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Into the Ether

An Invitation to Bodily Reorientations

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Literary studies has recently experienced two distinct theoretical “turns”—one toward affect and feeling, and the other toward the environment and ecology. Codified as *affect theory* and *ecocriticism*, respectively, scholarship in both fields shares a similar ambition to assess the relationships among individual ethics, politics, and a surround. Both fields conjure figures of the human body through a language of a material, yet elusive, relational environment in which the body, to use new materialist theorist Karen Barad’s phrase, “intra-acts.”¹ Yet, these fields rarely speak to each other with intentionality. Few studies exist that place these fields in tandem within literary studies.² Studies that do, we find, are “haunted” by what we would deem the ghost of the early twentieth-century—or modernist—body.

Scholarship’s abandonment of modernism’s varied, incongruous, and mutational conceptions of bodies has meant that contemporary theorists assume that the body, prior to contemporary understandings, was singular and petrified.³ The modernist body was far from stable, however, functioning instead as what we may recognize today as both ecocriticism’s fleshly, material site and affect’s processual “becoming.” Much of the literal and metaphorical modernist literary landscape composed bodies as variously nationed or politicized, (dis)empowered, (non)agentive, raced, sexed, gendered, sexualized, pathologized, enabled or disabled,

ethnized, colonized, animalized, interned, gassed, institutionalized, and classed by and through emotions and sensations, objects and atmospheres. Such embodiments and the puzzles therein are where we center our collection. Our contributors ask how feeling, environments, and bodies relate to, co-constitute, and undo one another, and what the “matter” is with modernist bodies. This collection therefore aims to initiate a historicization of the body, returning affect and ecocriticism to bodies at—to paraphrase Michael North—“the scene of the modern,”⁴ and tracing the ways in which modernist literature itself theorizes the body rather than simply (re)presenting it. We suggest, then, that affect theory and ecocriticism have something to gain from modernist literature.

We argue that by performing such a historicization of the body, this collection also remedies the impasses that both affect theory and ecocriticism are experiencing at present. The feeling-acting body in ecocriticism and the material-relational body in affect theory are each typically perceived as a point of contention in contemporary scholarship. When these debates are placed within the logic of the modernist body, however, emotions and matter may exist not causally, but contemporaneously. The modernist body therefore allows ecocriticism and affect theory to speak together to these fields’ shared critical limitation—the affective body or the ecological body, respectively—and productively engage an ethics of embodied subjectivity. The body inherited by the contemporary era would then take into account the impact of the highly formative period of modernism itself, presenting an actionable, though processual, ethics in its iterations as both contact and becoming—or the intra-action that encompasses these. While we use the terms *materialism* and *intra-action*, our project is not strictly new materialist. Rather, the collection employs these new materialist concepts and ideas as part of a diverse theoretical network driven primarily by affect theory and ecocriticism. Placing all these fields together, *Affective Materialities* looks newly to bodies as relational, divergent, and affected, replete with urgent political and ethical implications.

Affective materialities is our large-scale term intended as meaningful replacement for the terms *society* and *ecosystem*. The term refers to that which constitutes the modernist body’s surrounds, including the body itself. Using the term thereby avoids the false assumption of a division

between nature and culture, the physical and the social. *Affective ecology* is our operative term that asserts the relation of the body and its affective materialities, or surrounds. This term names the quality of the modernist body as constituted by interior and exterior realms without division. We practice no boundaries between the long-theorized separation of immaterial mind or emotion and the material body or environment. The *affective* refers to the capability to affect and be affected, to be influenced by and to exert influence upon others through the felt or emotional. We are using *ecology* to indicate the body-in-context,⁵ as “multidimensional hypervolume.”⁶ In other words, ecology is the quality of the body in time and space. It exists in and as this multidimensional hypervolume. The whole of all relations contained therein, together with the body itself, exceeds the sum of their addition. This departs from the term’s traditional usage within the sciences, where ecology is defined solely as a branch of biology that studies relationships between organisms and surroundings, and also these relationships themselves.⁷ Affective ecology is how the modernist body *matters*—affective ecology is a quality of the modernist body that feeds our collection’s emphasis on materiality. The modernist body matters in the sense that its literary representation evokes both understandings of the word: having meaning and representing materiality. We evoke *matter* at the intersection of its instantiation as verb and noun. Matter is “[a] thing, affair, concern,” “physical objects, vaguely characterized,” and the state of being “something of great importance or significance.”⁸ Matter is also “to care or be concerned about; to regard, heed, mind,” and “to be of importance; to signify.”⁹ The body in this sense has the quality of the elementally physical such as concretized flesh, rock, plant, or organism. These matters also and by virtue of their physicality have magnitude, by which we mean significance, capability, or force. The sense of movement in these forces—to act on or be acted upon with, against, or through other entities in both a social and physical sense—means that some ecological and affective registration of change is always present within the mattering of the body. We now turn with new attention to how the literary texts of the modernist period give rise to affective ecology.