and the little boys' senses are overwhelmed by the stimuli of their environment, a reality Isa is fully aware of. In her physical separation from the outside, she is still connected to it, as it isolates her children and gives her rare moments of freedom to think about her feelings for the farmer Rupert Haines. Even if it is partially cut off

from her (by her window), the natural world still fuels her exploration of "inner love" by being a harmless, protective, and concealing presence.

In contrast, the exterior environment is more concretely present in Mrs. Swithin's room. Birds can be heard through the window when she wakes, which she is "forced to listen" to as she reads her book, and which in turn informs her imagination, along with the view from her window (8). Indeed, nature plays an integral role in the construction of her imaginative, visualized past; what she sees from her window serves as an encouragement to withdraw from reality, as she is "tempted by the sight to continue her imaginative reconstruction of the past" (9). Her histories, taken from her book *Outline of History*, are anchored by the wild, untamed nature of the past, either buried beneath or carved in the grounds she can see from her room. She imagines:

> …rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (8-9)

The vivid images she creates are connected to the present, as ancestral and historical images of her present reality. Their richness and tangibility also allow Mrs. Swithin to be immersed in this past nature of her own creation, which can only be taken apart by another human presence, stranger to her imaginative world. A maid unintentionally breaks her out of the spell as she enters the room, not without difficulty: "It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself…, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest" (9). For a moment, imagination and reality are merged and struggle to separate when Mrs. Swithin looks at Grace with a "divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron" (9). In these passages, the materiality of

the room is altered by Mrs. Swithin and made anew by her mind's work, driven by a keen awareness of the natural world around her, its past, and its connections with contemporary humanity.

By intertwining the materiality of the room and nature in Mrs. Swithin's imagination, Woolf exemplifies how nature cannot be avoided or forgotten, despite a physical barrier. Its elements are in constant interaction with human lives, even if they would rather ignore them. The materialist strand of ecocritical studies has developed ways to rethink nature, as, for example, a "process that [is] all around us, all the time" (Sullivan 90). Heather I. Sullivan elaborates this idea in her essay titled "The Ecology of Colors," detailing that "[r]ather than locating nature elsewhere or in the wild or outdoors, nature appears – visually, sensually – all around us in its most energized form of light and colors" (90). Woolf moves in this direction in *Between the Acts*, as Isa's and Mrs. Swithin's interior and exterior spaces, and their materiality, are absorbed and reshaped through their minds' work. The natural world and all "environments" act upon human subjects, and vice-versa; even in a situation of supposed isolation in one's room, a person's actions and thoughts are impacted by their surroundings, from both sides of the walls. These interchanges allow Woolf's female characters in closed rooms to thrive, as they are liberated from society's expectations and free to explore their minds beyond limits. The perceived materiality of their rooms is transformed, as these spaces do not imprison, but rather open the world of creativity and romance to them. Suzana Zink writes that "the site of women's secluded lives — a recurrent motif in Woolf's writing on female creativity and the hindrances met by women writers at various points in time — is viewed as potentially fecund, and outward looking" (30). These quiet moments with Lucy Swithin and Isa make their rooms both "inward and outward-reaching," and "[rewrite] the oppressive private house" (30) as spaces of infinite

creative power, which links back to Woolf's ideas about women's artistry, creativity and prosperity, and highlights the necessary, dynamic entanglement of interiority and exteriority. Indeed, by welcoming the fullness of their sensory perceptions of inside and outside environments, Isa's and Mrs. Swithin's inner reflections and imaginative creations can shatter material boundaries, which become illusionary as they reach beyond the limits of their lives, even for the briefest moments, to feel as free as they desire to be, through extra-corporeal connections with their environments.

The porousness of the walls of Pointz Hall is addressed on multiple occasions in *Between the Acts*, beyond these prolonged moments of solitude, as other barriers in the composition of the material world are also revealed open by nature's elements. In her descriptions of life inside Pointz Hall, whether with the sounds of birds and other animals heard throughout the day or the wind moving curtains by open windows, Woolf highlights the inherent closeness and interconnections of the delimited "inside" and "outside" environments, making the walls appear as continuous with what they hide on the other side. Being closed-off entirely from the actions and influences of nature is impossible because it cannot be controlled and does not respect human-built boundaries in its aim to thrive freely. The "intra-actions" between the natural world and the larger material world, which go above "individualized things encountering each other" (Sullivan 84) and instead pre-suppose a form of unity, destabilize human activities and structures as they are parts of the wider, shared material world. Apart from the house, Woolf writes about the barn on the grounds of the property, which welcomes the visitors between the acts of the pageant performance, and describes how it is has lost its structural individuality and instead has become one with the world around it. When human beings are absent, the other-than-human beings and elements of nature roam freely within this building:

> The Barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked different angles and edges. Minute nibblings and rustlings broke the silence. Whiffs of sweetness and richness veined the air. A blue-bottle had settled on the cake and stabbed its yellow rock with its short drill. A butterfly sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate. (*BTA* 100)

This passage is one of the few where a human perspective is completely erased, and Woolf uses this moment to explore this bareness, as seemingly "nothing" is happening; she showcases the impossibility of "nothing" in the materiality of the world, as human activities are not the only instances of actions and movements on this Earth, despite our lack of perspective on this reality. Here, we are reminded of a similar technique, in "Time Passes," the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*: Woolf invites readers into seemingly "empty" spaces that are filled with life, despite the silence and stillness, thus exposing the absurdity of "nothing"—the air and other matter are always in movement and in relation.

As the title suggests, Woolf describes the passage of time across a decade in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, mostly through an omniscient perspective, as the house is emptied of its inhabitants, the Ramseys. She enlivens the dust accumulating over the house, and portrays the dynamism of "empty" rooms and still objects. In the growing absence, it invites all actors, human and non-human, involved in the passage of time:

> So with the house empty…, those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing-room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. (*TTL* 105-106)

Emptiness for Woolf is not stagnant, but is instead synonymous with other forms of evolutionary life. The atmosphere, and all things under the Earth's dome, shift over time and adapt to the

various actions imposed upon them. Across multiple pages, Woolf explains what "nothing" and "emptiness" entail for the house over the decade of the 1910s, as the world drastically changes around it with the First World War; not only can life be found in the sounds heard through the walls and windows and the light that penetrates and reflects upon walls and objects, it can also penetrate the house in multiple other forms, as its structure stands solid among instability:

> The house was left; the house was deserted… The long night seemed to have set in; the trifling airs, nibbling, the clammy breaths, fumbling, seemed to have triumphed. The saucepan had rusted and the mat decayed. Toads had nosed their way in. Idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro. A thistle thrust itself between the tiles in the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots. (112-113)

As humans have left this space, it can be reclaimed by the flora and fauna, and they add themselves to the air's transformative power by passing through the barriers that were solid and impermeable. Woolf rethinks spaces, so that they go beyond their human-constructed conceptions, or as Marco Carracciolo and his co-writers have observed, "[s]pace… becomes more than just a passive background upon which humans act, it forms the vital materiality where the objects we once thought were just 'dead' matter show themselves recalcitrant and agential" (8). She exposes the "nothing" in spaces emptied of human beings as agentic, lively matter.

The similarities between this section of *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* do not stop at the depiction of nothingness, but also extend to the perception of this lively phenomenon. These moments of "nothing," filled with energy and movements, and just as lively as human activities and gatherings, are inevitably interrupted by humanity that wishes to reclaim its spaces from non-human actors, which subsequently go unnoticed. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf writes: "But Mrs. Sands was approaching… She could see the great open door. But butterflies she never saw; mice were only black pellets in the kitchen drawers; moths she bundled in her hands and

put out of the window… The Barn was empty" (100-101). To the cook of Pointz Hall, animals and the traces of nature become noticeable only in their intrusions in her routine and remain in the background when they do not affect her. With this short passage, Woolf highlights a willful blindness in human nature, hiding what is of little importance to them, leaving them in ignorance for their own self-preservation and to cement their place in the world. While some may have more awareness of their environments, like Mrs. Swithin who notices the swallows in the rafters of the same barn, Woolf's novel, despite taking strides in decentering human lives, illustrates the selfishness of human beings, centering narratives and the material world's actions and expressions around themselves; they ignore what is seemingly of no importance, and, in doing so, separate themselves from their environments and stand distinct from it.

This is also made evident through the abundance of dialogues and sounds, heard and unheard, which constitute a large part of the novel and infiltrate human narratives and representations. Lisbeth Larsson explains:

> Not only do its characters talk; the entire universe seems to speak without anyone understanding. Cows moo, birds twitter, the wind howls and together with modern technology, in the form of telephones that ring, gramophones that play and aircraft flying in battle formation through the skies, the sounds of nature interrupt human speech and become part of what is said, although nobody hears. (213)

Although some of varying origins do go unnoticed on some occasions, the sounds of nature and from other provenances are actively noticed and remarked upon multiple times in the novel. However, they are also reshaped to fit within certain frames, to build up human creativity in various forms. In the following section, building on the non-existence of boundaries between the human and natural, material world previously discussed, I will explore the various intrusions of nature experienced or witnessed by Woolf's human characters during the pageant, which takes place on the terrace of Pointz Hall, out in the open. Additionally, I will discuss the merging of

humans' and nature's actions, which incites a variety of responses, from appreciation to horror, and from appropriation to dismissal.

1.3. Women's Creativity on the Grounds of Nature

As the novel is mostly set in the exteriors of Pointz Hall, *Between the Acts* contains a multitude of observations made about elements of nature and ecological phenomena. Nature in the novel actively integrates cultural productions and reflections, and alters or disturbs human existence, as it refuses to be quieted and thus counters human subjectivity in demonstrating its own (uncontrolled) subjectivity. Woolf's characters, by intruding in the natural world, witness its variety of disruptions and are the primary receivers of their impacts and influences, principally through the repurposing of the Pointz Hall terrace as a theatre, with a stage and a dressing-room, both installations made of nature's "structures." This serves not only Miss La Trobe's artistic vision, as the director of the pageant, but also Woolf's supposed intent to expose nature's forces and give subjectivity to what is beyond human control and understanding, within a story centered around human characters. Through this depiction, she can address the generalized human-centered perception of nature, as it is transformed, physically or figuratively, to suit human intent, and the various forms of respect accorded it.

Miss La Trobe visualizes the terrace and grounds of Pointz Hall as spaces fit for human creativity, by imposing her needs and wishes upon it. In the search for a dressing-room, she notices "[b]eyond the lily pool the ground sank again, and in that dip of the ground, bushes and brambles had mobbed themselves together. It was always shady; sunflecked in summer, dark and damp in winter" (*BTA* 56). Despite the area being mostly inhabited by butterflies and often visited for butterfly catching, she observes that "it was the very place for a dressing-room, just

as, obviously, the terrace was the very place for a play" (57). Her knowledge of typical theatrical spaces shapes her perception of the natural world around Pointz Hall, as it must welcome her play; her mind thus shapes what it perceives for her own, human purposes and disregards any concern for and about the environment. In this instance, Miss La Trobe's anthropocentric perception does not result in harmful effects on nature, apart from disturbing the butterflies for a day, but it does translate into a general indifference towards the impacts human actions can have on natural environments. She uses a similar rationale to find an appropriate stage for the performance. As the audience assembles and prepares for the beginning of the play, it is remarked upon that Miss La Trobe chose "the very place for a pageant": "The lawn was as flat as the floor of a theatre. The terrace, rising, made a natural stage. The trees barred the stage like pillars. And the human figure was seen to great advantage against a background of sky" (76). Centuries after being dismissed as the ideal setting for the Pointz Hall house, the terrace is repurposed for another human endeavour.

Without giving thought to the impacts this human fabrication will have on the natural world and solely focusing on human necessities, Miss La Trobe's theatrical production makes itself vulnerable to actions, or answers, of "unwanted" or unexpected ecological actors. As the director and writer of the play, Miss La Trobe does not appreciate nature's interventions during the performance, as they hinder her vision of success; her first, irrational impressions classify them as disrupters, even without active intrusion. For example, the visual component of the seemingly perfect setting of the play helps to sway the audience's emotions and reactions with its attractive force, to the benefit or detriment of the producer's intentions. She acknowledges the consequences of her choice, and worries about losing her audience to the picturesque view's influence: "The trees rustled. Many eyes, Miss La Trobe knew, for every cell in her body was

absorbent, looked at the view. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Hogben's Folly; then the vane flashed… She could feel them slipping through her fingers, looking at the view" (151-152). By choosing this stage for her play, she has the complex task of pulling her audience out of their environment, to focus entirely on her play, which is challenged at any given moment, whether the performers are out on the terrace or preparing themselves in the dressing-room during intervals. She would need to have control over what is beyond her reach; instead, she finds her creation at the mercy of active forces with significant influence over her audience. By using the advantages of the natural world for her play, by transforming it into a theatre and by hiding the gramophone in the bushes, she enters a relationship in which she can almost never have the upper hand. Even in a state of passivity, the nature around Pointz Hall remains impressive and influential.

Aside from providing an attractive backdrop, nature imposes itself in various ways during the pageant. Woolf disturbs the quietude of the English countryside grounds, as other-than-human actors affect the *déroulement* of the play; multiple ecological phenomena and animals disturb Miss La Trobe's production, and shape the audience's appreciation and comprehension of the play. Principally, in multiple acts, the blowing wind is the main disturbance, as it renders Miss La Trobe completely powerless and affects both actors and audience. Actor Eliza Clark loses focus when "the wind gave a tug at her head dress" and "threatened to blow [the ruffle] away" (85); the wind has an incessant effect on the spoken and sung words of the actors, which at times do not reach the audience but rather are whisked away by this ecological force. Woolf portrays the reoccurrence of this phenomenon through repeated words and phrases. In the first act, "They were singing, but not a word reached the audience… The villagers were singing, but half their words were blown away" (78), which is later followed by "They were singing; but only

a word or two was audible… The wind blew away the connecting words of their chant…" (80). Similarly, in the second act, "The wind blew the words away" (125) and in the third act, "The voices of the pilgrims singing, as they wound in and out between the trees, could be heard; but the words were inaudible" (163-164). The motif that emerges from Woolf's writing signals a consistency in the wind's effects, as it repeatedly rids the audience of words that make up the play, perhaps with intention, as it "blows" every sound away. This culminates in a battle of will, as Miss La Trobe repeatedly and threateningly demands the performers to sing "Louder! Louder!" (139) to fight against the perturbing wind, to no avail:

> The words died away. Only a few great names – Babylon, Nineveh, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Troy – floated across the open space. Then the wind rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even the great words became inaudible; and the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came. (140)

The wind drowns out every sound as it unleashes itself on the production, leaving the audience confused and Miss La Trobe frustrated. Her initial appropriation of this natural space for her theatrical production did not acknowledge the possibilities of perturbances coming from untamable elements that she could never have control over in her role as director. Her exasperation results from her disconnection from the environment and its unpredictability, and her anthropocentric perception of the Pointz Hall grounds, which she only appreciates if they enrich her artistic endeavours.

Woolf complicates Miss La Trobe's relation to the natural world, as it also occasionally enhances her production, which makes her question her instinctive dissatisfaction toward it. Following the failed battle against the wind, she laments that the "illusion" she aimed to create and maintain during the play "had failed" (140) when it was overpowered by this ecological force. However, the remedy for her troubles comes from the very same uncontrollable world that caused them:

> Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed… From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. Then the whole herd caught the infection… The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion. (140-141)

The cows' intrusion, at any other moment during the play, would have been considered an annoyance, but here, as the local fauna "takes up the burden," it is a welcomed balm to the damage left by the wind. Miss La Trobe rejoices after her disappointment, "wave[s] her hand ecstatically at the cows" and exclaims "Thank Heaven!" (141) to celebrate that the performance can go on as intended. She acclaims the cows' doings, as if they intended to contribute to the play, an acknowledgement that contrasts starkly with her reactions at other moments in novel. However, in her temporary positive outlook on the natural world, she imposes a religious aspect on the cows' interventions, which still implies a distinctively anthropocentric understanding of nature; the bellowing cows receive adoration because they seem like a gift to her and because they "behaved" in an appropriate manner, rebuilding the "illusion" Miss La Trobe needed to keep her audience enthralled. Bonnie Kime Scott notes that "the cows model human behavior, whether bellowing despair, browsing over fodder, or joining one another in their actions" (*In the Hollow of the Wave* 166). Through her depictions of the animals, Woolf confirms Miss La Trobe's human-centered look on non-human beings, matter, and phenomena. The shifts in her opinions, from adoration to hatred, stem from her ignorance of their independence from human narratives and her inability to accept their untamable nature.

Woolf appears to reassess Miss La Trobe's complicated outlook on nature on multiple occasions in the novel, with her efforts culminating at the start of the final act of the play. The concluding section reconfirms and validates the anthropocentric ambiguity that shapes the producer's perceptions of the environment she has chosen for her production. To anticipate the

beginning of the final act, "she wanted to expose [the audience], as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality" (*BTA* 179) and let them take in the integrality of time and their environment. Her intentions do not materialize, as "reality [is] too strong" (179) and distracts and agitates the audience rather than enticing them. This pushes her to rethink her entire enterprise:

> Her little game had gone wrong. If only she'd a back-cloth to hang between the trees – to shut out cows, swallows, present time! But she had nothing. She had forbidden music. Grating her fingers in the bark, she damned the audience… This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails. (180)

When grappling with potential failure, Miss La Trobe again displays hatred for the natural environment of Pointz Hall, wishing she could erase it and do damage to the tree behind which she is hiding. This moment confirms that she would wish to manipulate elements of the natural world as tools to ensure success, but she cannot make this a reality. However, as suggested previously, faced with a slipping "illusion," an unforeseen, almost-divine intervention from the weather transforms certain failure into triumph: "And then the shower fell, sudden, profuse. No one had seen the cloud coming. There it was, black swollen, on top of them. Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears… The rain was sudden and universal. Then it stopped" (180). With this ecological phenomenon washing over everyone and everything and reinstalling "present-time reality," Miss La Trobe rejoices that "[n]ature once more had taken her part. The risk she had run acting in the open air was justified" (181). She claims this intervention as her success and renders this ecological force, the rain, as merely a part in her cast of actors capitulating to her artistic vision. She appropriates the rain shower and integrates it into the narrative of her play, and thus her own narrative of success. Nature becomes valuable to her when it appears to respect her intentions, and when it serves as creative fodder.

Ironically, despite her conflicting feelings about the natural world's actions (and reactions), Miss La Trobe can acknowledge the coexistence of shared material, human and

natural, worlds in her appropriation of these interventions. Certain moments in *Between the Acts* point to a possible evolution in her ecological consciousness, particularly when she reflects on the perpetual role nature plays in human life when removed from the pressure and stress of the performance. Before the pageant begins, in the area beyond the lily pool and the terrace, chosen as the dressing-room for the day, participants preparing for the play disturb the usual order and quietude, without ridding this space of its natural elements. This meeting results in images that suggest peaceful cohabitation, as human and natural elements merge:

> The clothes were strewn on the grass… There were pools of red and purple in the shade; flashes of silver in the sun. The dresses attracted the butterflies. Red and silver, blue and yellow gave off warmth and sweetness. Red Admirals gluttonously absorbed richness from dish cloths, cabbage whites drank icy coolness from silver paper. Flitting, tasting, returning, they sampled the colours. (62-63)

Miss La Trobe observes this scene with interest, thinking about its potential, noting that "It has the makings…" before giving up and refocusing on her present worries: "Shading her eyes, she looked. The butterflies circling; the light changing; the children leaping; the mothers laughing – 'No, I don't get it,' she muttered and resumed her pacing" (63). She is intrigued by the fusion of colours and light, but remains unable to identify the source of her captivation and complete a satisfying picture. Louise Westling has illustrated how "[t]he visible remains always gaping open with incompleteness and ambiguity, since we only perceive it partially from where we are situated and with inadequate sensory abilities, on the basis of the particular culture which has shaped us" ("Eco-Literary Imaginary" 68). Miss La Trobe's imagination, despite her artistic achievements, cannot make sense of the spectacle of diverse and fragmentary ecological forces at play. As the butterflies ignore the human intrusion and still claim this space as theirs, she cannot solve her intrigue and puzzlement toward this display of interconnectedness between human life and nature, which would have warned her of what was to come during the performance of her

play. Witnessing the "physical, material surroundings that are actively, vibrantly, even possibly 'agentically' participating in processes of which [they] are a part…" (Sullivan 91), she cannot help being enraptured, but strictly within a state of partial ignorance.

A similar scene unfolds in the final pages of the novel, as Miss La Trobe prepares to leave Pointz Hall after the pageant ends; she witnesses a cloud of "starlings attack[ing] the tree behind which she had hidden," which results in "[a] whizz, a buzz [rising] from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree" (*BTA* 209). Additionally, she marvels at the empty landscape, that is no longer just a "view" in the growing darkness, when "there were no clouds to trouble the sky, the blue was bluer, the green greener," and when "[i]t was land merely, no land in particular" (210). These respectively active and passive instances of vibrant life inspire her, starting with the captivating landscape:

> She put down her case and stood looking at the land. Then something rose to the surface. "I should group them," she murmured, "here." It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her. (210)

She can answer her question and "complete" her vision by remembering the flying starlings, a form of life that is strange to her: "There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words" (212). Instead of rejecting her intrigue, she welcomes the contributions of nature, as they can help in constructing her depictions of life, traversing the boundaries of the human sphere. She has, in the end, opened herself to the actions and influences of the surrounding environment and starts to embrace the idea that nature, as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman have defined it, is "more than a passive social construction [and] rather, an

agentic force that interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human" (7). Woolf, through the evolution of a character initially defined by anthropocentric concerns, shows the possibilities of change from a state of willful ignorance and frustration to one of gratitude and understanding.

Isabella, another artistic character in *Between the Acts*, also forms strong ties with her surrounding environments, as they protect her from other people's judgment beyond the privacy of her room in Pointz Hall, and inspire her artistic, romantic musings. She stands in opposition to Miss La Trobe, who is publicly an artist and thus made an outsider; Isa is a closeted artist who does not want to stand out in public and fears that her true nature and desires might be discovered, particularly by other women. When speaking with Mrs. Manresa, a guest of the family, "she veil[s] her eyes, for [women], being conspirators, saw through it" (*BTA* 41). She resists embracing her individuality outside of her room and almost erases herself from attention and public life. Savina Stevanato notes: "She hides her written words, and almost reduces her spoken ones to silence by humming, muttering, or only whispering them 'taking care not to move her lips'" (180). She hides her creative side and keeps the comforting actions of making up and remembering (and misremembering) poetry for herself. Her murmured poetry is fed by her previously discussed "inner love" for farmer Rupert Haines, but also by her material surroundings. Unlike Miss La Trobe, she casts a more welcoming gaze on the interventions of environments and nature, and does not despair in the face of their consequences. Given that her artistic creations exist solely with and through her, the exterior world does not impact her poetry in a marked way as it did the pageant play. Isa repaints some of her actions and the material world around her as inspiration for her creative musings, and thus modifies her life to make it poetic, imaginative, and romantic:

> "Let me turn away," she murmured, turning, "from the array" – she looked desolately round her – "of china faces, glazed and hard. Down the ride, that leads under the nut tree and the may tree, away, till I come to the wishing well, where the washer-woman's little boy –" she dropped sugar, two lumps, into her tea, "dropped a pin. He got his horse, so they say. But what wish should I drop in to the well?" She looked round. She could not see the man in grey, the gentleman farmer; nor anyone known to her. "That waters should cover me," she added, "of the wishing well." (*BTA* 103)

Her creation is closely connected to herself, to her perceptions, and she lets herself be guided by her quiet words. Moments later, this reality is reiterated: "'Not again to hear on the trembling spray the thrush sing, or to see, dipping and diving as if he skimmed waves in the air, the yellow woodpecker?' She was looking at the canary yellow festoons left over from the Coronation" (104). What is found outside of her mind, among the shared material world, entices her to create, even if she is in public and could face judgement in her most intimate state, which reaffirms the protective quality the environment(s) afford(s) her. She is constantly in positive conversation with outside influences, which distances her from Miss La Trobe. Both are still affected by ecological forces and transform outside circumstance into creative fodder. Stevanato observed that "[t]he process which interested Woolf the most was not how sight/vision impresses the mind, but how the mind captures it by interpreting and reforging it. Ex-pression over im-pression" (96). Their reactions remark upon the various phenomena and material beings and things that present themselves; Isa distinguishes herself from the producer of the pageant by how "naturally" and ordinarily she integrates and registers the liveliness found all around her, making it fit organically with her inner reflections, instead of cursing it or reducing it as an imposter or upstart.

Isa's comfort with the natural world is reiterated throughout the novel, which confirms my earlier observations on the matter, when she could count on nature's all-encompassing power to shield her from outside influences whilst alone in her room. She feels "prisoned" by the

presence of her family members (*BTA* 66), and thus she turns to nature and outdoor environments to seek refuge and escape their judgement. She does so between the acts of Miss La Trobe's play, when all are expected to reunite in the barn for food and drinks. During the first interval, to escape the gaze of others, she visits the greenhouse with William Dodge, a fellow "conspirator" with whom she feels connected on the basis of their artistic interests and hidden lives. By placing herself in this situation, she is imbued with a feeling of safety, shared with her friend, which allows them to express themselves as they wish: "They knew at once they had nothing to fear, nothing to hope. At first they resented – serving as statues in the greenhouse. Then they liked it. For then they could say – as she did – whatever came into their heads… Then they talked as if they had known each other all their lives…" (113-114). Their experiences in the greenhouse allow for the possibility of expression; their awareness of their surroundings makes them recognize and embrace their isolation, which grants them short moments during which they can express themselves authentically and comfortably.

During another interval, Isa leaves by herself to get away from her family and the guests; she finds herself "sauntering solitary far away by the flower beds… escaping" (154), before wandering on the Pointz Hall grounds on her own, hiding her concerns and feelings from others. In these private and quiet moments, she unshackles her mind and lets herself be guided by her artistry, her emotions, and her fictionalizations of her present environment. For example, a tree she comes across during her walk makes her wonder about a past era: "The tree, whose roots went beneath the flags, was weighted with hard green pears. Fingering one of them she murmured: 'How am I burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions. This is the burden that the past laid on me…'" (155). While still murmuring her art, perhaps as a habit, the tree symbolizes safety and serves as the creative fodder she craves to feed her artistic

side. In other instances, she notices a rose or the cracked flags at the roots of the tree that stand as the symbols of momentary freedom; the compositions of her immediate environments are key to her authentic expressions, as they impress upon her their material and sensorial possibilities. Contrary to Stevanato's observations, I believe Woolf does not dismiss nature's impressions on her characters, as the "meaning" of those impressions can be found within their expressions. Though they use impressions and transform them for their purposes, in various forms of expressions, they merely translate what they have imbued them with, to fit within their individualities.

Both closeted Isa and affirmed Miss La Trobe are aware of the rich interconnections between their human lives and productions, and the natural, material elements composing the world they are a part of. Isa distinguishes herself by being open to this reality, as she welcomes and even seeks out the influential natural world to liberate her repressed creativity and her true self. Despite her need for privacy and isolation, she remains open to other materials' and organisms' influences through her perceptive, sensing body. As Louise Westling explains:

> Each body thus contains a sedimented history dynamically expressing itself as the organism reaches out and interacts with the world around it. The unity within each individual body opens it to other bodies, as we both touch them and are touched by them in a chiasmic intertwining that is also manifested in the interior synergy of our own bodies. ("Eco-Literary Imaginary" 67)

The combination of her perceptions of her environments and her personal actions and experiences builds the foundations of her artistic enterprise; her shielded interiority reveals itself through her interactions with the outside world, as her senses provide her with a basis for her creations and the exploration of her authentic self. Though she still views aspects of nature through a uniquely human perspective, the natural world presented in the novel is appreciated and valorized, and gets acknowledgement of its agentic capabilities, breaking out of its passive

backdrop role. The latter is eventually recognized by both female artists in *Between the Acts*; through them, we witness nature's integral importance for the happenings of their world.

1.4. The Theatre of Life

Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* explores the shifting and varied impacts of nature and ecological phenomena on the differing personalities of the novel's characters. The multiplicity of perspectives, including those of Miss La Trobe and Isa, can help us shape an overarching picture of the integral involvement of the natural world in life and the entire material world, and it also points to Woolf's positioning on this matter. Despite the instinctive ambivalence of Miss La Trobe and other minor characters toward nature's intrusions, the novel recognizes how embedded we are in the material, human and natural, world, and does so explicitly through its characters and the *mise en scène* of the play. The subjugation of nature to human narratives is leveled by the constant depictions of interconnections and unity between all things and beings in a greater ecosystem. Mrs. Swithin, with her acute artistic mind and recognition of nature's potential, is the first to bring up the "meaning" of the play before it has ended, when she muses:

> Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves – all are one. If discordant, producing harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus – she was smiling benignly – the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so… we reach the conclusion that all is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. (*BTA* 175)

This premature conclusion from one creative and imaginative mind puts into words what has been implied to readers attuned to the many moments of interaction between humanity and nature. This observation is later reiterated in different words by the Reverend who is trying to elaborate the meaning of Miss La Trobe's production, when he is addressing the audience after the play has ended:

> "To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole… We act different parts; but are the same. That I leave to you. Then again, as the play or pageant proceeded, my attention was distracted. Perhaps that too was part of the producer's intention? *I thought I perceived that nature takes her part. Dare we, I asked myself, limit life to ourselves?* May we not hold that there is a spirit that inspires, pervades…" (The swallows were sweeping round him. They seemed cognizant of his meaning. Then they swept out of sight.) (192) [emphasis mine]

His musings, approved by the flying birds, dismiss descriptions and meanings of life limited to humanity, or at least constitute the first step toward this recognition. Problematic aspects remain in his address: he still characterizes nature as a feminized "part" of life, one which "she takes," rather than by acting from its own volition, without following a human script. His observations do connect with Stacy Alaimo's affirmation that "[v]iewing nature as an actor radically challenges the idea that nature is passive matter, there for cultural consumption" (*Undomesticated Ground* 12) as nature is no longer inactive. Nevertheless, in his perception, nature remains subjugated, as he feeds into the essentialist, misogynistic notion that it is closely associated with women, and thus "subject to domination" (Scott, "Ecofeminism" 2) and subservient to other, more "important" forces. While he does initiate an alternative to an anthropocentric vision of life, he does not dismantle this perspective, which is perhaps impossible when he witnesses humans and nature brought together in an artistic production, and attempts to transpose this scenario to the real world. Another guest remarks: "He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that's the question!" (199-200). This simple interrogation, reflecting on the ambiguity and unclarity of the Reverend's speech, encapsulates what *Between the Acts* accomplishes in its portrayal of material unity: as Miss La Trobe hoped her play would present a panorama of English history and present reality, it was completed and made more "realistic" by actors and interventions she had not scripted, that she could not control, which exemplifies how little humanity can master its own fate, present and future, when the larger

material and natural world is also composed of agentic, lively beings and elements. Our contemporary concerns and knowledge of nature and the environment are perhaps more important and nuanced than those of the first half of the twentieth century. Yet Woolf's novel seems aware of the inseparability of our human actions, bodies and existence from the actions and reactions of our immediate or wider natural world, and shows how the "theatre of life" cannot be limited to multiple actors acting out one play in unison, but rather remains discordant and connected to a wider ecological reality.

However, Woolf's writing, as it mostly centers around human concerns and reflections, can still present nature and materiality as a means to personal fulfilment in the context of *Between the Acts*. The three female characters that I have discussed are aware of their connections with their environments, but they may not understand the extent of their agentic capabilities. Their partial recognition and respect leave a rift between themselves and their material environments, which has been noted by Christine Alt: she writes, about *Between the Acts*, that "Woolf suggests that humans are no longer attuned to their place in nature" (161) and portrays their "disconnection from nature" and their positioning "in opposition to their surroundings" (162). Though I would not characterize their estrangement with nature as an "opposition," since they (sometimes) welcome and value its interventions, I agree with her claim that "while calling attention to humanity's habitual blindness to the natural world, …Woolf also affirms the possibility of a greater attunement to and integration with nature" (163). The ambiguous aspects that remain in Woolf's writing are countered by an optimist outlook that hints at or presents new possibilities for respectful and mindful relations with the natural world through her characters, within the context of late modernism and war-torn Great Britain.

Woolf's acknowledgment of the role of nature falls in line with precepts of ecological humanism, a philosophy which, as explained by Louise Westling, forgoes control over nature and instead "restores humanity to its place within the bodily community of earth's life and refocuses attention upon the limitations and responsibilities that must humble our species" ("The Flesh of the World" 872). Also, it aims to illustrate how "[the] social world is not only human but collaborates within the much larger matrix of earthly life and energy," which Woolf aptly demonstrates in her "treatment of animal, plant, and meteorological… contributions" (868). In *Between the Acts*, nature still stands as its own wide and diverse entity, one which complements or disturbs, but also one we are intertwined with, despite any possible effort to oppose this. For Woolf, nature is more than a modernist background[11] and instead is comprised of a multitude of agentic elements, all in their own way, contributing actively to life, human or other. Even by making it another actor in her depictions of life in the novel, she recognizes its integral place in human-driven endeavours, as they cannot be removed from their always active, influential material settings.

Woolf's last completed novel reaffirms her status as an outliner amongst the modernists concerning nature writing, and she thus provides solid ground on which to revisit modernist writings that address the natural world and environments. There have been recent efforts made in the field of ecocriticism to push for "the extension of ecocritical practice beyond more explicitly nature-centred texts" (Black 22), such as those of modernism, to demonstrate how literary modernism can contribute to the exploration of the wider non-human world. By going beyond simple "nature," we can discover different forms of ecological concerns, and highlight a

[11] Val Plumwood has pointed out that some "modernist or even postmodernist accounts… 'background'… the natural world—imagining it as a mere resource for technological progress or social construction" (Alaimo and Hekman 8-9). Material feminisms counter such interpretations by considering nature as "a noteworthy actor within the realm of politics as well as science" (9).

multitude of manifestations of the natural and larger material worlds in a variety of spaces that ultimately share the same material conditions.

Chapter 2

Spatial Proximities:
Oppressive Material Unity in Mina Loy's Florentine Poetry

British-born poet and visual artist Mina Loy marked her entry into the avant-garde poetry scene with her groundbreaking 1914 poem "Parturition." The first of its kind, Loy's poem recounts the experiences of a woman during and after labour and childbirth, focusing exclusively on the maternal subject and not on her birthed child. As Tara Prescott notes, the poem offers a "hard, clinical, scientific, first person description of a woman's elevated consciousness through the physical experience of labor" ("Moths and Mothers" 196). Despite Loy's relative invisibility in the modernist canon, her works having been "rediscovered and reforgotten for decades" (Burke, *Becoming Modern* vi), "Parturition" stands as one of her most studied texts in the steadily growing body of critical work interested in Loy's diverse modernist contributions. In addition to its innovative subject, the poem informs us of a modernist woman's perceptions of birth, offered by someone who has known pregnancy and motherhood, and who likewise opposed Victorian cultural attitudes regarding these subjects. Loy's writing paints a feminist, provocative, and visceral representation of what was thought to be shameful, celebrating women's ability to give birth in a language that reflects her newly developed futurist ideals and aesthetics.

Loy composed "Parturition" in 1914, when she was living in the Italian city of Florence, having been involved with the Italian futurists for a few years preceding its composition. This dichotomous positioning of Loy, between Feminism and Futurism, is of integral importance to what we can refer to as her "Florentine" poems, written in the last years of her stay in Florence, between 1913 and 1916, and before her departure for New York. This context is particularly significant for "Parturition" especially, a poem that relies on a feminist depiction of birth

alongside futurist depictions of material existence. Her contacts with and interest in both feminist and futurist ideas fueled her creativity and political/artistic opinions during this period of great societal transformation prior to and during the First World War. Loy offers detailed versions of her sense of feminism and futurism in her manifestos, which allow us to understand her seemingly contradictory "shared" affiliations with movements categorically at odds outside of their treatment by Loy.[12]

She presented her polemical feminist ideals in her unpublished "Feminist Manifesto"[13] (*The Lost Lunar Baedeker* 153-156), written in 1914, in which she expresses her loathing of contemporary feminist movements of the time, deeming them "inadequate" for their conception of equality, and demanding instead that women "be Brave & deny at the outset – that pathetic clap-trap war cry Woman is the equal of man – / for / She is NOT!" Even more controversially, she shares a vision of maternity with ties to eugenicist beliefs, claiming that "[e]very woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility, in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of her sex—,"[14] and demands the abolition of the

[12] Important actors of Futurism have on multiple occasions publicly expressed antagonism toward women and feminism: in "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," Filippo Tommaso Marinetti states the movement's common goal "to glorify… contempt for woman" and to "fight… feminism," and Giovanni Papini, in multiple issues of *Lacerba*, called for "the massacre of women," who are their enemies, explaining that "[w]omen must disappear. It is useless… to preach scorn for women if we then continue to live together. Living together, one can hardly avoid loving them—and loving them, one can hardly avoid serving them—and serving them, we are cowards, the betrayers of our true destiny" (Adamson 177-178).

[13] Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" was never published during her lifetime; it was first published (inaccurately) in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* in 1982, the predecessor of *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* of 1996. It previously only appeared in a letter from Loy sent to Mabel Dodge in 1914 (Conover 216).

[14] The eugenicist tinge of her "Feminist Manifesto" is rightfully shocking but learning of Loy's conflict with her own identity and her later beliefs relativizes the importance of this controversial statement to her feminist beliefs. Aimee L. Pozorski posits that, perhaps influenced by "her mother's notion of racial superiority" (47) and the futurists' extreme patriotism, and "to disavow her confusion" (50) on her own dual identity, being born of a Jewish father and a British-Christian mother, "Loy seems to exalt purity in her own manifesto in order to repress this childhood cleaving and to renounce in typical Futuristic spirit the facts of the past" (50). This attempt at identity stability is short lived, as she continues to write about identity and race in works such as "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose" and her unpublished novel "Goy Israels," "a semi-autobiographical work" in which she presents herself as the "daughter of battling parents and the product of racial warfare" (47). Her later devotion to Christian Science and her attachment to America shape her later beliefs, which made her "[see] in hybridization a vehicle for exposing the

concept of virginity, but through "unconditional surgical destruction… at puberty." Between these radical revendications, she presents progressive ideas, including the hyperbolic suggestion to invalidate virginity, that aimed to destroy multiple belief systems that confined women to secondary, inferior roles. She affirms that "it is to women's interest to demolish… the division of women into two classes   the mistress, & the mother" since "Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions—there are no restrictions," and believes that women "must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved" to attain fulfilment on their own.

In "Parturition" (*TLLB* 4-8), Loy writes about a woman who has forgone romantic allusions, in full confidence of her possibilities in this extremely difficult moment of her life, which she is facing alone. The only man present in the poem does not influence the woman; the brief passage focused on his interruption aptly demonstrates "The irresponsibility of the male" Loy wishes to convey:

> The open window is full of a voice
> A fashionable portrait painter
> Running upstairs to a woman's apartment
> Sings
>   "All the girls are tid'ly did'ly
>   All the girls are nice
>   Whether they wear their hair in curls
>   Or – "

The man temporarily fills the space with his joyful, silly singing depicting women and girls as merely pretty creatures for his enjoyment. The speaker then shames him, stating that while he "Leaves woman her superior Inferiority. / He is running upstairs / [She] is climbing a distorted mountain of agony." Both in ascension, he to another woman's apartment and she to the apex of

artificiality of racial identity, positing difference as biological but not inevitable, since any notion of the biological is illusionary, a mask for an essential spiritual identity" (Vetter 48).

her physical pains, they remain impermeably separated in different universes, with diverging outlooks on the world they live in: he lives by his individual thinking, perception, and satisfaction, while she, confined to her "inferior" state in painful, obligatory reality, recognizes her accomplishments by elevating herself beyond her own human body, made possible by the destabilizing sensorial experience of childbirth. She attains a "superior" state by accomplishing this metaphorical physical feat of climbing a mountain which demands mental and physical exhaustion and leaves the man in his own small world, unimpressive on his staircase.

Loy's exclusive focus on the woman in "Parturition" allows for an illuminating conception of maternity to emerge, one which unites women in the universality of their experiences, in both feelings and in materiality. On her own, the woman is fully aware of her corporeal experience of labour and its myriad sensations and extremes. This process results in the woman opening herself to the outside world and acknowledging her connections with other parts of it:

> Mother I am
> Identical
> With infinite Maternity
>   Indivisible
>   Acutely
>   I am absorbed
>   Into
> The was—is—ever—shall—be
> Of cosmic reproductivity

Parturition brings the woman into a new reality, one in which her bodily and sensorial experiences weave themselves with surrounding entities composed of matter; she becomes one with a universe that stretches out over time and space, one that recognizes all forms of maternity and labour. The astronomical and cosmic nature of this image painted by Loy, which is followed by an "impression of a cat" and an "impression of a small animal carcass" that "[rise] from the

subconscious," points to a trans-corporeal communion and a unity between organic and inorganic forms of life and matter, "all participating in the same rhythms of life" (Prescott, "Moths and Mothers" 207). The woman's state transforms her into a more perceptive being, recognizing affiliations with other living entities and interconnections with the material space around her, and acknowledging the integral importance of "each woman-of-the-people" in assisting her in this process, who are "Wearing a halo / A ludicrous little halo / Of which [they are] sublimely unaware." Through the once shameful and recluse experience of parturition, Loy grants clarity and purpose to the woman, and transforms the female body from a subjugated entity to a limitless, aspiring site of power, exchange, and self-recognition. After her labour, the woman feels that "[she] is knowing / All about / Unfolding," her body's constitution in dissolution and her senses in a heightened state. Her experience of labour has made her open herself to the rest of the world and its various material forms, acquiring unfathomable and forbidden knowledge and recognizing her capability to give and understand life, not unlike, as Loy brazenly mentions, a God herself.

These interconnections between material entities, from the smallest of atoms to massive infrastructures, are relevant to the goals and expectations of Futurism, despite its stated disdain for ecology and nature.[15] Loy does not write about this anti-nature position in her quasi-manifesto of Futurism, "Aphorisms on Futurism" (*TLLB* 149-152), which was largely inspired

[15] Despite Futurism's unfriendliness to matters of environments and ecology, which rendered their texts unlikely subjects of ecocritical analyses, ecocritical studies of materiality can reveal new affiliations that deconstruct the dualistic separation between human cultures and the "exterior" world. Enrico Cesaretti addressed this possibility in his 2018 article "Eco-Futurism? Nature, Matter, and Body in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti," in which he approached a few of Marinetti's works from a material ecocritical perspective, which, in his terms, "does not exclusively focus on and put nature, landscape, or the human at the center of the discourse" and thus "is a more appropriate lens through which to examine a 'hostile' context such as Futurism from an ecocritical perspective" (217). He was convinced of this approach since the futurists made "many naïve remarks regarding the need to put an end to the superiority of the human, to 'penetrate the essence of matter and destroy the dull hostility that separates it from us'" (218), which gives way for us to reassess the larger futurist movement, its many actors, and its naïve representations.

by other members of the movement and the writings they produced, such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" of 1909, which clearly describes the movement's love of technological advances and destructive revolutions.[16] Loy was stimulated and creatively enriched by the ideas that were presented to her, and they provided her with a new outlook and understanding of the world. She detailed her own perspective on the movement and how to reap its benefits in life and in art in her "aphorisms," all from a less radical tone and a less cutting voice than many other futurists. Principally, she preaches for self-accomplishment by the expansion of consciousness, and pushes readers to reject the death found in the past and to embrace the future, which "EXPLODES with *Light.*" She also demands her readers "LET the Universe flow into… consciousness" and "UNSCREW [their] capability of absorption and grasp the elements of Life – *Whole*."

Despite Loy's feminist interests, her aphorisms do not address the futurists' contempt for women and the feminist movement; rather she chooses not to include this rejection in her conception of Futurism, since she was never in complete agreement with them. Her repeated gendering of "the Futurist" in the text with masculine pronouns "he" and "his" minimally acknowledges the masculinist aspect of the movement, but is far from a demand for change or a denunciation. However, even in following their codes, she distances her vision of Futurism from their anti-feminist one by declaring: "THE Future is limitless – the past a trail of insidious reactions. / LIFE is only limited by *our prejudices*. Destroy them, and you cease to be at the

[16] Indeed, the anti-nature stance of Futurism is not merely a perception, but rather inscribed in its founding and constitutive texts, that were written in part by Loy's principal acquaintances from the futurist movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Giovanni Papini, who was a contributor to the futurist-affiliated journal *Lacerba*. Their versions of Futurism included a violent rejection of the past, the valorization of speed, technological evolutions and war, and the promotion of a literature that "exalt[s] movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow of the fist" (Marinetti). Their aggressive pursuit of the future's revolutions, violence, and wonders signified a complete rejection of all that came before, including romantic depictions of nature.

mercy of yourself" (emphasis mine). While this does not represent a direct afront to Marinetti and others, she actively chose to counter their repressive speech with acceptance and openness to create a new path for creativity and self-determination.

In "Parturition," Loy writes a poetic representation of her futurist affirmations and demands that also respects and promotes her feminist beliefs, without signs of contradictions between these two potentially conflicting identities. Her dual approach allows her to explore a woman's physical, material condition and existence, as it expands beyond the confines of her anatomically constructed body, when she opens herself to new, unlimited sensations and rejects "the turbid stream of accepted facts" ("Aphorisms") that would have her, physically and mentally, restrained in her situation. She adapts both Feminism and Futurism to fit within her unique set of values to guide her in life and in her poetic creations of this tumultuous period. Her Florentine poems are concrete sites of inscription for this dichotomous identity, which loses demarcations of separation in Loy's life and her verses. As many of those poems focus on women, their living conditions, and the repression they experience, the outwardly feminist element of her Florentine poems results from these subjects and the empathy with which they are depicted, while the futurist element can be uncovered in Loy's perspective techniques, which present many compelling attributes for an ecocritical, material reassessment of Futurism, one which delves into ideas of trans-corporeality.

In what follows, I will explore Loy's depictions of women and their immediate environments, and the interconnections between them, in a variety of her Florentine poems in which she sought to shine a light on women at the mercy of patriarchal infrastructures and norms and their living conditions. Loy, in observing her environments as both a resident and an outsider, offers in her poetry rich portraits of women's lives in differing contexts, which consider

the incontrollable complexities of their submission and view them with empathy, even if this state of submission is in conceptual opposition to her feminist and futurist ideals. Material ecocriticism and feminism, and the concepts they share with trans-corporeal studies, will highlight in this chapter how Loy perceives the conditioning of women and their bodies by the environments they inhabit or visit that ultimately forge and influence them, and exert varying control over many facets of their existence. For the "exterior" of human corporeal boundaries to successfully act upon their constitution and conditioning, in Loy's perspective, there must be permeability in the flesh and matter that form women's bodies; it is precisely this element which allows interconnections of control and submission to emerge in the relation between women (and their bodies) and their environments—all of which I will enumerate and explain in my analysis. I will first look more closely at "Parturition," which places the woman's body and its sensations in the focal position, establishing its trans-corporeal abilities in a shared material life and highlighting the indivisibility between the fleshy and sensing human body and its immediate material environment. My exploration of Loy's conception of the body and its interconnections with "exterior" surroundings, having established the ever-present communion between all forms of vibrant matter, will then serve my analysis of the rhetorical influence of multiple spaces, such as domestic and public ones, on women in other Florentine poems.

2.1. Trans-Corporeal Possibilities of Bodily Sensations

Material ecocriticism goes beyond the study of nature writing and grapples with concerns connected to flesh and matter, in the wide variety of forms they can manifest themselves. Loy's feminist/futurist poetry does present itself as an interesting subject of material enquiry, as I have tried to demonstrate in my analysis of "Parturition" (*TLLB* 4-8). Rachel Fountain Eames has also

noted that during a time of great discoveries on the properties of matter and particle physics, perhaps in response to such changes, "Loy positioned the human body at the intersection of actives forces; the bodies described in her writings strive toward or break equilibrium, gaining electromagnetic force and gravity through dynamic atomic movement" (32). Aligned with her futurist aphorisms, Loy's perspective offers feminist possibilities in "Parturition," in which the female body is freed and reassessed in a new light. The opening lines outline this promise as the description of the woman's body is done with geometrical shapes rather than human components: "I am the centre / Of a circle of pain / Exceeding its boundaries in every direction." The image allows us to visualize the sharing of material spaces, as boundaries cannot resist exchanges of the molecular level that connect all that is made of matter, whether organic or inorganic.

To demonstrate the importance in scale of the events, feelings, and sensations the woman in "Parturition" is going through, Loy uses metaphors of astronomy:

> The business of the bland sun
> Has no affair with me
> In my congested cosmos of agony
> From which there is no escape

The use of "cosmos" implies that multiple components constitute the whole of the woman's entity, which exceeds its perceived boundaries. This destabilization of order allows her to rethink her individuality, but also places her in a trans-corporeal connection with her material surroundings. These moments of heightened sensibility as she deals with the different stages of childbirth make her aware of her situation of existence, shared with the atmosphere and environment immediately around her. Heather I. Sullivan explains: "sensory perception is a concrete form of our 'trans-corporeality' and is an embodiment of how our bodily boundaries directly incorporate parts of our material surroundings" (84). Indeed, the "irritations" of the

speaker of the poem come both from "within" or "without," as her material being dissolves and merges with what surrounds it. The expansion of her perceptive abilities and the transformation of her sensorial state during parturition allow new meanings of matter to emerge, which can complete the illustration of any event or situation. Sullivan equally notes that "our relationship to 'matter' is colorfully reshaped with attention to the processes of our sensory systems deriving and creating information through the continual exchange of energy and matter across our bodily boundaries" (81). Thus the woman and her environment are weaved together by mutual transpositions of matter and meaning, and she can elevate herself above the supposedly superior man; she is not trapped in labour, but rather infinite within her own "cosmos."

Loy's writing in "Parturition" mimics the pattern of contractions and pain in labour, and thus makes the textuality of the poem the primary act of trans-corporeality. Loy transposes a corporeal, physical experience to a textual form and structure, which results in an alternance between moments of relative control and stability and moments of intensifying, uncontrollable pain. The sensations from the human, material body build the structure of the poem, which then displays the permeability of its boundaries, its openness and its interconnections with material exteriors and other entities. In the alternance between pain and "control," the body is transformed, and the woman's mind must adapt to grapple with her body's senses and responses; in the bodily and internal struggle, in which "pain is no stronger than the resisting force," the woman familiarizes herself with what is stranger to her being, as "Something in the delirium of night hours / Confuses while intensifying sensibility / Blurring spatial boundaries." With heightened sensibility, she acknowledges how little control she has over the actions and reactions of her body, which seem distant from her:

> So aiding elusion of the circumscribed
> That the gurgling of a crucified wild beast

> Comes from so far away
> And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth
> Is no part of myself
> There is a climax in sensibility
> When pain surpassing itself
> Becomes Exotic

The contours of her body are blurred, and every sensation perceived through the modification of her physical state seem stranger to her. In recognizing these phenomena, even in absence of agency, she can maintain a form of self-definition by understanding the realities of shared material and sensorial experiences of maternity. This change is associated with a natural process, as the speaker makes "A leap with nature / Into the essence / Of unpredicted Maternity." The explicit mention of "nature" not only hints at Loy's personal opinions on maternity and motherhood (as rights or obligations, as per her affirmations in her "Feminist Manifesto"), but it also points at the inseparability of the natural and human components in the material world, as they share some universal realities. Mentions of animals and "beast" in the poem highlight the similarities between the human and "natural" spheres of life, and how innate these interconnections are within the subconscious of the woman speaker. On the proximity between animals and women, relating to the senses, Allyson DeMaagd, in describing past perspectives on the matter, explains that women were portrayed as "[m]ore akin to the animal world than the human world," and "were posited as sensitive, reactive, and instinctual, as opposed to rational and thoughtful" (5-6). Loy's use of animal imagery in the woman's developing reasoning and understanding counters such discriminatory observations, as it makes the woman expand her knowledge and makes these comparisons integral elements of her "superior Inferiority," to distinguish her from the man at the mercy of his desires and impulses. Loy thus plays with the essentialist notions of a relationship between women and nature to expose the rationality residing in this proximity, and renders the singing man joyfully ignorant of the processes of life in his

willful narrowness and simplicity of thought. Since Loy's "words, sentences, and stanzas confute established structures of 'man-made' language to represent authentic portraitures of the sensations and impulses specific to womanhood" (Krishna S. and Chatterjee 258), the trans-corporeal processes of the transcendent experience of parturition create a unity between women, one that can never be attained between men, but also one between women and their felt environments, where they can embrace all material entities of their living environments or, as Loy has demanded, all "elements of Life – *Whole*" ("Aphorisms on Futurism").

Ironically, the decentering exercise of trans-corporeality allows the woman to stand on her own and gain knowledge beyond what would be allowed among strictly human social structures and interactions. Loy plays with expectations of modern understanding of such a practice because, as Stacy Alaimo explains, "trans-corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position" and "entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding" (*Bodily Natures* 16-17). This method of perception places the woman speaker in communion with all life and material forms, which allows her to rethink parturition and maternity, with new awareness, independence, and rationality in her moments of heightened pain and relief, away from the rhetorical clutches of the Victorian era and the patriarchy.

Although trans-corporeality is integral to "Parturition," from its material conception to its depicted subject, it remains a tool in the hands of Loy, one which forgoes its ecological considerations. Her interests remain with human, female subjects, keeping the woman speaker as the central figure announced in the first stanza, while other material entities and images orbit around her to complement or complete her experiences and sensations. She does counter assumptions made about modernist writers by recognizing the importance of the body's exterior

in its constitution, giving her a certain environmental awareness, but purely from feminist and futurist perspectives, rather than one of ecological concern. Jessica Burstein associates Loy's "valorization of exteriority" with what she defines as "cold modernism," "mean[ing] that the body is taken as the start and the finish of all explanation" (12, 13). The woman speaker of the poem uses her body as the unique source of knowledge relevant to her situation; her body is sufficient with its infinite possibilities, a characteristic which aligns with another aspect of cold modernism, as it "offers an account of the human form in which the mind plays no role; or, in a slightly less extreme form, in which the mind is so physicalized as to have no more or less purchase than pure anatomy" (13). The human, woman body thus represents a site of inscription and learning, either of emancipatory power or of subjugating control.

Loy's conception of bodily, female existence in "Parturition" provides a message of hope and optimism for women's self-definition and empowerment, illustrating the myriad possibilities of trans-corporeal exchanges and interconnections. As a sign of Loy's acute understanding of exterior influences, other of her Florentine poems provide the opposite perspective of this reality by illustrating the oppressive effects of a variety of spaces, such as streets, cities (and their infrastructures), and houses, on the women who live among them. These poems align more readily with a traditional form of ecocriticism, as their depicted environments clearly act upon the speakers or the characters, but also stand out from traditional subjects of ecocritical analyses, since readers are invited to constructed or urban settings, rather than natural ones. Therefore, a material, ecocritical enquiry of these poems also aligns itself with ideas of urban ecocriticism, which "argues that an urban landscape is not a barrier to ecocritical enquiry, but fertile ground on which to examine 'the meeting point between nature and artifice'" (Black 30). Some natural elements do penetrate Loy's writing, as they do in "Parturition," but the poems "Three Moments

in Paris," "Italian Pictures," "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" and "The Effectual Marriage" are firmly set in domestic or urban settings, often removed from natural environments and interventions, and depict how cities and houses are felt and lived by women, through a multiplicity of sensory perceptions and material sharing.

Despite this distance from the natural world, Loy's Florentine poems can help develop a feminist ecological consciousness because, as Michael Bennet and David W. Teague explain about non-nature writings, they have the ability "to remind city dwellers of [their] placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for understanding urban life and culture" (4). These poems focus less on the body reaching out than on the active influences on women's bodies and selves of material surroundings. This will allow me to discuss how constructed and materials configurations of spaces perpetuate socially accepted customs and norms of oppression by trans-corporeal influence and how these spaces are even conceptualized with this in mind by those who seek to profit from the imprisonment of women. In other words, women are limited to states of disempowerment by the restrictions of movements and thoughts their environments impose on them. In the following section, I aim to develop a feminist reading of city life and infrastructure, which have long been developed to restrict the mobility and sexuality of girls and women, who have to "learn to take up as little space as possible to be allowed within the category 'female'" (Boys 41), and of houses, in which, in early twentieth-century Florence, no room could provide the freedom hoped for in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.[17]

[17] In my first chapter, about Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, I observed how material means and possessions, as well as an allocated personal, isolated space, are essential elements for a woman's "intellectual freedom" (108) and for her personal emancipation from patriarchal discourses. As I will demonstrate in the upcoming sections, Loy's female characters or speakers, despite their belonging to specific spaces, do not have ownership of them, and thus cannot enjoy the possibilities afforded to the women of *Between the Acts* in their moments of isolation and reflection in their protected rooms.

2.2. Immobile Bodies in Active Environments

Mina Loy's Florentine poetry is the combined product of her personal, lived experiences and her critical observations about a deeply patriarchal, oppressive societal structure. During this period of her life, Loy wrote "a series of poems that critique the social, economic, and psychological control of women – and, through these poems on Italian women's destinies, making comparisons to her own," which Carolyn Burke refers to as her "house poems" (*Becoming Modern* 199). This apt designation not only refers to the setting of a few of these poems, but also points to the central element of control and oppression in women's lives. The focus on the domestic, the familiar, and the everyday provides a connective and relatable background for most women of that era, who shared similar experiences of oppression in resigned acceptance to avoid the consequences of refusal and rebellion. As one who dared to defy some of the misogynist limits placed upon her, Loy thus stands as a knowledgeable observer, with concrete, equalizing experiences of marriage, maternity, motherhood, and, most importantly, of female transgression despite the limitations of her material conditions and living environment.

The physical settings of Loy's poems are of integral importance, as they inform the customs, societal rules, and infrastructures of power at play in her writing; the events and situations depicted in her Florentine poems cannot be dissociated from the material environments in which they take place, or from where Loy found inspiration. The poems "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" and "The Effectual Marriage" focus on the inner workings of houses that imprison and repress the desires of women. The settings as depicted in these two poems are more generic and universal, and can be appropriated and transposed to fit within the realities of many women. In the poems that compose sequences "Three Moments in Paris" and "Italian Pictures," the universality is found in the quiet and rampant oppression women faced in their daily lives, as

the gendered structures of domestic and familial life transpose themselves in the public societal sphere. Loy depersonalizes her writing by erasing most traces of emotions and feelings from the personal experiences and observations that might have inspired her. This allows her to tackle complex contemporary topics that concerned a wider population than the women of her artistic and social circles and makes it possible for most women to relate to the issues discussed and portrayed in an era when most of their concerns were silenced or misunderstood. The absence of emotions and matters of the mind constitutes a defining characteristic of Jessica Burstein's cold modernism, for which "the mind does not matter, or it matters purely as matter" (12), and also falls in line with Loy's given importance to material, physical spaces; in the "valorization of exteriority" (12), it is implied that the mind-body is built through material influences, as the relationship between the body and an environment can be seen as

> …one of fierce adjacency or even, in the mildest form, of a gripping proximity. Regardless, what surrounds [the body] – clothing, curtains, cars – is determinate, even constitutive. At times it may be difficult to distinguish between where a body stops and where another body or the extra-corporeal begins… (13)

Burstein's perspective on modernist works informs my ecocritical, material analysis of Loy's early poetry, as it recognizes the permeability of human bodies, made indissociable from their environments and at the mercy of "outside" forces in their conception or evolution.

Loy's Florentine poems highlight such influences by demonstrating how efficient physical places are at conserving memories and transmitting cultural norms, and how living environments come to "express" or enforce patriarchal discourses, as they shift through succeeding generations. Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth have stated that "the making of built space can and should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a discrete and foreclosed act of production" (4). Loy's poetry illustrates this phenomenon and how women remain victims in the absence of cultural changes that would transform the perceived

“interpretations” and “purposes” of different environments, and all entities and things that constitute them. In her two triptychs “Three Moments in Paris” and “Italian Pictures,” she illustrates the proximity between the living conditions and oppression of women and the material spaces that reflect the ambient patriarchal societal rules. The titled settings of Paris and Italy not only refer to Loy’s potential experiences in these locations, but also to the unbreakable connection between what is depicted in the poems and their geographical locations, as bodies and spaces are imbued with one another’s influences; the poems’ depictions of different places may depend on Loy’s personal knowledge of them, but they highlight much more the relation between body and exterior than Loy’s biographical reality.

The two introductory poems of the triptychs, “One O’Clock at Night” from “Three Moments in Paris” and “July in Vallombrosa” from “Italian Pictures” present minimal details of the environments in which the events take place, but still demonstrate how the speakers’ mind-bodies are influenced by what surrounds them. The poem “July in Vallombrosa” (*TLLB* 9-10), inspired by the time Loy spent in this area in the summer of 1914 when she was “recovering from a nervous breakdown, psychological illness, or depression of some kind” (Conover 177), focuses on a woman with no choice but to stay immobilized. Indeed, it contrasts the stillness of a British woman’s living situation with the liveliness of the local Italian women: the “Old lady sitting still” is likened to “Pine trees standing quite still,” in a state of “prolonged invalidism in Italy / At the beck / Of a British practitioner” waiting for the “ineffable moment / When Rigor Mortis / Divests [the body] of its innate impurity,” while just “round the hotel / Wanton Italian matrons / Discuss the better business of bed-linen / To regular puncture of needles.” Her distance from the Italian women, full of liveliness, contributes to her immobility, encouraged by her

invalidism and the care of the British practitioner, which remove her from any possibility of mental or physical stimulation.

The figure of the immobilized, silenced and observing woman also finds herself in "One O'Clock at Night" (*TLLB* 15-16), but not by the natural circumstances of illness, rather by the voice of her male partner. In a state of sleepiness throughout the entire poem, the speaker silently addresses him at first with a seemingly romantic declaration, affirming that "though you had never possessed me / I had belonged to you since the beginning of time." The romantic sentiments are quickly dissipated, as the speaker demonstrates how her sensorial body and state are overwhelmed by the material presence of this energetic and loud man, who made her spend a "Beautiful half-hour of being a mere woman / The animal woman / Understanding nothing of man." She goes through a process of animalization, or naturalization, when she is with him, when he infiltrates the boundaries of her body. She silently addresses him:

> Leaning against your shoulder
> And your careless arm across my back   gesticulated
> As your indisputable male voice   roared
> Through my brain and my body

Her senses of touch and hearing are filled by the presence of the man, which in her sleepiness, makes her subjugated to his will and words, even if the boisterousness of his discussions seems to be coming "Across an interval of a thousand miles / An interim of a thousand years."

The opposite can happen through the same means; as the poem progresses, the speaker gains awareness and leaves her slumber as the men around her converse about invigorating topics. The woman is first posited as ignorant, unaware of and uninterested by the faded, but powerful subjects being discussed by the man and his "brother pugilist of the intellect," but then, this conversation initiates her to a rebellious position, which both brings her closer to the man

and distances her from his power. This transformation from a state of inferiority to intellectual confidence is presented as inevitable:

> But you who make more noise than any man in the world when you clear your throat
> Deafening woke me
> And I caught the thread of the argument
> Immediately assuming my personal mental attitude
> And ceased to be a woman

The final affirmation seems to clash with Loy's beliefs as explained in her "Feminist Manifesto," but the abjection to "woman" in this poem is reserved for the futurist conception of this identity, which sees "woman" as an inferior counterpart to man in all spheres of life and learning. The booming noise and the presence of these men make the speaker's mental and physical state transform from those of a "mere" "animal woman," to those of a person who has been awakened from her slumber, finally appreciating "cerebral gymnastics." This found victory is short lived, as she is brought back to unfair reality by her diffidence and the man's wishes: "Anyhow who am I that I should criticize your theories of plastic velocity / 'Let us go home she is tired and wants to go to bed.'." After ideas of futurism have "woken her up," she is again immediately controlled by the one who made her "awakening" possible, he who remains ignorant of his and his brother's influences on her, and of her new perceptive abilities hidden by her programmed insecurities.

The first poems of "Three Moments in Paris" and "Italian Pictures" introduce how impressionable body and mind can be in contact with the material realities that surround them, leaving them immobilized or restrained. The association of events and states of the mind-body with their respective location and time is made clear: in titling the sequences and constituting poems after a place, Loy permanently joins her memories and poetic reconstitutions with their respective material environments and signals the importance of contextual settings on a person's

mental and physical conditions. I argue in the next sections that Loy uses this same implication to demonstrate the entrapment of women in poems "Café du Néant," "Magasins du Louvre," "The Costa San Giorgio," and "Costa Magic" and to affirm the role of urban, public settings in the submission of women. These poems also relay depictions of Loy's lived, felt, and sensed experiences and reflect her intention to portray life without filters and propriety. Carolyn Burke recounts Loy's words from a 1917 interview, during which she stated: "the modern flings herself at life and lets herself feel what she does feel; then upon the very tick of the second she snatches the images of life that fly through the brain" (*Becoming Modern* 8). Her observations produced poetic works that captured the hidden, hypocritical inequalities lived by women and depicted the connective tissue joining women's bodies and lives with the conditioning environments that maintained the boundaries of idealized womanhood. Through a woman's voice, the remaining poems of "Three Moments in Paris" and "Italian Picture" provide snapshots of life and of isolated moments that translate the inescapable influence of material realities that have been built by past and contemporary influences.

2.3. Watching Eyes in Mina Loy's Paris

The triptych "Three Moments in Paris," an assemblage of three disparate, isolated incidents and locations unified in the titled setting of Paris, showcases three different contexts in which women are confronted by their inescapable fates. As a woman who had the means to build her own path and who sought to intelligently and sensibly portray others who could not, Loy brings readers to the "Café du Néant" and the "Magasins du Louvre" after the introductory "One O'Clock at Night," and demonstrates multiple means through which women can be influenced by their widely different environments. In the second poem of the sequence, Loy introduces us to the

macabre and overwhelming ambiance of the "Café Du Néant" (*TLLB* 16-17), a transposition of the *Cabaret du Néant*, which opened in the 1890s in the Montmartre district of Paris. A "cabaret artistique," it welcomed guests in an "eerie" and "otherworldly" setting with coffin tables, corpses as decorations, and candelabras made of bones, inviting them "to consider the ramifications of life and death" (Prescott, *Poetic Salvage* 7-11), which made it a unique experience both amid and removed from the effervescent city life. Guests were first invited in the *Salle d'Intoxication*, where they were encouraged to "choose their poison" (drink), each having a name suiting the theme, which were then served to them by "waiters in funeral garb" (7-11).

It is in this setting of art and performance where we find the speaker of "Café du Néant," who is immersed in this fabricated microcosm of death in the middle of lively Paris. Loy recreates the ambiance of the "storyworld"[18] in her poem and highlights the multiple components that contribute to its success, from the décor to the human customers, all materially united by their mere presence inside the walls of the establishment. The light found inside this dark environment comes from different sources, such as the "Little tapers leaning   lighted diagonally / Stuck in coffin tables of the Café du Néant / Leaning to the breath of baited bodies" and the human customers with their "Eyes that are full of love / And eyes that are full of kohl / Projecting light across the fulsome ambiente." The guests bring much more to the cabaret than their luminous eyes: through their bodies, they can be seen

> Trailing the rest of the animal behind them
> Telling of tales without words
> And lies of no consequence
> One way or another

[18] Alexa Weik von Mossner argues that it is integral to have some details of a narrative's environment "to experience it vividly." The depicted environment can be deemed a "storyworld," "which allows readers [to] come to know what it is like to experience a space and time different from that of their reading environment" (27).

They fill the space with their unique material, storied existence, while also bringing the pretense of a created self through appearances and lies. The theme of the cabaret encourages guests to contribute to its success by their own means and play along, such as “The young lovers hermetically buttoned up in black / To black cravat / To the blue powder edge dusting the yellow throat.” The perceptive component of colour is not static or superficial, as Heather I. Sullivan explains with the help of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Theory of Color*: “Light and colors have such complexly energetic impact that trying to abstract them from the rest of the physical world leads us away from our concrete bodily experiences. An ecology of color and light embraces the murky intra-actions fully from within the processes” (89). Wearing black may be a stereotypical attempt at impersonating or interacting with death by the customers, but it remains successful in acting upon the people and the things that can be found in the cabaret, through its characteristic absence of light and its meanings constructed by cultural norms.

“Café du Néant” does not explicitly delve into the living conditions of women, but Loy still integrates her critical look on the codification and exploitation of women in the two last stanzas of the poem: in these last moments, one woman finds herself isolated in the spotlight, as death becomes a stronger active presence, leaving nothing outside of its reach, apart from the acknowledged exterior of the establishment. The woman is placed in a unique position as the guinea pig for one of the cabaret’s performed experiences of death. Loy plays with the woman’s reaction to such a position, which could be interpreted as either resigned acceptance or fright. She writes: “The woman / As usual / Is smiling   as bravely / As it is given to her to be brave.” The emphasis on her bravery not only points to the speaker’s admiration, but also to the effort needed for the woman to conjure her performative smile, to be a worthy object of attention

and fascination. The woman's fate becomes entangled with the rest of the cabaret, as everything made of flesh unites in the morbid atmosphere:

> While the brandy cherries
> In winking glasses
> Are decomposing
> Harmoniously
> With the flesh of spectators
> And at a given spot
> There is one
> Who
> Having the concentric lighting focused precisely upon her
> Prophetically blossoms in perfect putrefaction

The customers here are reduced to their flesh, which cannot be separated from the flesh and other materials that compose their immediate surroundings. The decay forms a trans-corporeal harmony, one which highlights the permeability of human physical boundaries. The human perspective of the speaker agrees with Enrico Cesaretti's claim that the body is "a privileged, environmentally interactive playground for matter's many narratives" (217), and thus cannot be delimited from its all-encompassing material space. Even if "there are cabs outside the door," a reminder of the fragile isolation of the *Cabaret du Néant*, which anyone could leave at any moment, the bodies cannot recognize the fabricated nature of their atmosphere and remain intrinsically interconnected with the environment and the spectacle of death. The star of the show, who has "the concentric lighting focused precisely upon her," acts as a warning of what will come for everyone, but in this scenario, her fate is fabricated and made a spectacle. The fear and the reluctance felt by the woman transform the performance into an act of control over her body and her independence; being the subject of attention, she is unwillingly and unknowingly trapped in this position, as an objectification of a "perfect putrefaction." The woman's worth resides in this performed process, in which she "blossoms" to her beautiful death for the entertainment of others.

The exploration of the objectification of women's bodies and experiences for public consumption continues in "Magasins du Louvre" (*TLLB* 17-18), which concludes the sequence of "Three Moments in Paris." The poem, structured by the repeated verse "All the virgin eyes in the world are made of glass," highlights the fabrication of the concept of virginity, which is imposed on girls and women as an appealingly integral element of their beings that ultimately serves as a tool of control and submission for the wills and desires of patriarchal society. The material unity depicted in "Café du Néant" is reflected in the final poem by the kinship of recognition between the "cocottes," made of flesh, and the dolls, made of glass and porcelain, on display in the shops. Loy joining these two entities highlights their similarities: their potential "success" resides in their appearances, as both are for "sale" to on-lookers, and their fates mirror each other's, as both are doomed to be objectified by the gaze of others for consumption.

As symbols of purity, status, and the "consumer cycle of womanhood" (Hart 44), porcelain dolls efficiently represent the standards girls and women should aim for, while also functioning as reminders of their codification and placement on the markets of goods, of marriage, or of sex. The connections between dolls and cocottes create a bond that is rooted in their material realities, which are distinct but equally immobilizing. The speaker of "Magasins du Louvre" witnesses the moment of this realization which can only come from the cocottes:

> They see the dolls
> And for a moment their eyes relax
> To a flicker of elements unconditionally primeval
> And now averted
> Seek each other's   surreptitiously

They find in the eyes made of glass, which supposedly express no emotion, a reflection that exposes the nature of their existence, which makes them shed pretense to transform into their "primeval" selves for the briefest moment before building up their facades again. The

experience, which took over their instincts, remains disturbing, as they struggle to and worry about recovering their covers, and brings feelings of shame to the forefront. It is the shame of "reconnaissance," as Martine Delvaux writes: "La honte arrive quand on se sent pris en otage par sa propre image, l'image-prison, l'image-corset, l'image qui *m'a mise à ma place*" (136). This moment in the poem is deeply personal, as it concerns the cocottes' most intimate realization of their existence, which is why the witnessing speaker shares their shame:

> While mine are inextricably entangled with the pattern of the carpet
> As eyes are apt to be
> In their shame
> Having surprised a gesture that is ultimately intimate

The shame translates into sympathy, as the on-looker removes her gaze from the scene and affords the cocottes the privacy they must desire in this painfully striking moment. In recognizing the trans-corporeal connection between organic and inorganic life, we are struck by the similarities in the objectification of two seeming opposites, between the fabricated virginity of the dolls and the scorning of purity by the cocottes. Loy may present a silent interaction between two opposite poles of women's representation, but this premise inadvertently includes all women of that era, confronted by the shamed cocottes and the fabricated ideal of the dolls displayed in shop windows, both of which reflect their state of imprisonment via eyes made of glass. Thus, the exchanges of organic and inorganic materiality in shared settings of "Three Moments in Paris" accentuate states of oppression and illuminate the mechanisms behind the objectification of women for entertainment and pleasure. The disjointed events and locations of the triptych create a cohesive message through Loy's perspective and illustrate the inability to escape gendered and patriarchal standards, no matter the material environment.

2.4. The Poisoned Streets of Florence

In the poems of "Italian Pictures," the isolated events of the previous triptych are replaced by connected and intertwining webs of life in the streets of Florence, as seen by Loy during her stay in this Italian city. The two poems that follow "July in Vallombrosa" generally focus on every day, mundane settings and thus provide a more universal picture of Italian women's lives than the introductory poem. Loy shifts the focus of the sequence from a sickly speaker recuperating in Vallombrosa to a wider population, one that walks or surrounds the street of "The Costa San Giorgio" (*TLLB* 10-12). The *Costa di San Giorgio* is a familiar setting for Loy, who lived on this street with her husband Stephen Haweis[19] starting from 1908 (Kinnahan), which is made evident in the poem from the familiar descriptions of this location. Loy begins the poem by positioning the speaker as an outsider, one who lives among the locals, but also perpetually stands out: "We English make a tepid blot / On the messiness / Of the passionate Italian life-traffic." Her observing position is removed from the scene, which gives her an advantageous perspective, one which can perceive all that makes up the "messiness" of the "life-traffic."

Indeed, what constitutes the representation of life goes beyond the strictly human since this component cannot be independently observed, when "The greyness of marching men / Falls through the greyness of stone." This trans-corporeal, material merge of colours manifests the potential of an ecosystem of city life, one which can exist outside of uniquely natural environments; humans are only a small part of the painting of life the speaker attempts to depict in its fragmentary composition:

> Fluidic blots of sky
> Shift among roofs

[19] Loy's marriage with Stephen Haweis was a conflictual and an unhappy one. They married in 1903 and divorced in 1917 after years of living apart. Affairs, conflicts, and time spent apart marked their marriage; they only occasionally found contentment in their respective or shared artistic endeavours. To Loy, Haweis was "a means for escape, so she 'wouldn't have to stay with [her] terrible parents'" (*Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*).

Between bandy legs
Jerk patches of street
Interrupted by clacking of all green shutters
From which
Bits of bodies
Variously leaning
Mingle eyes with the commotion

A variety of elements that stimulate different human senses of the speaker meet and interact in ways uncharacteristic of their usual dispositions, confirming their material relations with other entities outside of their boundaries. Among this scene of bustling public life on a busy street, we can find the female inhabitants that may respectably walk among others, and avoid confinement to the interior of houses. Mothers, who have fulfilled what was expected of them as women, are the only ones that are able to navigate the "life-traffic" without criticism or shame; reminders of their "successes" or "accomplishments" of righteousness follow them everywhere and diminish any negative assumptions, as the speaker remarks that "The hips of women sway / Among the crawling children they produce." They can merge with the rest of the crowd and the environment with relative ease since their role permits them to, unlike the other women who do not conform to the norms of conduct of the period, or no longer can.

As a resident of the street, Loy saw from her own eyes the realities women grappled with in this microcosm, as some were brutalized or shamed for their supposed unworthiness. For example, the poem mentions how a woman affected by sickness, "a consumptive," is "[l]eft outside" and how "her chair is broken," conditions which warrant her no care or affection, and leave her as another passive, unmoving observer of others, when "she wonders how we feel / For we walk very quickly." Additionally, "The Costa San Giorgio" metaphorically tackles the treatment of girls and women who are no longer virgins that still walk the streets without a husband or children, and the fates that await them. Loy encapsulates their experiences in the

third stanza: “Oranges half-rotten are sold at a reduction / Hoarsely advertised as broken heads / BROKEN HEADS.” The comparison between the half-rotten oranges of the poems and the non-virgin girls is made evident by the qualifier “broken heads,” which suggests the outdated and disproven concept of “maidenhead,” which was believed to be “lost” during a girl or woman’s first sexual intercourse. These girls are vilified, being referred to as “broken,” their only warranted descriptor, and devalued, as they are of inferior price to the other perfect, immaculate “oranges” that are offered.

The street, supposedly a space of freedom of movement, remains inhospitable to the women of no value to the patriarchal order, since their place of respectability is thought to be in the house, or in a space removed from the open exterior. Women are trapped in a dichotomy of male perception, between “pure” and “sullied,” which Loy clamored against in her “Feminist Manifesto.” Cynthia Cockburn explains that “[t]he women who were mentally contained within the home environment, the man’s wife and daughters, were to be kept in the first category” while “the women… outside the home were described in the second, their perceived sexuality constantly discussed and routinely joked about among the men” (Boys 51). Despite their regarded respectability and worth, those who have “followed the rules” have their lives limited to their domestic realities, where, as Loy describes, “there is little to do” and where every piece of “contaminated intimacy” must be thrown “OUT / Onto the middle of the street.” There lies the unfair irony of women’s places in that society: those who are deemed inappropriate for the house cannot find refuge in their attributed spaces, as they are still criticized as “broken heads” and ostracized for their presence in spaces of bodily freedom, that are still managed by the societal ideals of patriarchal desire. All girls and women are trapped in their positions, condemned to physical immobility, no matter their integrity; the speaker acknowledges those she cannot see,

those who are confined to their houses and thus are appraised with societal acceptance, but who must also deal with the static lives of matrimony that consume them:

> The false pillow-spreads
> Hugely initialed
> Already adjusted
> On matrimonial beds
> And the glint on the china virgin
> Consummately dusted

The girls who want to marry or who have already done so have their fates sealed on their matrimonial bed with their name (or their husband's) which demarks their implied space of belonging and their only destiny beside the reproachable and unrespectable "freedom" of the street. Apart from the mothers, whose lives are dictated by their children and husbands, who can walk the streets, by obligation only, without judgement after years of restraints, women cannot independently find contentment in public life.

With the final poem of the triptych, titled "Costa Magic" (*TLLB* 12-14), Loy highlights how misfortunes are not reserved for those who stray from matrimony, as women cannot escape the tentacular grasp of men's dominance over them, no matter their supposed respectability. Spatial belongings or situations and purity do not protect the girls or the women who wish to make their own decisions independently from the control of their fathers or husbands. In "Costa Magic," Loy showcases such a situation, as a father is "Indisposed to [his daughter's] marriage" with a man of her choosing; he pleads with her to change her mind and to instead follow his demands, guided by prejudice:

> My most sympathetic daughter
> Make yourself a conception
> As large as this one
> Here
> But with yellow hair

The poem is narrated by a speaker who, as opposed to the other poems, takes an active role in the unfolding events as a mother who tries to help her daughter Cesira falling victim to her father's degrading influence. Cesira's refusal of her father's wishes pushes him to act out against her, both mentally and physically, and she thus becomes weaker as the poem progresses. Loy presents his actions through a fantastical, horror lens: he "Pours something / Viscuous / Malefic / Unfamiliar" on her and his wife hears him "Mumbling   Mumbling/ Mumbling   at the window" what seems to be a "malediction" or an "incantation." He refuses to be displeased and disobeyed by his daughter, and thus condemns her to a state of sickness, diagnosed as "Phthisis" by the doctor in the poem, a historical term for "a progressively wasting or consumptive condition" (*Merriam-Webster*), one most likely "involving the lungs" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), which leads to her eventual death. She opposed the patriarchal control that shackled her and paid the price with her life.

As an impossible attempt to heal her daughter, "Knowing [Cesira] has to die," the speaking mother, following the advice of the "wise woman," takes Cesira outside of the house and the city, away from the father. The mother, the aunt and the neighbour bring her to a natural environment, away from the controlling eyes and rules of society, where she can be free according to her instincts. On the importance of exterior environments for a person's interiority, Hilde Heynen writes: "every identity is irremediably destabilized by its exterior and therefore subject to a process of permanent hybridization and nomadization" (22). The change of scenery does more than provide beautiful views for comfort, as it also allows for Cesira to change her being as she desires, far from the grasp of her father's influence; together with her caregivers, she visits "the magic tree" where "[she] becomes as a wild beast /   A tree of age," even if it is for the briefest moment, before "[they] drive home / To wait" for her death.

In all her explorations of materiality and its effects on the body and identity, this marks Loy's most important reference to the natural world, which never seemed to interest her as it did Woolf in *Between the Acts*. The inclusion of nature in "Costa Magic" as a recognizable influencer of the human condition extends Loy's vision on the interconnectedness of materiality, which goes beyond the human-built and human-thought spaces. Perhaps as a mockery to futurists, who believed in the "equation that puts woman and nature on the same level" (Parati 51), Loy, while avoiding essentialist notions, depicts nature as an empowering environment to women, who can escape patriarchal perception and power when they are within its realm. Unfortunately, nature can only bring temporary relief to Cesira: she is freed of constraints, just as the "magic tree" can thrive without human intervention, but her persisting condition is a constant reminder of the origins of her degradation, as her existence cannot be dissociated from her home and her father, both still inhabiting her despite spatial separation. A new or different environment is not enough to save her, since her being has long been imprinted by the material and societal realities imposed upon her, and has been condemned to either submit, or be destroyed by the consequences of rebellion. Loy concludes "Costa Magic" with a denunciation of the limitations placed on girls by their patriarchs, stating that "It is unnatural in a Father / Bewitching a daughter / Whose hair down covers her thighs." This reproach goes beyond the narrative of the poem, and reaffirms Loy's ideas on women's lives, and the control they should possess over their bodies and choices as fully developed individuals, in equal (yet distinct) standing to men.

The influences of the father and wider patriarchal society persist in the afflictions that have impacted Cesira and many others, since the root of the problem is found in the "home," in both its conceptual and material reality. Homes and houses are constant reminders to girls and women of their inescapable fates and forbidden possibilities. As Mark Wigley explains, and as

Loy also made evident in this last poem, "[t]he law of the house is undoubtedly no more than the law of the father. The physical house is the possibility of the patriarchal order that appears to be applied to it" (336). Cesira's father's powerful entitlement infiltrates every corner of their house and thus perpetuates the societal regulations placed upon girls before their marriage, when they must stay "protected" from the sullying exterior. The totality of "Italian Pictures," and especially the last two poems, illustrate the impossibility of destroying the state of immobility of girls and women, as they are perpetually haunted by the obligations of domesticity and marriage, birthed from the structures of home life.

2.5. The Housing of Women: For Virginity and Marriage

A home can not only accumulate the possessions of its inhabitants, but also welcome their essence and cultural beliefs that influence life among and outside of its walls. As Hilde Heynen writes, a house "can be read as a symbolic container expressing the identities of its inhabitants as well as conveying more general cultural assumptions and beliefs about the world" (21). Loy pursues a further evaluation of the mechanisms of patriarchal power in domestic settings in other "house" poems such as "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" and "The Effectual Marriage," which are set indoors, with women away from direct public scrutiny. In shifting her critical gaze to "private" settings, she focuses on women and their socially acceptable positions delimited by the threshold of their homes; her poem "At the Door of the House" (*TLLB* 33-35) explicitly illustrates this idea by exploring the sadness of women who know they cannot leave their house to pursue their heart's desires. With the empathy she developed in observing her female neighbours caught in the grasps of patriarchal, misogynist norms, Loy looks sympathetically towards women who want love when they are trapped in an unfulfilling married life. She was not

opposed to adjusting her feminist ideals, which dismissed the desire for love, to accommodate and recognize the realities of women in 1910s Italy, to instead target her reproaches to repressive institutional forces and to speak for those yearning for care and sentimentality in the face of apathy.

In this poem, “A thousand women’s eyes” are “Riveted to the unrealizable,” as they listen to the tale of the “card-teller,” presenting them with an impossible affair and romance with “The Man of the Heart” and awakening in them a forbidden desire:

> “And look
> Here are you
>   And here is he
>   In life and thought
> At the door of the house”

Loy paints a sorrowful picture in which the women remain hopeless and sad, for the simplicity of the romantic scene can never materialize itself. They are bound to their domestic settings and would never be able to go beyond the threshold of their designated homes to fulfil their romantic and sexual desires. The door provides hope for women, but it also acts as the ultimate reminder of their place within society and inside their homes, impossible to abandon. On Loy’s house poems, Laura Scuriatti explains: “Boundary areas such as windows and doors are endowed with the possibility of change and transformation, but they also simultaneously function as loci in which the ideological force of spatial structures is at its strongest” (73). With the motifs of doors and windows, in this poem and the following house poems, Loy highlights the constant disappointment that inhabits women trapped in marriages and inside their homes for the satisfaction of their husbands or male peers and for the protection of their estimated value and virtue. They remain commodities, even after they have fulfilled their destiny of matrimony, just as they were in the market of virginity, who can only look out to the impossible.

Loy illustrates the codification and objectification of girls in “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots” (*TLLB* 21-23), a poem denouncing the absurdity of such treatments. The title, along with its subtitle “Latin Borghese,” reveal what needs to be known about the material realities of this human market: set in a middle-class (bourgeois) environment, the virgin girls are concealed from the outside world with curtains barring the windows of their houses, and struggle to retain any suitor without a dowry in the hope of “buying a purchaser.” They are confined to their houses, which act as prisons, as “Houses hold virgins / The doors on the chain,” and block any sight of (and from) the exterior. This protective measure does not erase them from public perception, when “Virgins   without dots / Stare   beyond probability” and “[their] eyes look out,” making them traces in the materiality of the city, which transforms to “Plumb streets with hearts” that “[bear] curtains with eyes.”

The virgins’ absence of financial and material means leave them without desired purposes, which makes them surrender to the material conditions of their settings in their state of hopelessness and lose their physical and psychological integrity:

> A great deal of ourselves
> We offer to the mirror
> Something less to the confessional
> The rest   to Time
> There is so much   Time
> Everything is full of it
>   Such a long time

They must assure the appeal of their appearances, to the detriment of any other distracting activity, even those deemed virtuous, and thus they waste their time on unsatisfying and ungratifying waiting and hoping. They get to experience moments of respite, during which they entertain potential suitors who ultimately, given the girls’ material conditions and means, also waste their time:

> Virgins may squeak
> 'My dear I should faint!'
> Flutter . . . . . flutter . . . . flutter . . . .
> . . . . 'And then the man—'
> Wasting our giggles
> For we have no dots

They perform attraction and interest in propriety, seeking a treat or a relieving conclusion, a meaningless endeavour since they do not possess what the visiting men truly value in a prospective wife.

This market activity preoccupied Loy for a long time and throughout many of her literary works. Jacinta Kelly, in her analysis of the chapter "Ladies in an Aviary" from Loy's unpublished novel *The Child and the Parent*, which likens the ladies to birds, argues that

> [t]he loveliness of the ladies is tied closely to their captivity; they are bound to their cage so that they can continue to give pleasure to the men who watch them. Thus the worth bestowed upon them as women is intrinsic to their sacrifice of movement in exchange for the impositions of domestic space. (9)

In the comparison between birds and women, Loy describes a similar process to the one portrayed in "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots," albeit in a less crude manner. The women of both works would find themselves in unfavourable positions no matter their decisions on their bodily autonomy: in escaping their caging houses, they would be condemning themselves to humiliation and violence, "for 'at every doorway lurks a downfall for virgins who go wandering,' and for women who dare challenge their captivity lies the impending threat of an 'ailment known as impurity'" (9), while women staying in their prisons to await marriage would remain restrained in their lives of matrimony and motherhood. The virtuous path does not offer freedom or contentment, but it merely provides them with public and societal acceptance, which affords them protection from the mistreatment reserved for those of "impure" habits. The momentary giggles of the virgins in the poem and the cubes of sugar brought to the ladies in their cages in

the novel do not counterbalance their bodily and psychological sacrifices, rendering them eternal victims, no matter their material and spatial situations.

Through the poem, Loy denounces the hypocritical involvement of those who have never been girls and who merely seek to make good marital transactions, which shatters any hope the girls might have and inadvertently destroys the innocence of the girls they pretend to protect. The regulations imposed on the virgins push them to dream of something better; their yearning is felt beyond the walls of the house by the limitless sky, when "Some behind curtains / Throbs to the night / Bait to the stars." They wish to unite with these symbols of dreams and wishes, to find a peaceful ending in life, seemingly possible for all in "nature":

> A secret well kept
> Makes the noise of the world
> Nature's arms spread wide
> Making room for us
> Room for all of us

To their knowledge, they could find fulfillment in another place of the world, where "nature" would not condemn them, but as they have been rendered directionless and reduced to their purity, wandering outside for a better life seems impossible to them. They have been manipulated by men, by "Somebody who was never / a virgin," and who "Has bolted the door" and "Put curtains at [their] windows." Instead of leaving for the open arms of nature and following the dreams of the stars, the virgins, victims of timeless manipulations, can thus only pursue what will continue to restrain them with desperation and fury. In their escape from their house, they can only see the neighbouring, closed houses, which transforms them into wild animals in the concluding verses of the poem: "With the door locked / Against virgins who / Might scratch." Their extreme willingness finds itself rebuked, as their unfulfilled desires have changed them in the eyes of others, made even more undesirable by their eagerness.

The girls' lack of propriety and submission to house control inscribes them in the materiality of their neighbourhood, but through marks of desperations and violence rather than as observing eyes in curtained windows. Their refusal to stay within the physical constraints of their houses translates the overwhelming power of these spaces, which have been thought to retain girls and women in their prescribed positions. Mark Wigley argues that, when marriage is "understood as the domestication of a wild animal" and makes the house a mechanism in the "production of the gender division," "the role of architecture is explicitly the control of sexuality, or, more precisely, women's sexuality, the chastity of the girl, the fidelity of the wife" (336). These ideas imbue the walls of houses, and intoxicate the girls and women that live among them. Their ideas of freedom, romantic love, and nature's embrace are constantly brought into question by the only home they have been allowed to know; their independent thoughts are perverted by their environments that are designed to control them.

The house enacts societal expectations upon its inhabitants and strengthens gender differences and inequalities. Judith Butler's work on gender distances this concept from a biological feature, and presents it instead as "produced through its repetitive enactment in response to discursive forces" (Heynen 24). Loy's poem "The Effectual Marriage or The Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni" (*TLLB* 36-39) locates these "discursive forces" among the structure and walls of the house in which the events of the poem take place. As Hilde Heynen explains:

> Spatial elements such as the "master bedroom," the "rational kitchen," or "the study" do have implications in terms of gender, since their unproblematized presence in the home underscores the expectance that it will be inhabited by a married couple, with the wife an expert cook and the husband keen on his privacy. (24)

Loy's poetic depiction of matrimony, with traces of irony, presents a form of this divide in spatiality; indeed, it seems to be this separation between wife and husband that sustains the

marriage, and assures its prosperity inside the home, even if they first seem to be the perfect representation of unity. When we meet Gina and Miovanni,[20] once they have passed through "the door" (supposedly of their house), the speaker underscores the trans-corporeal unity of flesh and of spirit in their relationship: "They were themselves / Corporeally transcendentally consecutively / conjunctively and they were quite complete." This picture of interconnectedness, of inseparability, and of unnoticeable boundaries is immediately contrasted with their distinct spatial and gendered "belonging," separated by the walls of their home:

> In the evening they looked out of their two windows
> Miovanni out of *his* library window
> Gina from *the* kitchen window
> From among *his* pots and pans
> Where he so kindly kept her
> Where she so wisely busied herself (emphasis mine)

Loy's irony imposes itself in the justification of Gina's attributed space, and thus indicates to readers from the beginning the woman's lack of choice in her own destiny. Her position is even more diminutive for none of what is in the house properly belongs to her, but to her husband who can never be found in "his" kitchen between meals.[21]

Gina's placement in the house of Miovanni acts upon her ambitions and upon the very fabric of her identity. The speaker of the poem describes her as someone "Who wanted everything / To be everything in woman / Everything everyway at once" and "who lent monogamy / With her fluctuant aspirations / A changeant consistency." This presentation of Gina

---

[20] Roger L. Conover notes that the names "Gina" and "Miovanni" stand for Mina Loy and Giovanni Papini, which provides some biographical significance to the tale of the poem, along with its final verse, "—Forte dei Marmi," referring to the Italian seaside resort where Loy spent her summer in 1915, when the poem was written (185).
[21] A similar description of ownership can be noticed in William Carlos Williams' 1916 poem "The Young Housewife." Loy and Williams met each other in New York, and it is interesting to observe the similarity in their poetic perception of women's (lack of) means and possession. In "The Young Housewife," the speaker observes a scene: "At 10 A.M. the young housewife / moves about in negligee behind / the wooden walls of her husband's house." (57). Even as a stranger to her, the speaker cannot acknowledge the house as hers, even he knows this is where she lives and resides.

is challenged by her love for Miovanni, for he has become an integral part of her personal universe:

> If he had become anything else
> Gina's world would have been at an end
> Gina with no axis to revolve on
> Must have dwindled to a full stop

Her independent desires are decimated by her love, and his love for her, which leaves her wishing upon a falling star that "Miovanni would love her to-morrow." She contents herself with the simplicities of married life, cowering away from her husband in his study for the uncertainty of what she could discover, writing a poem consisting merely of good wishes "not too difficult to / Learn by heart," expressing her love solely through "Succulent meals   and an occasional caress" and romanticizing the "Pet simplicities of her Universe" behind "her audacious happinesses" that perfect their "effectual marriage:"

> The scrubbed smell of the white-wood table
> Greasy cleanliness   of the chopper board
> The coloured vegetables
> Intuited quality of flour
> Crickly sparks of straw-fanned charcoal

Her "audaciousness" has become limited to domesticity. This irony from Loy's part illustrates the discursive power of the house, of the domestic setting, which can transform a woman of ambition into a submissive one who can no longer see beyond her husband's satisfaction and his love for her. The lack of action from Miovanni is balanced by the house, which imprisons Gina and restricts her movements and intellect. On the mechanism behind this debilitation, Mark Wigley writes: "The wife learns her 'natural' space by learning the place of things. She is 'domesticated' by internalizing the very spatial order that confines her" (340). She disappears into the space that has been designated for her, molded by its walls, which affects her material constituency. In the poem, the speaker informs us that "Some say   that happy women are

immaterial;" while most likely referring to a lack of possessions, or to the desire for them, it also refers to Loy's perception of marital life for a woman, which renders her boundaries of flesh and thought permeable, leaving her vulnerable to her house's, and by extension her husband's, trans-corporeal influences. Her life, body and soul can then only merge with the house, "which assumes the man's self-control. The virtuous woman becomes woman-plus-house or, rather, woman-as-housed, such that her virtue cannot be separated from the physical space" (Wigley 337). Therefore, a woman who finds herself away from her house or cannot find one for herself stands to be shamed and punished, with the possibility of home slowly fading away with time, as it is willed by patriarchal power.

The poems "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" and "The Effectual Marriage" encapsulate the entirety of Loy's criticism of the systematic protective confinement of girls and women, and their categorization based on arbitrary ideas of virtuousness. By shifting her gaze toward multiple scenarios, as illustrated in her diverse Florentine poems, Loy displays her profound understanding of the mechanisms of patriarchal power, presenting them differently across different geographical and spatial locations. Whether in Paris or in Florence, I have demonstrated how she can aptly decipher the material properties of control and repression that worked in the service of men, from their moments of conception or their acquired cultural significances. Welcoming the expansion of sensorial materiality can provide freedom and other possibilities that drown out the influences of men, just as it did for the woman speaker of "Parturition," but Loy also acknowledges nefarious impacts of this bodily characteristic, when most women remain imprisoned by and unaware of spatial discursive forces. In the absence of any traces of patriarchal influence, the speaker of "Parturition" is free to feel as she wishes, and make discoveries on her own terms, while the women of the "house" poems must always tackle

the expectations and perceptions of public and private settings, which always succeed in dissipating any hope of independent ambition. Acknowledging the permeability of bodily boundaries and the influences of surroundings environments serves the development of an environmental, feminist perspective of existence and living spaces, one deciphering the overarching dominance of male control that would dramatically influence women in the search of fulfilment and independence through trans-corporeal communion. Mina Loy cannot provide this liberation to all the women she poetically portrays, as most are realistically mere receptors of material influences reflecting patriarchal power. Her poems instead provide hope in illustrating the machinations behind their submission and inviting them to welcome “feelings” beyond the restraints they have always known, for they will provide them with knowledge and sensations foreign to their ever-shifting, bodily self-constitution, and thus potentially bring about new possibilities, break the ties of the imprisonment they have always known and move them toward an independent choice for their spatial belonging.

Ouverture

Modernist Women's Environmental Consciousness

My thesis project highlights (dis)connections between Virginia Woolf's and Mina Loy's distinct modernist works and their recognition of environmental influences on women's lives. Both Woolf and Loy acknowledge the activeness and liveliness of the non-human world, in its constitutive organic and inorganic forms, and understand the impossibility to escape its influences, causing both positive and negative effects synonymous with the natural and larger material worlds' disregard for human interests. Such work creates an invitation for a wider study of modernist women's ecological consciousness in their various literary forms that address environmental concerns, material conditions, and nature. Were this project to expand, I would enfold a greater number of Woolf's and Loy's works and extend my analysis to the works of other of their female contemporaries, such as Katherine Mansfield, Marianne Moore, H.D. and Hope Mirrlees. Given their distinct situations—made evident by Woolf's literary criticism and journal writings, and Loy's affiliations with many artistic movements throughout her lifetime—this naturally invites their female peers into a conversation of wide-ranging possibilities, and could eventually produce a more complete portrait of modernist, feminist ecological consciousness that reevaluates the assumption of modernist antagonism toward matters of environments and nature.

In their rejection of the past, modernist artists provide a distinct positioning on environmental matters compared to artists of their past, some of whom may have indirectly inspired them. This "new" modernist awareness was thus partially shaped by contrast, and preserves links between past and present in the oppositions and remaining similarities. Though most modernist women were aiming to transgress and reject Victorian and other past

conventions, their works remain connected to the past and particularly their social and educational experiences in their youth. Their work can be understood as responses to this even as they view it both as a source of inspiration or as fodder for rebellion. Such would be the case for Woolf and Loy when looking at Christina Rossetti. Both appreciated the artist for her work, despite its reminders of past conventions. In her essay titled "I am Christina Rossetti," Woolf expresses the genuine admiration she felt for Rossetti and her talent, though she never strove to resemble her stylistically and recognized the singularity of her art and being. Loy, who likewise never aimed "to imitate [her] self-deprivation and eroticized piety," was fascinated by the "quiet anger and barely repressed sensuality" of her poetry (Burke, "Becoming Mina Loy" 139).

Works of their predecessors and of past artistic movements provide alternate viewpoints from which to examine modernist accomplishments that were, in their aim to reject them, reacting to them. For example, in connection with discussions of environments and materiality, the domestic spaces and gothic aesthetics of Victorian and fin de siècle literature present in a number of women's literary works could have served as inspiration, or as tropes to dismantle, for modernists when tackling issues of gender and the illusions and realities of control and imprisonment. These conditions associated with material environments, resulting in feelings of frustration and melancholia, may be universal in their reach for Victorian and modernist women, but the mechanisms behind the oppression and the depictions of such phenomena may present divergences in the evolution and transformation of cultural and literary practices. How Woolf and Loy dissect the influences of material spaces on women reflects concerns and values from a generation aiming to break bonds with the past, in art and in society, but the issues they were interested in have manifested themselves through different literary perspectives in the past. Deconstructing these transitions and transgressions in material analyses of the ecocritical and

ecofeminist kind reunites women of distinct social and societal contexts on the subjects of living environments and domestic spaces, and would clarify modernist women's positioning on these matters. It would also complete, or reinforce, the arguments and observations that lead many of them, like Woolf and Loy, to recognize environments' influential power on women's conditions, bodies, and minds, and showcase the fruitful and negative impacts of this universal living experience manifesting themselves in varying forms to women of different contexts and eras.

Works Cited

Adamson, Walter L. *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.

---. "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 237-264.

---. *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. Cornell University Press, 2000. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvtv93cc.

Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman. "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory." *Material Feminisms*, edited by Alaimo and Hekman, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 1-19.

Alt, Christina. *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. *Cambridge Core*, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511762178.

Bennet, Michael, and David W. Teague. "Urban Ecocriticism: An Introduction." *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*, edited by Bennet and Teague, The University of Arizona Press, 1999, pp. 3-14.

Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. University of Texas Press, 1986.

Black, Elizabeth. *The Nature of Modernism: Ecocritical Approaches to the Poetry of Edward Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew.* Routledge, 2017. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315232126.

Boys, Jos. "Women and Public Space." *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment*, edited by Matrix Book Group, 2nd ed., Verso, 2022, pp. 37-54.

Burke, Carolyn. "Becoming Mina Loy." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1-2, 1980, pp. 137-150. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1980.9978508.

---. *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*. Picador, 2021.

Burstein, Jessica. *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

Caracciolo, Marco, et al. Introduction. *Narrating Nonhuman Spaces: Form, Story, and Experiences Beyond Anthropocentrism*, edited by Caracciolo, et al., Routledge, 2021, pp. 1-16. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003181866.

Cesaretti, Enrico. "Eco-Futurism? Nature, Matter, and Body in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti." *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies*, edited by Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti and Elena Past, University of Virginia Press, 2018, pp. 215-224. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2204q7x.24.

Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. *Cambridge Core*, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511976261.

Conover, Roger L. Introduction. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*, edited by Conover, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, pp. xi-xx.

---. "Notes on the Text." *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*, edited by Conover, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, pp. 175-218.

Darling, Elizabeth, and Lesley Whitworth. "Introduction: Making Space and Re-making History." *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950*, edited by Darling and Whitworth, Routledge, 2007, pp. 1-12. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315233826.

Delsandro, Erica Gene. "Virginia Woolf and Mina Loy: Modernist Affiliations." *Women Making Modernism*, edited by Delsandro, University Press of Florida, 2020, pp. 174-202.

Delvaux, Martine. *Les filles en série : Des Barbies aux Pussy Riot*. Éditions du remue-ménage, 2013.

DeMaagd, Allyson. *Dissensual Women: Modernist Women Writers, the Senses and Technology*. 2018. Eberly College of Arts and Science at West Virginia University, Dissertation. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/dissensual-women-modernist-writers-senses/docview/2042860154/se-2.

Eames, Rachel Fountain. "'Snared in an Atomic Mesh': Transcendent Physics and the Futurist Body in the Works of Mina Loy." *Journal of Literature and Science*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2020, pp. 31-49, www.literatureandscience.org/volume-13-issue-1-2020/.

Estok, Simon C. "Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia." Iovino and Oppermann, pp. 130-140.

---. "A Report Card on Ecocriticism." *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, vol. 96, n. 1, 2001, pp. 220-238. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1179/aulla.2001.96.1.014.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2023. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003174011.

Hart, Maria Teresa. *doll*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. *Bloomsbury Collections*, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501380891.

Heynen, Hilde. "Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions." *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture,* edited by Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar, Routledge, 2005, pp. 1-29. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203479476.

Iovino, Serenella. "Bodies of Naples: Stories, Matter, and the Landscapes of Porosity." Iovino and Oppermann, pp. 97-113.

Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.

Kelley, Joyce E. "Stretching Our 'Antennae': Converging Worlds of the Seen and the Unseen in 'Kew Gardens.'" *Virginia Woolf: Writing the World*, edited by Pamela L. Caughie and Diana L. Swanson, Liverpool University Press, 2015, pp. 160-166. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gn6cc4.27.

Kelly, Jacinta. "Purging the Birdcage: The Dissolution of Space in Mina Loy's Poetry." *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2012, www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/18/kelly.

Kinnahan, Linda A. "Loy's Italian Baedeker: Mapping a Feminist En Dehors Garde." *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, edited by Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda A. Kinnahan and Susan Rosenbaum, University of Georgia, 2020, mina-loy.com/chapters/italy-italian-baedeker/.

Krishna S., Swathi and Srirupa Chatterjee. "Mina Loy's 'Parturition' and L'écriture Féminine." *The Explicator*, vol. 73, no. 4, 2015, pp. 257-261. *Taylor and Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2015.1087377.

Larsson, Lisbeth. *Walking Virginia Woolf's London: An Investigation in Literary Geography*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. *Springer Link*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55672-7.

Lauwers, Margot. "Ecofeminism." *Rethinking Nature: Challenging Disciplinary Boundaries*, edited by Aurélie Choné, Isabelle Hajek and Philippe Hamman, Routledge, 2017, pp. 106-113. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315444765.

Loy, Mina. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*. Edited by Roger L. Conover, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism." *ItalianFuturism.org*, www.italianfuturism.org/manifestos/foundingmanifesto/.

Morse, Deborah Denenholz, and Martin A. Danahay. Introduction. *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature*, edited by Morse and Danahay, Routledge, 2007, pp. 1-12. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315235073.

Neyrat, Frédéric. *Literature and Materialisms*. Routledge, 2020. *Taylor & Francis*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315560502.

Parati, Graziella. "The Transparent Woman: Reading Femininity within a Futurist Context." *Feminine Feminists: Cultural Practices in Italy*, edited by Giovanna Miceli Jeffries, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 43-62. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsff4.7.

Parmar, Sandeep. "Mina Loy's 'Unfinishing' Self: 'The Child and The Parent' and 'Islands in the Air'." *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, edited by Rachel Potter and Suzanne Hobson, Salt Publishing, 2010, pp. 71-98.

"Phthisis." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phthisis.

"Phthisis." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2006, www.oed.com/dictionary/phthisis_n?tab=meaning_and_use#30437555.

Pozorski, Aimee L. "Eugenicist Mistress & Ethnic Mother: Mina Loy and Futurism, 1913-1917." *MELUS*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2005, pp. 41-69. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30029772.

Prescott, Tara. "Moths and Mothers: Mina Loy's 'Parturition'." *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal,* vol. 39, no. 3, 2010, pp. 194-214. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497871003595893.

---. *Poetic Salvage: Reading Mina Loy*. Bucknell University Press, 2017.

Raine, Anne. "Ecocriticism and Modernism." *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 98-117. *Oxford Academic*, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199742929.013.010.

Scott, Bonnie Kime. "Ecofeminism, Holism, and the Search for Natural Order in Woolf." *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World*, edited by Kristin Czarnecki and Carrie Rohman, Liverpool University Press, 2011, pp. 1-11. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gn6c4h.6.

---. *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature*. University of Virginia Press, 2012.

---. Introduction. *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Scott, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 1-18. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/jj.5501026.4.

Scuriatti, Laura. “Negotiating Boundaries: The Economics of Space and Gender in Mina Loy’s Early Poems.” *Feminismo/s*, no. 5, 2005, pp. 71-84. *Repositorio Institucional de la Universidad de Alicante*, http://dx.doi.org/10.14198/fem.2005.5.05.

“Stephen Haweis.” *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, edited by Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda A. Kinnahan and Susan Rosenbaum, University of Georgia, 2020, mina-loy.com/biography/stephen-haweis/.

Stevanato, Savina. *Visuality and Spatiality in Virginia Woolf''s Fiction*. Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=488264&lang=fr&site=ehost-live.

Stevens, Wallace. “Anecdote of the Jar.” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/14575/anecdote-of-the-jar.

Sullivan, Heather I. “The Ecology of Colors: Goethe’s Materialist Optics and Ecological Posthumanism.” Iovino and Oppermann, pp. 80-94.

Sultzbach, Kelly. “Modern English Fiction.” *A Global History of Literature and the Environment*, edited by John Parham and Louise Westling, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 254-268. *Cambridge Core*, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316212578.018.

Thacker, Andrew. *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism*. 2003. Manchester University Press, 2009.

Vetter, Lara. “Theories of Spiritual Evolution, Christian Science, and the ‘Cosmopolitan Jew’: Mina Loy and American Identity.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2007, pp. 47-63. *Project MUSE*, https://doi.org/10.2979/jml.2007.31.1.47.

Wallace, Kathleen R., and Karla Armbruster. “Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where To?” *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, edited by Armbruster and Wallace, University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp. 1-25.

Weik von Mossner, Alexa. *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative.* The Ohio State University Press, 2017.

Westling, Louise. “Merleau-Ponty and the Eco-Literary Imaginary.” *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, edited by Hubert Zapf, De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 65-83. *De Gruyter*, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110314595-005.

---. “Merleau-Ponty’s Ecophenomenology.” *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, edited by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, University of Virginia Press, 2011, pp. 126–138. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrhdg.13.

---. "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World." *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1999, pp. 855-875. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20057575.

Wigley, Mark. "Untitled: The Housing of Gender." *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 327-389.

Williams, William Carlos. "The Young Housewife." *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume I (1909-1939)*, edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, New Directions Book, 1986, pp. 57. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/books/young-housewife/docview/2153752993/se-2.

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. Harcourt, Inc., 1970.

---. "I am Christina Rossetti." *Complete Works of Virginia Woolf*, Delphi Classics, 2014, pp. 4074-4082.

---. "Kew Gardens." *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick, 2nd ed., Harcourt, Inc., 1989, pp. 90-95.

---. "Modern Fiction." *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*, edited by Andrew McNeille, The Hogarth Press, 1984, pp. 157-165.

---. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt, Inc., 1989.

---. *To the Lighthouse*, edited by David Bradshaw, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Zink, Suzana. *Virginia Woolf's Rooms and the Spaces of Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. *Springer Link*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71909-2.