

“Networks of Foam:”

Becoming through Relation in Marianne Moore's Shoreline Poems

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English

Marianne Moore in her poetry collection *Observations* adopts a speaker who evades a clear subjectivity and positionality. Poems set at the shore, including “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” “Like a Bulrush,” “The Fish,” and “A Grave,” feature a speaker who embraces a decentered way of being as she moves fluidly – sometimes jarringly – with amphibious, entangled, and elusive creatures. Although some critics might conceptualize the speaker as a merely detached omnipresence, the poems reveal instead a speaker who imagines herself as a human who exists relationally with the nimble aquatic creatures that emerge scattered and fleeting through her visions. As the poems create nuanced balances between connection and displacement, they demonstrate poetry’s role as an open space of relationality where one can move through imagining the self and other intertwined in the complex networks of ecosystems. Reading Moore’s shoreline poems, one encounters a model for engaging with the world as a *more-than-man* attuned to the vast relations that inextricably connect humans with our natural surroundings (Lowe and Manjapra 6).

Scholars have studied Marianne Moore’s use of wit, paradox, parallelisms, and “sophistication of surfaces” in her many poems from *Observations* that bring together a myriad of material often sourced from scattered or unknown ephemera (Sister Therese 20-21). Breaking from Imagism’s treatment of a thing symbolically and subjectively, this 20th century American modernist poet adopts a strict impersonal objectivism that studies, as her speaker does in

Observations, objects and creatures in their own right (Weatherhead 10). Similar to William Carlos Williams's concern with the contours of the concrete, Moore's visualizations make room for what her poem, "What is Poetry," famously argues for – an ethics of "the genuine," which for Moore embodies a way of authentically representing and appreciating the natural world (10). Unlike Williams, who asserts himself as a figure of authority over his objects, Moore tends to withhold knowledge because she neither has nor wishes to impose it (Wasmoen 54). Considering her interest in unsettling viewpoints, it is perhaps no surprise that Moore turns to the shore, characterized by its energetic changes and oppositions. Beaches, marshes, and intertidal zones may incite imaginative mediations upon the rich dynamics of ever-becoming identities and even the slippery indeterminacy of language, because such places are composed of constant exchange and transformation (454).

Rene Dietrich, writing about American shore poetry, explains that 20th century poets during and after Moore's career enacted poetics of liminality by exploring the shorelines as "border regions of ambivalences, constant changes, and confrontations" (451). American shoreline poets have commonly looked to the intertidal zone's (the place where the ocean meets the land) inherent instability to recreate the ocean space into a metaphorical representation of their specific cultural positions or subjectivities (450). Moore is deeply interested in the shore's un-chartable limbo, but she refrains from imposing a human-centric view on the environment, that may otherwise render the ocean space a symbol of identity or an emotion, or even perhaps frame it as a colorful background to support a particular argument. Instead of casting any domineering stance over the ocean communities, Moore's speaker looks through a glass bottle at a wave, past a man on an overhanging sea-cliff, and at unknown shadows darting beneath the watery surfaces, and allows what she sees to engage, alter, and problematize her perspectives

constantly. The natural objects dance in and out of the observer's view so quickly and incompletely that they enter the poem only as impressions, that they escape any attempts to study them in detail and often leave the speaker and readers with wonder and perplexity. Through her techniques of juxtaposition that places contrasting language and imagery in close proximity, Moore shares ideas that she readily invites the dynamic shore to respond to with alternatives. At nature's foamy threshold where "land and sea meet, but also center and margin, inside and outside, 'self and other', and in which those very concepts shift, switch, dissolve and clash," Moore highlights the way in which the environment acts and influences human thought. Doing so, she challenges the foundations of Western humanism that privileges the knowledge and agency of the human subject, and she blurs even the lines that separate the human from the nonhuman (Dietrich 450). As the poems' elusive animals and environmental forces overturn assumptions and form new associations, Moore decenters human knowledge and reintegrates the self into a shared, ever fluctuating, and ungraspable network of relations with the ecosystems that surround us.

Becoming Through Relation

"Like a Bulrush" is one such poem that carries readers through observations of sea actors that bring about new discoveries and equally new ambiguities through ever shifting relationships between subjects and objects, humans and animals, selves and others. The question suggested precisely from the beginning of the poem is "who is *he*"; what follows is a long stream of leaps from "he" is "like" a bulrush (a plant that is scattered in many environments but often found in saltwater wetlands) to "or" (he is like) a spike, or the moon, and so on (Moore 35, lines 1-3). Conjunctions, verbs, and prepositions often sit at the edge of the poem's line breaks, forcing the

readers to change quickly from one line to another alongside the speaker in search of objects and creatures that might tell us who “he” is. For example, the poem reads, “he did not strike / them at the / time as being different from / any other inhabitant of the water; it was as if he / were a seal; in the combined livery / of a bird plus / a snake” (lines 4-7). Breaking up the syntax through line breaks creates visual gaps between the pronoun subject and the objects, and become spaces where the reader lingers briefly in moments of uncertainty. In a sense, the “he” also wavers in these gaps with the suspenseful “maybe’s” and “as-if’s” that propose new associations. Just as the speaker is about to fix him with one object – say a bulrush, a fish, a bird, or a seal – the “he” escapes the grasp of any identifier and leaps towards the associative pull of the next object. Where creatures swim through channels in bulrush saltmarshes under the moon, the human-nature, subject-object, and self-other dualisms are relinquished as a subject “he” eludes us for being neither fully separate from nor fully one with the nonhuman actors in the environment.

In addition to the unidentifiable “he,” the nonhuman actors that the speaker relates him to also appear quite slippery. Linked together by the poem’s repetitive stream of words such as “of,” “or,” “as if,” and “plus,” the nonhuman actors are equally interconnected and gain new meanings as they move in proximity with “he” and with each other. In other words, as “he” is like these creatures, they are like him, and they become like each other in an entangled web of ever changing morphological points. For example, in the speaker’s imagination, it is as if the “he” is a seal, which transforms into a bird and a snake, when the speaker considers the way a seal seems to wear the “combined livery” of these creatures as it slides into the ocean with its wing-like flippers and smooth, agile belly. The “he’s” transformation into a possible seal-bird-snake takes only three brief lines that get shorter from the first to the last, which indicates a movement from the four actors’ separation to their sudden convergence. The speaker then

proposes, that it is as if the “he” knows that “penguins are not fish,” a phrase which suggests a moment where the “he” was forced to differentiate between the penguin and the fish’s analogous biological forms (line 8). What these phrases tell us is that as much as the “he” is liminal, so too are the creatures associated with him.

Visuals of interdependence in “Like a Bulrush” and Moore’s other shoreline poems that this paper will soon explore invite applications of several theories of relation, such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the concepts explored in Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra’s “Comparative Global Humanities After Man.” Building upon Bruno Latour’s foundational work, Rita Felski discusses ANT as a method that offers a relational ontology. Turning to the marine environment to illustrate this concept of ANT, Felski explains, “A rock makes a difference by causing the water running downstream to flow around it rather than over it, while its overhanging side makes a difference in providing shelter for tiny water creatures” (748). Felski concludes that an actor refers to “acting-as-agency, not acting-as-theatrical-performance” (748). In other words, human and nonhuman actors are actors in the sense that they influence or make a difference upon one another not by independent, conscious will or dramatic intention, but by their coordinated actions as they operate and move in space naturally (748). Extending upon these key ideas in ANT, the parallax effect also serves as a useful lens for understanding the interchanges in Moore’s poems. Lowe and Manjapra define the parallax as an epistemic effect “from maritime astronomy,” which “refers to the seeming change in locations of an object, such as a star or celestial body, depending on the position of one’s boat” (Lowe and Manjapra 11). Through this illustrative concept, one can see that as an observer’s position changes, so seemingly does the object’s position. Although the parallax grounds itself in the understanding that the star’s locational changes are illusions, the effect does demonstrate how appearances depend upon

positions, and how, as a result, positions (physical, visual, and imaginative) depend upon how an object's appearances affect observers.

As the speaker in "Like a Bulrush" consciously constructs her associations, she does so by observing the nontheatrical functions and movements of objects and animals at the shore. Like a rock that falls in the water to create both obstruction and shelter, the extreme variation and mixing at the shore or intertidal zones have caused inhabitants to evolve with hybrid characteristics so that they may thrive at these thresholds between land and sea. To add to the effect of agencies, the creatures' strange appearances and behaviors in this poem place the speaker's observations, meaning-makings, and positioning of self in a similar state of constant fluctuations. The poem creates a synergetic community of humans and nonhumans. Indeed, although the verses constantly tease the reader with new possibilities of association, the poem begins and ends with ambivalence. In the last line, the speaker says, "they" [referring to the penguins in their "bat blindness" as Moore writes in the line before] "did not realize that he was amphibious" (line 10). If readers imagine themselves as a part of the parallax effect, then as the "he" wades at the end of the poem "in-between" two objects in a network of community members, so, in a sense, do we.

"Like a Bulrush" demonstrates ways of seeing truth as that which emerges and changes through the relational processes of actors acting upon and reacting to each other. Encountering new verses and even re-visiting the poem entirely unravels associations made in the previous line or reading and reorients the readers towards considering new alternative identities for the "he." Similar to what Lowe and Manjapra witness in Shahzia Sikander's art simulation of the parallax effect, readers of Moore's poem observe subjects and objects that converge, separate, and reform with emergent meanings, as the speaker shifts and revises her perspectives of the watery realm

(Lowe and Manjapra 11). While the pronoun “he” has come to represent the Enlightenment notion of the individual human – singular and exclusionary to the Other – “Like a Bulrush” bursts the notion of a contained being (separate from surrounding objects) in order to show that “he” in an ever-becoming, osmotic relation to all the things beyond himself, from a bulrush plant and the moon to the blurred image of a seal-bird-snake. In addition to “Like a Bulrush,” the poem “Black Earth” demonstrates how Moore explores object relationality in many of her other poems that are not set at the shore. “Black Earth” places readers into the inner thoughts of an elephant (though James Dennis Hoff in his analysis is quick to add that the speaker may be the poet herself) musing upon its sunbathing activities. Moore shows that the elephant is an object, a creature, in its own right, but the poem shows that this existence is only possible through relation. For example, the elephant is happy to do what pleases no one but itself, paradoxically by moving *with* “the naturalness of the hippopotamus or the alligator” (Hoff 320). For Hoff, not only does the elephant (and/or the poet) understand itself by associating with its surroundings, it is transformed or “reborn” through them (Hoff 321). Sun heats its mud-covered skin, changing the color from black to grey. By the end of the poem, the elephant literally inhabits itself anew. Hoff concludes, “Remove the world, remove the circumstances of our environment, and one necessarily removes oneself, for there are no individual existences—no ‘private feelings and sensations’ as Dewey says—separate from the world of “objects and events” that surround us (*Art 25*)” (321). These statements reject the notion of the self as a separate unit; rather, the self – whether the self is Moore or an elephant – only exists through an inherent symbiosis with the other.

From my reading of “Like a Bulrush” and “Black Earth,” I find myself strongly agreeing with Dancy Mason’s assertion that Marianne Moore’s animiles, a name that refers to her poems

with animal-subjects, are “shifting, posthumanist ‘contact zones’” where the distinctions between human and nonhuman forms blur and unsettle as they come into contact with one another in the world (Mason 320). Moore’s poetry stands out among the writings of other modernists, including Williams, Eliot, and Lawrence, who all took an interest in object and animal alterity, but did so to maintain humanism and anthropocentrism. Mason writes, “they are perhaps more concerned with re-confirming, not interrogating, the human self through the non-human other” (321). The shared perspective of these modernists reinforces Felski’s notion that the supposed separation between humans and animals, which has come to undergird humanism, is an artificial and ideological positioning of human agency as a qualitatively different kind, severed from the nonhuman network (Felski 748). Still, before celebrating Moore as a post-humanist vanguard in her career, one should ask: Were Marianne Moore’s own interactions with and treatment of creatures in the wild and in zoos anthropocentric and exploitative? One of the most famous examples used among scholars to study Moore’s eccentric interest in animals was her visit to the circus, where she met and plucked a hair from an elephant to make a bracelet. Johanne Feit Diehl writes that when the bracelet went missing, Moore supposedly told Elizabeth Bishop of her plan to clip a few hairs from a baby elephant to make a new one (Diehl 20-21). Bishop recounted another time when the curious and concerned Moore, likely to the point of being overly inquisitive, brought eggs and orange juice to a caged snake she had visited previously. Looking at her slithering friend, Moore exclaimed, “See he knows me! He remembers me from last year!” (Diehl 20-21). According to Diehl, Bishop reflected upon Moore as someone who hated seeing animals in cages, yet felt so passionately interested in them that she was willing to put aside her outrage (20). Moore’s need to take something of the elephant may be an example of human appropriation of animals, and her attempted gift-giving presupposes the snake’s needs; however,

these gestures also suggest a desire to gain proximity and find mutuality with wondrously unknowable animals across the repressive cages of anthropocentric divides.

Some scholars have studied Moore's poetic animals like they do her elephant hair bracelet, but more so as decorative art pieces or as useful moral exemplars that essentially become bundled into collections owned and cherished by the poet (Berry 18-19). While these interpretations are useful, more attention should be paid to Moore's resistance of positioning her speaker as a manager of her animal collections, particularly those found in her shoreline poems from *Observations*. Firstly, the spaces presented in shoreline poems are far more unsettled, energetic, and hyperbolic, a term which this paper will soon apply, to be stationary units of cages and enclosures. Furthermore, the creatures found throughout *Observations* are far more lively and elusive to be captured and studied as immobile treasures. When the animals do seem to appear brilliantly held under focus, for example the lizard in "The Strategist," they still pivot and evade clear definitions equally as well as the sea creatures at the shores, and form imaginative connections with the associations around them. Therefore, despite Moore's juxtapositions in her own life, her poems demonstrate a radical willingness to let go of the contained subject, and use alterity to obscure knowledge so that she may reveal the complex interconnections between human and animal. Unlike her contemporaries, it is clear in *Observations* that she is working to challenge the conventional notions of the human/animal dichotomy. As Josh A. Weinstein writes, Moore "works to subvert the male Romantic subject's appropriation of nature," and takes a "wide perspective of holistic unity [...] as humans and animals are always already part of an intersecting web of interdependencies" (Weinstein 374). Even if Moore did not protest outright against caging animals or refrain from assuming consent from the elephant to take its hair, her speaker invites the animal subjects in her poems to overlap each other, to emerge up close, dart

away, and roam freely in their own rights. Her effort to write curiously through the physical spaces of interactions and the imaginary realms of ideologies reflect a project to showcase or create contact zones of nonhierarchical, shifting relations among humans, animals, and objects.

Peering into the Genuine

Set in the intertidal realm of species entanglements and ongoing change, other the poems like “The Fish,” “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” and “A Grave” radically let go of the entitled human and consciously re-enter her into the networks of ecosystems (Lowe and Manjapra 6). In this section, I will extend a focus on ways that liminality, juxtaposition, and fragmentation, which can refer to the breaking up, displacing, or shattering of words, syntax, or images, illustrate a speaker immersed in un-mappable and incomprehensible ocean space. To analyze relationality in these poems, I turn to another lens to embrace is the conceptual offerings of “hyperbolic geometry,” which has been incorporating into the humanities field by Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra and feels fitting for studying a poet with a well-known interest in science and an almost algebraic exactness to imaginatively capture the relationships. Euclidean geometry imagines lines that cross to form grid-like units, which are recognizable in architectural pieces that immobilize, enclose, or separate. In contrast, hyperbolic spaces do not move with predictable uniformity, possess parallel lines, or close up into circles or spheres; rather this kind of geometry is full of open curvatures (See Fig. 1) (Math Explorer Club). Hyperbolic geometry’s many connected curves and wrinkles yield high surface areas, which explains why many creatures near or at the intertidal zone, such as corals (See Fig. 2), kelps, and sea slugs, possess hyperbolic forms to maximize sunlight and nutrient absorption in an environment of extreme variability (“Hyperbolic Space”). As coral reefs use hyperbolic forms to filter feed, they do so

purely in relation to exact same geometry of the ocean in all its “flows, waves, eddies, and warps” and its currents that move nutrients through the organism (Lowe and Manjapra 11). Like elephant’s relation to the natural movements of the hippopotamus and alligators in “Black Earth,” or the “he’s” (in the poem “Like a Bulrush”) relation to the slippery analogies of the seals and snakes, the reef’s existence depends entirely upon its relationship with the oceanic currents, made possible through the reef and the ocean’s shared hyperbolic geometries.

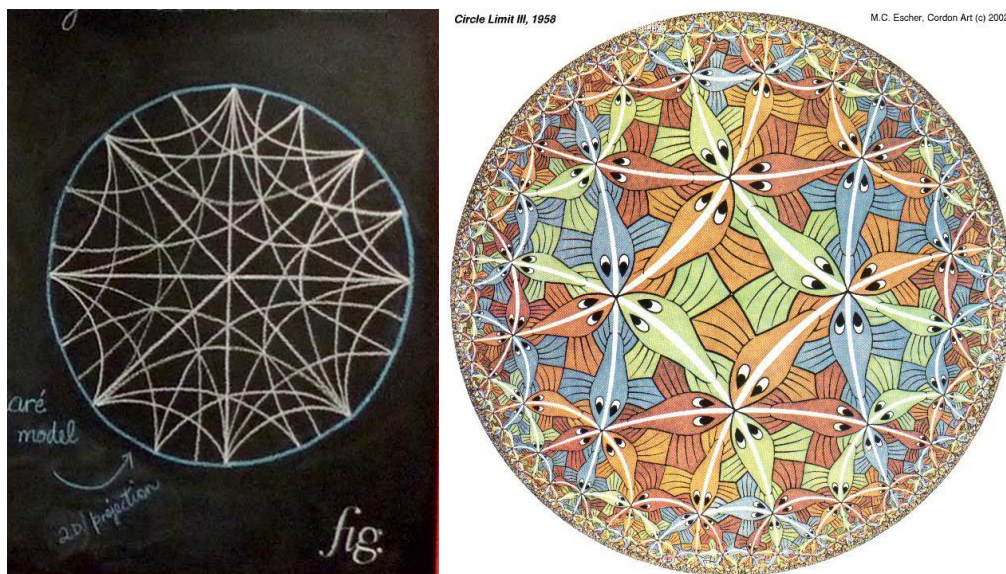


Fig 1. (Left): In this blackboard drawing, Christine Wertheim illustrates hyperbolic geometry with its basic webs, curves, and interconnections. “Crochet Coral Reef: About” *Crochet Coral Reef*. Institute for Figuring (IFF), 2003-19. Accessed 06 December 2019.

<https://crochetcoralreef.org/about/theproject/>.

(Right): Image by Walter, Jörg. “Interactive Visualization and Navigation using the Hyperbolic Space.” Accessed on 06 December 2019. <http://www.techfak.uni-bielefeld.de/~walter/>.



Fig. 2. Photo showcasing Christine Wertheim's coral reef crochet piece. Crochet demonstrates hyperbolic geometry in the three-dimensional space as having many overlappings and curvatures, whereas Marianne Moore's poetry shows hyperbolic space in the imaginative realm through language. "Crochet Coral Reef: About" *Crochet Coral Reef*. Institute for Figuring (IFF), 2003-19. Accessed 06 December 2019. <https://crochetcoralreef.org/about/theproject/>

Hyperbolic geometries demonstrate how the ocean consists of vast networks of relationalities that cannot be mastered or delimited (Lowe and Manjapra 11). Illustrating this concept is Shahzia Sikander's art simulation *Parallax*, which begins with closed circles that begin to fracture in a million pieces until one of the circles explodes. Its shards pierce the other circles so that all shatter and expose a hyperbolic, kaleidoscopic scene of waves and curvatures (See Fig. 3). Only through the destruction of the straight lines and closed shapes do the viewers discover the actual colors beneath that move freely like oil or even oceanic currents.

Comparatively, in Moore's poems "The Fish," "An Egyptian Shaped Glass Bottle in the Shape of the Fish," and "A Grave," it is only by means of shattering light rays, ocean currents, objects, and frameworks, that the speaker can alter her vision to see an extremely dynamic intertidal zone. In *Parallax* and all these poems, the synergies between beauty and violence, stasis and change, light and dark, life and death allow the speaker to wonder at the ocean – dynamic, relational, and complex.



Fig. 3. Sikander's *Parallax*. More information and video of at honoluluuseum.org. Images cited in Lowe and Manjapra analysis in their article "Comparative Global Humanities After Man: Alternatives to the Coloniality of Knowledge."

"The Fish" invites an opportunity for readers to wonder at the mysterious and restless movements and the colorful biological forms belonging to the inhabitants of the shore. In the title and first two lines of the piece, readers meet "The Fish" that "wade / through black jade" (Moore 41 lines 1-2). "Wade" is a verb that depicts a slow, deliberate motion through dark green water that occludes most life below except for the fish that swim briefly to the surface. Through the rest of the poem, readers wander with the speaker through the water world to encounter new sea creatures in each verse, including mussels, barnacles, jellyfish, and crabs who refuse to reveal themselves fully to the eye of the observer. For example, the line that follows "black jade" begins with the preposition, "Of" which displaces the subject we might expect to find at the front of the sentence (line 3). When the poem does introduce the subject, it comes at the end of the line as "one," a simple, yet complex and ambiguous word because it can function as several expressions: as a personal or impersonal pronoun, an adjective, and of course a number. Because of its many uses, the reader may be unsure whether "one" refers to one of the fish who "keeps adjusting the ash heaps" "of the crow blue mussel shells," or whether "one," if we reverse the

syntax of the sentence, refers to one of the mussels who keeps adjusting the ash heaps. The next few lines “opening and shutting itself like / an / injured fan” makes it more clear that the one is likely a mussel; regardless, the speaker here is trying to point out one creature in a hidden underwater profusion of many living communities (lines 6-8). These displacements in syntactical structure described above estranges one from fully knowing the fish and the mussel as a way to replicate the experience of trying to see nature’s species up close with all their wonders and intricacies. The longer the readers immerse in the images, the more uncanny the creatures appear. The one mussel shell that keeps adjusting its ash heaps for a moment may seem like a person who keeps adjusting his or her paper stacks, dish racks, or clothing piles.

Not only do the sea-creatures strange actions alter perceptions of the ocean space; both the sun and ocean are related to instruments of craftsmanship, experimentation, and destruction, whose actions completely transform lives of the creatures and the vision of the speaker. Like the sun that heated the mud covered elephant into a being reborn, the sun rays are “split like spun glass” when they strike the water and then move “with spotlight swiftness” to over a now kaleidoscopic array of shapes and colors all the bodies once disguised beneath the waves (lines 12-21). The submerged sun shafts alter species interactions; for example, the lights penetrate the crevices of barnacles, which, now exposed to the dry air and the speaker’s eye “cannot hide,” a phrase that the new behavior they must exhibit in the light. Inevitably, the restless waves surge again, mixing jellyfish and crabs, crashing them against the coastline rocks, and leaving behind bespattered ink across the stars, “dynamic grooves, burns, and hatchet strokes” (lines 22-42). In a coastline filled with fluctuations between light and dark, visibility and invisibility, form and formless, no single vision of nature can therefore be maintained. As the speaker reflects on a place that hides, reveals, and destroys its surfaces, her subjective focal points must fracture and

reform to see the space in its new colors, angles, and meanings. Thus both the state of and her understanding of the marine environment are as unstable identity of the “he” who wavers between relationships in “Like a Bulrush.”

“The Fish” ultimately suggests that only by shattering the surface mirrors can a person perhaps peer through a window and glimpse the ordinary world in all its realness, or in Moore’s term, its genuineness. Therefore, when Moore’s speaker holds up an “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” in the poem titled just that, to look at a wave, she seems to challenge whether the viewer can frame the natural world like a still work of art in a static, unified vision. If the wave belongs to a hyperbolic space in continuous motion, then charting the wave in a poem as a linear structure, or enclosing it within the perpendicular lines of a frame distances one from the genuine. By the time the reader arrives at the fish whose scales “turn aside the sun’s sword with their polish,” actively resist the views that try to freeze them in an image. In addition, juxtapositions in Moore’s poem like “patience” and “thirst,” “not brittle” but “intense,” “spectacular” (which suggests sweeping grandeur) and “nimble” (which indicates nuanced dexterity) playfully challenge the notion that a single idea or feeling can dominate an image of the natural environment. In addition to describing the sea’s inconstancy, juxtapositions engage the nonhuman and human actors in a parallax relationship. As the fish pivots, it alters the angle of light, breaking it apart like a prism into a million rays and causing the speaker and reader to revise the way they perceive the wave entirely. Similarly the slipperiness of the poetic language in these juxtapositions prompt one to ask whether poetry can hold a centered position as well.

Thinking More-than-Man

Like all the poems explored in this paper, “A Grave” explores how the lives of creatures, the actions of the ocean, and the perspective of the participatory observer all depend and move with one another as actors in a fluid, extensive, and entangled web of causes and effects. The oars of people rowing move *like* water-spiders in a phalanx leaving ripples on the surface above the underwater networks of foam where bones mix with nutrients (Moore 16). Despite the fact that the rowers’ strokes are rigorous, they still “fade breathlessly” while the sea “rustles” energetically through the proliferations of seaweed (Moore 16). Rigorous, breathless, and rustling all show the tensions at play in the intertidal zone. Like the strange creates in “Like A Bulrush,” the birds in “A Grave” *swim* through air *like* fish and emit cat-calls, prompting readers to wonder at a creature that blurs the lines between water, land, and air. While the birdcalls proclaim a sense of vitality, the image of turtle shells crashing at the feet of the cliffs intensifies the narrow gap between life and death. In these moments, the speaker witnesses the most apparent opposites converge and overlap. Indeed, although death is a central focus, the poem illustrates how it exists only adjacent the ocean’s flourishing activity. An ocean continues to move because it is an open conduit of exchange. Like a grave, it recycles; it decomposes in order to allow for new growths. Worms and roots will inevitably desecrate a grave; similarly, the sea cannot remain untouched. As birds dive in and fly up with their fish-catch, the sea ejects as much life as it receives. So while the ocean is a collector of interchanges, it is not a container nor is it contained.

Only by dismissing the man who positions himself on the sea cliff as a figure of dominance over the natural world, can the speaker in “A Grave” let her mind immerse in the activities below and see more clearly how the human condition of life and death is inseparable

from the nonhuman actors at the coast. Jeredith Merrin Weinstein speaks to this scene when he writes: “‘Moore found a way to chasten [the Romantic poet’s] imaginative egocentricity, replacing his I-ness with her appropriative, minutely observant eye’ (79–80), and in the process ‘subtly mock[s] his delusion of dominion, of imaginative sway’ over the natural world (77)” (Weinstein 374). In “A Grave,” the speaker contemplates how the men in the boats lower their nets “unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave,” and row along the water like water-spiders “as if their were no such things as death” (Moore 58). Of course what the poem positions against the people’s presupposed superiority is a world just below their notice, where dropped things that appear to “twist and turn,” actually move with “neither volition nor consciousness” (Moore 59). Overthrowing the man’s certainties, the poem demonstrates human fragility in the ocean’s ceaselessly transforming aggressions. The ocean grave also shows an intimate relation between the speaker and the nonhuman actors precisely because it exhibits the liminal, paradoxical realm that life occupies. Just as an ocean forces the observer to wade between life and death, a poem like “A Grave,” to quote Matthew Zapruder, “places us [readers] in the middle of the inherently contradictory nature of being” (Zapruder 109).

Rejecting centralist ideologies of “Man” above all, Moore’s decentered, inconspicuous speaker yields her to produce observations, that are “full of ‘powerful incongruities and bi-directional signals,” which reinforces both a respect to the unknowable nonhuman actors, and an embrace of the connection between the human and nonhuman (Mason 320). For these reasons, *Observations* ultimately speaks to Lowe and Manjapra’s new comparative humanism concept of the “*more-than-Man* which, “attends to the superabundance of dynamic relations that cannot be contained or delimited by the human: that is the relations between different human histories [...] amongst other humans, animals, ecologies and environments” (Lowe and Manjapra 6).

As Moore's poems demonstrate, perhaps the way to restructure institutionalized ideologies is to free the mind in an imaginative space of possibilities to critique and reconsider the knowledge forms and discourses that centers the human. Howard Nemerov proposes this very point in his poem "Because You Asked About the Line Between Prose and Poetry." When the speaker marvels at the convergence of birds and snow in a white flurry, he exclaims, "there came a moment when you couldn't tell" (Nemerov line 5). What Nemerov and Moore suggest is that change and wonder occur in the instance of perplexity – when the self is positioned between knowing and not knowing the differences whether they be between birds and snow, penguins and fish, humans and animals, or life and death. Moore's *Observations* blur dividing lines and interrogates definitions to help readers see more clearly through perplexity the multidimensional, non-linear spaces of the natural world (Lowe and Manjapra 6).

This paper has aimed to show how theoretical tools for exploring relationality can expand scholarship on Marianne Moore's animalies as spaces where the poet explores ways of understanding herself as *more-than-human*. Even if poetry takes place in the imaginative, dreamlike realm, Moore's intertidal poems show that poetry is unquestionably engaged with the sounds, colors, and actions of the real world. To reference Zapruder again in *Why Poetry*: "In poems, as in dreams, the ordinary is rearranged, reconfigured. In a dream this happens unconsciously. The poet transforms the material of the real in a more-or-less conscious way, in order to create a space of contemplation, and imagination, and possibility to "not merely understand, but to *feel* what is happening in the world" (Zapruder 84-87). In all of the poems explored in this paper, Marianne Moore does not attempt to rationally explain the ordinary world nor squeeze it into any dominant paradigms, but rather works to bring to the reader through the vastness of language the way the world is lived and embodied. Indeed, to embrace the mindset of

“*more-than-Man*” and realize oneself constantly engaged in parallax effects and hyperbolic spaces is to think “beyond units of national territory and culture [that] includes appreciation of different relations of scale: from the hemisphere, to the oceanic, to the archipelagic, to the diaspora, to the bodily” (Lowe and Manjapra 5). While debates still question the extent to which we should consider Marianne Moore a post humanist or environmental activist, what is clear is that Moore’s inquisitive speaker represents a desire for herself and her readers to feel through poetic engagement with the body at the intertidal zone, the inextricable links between the human subject and nonhuman life forms.

Returning then to Moore’s prevalent question in *Observations* – what is poetry? – “Like a Bulrush,” “The Fish,” “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” and “A Grave” all demonstrate how poetry, like an ocean, is a dynamic, open space of interactions in the syntactical networks of language within verses, and those very same kinds of expansive, indeterminate networks in the world outside the page (Zapruder 58, 109). Like the intertidal zone’s violent yet flourishing space where land, air, water, life, and death mix, a poem is the threshold between one and many, subject and other, writer and reader, silence and speaker. In short, perhaps Moore is saying that if poetry *is* anything, it is relation, or at the very least, an effort to re-establish relationships. Because poetry shares itself with the many, its surface, just like the water’s surface, shatters, reforms, and changes as we dip our oars into its warps and marvel at the swirls we make. Poetry helps one say, yes I am me like an object in its own right. But, simultaneously, like the one fir tree with the many fir trees on that cliff in “A Grave,” I am me with the snake I visited last year, with Elizabeth Bishop, with an elephant, with the hippopotamus, with the mud, and the sun, and the turquoise bodies, and the sea waves, and the nimble fish, and the seal, the bird, the snake, and the networks of foam, and the entangled seaweed. I am me with life and

death, and the pulsation of lighthouse buoys, and my eyes, and the moon, and the oar, and the pen, and the paper, and my voice with yours.

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