

Into The Forest: Exploring Trans-Corporeality Through Nature

With the advent of social technologies such as the Internet and cell phones, it is easy to think that we are living in a more interconnected world than ever thought possible. However, as Stacey Alaimo argues in *Bodily Natures*, the threads that compose the vast interwoven tapestry of the Earth are not limited to the ones connecting humans via social networks or instant messaging, but instead range across all natural and cultural aspects of life in a universally inclusive concept known as trans-corporeality. Alaimo claims that due to the infinite connections between organisms and the environment they inhabit, “the walls [that] separate human from nature and define the human as such are nowhere to be found” (14). In this way, to truly realize humanity’s place as a small piece in a grand natural puzzle, it is essential to put aside our anthropocentric lens that sees “the human subject as the sovereign, central position” (16) and embrace nature as something that constitutes ourselves just as much as we constitute it. In this regard, I will argue that Alaimo’s ethos is exhibited in the eco-poetry of Mary Oliver demonstrated in her “Bone Poem” and “Sleeping In The Forest,” as well as the Grimm Brothers’ “Little Red Cap,” wherein the subject’s embracement of trans-corporeality as meditated through their return to an environment absent of human domination enables the attainment of both a sense of deep self-discovery within the interconnected world, and a means for social change.

Quoting Harold Fromm’s book review “The ‘Environment’ Is Us,” Alaimo describes trans-corporeality through the notion that our environment “runs right through us in endless waves,” and, in doing so, asks us to imagine “water, air, food, microbes, toxins entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out” (Alaimo 11). By extension, Mary Oliver’s “Bone Poem” demonstrates this flow of natural energies through the process by which the Earth consumes and transmutes the “shrapnel of rat bones [and] gull debris” (Oliver 195)

discarded to a forest floor after an owl's feast. Although the poem's rhetoric is embedded within imageries of death and decay, the eternal and immortal nature of all living matter is heavily implied by the manner in which the soil preserves the "holy protein" that the entire ecosystem shares. As Oliver notes, "the rat will learn to fly" when its atoms are eventually digested and incorporated into its predator, and "the owl will be devoured" once it has died and returned to the earth. In these final lines, Oliver remarks on "the equity" of the forest which allows life to flow freely from one organism to another over long periods of time; in this way, she provides visceral proof of Alaimo's assertion that food is "the most palpable trans-corporeal substance" (Alaimo 12) due to the universal and matter-preserving nature of digestion. "Bone Poem," through its non-anthropocentric viewpoint of an environment, thus artfully depicts how "*we* becomes singular" (Oliver 195) in the grand trans-corporeal world. Similarly, in "Sleeping In The Forest," Oliver continues this theme of natural singularity by introducing a human subject into the dense living environment of the forest. Though an outsider in the untamed wilderness, the narrator feels a natural kinship with the environment, even stating that the earth "remembered [her]" (181) as if she were returning to a childhood home. Instead of feeling anxious or guarded against the unpredictable wildlife, the subject feels enough trust in her surroundings to fall into a deep sleep, ostensibly leaving her in a completely defenceless state. By lowering these boundaries and accepting her place in the collective organism of the forest, she sleeps "as never before" (181) and becomes aware of the vibrant life enveloping her, hearing "the small kingdoms breathing" (181) with a peaceful harmony rarely felt in a landscape dominated by humanity. By the time she awakes, the subject feels that she has fully integrated into the natural world, having "vanished at least a dozen times into something better," (181) and in this way, she demonstrates the feeling of having truly lived in a trans-corporeal manner by allowing herself to become a part

of her interconnected environment. Furthermore, the dissolution of human societal boundaries in a non-anthropocentric environment is represented by the literal removal of barriers between the subject and the natural world. Lacking a roof to close her off from the skies, she feels there is both “nothing between [her] the white fire of the stars,” (181) and that her thoughts float “light as moths” out into the open air. By freeing oneself from the unnaturally exclusive and protective boundaries that define human spaces, the mind is able to thus stretch out and freely contemplate the vast interconnectedness of nature. In this way, trans-corporeality is realized to its full potential through the displacement of a human subject into a more than-human-environment.

Though Oliver’s ecological poetry may seem indicative of a contemporary move towards a trans-corporeal viewpoint of world, similar themes of self-discovery through interactions with the more-than-human realms have existed in culture for hundreds of years, notably in coming-of-age fairytales such as those attributed to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Through the telling of a young girl’s journey into a dark and untamed forest, their “Little Red Cap” demonstrates themes of realizing one’s own deep connection with nature, similar to “Sleeping In The Forest”. Though society’s aversion to leaving human-dominated spaces has been firmly imprinted onto the girl through her mother’s advice to “walk properly” and “not leave the path” to her grandmother’s house, (Grimm) she nevertheless is mesmerized by the all-encompassing beauty of nature shortly after leaving her village. Her immediate reaction to the “sunbeams dancing [...] between the trees” and the “beautiful flowers all around her” is not unlike Oliver’s expressionistic wonder and, like the subject in “Sleeping in the Forest”, the girl quickly wanders into a non-anthropocentric environment, coaxed by a wolf to stray “deeper and deeper into the wood” in search of flowers. In this context, the wolf acts as a representation of the untamed and wild aspects of the world, those with which the girl has not yet interacted in her safe and

anthropocentric environment. Having been suddenly introduced to this unfamiliar new environment, her desire to find flowers reflects the childlike need to explore the unknown, seeking out the beauty it holds without considering the danger that accompanies it. However, this abandonment of human spaces is not without repercussions, as the wolf takes the girl's distracted state as an opportunity to rush to her grandmother's cottage, and "without a single word [goes] straight to grandmother's bed," devouring her instantly. Though the girl has found natural beauty in the lush environment of the forest, the realization of humanity's non-central place in her worldview triggers not only the rejection of safe, human-dominated spaces but also the subversion of the traditional ideal represented by the grandmother. In order to truly embrace life as the non-hierarchical system of nature that trans-corporeality defines, the feral wolf replaces the "sick and weak" grandmother as the model to which the young girl holds herself, literally acting as the grandmother's doppelgänger by wearing her "clothes and nightcap". Furthermore, just as the rat in "Bone Poem" becomes the owl through digestion, the highly respected social ideal of the grandmother is reincorporated and preserved in the new, naturocentric ideal of the wolf, demonstrating the cultural trans-corporeality that recycles and mutates existing ideals, as cultural norms change with time. However, these new ideals are shown to be just as variable and plastic as the anthropocentric ones that preceded it; not long after the wolf's devouring of the grandmother, a traditional, anti-nature worldview is reestablished by a hunter, who subverts the natural, trans-corporal process of digestion by cutting into the wolf's stomach with scissors and extracting the grandmother trapped within. Though people, like the young girl, may naturally be drawn to a non-anthropocentric worldview when confronted with naturally interconnected beauty such as that found in a forest, the "Little Red Cap" seems to unwittingly warn that individuals in positions of power are likely to fight against nature to uphold the status quo and refocus the lens

of objective importance back onto humanity. In this way, the Grimm Brothers' story provides a surprisingly sobering and cynical commentary on the shortcomings of naturalist social-progressivism, which starkly contrasts with Oliver's emotional and personal interpretation of trans-corporeality.

When one leaves the constructed security of a space dominated by human influence in favour of the naturally egalitarian order of nature, the nigh-unavoidable result is the realization that humanity is not the central defining feature of reality. This new, trans-corporeal view of the world, which sees all aspects of life as equally important to the grand interconnected system of Earth, is not only a means of coming to terms with one's own place in the universe, as demonstrated in the eco-poetry of Mary Oliver, but also a possible trigger for society to establish new, non-anthropocentric cultural norms that value nature above rigid human expectations, as seen in the Grimm brothers' "Little Red Cap". Interpreted through the lens of trans-corporeality outlined in Stacey Alaimo's *Bodily Natures*, both Grimm and Oliver provide effective representations of the interactions between the human and a more-than-human environment, as well as detailing how a more inclusive and nature-focused viewpoint can inform alternative viewpoints free of influence from traditional, outdated social norms. The full integration of Alaimo's ideals of trans-corporeality into contemporary society could even cause cultural values to drastically shift, resulting in a more prudent, less selfishly anthropocentric society that all may benefit from.

Works Cited

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